

Missouri Youth Write 2023 Honorable Mention

Missouri Youth Write is sponsored by the Missouri Council of Teachers of English (MoCTE), the Greater Kansas City Writing Project (www.gkcwp.org), and Missouri Writing Projects Network coordinate the Missouri Regions's Scholastic Writing Awards Contest, sponsored by The Alliance for Young Artists and Writers (www.artandwriting.org)



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Carmel Andeberhan

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Ladue Horton Watkins High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Shruti Upadhyay

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

The Road to Heaven

By the time I was seven I had my path to heaven set out. Well, it depended less on me and more on chance but in my young mind it was a plan nonetheless. All I had to do was die before my next birthday. The way this ill conceived and slightly concerning plan came to be was a classic misinterpretation of Christian doctrine. At some point in my Orthodox Christian upbringing I came across the notion that children under the age of eight automatically got into heaven. While I realize now that this message was supposed to be a testament to God's kindness, I interpreted this rule as a fast pass to heaven, a cop-out in a way. Why spend eighty years trying to live a good life and risk going to hell, when I could simply die now and have my soul's future secured? Feeling that this was necessary to prevent an eternity in Dante's Inferno, I prayed that God would put me in a tragic but lucky accident securing my spot in heaven. While I eventually forgot about this plan all together, I never grew out of the way of thinking that led me to it in the first place.

As I'm sure you can tell I was never particularly good at interpreting scripture. Somehow every line that I read or heard would be tinged by the cynical filter in my mind, tainting everything I consumed. Now I would call that critical thinking skills but my church leaders and parents called it insolence. I mean, only an insolent child would interpret God's grace as a disturbing get out of Hell free card. This filter only intensified as I got older. Sitting in comfortably cushioned pews with the sounds of deacons singing the liturgy acting as background music, I would flip through off-white pages of the worn and in some places torn King James Bible in search of a story more interesting than what was going on around me. Finally finding one, my eyes would flick back and forth, skimming the tiny lettering until my brows were furrowed and I was at the end. With every story read and every sermon attended the number of questions lined up in my mind's arsenal would grow, waiting to be unleashed on whatever Sunday school teacher would be forced to answer them this time. Why was the old testament God so cruel? Why would he kill someone for working on a Sunday? Isn't that way worse? Why does God make all these requirements for entering

heaven? Isn't being a good person what should matter, not just being a good Christian? Their often inadequate explanations left me feeling unfulfilled and slightly guilty for questioning God. Over the years I had more and more questions, and with each non answer I could feel my sense of guilt rising. What I didn't feel was my faith slowly slipping away until every prayer, gospel song and ritual I participated in became a meaningless performance.

This all came to a head at the annual Orthodox Christian Youth conference, the summer before my last year in middle school. The near four hour bus ride of watching movies, eating snacks and chatting with my church friends reminded me why, despite the growing schism between the church's teachings and my values, I still wanted the connection religion gave me to my community. But, unfortunately for me after that bus ride the trip took a prompt, downhill turn when the three day conference began. That first Saturday morning was a hectic one, the hotel filled with people running around trying to find irons to get the wrinkles out of their white, floor length Zuria's or extra head coverings or whatever else they forgot to pack in time for the six am service. I happened to be in all of the above categories. Once the adrenaline rush of the morning passed I was left fidgeting and bored in an itchy dress at uncomfortable wooden pews. At least at my church back home I could sit comfortably. I focused my energy on distracting myself from the sermon that was somehow more boring in English than in Amharic. I began to daydream while trying not to get that glassy eyed, zoned out look: until finally the sermon ended and we moved on to the segment in the itinerary I had highlighted in anticipation, the Q&A.

"We know that growing up in America there is a cultural barrier between you all and the Church. We want you to know we're here to support you all in your journey to connecting with God." The head priest (H.P) started. "So, what questions do you all have for me?"

The first person calls out, "How do we get into heaven." H.P's response comes quickly, "The way to heaven is through the sacraments, baptism and communion and living a life of righteousness and repentance."

That question brought me back to the start of my first memorable discontents with the church, the concept of judgment, heaven and hell. My hand shot up. I was hoping for an answer different from those I had received all my life, one that would show me that my values and the church's aligned and allow me to rekindle my faith. "Why does God allow good people to go to Hell for not being good Christians?"

"What do you mean by good people?" He asked after a second.

"People who try their hardest to help and love those around them. Why should people like this have to

suffer for eternity for not being a Christian, or straight or anything else not intrinsic to being a good human?" I said, holding out hope that there would be a reason for this that could resolve thirteen years of internal conflict. Around me veiled heads turned left and right and whispers of surprise at my boldness, my willingness to confront ideas that should simply be accepted.

"No, no that's a good question" the head priest started, silencing the buzz in the room and empowering me to continue to hold hope for my church. "God does this because he created our souls and thus he has the right to cast them into Purgatory if he so chooses," he continued throwing a damp blanket over the spark I was trying so hard to reignite, "Our God is not a cruel one. One can not deny and disobey their creator and be a good person. God does not send good people to hell."

In that moment I realized that I had developed my own beliefs and values outside of the ones the Church preached. The journey to this realization made me a critical thinker and gave me the voice to speak on the causes I am passionate about. After a childhood of being chided for my lack of silence, my voice became something I valued and was willing to defend at all costs. While I no longer obsess over the road to heaven, I will never lose the critical lens of thinking that started with an ill-informed plan.

Emma Anderson

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Nerinx Hall High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Jennifer Staed

Category: Poetry

From Within

Who are you?

When you're drunk on anger,
Your sober thoughts become your wasted words,
Where is he?
The little boy I once knew,
Now a man and never sober
I miss the one who would wrap his arms around me,
And promise to always be there,
But now I look and you,
And wonder,
Who are you?

The beauty in me

My freckles make up constellations,
Igniting my inner glow,
A mark of my mother,
That I'm proud to show,
My lips,
Blushing with pride,
The café au lait spots,
And the tiger stripes,
Beautifully painted on my body,
They remind me,
Once again,
That I possess beauty
And dignity,
After all,
I am liberated within the beauty of me

Introspection

A feeling no being can describe,
For it comes from within,
A message from the subconscious,
The known,
And the unfathomable,
Vibrations,
Ignition of the senses,
From the angels above,
To the roots below our feet
Soul ties
Intimate connection,
A distinctive feeling,
Drawn from inside you,

Magnetizing,
Subconscious safe,
For it recognizes,
True connection

Phoenix

Arise from the ashes,
They often hold you back,
A mystery I often ponder,
Because you are a phoenix,
Possessing the most power,
And beauty,
Yet you allow the weakest,
To keep you from flying

Honduran emerald

The bird,
Always wraps himself in his wings,
After all,
That is his protection,
And all he's ever known,
To cushion his fall

Maya Angia

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Francis Howell High School, Saint Charles, MO

Educator: Sean Wheeler

Category: Poetry

Moonlight Drowning

The light of the moon gives me
a strange sense of sanctuary;
safe, but dying.
Pools of decadent silver
so beautiful I could just
fall right into them,
the resounding ripples
the only evidence
I ever existed.
The undulation
of wintry light,
like an underwater Aurora,
reflects off the
bubbles I breathe out
as I sink.
It's hard to see,
hard to breathe,
hard to think,
but I don't care.
I willingly chase
the moonlight's allure
far past the limits
of my ability
and survival.
It kills me.
It completes me.
The light of the moon gives me escape.
But I know it's not real.
The light nor the escape.
I know that the moon,
a dull, floating rock,
merely reflects light
from the sun.
And I know my escape
is merely temporary,
a brief, deadly respite
from life.
But the moon
gives me hope
that maybe I, too,
can feel warm and bright
in the odd way
of the moon,

that I won't have to escape anymore.

Maybe my heart,
dark and bleak,
frozen by rivers
of frigid blood,
can also *look* full of emotion.

Even if my emotion
is only a reflection,
a hollow imitation.
Despite this hope,
me and my mirror
of a heart
never truly escape
from existence,
always dragged back
to the surface
by a primal need to
breathe.

But that's the point,
that escapism
is only temporary,
because the beauty
of death is also
only a reflection
of the beauty of life.

The moon,
in its quiet poignance,
has taught me how
to revel in the feeling
of drowning in moonlight
but to always remember
to come back up
and breathe.

Taylor Banks

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: Parkway West Middle School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Tracy Bouslog

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

It's Just Hair

Fourth grade is probably my least favorite grade. As sweet as my teacher was, the class itself wasn't that good for me. The year was a tough one to get through, but in the end I'm glad I made it.

The class was full of 'popular' kids in our grade, and a grand total of 14 boys and 9 girls. I had some good friends in the class though, and luckily my best friend at the time was in the class with me, and honestly I didn't really mind talking and joking around with the boys. It was just the *popular girls*. These girls were only known as popular because of how they dressed and acted. They all wore the same outfits with leggings, athletic shirts and hoodies, and fabric Nike or Adidas tennis shoes. Their hair was always perfectly long and straight, in a ponytail or brushed down. Everyone wanted to be like them, including me, even though they were rude to anyone that wasn't like them. I guess it was the combined fear and idolism towards them that made them live up to their 'popular' titles. There were four particular popular girls in my class that caused me a lot of trouble that year.

My mom put my curly 4C hair in many different types of styles in elementary school, and I often came in with a different style each day. As you can imagine, my hair was very different from other girls in my class, and these girls had never really seen my hair type before.

"Can I touch your hair? It's so exotic!" They'd say to me nearly every day. I'd typically say yes, mainly because I didn't understand that letting them rub on my hair was wrong, and that I wanted them to like me. But every time they'd touch my hair, it felt as if I was a dog being petted, treated like some kind of 'exotic' animal. I didn't realize until years later that they never actually liked me, and that they just wanted to touch my "exotic" hair. Curly hair was like a foreign concept to them. They'd also exclaim how fluffy and poofy my hair was, comparing it to a sheep's wool. I hated this. I always wanted to tell them my hair wasn't an object, a fidget for their amusement. It's just hair. Nearly every day of that school year, I got my hair patted and rubbed tied to a weird comment or remark about the style or the texture. I knew these girls didn't know any better, so each time I'd let it slide. My mom would always ask me what happened to my hair when I got home, why it was more frizzy than when I left, and I'd respond, "I don't know," knowing she didn't like how my hair got messed up almost every single day.

Years later, I'm realizing how backhanded these comments really were, whether the girls realized it or not. I've come clean to my mom about what really happened when I was at school and why I'd come home with messy hair. She's still upset with those girls to this day.

To this day, I'm not friends with any of these girls. I mean, why would I be? They're still very backhanded about everything and it's clear they haven't taken the time to culture themselves, I notice this still even as I haven't talked to them in years.

No one asks me if they can touch my hair anymore, not even when it's in braids. I don't know if it's because anyone cares anymore, or if it's because I typically wear protective styles now, but I do know that if anyone ever asks again, I'm definitely saying "**No.**" And I won't take any backhanded "compliments" either.

Casper Boll

Age: 16, Grade: 10

School Name: Lindbergh High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Sandra Olive

Category: Poetry

Cosmic Teatime

i see you've one foot out the door,
but could you spare a moment more?

please, just a minute, only one
to hear goodbyes from lovely Sun:

"i loved to shine upon your face
and warm you with my bright embrace;
i left at night, i'm sorry, i know
but i missed you then, and shall too if you go!"

take your gloves off, have a seat;
you know you'll miss Sun's loving heat!

but if her words can't make you swoon,
perhaps hear from romantic Moon:

"i loved to rock you to your sleep,
i watched you in your bed, so sweet;
i gave you dreams of love and sorrow,
'till i was sent off in the morrow;
i'd love to shine on you again
please stay with us, my nighttime friend!"

the Moon's loved you since you were small
from midnight in summer to evenings in fall

come closer dear, have some more tea
and a chat with our dear friend, the Sea:

"although i rained, and though i poured
although i reigned a mighty hoard
you caught my raindrops in your hands
and in my puddles you would dance
when you were young, you taught me
to be wild, happy, and carefree
i'll send you one last wave goodbye
but could you stay, or at least try?"

now we all sit by the fire
sipping tea until we tire:

you and me and Sun and Moon

and Sea, and all the others too;

thank you for staying and listening, dear;
we want you to know: we're happy you're here.

William Brown

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Lee's Summit West High School, Lees Summit, MO

Educator: Rachel Kline

Category: Short Story

Jacksons Normal Life

12/32/3924

Attention All Humans of 2036,

In three days, you will be sacrificed for the greater good of the future world. You have proved only to cause destruction, war, and corruption. By destroying this version of the world, we plan to generate a warp in the timeline which will ultimately rewrite the structure of humanity. Only a small percentage of you will survive this event, and those who do will have the opportunity to repopulate, as long as it develops without the attributes of shame, currency, or authority. This project is called Adam and Eve's Second Chance (A.E.S.C.). We wish the best of luck to the survivors and remember you're in charge of your destiny.

Regards,
A.E.S.C.

It was June 7th, 2036, when the world received this message. The unsightly words were plastered on every social media platform, streaming service, TV, and radio station across the world. For the first 72 hours, the world seemed to stop as everyone took in the surreal information. Only two years ago we had gotten out of a global pandemic and life seemed to be normal again. Now in three days, the world was going to end. I look through my window and see children being called back to their homes. As I sit in the kitchen eating a chili dog made with chili of questionable age, I see my neighbors go into a complete panic and scurry all the children inside. Finishing my meal, I noticed police drones began to murmur through the streets. In denial at first, I assumed this was a neighborhood prank, but within thirty minutes I saw the small town of Chrysanthemum, Texas crumble. I quickly isolated myself knowing that my childhood home was no more.

That night I didn't sleep. Fearing for my life kept me awake and trembling, when I looked at the clock it was 7:30 am. I was only fifteen and my parents were out of town for a business trip. The night was filled with the sound of broken glass and sirens. Electronic communication has been cut off due to all the panic. I hadn't talked to my parents in almost twenty-four hours and now I couldn't if I wanted. Sometime around midnight, an intruder entered my home while I was hiding in the basement. The absence of a car must've made them think no one was home. I forgot to bring something to protect me so all I could do was stay silent and hide. "I should've grabbed my daddy's gun." I thought to myself. I hear footsteps slowly approaching the stairway, creek, Creek, CREEKreek. I panic as I realized there was nowhere to run if they found me. I see a pile of blankets and quickly hide under them and wait. For hours I sat there in silence. Suddenly I felt my stomach begin to betray me, It was the rancid chili dog I had eaten. I could feel my stomach inflate more and more with the putrid gas of chili and hot dog until... Boom! In a matter of seconds, the room wreaked of a sour smell that consumed the room. I didn't hear footsteps so I assumed I was in the clear. As I lifted the blankets I see two feet pointing at me. "I'm not gonna hurt you." a soft raspy voice says. He sounded like he was a smoker. I stay silent and slowly take the blankets off my head. The voice was unfamiliar to me, so I was still cautious. I look to see an old man in his seventies tower over like a giant. He had a grin on his face like he was going to say a snarky comment to me. I still sit there quietly. "Your parents told me you'd be down here." the man said. The shock on my face makes the man chuckle. "How do you know my parents?" I said in disbelief. He chuckled again but started to cough. Once he finalized his coughing attack, he explained what happened. "Your parents aren't the people you think they are. They are spies from the future. All the business trips were trips to different places in time. They had the job of making records of events that happened in the past to evaluate humanity." My jaw dropped as I stared at him in complete confusion and then realized that the man kinda looked like me. "Are we related?" I asked. He took a long pause thinking of the best way to explain his scenario. "

Jackson Greene, I am your son, Jackson Greene junior, but you can call me Junior.” “You’re lying,” I say. “You don’t have to believe me but we do have to leave,” He exclaimed. I saw no other choice figuring there was nowhere to run and the world was going to end in less than three days. He leads me upstairs where we find an egg-shaped machine, and says, “How do you like my ride?” “It’s an egg” I mumbled. Junior stared at me like he took offense to my reaction. I laughed but Junior quickly attempted to silence me. “Why am I being told what to do by my son!” I yell out loud. Pushing his fingers to his lips, he quickly silenced me again as if someone was watching us. The giant egg looked scratched and beat up like it was in a demolition derby. Before entering the beat-up egg I look outside. It was surreal In only 12 hours my neighborhood was in ruins. At that moment I knew I had to leave. I step into the egg and quietly wait for what will happen next. My home was ruined, my parents are still gone, I’m with a stranger who called himself my son, even though he is 55 years older than me, and to top the cake, I’m in a time-traveling egg. At this point, I accept the fact that my life was never going to be the same. The door on the egg closes And Jackson and I sit together having pre/post-father-son time.

The trip in time was surprisingly long. You would think traveling thousands of years into the future would only take a matter of moments but it was the equivalent of traveling across the country. We had to stop every few hundred years or so to refill on solar energy and relieve ourselves. In total, the trip took almost 2 days. I slept most of the way Because recent events left me sleepless. Spoiler alert in 2180 the London bridge falls again for different reasons of course. We finally reach year 3924. I was shocked by what I saw. On Multiple screens, there were timelines all experiencing similar crises. I look up to see a sign saying production room. I take a closer look at the screens and see my timeline. It had a sign that said season 2 on it. I realized that something was off. “JUNIOR!!!!” I shout in fear. “what is this?” He looks at me with a straight face and says, “television. “ “I thought you said that the world was going to end?” I say. Then he explains, “ In 3824 we learned how to isolate timelines so they wouldn’t affect future generations. We then had the brilliant idea to use it for entertainment purposes. We embed world-ending events into your world and record their reactions. Your timeline specifically went through a pandemic we set up but somehow survived. Your survival made ratings double because you were the first. But people wanted to see the end so we put you through another crisis. The only thing we did this time has broadcast a message and chaos was the product. We told them they were in charge of their destinies but they collectively didn’t listen and went into a panic. This started world war three with nuclear warfare. Your parents are okay and are here, but we couldn’t tell you everything so you would leave.” I stared at the screen in despair as I see the bloody mess my world has become. All my so-called family and friends were in that timeline and all I could do was watch as their bodies rotted. And then in a rampage of hysteria, I blacked out.

It’s June 10th, 8:00 am. I just woke up trying to figure out if what I just witnessed was real or not. I looked around and realized I’m in my room at home. I look out the window and everything is back to normal. But what I had just witnessed was so vivid and real. I see my parents pull up in the driveway and I start crying I don’t know what is real or fake anymore. My parents walked in and said, “we need to leave now.” Without packing anything we left. I didn’t know where we were going or why but as the day went on, my memory of what happened quickly begins to fade. We traveled to Colorado and pulled into the driveway of a new house. We walk in and everything is furnished. My room even had clothes in it. My memory is still fading and by the next morning, I’m under the impression that this is where I live and have always lived. My Mom and dad leave for another business trip, and I’m left alone once again. I never know where they go, and I don’t even know their real name besides mom and dad. They never share childhood memories or even how they met. All I know is that they are my so-called parents. On the kitchen table, I see a note that says “Happy birthday dad” from Jackson Greene junior. I forgot it was my birthday and I’m 16 now. And I wonder who Jackson Greene junior is. I toss the note on my dresser and go back to sleep. Before I do I wonder why Jackson Jr. remembered my birthday but my parents never do. I was still tired so I didn’t overthink it and went to bed. when I woke up the note was gone. "I must've imagined it." I think to myself.

Honorah Brozio

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Nerinx Hall High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Jennifer Staed

Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy

Land of the Free

The slab of cement is cool against my butt. They don't let us have anything except a gray T-shirt when we're in our rooms and nothing while we work. The shirts are extra soft and stretchy which seems nice but I think it's made this way so no one can strangle themselves. I wish I had something to strangle myself with. Because five months ago, I was kidnapped by white supremacists and they ruined my fucking life.

You're probably wondering how it happened. It's a funny story really.

It was normal. So pitifully normal. I sat on the couch with my family wishing we didn't have to engage in family bonding time. We were watching *Pride and Prejudice* because it was my sister's turn to pick. For some reason she only liked ancient movies.

"Gimme the remote," my sister grumbled at me, her eyes locked with Mr. Darcy's as she poked me in the shoulder.

I rolled my eyes, not that she would have noticed, and shook a dramatically pointed finger at the coffee table where the remote conveniently sat. "It's literally right there."

"Well can you get it?"

"It's closer to you than me."

Mom chimed in with, "Shh, I want to hear what they're saying." This was pretty stupid if you ask me because she was adding to the chatter. Dad just snored in his recliner and enjoyed the beauty of his eyelids.

I leaned back and used my sister's knee as a pillow. "You're being stupid," I said.

I felt my human pillow shake me off. She kneed me in the stomach. "Get off weirdo."

She finally gave up and reached for the remote. I kicked it off the table before she got to it.

"Popcorn? I'm going to get popcorn to distract myself from the ungodly amount of sideburns I'm being offended with."

"Get me some. Oh, and a water," Mom said.

My sister gave me the finger. Dad responded by snoring extra loud. I got four bowls.

Just as I started to pull the first round of Pop Secret from the microwave our house blew up.

I don't even remember getting blown up, just the ringing that filled my ears and the red kitchen tiles flying everywhere. I ran to the living room only to see my family in pieces, literally. The TV, though cracked, had Elizabeth's face frozen in a loving smile.

I cried loudly, kept touching their blown up faces and shaking their burnt shoulders. But what I should've done was run.

A man heard me. He tossed me over his shoulder and threw me in a van.

There was a man in the driver's seat who looked much like the one who picked me up. They wore uniforms of dark green with a white logo that said "WAR." A red upside-down cross sat beneath "WAR" and that's when my blood ran cold. "Western American Restoration," the most notorious group of motherfuckers in all of West America. After America split into the West and East, the West obviously became known as the most racist half due to the fuckers that moved here for "freedom" but I didn't know we would officially turn into Confederate country.

California had been taken over by a bunch of boys with a superiority complex.

I heard two men outside the van bickering.

"Did you get all of them?" Guy One said.

"Yeah," Guy Two said.

"Yeah? What does 'yeah' mean? There's only one."

"Yeah that's the only one we got. There wasn't anyone else."

"One? Only one for the entire street?" Guy One said.

I could practically feel Guy Two tuck his tail between his legs. "One survivor, yeah."

“Yeah? Just one chink for all those houses we blew up? This street is supposed to be full of them. Next time, try not to kill everyone. We’re gonna look like a bunch of fuck ups back at camp with one.”

Guy One opened the passenger door and the van roared. Guy Two climbed in back with me and held his gun in my face.

After a long awkward ride, we got to a place for “people like me.” It’s a camp full of non-white people with vaginas. We pulled up next to rows of other vans of the same color and logo and the first thing they did was shove me and other newbies into the “courtyard” as they called it. But it’s not really a courtyard. It’s a big dirt square surrounded by chain link and barbed wire.

Everyone in WAR was a white man in the same uniform. The red Saint Peter’s cross was small on the front over their uniforms and large on the back along with their motto “WAR is Peace.” Unoriginal if you ask me.

We were stripped naked, because they believed in embracing the beauty of the natural body, and hosed down, because they cared about hygiene. They gave me a tattoo right between my tits that said, “rice eater” and I was really happy because my parents said I’d have to be forty and they’d have to be dead before I got a tattoo and a big beautiful like this would have cost at least a grand but this was for free so I was grateful.

A Black girl got one that said “slave” and several more got the N-word. I think they could have been a bit more creative but seeing as their motto and logo were pure plagiarism I didn’t expect much. If it were me I’d call myself something like, “karate kid,” or “Ms. Rona.” They made a Muslim girl eat pork and a Mexican kid sing Despacito. You know, typical white supremacist past-times.

That day, I was still a dumb piece of shit smartass.

“Hey,” I said to one of the Warheads. That’s their nickname. The Warheads. Overly sour and equally as disgusting.

But this wasn’t just any dumb guard fucker. He was their leader. He wore a different kind of jacket, a brown one with “WAR” in gold Times New Roman.

He turned to me.

“The Nazis did this torturing shit better than you,” I said. I was a stupid naked weak little kid who was tired and angry and ran my mouth for nothing. “Come on, hit me. Make me scream, you pussy.”

He came at me like a provoked kindergartner. He slapped me so hard blood spurted out of my nose and then he twisted my nipples so hard I thought they’d fall off. I didn’t scream though.

Leader Guy took my bony chin in his meaty white hand. He did it gently like it was precious China.

“My name’s Kevin,” he said. “And I’m not going to make you scream. I’m going to ruin you.”

Then Kevin decked me real hard and they had to drag me to my room by my hair because it’s a good handle for dragging they said and they gave me a T-shirt for free and wasn’t that so nice of them.

Later that first day, we were all rounded up in a room with a projector.

“Good evening ladies, it’s so nice to see you all in one place. Today is November 21, 3140 if you wanted to know. I’ll start by introducing myself. I’m Kevin and this is orientation time for you new recruits.” Recruits. That’s what they call us. “I know you’re all confused, scared maybe. But this is a place for growth, for learning.”

While Kevin blabbered his slides showed pictures of smiling “recruits” doing the tasks they gave us. “You all are bits of slime, dirt that isn’t fit even for the bottom of my shoe. We don’t *hate* you though, don’t associate us with hate. We’re just trying to figure out how to fix your nasty habits. You all weren’t raised right. We’re giving you a second chance, a chance to make yourself useful to the new society WAR is working to create here in the Western American Restoration. And be thankful because you’ve been lucky to have made it here. We couldn’t save every one of you. Even now, some of you will succeed and some will fail. If you complete your recruitment you get to, level up as they say, and join a place designed for you. But for now, you’re here so we can sort the teachable and unteachable.”

For the first time in my life, I was angry I lived here. I knew West America had serious racism problems but at least we weren’t raging communists like the East. Just like anyone else I wanted liberal and justice for all.

When I’m not sitting in my cell, I’m naked and working on whatever crap we work on that day. We vein lots of shrimp here. I’m getting really tired of eating shrimp by the way because it’s all they feed us once a day. We do laundry and cook better food for the Warheads and build simple box like buildings made of cinder blocks. They don’t let us talk to one another so we don’t start being friendly and they slap me if I monkey around like if I start dancing or singing.

I really miss *Pride and Prejudice*.

WAR is a big deal. I knew of them before all this shit but I always waved them off as silly racists. Violent? Of course, they were known for hate crime shootings and protest bombings, but ready to take over and start Civil War II? No. if anything I thought they would’ve died down by now, thought someone would’ve made it illegal to be an asshole.

I guess I was naive about what our country, land of the free, would turn out to be. They just rolled up to my

house with bombs and started a society of shit. Obviously, I should have noticed. They made the news from time to time but they were those things you see on TV and assume it will never affect you. You send thoughts and prayers, get angry even, but never assume it could ever be you.

Now I'm sitting on my slab of cement trying to drone out the sound of my own breathing by scraping the wall with my nails. My breath and heartbeat, the only music that fills this place, is too much for me. I prepare for another weekend alone, because they believe in free weekends, a weekend where my mind runs wild with desolate thoughts. But the door swings open with a clang.

"Get up," says a Warhead with a long gun.

My body is a clammy mess. It has forgotten how to move. They never bother me on the weekends. No one ever comes in here unless it's Monday and they're demanding that I surrender my shirt so I can work in nude. Right now I'm half naked and for some reason, suddenly worried about my modesty.

"What the fuck," I mutter. In the hall, he rips off my shirt and tosses it in a rolling bin. I look down the hall to see more Warheads doing the same to everyone.

He tosses me into a pile of other girls. The clump of bodies is herded down the hall.

"Hey," I say. I nudge a girl next to me. I feel people's breath down my back and their trickling sweat on my exposed bum.

"What's going on?" I stumble forward. A large door awaits us. It's the door to the courtyard.

The girl next to me shakes. She's Hispanic. Mexican. Brazilian. I'm not sure. Anything but white or else she wouldn't be here.

"I, I don't know. They've never done this before."

A Black girl on my right leans in and confirms my worst fears. "They're done with us. We're target practice."

The first girl shivers and then breaks into tears.

The Black girl manages to shake my hand as we march toward doom. "What? Hi nice to meet you too, I'm Hailey by the way." She smiles maniacally. "You think they wouldn't get bored of us? It's almost been a whole year for me. I'm surprised they haven't popped each of our heads off by now."

The first girl cries harder.

"Why do you sound so sure?" I don't know why I ask.

Hailey scoffs. "Because. We were a little game for them. We showed off their power. And now that they're done proving themselves as supreme overlords they're gonna twist our ethnic little skulls off like bottle caps. Forget them 'fixing us.' They didn't want to fix us. They wanted free labor. Now they're making room for healthier, stronger people."

If I ever really doubted Hailey's theory, the clunks of our bare footsteps bringing us closer to doom made me reconsider. We were almost out of the building, almost in the courtyard.

We stopped and I saw the tip of a dusty brown head of hair. I was near the back of the horde of people so I didn't hear the first part of his speech. His. Kevin's. "Jarel, open the door for these ladies."

The door opened. We walked until we were fully surrounded by the courtyard's dirt floor and chain link walls. Kevin and another Warhead, Jarel, leaned against one of the walls. Warheads with rifles flanked them. Jarel was taller than Kevin but was visibly less intimidating. While Kevin had the stance of an alpha wolf, Jarel stood with hunched shoulders and flitting eyes.

Hailey stiffened next to me.

She looked at me and didn't even try to keep her voice down. "No one's making it out alive. I should've known." She sighs. "My dad is one of them."

I swallowed.

"Stay close?" I ask the Scared Girl and Hailey. I try to keep my voice steady but it comes out weak.

Scared Girl grabs my hand. It's drenched in sweat. She digs her nails into my skin and rests her head against mine. Perfect strangers could be turned into best friends when the situation called. And my situation is that I'm about to piss myself.

Kevin had still been blabbering but he stopped to single out Hailey. Of all the people he could pick on right now. "Hailey." He says her name like she's an old friend.

"Come here."

When she doesn't move a Warhead drags Hailey from the group until her bare toes almost touch Kevin's steel-toed boots. I know they're steel because I've been kicked with them.

This next part will confirm that I am stupid. I was forming a crazy plan that would probably end up with me flopping like a fish in my own blood.

I ran toward Hailey in three giant leaps. I think Scared Girl was trying to hold me back but before I knew it, I was standing right next to Kevin. I grabbed Hailey around the middle with all my strength and tried to pull her

back but she stood her ground.

“Hailey here didn’t improve her ways and neither did any of you,” Kevin said addressing the group. “You have failed.”

Jesus fuck. Does this man have to be so dramatic?

Everyone started to panic. I clung to Hailey.

“Let’s get this going,” I heard Kevin mutter to Jarel. Kevin, though equally pleased with our intimate deaths, was a lot more composed than Jarel. Jarel laughed heartily and took the first shot right at Hailey’s head.

“Keep it clean boys!” Kevin hollered. The massacre had begun.

I let go of Hailey’s body, run, and feel a bullet zip past my ear. I look up and I’m not surprised Kevin’s the one who shot at me. I say a quick Ava fucking Maria and look straight into this man’s eyes. Kevin looks at me with the same satisfaction as the first day. His small sneer turns into a full expression of glee as he raises his gun again. I charge him.

“You sick fuckhead I’m gonna fuck your mother and cut your sick fucking daddy’s dick off!”

I scream all of this while I ram into his chest. He shoves me away and kicks me to the ground. He slowly presses his foot into my stomach until I think I’m going to barf. Then Kevin hits me in the head with his gun and walks away. I curl into a ball. Minutes later I peel open one of my eyes and everyone is dead.

“This is the last one. Who wants to practice a trick shot on our resident dog eater?” Kevin saunters to the other end of the courtyard and hikes his rifle over his shoulder in a way that makes him look like Jesus hanging on the cross only, he isn’t very holy. The other sons of bitches cackle and ready their guns and line up behind Kevin.

“Who wants a shot?” But no one moves. It’s like they know Kevin has to go.

“No one?” No one. Kevin, fueled by arrogance, puts his gun over his left shoulder with his back toward me. He pulls out a shiny spoon and aims. What a showoff.

“I smell soy sauce in the courtyard today don’t you boys?”

They all laugh.

“Uncurl yourself roly polly.” I didn’t. Obviously.

“One...two...”

And at the same time the line of motherfuckers all said “three.”

Kevin fired and the bullet hit me in the side. The space between my hips and ribs exploded in pain. I heaved my chest, screamed, thrashed, gasped and put on the best show of my life.

And the fuckers did exactly what I wanted.

The whole damn lot of them started clapping. Kevin probably grinned so much he tore skin.

“Alright, alright shows over. Cleanup crew will come tomorrow. The chink is bound to bleed out in no time,” Kevin said.

They all left. Not a single one looked my way as they left. They just slapped Kevin on the back or laughed a hyena laugh. I was left to plot my escape.

Honorah Brozio

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Nerinx Hall High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Jennifer Staed

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Furry a Friend

I think we have all experienced the twisted tragedy of accidentally killing a pet. Common incidents include stepping on lizards, hugging bunnies, and squishing mice. Childhood pets are charming, fluffy, and a great way to teach kids life lessons. Your child will scream and cry “Bring him back Mommy! Bring him back! You told me you could do everything!” after you tell him “Sorry son, but Spots died at the vet last night” when really you put Spots down after a long battle with colon cancer. You can’t argue that pets make memories that last forever. For me, Sugar the hamster had to bite the bullet so I could get over my fear of dead bodies.

Here is a bit of background information on how Child Me felt about death. Death was a lingering taste in my mouth, every account pouring me full of rigor mortis. Sometimes it made me squirm in my skin. When I was very young, during summer camp, I took a field trip to the park and passed a flattened squirrel boiling on the pavement so intensely that I thought it would burst. I did all I could to suppress the chunks of vomit that threatened to slide up my throat and ended up standing in front of this thing crying and unable to look away. After that, I chose to blind myself to the dead every chance I could because I did not want to experience their nothingness. Bodies were nothing more than gruesome strips of deteriorating flesh and piles of limp limbs and cold blood. So dying, decaying, darkness, it all hugged me like a wet paper towel. I never slept without my nightlight or without a door cracked enough to let in a glorious triangle of yellow. In my pink butterfly sheets, I closed my eyes but didn’t let myself fall asleep so my vision would turn into the deep splotchy purple and greens you see when you close your eyes for too long, and I wondered if this is what I’d see when I died.

I didn’t like the way my room felt at night, all shadows of actual things and allowing the possibilities of terrible fantasies. Sometimes it followed me into the daytime, a glance at my smiling mother driving me to school would sometimes be a scenario of her dying in a car crash. My dad standing at his laptop doing salesman work could be him bleeding out from a slit throat. Every time I saw knives sitting in the sink with droplets of water, their ridges covered in crumbs, I thought of their potential to slice and dice human flesh. Sometimes my worries followed me to sleep as well; my grandma being carried in a funeral parade or a classmate bleeding out from his head.

Yeah, I was a messed-up kid.

But everything changed after I got my hamster. It was third grade and for my birthday my best friend got me a hamster, Sugar. We had a dog, of course, a cat at some point, and some fish that didn’t last long, but Sugar was the first thing to be wholly mine. I took videos of her every day and watched you run around in your pink plastic ball. Every morning I opened the top of her cage and inserted a brown almond-sized treat into her mouth. She took it straight from my fingers and her chubby blush-colored cheeks puffed in and out. And sleeping wasn’t half as scary with Sugar active well into the strange hours of the night. For one beautiful year, my room at night was filled with the earthy scent of hamster bedding and the sound of a hamster wheel. For one year, I had a furry friend the color of coarse sugar and pink teacup roses. For one year, death didn’t concern me at all.

That is until the morning I walked into my room and saw her die.

Honestly, I should’ve seen that one coming. Those little boogers can die of a sneeze. The kid who gifted me this little creature had lost about three herself: one to the air vents, one to the inside of a piano, and one that supposedly ran away and still lived happily doing whatever hamsters do after a great cage escape.

Sugar was climbing to the top of her cage to receive her daily treat but halfway up the rungs of the hamster-sized ladder, her small cream-colored paws lost their grasp and she fell into the soft bedding that was a sea of pencil shavings. I stood in the doorway watching as her eyes started to pop and her mouth formed a tiny O of confusion. I expected myself to cry or want to throw up or feel my insides turn to knots, but for the first time in my life, I did nothing. Nothing but come close to the cage and inspect her more thoroughly.

I contemplated the actuality of corpses. Already her fur seemed less furry, her eyes little more than beads laying in her sockets. How quickly a living thing became so dead. How quickly her bones became so delicate, so

easy to snap.

Sugar was scooped up by Mom. Only after I was relieved of her body could I cry, could I feel everything that came with the loss of her. I didn't go to school that day. We had to leave her in the downstairs freezer for a good long while because my grandma died next and human funerals typically take priority.

My grandma died in January and school that day was particularly good, though I'm not sure why, and I was all smiles as my parents picked me up. Parents, that was odd. They never came to get me from school together.

Looking back, Mom looked watery only I didn't realize it then. I was too consumed by my happiness.

"We have something to tell you when we get home," Mom said from the passenger seat.

I didn't cry. Even now I wish I did because it would have made everything more normal. I cried over a hamster and roadkill for Chrissake but not my grandma who lived with us for seven years? What the hell was wrong with me? I was nine and very oblivious to things that didn't revolve around me and Grandma dying wasn't cry-worthy I guess. I sat on the couch blankly as Mom broke into tears. I snuck a peak into Grandma's room. The lights were still on but her bed was stripped and empty.

At the funeral I expected my parents to want me to look at her remains because for some reason people always insist on looking at dead things and their ruined bodies and done-up faces. They expected me to say "goodbye" to a thing. But it was not the person anymore and it was not closure. If anything her room held more of her with its lotion, powder, medicine, and holy water. With its crucifix, overly dried Palm Sunday palms we forgot to burn every year, and TV still set to Wheel of Fortune.

Let me tell you, funerals and wakes in my family are as plentiful as weddings and birthdays. In my eighteen years of life, I've been a guest at at least eleven funerals (but who's counting) which I assumed was normal until I asked my friends about how many funerals they've attended. Every time I went to a funeral I would ignore the body laying in front of the room and take in the church. (Ok this is a really important sidenote, hear me out. Why do we eat communion host and drink wine with a dead body right in front of us? The priest really gives out the bread right with a corpse behind him. And don't get me started on wakes; wakes are like a half-business cocktail hour half-autopsy session with a buffet and drinks on one side and an open casket on the other. Who did this, like who thought "Let's eat with a dead relative in the same room because that's perfectly normal." At least the cheesy garlic breath won't bother one person in the room." I'm just saying it's got to fail a few basic health standards.) Some churches were modern-styled and minimalist, with a near barren box of white paint and straight-cut pews, while some were old and extravagant, with a vault filled with carved door frames and whimsical stone arches. I would look many places but I refused to look in caskets and behold myself to the mannequin-like forms of heavily made-up stiff faces. Whenever I saw a dead thing, roadkill, human, or otherwise, I didn't see a remembrance of life; I saw something dead.

But my parents never made me look at funerals and they didn't start. I usually stood in the back while everyone walked down the aisle to kiss the thing or hold its hand. I don't know what compelled me but of all the funerals, Grandma's was the first I dared look at. Everyone was saying how "good" she looked and how "life-like" a job those morticians did but I still didn't like it. I didn't agree. The lobes of their ears were always white, so white, their skin so papery. How did people coo over a thing so grotesque?

I didn't want to vomit or scream or cry when I saw Grandma. I didn't feel much of anything.

By the spring we could have Sugar's funeral.

"Sweetie, do you have any last words?" Mom asked me. She, me, and my two best friends stood in a semicircle around a garden stone with a cheesy quote about "remembering good times" that I'd picked out the hour before. Sugar sat in a hot pink gift box from Target a foot under our backyard next to the two fish, a cat, a couple of dogs, and Lord knows what other animals our family buried. But for legal reasons that last sentence is a joke and I have no idea about any pets buried in the backyard.

I shook my head solemnly. My eyes were watery.

"Does anyone have any words for Sugar?" Mom asked my friends.

The kid who'd given me Sugar looked down at the garden stone and said, "She sure was furry."

And then we all clambered onto the trampoline while we waited for the pizza. Sugar was celebrated the proper nine-year-old way, with a bang if I do say so myself.

Since Grandma's funeral, I think I've been to three or four. Every time I took a look without a feeling of impending doom. I got rid of my nightlight and I don't mind roadkill anymore. I stopped using a nightlight a few years later even though I still appreciated a bit of cracked door. I don't stay up to think about dying, at least not in a way that's scary. Sometimes I think about my own funeral and I don't mean that in a grotesque or depressing way. I just want it to be a party without anyone crying because I don't want to waste a bunch of people's time and money on a whole afternoon of intensely smelling flowers or pre-made food. Funerals mean a whole lot of people who don't actually know you will show up and they deserve a good time. I want everyone to wear their fanciest outfit and it doesn't need to be black but if you want to fine, but it doesn't need to be. I want everyone to look like guests of the

Met Gala and to eat and drink a lot and dance with a whole long soundtrack of my favorite songs but no sad ones. I don't even want to be there; I want to be donated and you can use casket and crematory money for something actually cool like a popcorn and skeeball machine. I don't need a big speech. I just need someone to say, "She sure was BLANK" and whatever adjective that one brave soul who speaks at my funeral thinks I was.

Honorah Brozio

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Nerinx Hall High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Jennifer Staed

Category: Novel Writing

13

Brief summary:

THE YEAR IS 3167 AND, CHARLEE has a strange life. On top of having absent and absent-minded parents, dealing with stuck-up bullies, and earning worse-than-awful grades at school, she is whisked away to a summer internship with intentions quite unlike the ones advertised in the brochure. Wanting home for the first time in her life, she will have to use undiscovered wits to save herself and a few new friends from being locked in a basement for the rest of their lives. JAE is destined for greatness. Raised by a mysterious genius, there's no teenager smarter than him. He would have been satisfied living the rest of his days on his secluded island home, researching, calculating, and forcing kidnapped children into providing data that will revolutionize the future of medicine. You know, what geniuses often do. But when Jae's comfortable routine is interrupted by a girl with flip-flops and poor handwriting, his definition of normal is rewritten entirely. ONE STRANGE EXPERIMENT TO SAVE THE UNSAVABLE, TWO TEENAGERS WITH DIFFERENT AGENDAS, AND A DANCING BLUE DOG. On an island where geniuses thrive and those deemed stupid fail, will anyone be willing to pull the plug on an experiment gone wrong?

Excerpt:

EXCERPT: 13

JAE

It wasn't until we were sitting across from each other both playing the best game of Avoid Eye Contact, that I noticed Ralph's lack of hair. I didn't memorize his hairstyle or anything, but I could have sworn it was never this sallow and blotchy. Maybe a slip-up with the trimmers. Must be an old-timer when it comes to that kind of stuff. Perhaps he attempted a new trend and managed more of a zen garden than a hot celebrity look. Not that he could ever look halfway decent.

This was ridiculous. Pointless. Forty minutes scrolling through files I've familiarized myself with hoping, *praying*, by some miracle he'll catch on and I can start making some actual progress. Time for a little pop quiz to steady old Ralphie's brain. Or, you know, mash it up more.

"What's the subject's name?"

"Charlee," he peeped, eyes down, lips barely opening.

"How about a last name?" I thought that was a given when I asked the first time around.

"Algers." This required a little more movement of the jaw and more syllables, making him uncomfortable.

"Parents? Last name included."

He pointed his eyes to a corner in the room and said, "Tan Al-Algers and Kenni Algers. Last name taken from Kenni."

"Why?"

"Tan said he thought Algers was better than Eierkuchenessen and Kenni, and Kenni agreed." He twitched. Roach.

"Where does she live?"

"New York, city, New York City. In the lower class part of town."

"I thought New York was a Dajian state, a unified progressive state without class discrimination. Tell me Ralph, why would Charlee live in a 'poor' neighborhood then?"

Ralph thought for a moment either to gather his words or actually think. I don't think the latter was possible. "They proclaim themselves a true Dajian State where everyone has fair resources but to live a-a, decent, um decent

life, Charlee had to um, she-she—”

“She what?”

He closed his eyes for a second. “She raced in illegal bike races for money because Kenni wanted her in a good school. Schools are technically-tech, technically, free for everyone but the-the, only go-good ones are private schools.”

Ralph heaved a breath like that much talking exerted him.

“And her father?”

“He doesn’t send-send them money anymore so Charlee-Char, Charlee gives her m-m-mom money and sa-says, says, it’s from her-her da-da-dad-dad.”

Every word was a battle and the longer we talked the more he stumbled. “So, Ralph, how long have I been observing her?”

“Four years.”

“No. Four years, three weeks, five hours, and twelve minutes. I held my breath until the second she was on Happy Water Institute soil. My whole existence has been for this. She has been the answer to everything important. Charlee Juan Algers is the only thing that is going to make any difference here. Not you, not me, not the good Lord above. Got that?”

Too many words at once. He curled up his lip and looked at me like I had just announced the start of a world war.

“Yes-yes, yea, yeah.”

“Any questions? Gainer?” Ralph Gainer. A perfect name for a perfect fool.

“Uh, uh wh-why, why are we-we going o-o-over a per-per-person re-re-report?”

I crushed my coffee cup to freak him out. That was kind of mean but I needed to put my stupid intake somewhere. Luckily, I had drunk most of the liquid but the few drops that remained spattered onto Ralph’s white lab coat. I never understood those, why have a thing so pure every speck of stain showed? It wasn’t like we had a messy job anyway. Ralph worked with files more than he did with chemicals.

But instead of the crisp fresh out of the laundry white scientists stereotypically wore, Ralph’s coat bore no sign of leisurely taking notes and writing papers. His was covered top to bottom with dust and unknown filth. Are those spots of blood I see? Rust. Yes, that was most definitely rust that sprinkled his clothing. Happy Waters isn’t cleaned very often. He probably got lost and bumped against a wall causing unclean chalks of dirt to rain on him. Of course, the idiot must have stumbled to the basement where we had flooding and therefore, rust.

I inhaled through my mouth and asked, “What kind of science do you like Gainer?” How nice of me, making small talk with a scarecrow. A brainless, straw-filled thing sewn together with thread and rags.

He looked at me as if the question were trivial and leaned back a smidge when I called him Gainer. Gainer was perfect for a guy like him. He had plenty to gain; it was just hard to know if he had the capability or not. What if he didn’t gain any thoughts? What if those three fast years in college were nothing more than a piggyback ride off the hard work of his brilliant brother?

We sat there for a long time, me leaning towards his stained lab coat, him stiff in his chair, mouth grappling for words.

“What? Nothing? You don’t like science?”

When I broke the silence, Ralph, for once, went still. His tick magically disappeared along with my patience.

“Then what are you still doing here!” I stood so quickly I knocked my chair over.

Ralph didn’t move. Only grasped at his rust encrusted coat for something to do with his hands. Rust. Rust, not blood. Rust. Not Eli’s broken, twisted spine. Rust. Certainly, it’s not my hand as it squeezes the handrail. It’s rust, and the cold white light of the lab tricking me into seeing something devious. There’s no hard cement wall soaking up a boy’s mandatory fluids. Rust. He’s fine. He’s fine, everyone is given a vaccine to prevent blood from spilling. He has the drug, he must have it. I have it. Airika has it.

“I said, whyareyoustillhere!” My words stumble and clump. “You can barely speak, you can’t understand a thing I say, you can’t think. Common sense could run up and smack you on your stupid skull and you still wouldn’t know how to act like a normal human. You should be in a mental ward, not a highly selective institution with the brightest minds in the world.”

He didn’t give any suggestion he was leaving.

“I said get out!” I stood up and the crushed cup flew out of my hand and into Ralph’s face. He jumped like a frightened cat. Literally, his back arched and his ears seemed to shrink to the floor.

“Go on now, you hate science. You don’t need to be here.”

CHARLEE

I sit on the floor in a puddle of my stupid hemophiliac blood. Anytime I get so much as a paper clip my blood gushes out quicker than the old Bible people during Exodus. I knew this, my kidnappers knew this, and that meant they didn't mind almost killing me for the sake of punishing me.

Now I have two fewer fingers and an extremely pissed-off mind. That meant I'd spent the past few hours yelling obscenities. Unfortunately, cursing couldn't scrub the floor clean of the red fluids that used to be in my body nor could it sew my fingers back on my shaking aching hand.

There are so many things I can't do now I'd never even thought about. I can't type properly, punch properly, interlace my fingers, count to ten, and most importantly, flip off that "genius" who walks around all high and mighty. If you didn't get it yet I'm talking about Jae, the owner of the most punchable face in the world.

For a genius, he isn't very sharp. He thinks he's smart because he knows a whole lot about stupid imaginary impossible pointless math theories or whatever at the age fifteen. Well guess what Jae, all the math in the world wouldn't prepare you to survive a single subway ride to Queens. Happy Water's big boss lady Airika tells him he's a special little fart but I think he got here just like the rest of us did. Head in a bag, hands tied behind your back. Speaking of Airika, I still haven't figured out why that fucknugget gave me a Lazer instead of letting me die.

Hours ago, she cracked open the door to find me in a fetal position clutching my middle fingerless hands. She smirked a little and tossed a Lazer in my steadily growing pool of blood. Once she left, I grabbed the Lazer and cauterized what little remained of my middle fingers. My hands looked good as new, that is if humans were born without middle fingers.

It must have been a last-minute change of heart because she let me bleed out pretty long. Whatever. Once I get used to fighting with eight fingers I am going to cut off something of hers and see how she likes it.

Eventually, after hours and hours and many years, I somehow fell asleep covered in blood, my hands hugged against my chest like a stuffed animal.

...

Bright light shocks me awake. A wave of nausea washes over me and it feels like I'd been put through a washing machine. Blank walls devoid of windows prevented any reasonable guess of the time. My feet, which once clinged to cheap plastic flip-flops, are bare and point straight up at a movable light fixture like at the dentist. Instead of my jacket sleeve, tape holding an IV sits in my arm. My arms rest, elbow creases up, like limp pool noodles. And instead of my blood, I lay on a bed. Actually, calling it a bed is generous. At most, it was a thinly cushioned frame of metal set up like a therapist recliner. Besides the numb headache that beats against my skull like a bouncing ball, I feel oddly relaxed and refreshed.

But if I could step back and look at myself, I think I'd look like a corpse on its way to the morgue. I would usually move, fight instead of freeze. There doesn't seem to be anything holding me down, but I am very comfy and too tired to do anything.

The IV line drips steadily and I breathe a sigh of satisfaction. I am being held hostage by a bunch of scientific psychos, but at least my veins are happy. But the beautiful sensation of life-saving fluids pouring into me halts. I feel one of the tubes rip out of my arm. I try to sit up but a wave of nausea hits me and I see spots. A gentle but forceful hand shoves me down.

"I wouldn't do that just yet." Jae's stupid face leans over mine. He stands behind the bed but walks over to my side.

My first instinct is to deck him but I'm not up for that. I notice Jae isn't as polished as usual. He's ruffled and flushed as if he ran here.

"The hell are you doing?" I say firmly as if he's interrupting. And he is. I was very peaceful.

"I know about your little outing last night." Jae towers over me but only because I am laying down. I see my attempted escape in his beady shark eyes. I'd wreaked havoc in the entire lower wing and lost fingers for it. Jae probably slept through the whole thing and found out from Airika's gloating voice.

"And?" I want so badly to shove my butchered hands in his face, show him what his boss he follows blindly did to me. But I remember her warning. Jae didn't know I was being like literally tortured. He thinks the subjects for the stupid projects are treated like royalty and that's ok to kidnap people if it's for the better of humanity. If he did find out, Airika promised she'd kill everyone I care about. That's not a lot of people but it's enough.

"Charlee, were you really so curious to see the lower level you had to sneak out unattended? In the middle of the night? You know I would have escorted you anywhere you like. The rust and bacteria you exposed yourself to down in that filthy basement have infected you. Your hands turned gangrenous in the night. You're lucky you only lost a few fingers. Airika acted fast and now you don't have to suffer."

He really thought that's what happened? I wanted to ask him how he explained my two middle fingers conveniently being the only thing that needed amputation. I also realized Airika only gave me that Lazer because it

created a clean line so she could give Jae this hogwash of a story.

“Right.”

“It’s that terrible neighborhood you live in. You’ve been harboring a serious infection for months now and this sent you over the edge.”

Ah yes. The filthy germ-ridden land of New York City. Surely if this kid was actually a genius he would have noticed some inconsistencies with his notes of me. The kid had years worth of videos, documents, messages, and photos of me, and yet he let Airika convince him I had a long-term hand infection with one silly story.

“Obviously,” I agreed.

Jae took a seat on the end of the bed just a touch away from squishing my feet. “I know you’re confused but you don’t need to worry. You’re part of my project.” His tone is so victorious I can practically hear him salivating at the thought of “his project” going the way he wants. “It’s going to change the future of rare diseases and I need you in pristine condition. And I need you to listen. Happy Waters is a big place and we don’t want you getting into anything dangerous.

“Jesus, you people are crazy.” I’m getting tired of hearing him talk about this every day.

“Do you know the trouble I went through last night cleaning up your mess? That alarm you set off put everyone on this and the next floor in panic.”

So he was involved with the chaos last night.

“Yeah that’s kinda what alarms are for. Jae, I did it on purpose so people would know I need help.” I know what you’re thinking, but I promise this was before I knew we were on a remote island.

“Tell me you were happier in that box on seventeenth street.”

“Who spit in your tea?” It was true. He was usually quite asshole but right now he was extra snippy.

“I’m not in a pleasant mood. Rough morning.”

“I’ll say. And by the way, stop saying stuff like ‘your box on seventeenth street.’ It’s not normal to go around dropping personal information like that. It reminds me you stalked me for years and memorized everything about me.”

“I was simply stating true information and suggesting living at your house is inferior to living at Happy Waters. Is that untrue?”

“Very.”

It unnerves me how little Jae knew about what was creepy and what was socially acceptable.

“Charlee, I know this is hard. But you’re the most important part of Project Revelation. I know everything I need to know.”

“I’m not your science fair project.”

“Why’d she pick you?” Jae says to himself more than me.

“Who is ‘she?’”

“Airika. I’m beginning to think you’re not the one. You’re nothing like what I observed.” Jae had a flash of realization like he judged my whole worth based on this small interaction.

“You’re just a normal kid,” he says.

“And you’re just a normal idiot.”

He’s up and pacing now. “Immature, impulsive, careless. I took all these flaws into account but they seemed to work so well on paper.”

I roll my eyes around my skull so many times this boy must notice but he ignores me. “I’m gonna need you to explain this whole shit show right now,” I say. “Not piece by piece, but everything, now.”

Jae leans over me. He rips one of the many tubes out of my arm. “I’m not supposed to be here right now,” he says. “And you need to act like you’re fine. Nothing happened last night.”

“Right because there’s no evidence of last night anywhere.”

Jae looks at my hands and shrugs. “All the other researchers have been informed of your emergency amputation.”

He pulls the last of the tubes and stuck a needle in my leg quite forcefully. A second later I slowly feel life coming back into my arms and legs.

“Ok.” I honestly want to stop worrying about this freak and collapse into a decent sleep.

“Last night you went out on a rampage—”

“Because you kidnapped me!”

Jae’s eyes flicker. “Here’s the thing; I’m in charge of you and when you get in trouble, I get in trouble.”

“So you’re on babysitting duty while the adults do the real work.”

He blinks several times. “Just stay here and don’t do anything stupid. I’ll come get you later. We’re scheduled to test you today. I’ll explain later.”

“You can’t just keep throwing me in rooms until you need to use me. It’s not fun.”

He puts his finger in my face. "If it weren't for me you would've been removed from this project."

"I wish I was removed." Little does Jae know "removed" means bleeding to death.

With the push of a button, Jae props the bed into an upright position. I can move most of my body now and I see Jae holding my shoes and jacket in one hand and the doorknob in the other. The flip-flops and jacket are blood free with no evidence of the night before.

He shakes my stuff in his hand. "You'll get these back when you stop acting childish."

I convert the bed back into laying down position and, for the first time, wish I was in the original room, the one with a TV showing the perpetually dancing blue dog.

Charlee

The day has finally come. Even after all the begging and pleading with two insidious “mature adults” legally signed as, my parents, they are still forcing me to go to some stupid overnight camp. It’s the biggest waste of money and summer I’ve ever heard of. I’m sentenced to a whole summer of “Making lifelong friendships and happiness” or at least that’s what the smiley brochure claims. Besides, why would a fifteen year old need to go to summer camp? I’m capable of watching myself.

I struggle to carry two enormous suitcases and a swim bag. They weigh a zillion pounds of who knows what, full of unnecessary items packed by my mother. If it were me loading up I’d be carrying a lightweight backpack with a few t-shirts and maybe my buzzer. Scratch the buzzer, nothing requiring electricity allowed because I’ll be on a Godforsaken island without internet.

I probably look like a homeless person with my stuff hanging out in the sloppiest fashion. The nylon swim bag is a pendulum with my face as a swinging target and the weight bearing duffle might as well be a wet octopus trying to eat me. Its continents, a long sock and many shirts, continue to tackle me. I re-adjust the load even though I know it’ll never be comfortable slugged over my shoulder as I unwillingly walk to the dock. Streaks of purple highlights in my black hair were getting in my face because of the dumb wind that blew furiously through the blistering heat. The hair sticking to my face makes me even more miserable than I already was, and I was unable to push it away because of the pounds of suitcases.

Another thing I hate about this camp, we have to ride a boat to get there. The thought of riding on a boat chalk full of sweaty kids for a whole three days mortified me. I don’t know how anyone could stay in the middle of a freaking ocean that long without feeling cramped and uncomfortable. I have hard time just sharing a locker at school. Imagine with 20 something other kids. The camp also happens to be on an island. Trapped on an island all summer with a bunch of people I’m probably going to hate.

The camp’s ingenious title, “Camp Happy Waters.” I suppose it’s called that because it’s surrounded by water. I can’t understand why any parent would send their child to an island that’s miles away from home. This magical camp might as well be called “Camp Alcatraz”. I’ll be the one who feels the most trapped because strange as it is I’m terrified of water.

Not the chemical filled public pool kind of water, but the great vast ocean I’ll soon be enclosed by. I’m a lousy excuse for a swimmer but if this disaster of a boat goes down all you’ll see is me paddling for land till my legs fall off. As I prepare myself for the worst summer ever I can’t help but stare at the other campers. I’d been so caught up in my grouchiness I failed to notice how overly cheerful they all seemed.

One girl who looked a tad bit too old to be a camper twirled around wearing pigtails and a bright pink skirt. Her smile was equally as bright as her skirt, covered in pink braces. As she twirled she narrowly avoided smacking a little boy in the face. Then the boy started to skip around and hum an annoying and mildly creepy ditty of “Mary Had a Little Lamb”.

Everyone had an extra spring in their step when they hugged and kissed their parents goodbye. They sounded a bit too enthusiastic when they repeatedly thanked them for such an amazing summer opportunity. I got no hugs or kisses from my parents who quickly packed me up and dropped me off at the nearest road to the loading dock. They were acting kind of odd today. I didn't pay it any mind though because we'd never had the best relationship.

They're always insisting that I'm too rebellious and break too many rules. Or in the principal's own words, "Charlee is a free spirit that has many ambitions that must be contained until her later life." Whatever that means. She commented mercilessly on report cards, probably in half hope my mom would see it and put an end to her destructive daughter with a horse like 'free-spirit'. It didn't matter who complained about me since she never replied or even opened them. Her sickeningly polite attitude with the school stiff aesthetic I knew she always was even in the summer, made me suppress a gag every time I saw her. I say they're much too obnoxious. Weirdly civic teachers and phantom parents get to ya. Deep down I know that they are probably right. I had 14 detentions in the past school year and that had been my 3rd school to be expelled from. But the worst thing ever is to have nagging parents. All the "Do your homework!" and "Did you clean your room yet?" were driving me off the edge. The thing that hit me off kilter though was my best friend leaving.

Well let me rephrase, I say Braelin left because no one knows what happened. Here one minute, gone the next. She disappeared faster than a light has a chance to flick on. I started to panic and called the police but when they arrived no one, not even her family, knew what on earth I was babbling about. I was the only one who remembered her.

My parents called me crazy and that's where my tolerance for people runs short. I had to suffer the maddening thought of not knowing what happened to Braelin while nobody else remembered she had ever existed. I know what I saw. And someday I will find Braelin, even if I have to tear the world apart bit by bit.

So now I guess mom and dad were just trying to have a troubled psychotic teen free summer by sending me to an uncharted island. I can only hope I live through three months of sing-alongs and macaroni necklaces.

....

It's been nearly two hours and there's still no sign of my boat. I'm about to die of boredom and I'm starting to worry. I'd much rather stay here then endure the torture of camp but it was getting dark and sitting on a bench at an almost deserted dock wasn't my idea of fun.

The other campers have already gotten on their boats and now only a fatigued looking sailor remains. He doesn't like the job of waiting the long unexpected hours until a camper's boat comes and so he sits slumped against one of the pilings smoking a pipe. Another whole hour passes and he starts to drift off until something awful happens.

A loud *bang* erupts in my ears and I unintentionally jump. The darkness prevents me from seeing if anyone is around but I know for certain the noise was a gun. I duck under the bench so as not to be seen by the shooter.

After a minute or two I deem it safe to come out. I carefully look around and to my dismay I see the sailor sprawled on the ground. A pool of blood surrounds him. I had the life scared out of me and thought about calling the police.

I found I was glued to the ground; too frightened to move. But before I had the chance to process a complete thought a masked figure popped out from nowhere. *Wow, going out in the open was smart of me.* I started to bolt but I knew I wasn't going to be getting far when another figure appeared.

I had no clue where they were coming from but that didn't matter much when I saw one of them pull out a gun. The next moment I'm sprawled out on the ground just like the sailor.

Airika

June 13, 3167

TEAM REVELATION:

Ms. Algers has been successfully brought to CAMP HAPPY WATERS (at 23:45). She is to be held in Room 4H until further notice. Absolutely no harm is to be bestowed upon her unless completely necessary. I'm one hundred percent certain she is the one who will finally put our problems at ease. Ms. Algers will in no way be allowed to see the other participants at our facility. Soon enough the Riemann Hypothesis will be solved at last. With the other 6 solved our last hope in getting any sort of credit in the world of mathematics is going to come true. I apologize for the interruption but I am very pleased with everyone's hard work. Enjoy the rest of your day.

Sincerely, Airika Savitz

Adelie

Four years. When I think about it like that it seems like it's been forever. Four years away from my family. Four years without seeing anything but the rusted walls of Camp Happy Waters. Although, I'm sure that's not this place's real name.

What they're doing is not bad though. All they want is to solve a problem. What's the harm? It doesn't matter that it's a secret organization. Or that they have over 40 people here against their will. I failed them. And I do not take failure lightly. Every day I think about what my life would be like if I hadn't turned out to be a Fail. I didn't give them what they wanted. So I'll rot in here for a while, but I don't mind. I had nothing worth living for in my previous life. The reason why I'm here is because I know too much.

I know my parents don't wonder why their daughter hasn't come back from a summer camp that was only supposed to last three months. I know they've lost every trace and memory of me. I know that I wasn't smart enough to solve an equation. I am not the first Fail. My wristband reminds me that I'm the 12th one to unsuccessfully try to solve the Riemann Hypothesis.

I suspect the next attempt will lead to failure as well. Another soul locked in here for all time. I just hope they handle their lack of success as well as I do. Some before me have gone mad or found a way to end their misery. I manage fine alone. All I need is me, myself, and I. Me, myself, and I.

Together forever. Or until they get bored of me.

We Fails seem like a waste of foodair to me. So we must be of use somehow. That's one of the only things I don't know about this place, why they bother keeping us alive. I hear a girl scream a shrill cry of despair. I wish I could tell her to shut it. A long while ago when I was fresh and not rotten I would've been sympathetic to her woe. Fortunately protection is provided for the living. Sound proof walls keep any noise in (or out depending on which side you're on) and all anyone's screams do is annoy me. They used to frighten me. The first night I was in this place I remember being scared down to the bone.

I make tiny knots in my shaggy blonde hair. At least I think I look pretty shaggy. I haven't seen a mirror for quite some time. I look down at my over grown nails. Grimy and uneven. Stuffed with dirt. I let out a wild laugh. Just because I can. No one cares what the Failed do. We can scream, pound the walls, and make as much noise as we want. Nobody's going to check on the insane.

I stare at the broken light fixture. I'd smashed it long ago out of rage. Now only darkness surrounds me day and night. Except for the dim light that comes by once a day with food. In my old life I'd never been the smallest person ever, but now I feel as if I could slide under the slim crack of the door. I crawl to the other side of the small room to see if the butter knife from yesterday's meal is still there.

It sits on an empty plate. They must have forgotten to get my dishes. I pick it up and carve into the wall. "ADALYN ZOMORA WAS HERE" is now hauntingly waiting on the wall for the next person to read. Out of all my time here I can't believe I hadn't done that yet. Then I raise the knife above my chest, hoping its sharp enough for the job. Why should I stay in a place where I don't have a life?

A huge grin covers my face. A scary one. Happy for the first time in years because I can finally quit living an empty life. A life trapped by thoughts and bare metal walls. Another laugh escapes me, but before I can finish the job I curl into a ball, my stomach cramping from the bursts of laughter. The knife clatters to the ground and I begin to cry. The awkward sort of laugh-cry that you do when you don't know what else to do. Or at least I think that's a thing. I can't remember anymore. All that fills my head is craziness. Things I'll never see again.

My house, my dog Winston, a vacation taken a long time ago at the beach, my mom, my dad, and even a squirrel because why not? Nothing matters anymore. The laughing fades and I know my mind's entered crazy town.

"One fish two fish red fish blue fish!" I chant.

The ancient nursery rhyme was taught to us in school. By a fellow insane person like me it seemed. Who writes about fish when there are so many other things out in the world?

"Black fish blue fish old fish new fish!" since when were fish ever blue black or red?

The reason we learned about that strange book from the ancient times was because of the flow of the poem. How it rhymed. But that was a thousand years ago. Why bother? No one wrote poetry or books anymore. You could look one up on a tablet. Tablets make random stories every day so people don't need to waste time typing one. And it wasn't like books were ever interesting.

"This one has a little star this one has a little car. Say! What a lot of fish there arrrrr!!" I howl as I hold out the are.

My old teacher Ms. Alcott told us these stories were for children. Weird to tell children fish have cars and such. I guess people were just stupid back then.

"Yes. Some are red. And some are blue. Some are old. And some are new."

I wonder what else they wrote about. I do remember her mentioning something about a Fantasy. That they told nonsense tales about flying carpets and magic fairies. Lying to people isn't nice. Not at all. I would know.

"Some are sad. And some are glad. And some are very, very bad!" My throat is raw from the yelling and so I gather up saliva so I can swallow. Crazy bats those ancients were. crazier than me.

Charlee

I suggest never going to summer camp overseas. You may end up like I am. It is not fun to end up like me. After waking up from the tranquilized sleep I was in I take a look around and I'm in a sterile white room. A monitor is attached to the wall where a happy looking dog dances across the screen.

"What the heck?" I mumble. I look down and see that I'm cuffed to a metal examining table covered in paper. The room is annoyingly bright and my head feels like a volcano about to erupt. It burns worse than any headache I've ever had.

"Hey! Let me out of here!" I yell in the hope someone is listening. I twist my body in a somewhat comfy position and try to go back to sleep. But I know they'll be no sleeping in this place. After what seems like hours of watching a stupid dog prance around the screen someone pushes open the door.

I sit up quickly. Unfortunately the handcuffs I'm in are so tight I feel them cut against my wrists when I move and I can feel the warm trickle of blood run down my hands. The blood drips onto the table. Pooling into small circles. "Where am I?" the words that come out sound deafening after the long silence I'd previously been in.

"I hope your ride here was enjoyable. And that you are getting settled into your room." The voice comes from a tall man with round glasses and a pristine lab coat on.

"Yes being knocked out and handcuffed to a table was quite enjoyable." My words are filled with deep sarcasm. Having never liked being kidnapped or liking especially strange strangers, I aim a kick at the guy who appeared to be a doctor but he slides away too fast.

“Ahh I see. There is nothing to worry about though. Our methods may seem to be very oh how do I say this, direct. But there is no need to kick me.” His voice was smooth and calming even under the circumstance I was in. But I refused to be calmed after being kidnapped.

“Let me out of here you creep!” I thrashed and kicked but the doctor quickly shot me a dose of some sort of muscle relaxer. My body tensed up then fell slack as a dead slug.

“There, there. Relax,” the word relax was held out extra-long and controlled through his therapeutic voice. “now I’m going to give you a quick exam. Just breathe.”

That last statement was cruel because all I could do was *breathe*. My head laid back on the cold metal surface and all I saw was the blinding white ceiling. I tried repeatedly to move but all I got was that feeling when your foot goes to sleep. The doctor looked in my eyes with a flashlight, tapped my knee, and all that tiresome checkup stuff.

When he was finished my body was still unable to move but my mouth had loosened up a bit. He turned to leave. “Hey.”, it came out as a croak. “Hey,” a bit clearer. He turned back to me. “Hey you craven rump-fed minnow. Let me out of wherever the heck I am!” now that I couldn’t kick him I’d have to resort to insulting him. Which isn’t my strong suit. I had memorized a bunch of Shakespearean insults just for the fun of it. It’s nice to see people’s reaction when they don’t know if they’ve been insulted or not.

But instead of looking confused he smiled. “You’re a very special guest here Charlee Algers.” It unnerved me as he said my name. “I suggest you don’t disrespect the title, or soon enough you’ll be a prisoner instead.” He chuckled at my horrified facial reaction. Which was good because it meant I could feel my muscles coming back to me. He was so caught up with his enjoyment he didn’t get a chance to move before my legs started to swing toward him. His ungraceful fall to the floor seemed to go in slow motion. Probably because of how much I relished it.

“Whoops. Sorry about that. Guess my legs were a little crazy from that shot. I would help you up but...ya know handcuffs. Welp, think I’m most settled into my room now Doctor. Thanks for the checkup.” He sat up and rubbed his head groaning. The fury on his face was priceless. It was beet red with a bruise.

“You just wait until Dr. Savitz hears about this!” he screamed.

“Planning on telling on me huh? Have fun. I’ll be waiting right here.” The cuffs keeping me to the table were starting to get excruciating around my wrists. The doctor was clumsy due to his anger and scurried out of the room, taking a chair down on his way out.

There was victory in the silence after he left. It was quiet until I heard the puppy on the TV start to sing a line, “There’s no need to fear, Underdog is here! When criminals in this world appe-” then the screen flicked off. What a shame. I was starting to like the dog from the archaic television show.

Jaxson

My time at Camp Happy Waters has been incredible to say the least. I’ll always be proud to say I was the one who put the place together but maybe not so proud to say I was the one who told

them how to run things. Sure I miss my family, my friends, but it's worth it because I know this place is so close to helping everyone in the world. We already fixed the problem of cancer, Ebola, and Lupus Erythematosus, we'd figured out teleportation, and perfected the polygraph. Who knows what else we're capable of?

All the small bad things that go on here are nothing when compared to the good that comes out of it. It wasn't my choice that we take kids for experiments but I understand why. Their cell structure is completely different from a grown adult and their minds are also more opened up. Besides, Dr. Savitz promised me that we'd release them and restore their parent's memories when they turned 18. No harm to anyone! It's perfect.

Even though I'm only 15 years old Dr. Savitz is always telling me how I am the smartest one here. I stumbled upon CHW when I thought it was just a normal summer camp. What a surprise it was then. I'd no idea where I was, but they saw my potential. I helped the facility grow and now we can do amazing things here.

Unlike the other kids I plan on staying here and helping CHW go to its full extent. Maybe someday I'll even make this place known to the world and everyone can thank the amazing doctors who worked so hard to cure awful diseases. I know if the world knew about us they would support us and help us with our research. I can clearly imagine there being tons of places like CHWs everywhere.

"Excuse me Mr. Honlin, but Dr. Savitz would like a word with you. Please meet her in Room 4I. She says it's urgent." a lab assistant told him.

"Of course, I'll be there as soon as possible." Jax knew even if Dr. Savitz had something as insignificant as a broken nail to tell him about he'd run to her immediately. She was the one who was responsible for his life and job here. Airika Savitz was practically his mother. He'd come to CHW when he was twelve and Airika took care of him, but Jax was not raised to be normal. Not one bit.

He walked the long five flights of stairs to get to room 4I. Jax hated taking the elevator. He'd been trapped once and he'll never get over the incident. When he got there Dr. Savitz was waiting there as expected. She took a long sip of coffee before addressing Jax's presence.

She looked up saw him standing in the doorway. "Hello Jaxson. Please have a seat." Jax took a seat in one of the many plush white chairs in Airika's office.

"What was so urgent Miss? Is everything okay?" Jax liked everything running smooth as possible at CHW. And if there was ever a problem he was the first to hear of it. "

"Yes everything is perfectly fine Jaxson. I didn't mean to alarm you in any way. It's just that I have *very* exciting news I'm sure you'll find intriguing." She paused and sipped more coffee. "I didn't send you the same email as everyone else because I knew you'd want to hear this in person. Two days ago Charlee Algers got here. I know she'll be the perfect match for what we were looking for."

I was so thrilled I had to bite down on my tongue. It was all I could do to suppress the burning urge to jump and do a dance. Charlee Algers! It may seem like stalking, but I'd been searching

for a new person to solve our equation and found Charlee. I've been observing her for around two years. And she's finally here.

It'd taken so long because of how much she didn't want to go to summer camp. Taking her parents memories had been the easiest part. They seemed almost happy to be rid of their only child. What really convinced Mr. and Mrs. Algers was a whole summer free of their troublesome daughter. I'm just hoping Charlee, marked as the 13th attempt, is able to solve the problem. If not... Dr. Savitz may not take it too lightly. She was furious when number 12 turned to be a Fail. She practically ripped her office to shreds and screamed at everyone for weeks.

If Charlee is a Fail we're all going to be in trouble.

Charlee

On the third day of my stay at Camp Farts A Lot, things started getting interesting. I'm un-handcuffed and lead to a new room. Throughout my protests, yelling, and punching the guard escorting me didn't say a word. Although he did seem annoyed I'd managed to bruise him a few times.

He took me into a room that was more or less the same as my previous one. It was white as the last but had a table cluttered with papers nestled in the corner and a computer. The computer was one I had never seen before. Scratch that, it was more like a ginormous TV with a keyboard attached. The guard left.

"Hey where you going?" the door slammed and I heard the twist of the lock. "What am I supposed to do in here?" I bang on the door but no one comes. Wasting my voice on yelling isn't going to get me anywhere so I sit on a small stool that was tucked under the table.

Not wanting to be bored any longer I fiddled around with the computer. The desktop has a picture of a tree. *Click*. I open the internet to see if I can find out where I am. Instead of seeing the usual search bar, someone's email account is open. I read it but find out I have more questions than answers.

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I read several times before I can fully understand. Me? The dumbo who can't even get a 65% on a math test is *special*? Not possible. In school I always fell behind in class, especially math, and failed every subject. Of course that's not counting my lack of attention. School bored me to the extreme. Slaving away at homework I won't remember the next day was pointless.

I'd heard of this Riemann Hypothesis before. It's one of the world's biggest concerns; supposedly solving it will fix everything. Now I guess this place isn't made up of a bunch of kidnapping psychos. They're scientific psychos.

If I'm a math genius why don't I like school? Or most people for that matter. The only friend I've ever had was Braelin. She's gone. The only people I'd ever loved with all my heart were my parents. They don't love me anymore. At least not like they used to.

I flip through more emails but my search isn't fruitful. These people must like medicine and screws a lot because all I find are parts for machinery and pharmacy prescriptions. Clicking the

home button I see that whoever's computer this is loves dogs. The picture shows a zillion different images of every breed of dog there is.

After getting tired of searching I select a random document. It has strips of blue on the cover and is entitled, "Doc. 13",

SUBJECT: 13

TRIAL: 13

ATTEMPTS: 0

NAME: CHARLEE ALGERS

DATE OF BIRTH: April 20, 3152

HEIGHT: 5'2

RECENT OBSERVATIONS: *She has yet to figure out much. Charlee is aggressive, rude, and hot tempered. She assaulted the guards and Dr. Garcia and shows uncooperative behavior.*

I smiled at the last line.

Dr. Savitz thinks she'll be the one. In my observations of her I think she'll be just like the others. Another fail to our attempts in saving humanity. In my opinion Charlee Algers is a desperate way of trying to solve this as quickly as possible with no second thought. She has no respect for our love of science at CHW and is a lazy worthless child who is a waste of our precious time.

REPORT FILED AT 18:00 THURSDAY

Well that was rude. I know I'm not the role model kid everyone dreams of giving birth to with heavenly lights adorning my crown but this dude was overly blunt. I checked the name at the top it said the file written by Mikeah Robins. Just another person here I hate to add to the list. Overall I'm not surprised. Now I'm quote on quote the one who put their problem at ease, I expected another if not more papers about me. Not that I'm pleased.

With all the time I had on me I started to form an escape. It wasn't long before I had dismantled the computer keypad. I guess CHW isn't high on security because I noticed all the doors so far were old-school locks that required simple keys. Checking that there was no camera I formed a makeshift key and used the wire to jimmy open the door.

It opened easily and soundlessly to my advantage. I looked both ways then scurried quickly and quietly to the left. Up to here I had everything thought out.

Adalyn 7

Today I do push ups. Yesterday was jumping jacks. The work to keep my mind straight and my body from turning to useless mush was more exhausting than I thought it'd be. The last time I moved around this much was years ago.

"Patty-cake-patty-cake--baker's-man!" I chant while I sweat furiously. "Bake me a cake as fast as ya can!" I put on of my arms behind my back. "Pat-it,-roll-it,-mark-it-with-an-A," A new routine I formed was reciting a song from history class and doing one push up, jump, etc.

for every word. “Put-it-in-the-oven-for-Cloey-and-me.” Instead of baby I always say Cloey. Cloey my little baby sister. Well, not baby anymore. She must be a tot by now.

“Patty-cake-patty-cake-baker’s-man.” The day before I left for CHWs I remember my mom promising me, “When you get back you’ll get to see your new baby sis! How exciting?” I can still picture her big rosy smile perfectly. I’ve forgotten a lot over time but this will never leave me. I won’t let it. “*and* maybe we can go see that movie you’ve been dying to see. I don’t know, we could do anything. As long I get to spend time with you. Oh, I’m going to miss you so much. Love you Ads.”

I hugged her big belly full of my future sister, not knowing I would never get to meet her. Taking her farewell as the typical over exaggeration mom, I hugged her quickly, to excited about going to a camp I wouldn’t get to leave. I expected more of these annoying goodbyes then but now I hold on to this memory tightly like it was worth a million diamonds. It was to me anyways.

I finish my exercise and take in a deep breath. Maybe this isn’t the worst fate. There’s always someone out there in a worse position. Right? Maybe I should except where my life has ended up. No point dawning on things that aren’t going to be. Or maybe trying could help. But why try? I’m going to die. Why not it be in a rotting cell? What’s the difference? I mean, I’m not the first one. Maybe peace would be in death. No!

Don’t think like that again. Hope!! Think hope. Someone will find out how screwed up this place is and help me. What if I could... no, no. Too many maybes. Grr! Why do maybes taunt me? I hate maybe. I am fearful of maybe. And fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. Hate leads to suffering. As wise master Yoda says.

If all that confusion leads to suffering then why do I suffer now? I had plenty of confusion in my life, so does confusion lead to suffering in the long run? Guess I’ll never know. Oh geesh it happened again. My mind messing with me. Getting distracted was something in my old life I had problems with and some alone time hasn’t changed anything.

I imagine the rest of the day will go the same. Looking around at the same dark walls and murky floor waiting for my meal. Just like the day before, the one before that, and for rest of my days. Unless my farfetched hope of somebody coming to save the creepy insane girl comes true.

A future was something that once was a possibility. I was doing well in math and physics at high school and I was pretty proud that I was the youngest student there. Nine as a freshman wasn’t common. My self-pity was interrupted when I heard people coming down the stairs. A bored voice and a fidgety figure stopped at the entrance of the Fail Room. Specify room 69D. I’d long ago memorized all CHWs room numbers.

“...and this is the Fail Room. Not that you’ll ever be in here or need to worry about it. This is where the crazies live.” The man speaking talked as if he’d been explaining simple things to a stupid child all day and was sick of it. The fidgety one jumped as a Fail threw himself against a barred door that was dangerously close to him. The Fail screamed and hollered for, “Someone to help me!” and Fidget backed away.

“I think our tour is complete. Go back to room 8J and do *not* embarrass me with your stupid mistakes. But after a few days I’m sure Dr. Savitz will regret hiring you.” Fidget looked like he wanted to say something but was too frightened by the Fails and the harsh man giving him a tour.

“...uh...um I-I ju-“ Fidget started to say. “Spit it out you imbecile! I don’t have all day.” The Fidgety one’s tour guide was tapping his foot and looking out the door. He was done with showing him and around and wanted to go back to the world of the living. He didn’t even flinch when a Fail yelled in his ear. “D-dr. Robins, I j-just wanted t-to ask w-where you’ll b-be m-most of the t-t-time.” Fidget took a big breath like the one sentence caused him to lose all of his energy.

“Why is that any of your business Ralph?” Dr. Robins asked. Ralph saw his stern face and quickly stared down at his shaking hands like he should never have asked the question in the first place. “J-just if I had anym-more questions in the f-f-fture.” I desperately wanted to tell poor Ralph that Robins worked in the chemical science lab. I briefly remember seeing Dr. Robins there. Even in his lonesome his face was molded into an expression that showed he thought everyone the dumbest in the world.

A Fail managed to get an arm out and wrap it around Ralph’s torso. Ralph nearly jumped right out of his own skin until Robins slapped the Fail away. He did so very easily, merely an annoying bug, not a human being. Then without answering Ralph’s question he grabbed his wrist and pulled him out of Room 69D.

I swear I tried. I really did. But I have a laughing problem that just won’t go away. A tiny giggle came out of my mouth that turned rapidly into a hysterical gale-storm of loud booming laughter. I threw my body back and forth, wall to wall. Exercise! That’s what it is! “Hahahahahah!” A snort even manages its way out. So I end my day laughing. Oh how I love to laugh! It makes me sooo happy.

A wave of anger comes as well. I did this the day before I realize. Just as I realized yesterday. And then I’ll forget. But that’s the side effect of confinement. You do something and forget. And sometimes you do again, and again, and again until you snap out of it or die. I feel like the old villain, the one who laughed a lot. What was his name? The Joker. Yes that’s what I am. The Joker. My life’s a sick joke I can’t figure out and I’m a laughing fool.

After writing my name on the wall I started a collection, (icouldntstopitbecameanadditionofmine) the main word or feeling of the day. Today’s is “JoKER HA HAH HA!” I look at the other words, ADALYN ZOMORA WAS HERE, I’ll be here till the end, HOPE, Alone forever, Red Fish!!! Patty cake or pat-a-cake? Guess I’ll never know, and Do or do not, there is no TRY.

The food comes and I scarf it down like an animal. Nighty night!

Jaxson

“Today and for quite a while, I want you doing some new work.” Airika tells me as we sit in her office sipping coffee. “I’d appreciate if you could study everything you can about thalamus and write up some reports and theories. After that I want you dedicated to the human brain.”

Hearing this made my heart melt. These were simple school facts. Why should I waste my time on high school science when we're helping save humanity?

"Yes the thalamus, a large mass of gray matter in the dorsal part of the diencephalon in the brain with several functions controlling sensory signals to send to the cerebral cortex. It also regulates consciousness sleep and alertness. But don't you want me to help with the dementia cure or the aortic aneurysm cure? I'm sure there are more important things I could do."

"Trust me when I say this is a big deal. I haven't told anyone about this project but you. Alas, I can't explain to you all I have planned until I have more information than the common knowledge everyone knows already. Once you write me a report I'll fill you in." She said this like it was a big deal. But I didn't think there was any more to know about this particular portion of your brain, especially one with so little to learn about.

Nevertheless from all my time with Dr. Savitz I knew she did nothing without an intention. Whatever it was she was going for I figured it had a reason. "Yes of course. I'll get to work on it right away." I said and got up to go to the computer lab.

Airika smiled and then looked down to her computer. Her dark red hair, in a tidy tight bun as usual didn't swing in her face when she worked. Another day for her to type things and research. Barely, just barely, I thought I saw her smirk.

....

The research got boring fast. I did a two page summary on the basics of the thalamus then wrote a timeline about the adaptations of the structure. I drew a diagram, made a digital figure on the computer, and copied every test and thing ever said about it. I had stared at the computer's screen for hours just looking at how realistic the programming was and how flawless screen could stay up for hours without so much as a flicker.

I sent it to Airika but didn't get a reply till four days later. I know she's a busy person but I thought this was a special project. So when all she sent back was, "Great work. Meet me in the cafeteria at 19:30. I have someone who would be very happy to meet you." I didn't know what to think. For the first time in my life I was unsure. Someone wanting to see me? I knew everyone at CHWs.

Every scientist, assistant, doctor, and even the people who sweep up. It was a rarity to hire a new person, and rarer still to invite a family member. Things we do here are all classified. The only one to come have been the seventeen's and younger for testing.

Suppose I'll find out soon enough. I head towards the engineer's room to see Demetri. He's probably the only other person besides Airika who I'm close to. I'd almost call him my friend if he wasn't 39 years old. Correction, today's his birthday-40 years old.

Demi is the best mechanic in the whole facility and he's working unflinchingly on something new. One day he could be building a flying car then I'd come in like, "How's the car coming along?" and he'd say something close to, "That old thing? Finished it last night."

Last time I checked he had an old fifth-generation jet fighter scattered across the work room but you never what he's up to. "Hey Jax!" Demi yells across the room. He turns off a loud machine to greet me properly. As usual he wears grease soaked jeans and an old t-shirt.

Wiping off a spot of his face he asks, "And what do I owe this visit?" He sits on a three legged stool and sets down a wrench. "I came to wish you a happy birthday." I say. Then I hand him a small white box.

Smiling he says, "Oh? What's this, a ring box?" "Very funny but no. Open it." I'd been waiting all day to see his reaction and it was better than what I'd imagined. He looked down to see a silver holo-drive. Holo's were the only product we'd released to the public.

Demi invented it to replace the outdated flash drive everyone had still been using. But it had taken a lot of pleading and begging to convince Airika it was okay to show the rest of the world. It contained a collection of every blueprint him and I had dreamed up. All you had to do was press the button to access as many photos, videos, or in this case blueprints as you wanted.

He clicked the start and a 3D piece of paper popped up in front of us. The amazement and happiness on his face made me proud of my gift. Demi deserved it. He worked day and night-and not because he was paid to do so but because he wanted to.

We watched as a holographic robot walked around the floor and a scroll of print in 3-D came out. The holo was 56 slides long after watching it all he said, "This is truly the best present I've ever gotten. I can't thank you enough Jaxson." Demi clicked the off and set the holo down on his table amidst many other trinkets.

"It was no problem and I had fun putting it together. Happy birthday old man." I said. "Hey now, 40 isn't old. It's 50 that the gray starts to come and your back gets achy." He laughed and explained how his newest gadgets worked.

"So what does the boss have ya workin on?" he said. Demi never called Airika anything but the boss. His southern accent comforted me every time I talked with him. "She asked me to do some brain research." I say.

He raised an eyebrow. "Brain stuff? Ya way past searchin up brain nonsense. What about that Charlotte girl you'd been lookin at?"

"Her name's Charlee and yes I was confused about having to look up thalamus research but she has a plan. She always does. As for Charlee she's not my concern anymore. The scientists take it from here."

"She should be ya concern. You havin worked so hard to find her."

"But she's not so I'll forget her and continue new things. It'll be fun." But in all honestly I find myself thinking about Charlee more than I should.

"Okay you have a fine day Jax. Nice of you to give this to me." Demi stalked off in his heavy boots and got back to making the loud noise.

I stroll back to my room, slowly. I take the long route. The route that goes past Charlee's room. Hating to admit I do this almost every day, I count through 14H, 13H, 12H, and so on until I get to 4H.

Doing this makes me feel like a stalker. First because I do it so often and second because the glass is a two way mirror. Instead of seeing Charlee all I'm met with is an empty room. Charlee's

gone. Not good, not good, what will Airika say? I made sure the door was locked this morning and there was no way she could get out.

Old fashioned locks beat computer passcode ones and facial recognition. But this was Dr. Robins computer room... *no, no, no if I lose Charlee Airika won't be happy. Not at all.* I race towards the surveillance room and check every single camera as fast as I possibly can.

Every camera I check has no sign of her. I run to my room and log in to my computer. Tracing Dr. Robins' computer shows me that the keypad cord was disconnected 2 hours ago. *Two hours! Two blasted hours? How could nobody check on her within a two hour time span?* I didn't see anything else leading to her and if she'd used any other technology it would've shown me.

I slump in my seat and cover my face with my hands. Ug no time to mope. I get up and to go to the guard's quarters. "Captain Kruts I want every last one of your guards to search the building for Charlee Algiers and then I want to know who had the guts to not keep watch on her twenty-four seven." I bark the words.

The guards sit on their lazy butts all day when they should be keeping an eye sharper than an eagle's on the most high profile project here. That's what they're paid for. To guard not let our experiments wander the halls.

I personally lead them, if I didn't I'm not sure if they'd be searching the building or running around like blind mice. They let people's hard work scatter away. I sprint through CHWs with thirty armed guards behind me.

We get decently far before a lab assistant grabs me by the shoulder. "Mr. Honlin! Wait please just a minute, an alarm sounded in the Fail's cells." The girl stops to catch her breath. "Charlee's down was down there."

"Was? Why do you say *was*?"

"The alarm was put on delay. We didn't get it until a few moments ago. She may still be there but maybe not."

Not having perfect technology is the biggest flaw in our world. If it can be hacked then why have it? And if it is here to make life easier then why does it not work correctly? "I want the alarm replaced. Make sure Demetri Tyler is the one to install it."

The girl nodded and scurried away while my guards stood around stupidly. "Well? You heard her. Move!" I wasn't losing an opportunity to perfect life because I have a pack of morons as security.

Once we were down in the Fail room I saw Charlee talking hurriedly with a girl that wore threadbare clothing and was dirty top to bottom. One thing Fails haven't failed at is causing me to gag. She flinched when she noticed the herd of guns at the end of the stairs.

"Charlee! What are you doing down here?" she looked about ready to kill the nearest person in the room. Then she tried, in vain, to get an ounce of support from the Fail who just laughed like a maniac.

"I was running away from you bastards. You really think someone won't catch on to a horde of mad scientists with abducted kids?"

“You shouldn’t be down with the rejects Charlee. You’re better than that. You can help us.” By now I knew she’d seen the emails and our plans. But won’t she understand our goal? My answer is no. She shoots me a death glare and sends an elbow into my face.

Boney. And sharp. I reach for my face as a guard holds Charlee’s arms behind her back at takes her upstairs. The Fail she was talking to giggles and stumbles back into her cell. I go to my room and fall asleep without meeting Airika and her guest.

Adalyn

“Come on! Please, I need a way out of here. What am I saying, you’re babbling about the ABC’s.”

The girl’s words echo through my head. Her name... Charlee yes. The odd duck. Charlie Chaplin. Charlie Brown. Charlee the one who wanted to leave. She was right though. I told her what the alphabet meant. It was knowledge everyone should have.

“My name’s Charlee what’s yours? I’m desperate. And I’ll let you out if you help me.”

Out? Out to where? I don’t know of any place but here anymore. But out sounded nice.

“Next time won’t you sing with me? Ha ha . I’ve never been a good singer but if you would sing with me it’d be lots of fun!” I don’t think Charlee like to sing either because she smacked her face and shook her head.

After I finished my song I recited the whole layout of the complex. Then said every room in the building. “... 78M is the loading dock, and 79M is the transportation room.” Charlee must have liked that because then she was interested in me.

“Did you just say you knew the whole building? Could you tell me where an exit is?”

Grinning I said, “Z,Y,X,W,V,U,T,S,R,Q,P,O,N,M,LK,J,I,H,G,F,E,D,C,B,A.”

“You’re crazy you know that?”

Now that’d thought about it I realized all my words were jumbled. Weird because in my head my thoughts are nice and neat-ish. But when I talk to Charlee they flood out all at once and my sense of clarity leaves me. She climbed up on a crate that was tall enough to reach the ceiling and smashed a red box with her elbow.

“What’d you break the square for?” I said.

“Well if you don’t want a loud obnoxious alarm going off then agree with me, breaking the box was good.” She jumped down picked up a backpack.

“Backpack, backpack! Backpack, backpack!” Dora had a backpack. A backpack that liked to sing.

“My gosh shut up!” Charlee covers her ears.

“Oh the backpack loaded up with things and knickknacks too. Anything that you might need I got inside for you.” I reach through rusty bars to touch it but get pushed away.

“Don’t touch. If you can get me out of here I’ll bring you too. I’ll even put up with the singing. Sound good?”

“Does the backpack have everything we might need?”

“Yeah. Once we blow this pop stand we’ll depend on this thing. But that’s only if you can lead us away.”

“Totally walk this way, that way, here and here. Door.” I move my hands in swishing motions to help her understand better.

Charlee took a deep breath and closed her eyes. “Make sense.” She put her hands together like she was praying. “Please. I’m begging you.” Then she said something quiet. She looked at the lock to my cell. “Wow the only place they put computer locks are down here. Idiots.”

She did a little click click turn faster than I’d ever seen human hands move and I was out. Even though I was only a foot out of my little room I could feel freedom. I stared at her. But then stopped because she looked like she was getting creeped out. “Vier Jahre dort gefangen. Wie kann ich Ihnen danken?”

“I can’t believe my fate depends on an insane German speaking girl. Did you understand anything I’ve said this entire time?”

The German was not on purpose. I had picked it up from the long afternoons listening to my grandpa. I intended to learn more but I was a little occupied being used as a guinea pig on an uncharted island.

“Let’s skedaddle before someone finds us here.” She straightened her pack and grabbed my hand. “Let’s hope you’re more help than a burden.” We ran really fast towards the door, past hands that reached and cried for help. We went a little too fast for someone who hasn’t run in four years, and stopped.

“Why’d we stop?” I panted so much I think I beat a dog that’d been in the sun all day long.

“Because, you look about really to drop. Are you okay?”

Before now I hadn’t noticed how vast the Fail room was. “Go dog go.” Whops. That was, I guessed, my interpretation of “I’m fine let’s go before it’s too late”.

Charlee raised an eyebrow but didn’t question it. “So you say…”

Her words turned into something even more confusing than German and I couldn’t hear anything but my psychotic laughs. The thud of boots and the clank of guns rustled faintly in the background. Charlee looked at me and frowned. She shook my shoulders and said something I couldn’t make out.

The next thing I knew I was back in my box and I didn’t like it one bit. I wanted to do whatever it was Charlee wanted me to do, and I wanted a crystal clear mind. But that was then and this is now. Then I feared. Fear leads to anger, anger leads to hate, hate leads to suffering.

I don’t want to suffer, so I won’t fear anyone anymore.

Charlee

Crazy girl. The crazy girl was the reason I was here and not out there. Out there was in my mind anywhere but here. But before all, that after I’d left the cursed room, I happened upon the only nice person in the whole building. I was aimlessly trying to find supplies before my escape when I found the engineer room. Sounded promising, plenty of hard and pointy things I could use if need be and I have always loved fiddling around with spare parts.

I had gotten a backpack from a break room and emptied it. (Containing moldy fruit and coffee stained papers. Yuck) I slowly pulled open the door to the engineers workspace and prayed no one was in there. Just my luck. Of course someone was in there. Making a ratchet which I somehow failed to hear, probably because I was too nervous to hear anything.

The man looked up when I entered and I flinched. I started to run but before I could get far he got up faster than I would think he was able for a man his age, and held me too tight for me to run. Screaming wasn't going to have any benefit; I was of course trapped in a place of people obsessed with me.

“Relax. I'm here to help yo-”

My kick to his shin silenced his words. “You let me go right now.”

“Yeah? And what? Have them lock ya up again? Trust me I won't hurt you.”

“Yeah right.”

“Seriously, what good would getting caught be?”

“How did you know I was running? Maybe I was just taking a stroll. You know how chill people are here. I got free roaming.”

“Was it the backpack or the face?”

“Face what's wrong with my face? Oh, the hair. Yeah my mommy doesn't like it either.” I said the words overly hard. I'd be thinking back to the day when I'd come home from school welcomed by my mother's disapproving voice.

“What the hell did ya do with your hair Charlee!” She said, nearly dropping a glass of amber liquid. The other hand wasn't as fortunate and it sent a pack of cigarettes tumbling to the ground.

“I thought I needed a little color in my life. You know because I felt the need for a *change*.” Mom stumbled back into the kitchen table when I said the last word. Her motto in life was, *If it isn't working out than you probably feel you a change. Changing and starting over can fix everything*. When I was little I believed it. I thought everything my mom said was good and holy. But It stopped when her changes were getting too big.

Dad was never home. The only time we see him is on Christmas. I still don't know exactly what he does but whatever it was didn't have a good paycheck. His earnings were sent monthly to our house but they started getting smaller. Mom decided we needed to change homes to be able to afford anything. I think moving was just a poorly set up masquerade to lead me astray from the truth, that she wanted more money to pay for cigarettes or get more somaerietelfeznioafekt treatments, better known as perfections. A few perfections could help you a lot but my mother was addicted and got a new one every few months. What can I say? They made her perfect. Perfections are supposed to improve your physical flaws, like say your nose was a tiny bit off center or your eyesight wasn't 20/20, you can perfect that. And boy does my mom like to be perfect. A pimple that wouldn't go away, get your skin cells mixed with a perfection concoction and be pimple free forever!

Nobody had braces, glasses, or fake body parts anymore. Everyone could get a perfection, if they had enough money. The problem with mom was her smoker's lungs couldn't be fixed. No one but me knew about her gross addiction. For a while she was off the nasty things but then out

of nowhere it was an everyday habit again. Cigarettes were banned and a thirty year sentence would be my mom's future if anyone incorporated with the law found out.

"My God Charlee why did you do that? Where did you get that hair dye?" She was standing straight now and eyeing my stripes of purple.

"You like it? I got it from Walgreens. \$40. Better be a good one."

"Charlee! You can'-"

Before she could lecture me about spending her precious money I firmly shut my bedroom door. I sat on my bed twirling the violet locks listening to my mom stumble about our small apartment. I stood up and put the most recent box of cigarettes I'd taken and put it in my closet. A large pile sat there and I wondered if she would ever stop. When I sat back down I felt the detention slip wrinkle in my pocket.

Mrs. Algiers,

I regret to inform you that your daughter has missed several classes, misbehaved in school, and missed unaccountable homework assignments. She has after school detention with Mr. Somar. Please sign at the bottom.

As much as I wanted to blame my mom for my screwed up school life I knew it was all me. This was of course, after Braelin disappeared.

I scribbled mom's signature down on the paper and put it in my backpack. Even though I was late on book reports I'm always up to date on detention slips.

"Hello? You in there?"

I looked up and snapped back to the reality of a guy holding me captive.

"Yeah, yeah what?"

"You want my help?"

I gave him a face that said I wasn't going to accept him winning but I did want out of his sweaty, grease covered fingers.

"What do you propose?"

He let go of me and picked up a box covered with lots of buttons as big as my hand from off the worktable.

"I call this the Zap. Hit green if you wanta knock someone out, red which I hope you never have to use, for lethal reasons, and blue if you just want ter mess with ya friends."

He tossed it to me but I didn't want to use a CHWs employee's tool without knowing if he was telling me the truth.

"Why all the buttons if you only need three?" I said.

"Confuse people. If anyone gets a hold of my inventions I want them to regret it. Don't touch any of the other buttons unless you don't mean on havin your hand anymore."

I studied it and then threw it back to him, wanting him the test it first. He understood but pointed it at me.

"Hey now wh-" I started to say. A light tingle went through me. "Ouch!" It didn't hurt, tickled really, but I was perplexed when I saw a blue line coming towards me to make me feel tingly.

He passed it back to me. "Names Demetri. Told ya I mean no harm."

“Thanks and sorry I was slow with the whole trusting thing, you know being held against my will on an island and all. But how is this different from any other Taser?”

“It being made by me makes it automatically better.”

“Well then, thank you almighty god of engineers. I’m humbled to be in your presence.”

“Be a little more thankful I’m not like the rest of em. You got lucky. This place be swarming with all em doctors and scientists.”

“Really, thank you. Yeah know the name could use some work.”

“You won’t mind the name when it’s saving your life. Use that well Charlee.”

“Don’t worry I’m going to get those mewling shard-borne coxcombs.”

“Excuse me?”

“If all goes well I’ll be gone by morning. Thanks Demetri.”

Demetri was wrong. I am not the lucky type and things did not go my way this night. For some reason the weird girl is invading my mind and guilt is clawing up my spine for not being able to help her. The skinny, pitiful, wretched girl who could barely speak one word without stumbling, let alone a sentence. She stays in my dreams showing me a way out and all the while I’m acting like my bratty self, demanding she go faster. Her dark blonde hair sways back and forth when she skips to freedom. When I’m sleeping I realize she had life before CHWs took it. A family. The steel walls are the ones who turned her mad with their censorious stares and impenetrable door. I think like how she would think, without hope of escape and vulnerability. I remember her dazed stare and disoriented actions. Lost and confused she reminds me of my mother. A strange thing that I think is called compassion, something I didn’t know I possessed, goes out to her and for a moment I trick myself into thinking I’m not at CHW and I’m with my best friend. Braelin doubles over laughing in a carefree way, my mom is acting how a mom should, and my dad makes up for the years he wasn’t around. My half-dream half-conscious thoughts drift away into real sleep and I don’t remember them by morning.

∴∴∴

They say every day is a new start. A new chapter in your long journey in life. But today was not one of those days. I can’t feel a layer old skin being drawn back and I’m left not with a restored and replenished version of myself but the same moldy mucked up one. Yesterday still stung and my fresh new start doesn’t start off to dandy. I’m back in Dr. Robin’s computer room, but this time I don’t have the privilege of being not attached to the wall. Unlike last time CHWs gave me the courtesy of old timey handcuffs but this time around they got smart and latched me on with uncanny rubber ones with no source of an opening. His computer’s keyboard was unfairly an inch away from my reach and the screen glowed a phlegmatic blue. I sighed wondering whether or not Demetri, the nice guy I’d briefly met the night before, got in trouble because of me. I didn’t get a chance to use his Zap but on my way out I snatched a tool that was lying on the ground. Only a little guilt resulted in my grab because I seemed to need whatever I could get at the time.

I wasn’t paying any attention to what I’d picked up but it proved its worth. I had just so happened to get something that helped me unlocked doors. When I had looked down to see what

I got I did feel lucky. I unlocked doors and ran faster than I'd ever gone before. My route was a mess since I had no idea where I was going. Me being the math genius I am, choose the darkest most treacherous path. It led me down a zillion flights of stairs, a not up-to-date part of CHW because stairs are just legends to people now, and started to smell when I got to a certain point. And since I'm oh so lucky I got the worst room, I imagine, in all of CHWs. People clawed at my back and screeched in my face, begging me the let them go. I hurried past all of them, scared to death.

Wandering around for a while I saw nothing but the same tragic people, tragic and tragically loud. None one of them were quiet and I thought my head was going to explode. That was until I found the girl. She wasn't banging on the walls or raising heck, she was just sitting there. Sitting staring at nothing with a hint of a smile on her face. I tried talking to her but then she went from being perfectly silent to telling me the ABCs.

I admit I was not being patient but the girl was freaking me out. I was getting irritable and annoyed and was about to leave before I heard her say something about the complex's rooms. Really it was my fault for expecting so much out of a not right person. I should've left but there was something was holding me back and it wasn't the possibility that she could help me. There was something in those crazed eyes that were so innocent confused.

For a while there I'd thought she was getting some sense but then all went downhill when the poor girl began to giggling like she had no air left in her body. It wasn't one of those choking laughs that overwhelmed you, it was an 'I love being able to laugh as much as I want, and this feels like a good time to let it all out' types. At that moment I realized why I had stayed down in the dumps of Camp Happy Waters. The girl's smile, though intoxicated with insanity, was Braelin's smile. Her eyes had lit up in the same way Braelin's do-did, a cheerful bold onyx coloring that was a shade deeper and vaster than the big infinite sky above us. They were the same eyes I didn't know took for granted every time I saw them. But after that second of peace, I could tell that was one of her more peaceful moments; the girl experienced I had to witness her bright grin twist into a mental scowl. I shook my head. This was not my best friend, this was a screwed up person in a screwed up place.

"Well if it isn't Miss Alimzhan Tokhtakhunov."

"Who in the name of Abraham Slender is *that*?" I replied to someone. I was too lazy to look up five inches to check. "Besides, you're the one who came to pay me a visit. I didn't really have a say in the matter."

"I didn't know Airika would hole you up in here. Abraham Slender?" whomever was speaking was walking closer to me, which I wasn't comfortable with one bit.

"Read some Shakespeare you illiterate fustilarian." I twirled my violet strips of hair and saw that it was fading already. Ops forty dollars of my mother's money, for naught. Not that I was ever satisfied with the dye job, I had it done the old way to burn some more money and my hair was too dark for the less efficient way to get it thoroughly colored.

I felt something shake violently and turned my head to see the guy who was talking had slammed his forearms, a little too forcefully I must say, into a stake of holo decks. I hope

whatever he just hit wasn't important because the day before I checked, the decks had no backups and were practically flimsier than paper.

"Somebody didn't have a good morning." I said looking at the now messy floor.

"No I didn't have a good morning; I was cleaning up your crud filled escape plan last night."

"Oh good! You remember that too." An owy gross feeling erupted in me when I recognized this guy as the one who led the pack of wolves to the basement, or I assume it was the lowest level.

"It wasted a lot of my time Charlee. I tried asking you politely to help me but I'll take last night as a decline. T"

"Now you wait a minute Mr.! You kidnapped me and others and expect me to do what you want here? No sir. Ain't happening."

"Sorry if that wasn't the best approach but I've been watching you for four years and"

"Holy heck you were stalking me too? As if the first part weren't bad enough."

"I like to say I'm a patient man but"

"Man?" I snorted. "Please you can't be any older than twelve. Aside from the youthful face look at your clothes."

"What the heck's wrong with my clothes?"

"I'm no fashionista but if we just start with the shoes it all goes wrong. Brown and blue Scits? With those pants? I don't think so."

The dude actually looked down to check his shoes but then quickly shook his head. "That is not what I'm here to talk about, I"

"Skip the long talk about how I'm in trouble, I've had it plenty."

"Quit interrupting me first off and second, why did you go a restricted area of Happy Waters?"

"Like I know my way around, and I guess you're as stupid as I thought you were. Do you think I want to stay with you creeps?"

He closed his eyes and bit his lip. "You mean a lot to us Charlee I"

"You sure have a way of showing it."

He took a deep breath to try to calm down. "I apologize for not coming to talk with you sooner, that was a loss on my part. My name's Jaxson. I've lived and worked here nearly all my life, I love it here. Sorry I was a little insensible yesterday. I was angry all my hard work could've been washed away because of a faulty camera. You se"

Jaxson's stupid speech was already getting bland and expected, CHW's perfect little scientist who strived for greatness. He was here to convince me this place wasn't bad. I was going to suffer through it until I heard he thought I was his hard earned work. I'm not a computer that can be bought with an allowance from mommy and this freak had already taken it too far. I sure couldn't strangle him at the time but my knee was more than eager to give Jaxson a punch in the you know what. He had kept coming closer during his talk and was directly in line of fire with my knee facing perfectly towards the target.

"Well the thing is Mr.," knee gab. "I don't appreciate you calling me your work." His face crumpled tighter than a wad of paper and he stumbled far away from me. "Now please, try to

enjoy the rest of your morning.” He looked so funny, floundering around the room trying not to yell.

“Oh my gosh,” I snickered, “You act like you’ve never been hit before.”

Jae

“Charlee!” I finally gave up and let out the much needed yell. Well, more of a pup like yelp. She didn’t say anything. She just sat there with her smug look being very correct in saying that no one had ever hit, let alone knee me in the spot. Dr. Savitz was a big NO on physical contact which even included hugging, handshakes, and highfives. The only person who’d ever gotten close to me was Demetri. She was so far reckless and carefree but did she have to be so... content about it?

I left Dr. Robin’s room disappointed. Charlee, the girl I’d be observing for four years, wasn’t anything I imagined she’d be. Going to the Fail room? Kneeing me. I’d never actually learned anything about her over the long time I’d be watching her. Not her personality or anything besides her IQ and her serious case of hemophilia. But this was the biggest disappointment I’d ever experienced. A whole chunk of, my life had been spending long hours looking for the perfect mathematician and for what? A purple stained delinquent? But giving her up for Fail after all my work is not a plan A for me. I didn’t even know her. Not really.

When Demetri heard about the incident he didn’t say much. I stayed with him while he fixed the alarm and I pounded the walls the whole time. I was so mad and wasn’t thinking at all. I left when the Fail’s screams got too rowdy and Demi was still quiet as a mouse when we went back upstairs. Oh the stairs. For years I begged Airika the replace them with something else. They were old, unstable, and lasted miles. But the thing about them I hate most is the time someone died on them.

Fail eight. His name was Eli Thoms. I never wanted to see brilliant people go down there. They were failures but they still had potential. Airika thought I needed to see what it’s like for the ones who had yet to prove any meaning to the world. I agreed with her at a time. I thought they were nothing but desperate cockroaches looking for a purpose. They’re still are but I guess I think a little more humane about them.

A guard and I were halfway down when Eli started to panic. He flailed his arms everywhere and was crying big fat tears I’ve never seen anyone cry before. The guard didn’t even make a grab for him when he started his descent. I can’t say much because I didn’t either. I stood behind him as he fell, waving his arms like he was trying to fly back the land of the living. The stairs went so far down that I couldn’t hear his body crunch or hear his last scream. The guard escorting us turned without a word and without me. She walked hastily backup as I chased to catch up with her.

During my run up the rickety steps I saw one thing on the banister and wall I wished I hadn’t. Eli Thoms’ blood streaked the bars of the handrails and walls; his blood was dripping in enormous amounts, blood I never tried to prevent from dripping.

Blood was a rarity nowadays. Nobody bleed because of the yearly vaccination everyone received. I knew me and everyone else on earth had this, even though I hadn't been in the open free world in a while. I mean of course I knew because I invented it. But CHWs gave all citizens the benefit of this helpful medication except the children who lived here.

I learned about blood but I'd never seen it until that day. Based on today's society I assume not many have seen blood or even know what it looks like. But I found out that we're lucky to not have to see blood because it is a gruesome, sad, and horrifying thing.

....

"Jaxson."

I turn to see Airika holding a stack of holo decks. "Hello Mrs. Savitz." At that moment I knew I made a mistake. Calling Airika 'Mrs.' Just wasn't going to go down well. I'd never made the mistake before but I was distracted when I was looking at my computer. She said I never had to be formal with her but to me she'd never been anything but formal. Airika was the epitome of formality.

I watched her as she sucked up a breath and continued.

"Dr. or Airika please and thank you Mr. Hollin." She was annoyed. Or at least I hoped she was. It would probably be the best case if she was. Whenever she called me Mr. it had to be serious business.

"My apologizes. So what's up?"

"I think you know part of the reason. It has something to do with Miss. Algiers."

"You heard about the accident I assume?"

"Of course I know and I wish you'd stop referring to it as an accident. Charlee is dangerous and needs to be contained."

"I agree she needs a little supervision and time to settle in but she's not dan-"

"She is, she was, and forever will be a danger. I want my scientists to have nothing to do with her. I've granted she'll be gone by tomorrow."

"No."

Before now Airika wasn't looking at me she had her head held high in her authority like gaze. But at the hearing of her request denied she looked at me with her piercing hard eyes. "I beg your pardon?"

"Sorry Airika but I worked hard to find Charlee. I'm not just going to let her go because you don't think she's safe. How about this, I'll work with her. No one else but me. Your scientists won't have to get a step closer to her."

"Fine." She turned. I was glad she did because I was getting pale talking back to her. Never have I ever said a thing against the person I looked to. I still respect her but I decided to take Demetri's advice and fight for the work I wanted to work on. The only weird thing was the quickness Airika showed to get rid of her. She was willing to toss a chance of a genius proving a theory no one's proven yet. The thirteenth genius. "But on the condition that you have one other lab partner."

"Okay. Who would you like me to work with?"

“Ralph Gainer.” She walked away, her heels clinking loudly down the tilted floors of CHWs.

Charlee

“It seems you won’t be going anywhere after all Miss Algiers. Consider yourself lucky.” The evil lady with red hair and a red soul threw something on the table and left.

I had many Shakespearean insults loaded and ready to fire but my hands were in too much pain to yell anything to the tottering tickle-brained varlot. I wished people would stop trying to tell me I was lucky. To me lucky didn’t mean dying of blood loss.

That’s right blood loss. I’ll be the first one in a long time to die it. Once that idiot Jaxson left this menacing looking lady came in all like, “Charlee you should be so glad to have this opportunity, you’re a very smart girl and I assure you you’ll never have another chance like this.” She told me this was a special place where people help the world evolve and I shouldn’t pull another trick like the one last night. I was to treat everyone like how I would treat any top authority. No more hitting guards and especially no more knee launching into her oh so precious Jaxson’s ouch spot.

Most of her talk was much of the same but then she whipped out a diagram of what I assumed was a model of CHWs and I straighten up. She was pointing to a section that was underwater. The caption read FAILS.

“As I was saying,” she knew I wasn’t listening so she spoke louder. “I saw you were rather fond of one of our Fails. The worthless low life you were speaking to is Adalyn Zomora. Eighty-seven people all like her are underwater at this very moment. All I ask of you is to help us so we can improve our lives--all our lives.”

“Sorry what does that have to do with the unfortunate people down under?”

“I was getting there, if you don’t this girl and eighty-six others won’t get to live anymore, got that Miss Genius?”

“Hey your words not mine. Thanks for thinking I’m smart and all but I really hate you everyone who works in this building.”

She grabbed my chin and made me face her head on. Sharp graphite colored nails pinched my skin. “Resist anything I or Jaxson says and I cut the air to eighty-seven lives faster than you can say Riemann.” When she released me she let my head slam back into the cold hard wall. “I am Airika Savitz and you will help me with what I have devoted my life to.”

I didn’t know any of the souls downstairs but I didn’t want to feel responsible for the loss of their lives. It wasn’t close to my fault but I knew the strange feeling of guilt would surface if I let them die. That Adalyn girl was a nutter but I sort of need her. But I sure as heck wasn’t going to let this lady know I had emotions past annoyance and pride.

“Not that I doubted your cruelty or anything but would you really want to carry the weight of some innocent kid’s death with you forever? If you mean you devoted your life to stealing children’s childhoods I congratulate you, you’re doing just fine. But even when you do make it down to hell you’ll remember those manic screams and searching arms just wanting to go home.

I don't think you want that. Okay maybe you do, but if you hold up to your threats I guess they're going to die because I will *never* do what you or the gudgeon Jaxson says."

To finish it off I presented to two hands free of rubber cuffs to her beat red face. But in an extra special way, I gave her a double dose of my middle finger.

Her mouth opened in shock and anger and the next thing I saw were my middle fingers on the ground.

"Ah! Oh my God you freakin-arggg!" it hurt like nothing I've ever felt. The red headed monstrous woman walked out of the room holding onto a sharp razor dripping blood.

The cut was so clean I didn't know what kind of blade she'd used. It was a clean cut but that didn't mean the leftovers were clean. The floor was soon covered in swirls of scarlet and my shirt was soaked through with my non stopping blood. There was a wad of bandages on a shelf but I knew they wouldn't help at all. This cut would hurt like crap to normal people but my problem was that I was a hemophiliac. This wouldn't just hurt it would kill. I'm pretty sure these people know all about me so cutting off my freaking fingers was a bit much. All it would take to kill me was a tiny slice.

My mom didn't know about this nor did anyone else but me. This was an easy fix but the fix would've had to have been a perfection. I refuse to get one because I felt like if I did I would be one step closer to being like my mom. Even if that step was only an inch. Not everyone who gets them are addicts, some just want better nails. I know that it was a stupid theory and if I didn't want the risk of death every time I skinned my knee I would have to get the most common treatment of all in America but no, I just had to wait until I was on an island, hold up, I don't even think this is an island any more. The chart Savitz showed me was a clump of buildings, but whatever the heck I'm on I had to wait for the time when I couldn't get medical attention unless it was a creepy doctor giving me a check-up. The only time I couldn't patch myself up.

The way I found out freaked me a lot. I was a little seven year old girl in my room and didn't notice a nail that stuck up in one of the floorboards. It was the day my yearly vaccination was supposed to be renewed, not that it would've gotten renewed even if I hadn't hit that nail. The shot that wouldn't let blood flow from anyone. My mom never took me so I didn't know blood liked to be messy and spill out everywhere.

The left pinkie toe scrapped against it hard enough to form a small cut and I expected it to slow down and barely bleed at all. That's what we learned at school. That in the old days before the yearly shot naturally people's blood didn't want to leave our body and it clotted to second it hit the air. Being seven I thought my blood hated me and didn't want me to live. I was a watery mess and there was soon a puddle of tears almost as big as the sea of blood.

I finally sucked it up and ran to the bathroom where I knew there was a laser. Back then lasers were special and still developing but now they make just about everything easier. I didn't quite know how to use it because I was fluky to have a halfway caring mother up until I was nine. She had fixed things with lasers all the time and when she finished a scar like mark stayed behind on whatever she'd fixed. I thought if I cut my baby toe off I could get it to stop bleeding and be left only with a scarred toe numb. Thankfully it'd stopped gushing out faster than Niagara Falls but

now I think about how I could've saved all my toes on my left foot if I had just taken off a little sheet of skin.

Now I don't have my childish mind to guide me through the pain of the loss of two of my fingers. A sea of blood surrounds me and I close my eyes while gallons of blood continues to leak out. It stains the light colored floor to a heavy pink.

Ages later Airika comes back and throws me a laser.

"Little late snot rag." I said through clenched teeth. I was squeezing my hand in vain to try and stop the blood.

She was gone for what seemed an hour and I was starting to get dizzy. I struggled to pick up the laser with my eight fingers and when I finally did I performed a clumsy job of sealing the cut back together. I bit my tongue hard, but not enough to bleed because I don't need a scar in my mouth. I slumped back against the wall and sighed. My hands were burnt and still sizzling from the too hot laser I didn't have time to adjust.

"That'll leave a mark." I said to myself. The blood was so smooth it looked like silk as it flowed around the room. I'm the most blood covered and I see my black hair has a new color to it; one that I think will stay better than purple.

Adalyn

"You have brains in your head," but not the sort that help you. "You have feet in your shoes," shoes? I ran barefoot with Charlee and felt all the spikes along the way. "You can steer yourself in any direction you choose." I steered myself right onto the brink of the hottest cauldron of lava you could imagine. If I move an inch in the wrong direction I'm dead. But hey, thanks for the positive words Seuss.

"Ain't that right Savitz! It's entirely my fault I'm down here!" working out didn't prove any helpfulness so I'm back to manically screaming. My encounter with Charlee left me hopelessly grasping at the idea that I could have a friend for a change and manage my way out of this dump.

I wanted to abandon this sick excuse for a bedroom and get a real brain for my vacant skull. Like the tin man. Instead of having a gravely wall etched in rugged script I dreamt of a computer that I could type my every thought in.

Tears tumble down my ashen cheeks.

I was getting desperate for something more to this world than the same feeling every morning. A morning without despair was so close I could touch it. I longed for a day where I woke up and didn't feel the multiple coats of oil in my un-brushed tamed hair. One where my eyes weren't drier than the sun baked sand and I was surrounded by walls that supported layers of beautiful paint. I wanted the newest electronics and a bed that was softer than a cloud. But shards of reality always stab into my lyrical fantasies and I come to terms with my life. I would never have hair comb gentler than a knife, my eyes will never feel like they aren't covered in layers of fitful sleep, the walls are cold and hard, my small bit of electric light are a few remaining bits of glass from when I smashed my only hint of light, and never would I ever get to have a bed.

I wipe my face of salty drops and snot.

When someone reminds you not to take things for granted and you should appreciate your life, everything in life, listen to them real hard. They'll never be anyone who says anything truer. Enjoy the little things because you may not have another chance to enjoy anything at all. Try not to close your eyes at the wrong time, something gorgeous will fly by and you'll never see it again. Please think of the things that are really important to you and don't forget them. Cherish the pain of a lying friend because though it may hurt right then and there you'll realize you're lucky to have friends at all. Be happy you have people in your life to talk to because someday you might find yourself able to talk to only sinister walls. You could be whisked away forever and sit around thinking about how your last words to someone you love were utter garbage.

My cheeks ball up and my lips turn into a tortured smile.

Only God knows how I've been lied to and there's no way to describe the complete torture you feel when you find out someone was a fib. It's even more heart wrenching when you thought they were the most trusting of all people. I hate lies worse than I hate Savitz but if I could be lied to again to leave this pit of crushed lives I would accept to the fullest. Oh... if only I'd never gone into her room. I would've never found the beginning to a strand of rope that led me to true facts. I was better off believing her made-up stories hasty promises were as real as the sky and I wouldn't feel this emptiness, betrayal, and failure.

I snifle.

I'd failed this girl in too many ways and emptied out my soul for her. If only I would've never found out she had a dark and infinite tunnel of lies. I would be happy. Happy I would be if I hadn't regretted every choice I'd made that day, everything I did then was so wrong I couldn't even find a place to start to begin to fix it. At the time and in that moment, I put all the weight on her shoulders. I had tossed the satchel to her to carry but now I know I was just trying to avoid the truth.

A sob chokes its way out.

But it wasn't just her that I'd failed. No, I just had to go and ruin my relationship with everyone I'd ever cared about. It shouldn't matter anymore since nobody knows I ever existed but it was one of the rare truths in my life and it did happen. It happened to scar everyone. But it's okay for them yes it's all good, to them it never occurred, me on the other hand I remember it all. I never knew there was so much damage a ten year old could do.

Oceans start to flood my mouth and the salty waters sting when they hit the ripped, raw, and bleeding flesh of the inside of my cheek. I'm fully aware my mouth should be in a lot of pain but I can't feel an ounce of it.

The words I inflicted on her conscience for the last time were more horrifying than the evil deed I had done. And I wish never to think of them again.

....

I have officially destroyed my wall, the only sort of thing that kept me from falling into the lava. I can't write on it anymore because during my little sulking session I chiseled into like a four year old, neglected my food service, and threw the knife out the barred window. I knot my hair into messy little clumps for an hour until something out of the ordinary happens.

A familiar silhouette comes close to my cage. It's Ralph, the fidgety and stutter bond man who is terrified of Dr. Robins. As he comes closer and I can see him better I notice his progress is laughably slow and his stride probably couldn't out walk an inch worm. His lower lip was quivering so fast I worried the upper would accidentally get violently bit off. Ralph appeared to be alone as he takes baby steps nearer to me.

He shut his eyelids and with a high pitched fearful voice announced, "W-w-hiiiiiiy? Why? Must this be done by me?"

Ralph had a naturally animated look and the manner in which he held himself was awkward, clumsy, and unbalanced. I should say hello! It'll make his day brighter.

"Guten morgen mein freund! Wie war dein tag bis jetzt? Meiner war nicht der beste, entschuldigung, lass uns nicht über mich diskutieren. Dein name ist Ralph ja?" Nothing like a guttural greeting to make your day! Ralph didn't seem to think so and he tried to hug the wall like it was a safety line. Hug a wall? That won't work out. Not a bit.

He looked at me but then quickly covered his face with skeletal fingers. His whole body looked that way, twiggy and like it would shatter any second. "What was that? Please-plea don't kill me."

"Hi Mister. You looked like you need a nice hello. Sorry if I kind of freaked you out a little."

Ralph breathed heavily as he realized I wasn't going to do anything but still looks like he could throw up many pounds of barf the second he went to full out terrified mode. I mean what could I do? "Sorry-sorry I'm here. I'm a little lost. This place is a maze."

I laughed. "I ran through it earlier! I'm a runner like Thomas, Minho, Nick, and George. But really I'm Newt because I'm a former runner. My mind is jacked instead of my legs but neither of us will run anymore. He's dead and I'm close to it. If you're in the maze Ralph, you must've come here on accident. You're too slow to avoid the grievors."

He gave me a nervous smile but it had fear sewed into it. Don't be scared Ralph! I only want a friend. Sweat dribbled down to his neck and I had no doubt it was cold. Runners sweated a lot from the hard work they did so I guess it's okay he's in the maze.

"How do you know my name?" he asked while he balled his button-down shirt around a fist. His battered leather shoes stayed cemented to the floor and an aura of oh-my-gosh-how-the-crap-do-I-get-outta-here was being clearly displayed.

"A-B-C-D-E..." Ah never mind you know the rest. I won't waste anymore trees' lives on that tune. I laughed again. Dangit why won't that go away? A snort strangled me as I try to get more words out. "Don't be scared. If you're scared it leads to anger. Anger leads to hate and hate makes you suffer. Don't be scared of me Ralphy. No need to be angry. Please don't hate me because that'll make you suffer."

Since Ralphy's nerve level was an automatic zero I expected him to back away or dash out screaming but instead his body stopped tensing and his demeanor seemed relaxed. "You like Star Wars too? I thought nobody liked that anymore. And you obviously know your James Dasher," Ralph walked close enough to me that I could see the dark blueness of his eyes. "Dr. Robins said

everyone down here was a half-wit but anyone who remembers the best story in the galaxy isn't crazy to me."

...Robin laid an egg... the Batmobile lost its wheel and the Joker (me) got away... Hey! A robin bird; a migratory songbird that belongs to the true thrush genus including the Turdidae is named after the European robin. It is most commonly found living in the North American area and is the state bird of Michigan, Wisconsin, and Connecticut. This must be a very special bird we're talking about, three states claimed it as their official bird even though there are over ten thousand different kinds of birds, and that depends on who you question. Some include extinct birds like the once popular bald eagle. But for some reason I think Ralph is referring to a different 'robin'. Not Dick Grayson or the bird. I know! Robin Williams. He's the one.

"He died many years ago and he wasn't all that straight minded. He said it himself, 'You're only given a little spark of madness. You mustn't lose it.' And if you're saying he said I was a half-wit I presume that means I only have half of my brain. If I've managed to retain half of a brain this long I don't imagine it'll be all that difficult to find the other half."

"You're right it that sense but I'm speaking of Dr. Mikeah Robins. Scary personality, tall, always has a lab coat on. Ring a bell?"

I waited for a bell to sound but heard nothing. "Don't lie and tell me there's a bell. I hear nothing but us talking." I still wanted Ralph's bell to make an appearance but it didn't and in that time I remembered Dr. I-smarter-than-everyone-on-planet-earth. The mean one who took Ralph here the first time. I look down at Ralph's shirt, wrinkled from his ball it up moment.

"So what are you doing here Mister?"

"Dr. Robins told me to come down here but didn't tell me why. He locked the door after I was on the first step."

"That's not what an honorable Jedi would do. Not to anyone. Luke wouldn't even put Darth Sidious in a pit with something bad as Sarlacc."

"I think I'd rather be here with the Fails than with a hungry monster. I already see not all of you guys yell and try to scratch my eyes out. And Dr. Robins is my brother so yeah. He would want to throw me into a place where he thought I would die. He's not a Jedi. He's a stormtrooper who follows orders and never lets anyone question him."

"Your brother? I never had any siblings but if I did I always hoped they would be my best friend. We'd be closer than Chewie and Hans."

Ralph knew he'd be here for a while so he slid down the wall and got comfy. He could be my friend, maybe. No one in my life had stayed long. "You've been nice and my brother was wrong when he said everyone was worthless here but I need to leave."

I snorted. But this time it wasn't laughter that triggered it. "Don't even start about wanting to get out of this place. I've been here *way* longer than you."

"No I know but Ms.—Dr. Savitz is going to slaughter me for being late. Everyone already thinks I'm a slow idiot with ties who doesn't belong here so I don't need to prove them right by being late. I mean, they think I don't my left from my right. I need to be in her office in ten minutes. Dr. Robins said it was down this way and I should've known better than to have trusted

him but I was in a hurry. I'd spilt some coffee on my shirt, given to me Dr. Robins, and had to go change. Then he led me quickly down here. Oh my goodness was I dumb. Down a long winding staircase? That could never lead to Dr. Savitz's room."

This was all spoken awkwardly and in an out of breath manner. Ralph adjusted himself and looked embarrassed for having said more than a few sentences.

I asked, "Why don't you ever call him Mikeah? You only refer to him as brother and Dr." I knew very well why he had corrected himself when he almost tripped up and called Dr. Savitz 'Mrs.' I did that once and I did not have a happily ever after. "And calling you slow is not true. You're not a turtle Ralph. They're very stupid if they see you as a reptile. I'm going to say you're lucid. How's that? You're lucid and flowy person who likes to take time to absorb everything.

Ralph went all jell-o on me, turning red and wobbly with appreciation. "That's nice of you to say." I could tell he was having a hard time trying to keep up with my order of words and he went back to his bro, "He doesn't think I deserve to use his causal title because I messed up his stupid collage opportunity."

"Ugh sounds like he's a huge stick in the mud."

"Tell me about it."

"Worse than Jar Jar Binks."

"What do you against Jar Jar?"

"He was so helping the sith."

"No he was an innocent awkward creature trying to help Padme and had some very funny lines."

"Okie day isn't that clever. I say random stuff all the time."

"At least he didn't just beep and make buzzy noises."

"Did you just say you didn't like droids!? I no longer like you." I did like him and we both knew it because were laughing at how we were nerding out about a fandom from 1,190 years ago.

"I just don't trust any of them. They hold literally every bit of information they collect and could use it against someone."

"I cannot believe your opinions on this. Jar Jar was by far the most untrustworthy and probably the reason Anakin got sucked into the dark side. A droid is so harmless, they're easy to rewire and you can break their memory chip faster than Hans can fly."

"Poe's a better pilot."

I clamped my mouth shut and lost the ability to breathe. I didn't mind his love for Jar Jar or that he had a strong dislike for the robots of Star Wars not really, but denying Hans Solo the title of best pilot in the galaxy was absurd. It was crazier than me and the batty ancients who liked to tell fiction tales that were lies for children.

"Okay so I really do hate you now even it'll lead to suffering. Say Hans is the best and I might forgive a little."

"Poe's better. I guess Hans *was* pretty good but we'll never know."

"Oh you had to go there! Dead or not he's still better."

“Naw Poe’s the best.”

“In your dreams, now who’s the better pilot? You have got yourself five seconds or else I’m going into full one Fail mode. I’ll be past the Gone and I’ll act nuttier than a Crank from the Scorch.”

“That’s pretty bad but... Poe’s better.” He smiles and I get a glimpse of beautiful teeth. They were too perfect. Probably a perfection treatment but still. I liked them.

“Funf, vier, drei, zwei, you have one second until I go into Crank mode.”

“What? No fair! I don’t deutsch sprechen. And Poe’s better.”

“Sounded like pretty clear Deutsch to me, eins, null—Now I’m a Crank!” I scream louder than I have ever before but it hurts so I cut my Crank yelling sort. I can’t believe I just had a conversation with someone. I spoke surprisingly clear and I noticed Ralph didn’t stutter when we went into Star Wars chat. Maybe I could have two friends, Charlee and Ralph. The problem is I have to go find Miss Charlee Chaplin and try to not go crazy on her.

Unfortunately Ralph and I’s talk was interrupted by a red faced Doctor named Airika Savitz.

Jaxson

I know Airika wasn’t happy with me but did she have to pair me with the worst person in the building? First I receive lousy brain work to do and now I’ll have to put up with Dr. Robins’ slow brother. I mean he could’ve figured all his stupid problems out a long time ago with a perfection. He barely ever talks and when he does it’s half English half st-st-utter. How am I supposed to work with that? Hopefully he’ll be a good boy and stay out of my way.

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Once in the room, I hit the “dark roast” button. I leaned forward to grab the drink I was about to majorly over sugar/cream but was interrupted by a, “M-ma, uh, Mister?” I shrunk low into my body and grumbled.

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“Good mor-morning I, sorry, I late, had a long night.”

I turned back to the coffee maker and made another cup. I was going to need it. “Do you want coffee?” Not that he needed it as excitable as he was.

“N-noo thanks. I had some, a-a-a one earlier.”

I bit down hard on my lip and started my daily ritual of sugaring and creaming my coffees. I usually had two a day and adding all that sugar together plus the cream I was due for a stroke any day now. But oh well. Drink junk while you're young.

The jittery little guy wouldn't stop looking at me. Small brown eyes—common boring eyes—that stood as wide as they could to search me thoroughly. Didn't have anything to look at I guess, but still, it was freaky. I stirred so more sugar into my drink, which was now more dessert than coffee. He wasn't even supposed to be here, he wasn't a real scientist. Just an early college graduate who majored in biology. He probably barely passed. Dr. Robins only brought him here because he needed a place to stay but if it were me who was stuck with a brother like him, I probably let him fend for himself, dead parents or not. Mikeah and Ralph were so different it was hard to believe they came from the same blood line.

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I mentally shook my head and physically left the room. Ralph followed a few feet behind twitching all the way. I walked fairly slow so he wouldn't get lost but I could tell no matter how slow my pace was he'd always be a wanderer. How could Airika be so heartless and make me suffer like this?

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Charlee

And when I thought these people couldn't be anymore barbaric. I was still in the bloody room, with two less fingers, and an extremely irritated mind. No amount of Shakespearean insults and profanity could describe how much I hated the Savitz character who was running this whole programme. Unfortunately being mad and cursing couldn't unlock the door either. It couldn't scrub the floor clean of red fluid nor could it sew my digitus medius back on my aching hand. I guess people tend to take their fingers for advantage because I sure did miss them.

Picking stuff up was hard and using a pen was nearly impossible. At least keyboards were more common but there was a number of things I couldn't do now I never thought about: giving people the good luck sign, ALS, playing chopsticks, piano, any instrument really, tie my shoes, okay maybe that one can be accomplished if I work on it, interlace my fingers, count to ten, and most importantly flick off that fobbing dread-bolted clotpole who dared call herself a scientist. I'm sure there are more restrictions but I don't care to think of them right now. And Jaxson. Wow, does he have a punchable face.

For a genius he isn't very sharp. I did him a favor of giving him his first kick to the you know what because when that happens and you don't know what to expect, it's a heck of a lot worse. I still haven't figured out why Ms.-I-HATE-YOU! Gave me a laser. It must have been a

last minute plea because she let me bleed out pretty long. Whatever, I'm breathing in fresh CHW air so I won't linger on why I'm not. The next time I get used to these new claws I going to cut off her middle fingers and see how she likes it.

The night has turned me into an insomniac thinking about things I hate thinking about. Most people get frustrated and guilty when they realize, *Oh no! Even though I've only been away from home for a day, I haven't thought about my dear loving family once!* But for me I more than annoyed that my family is all I can think about. They've been the running headline in my mental magazine non stop and I wish the stupid editors would give me a break from the same old story. It was worse than the uninspired news crew who talked about a new store for hours on end and more painful than a cheesy sitcom that everyone somehow finds hilarious. It'd been a few weeks but my mom and dad just wouldn't give me peace.

The day they sent me off to camp was one of the rare days they were side by side. My dad had even paused work to see me off—how considerate of him, but they were acting almost robotic that day. I never had much memory of them together but since dad had taken off work I thought maybe they'd at least pretend to be a happy couple. Two peas in a pod. PB & J. Nachos and cheese. Toaster and strudel. I don't know anything but how they were. My mom had a juice box that I was more than sure was illegal and dad kept his distance from me. To be honest a fight would've been plausible.

Right before they drove off without exiting the car or helping me with my luggage mom said to no one in particular, "I expect her to do great things." she hit the gas hard, sent her choppy unkempt hair blowing out the unclosed window, stared straight ahead toward the boring blank road that went on forever until you hit New York City, and never looked back or made any suggestion to move an inch. I still don't see how anything that went on that day made sense and come to think of it I don't even think dad rode in the passenger seat. He sat stiller than a rooted tree and I don't recall him blinking. But I wasn't concerned or even in the slightest bit worried. My mom was easy to be mad at all the time but I guess I haven't released all my rage on dad because since he's never home I haven't had time to construct the worst image of him like I did with mom. Kenni Algers, had won mother of the year award. Most non mother like mother of the year. She was a defending champion because the skinny rolled up packages of nicotine spoke to her like detention spoke to me. She had a title to protect and I don't think it will be going to anyone else. Ever.

It's not all her fault, of course it's not. It's not like the cigarettes jumped into her mouth own their own, picked up her money to spend it on perfections, and sold our house. It's not like this case is all on her for not bothering to pay the bills or brush her teeth. Mom liked a perfect image on the outside but I guess in her opinion burn personal hygiene with fire. Well, she thought she looked like a supermodel. Far from actually. She'd never eat cigarettes instead of breakfast and drink till the cows come home, because it's clearly not her fault! It's my bad I'm a suckish daughter and disappointment to the world. I remember the day after I had colored my hair mom had come home from a perfection appointment, totally trashed, and she asked why my hair was purple.

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She giggled and whipped out a box of cigarettes. “Yeah I like your hair. It’s pretty.” she lit her smoke and sat down, on the floor.

“Thanks mom. I like yours too. You look beautiful.” her most recent perfection entailed superb hair and nails.

Mom used to do all the fixer-uppers on her own. She looked twenty instead of forty but with pounds of perfections on board, it gave the reflection of forty trying to look twenty. I really meant it when I said she look beautiful. But the thing was perfections were the only thing keeping her body from falling apart. The doctors will find her lungs aren’t holding up someday and she’ll get her sentence of prison. I just don’t know which one would be better for her jail where she’d most likely lose it or home where she would be free to continue abusing herself. I don’t avoid facts and one of the facts about Kenni Algers was; her throat was intoxicated and she was going to die. It’s not a surprising fact or anything. I don’t even know how she’ll die. Maybe she could beat the smokes and die of old age or something normal. Another fact was; I was not attending her funeral when the time came.

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Adalyn

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“Hi-hi. Uh- was just leaving Miss.”

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(START AGAIN)

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Adalyn

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"Hi-hi. Uh- was just leaving Ms."

That made her even more angry. She pushed him against the wall and unleashed the wrath of an angry scientist. Which to warn you, is not pretty.

Airika yelled a lot. I guess, I don't know but she seems like the jelly meanie type. Not quite in control. I was in a trance of watching light ash brown tufts of hair float to the ground. They fell so slow and gracefully it aroused a memory of five year old me dropping a fork into honey. Mom fished it out and told me that was a silly thing to do but I put it back in. It was perdy. It was like the fork was in it's own world, sinking fast or as slow as it wanted to with no one around to mess with it. Sunlight bounced off the light gold liquid adding to the display causing spots of yellow to jump. The fork hit the bottom after seven seconds, the same amount of time it takes for food to reach you stomach, and mom pushed the honey jar out of my reach. No playing with food she scolded, but it wasn't playing, I was watching a fork being immersed in shiny thick substances and noting it's slowness. Or maybe this fuzz is clumps of feathers, falling naturally to earth's geosphere. A bird plucked it's loose scratchy feathers and accidently pulled one to many. They were hurled to their new fate, but the wind wouldn't them go painfully. It scoops up the delicate soft quills and gently glides through long currents of air. Alas, the breeze is feeling feisty. One of the baby feathers catches in the abrasive channel and flips away from it's family.

It hits me that this is Ralph's poor scalp being maimed, not light feathers in a narrative that belonged in a Pixar short film or forks sinking. The hair that falls is increasingly redder every time and I could've sworn it was brown colored, not rust. That would hurt, yes it would. Ralph had his eyes shut but it didn't seem to make Airika go away. Skin tense and shaky he attempted to shield his face before she could damage something breakable.

But she smashed the frail boy to pulp and went on about how she should kill him right there for being such a failure, leave him here where he belongs, how gross he is, blah, blah, blah, the usual scary death threats and punches.

"You are wasting Jaxson Hollin's valuable time. Remember I only let you stay here because your brother felt obligated." she let go of him.

"I-I-,"

"Do you even understand me?"

"I could, couldn't leave. Mrs.-"

"WHAT DID YOU JUST CALL ME?"

Ralph was facing the wall holding his blistering head. Unfortunate Ralph didn't know about Airika Savitz's putrid hatred toward the word Mrs. It was unfair really. You had to learn yourself,

if anyone talked about her anti-Mrs. gene you could be sure she found out. Even thinking about it gave me chills. I only called her the big M one time, and it was just so I could watch her skin boil to match her shellacked hair before I got cast down to the land of scheisse.

The scrawny boy bites his lip (like that would help) and feet tripping he backs into the metal cast wall even closer than he as before.

“I’m sorry-sor, I didn’t mean--” he whimpered.

“Go upstairs and find Mr. Hollin RIGHT NOW, before you make me lose control.”

As you might have guessed, I laughed like a hyena straight out of the Lion King through the whole torment and I didn’t displease my Fail reputation by making Ralph regret chatting with me. Star Wars friend or not. He looked at me a few times for assistance but all he saw was a scary girl who looked like she belonged in Annabell. Who *was* Annabell. Hands gripping the bars and I made my cheeks hurt and my throat raw. He saw Bruce Banner transforming into the Hulk, the Joker’s eyes going bloodshot, Chuckie, anything but a human.

I almost had someone who resembled a friend but I couldn’t even handle a few minutes without revealing my greatest fear to him: myself.

Jaxson

It wasn’t until we were sitting across from each other both playing the best game of avoid eye-contact, that I noticed Ralph’s lack of hair. I didn’t memorize his hair style or anything, but I could have sworn it was never this sallow and blotchy. Eh, maybe a slip up with the trimmers. Must be an old timer when it comes to that kind of stuff. Perhaps he attempted a new trend and managed more of a zen garden than a hot celebrity look. Not that he could ever look halfway decent.

This was ridiculous. Pointless. Forty minutes scrolling through files I’ve already familiarized myself with hoping, *praying*, by some miracle he’ll catch on and I can start making some actual progress. Time for a little pop quiz to steady old Ralphie’s brain. Or, you know, mash it up more.

“What’s the subject’s name?”

“Charlee,” he peeped, eyes down, lips barely opening.

“How about a surname?” I thought that was a given when I asked the first time around.

“Algers.” This required a little more movement of the jaw and more syllables, making him uncomfortable.

“Parents? Last name included.”

He switched his eyes to an angle and said, “Ian Al-Algers and Kenni Algers. Last name taken from Kenni.”

“Why?”

“Ian said he thought Algers was better than Scharf and Kenni, Kenni agreed.” He twitched. Roach.

“Where did she live?”

“New York, city, New York City. In the lower class part of town.”

“I thought New York was a progressive state, a place without class discrimination. Tell me Ralph, why would Charlee live in a poor neighborhood then?”

Ralph thought for a moment either to gather his words or actually think. I don't think the latter was possible. “They proclaim themselves a true Dajian State where everyone has fair resources but to live a-a, decent, um decent life, Charlee had to um, she-she—”

“She what?”

He closed his eyes for a second. “She raced in illegal bike races for money because Kenni wanted her in a good school. Schools are technically-tech, technically, free for everyone but the-the, only go-good ones are private schools.”

Ralph heaves a breath like that much talking exerted him.

“And her father?”

“He doesn't send-send them money anymore so Charlee-Char, Charlee gives her m-m-mom money and sa-says, says, it's from her-her d-d-dad.”

Every word was a battle and the longer we talked the more he stumbled. “So, Ralph, how long have I been observing her?”

“Four years.”

“No. Four years, three weeks, five hours, and twelve minutes. I held my breath until the second she was on Happy water soil. My whole existence has been for this. She has been the answer to everything important. Charlee Juan Algers is the only thing that is going to make any difference here. Got that?”

Too many words at once. He curled up his lip and looked at me like I had just announced the start of a world war.

“Yes-yes, yea, yeah. Uh anything else? I should-should k-k-know.”

I crushed my coffee cup to freak him out on purpose. That was kind of mean but I needed to put my stupid intake somewhere. Luckily, I had drunk most of the sacchariferous liquid but the few drops that remained splattered onto Ralph's white lab coat. I never understood those, why have a thing so pure every speck of stain showed? It wasn't like we had a messy job anyway. Ralph worked with files more than he did chemicals.

But instead of the crisp fresh out of the laundry white scientist's stereotypically wore, Ralph's coat bore no sign of leisurely taking notes and writing papers. His was covered top to bottom with dust and unknown filth. Are those spots of blood I see? Rust. Yes, that was most definitely rust that sprinkled his clothing. This building isn't uptodate, he probably got lost and bumped against a wall causing unclean chalks of dirt to rain on him. Of course, the ignoramus stumbled to the oldest part of the place where the cleaning crew missed.

I inhaled through my mouth and asked, “What kind of science do you like Gainer?” How nice of me, making small talk with a scarecrow. A brainless, straw filled scarecrow.

He looked at me as if the question were trivial and leaned back a smidge when I called him Gainer. It was his given surname, Mikeah was married and took on Robins probably because he couldn't stand the thought of sharing his brother's anymore. Gainer was perfect for a guy like him. He had plenty to gain; it was just hard to know if he had the capability or not. What if he

didn't gain any knowledge? What if those three years in college were nothing more than piggybacking off the legacy of his brilliant brother? Maybe he doesn't think legitimate thoughts. Only floaters and bubbles.

Exhale. We stood there for a long time, me leaning towards his stained lab coat, him stiff in his chair, mouth grappling for words.

"Huh? Nothing? You don't like science?"

When I broke the silence, Ralph, for once, went still. His tick magically disappeared along with my patience.

"Then what are you still doing here!"

He didn't move. Only grasped at his rusted encrusted coat for something to do with his hands. Rust. Rust not blood. Rust. Not Eli's broken, twisted spine. Rust. Certainly it's not my hand as it squeezes the handrail. It's rust, and the light tricks me into seeing it as something else. It's not the cold cement wall soaking up a boy's mandatory fluids. Rust. It's not my bleeding heart as I watch someone die. He's fine. He's fine, everyone is given a vaccine to prevent blood from spilling. He has the drug, he must have it. I have it, Demi has it, Airika has it.

"I said, why are you still here! You don't talk, you don't no science, it could run up and smack you on your stupid head and you wouldn't know what science is. You should be in a mental ward, not an institution with the best minds in the world."

He didn't give any suggestion he was leaving.

"I said get out of my office!" I stood up and the crushed cup flew out of my hand and into Ralph's face. He jumped like a frightened cat, literally his back arched and his ears seemed to shrink down to the floor.

"Go on now, you hate science, you don't need to be here."

....

Charlee

My mom used to be a big believer in the area of spiritual crap. Not religious--she would stop smoking before she ever kneeled down and prayed--but she was obsessed with zodiacs and was a sucker for horoscopes. Complete slave to them, everyday she would check her Aquarius status and make sure she did everything right. It was kind of sweet to see her dedicated to something and have faith it would never let her down. Whenever she got a day that predicted bad fortune she wore a necklace encrusted with lucky stones. I don't remember what she called them but they were pretty. Pinkish and glowy. She never let me in on her zodiac club which was by all means, fine by me.

My birthday is a curse to her. One, I was born, two it's the same as Mr. Jew killer the famous Adolf Hitler. Aries seemed like a fine a zodiac to me, I looked it up, she wouldn't tell me, even though it was a day where the worst dude ever was born about 20,000,000 others had it too. Only so many days to go around. Besides zodiacs aren't real. They're just a myth some Egyptian person decided to tell stories about, a zillion years ago. And nothing that old matters.

I like three days after my birthday better than the actual day. The greatest writer in the universe entered our world. You guessed it, William Shakespeare. I don't especially like his stories, who wants a bunch of death here death there and ha, ha, so funny you just changed a man's head to an ass face! Genius!

I appreciate his impact. Shakespearean is a new language as far as I'm concerned. Old, difficult, weird, challenging, and the insults beat cursery by a landslide. Foul mouthing is too easy, I'd rather spend my days in the dictionary finding a meaningful clean word than pull a F bomb off the top of my cranium. Much more rewarding.

I don't think my mom shared my view because when the whiskey was popped and the perfections were placed she had no other ideas what to say, how to speak. When I was ten, and my mom wasn't overly insane, I bought her a zodiac calendar. She liked it but didn't say very much. The next day I found it in the rubbish bin.

CHW is my own personal trash can. Trash goes in, no one misses it. Did my mom call the authorities at least? I've chosen not to care. This place might be better than home. Just like how mom may have been better off in jail I might be more preferable here. I would say I've been wondering what she's been doing but I can't say I have. Buying more gross stuff than she can afford and getting perfections.

Don't even start me on dad.

Jaxson

"Not to be rude, but Airika has gone off a cliff somewhere. I don't where, but it majorly screwed her up in the department of 'Concern for Jaxson'. She's tripped and went spiraling into the great perhaps." I tell Demetri while laying on his work table. I cleared it off and plopped down when I came in here.

"Yesterday was worse than getting slugged by Charlee." I complain.

He laughs and says, "That my friend," he screws some gizmo in place. "Sounds like it was pretty bad."

"It was. He was late, filthy, stupid, unresponsive, and he jittered like a massage table." I hear Demetri make weird mechanical sounds and cringe as a loud whine erupts from his newest steam powered device. I pick up a bolt and roll it between my hands.

Demi tries to speak through his welding helmet but it's much too thick. All I hear is a mahahjdkaha.

"What?"

Pulls it down and puts a torch aside, "Why don't you ask Airika, nicely, to do someturn else for a whil till yer figure out what's up wit the Ralph character."

The ceiling is a high complicated weave of wires for intercoms and electricity. This is the only room that you can see a full x ray of what lies beneath decorated walls and chandeliered ceilings. Demetri says it's because he doesn't trust the idearotic electricians with anything but I like it because it looks cool.

I'm a young genius who knows four hundred thousand different words, excluding my scientific vocabulary, and am educated on a college level but I can't come up with any other way to describe this workplace than 'cool'. I would say it's the ounce of teen in me but wouldn't be quite true. No other word could match with cool. It interprets to so many things, it could be the awesome kind of cool, most commonly, or I'm cool, such as the forecast, mixed with sarcasm it was more of a I don't care stop talking, through text it comes through as yeah great, we're done talking, and when adults said it to children it meant I didn't catch a word you said but keep it up! It was a polite word in today's society.

Everything about Gainer was cool. And every aspect of Charlee's life could be summed up with the word cool.

....

Charlee

I hate to keep bitching about this, but I am just not a lucky person!

Some would argue, "Well that Demetri guy sure was a nice fellow, isn't he somewhat a miracle?"

No positive happy goers, I'm telling you it's not.

My parents were teasing me in every way cruel when I got to know Demetri Tyl a little better.

....

I know, I know, politeness works magic, "Pardon me," keeps us safe and please is peas, but seriously, cut the niceties when I'm coming through with a harpoon!

It was a bit of my, "My bad!" sort of thing for me so don't automatically conclude Demetri stopped me from impaling a shark. Although I'm glad *someone* did because I did not want the chance of a hemophiliac shark, that would be straight cold blooded murder. The government needed some real work with their vaccine, who could leave innocent water dwellers without proper medication available to the rest of us? Oh, yeah. Frozen hearted government workers. One day they could be swimming along and, BAM! A little poke and, *no more fishy*.

I could tell that sweet Demetri guy had been fiddling with the switches all day. He wanted to be with the big boys working security, it's okay dude, I don't understand the need for ten million buttons when you only need one either but you clearly do so maybe you need a promotion. I noticed the lights flicker twice, the air conditioner snap on once, a window rush upwards but shut firmly soon after, the computer screens glitch over, and finally the door click open.

My hands still hurt and even though it felt like wasn't enough blood left for any pain. I could still walk without falling. Okay maybe once or twice but no more than that. So I had to have lost at the most a liter and a half of my blood. A few more minutes and I would have lost two liters. Now that would've been pushing it. My blood pressure and respiratory rate were going to be elevated once I got moving so I started off at a minuscule crawl. I was going at the rate of a baby snail but hey, better than falling five feet and two inches.

“Hehe,” I crunch my shoulders and arch my back while my face shrivels into a raisin. “Oh gosh,” I snort, momentarily disgusting myself, and sit against the camera riddled wall. Thank the Lord I choose this wall to have a blood-loss fit or else Demetri wouldn’t have seen me. Cartoons always show an unfortunate animation toppled over with stars spinning round their comical heads but really you only notice one thing when it seems like your riding a coaster. A big fat pile of puke.

“Giglets!” Ew. I don’t have any experience with this ‘puke.’ A boy in the cafeteria spat some goop up one time maybe but not tankard like this. A not-so-subtle entrance, into the nearest chair might I add, gives me enough adrenaline to perk up and swallow before more ewies came slinking their way back up.

“Oh thank goodness this is the right room,” A hunched man says while leaning on soot colored knees. Red cheeked and steaming he stucks in breaths faster than his lungs can keep up with. A few times he tries to rise a hand to wipe off some sweat but instead continues his huffing and puffing. His shirt has been reduced to paper mache and while he clearly was venturing for me, he also clearly didn’t know where he was going or for that matter, what he was doing. Based off this five second inquiry he’s been running. Around in big circles.

“Good day Ser,” I tell him,” To whom do I owe this lovely visit on this lovely morning?”

“You’re one to talk--”

“No, no I seemed to have caused quite the ruckus,” my fingers are killing me and dizziness makes my voice waver.

“Charlee you’re not well--”

“I’m the not well one? Thy hast fallen *into* a well whilst beseeching one you imagine for whom is a friend. You hast been tripping over your own flock like an aunt in a maze. Come Lysander!”

I faintly recall Demetri picking me up and trying to keep my arms from smacking him in the face. Bump, bump, bump, down the stairs and scit, scat, through the halls.

“I think I lost a finger or two.”

“I know Charlee, bare with me. We’re almost there.”

“Where?” The walls are sparsely decorated which actually served me well. Anything too distracting and I might have conked out from all the unearthly spinning. Demetri wasn’t having the time of his life either, he was already going as fast as he could and my extra weight was slowing him down. Now, I’m not a heavy girl, unless you consider ninety two pounds heavy, but at this point a milk carton in hand could’ve buffered his pace.

“Why are a snail...?”

He carefully slumps me against a window deprived wall and asks, “What blood type are you?”

“Blood type?” I smack back another urge to vomit. It would all over poor Demetri’s shirt, how could I possibly barf over nice ol’ Demetri? Oh what the heck I need it out of my grossining system. There it goes, water and the snack that smiles back. Shame. I like goldfish.

He only smuthers a sigh and slings me over his shoulder. On the trip over the mountain I see he provided me a frustrated look that is all too easy to read. *Blood type? What do you mean! Gosh, kids these days. Don't remember nothin from yer schooling.*

“Blood...”

“Yea Charlee. You lost a lot of blood and we nerd ter get ya more, but I can't if I don't kner ye blood tipe!”

When he was all hissy pissy it got hard to understand what he was saying. Dizziness, dehydration, boring walls, and rambling Demetris did't make for a pleasant trip to the nearest urgent care. I'm not sure what accent he was supposed to have, but wow. It was an earful.

“Thou hast scattered mine eardrums you haggard.”

“Just need ya to hold on a few mer seconds.”

“One Riemann, two Riemann, three Riemann...”

He wasn't joking about seconds and few, I counted. This was far worse than being shot and brought to a fake summer camp, this was syringe, tube, and bag of a suspicious red punch.

“Oh, no. No pokey chokies please and thank you,” if there was any possible torture method worse than ridiculous amounts of water it needles had my vote. Then came scalpels, sheets of metallic smelling metal, medical tape, alcohol, math, homework, strange people telling me to solve their math homework, and things rolled in white paper.

“Charlee I need to stay still ars possibl, can yo do that?”

Hold still? What did he think I was doing right now, running a five-K for Christ sake. He was, not me.

“Um, er ut you doing?” Well now that he had specifically *instructed* me to be non-moving, of course I was going to try to get up. You just have to learn the ways of Algiers. It's so complex it requires schooling that isn't like school. Ah, just hang with me for a while and you'll know.

The frantic looks he was nailing me with weren't what I'd call reassuring. It was more like he was about to stick so sophisticated instruments into me without any med school. Or anesthetics. I presume he's about to hook me up to a blood balloon to get some circulation but I can tell he's not a professional within the medical world.

“I'm gerna go wit O-pos,” he absently tells me while wiping off my arm with something cold and wet.

“Sure, sure. Whatever that is,” breathing feels like rapidly sucking in sand. The paranoia takes over and I'm dying. I sit up in the identical room and clutch the sides of the metal exam bed so hard I can feel a pinch. I let go. Wouldn't want any more cuts.

I hate this bit. Must we reexamine? I'll go fast so I can hold my breath while we walk. I broke through my loath to cuss and hit Demetri in the face with a my shoe. That was probably the least regretful part, I was wearing grey flip-flops. And I gave that Jaxson guy a rough time for being in my presence with Skids but I had them on too. The IV cart went spiraling out the door while Demetri searched for a knock-out-the-crazy-girl syringe. He was debating whether or not he should use it, he didn't know how to hook me up for a drink and what the heck, maybe I knew better than him. I was the genius after all.

“Get out!” I yell in a weak voice. A computer this time. I hope Camp Happy Prisoners has a decent credit score because they’re going to need it by the time I’m done wrecking the place.

“Charlee please!” a glass cup gets hurled into a cabinet. “Stop! Right,” he ducks under a dull looking tale. “Now!”

My lack of creativity leads to me taking the time to balling my sweatshirt up and throwing it at him. It was more of a toss of eh, I was running out effort and things to throw.

I sit.

On the ground obviously. I destroyed all the chairs.

“Okay so what do you need to do?”

He was surprised or ticked off like I thought he’d be. He just stands there kinda confused.

“Uh, oker. I’mma go wit O-pos and all you need to do is close your eyes and stay still.”

“That all?” I hate closing my eyes upon request.

“And stop trying to kill me. That’d ber nice.”

“Righto.”

Then my face felt all wobbly and I was rendered unconscious.

....

Adalyn

Did you know red is not the opposite of blue?

When you see a sign at a sport game saying ‘blue team’ do you not automatically assume the other other team is red?

Red is not the opposite of blue.

I don’t know why we associate red and blue so much. They look awful together in an outfit, unless of course you’re trying to be patriotic beacon of what not to wear, and are completely indifferent towards each other. Sure, maybe they are on separate ends of the color spectrum but it is not right and left.

When a store’s too cheap for pink coloring they use red for girl toys and blue to symbolize boys. I don’t understand. All my friends who are female like blue and one of the boys likes red best.

Female is the opposite of male?

Dogs are the opposite of cats?

Day is the opposite of night?

Old is the opposite of young?

Lazy is the opposite of hard working?

Opposite: adj; diametrically opposed. When compared on opposing sides. Of the contrast, conflicting, incompatible, irreconcilable.

We need other words to describe words we don’t understand but I don’t like that. They all mean different things if not the slightest millimeter off. How can you tell someone depressed is the same as being sad? How can you say all reds are directly apart from blue? How can you say everyone who can’t prove a math theory is retarded? How do you live with yourself when you

assume all cats are vicious? Who do confess to when you explain to me that red is the opposite of blue!

Stupid is the opposite of smart.

Driving friends away isn't smart.

Pretending Charlee will come back to save me is stupid Seuss tale.

Running with a harpoon gun isn't either one.

....

Charlee

Is being dangerous stupid?

I thought I was being rather brave if I say so myself, but then again courage is the kindest invitation into the world of idiocy. I'll skip over the boring hour of blood transfusion. We all want to hear about the time I tripped while carrying a harpoon don't we? Of course you do. I'll get on with it.

....

Adalyn

Didn't your parents tell you not to run with knives?

I guess Charlee didn't listen because she was going faster than a cheetah when she came barreling through.

"Demetri! Don't be a lousy tosser, come on!" A girl with half a purple head yelled behind her. A pewter blood stained pullover hung tied tightly around an athletically built waist, limping all the while trying to keep up with her intense speed. It was plain for the world to see her brain wasn't accustomed to extreme exercise but her body was ready to embrace it. The pointy object she was so carelessly clutching hazardly swung back and forth. I heard a ear cringing *dink* when it scraped the cement floor with its sharp tip. It's a reasonable assumption no one had need use for a harpoon for a while because the thing was rusted over and dull.

"Hey! Slow down. You just had a transfusion, you need rest," I frantically tried to keep up.

"Rest my ass. I gotta be somewhere."

The Fails whooped and hollered at them like it was race.

I don't know maybe it was. The dead observing hamsters going round and round forever not expecting the wheel to end even though it does. It will. Charlee reached the end of a section in the Fail basement and turned abruptly and posed stiff like a girl straight from a comic book. I don't comics particularly. They have animals with low IQs and adults lacking intelligence to make the hero seem heroic. That's what Charlee was in this situation to be perfectly Pinocchio free.

"Demetri I need to get out of here Sir please. The Knights' Templar awaits," dauntingly, she raises her harpoon and searches for an exit.

"To your right Frau," I helped her.

"Who goes there deep chessined stallion?"

"Oh not a horse, just me," I correct her. Silly Charlee.

I see now. Charlee snapped and got sent to live here. Pity.

“Hereeee! Over Herrrrrrre!” If she has to stay, she should stay with me. That’s when Charlee got to test the sharpness of her harpoon. This whole while she was standing on top of Zanny. He’s our pet shark!

....

Charlee

“Charlee get over here! Tha tings gerna get ya!”

I stared at him in question for a few minutes before I came to my senses and felt a, *thud, thud*, that must’ve been pounding for a while. Unfortunately I do not accept his warning and stay put.

“Huh?” It’s a pretty stupid question but I can’t hear him properly. So I don’t care! No hear no do. But the metallic square I’m standing like a statue is shaking so maybe he’s not yelling for fun. The rat tat tat of the floor makes me jump off just in time to come face to face with a shark. I’m not a marine biologist so the classification I give this fella is big, hungry, Charlee-avore. Yep! Bigger than a bottle of bourbon with more teeth than cigarettes in a carrier.

Demetri runs away probably yelling something like, “I told you so!” and the nutjobs caging us in cheer the shark on. I am so likeable aren’t I? The shimmer on its fin is blinding and would honestly be attractive if not for the wild things instinct to chop me into suey.

The sharp object in my hand seems to be growing sharper by the second and I can’t get the notion that all it means is trouble out of my head.

All of everything is swimming. Have you ever had the sensation every atom in the verse is stopping just for you? Just so you can catch up in the vast ocean called your life? It was like a close up magic trick; my focus was on wht my brain wanted me to see with the important stuff floating away right in front of me. I move four my eight fingers through the waters of bleakness. Stretch them. The cutting corners of the unconcenplattable room dance a polenance for one member of the audience. And she’s not listening. I work to pay attention, but even with things going at the rate of falling pudding it’s true heads can butterfly while concepts jump and leap over you. Swirling in a way that’s too fast for you to see. The water sharky’s pooling in is a deep electric blue. A scar on my bare pinkie toe indent magnifies and all I can see is an ugly raw red of badly healed skin. Does it always lump together like that? I am perplexed. I never noticed.

Fast forward, back to sharky.

I do hate listening to animal facts on the telly or hearing an old Mrs. Seamander blabber in biology, but I can’t help but think sharks, do not typically shine. Or have glowing spiracles.

“Grrroar!” the shark jumps out and uses its HUGE underbite to kill me.

Haha. Just kidding.

As I said, I don’t listen in biology class but sharks do not make noise, glow like a night stick, or eat humans, so really I just made up a whole scenario with the most horror struck part of my brain where the reaction of a typical humans fight, flight, or stand and be a dummy while daydreaming of your death got turned on. Ug! Emotions! Annoying little parasites, wouldn’t you agree?

What really happened was I stabbed the poor thing, which was barely moving, not trying to be a sharknado, by throwing the harpoon spiraling (pretty impressive first try I might add) into

one of its glowing spiracles. The while, I was cowardly many feet away. Demetri pulled the harpoon out of the shark howling in pain and shoved me back a few strides. Keep me from more damage.

Now, picture this: an unsuspecting Charlee leaning heavily against an innocent barred door after murdering a shark. A girl that looks like she just escaped a sewer monster. The two colliding, not colliding, the blonde rag hugging the life out of naive left arm and calling me her hero.

Let's just say it shocked me.

"Hey!" I launch a four fisted swing but grab only air. Right, she's *behind* me. My head feels like it's full of soup and then some.

"Hi!" I get a gleeful response.

Lifting my head up and tilting it back I can feel the lava tickle my cranium. The girls' hug is more of a sushi encasing with tiny nails gripping my open arms.

"Let," she's impressively weak and tiny and for some reason I have an itch floating around my bowl of brain urging me not to hurt her, "Go," if I'm not mistaken it's the same girl I met listing her alphabet stew all over the place, "Please," I tangle a wad of purple hair into her mouth which was clamped wider than a owls ever expanding pupils.

"Charlee's back to save us!" her proud announcement ricochets like a speeding bullet through a tunneling cove. In causing the other prisoners to riot the pre tormented fish wiggles in agony the undercooked seafood fums. I can see its flimsy fins covering whatever ear holes it might have. Unfortunately, unpropertly educated Demetri didn't know, "You shouldn't pull pointy objects out of living creatures; for their flesh is made of sushi paper and their sauce spillable. Must've hit a major artery. Silly me! The great white, or whatever the thing was, dropped to the bottom of its habitat quicker than gravity itself. The blood leaked like food dye into the unsuspecting waters of the majestic animal.

Miss Mama Sloth was still in a clutch around my arm but as soon as the big fella started to fall, well she wasn't happy.

"Zanny!" Oh Lord. They named the thing? I regret causing it ill fortune but it is not a friend. Her partial embrace wavered and Adalyn, yes that's what Airika called her, echoed cries of concern directed to our fishy dilemma. It's a tight hold again.

"This is what I choose as a day job?" Demetri pulled the newly fixed fire alarm. I don't know why it didn't anchor the radioactive shark back up or save it from a rosey death, it merely caused the rags to panic.

"Charlee! What are doing? Let's go," the words barely registered when I caught the old guy hustling up the rickety death slide called 'stairs'. Funny things they are, someone could get hurt.

"I'm coming. Right after the cling on bugs off," I shake and distract by motioning to 'Zanny' with my mobile appendage but the girl doesn't take a break. But in truth I didn't want the shark to die. It was the king of the ocean, top of the food chain. How could I leave something like that?

Demetri was long gone. I could hear him prancing on the eathwaking steps. The grouchy ol' Jaxon would find me anyways. He was probably already forming his squad upstairs. But a nag is

stuck and I don't think it's my waterlogged brain this time. A nag is pulling me to stay because a very familiar girl is tugging on me like a child and a very sick shark is stealing my eye's attention. And I really don't want to move an inch.

Maybe a few inches. So I can chat.

"Hey," I turn as far around as her sweaty hands will let me.

She gurgles and her eyes give away their genuine intention with a crinkle, "You said that already."

And I thought she didn't remember past a moment. I gently pull her hand. A finger, two--one, slides off slow as I try to add reason, "I hear your name is Adalyn."

A flourish of her lips makes her sparkle. There has to be an explanation to why she's so reminiscing, "Is it?"

"I'm not sure. That's why I'm asking," Another.

"You didn't ask. Confused."

I'm accustomed to her features and there's no mistaking her eyes, "Who's Zanny?"

Another finger pops off and a sputtering hybrid of a laugh sneaks out of her mouth, "A large mackerel commonly called a white or great white. He eats other fish which I guess makes him a cannibal but I know Zanny personally so I know he'd never hurt a krill."

"And Zanny's an experiment?" I loosely tug my arm away.

She seems offended by my gesture and hugs harder, "No. He's a friend."

Suddenly unaware of his current well being she defends. Her reddening grip relaxes and I apologetically tear away, "I have to go. Take care of Zanny."

I march after Demetri, he's probably still hiking it up the endless path of stairs, rubbing my pit of a digitus Me'dius in nostalgia. Or many the nostalgic part was something else.

....

Jaxson

Just as I was about to complain, loudly, the dame herself walked in. The clink and slide of her pumps was all I needed to know Airika had taken the time to come in the workroom. She'd never been in here before.

She was steaming from head to toe and I wouldn't have wanted to be the one to call her Mrs.

"What the *hell* were you thinking Mr. Hollin?" she said as her poised spine quickly turned to spider.

"I-I don't," I was turning into Ralph with all my stuttering, "I did not such evil."

"You weren't thinking at all! Ralph Gainer is here to be your partner," she marches over to my inhabited table, resentment sprawled across her painted face, "Not your punching bag." She might as well punched me in the gut and it would've felt better.

"I did nothing undeservedly," I sit up amidst the bolt sprawled table, "The Tourette filled fleabag needs to go."

"This is Mikeah Robins' brother you speak of. He stays or Charlee goes!"

I roll my wrist and flex as habit to confrontation which I'll add is seldom, "I don't know why you're defending him. He knows nothing about what we do here, what are his benefits? Mikeah doesn't even like him,"

My feet are so fidgety I internally wince when I feel an icy metal support from the table hit/touch my toes when I swing my foot/ankle just so. The coquelicot Scids Airika got me last year gently thud to the ground from my fits of adjustment (from this uncomfortable confrontation). I pick it up, looking kinda weird in the process since I'm too lazy to get off this 'alluring' table.

"I thought you were maturer than this. I asked an adult to take over the Charlee assignment and a child seems to be the one doing the lifting. He's not the best scientist I agree, but he is here for a reason that being to give you the gift of restraint. Ralph is your partner. Did you hear that? Partner. I hope you know what that word means Mr. Hollin because I sure do." She doesn't shift positions or furl her hands as most would do. She stayed in the same stiff slightly intimidating incline one would expected from a stick bug. "I don't want to have to yell at you every time you mess up but keep this behaviour going and I will find a worse job than working with Ralph."

Redheads have fire but it seems Airika had a volcano hidden it that bun of hers.

(Revised version)

"Charlee get over here! Tha tings gerna get ya!"

I stare at him in question for a few minutes before I come to my senses and feel a sharp, *thud*, *thud*, that must've been pounding in my head for a while. Unfortunately, I do not accept his warning and stay put.

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Lifting my head up and tilting it back I can feel the lava tickle my cranium. The girls' hug is more like sushi seaweed with tiny nails gripping my bare arms than a friendly embrace.

"Let," She's impressively weak and tiny and for some reason I have an itch floating around my bowl of brain urging me not to hurt her, "Go," if I'm not mistaken it's the same girl I met listing her alphabet stew all over the place, "Please," I accidentally tangle a wad of purple hair into her mouth which clamped wider than a owls ever expanding pupils.

"Charlee's back to save us!" Her proud announcement ricochets like a speeding bullet through a tunneling cove. In causing the other prisoners to riot, causing the pre tormented fish to wiggle undercooked shrimp agony. I can see its flimsy fins covering whatever ear holes it might have. Unfortunately, not properly educated Demetri didn't know, "You shouldn't pull pointy objects out of living creatures; for their flesh is made of sushi paper and their sauce spillable. Must've hit a major artery. Silly me! The great white, or whatever the thing was, dropped to the bottom of its habitat quicker than gravity itself. The blood leaked like food dye into the unsuspecting waters the majestic animal once roamed.

Miss Mama Sloth was still in a clutch around my arm but as soon as the big fella started to fall, well she wasn't happy.

"Zanny!" Oh Lord. They named the thing? I regret causing it ill fortune but it is not a pet you feed and cuddle. Her partial embrace wavered and Adalyn, ah, yes that's what Airika called her, echoed cries of concern directed to our fishy dilemma. It's a tight hold again.

"This is what I choose as a day job?" Demetri pulled the newly fixed fire alarm. I don't know what that was there for, it didn't anchor the radioactive shark back nor save it from a rosey death, all it did was make the miserable rags panic.

"Charlee! What are ya doing? Let's get outta here before she comes," the words barely registered when I caught the old guy hustling up the rickety death slide called 'stairs'. Funny things they are; someone could get hurt.

"I'm coming. Right after the cling on bugs off," I shake and distract by motioning to 'Zanny' with my mobile appendage but the girl doesn't take a break. In truth I didn't want the shark to die. It was the king of the ocean, top of the food chain. It died in a weak way with nothing to show. How could I leave something like that? It deserved better.

Demetri was long gone. I could hear him prancing on the eathwaking steps. The grouchy ol' Jaxon would find me anyways. He was probably already forming his squad upstairs. But a nag is stuck and I don't think it's my waterlogged brain this time. A nag is pulling me to stay because a very familiar girl is tugging on me like a child and a very sick shark is stealing my eye's attention. And I really don't want to move an inch.

Maybe a few inches. So I can chat.

"Hey," I turn as far as her sweaty hands will let me.

She gurgles and her eyes give away their genuine intention with a crinkle, "You said that already."

And I thought she didn't remember past a moment. I gently pull her hand. A finger, two--one, slides off slow as I try to add reason, "I hear your name is Adalyn."

A flourish of her lips makes her sparkle. There has to be an explanation to why she's so reminiscing, "Is it?"

"I'm not sure. That's why I'm asking," Another.

"You didn't ask. Confused."

I'm accustomed to her features and there's no mistaking her eyes, "Who's Zanny?"

Another finger pops off and a sputtering hybrid of a laugh sneaks out of her mouth, "A large mackerel commonly called a white or great white. He eats other fish which I guess makes him a cannibal but I know Zanny personally, so I know he'd never hurt a krill."

"And Zanny's an experiment?" I loosely tug my arm away.

She seems offended by my gesture and hugs harder, "No. He's a friend."

Suddenly unaware of his current well being she looks to his watery grave. Her reddening grip relaxes and I apologetically tear away, "I have to go. Take care of Zanny."

I march after Demetri, he's probably still hiking it up the endless path of stairs. Rubbing my pit of a digitus Me'dius in nostalgia, I follow his long gone footsteps. Or, maybe the nostalgic part was something else.

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Jaxson

Just as I was about to complain, loudly, the dame herself walked in. The clink and slide of her pumps was all I needed to know Airika had taken the time to come in the workroom. She'd never been in here before.

Steaming from head to toe and snarling, I wouldn't have wanted to be the one to call her Mrs.

"What the *hell* were you thinking Mr. Hollin?" She said as her poised spine quickly turned to spider.

"I-I don't," I was turning into Ralph with all my stuttering, "I wasn't thinking straight."

"You weren't thinking at all! Ralph Gainer is here to be your partner," she marches over to my inhabited table, resentment sprawled across her painted face, "Not your punching bag." She might as well hit me in the gut and it would've felt better.

"I did nothing undeservedly," I sit up amidst the bolts sprawled table, "The Tourette filled fleabag needs to go."

"This is Mikeah Robins' brother you speak of. He stays or Charlee goes!"

I roll my wrist and flex as habit to confrontation, which I'll add is seldom, "I don't know why you're defending him. He knows nothing about what we do here, what are his benefits? Mikeah doesn't even like him,"

My feet are so fidgety I internally wince when I feel the icy metal support from the table touch my thinly socked toes. The coquelicot Scids Airika got me last year gently thudded to the ground long ago due to fits of involuntary adjustment (from this increasingly uncomfortable confrontation). I pick it up, looking kinda weird in the process since I'm too lazy to get off this 'alluring' table. But anything's better than being yelled at *and* having cold feet. Literally.

"I thought you were maturer than this. I asked an adult to take over the Charlee assignment and a child seems to be the one doing the lifting. He's not the most talented scientist I agree, but he is here for a reason, that being to give you the gift of restraint. Ralph is your partner. Did you hear that? Partner. I hope you know what that word means Mr. Hollin because I sure hope you do." She doesn't shift positions or furl her hands as most would do. She stays in the same stiff slightly intimidating incline one would expected from a stick bug. "I don't want to have to yell at you every time you mess up but keep this behaviour going and I will find a worse job than working with Ralph." Her pattern of going from ferocious to scary calm is tiring to have to deal with.

Redheads have fire but it seems Airika had a volcano hidden it that bun of hers.

Sometimes I hate how she's my mom and boss.

Charlee

"What *was* that thing?" I gasp for breath and squeeze the railing at the top of the infinite spiral of steps. This time it was me with water balloon lungs. Looking down on it from the top gave my

aching head another string wave of nausea. The sea of black scales were arranged in the most treacherous layout, the stairs fitted together with the thinnest pole that looked, and felt, like they would collapse at the slightest breath. And maybe they would. During my brief time at Happy Waters I gathered they don't prioritize keeping people alive. On the sprint up the kaleidoscope stairs, I lost a Szid flip flop and watched it clank down hundreds of feet. I more so heard it falling because I was a wee bit busy trying to get out of the middle of a swaying staircase of death and to a place where I could properly take nap or faint from blood loss, whichever came first.

"Well see there were a lot of things down there Charlee. You could be talking about the radioactive shark, or the caged people, or maybe you're just concerned out fire alarm is down. I can assure you I was meaning to fix that but some stuff came up." Demetri's grey t-shirt blurred through my dazed lenses. He didn't seem as out of breath but that might have been because I felt like I'd been hit by a ton of bricks and he just looked less worse for wear.

"It like... tried to eat me." I really wanted a strawberry bubble snow right now. The coolness of the concrete ground drifted away as Demetri swooped me up like a baby.

"Yes it did."

"Am I flying?"

"No. I'm taking you back to your room in suspiciously as possible. You're already screwed over kid. I don't plan on getting caught up in these last few hours."

"Mmmhm." Fresh strawberries sprinkled my tongue and I could feel the ice crunch between my teeth.

"Hey hey hey, stay awake. I don't want it to look like I'm carrying a body. If someone sees us I'm dumping your ass and you're running or crawling or whatever but you're getting out of sight, you hear? You seem like a great kid but I ain't taking chances getting caught with you. I've got too much to lose, you hear, more you got to lose smarter and safer you get. Remember that eh? You aren't listening to a damn word I'm saying, just run." Demetri's Russian and somehow also Southern tone rolled across my ears like bubbles from a boat motor. His choppy "r" sounds came through my dazed eardrums thick as honey. I might as well been underwater from the sounds I was picking up. He wanted me to, "have fun?"

The long repetitive halls of Happy Waters scrolled past me in a blurred haze. White with a hint of white lapse one over the over and I'm not sure how anyone could get around without a map and rations for at least a week. The only thing that changes are the small shiny plaques with different numbers on them in the top right corner of every door frame.

Demetri sets me down on the table of my room, eh, prison cell. At least it won't be for long, after the little stunt I pulled I doubt this Airika or the cranky Jaxson would let me stay in a room with a computer and a ridiculously easy to pick lock. Their mistake. Maybe I'll get a more scenic room this time, one with nothing but miles of ocean view. Happy Waters has some surprisingly good Wi-Fi connection for being an Inaccessible Island. I can't help but wonder now though, am I really where I think I am? I assumed they took me to an island posed as a summer school but actually on an island nonetheless. But I have yet to have seen a window and as far as I'm aware, we're underground living like mole rats.

The engineer turns to leave, the quick action of yanking the door open to flee matching with the blaring alarm and chaotic air that plagued the building. He needed to get before he was in trouble but I didn't care. I wasn't here to make friends or protect anyone but myself, even if I was laying down with a brain that felt like it'd been through a blender and a stomach that wanted to eject itself. I might be if anything, a bit vulnerable right now but I wasn't going to let him go anywhere without something I wanted. And I want a lot of things. I held the Zap arms length and pointed the rounded alien gun tip looking thingy straight at the center of his face. I did not look the most intimidating but I was on last resort.

"Where am I, who are you, and what am I doing here?" I might have embellished a bit on the part where I asked who he was but I'll leave the exact phrasing to your imagination. And since this is supposed to be a YA story where characters are supposed to speak like angels and never have acne, just keep in mind that I'm an actual teenager who doesn't exclusively use PG language. It will make the story a thousand times more interesting. Anything else I don't describe for censorship sake, just assume happened and make it up yourself. Because I promise you when my damn fingers got cut off I wasn't happy. But I'm only telling you this to make up for how sluggish I sounded. My, "what" sounded more like, "fut." I swear my tongue was rolling inside out on purpose.

Before I could even unlock the safety Demetri easily takes it out of my wobbling hand. He speaks in a tone of confidence, a simple battle he won. "Okay nice try. Now pretend you're asleep and claim what you did was stupid in the morning," he hooks me up to a saline line and shoves a pill down my throat. "I was never here, got that? You gave yourself the line and *you* gave yourself a transfusion."

I start to grow slightly more alert. The pill catches halfway down the hatch and I stumble on my words and try to cough up the pill. "The heck is this? You're little story isn't going to check out. They know I wouldn't know a thing about blood transfusions or even how to start a saline line."

"I may not have graduated from (Fancy med school) but I know a few things about (drug name for knocking someone out instantly)." He gives me a quick blow in the nose with one strong breath and the pill slides down the rest of the way.

Everything is fading fast. Demetri's shadow of a beard swirls into a grey and white mass and his tense form softens. "At least tell me something about this place."

He steps back and comes forward again like a prodded and revved tiger. "At least? You're the one who hauled your sorry ass around like a lost middle schooler. Next time you plan on taking a tour of a building full of people who want you caged as a rat, don't. That lady who cut off your fingers, doesn't mess around. Her name is Airika Savitz and she'd rather you be dead than defiant and there ain't nobody who's gonna come get you. No one out there cares you left and frankly, I wouldn't either. If you want something, do it yourself. Without anyone's help. She makes kidnappings look like causal incidents and no one will even bat an eyelash about you for the next three months."

My speech came out mashed together and woozy and it was impossible to sound sincere. It sounded like my mom after a night out. “You aren’t seriously saying any of this is my fault. How am I supposed to know anything? That’s not fair.”

I must have pissed him off or something because his Russian side popped out. “Airika only takes people she knows won’t be any trouble. Parents that can be paid off, kids who aren’t worth looking for. She wouldn’t hesitate to take you out if you brought attention to her.” He slowed down his spiel and went back his calm Southern mix. “Here’s the thing, you ain’t that Goddamned special. Happy Waters has a lot of projects in the works. Most of the people here are good people. Only a small percent know what Airika wants out of all of this. So if one of these good scientists working real hard to cure Ebola or invent an underwater bunker finds out Savitz is going against the law, her organization crumbles because no one wants to mess with illegal shit or realize what they’ve got themselves wrapped up in. You ain’t worth anyone’s time here if you’re going around with harpoons and liberation.”

“How do you even keep something like this a secret? Your stories must crossover. You must slip up if they’re so many honest hardworking people.”

“She has her stories straight. I’m here because I thought I was invited to co-invent the next enemy destroyer for the Russian Navy. Got a letter one day saying the RN saw my work at a presentation I was giving and wanted me to come to a top secret base out here and they paid me real well. 50k upfront. Who would want something that spectacular to turn out to be a lie? Most people ignore anything off about this place. They tell their family they’re off on a year of work trip, make a couple hundreds of dollars and come home to a happy family. And if you wanted to look into Happy Waters, Airika is spread so far you wouldn’t even be able to guess where the real origin is at. No one would start with a summer school. We have an entire fake school upstairs, we live like tunnel rats. These workers buy into it, think it’s for their protection and to keep their inventions secret until it’s the right time to show them to the world. Airika’s got them believing the government would spy on their creations and steal them if they tell anyone. You’ve probably seen Happy Waters out and about. Ever heard of a little company called Szid? Yeah she secretly owns them and countless others right in front of your noses.

“Well that’s crazy, it’s not fair.”

“Nothing about this place is fair. If you want fair, bring it up at the next town hall meeting in your safe little city. You won’t get anywhere acting like the entitled brat you are or your defiant sass. Get used to things not being fair.”

“What am I entitled to? A normal life where people don’t pretend to be a summer school, yeah I’m pretty sure I am. This isn’t normal.”

“Neither is Airika Savitz. Tell anyone about this, especially Jax, and you’ll regret meeting me,” he commands as he shoves the Zap into the back of my waistband and flicks off the light. I barely hear him as he patters away quieter than someone of his stature should be able to.

“Whatever you say grandpa.”

The Zap, aw screw that pathetic name, the uh—gun, thing, digs into my back almost as uncomfortably as my hands feel. Mr. Demetri's Happy Water tea gave me enough to know what I was going to do next. But it can wait until after a much needed pass out nap.

....

Charlee

Bright light shocks me awake. The harshness of the doctor's office quality room blinks in and out as I use all of my strength to keep my eyelids open. A wave of nausea washes over me and it feels like I've been through a washing machine one too many times. The bout is quick though and mercifully briefer than last night. Night? It was night wasn't it? It was sometime yesterday but the darkness of the strange basement and the halls devoid of windows cut me off from any reasonable guess of what time it is. My feet are bare and cold laying straight on the bed. Well, calling it a bed is generous, at most it was a thinly cushioned slab of metal set up like a therapist recliner. It is set up at a slight and perfect angle where I can see the entirety of the room and I'm level to the bottom small slit of glass that is centered on the door. Besides the numb headache that beats against my skull like a bouncing ball, I feel more relaxed and refreshed than I anticipated. My jacket is gone though I don't remember Demetri taking it off. He must have to put to IV in. My arms rest, elbow crease up, like dead pool noodles. From any outsider's perspective I look like a corpse on their way to the morgue. The gun. I almost forgot. When you're sleeping like you were knocked out, which I was, I guess heavy guns and predicaments slide into your back pocket without a care. Forgotten and unimportant. The room shifts in a sudden breeze and I shiver. That jacket was no use, suck it Mom. The IV line drips steadily into my veins and breathe a sigh of satisfaction. If I was being held hostage at a scientific psycho ward at least my veins were happy. But the beautiful feeling of having fluid poured into me is quickly ripped off. I sit up with the gusto of a charging bull but the nausea version. I try to get up all the way but sit back at the feeling of a gentle but forceful shove.

"I wouldn't do that just yet." Jax pops up a barricade on the side of the table bed so I can't see him. It's like being in a hospital bed and a coffin at the same time.

Even though I am in a position to see everything I am still blind to what I want to see. I shift in the small table/bed thing and try to turn my head to look at the smug motherfcker but he's out of my reach.

"What are you doing here?"

"Even though you decided to have a run last night and you're confused and probably wondering what this place is, none of it matters. You're part of my project." Jax towers above me like a parent looking down on their infant. His tone is so victorious I can practically hear him salivating at the thought of his project going the way he wants. "Did you really need to panic so suddenly? You've barely been here for but a moment."

"Yeah cuz you're a mad fcker." I slowly slide my hand to the back of my waistband. The gun should be there it was poking me like crazy a second ago.

"Do you know the hell I went through last night cleaning up your mess? That alarm you set off put everyone on this and the next floor in panic."

“Yeah that’s kina what a fire alarm is for. So people can recognize the kidnapped girl in your basement.”

“Looking for something?” Jax holds the Zap above me like a toy.

“Give it back.” I highly doubt Demetri will be happy when he finds out I gave him away because of this prick.

“Shouldn’t take what isn’t yours Charlee.”

“That’s funny coming from you.”

“Stealing from the engineering wing won’t get you out of here.”

So he doesn’t suspect that guy. I wonder if they know each other or if he’s just playing stupid. It wouldn’t be hard to pretend. I consider covering up for the oldish guy but what’s done is done. “I got it from a guy. Oldish, grey hair. He said it was something he’d been working on.”

He processes this quickly as if he’d already guessed. “He is not supposed to know you exist, hear me? Tell so much as a scurrying cockroach you compromised yourself to someone and I promise, you’d be happier in your box on 17th street.”

Snaps at him “What do you know about my house?”

“I know the 300 sq ft rubic cube you live is not the Ritz.”

“Why wouldn’t I?” Idiot just gave away the guy without a thought. I have a lot of suspicion he doesn’t get out much.

In a flash his eyebrows perk up. “Don’t. He probably didn’t know better. If she finds out he helped you—”

“Who’s ‘she’?”

“No one I mean, just don’t okay?”

“Give it back.”

“What?”

“The gun thingy. The one you’re holding that looks like a children’s toy.”

“No.”

“I guess ‘she’ will know about your old bestie’s invention then.”

“Fine but you can’t say a word.”

“Fine, give it. And stop shoving me for gods sake. I’m not a project you can do whatever you want with.”

“Why’d she pick you?” Jax says to himself more than me.

“Who’s ‘she’?”

“She! The one who ultimately said you were best. You’re just a normal kid.”

“You’re just a normal idiot.”

He’s pacing now. “Immature, impulsive, careless. I took all these flaws into account but she still picked you.”

I roll my eyes around my skull so many times this guy’s bound to notice no matter how far he paces or keeps me out of sight in this crib. “If you don’t tell me who this lady is I can’t think of something snarky to say.”

Jax leans over me. He rips the IV out of my arm, the cold needle sliding through my skin like a bee stinger being pulled wrong out of fear. "I'm not supposed to be here right now," he says. He towers so closely I can see the rivets of his brown eyes. "And you need to act like your fine. Nothing happened last night."

"K." I honestly couldn't give another thought to this freak. Whatever his problem was wasn't my concern. My parents probably sent me to a psycho ward because they were tired of looking at my short lesbian haircut and Jax is a psycho patient who snuck out to exercise his psychoness. I can't blame him for being bored but the heat of his breath in my face was just not it.

"If she finds out you went out on a rampage—"

"You fckers kidnapped me."

Jax's brown eyes flicker in annoyance. "I'm in charge of you. Stay here and don't do anything stupid."

"K babysitter. What *am* I supposed to do then?"

"Later today I'm scheduled to start working with you. You'll know more then."

"I'm not a vibrator you bought at the store. You can't just throw me in a drawer until you need to use me."

Points finger "You, were not supposed to be down there last night. You almost wound yourself in a permanent suite in the Fail room."

"Well I'm "*supposed*" to be in boarding school not suffering severe blood loss cuz my flippers got cut off or threatened by skinny little boy who can't stand getting his balls kicked by my puny foot, which were wearing flip flops I'll remind you. It was probably like getting hit with a cotton ball"

His face shuts down like a disappointed parent for a split second. His lips roll over on to each other and his eyes hide behind two scrunched shades. But he blows it off and in one push he fixes my table bed thing to a sitting position. I can see him wholly now. He holds my good for nothing shoes, jacket, and gun. "You get these back later."

Jae 17

I had to cover all that up. Ran around calming everyone down and told them it was just another experiment and not to worry.

If only Charlee knew how serious the consequences to her actions were, if only she wasn't such an unpredictability. Airika must have been coming off a joint when she gave me Charlee to observe. I watched her for months and not once did she prove to be an ideal addition to the project.

I have kept her in the dark so far and I admit it is regrettable to not explain but every time I see her and I am reassured she is not the one. We keep our participants in a seven day dark incubation period to document how they react. Airika started project Revelation as the brain of Happy Waters. She uses it to propel her other projects to greatness. The diversity and goals of Happy Waters is what makes it run so smoothly. Everyone has a job and they stick to it. Charlee

running rampage like a wild water buffalo taking a peak on a radioactive shark does not help us work smoothly.

It seems unfair to expect so much of her but she's all the project is riding on. I've lived almost my whole life picking out subjects, reviewing people's lives. She must understand how important it is she cooperate. She's been through Mikeah's files and possibly compromised Demetri. My only friend. Even now as I scroll through her folder my blood is injected with her poison. I feel let down by someone I thought I knew well.

CHARLEE ALGERS

REVELATION: Subject 13

A candid picture is in her file. It's one taken with our teleportation (ah get a cool name) technology. It's how we get subjects, supplies, and how we travel efficiently. With so many moving parts, conveniences like this are very necessary. It's wonderful, everything that is accomplished here. Airika's plan is to share our groundbreaking technological advances with the world as soon as we're done with them. She doesn't want our hard work to turn into a commercial gimmick when it's released to the public so we need to use them effectively first and get serious work done before people use it as a toy. The teleportation belt is my favorite and it was part of Demetri's department. Instead of learning sports or being in band like most kids, I got to grow up seeing the future being invented.

Revelation has few people trusted to work on it but we do get some help from engineering. Demi says when either my brain is fully developed or they make the teleportation transfer every molecule at once, I can teleport but for now I can only watch. Airika says I will *never* be allowed to teleport and she kind of vetoes everyone so I guess I'll never get to teleport but it's my favorite invention. Modern transportation will never be the same when it goes global. Transportation is fairly good now, but this. Happy Waters is genius.

Whenever I needed footage or Charlee or photos someone, who wasn't me, went on a mission. I have a year worth of daily footage of her from cameras that were placed in her school and living room. Her profile's picture is one before she cut her hair. It's unbelievably long, falling past her waist in a waterfall like cascade. It shimmered in the sun, it's dark qualities casting sharp white reflections to anyone looking at it. (idk how to describe dark hair and it's contrasting highlights it has) The candid is one of her coming out of school. Her head is on a swivel and nearly hidden behind generic school garden scrubs. It's almost as if she's looking out for someone.

I didn't want to be so direct with her. Starting with, *hey I've been observing you for a year and I know everything about you* didn't seem like the way to go. My socializing experience ranges from Demetri to Airika and now Ralph but talking to him is little more than conversing with a wall. Airika never let me talk to people from different departments than mine. If she knew I went to the engineering and technical advancements building weekly, well I don't know what would happen because I've never given a reason to upset her, but I don't think she'd be happy. There isn't much I don't do that she asks though and I don't see human interaction as a bad thing.

It was hard getting to know Demetri at first. He speaks exclusively Russian and never tuned into the universal language. Airika refuses to speak anything but English and sometimes Dajia unless she's talking to another Russian. I know English and Dajia but Dajia is the easiest and best in my opinion. It didn't fail like Esperanto and is perfectly simple but effective. It throws nonsense away but is still capable of getting emotional thoughts across. Charlee only knows Dajia. New York is one of the most progressive cities in the world. Most countries have tried to push the new language on their kids and it's spread fast in the past. It's hard to find anyone under the age of fifty who doesn't speak exclusively Dajia. After New York was given the title of its country's capital almost one hundred years ago, it's been dedicated to change, it's given a strenuous amount of energy in trying to be right. To be better than the world's been at its attempts at inclusion.

Most everyone knows Dajia or at least a good deal of it. It's the official language in every country and taught in all schools across the world. Most people have accepted its relevance and the logic of having a language everyone can speak with but there are always a few families that refuse to speak anything besides their native tongue. Demetri's family only spoke Russian and he grew up in a traditional community, attended a private school, and wasn't exposed to unity culture until he went to school to study engineering. He's told me he wanted to learn Dajia but he's oldish now and learning a language when you're an adult is hard. He's picked up a bit from being at Happy Waters from almost ten years now where everyone speaks it and he tries his best. His Russian accent tinted with a southern draw flavors everything he says with a boldness I have come to look forward to every time I see him.

INITIAL BIO REPORT: Charlee enjoys spending time with Braelin Chesterly. Although she is a fairly popular and liked student at her school, she often neglects time with her large friend group and chooses to interact with a few people at a time. Braelin is her most visited companion and very close to Charlee in an almost family way. But Braelin disappeared from Charlee's life due to unknown causes. Charlee does not do much outside of school work and occasional excursions with friends. She does not appear to have any passions or long lasting hobbies besides a few band posters in her room. These band favoritisms do not seem to have much significance as she has not redecorated her room since her mom put them there. They seem to pose only because they were gift from the father from his job in California as a music record label scout and do not reflect on Charlee's personal interests.

Everything's finally coming to together. Charlee may not be the one but this is my chance to conduct my own research, gather my own data. This run of Revelation could be the last fail. All of these runs led to failure but whether or not they contributed to Revelation was the important part. There has been more than one wasted attempts, scientist's precious time consumed by children's incoherence and lofty babel. Asking a ten year old the beta function of zero seem worthless but Airika has said they know. There are people out there who's minds work in curious ways. To society, they are known as the Savants. It's treated as a syndrome, a peculiar

disorder that comes with autism or neurological damage at birth, but we know it's more than an oddity for the media to comment on. It's not a superpower or small victory that comes with a condition, it's a miracle. It's rare and it's neglected. There is no one to nurture these people blessed with a supernatural mind. There are only one in two million known cases and with medicine and people treating this as a curse, even that number is decreasing. Autism is nearly abolished and with birth complications being less likely than winning the lottery, Savants could very well cease to exist. A female Savant like Charlee is one in four million. Revelation is determined to keep the genius line alive.

Airika suspects there are more than the documented diagnosed cases. There is shame and stigma to having a publicly disordered child. Special children are a rarity and there is a clear trend to parents wanting to ignore or cover up their child's mind when it is different. With all the medicines we have it's embarrassing not to be able to cure something. But I don't understand. I mean, what kind of family would want to put their extraordinarily bright child on meds to stifle their potential?

"All doctors do is kill anything that is an outlier to the majority of humanity," Airika told me seven years ago. Before I could do work myself I sat in a blank lab room that had been transformed, very poorly but still transformed, into a classroom. Every room in Happy Waters was like the other. Devoid of all things decorative save for the things that were necessary. Airika didn't believe in toys. A boy who would have had a soccer ball got a Van de Graaf. My comic books and coloring pages were swapped out for bridgebooks and pull apart brain diagrams by the time I was six.

It was a big room with only one student. I had read about kids in their schools but none of them were like mine. Airika paced in front of the singular chair and desk duo that took center stage of the otherwise bland room. She stopped in front of me. "You must protect people that are different than others Jade. Do you understand?"

Study days were hard for me to get through. Airika turned into a philosophical professor and told me things I didn't understand. "Mommy," I fidgeted with my Holopad and looked to the wall. It was not full of posters like my room. My room was the only not boring room in the whole building.

She stooped down to my elementary desk, her skirt tightening around her legs and her heels clicking against the cement floor. "Do not call me that Jade. I am not your mom," she said this softly like it hurt, like there was a thorn in her cotton candy that ruined her chance of eating it. She had told me not to call her mom since the day I could first say the word. I tried many different times, first with the Dajian word, *ama*. She ignored me and asked why I'd heard that word. I had no interactions with anyone. From a man with a hairy face *ama*, I'd told her. She nodded and smiled.

"But you're my mom."

She sighed. "I gave birth to you but that--"

"And you take care of me and play with me and feed me. Doesn't that make you my mom?"

“You are a Savant Jade. You are special.” I learned later on I received the gene from Airika who was born a month premature.

“Can you promise me, you keep the genius race alive? Push aside the thousands of weak and ordinary? Use your intelligence Jade. It is your only weapon against ignorance and incompetence.” Airika kept teaching me things.

“Can you?” She lulled and she struggled to keep my attention during the end of her lecture. “I know *aia*, it has been a long day.” She stood up and drug a hand through my hair. She looked disappointed and I didn’t like that.

“Did I upset you Airika?”

“Of course not my *aia*, I just find it sad that you didn’t catch onto today’s lesson.”

“But I did, it was about a superior mind and how they are the solution to our problems. And I know the dumb and ordinary are useless and it’s my job to keep them ruining our work.”

“Yes,” she said disinterestedly. She started to pack her bag and end the day in her office.

“My work is at Happy Waters. Revelation is the key to solving every problem in the world. And I can help.”

“Yes,” she said a bit more perkily. She walked out of the classroom, her heels tapping with every step. I had asked Airika why every room was made of cement and she said not to ask again.

“Am I right?” Ever since I turned seven, Airika's lessons started being more than just quantum physics and organic chemistry. She taught me morals and what I can do to save the world.

I saw her auburn bun as she walked out the door bob up and down and smiled.

To this day Revelation is my dream. It’s my chance to enhance the Savants. So far, every case we’ve tried has led to a dead end. The children we have chosen have proven to be of average mind. I spend hour of the day at my computer searching for people with Savant qualities but none of them have prevailed. The search for the outliers continues. I should be sensitive for taking children and adolescents for testing but the Savants are hard to find in anyone older than seventeen. The condition has mutated so that it is nearly impossible to find in children let alone developed adults. The signs of a Savant start to dwindle once a child has reached adulthood either because their doctors have taught them to handle their symptoms or medicine has destroyed their brilliance.

DATA: Charlee’s chance of being a true Savant are slim. She show little to no interest in a singular passion. However, her failure in school is a strong sign of Savanthood. Charlee struggles in math especially but this is likely due to the fact that she does not try.

Savants syndrome is often found when the child is still in the womb. Modern medicine has found a way to inject the pregnant person with a shot to prevent the child from being born a Savant. It’s disgusting how people could want their child to be “normal” so badly they’d want to change them before they’re even born. Being a Savant is labeled as a life crippling disorder. It’s in the same category as down syndrome and cerebral palsy but it’s not harmful. We need to stop

taking these kid's personalities away. They can get help. Just because they'll grow up to be different doesn't mean they'll be less intelligent. They won't be dangerous as some people assume. The greatest minds are the ones that are "disabled."

Problem is, receiving the anti-Savant injection has side effects. It can make the pregnant person sick with chronic illnesses like or make the fetus premature. Some families who learn their child is at high risk for developing Savant syndrome opt to abort. Why would you want your body damaged? Why would you rather have a dead baby than one who just needs a little extra math tutoring? Of course, some families are well off enough to let their child thrive naturally. No injections, no medicines. Some can let their kid grow up to be about seven to the age nine and see if Savant syndrome has actually developed. Because it's impossible to know 100% until the child is older. Wealthy families can let junior grow up and if they are a Savant, they can just put them through a surgery. It's expensive, but one of the easiest and safest surgeries for children to undergo. On the other hand, families who don't want to risk the shot have to let their bundle of joy grow up and then have them rely on medicines which are much cheaper. They're horse pills the kid will have to take twice a day for the rest of their life but clearly, pills and surgeries are a better choice for the kid than growing up and being different than everybody else.

Unfortunately, it's true. Disorders, chronic illness, they're so rare no one wants one. You'd seem like a freak if you were dyslexic in school. Airika told me the public school system is corrupt because they stopped having a budget for special needs kids. She taught me that there used to be people called, "deaf" who couldn't hear and "blind" who couldn't see. Since we can fix these almost everything now there aren't anymore deaf or blind schools. Special needs schools don't exist anymore because no one is special needs. Airika told me we need these resources though. Some people are just born the way they are and we shouldn't play God and change them.

And that's what Revelation is for. Finding people who need help uncovering their natural talents. Every year there is a new person brought in. Each year we age them up. The project started when I was three. We vary the kid's age to increase the chance of finding a Savant. Airika tells me what age to look for. It has to be precise or we could risk looking too much in one age group.

Gender is a big factor as well. 75% of Savants are male because of the gene Savant syndrome is related to. Charlee, as difficult as I find her, is extra special. Happy Waters has only had the privilege of having two girls for the project and Charlee is one of them. Sadly, the first girl, trial 10 was troublesome. Almost more so than Charlee.

I don't like to think of the past children who helped with our project. They've served us well but are living a worse life. Airika told me that the failed Savants have to go back home. It's hard to take someone away from their family for months but it's harmless really. They're sent back safely and they go back to living their lives without being able to fulfil their true purpose. The rest of the world doesn't treat Savants well. Happy Waters is the only place people like them can thrive.

Today's been tiring. Hopefully Charlee won't be as erratic after I debrief her tomorrow. Barely a week into the project and she's gone off the wire. I couldn't throw her into Happy Waters too fast. She needed time to ease into the life she'd live for the next few months and I needed time to read her vitals and complete my summary on her. Watching someone through a screen can only get you so much before you need them in the flesh. Just the few interactions, however unpleasant, have been more helpful than my year of research on her.

I finish up my report edits on Charlee's file and pack my bag. Revelation's research lab is always empty. It's usually just me, occasionally that dingus Ralph, but I'm always alone when I study. Alone when I write reports and file data.

It's a big room. Made of cement and monitors. This is the first time Airika is letting me work with the rest of Revelation's team. Before, I worked in my office or the classroom. I worked alone while searching for kids. I filled out the workbooks Airika gave me alone. But now I can work with others. Yay. I know from observation, humans are sociable, interactive creatures but so far, I'm not into it. Independence is my weapon against weakness. Needing people is an easy way to lose your skill sets and become unnecessarily attached to someone. Mainly people are just annoying. We don't have the technology to communicate psychologically so I have to explain everything I'm thinking to someone and that takes a lot of my time. There's also the issue of them not understanding or wanting to challenge you. It's unbearable. Ralph is the only person I've had to work with on a project. I'm not counting Demi's craft days or "camping" trips. *insert <* But on a serious piece of work, sharing my data with someone I don't trust, letting them add to my work, hurts.

I have my first meeting with the Revelation team in twenty minutes. I look down at my wrist. I hit the small button embedded in my wrist to check the time. It's a *fancy word* clock. They're a bit frightening at first. A clock inserted in your skin? Yeah it's interesting but it can be a calculator, camera, lots of stuff. Airika was worried about me getting one put in but I insisted. It's a popular gadget among teenagers these days. It's capable of looking almost invisible or downright gaudy. Some people even customize their button to look like a tattoo. Lots of schools were outraged and banned them because of the spike in test cheating but I don't have anything to cheat on or uniform dress codes to abide. I've had it about a year and it's convenience is worth the shocks I get now. I open the *word* to the clock and swipe up to check the meeting time.

"Shit," I say to myself. Make that ten minutes.

Happy Waters is a big place. Think the United States White House but doubled, stacked on top of each other. We're not allowed to use teleportation belts for causal transportation. It'd be ghastly to use for a quick walk down stairs. Anyway, Airika would never let me use teleportation for anything. She's worried I'd come back spliced.

We have really good elevators. As in, they're made by the best inventors in the world and will hopefully be released to the public summer of 3170, but frankly I usually take the stairs. We have lots of those as well. *desc the halls of HW and rooms* It's silly to try and walk the whole way there but I can't help it. I was never an athletic kid. I didn't get to join the soccer team or run the mile in P.E. Of course, there are exercise machines that you can sit in. You strap yourself in

and it works your muscles while you can relax your brain with a movie screen above your head. I've heard of a lot of police officers, firefighters, and professional athletes using machines to buff themselves up. Ads in the news rave about them. Food weight loss campaigns collaborating with exercise machine companies dominate infomercials and QVC. There's also the pill. Relatively affordable medicine that a lot of middle class citizens buy to keep their BMIs in balance. Body toning meds and machines are great and all but I know natural fitness is the only way to have proper muscles. The media occasionally tells stories of baseball players who sue machine companies because they pull a hammy or break a bone. They always get refuted because the people's crave for the easiest way out of things perseveres in every situation. I know it's just the person's fault. The pill and machine are fine but most people don't use them correctly. If you rely completely on the machine you can risk not being as in control of your muscles as you need. Muscle memory fails to form if it's doing the same old routine every time. Pills are safe and helpful but can build up an excess of protein and calcium if not balanced with a corresponding meal plan. Technology can work so much smoother if people understood how it worked.

But the best way is still natural workout routines and non processed food sources. I've studied anatomy and natural sciences enough to know some things don't change.

Airika started me with the machine. She wanted me to be physically fit and healthy. But I didn't like how the straps pinched and the time it took away from playing.

"Look *aia*," Airika had smiled at seven year old me. She looked like she was trying to get a toddler to "look at the camera and say cheese!" She clicked on the screen at the top of the machine. It wasn't fit for my small body. Airika had tightened the straps as small as they could go and adjusted the seat to the bottom. *desc the machine*

"But Airika," I said. I learned to stop calling her mom. "It's no fun."

She kept smiling like it would convince me to like the exercise machine. "Yes Jade, it is. Look," she pointed to a blue dog hopping across the screen. It turned toward me and barked. "You can watch this while your muscles get stronger." She put her finger on my calf. "*science word for calf* You are too scrawny right now. Do you want big muscles like a strong boy?"

I wasn't convinced. "I'd rather be with Demi. We play soccer outside and he says that's the best way to become a strong boy." I kicked my legs in the machine. "This is stupid. I don't get to have fun anymore. All I do is learn about body parts and watch stupid movies. My brain needs air! Little boys should play."

Airika stopped smiling. "Who is Demi Jade?"

"He's my friend. He told me I can go outside when I'm with him."

She winced. "I," she swallowed. "I take you outside to play."

"Not a lot. I want to play with Demi. He says exercise is better if we're the ones moving our bodies." I started to undo the straps. "And I don't even sweat in here. How'll I know if I'm workin hard if I don't sweat?"

"Jade Alexander, you will not use slang around me." She looked me up and down as if rethinking putting a little boy in a workout machine. "This machine," her voice cracked a little. "This machine will make you very strong. It will keep your heart healthy and steady. Yes, sweat

is a good indicator of *working* hard but this regulates it so your pores are overloaded and your mind doesn't worry about it too much. This "Demi" who plays with you sounds like he wants you to get in trouble." She scrunched her nose and smiled. She shook her head slightly as if to assume Demi was imaginary. "We need to keep our bodies healthy and regular okay? Say okay."

"Okay Airika." I said.

She looked at my eyes. "We need to have routines. This machine can help your muscles form a routine." Her voice was tight as if she wanted to cry. "Soccer doesn't help establish a routine. It's wild and unreliable."

"Okay..." I mumbled.

Airika readjusted my straps and turned up the volume of the dog cartoon. She pressed the start button on the machine with her head held low. I could tell she was hiding her weepy eyes. She backed away from the machine and I could see her eyes red with tears. Her face was flushed and crumpled.

"Okay *aiia*. I'm going to get some work done. When you're finished come find me and we can go over those algebra problems you were struggling with."

What Airika told me that day didn't make sense but I didn't challenge her again. It took a lot to make her upset and I'd felt bad about making her cry. I've never seen Airika cry since then.

Although I promised Airika to use the exercise machine, I don't. She helped me with it until I turned nine and then I stopped. It was boring. An hour and a half of watching cartoons or science documentaries. I'd liked movies and shows as a kid but it was more fun to do stuff. I liked building houses out of sticks and solving math mazes. I have a habit of being hyperactive. It's probably why I work so much. I respect Airika and her plans. I thought Airika's exercise machine was pointless though. The moment she trusted me to workout everyday on my own I turned the machine on and snuck into Demi's workroom. Airika had all kinds of weird stuff she wanted me to do. I used to drink these smoothies that tasted like crap. *detail. It's to treat Anorona but he didn't know*

insert Demi and Jae playing outside, camping, being normal. explains why Jae likes running down stairs for exercise

side scene where Jae finds Ralph needing help with something/ is lost and has to help him get to the meeting. And the elevators crash. Is really pissed bc it makes him late

more building desc Jesus why did the Revelation meeting have to be four floors away from the Revelation lab? Airika said we needed a formal business room to conduct a nice meeting but I was already in the lab. Now, I'm dragging this moron with a hack job haircut down four flights of stairs. All the meeting and conference rooms are near the bottom of the building. Christ this imbecile is causing more pain in his first week here than I've experienced my whole life. Between him and Charlee I've been running around the building enough to give me enough routine exercise for the next year.

Ralph did an awkward shimmy in my grasp. His lab coat, which he does not deserve nor understand the value of to wear, twists above his skin. I can feel his unease. “I’m, I’m, I’m—”

“What?” I say forcibly. I let go of his sleeve and politely shove him forward.

He adjusts his glasses. “I’m sorry Jade. I—”

I walk behind him down the long path of stairs to keep him moving. The stairwells in the building aren’t as well loved as the elevators. They’re identical narrow cinder block paths that anyone unfamiliar with the routes of Happy Waters would get lost in. Along the way I’d noticed little nods to my childhood. Stickers I’d left at the end of landings. Smiley faces drawn on exit signs. I was a bubbly kid. I didn’t care about anything important.

I nudge him forward. He walks so slowly. “Call me Mr. Savitz if you will.” I’d never been able to tell someone what to address me. Airika and Demi were too authoritative in my life to do that. Mikeal treated me like a child. If I was being honest I itched to be called Dr. I was almost finished with my undergraduate in a college course Airika had designed for me and I hoped to advance enough for the title Dr. But I didn’t want to get ahead of myself.

“Y-yes, yes. Mr. Savitz.” It must have been embarrassing for him. Me being five years younger and at the same level of respect. The same level of education. The same level of advanced research. I just know deep down Ralphie wishes he could speak to my face without stumbling and put me down as the teenager I am. I’ve worked too hard for someone like him to be of higher status than me. No matter how hard Ralph works or what college degrees he obtains, I will always be ten steps ahead because I am a Savant and he is ordinary. Well, his mind is at least. His tongue does backflips around itself.

We make our way down the stairs. *or maybe the meeting rooms are up top? :0* There are hundreds of them. I know, I’ve counted. We run down, my hand sliding on the handrail, his lab coat catching air so that he looks like a mad scientist. I know these handrails well. I used to hang on them or try to sit on them like a slide. Some of the ones at the bottom stretched out so that I could flip over them. Stairwells and dog cartoons were all I needed for a playground.

We walk until we reach our stop at a door with a shiny gold plaque. It says, “Conference Room 3.” This floor is a lot more airy than other halls. It’s wide and spacious with carpeting and shiny veneered walls. Ornate couches guard almost every double set of meeting room doors. Vases on dark wood liquered tables dot every other hallway intersection. Virtual windows were placed sparsely. Each displayed a calming cityscape. Window holographs were popular for basements and otherwise darkly lit homes but they never soothed me. I always noticed the slight flicker every time the graphic restarted itself. Overall, the formal meeting areas are not far from being poorly decorated hotels. Whoever designed this floor veered from the rest of Happy Water’s modern polished look. Walking to floor four was like walking into the 3140s.

I push open the door to Conference Room 3. A dark green gloss paint covers every door in this hall. There’s a lot of color coordination at Happy Waters. White for the research labs, dark green for meetings, navy for offices, grey for engineering.

I look at Ralph. He’s just standing there. I gesture my arm in a sweeping motion as if to say, “Your Highness” to let him know to get in the damn room.

“Whe—” he starts.

“Shhh,” I push him by the small of his back. “There are other meetings going on,” I whisper. God, I’m a superstar. I’m a scientist, mathematician, and babysitter.

Ralph walks in the room right as I’m adding more pressure on his back. He goes too fast and I stumble in after him.

“Ah, look who decided to join us,” Mikeah Robins greets us. He doesn’t move an inch from his high backed chair at the end of the table. His legs are crossed and he leans back comfortably. He looks like he’s lunging in the living room. The room is big and overly decorated. An oriental rug sits beneath the long magomery table. A sad water dispenser is tucked away in the corner next to a virtual window and some tissues. They look like they haven’t been touched in years. *more descr*

“I-I,” Ralph says. I cut him off before he takes the next weekend to finish.

I give him a frustrated glance and look toward Mikeah. “We were caught up in a trivial matter. I apologize for being late.”

I open my clock. I’m nearly thirty minutes late.

Seeing as Mikeah has already elected himself as president of Revelation, I take a seat on the far opposite end of the table in a normal chair. It’s squishy red leather that sits like a kneeler compared to Mikeah’s voluptuous throne. I set my bag at my feet and quietly unpack my laptop and notebook. It’s a rarity to see pens or pencils nowadays. I usually get strange looks when I pull out my physical copies and pencil bags but it’s easier for me to see when I write it out. Four other people sit at the table. I’ve never seen them before. It’s not for lack of trying, I just don’t have time to meet many other people in the facility. All of my work can be completed alone.

Mikeah dismisses me with a curt wave. “As I was saying, participant 13 is expected to require complete distant control. For logic games, study sessions, lessons—”

I stop him. I quickly open my notebook and start scratching things down. “Complete, distance? I hardly expect Charlee to interact well with virtual notes and indirect communication. From what I’ve observed she’s a hands on kinetic learner. She needs human connection and physical exercises to engage.”

Mikeah looked annoyed. “Yes Mr. Savitz we know you have extensive data on participant 13. I’m sure you could easily humor us all day with your findings and fact toys on this human’s behavioral habits. If you would let me finish, I was going to go on to state 13’s less desirable traits and then her strong points as to have a fully fleshed summary of her recent actions. Is that alright with you?”

I twisted my pencil between my thumb and pointer. Mikeah Robins scolding me in front of Revelation’s team felt like he was wrapping my skin in his fists like dental floss and pulling it. He spoke to me like I was a child barely past the first grade.

“Pardon my interruption. Proceed Dr. Robins.”

“Actually, let’s take a few steps back for these two.” Mikeah eyed me and Ralph. “I daresay Jade has yet to meet any of you. He missed introductions and keeps to himself most days. As for my brother, he just arrived at Happy Waters. Let’s give them our names and alma

matter starting with you.” Mikeah recrossed his legs and dipped his chin at a woman sitting next to him. She was Asian and looked slightly older or possibly the same age as Mikeah. Dr. Robins was twenty eight and it seemed like he liked to remind me. He was four years older than Ralph. Ralph who’d gotten a full ride to *fancy college I’ll name later* into the neuroscience program. It was an eight year program at the best school for human sciences neither of the brothers deserved. Ralph, for not being qualified enough and Mikeah for using his degree to establish power and a superiority complex. If I lived in the natural world I could have gone to any school I wanted and they’d be glad for it. It wasn’t fair people like them got pretty things.

The woman next to Mikeah smiled. I smelled fresh out of grad school on her. She wore a loose fitting pewter blouse and no nonsense business slacks. Her hair was pulled back in a low pony and her makeup was sparse. Not neutral or light, just like she didn’t have care or money for hefty appearances. I estimate she took no more than fifteen minutes in the bathroom every morning. For my first interactions with new people these were a great bunch.

She smiled. “Hello I’m San Yoko. You can call me Dr. San or just Yoko. I graduated from *fancy college in Japan* and I’m very excited to be here today.”

She spoke in Dajian without a hint of accent. She must’ve grown up in a big city or possibly the States although she did use Asian surname traditions so it was probably the first option. She was polite but friendly. She was going to be opposed to small talk but helpful in group work.

The man next to her was brown. He might have been Mexican or Brazilian. He wasn’t the same shade of brown I was *detail* He also appeared to be in his later twenties. Being the youngest never bothered me. I’ve never even met any people my age aside from the participants in Revelation.

“Hi I’m Francisco Banderas. I finished my doctorate at *Mexican college name* and I hope to use Revelation as the thesis of my first independent study. I go by Frank.” Francisco’s hands were clasped together on the table. He had on basic casual clothes, sort of like he was the model for Fruit of the Loom’s next campaign. His clothes were the sort Demi would wear.

Next was a woman named Hana. She went to *Indian college* and also had the title of doctor. I see Airika had been diverse in ethnicity when choosing her Revelation team. On the other hand, she only picked people with impressive degrees. Except for me.

“...and I’m so pleased to meet you all.” Hana had a distinctly Hindu accent to her Dajian. She probably knew Dajia as a second language. Maybe her family spoke Hindu at home.

I really was lucky Airika let me contribute to Revelation full on this year. It was one of the most prestigious programs at Happy Waters and I’d almost been ungrateful. I’d been so spoiled to live here all year. I didn’t notice I was constantly surrounded by the brightest minds in the world. Revelation was an annual internship that thousands of college graduates sought. Some were students looking for credit or a topic for their end of the year project. Some were here for experience so they could start their new career. It really was the best opportunity I could have ever hoped for. I was taking the spot of someone who could have used it.

Ralph introduced himself however slowly it may have been. And a man named Ibn introduced himself. Dr. Ibn. “I recently graduated from Cambridge University but I plan to go back for my *fancy degree title* next year.”

A few beats. Mikeah looked around the room. “Mr. Savitz you are the only one remaining.”

I looked up. I’d been fixated on comprehending how far these people had come to work on Revelation. “Sorry,” I said as I sat up in my chair. I pulled myself closer to the table. “I’m Jade Savitz and I’m happy to have the pleasure of working with all of you.”

I stared at each person as I internally begged them to stop looking at me. I knew they were expecting me to announce my Harvard or MIT doctorate but I didn’t have anything else to say. I silently cursed Mikeah for not continuing. He did this on purpose. He wanted me to feel small in a room of qualified adults.

After condemning me to a few minutes of awkward scunitiny, he started the meeting once more. Revelation was a complete team effort so I don’t know why he decided he was the leader but what can I do.

“That all?” Mikeah said without looking at me. “It’s impressive indeed that Revelation allows for a chance for intermediate people to grow alongside bright individuals. Even ones who are the same age as our project subject.” The room glowed with a warm laughter. These people with fancy degrees just wanted to appease the leader of the I’m-cool-I-just-graduated-college-pack.

Boy was he laying it thick. It was the closest thing to him saying “You’re a dumb child who is just sitting in on adult conversations. Be happy you’re even allowed in the room.” I wanted to smack him and let him know I was technically almost done with my fourth year of college but that probably would have proved to make myself sound immature. So I nodded and leaned into my chair. This meeting sure was going to be full of energy.

“I’m quite sure everyone is familiar with me.” I pushed my pencil lead hard into the soft paper of my notebook to keep from rolling my eyes at him. “I am Dr. Mikeah Robins. I completed the *college* program last year. I am so glad Happy Waters has me here today in the presence of such potential greatness.”

He looked at me when he said “potential.” I didn’t know which brother I disliked more. The stupid one or the protentious one.

“Dr. Savitz hasn’t given us a rigid criteria of goals to accomplish, thank God. I don’t know about any of you but I remember some especially tight minded professors from those days.” Mikeah gained another round of light laughter. Relatability was an important factor in human interaction. I’d studied sociability and communication but I’d rarely gotten a chance to see it in action.

“*insert witty college meme*” Francisco said. “The freedom in this program’s great.”

“Very,” Mikeah gave what I think was supposed to be a smile. He looked more like he was grimacing. “Since Mr. Savitz seems eager to show us how much he knows about Ms. Algers, let’s let him refresh our basic knowledge of participant 13.”

Now he wanted me to mess up. I wasn't going to. I stopped scribbling circles in my notebook and straightened my back as much as I could.

"How do you want me to present the information Dr. Robins? Do you want a summary of Ms. Algiers, an overview of Revelation, past participants, I could show some data charts." He'd left the floor uncomfortably up to interpretation. One skill logicians lack is creativity and improvisation.

Mikeah was stiff with me. I could feel him holding back a groan. "Just tell me why we're here. What is the correlation of having a minor help us conduct investigations for human brain functionings?"

At first I thought he was talking about me. I jerk even straighter than I already was in my chair for a second before realizing he wanted me to explain what we needed Charlee for.

I cleared my throat. "Revelation's mission is to utilize a participant possessing Savant traits to study their brain. We use people in their child or adolescent stage because young undeveloped brains are easier to confirm them as a Savant. Undeveloped Savant brains are capable of being molded to a new mindset. Children and teens are easier to teach than adults. Think of a dog, when they're puppies they have a lot of potential. They can be trained to sit in practically a day if taught well. But as they grow, they've become accustomed to their lives. They're resistance to change gets intense and almost immovable. When they're pups they can even become trick dogs. But keep in mind only dogs bred for heavy athletics can be taken on an obstacle course. A border collie for instance. A pug can't jump hurdles. They can be the best at their trade because when they're young, they're flexible. We have a lot to work with. That's the same thing we're doing here. We're finding the border collie. We're teaching them tricks they can only learn as puppies."

I stopped and looked around the table. Everyone was attentive. It was the first time I'd gotten to talk about my work with someone other than the woman who was practically my mother. Mikeah looked bored, Ralph anxious. Yoko kindly nodded her head every once in a while and Frank leaned on the table closer to me. Everything I'd studied and worked for my whole life. I was finally able to tell people about it. I'd never considered wanting to share my work with others. Airika didn't prepare me to want to show my work to the world. She told me to be happy for myself and be content with knowing. I'd never even thought about the glory part of achieving something. I know there are awards for people who achieve scientific excellence but I'd never thought I could be one of them. I was happy to converse with a small audience but it was a bit intimidating once I realized people were listening to me.

"Um, yes and Revelation has been around for thirteen years." I stumbled. Gah, obviously it's been thirteen years. I saw Mikeah yawn. "Every year a new set of interns and researchers attempt to gather the best data on a participant. The thesis of this project is up to you. Every year researchers like us get to choose what to make our focus is. We can investigate why the ratio of male Savants is almost 90% higher than females. We can perform surgery on a brain to gather a close up interaction with a Savant brain. We can write up tests or exercises for the participant to perform and study the data. We get to draw our own conclusions."

I tensed as Mikeah coughed. It was obviously on purpose and as close to a groan without actually being one. He seemed to be saying, “Get on with it.”

I went on. “Charlee Algers is here as a physical tool to help us with our research. Paired with interactive labs, independent work, and group conclusions, Revelation will surely be the most successful internship we can ever hope for.”

Mikeah quickly stepped in. “Thank you, Jade for refreshing the program’s description for us. I’m sure you’ve read over it several times as a bedtime story.” I cringed as Mikeah switched to my casual name. He’s so degrading.

gah really important scene where Mikeah explains what they’re gonna do and the details and ppl talk too during the meeting so we can get to know everyone and some room and ppl desc. Then Air comes in the last part of the meeting

Before my cheeks could fully transform into tomatoes, Airika strode in. She was confident. She made everyone look at her.

“Hello interns. I wish I could have joined you sooner but Happy Waters is a lot to manage.” She greeted us with a warm smile. I’d never seen Airika smile like that. It was business casual but also genuinely kind and inviting.

“I want to congratulate you on making it this far. Getting into this program is no easy feat and I oversaw everyone’s submissions and resumes. No matter what happens over the next few months, remember that you are one of the top seven best scientists in the world. I am the only overseer of this project and you are the only people working on it. It is a very small operation and I am giving full freedom to conduct experiments and research however you chose. Since I will not be interfering much, I expect you to see it for yourselves to organize your priorities and work together. I will meet you tomorrow morning in Revelation’s private workroom so we can meet Ms. Algers. A full schedule of this week’s guidelines are in the files we sent last month and...”

And Airika’s voice faded away. She talked about details I already knew. I’d been studying Revelation my whole life and seen the process through since I was three. I twiddled my pen.

For years I’d sat in the background, gathering information and data on child after child for Revelation to use. But I’d never gotten to be a part of it. Of course, I’d done mock experiments, practice papers and fake theses. I’d snuck into the Revelation lab at night and gazed at vials of blood work and fawned over framed brain scans. That lab had been my idol. It was the epitome of scientific achievement to me. It was kind of surreal to think I was helping with the project this intimately.

I’d never met the participants before. Not until Charlee of course. And Eli but I don’t like thinking about him.

By Honorah Xu

Charlee 18

-Jae and the Revelation group start working with Charlee on Revelation. Charlee is in a soundproof room so she can't yell for help & strapped to a dentist looking chair and the team watches a screen scan her brain. The team is told she looks resistant just bc the drugs made her jittery (they don't know she was kidnaped)

Oh my motherfucking Jesus fucking son of a skank Christ.

I can't believe it. I'm literally strapped down like a cadaver. They're gonna dissect me.

Ok, not really. But they might as well.

Jae dragged me out of my room this morning. Too bloody early if you ask me like five thirty or something. I'm glad to be out of my dumb room. All there was to do was breathe and poop and watch a dumb little blue dog on the TV. They didn't put me in handcuffs this time or restrain me to the bloody bed but they made sure there were no computers or anything fun. They only turned the lights off when I guess it was nighttime but I don't know for sure because there's no clocks or windows. I was just sitting on my hospital worthy bed staring at the wall and minding my own business. I was contemplating the entirety of my fucked up life and regretting stuff and then unregretting it and thinking about all the dumb shit I've done and feeling embarrassed but then concluding that no, life's too short to be boring. You're awesome Charlee. But I usually just realized that my fifteen years of life were really useless. Like, if this is really it—if I'm destined to be stuck on this bed made of cheap metal hinges and that weird faux leather on doctor beds that are colored an ugly aqua tone and peeling to reveal that it's definitely not leather even though you knew it was fake but they should've at least tried to fool you better because it's really just that coarse beige weaved cord stuff covered in a thin layer of plastic that's supposed to be leather—then wasn't my life just a lie?

Goes into a bunch of dumb stuff she's done and how she got into racing and motor tech

My parents probably think I ran away and I'm screwed because they'd expect that of me. I've left the house before and it wasn't like a dramatic runaway depressed teenager situation which honestly it should've been but I was just mad at my mom for not paying the bloody water bill. I'd bleached my hair for the first time. It was back when I had hair down to my ass and the water cut out right when I needed to rinse. I'd assumed she'd done it on purpose. She hates just about everything I do. So I yelled at her and walked out. *dialogue details*

I went to Braelin's house, washed my hair, and apologized rigorously. I don't think her parents are too into me. It's probably because I stop by for food and clothes like a bloody hobo all the time. *explains a ride she went on when she left* I came back at like four that morning. My mom didn't even move from her spot on the couch.

Jae walked in all businessy like he wasn't part of the psycho cult who'd kidnapped me.

“Good morning. I'm sorry to intrude but I am thrilled to begin the first part of the program. You're a very important member and today we're going to go slow start with an easy

observation and brain scan, maybe a quick interview if you're up to it. I'll let you get ready here first though--"

He didn't look at me when he said this. His eyes were glued to a thick notebook and he read it like he was presenting at school. Jae's highly punchable face looked as excited as a scientist could be which didn't look like much but I'm sure he was bursting.

"Whoa, start over. What the hell is happening here? You can't just go into your spiele tell me what the bloody hell I'm here for." I stood up and got close to him. He shrunk back a little.

"This is Happy Waters--"

"Ok no shit what else. What's all this?" I waved my hands around.

Jae swallowed like it'd help me lean farther away from me. He was already pushed back so far in his shoes he'd fall over if I came closer.

"We have selected you to be a part of project Revelation, an annual summer internship for the brightest minds of tomorrow. It is three months of testing, training, and observation before we write a thesis or summary on our independent studies--" he sounded like a college brochure.

"Ok shut up. Stop acting like my high school guidance counselor and tell me why you motherfucks kidnapped me." I grabbed a bunch of her shirt and pinned him against the door. "Start talking or I'll shatter more than your dignity this time." His head rebounded on the glass of the door window. I felt him shake beneath my gasp. He probably wasn't prepared for my five two stature hundred pound self to get a hold of him. And I know he knew my data because everything about me was in that dumbass folder. He was only a few inches taller than me but he dressed and talked like a thirty year old so it was hard to guess his age.

I looked into his small scrunched eyes. He was whimpering like a dog now and putting his hands up. Pathetic. A burly looking guy outside the door saw us and opened the door so hard it pushed both of us back. He wrenched Jae away and grabbed me by my arm. His huge hand went all the way around my forearm and I could feel my twig like limbs pulling from his grip.

"Careful with her." Jae staggered backwards. He leaned to pick up his notebook. I was still close to enough to him so I swung my foot at his shin. But somehow I'd forgotten I was barefoot and let's just say it hurt a lot. "Charlee please stop hitting me."

"Only if you stop kidnapping me."

Jae stood and did that weird lateral head nod people do in action movies. Jae six foot minion followed him down the hall. I prepared to wiggle around and hit him where it hurt but I remembered Airika's warning. *hall desc* Jae and (I guess he was a guard but he wasn't wearing a uniform it was more a science guy outfit) this guy were whispering to each other. They muffled their volume so much I don't know how they even heard each other even though they were practically on top of each other. But even if they were speaking normally, I wouldn't have understood. They spoke in something that sounded like a harsher version of Daijian. *desc.* We walked down the hall like this, falling over one another and with them snaking words back and forth. The guy holding me glances down when Jae says something and tightens his grip. I make myself slack as possible so he has to drag me *desc* but he gets annoyed and gives me a small

kick in the back of the knee. He does it gently enough so Jae doesn't go off again and honestly it's a lot of work resisting so I walk normally. Even though Jae and this dude have stopped bickering like children, they still walk so close it's hard to get where they're trying to take me.

idk who's holding her but I want it to be Ralph or some other Rev person so describe them

"Where are we going?" Motherfckers might at least tell me something. Maybe I wouldn't be so mad if they'd just fess up. Maybe this is an exclusive resort where only the most in need of pampering get accepted and I'm the lucky winner of a full body massage.

Jae's a few steps ahead. He looks back at me for a second. "I will debrief you shortly."

I'm getting tired of his punchable face and science guy word choice already.

"I said, if you don't tell me what this is in about ten seconds, I'm going to beat this punk's ass." The guy isn't too buff looking. He's taller than me but most people are. He's scrawny and has muscles wire thin. I can tell by the way he grips my arm that he's never taken a step in the gym or even tried out little league. Scientist am I right?

So even though Airika might murder a missing person I like a lot, she's can't figure out I do this if I rebel in small amounts. In a few moments, I've got this guy's arm twisted so far behind his back I hear it pop. A quick push and I could snap his twig forearm in two. The Zap Demi gave me is still buried in my waistband. It's impossibly small and I'm surprised no one's noticed it but I haven't decided to give it up yet.

"Wait!" Jae squeals. He sounds like a goddamned cat mewling for help. It's like these puss-cats- have never stepped foot outside their laboratories before. Sometimes I swear they're just inside plants no one's dared to water.

"Yeah? So first, who are you and where am I?" I push his arm a centimeter farther. It won't leave a mark or nothing but hurts the same way snapping your skin in a door would. He'll be fine though. It's a neat trick I learned that helps leaving motor races at night. Men just don't like to leave people alone do they. I'm no expert but I know enough to keep myself from getting robbed after winning a race. A girl like me beating those big macho boys makes their penises feel fragile so they usually stalk me or jump me to stroke their tiny ego. I've had enough experiences in dark alleys to know how to flip someone a foot taller and a mountain wider onto their butt easy as wiggling a kid off your back.

Jae swallows. He holds up his pathetic little hands and shakes them at me like he'll turn into Doctor Freaking Strange if he focuses hard enough.

"Let's calm down." He can't even look at me. What a puny little small dicked loser scientist nerd prick.

"Okay." I push his arm harder. He lets out a wince like a kicked puppy. Jesus what a crybaby. I'm being easy on him since I don't want *her* to have proof of damage.

Jae shivers like he's been possessed by a goddamned spirit. "I'm Jade Savitz."

"Cool and I'm the Minciline Man." I grab his other wrist and pull it down his back like stretching his bicep; this probably pulls his tendons a little too tight. I do it so fast he doesn't even resist.

“That’s *name* and you were chosen for Project Revelation.”

I hold his tight unimpressed. “What the flying fck is that?”

I’m feeling pretty good. These guys are shrimps compared to the shit I deal with most nights. But then I see Jae Freaking Savitz press the two silver dots on his wrist that are his lifeline, his phone and computer and the whole world, the one they took from me, and hit something fast. His screen was on private so I couldn’t see what he did.

“I saw that.”

Jae looks at me. The light from an artificial window turns his feathery chestnut hair an intense blue. “I promise it will make sense.”

And these two people pop out of nowhere like they did when they kidnapped me and knock *name* out of my arms. These people were actually trained and they don’t have skimpy scientist bodies. I don’t even put up a fight. What if Jae tells Airika about this?

Jae jerks his head to the right like a guy in a shoot em up action film and we continue but even more uncomfortably. If they have all this fancy shit why do we have to walk? This place is huge. I tried to count the rooms we passed and the stairs we walked but there were too many.

As if he read my mind Jae said, “I’m sorry about the distance. I just it’d be nice to give you a look around. I know you took the liberty yourself but think of this as a guided tour.”

I couldn’t roll my eyes back far enough.

Jae looks more confident now. He walks next to me, as next to me as he can with me flanked by two muscly guys, and has his arms behind his back. He’s like a goddamned sergeant general.

DECS “This is the agricultural wing. Here about eighty, a hundred or so, of the best agriculture engineers come up with the best innovations for crop productivity and the future of our environment. Where we came from was called *name* it was for medical discoveries and where our new arrivals stay. And here,” he says as we all step onto a moving walkway, “is the motorized engineering wing.” A few people look up from their work at torch benches or motherholes or engines to gawk at me but most people don’t bat an eye. I see Demitri in the back.

“This is Happy Waters.” And that rings a bell. Everyone knew about Happy Waters. It is the face of school brochures and internship propaganda. Every year I’d see posters in the halls promising students great opportunities. In newspapers it advertised an innovative workplace with a unique format and a chance to actually contribute to society. *detail*

“As you’ve seen so far, we are an industry run by the smartest and best minds of today and tomorrow. With over thirty programs and areas of study, you can see you’ve only seen a drop of what Happy Waters has to offer. I’m thrilled to welcome you because you’re an important piece in our puzzle to deciphering the human mind.”

It’s all a bit silly considering I’m being manhandled and dragged down the shiny aisles of Jae’s grand industry.

“So you let me strangle that guy and get dragged by these people all so you could give me some fabulous campus tour?”

Jae's smile twitched. "Protocol, protocol, protocol. We have a schedule to stick to boys and girls so on to our next stop."

He went the whole way like this, playing museum curator and summer camp counselor. I got to see the doors to a lot of dumb rooms and explanations as to why I couldn't go in these rooms. We stumbled along very awkwardly for a long while. I wasn't being difficult or anything, it's just hard to faster than snail speed when being escorted by two people and hounded by another. Jae stayed so obnoxiously close I thought he'd spit in my ear.

We got to a set of painted grey doors. They were like the ones schools use because schools are cheap and don't care about you. Jae pushed on a bar and it made a pitiful squeak like, "Help, me. I'm forced to open for these creepy kidnappers to do dissections on."

I was joking about dissections but it turns out I wasn't far from the truth.

"Welcome to Revelation." Jae said. And this is when my life gets ruined for good.

Jae does another cool bro nod which I find uncharacteristic give his logical clean cut good boy attitude. Maybe it's all a ruse. Maybe he is a closeted badass Liam Neson type guy who calls the shots. Maybe he's cool and sleek and everyone quakes in his wake and listens to him.*daydreams his whole life

But my speculations crumble when that Micheal I think his name is guy tsks in Jae's face when we come in. It's a fair sized sterile feeling room. It's like a gamer lounge with a dentist looking chair in the middle but comfortable and sleek enough looking for it to lean more on the "I was purposefully made to look like this" vs a I was thrifted from a dental supply store. A glass wall divided the room but it was so thin and delicate I would've missed it had not Micheal opened a door in the glass to join us on the other side. Jae's friends let go of me and snapped away.

"Jesus Christ." I admit I was startled. "You could give me a heads up or like a signal before you do that." It was like they just blinked out of existence. There was instantaneous forms of transformation like *etc* but nothing like this. Nothing that just took your entire body out of sight.

"Jae. Just ten minutes late this time." Micheal I think his name was said. Look I know it's been a few days but almost dying of blood loss, being kidnapped, and finding out there's a woman who's not scared to just kill your best friend a few floors down is a little overwhelming.

He smirked at Jae more ruthfully and distantly than I ever could. "I see you've acquainted yourself with Ms. Algers."

Jae bristled. He had been stalking me for years. He gets quite defensive when people think we're just new pals. "I've been working on her case for a year."

There it was.

"Then you should know procedure started ten minutes ago. The lab's been ready for thirty minutes."

"Great then I guess Charlee is good to go and we can start dialysis." Jae stepped closer to me."

“Mmmh.” He murmured. He gave Jae another sharp look and stepped back through the glass wall. Each time he’d pressed his finger to a scanner at the handle.

Jae turned to me. “I’m so sorry I haven’t had time to explain the procedure I—”

“Can the procedure explain why you kidnapped me?”

He closed his eyes. “I do hope you can understand that this is not kidnapping.”

I held back from slapping him. “What the blazes is this?”

“It is easy. This first time we’re just going to get to know a few friends. You’re going to sit in this chair and just let us do the work for you.” He tried for what I think was supposed to be a smile. It was one of those annoyingly superficial things doctors or desk people do because they think they’re supposed to not because they want to. I never really understood smiles that weren’t genuine. It’s too animated and simplistic for the real world. Smile when you’re happy, frown when you’re sad. We don’t go around pushing our face muscles down every time someone cuts us off or when you’re having a shit day. For every emotion we have we force ourselves into neutral. Unless it’s a smile. We always want to look happy for some reason. I guess it’s just another thing we do to be fake.

I really wanted to know what the hell this boy was going to do. Six *idk number* people dressed in their sciency attire stood on the other side of the barely there glass gawking at me. Some had their *tech word* at the ready for notes and someone had their *tech* glowing at their necks for audio note taking. *tech* on necks was only for people like *Bitch she punched* because they cost probably more than my dad sends a year to get installed. They’re closer to your brain and therefore faster and way clearer for audio. I looked down at my own wrist and felt over the spot where my *tech* used to be. Two raised scars neatly closed the place where they ripped it out looking like I’d been scratched by a two-clawed bird.

They all looked stern, eager, or downright jolly. I guess I wouldn’t know the feeling of being excited for a science class demo but these people looked like chemistry students seeing a light the dollar covered in *word* on fire for the first time. They were all young college age looking people or a bit older. *explain how she saw HW did internships and such*

Desc the room and lights and equipment

Jae took my arm.

“What are you—”

“We have it all covered...” He was still smiling.

Everything got blurry and I wondered how many times these people could knock me out or sedate me before grew tolerant to *drug name* I fell into Jae—you know this shit was strong if it made me lean on him—and he picked me up and put me in the chair.

“Why...” I mumbled. But the room was getting dark. It was like someone had taken my eyes and smudged them. I could still see but just shapes and colors. I tried to talk but all that came out was a fish like noise of bubbles and mumbles. I was no better than a baby making up sounds.

Jae hit a button I hadn't noticed and the people on the other side lit up. Their focus became more on me. There must have been a fogged glass effect or two way mirror set up although it was nearly perfect.

Surprisingly, I could hear fine and think but if this is how cerebral palsy people feel like I wasn't cut out for it.

"You're doing great."

Jae was stronger than he looked. I definitely could have beat him to pulp under any other circumstances, he had chicken legs and wiry arms, but there was a lean strength to him that I hadn't noticed under all his cowering and raised hands. It was like his spirit only came out for science. I don't want to give him too much credit, I'm confident to say I'm fit. All the races I do and workouts and sports before I had to stop weren't for nothing. But I was still a tiny Asian girl made up of roughly 110 pounds so I couldn't have been that hard to manage.

He stuck another needle in my vein and hooked me up to these tubes. *desc*

I could see Mikeah moving his mouth but the glass was soundproof. Probably so their innocent interns wouldn't hear a kidnapped teenager yelling. I tried to push the tubes away but my arms turned to jelly. I thought it was like a dentist office at first but the light blue leather was more like a gynecologist set up. The chair had things for my thighs and the headrest went back like they weren't interested in my face. My arms had a place too. Gentle cuffs went around my biceps. Jae pushed my arms in and they popped in easily and tighten when I was in. Come to think of it, Jae wasn't doing much work. The chair must have been programmed because it tucked me in like a baby. All I could look at was the blinding plastic light on the ceiling. *desc*

A screen popped up on the sides of the glass wall. It had my blood pressure and heart rate which was a meager few beats per ten seconds and a bunch of other doctory stuff I didn't know. Jae sat next to me with his paper notes. God what a dork. No one except my grandma *chinese word* used paper and that was only when she wanted to show me old photos. The tree depletion didn't allow for much paper to be produced and Jae always had buttoloads of the stuff. Happy Waters must have been a real special place. Australia was basically the only place that will harvest it anymore and God knows what happens in the land without rules. You'd have to be dumb or smart af to move there. Stories of capitalists and money goers always flooded the headlines about the next billionaire to have workers killed over there. Australia only had three kinds of people: gang members, investors, and giddy suicidal joyriders who probably came because they thought kangaroos didn't go extinct. *mini paper history*

Jae took notes furiously while checking on the chair. I saw him click his *tech* at his temple, *tech* reserved only for the richest of fools, and probably tap into Mikeah's microphone. I waited for something to happen. One of Airika's lasers to come down from the ceiling and burn my head for further inspections or the chair to extract mechanical arms and knives and pick me apart. But nothing happened. I just stayed here for like twenty minutes vibing to the sound of Jae speaking that odd language in his *tech.* At one point he came over and fixed my slipping leg. The anesthetic had turned me into dead weight. Jae took my calf in his hands which were puny and girl like but still surprisingly had veining rippling through them. He moved my leg into the

leg rest again and tightened the clamp. He looked at me while he did this, his eyes sneaking up at me while his head was bowed at my foot. He did it so carefully I might've been tricked into thinking it was a day spa.

The scientists did their little science thing and chatted about stuff. The only thing I could really hear was the whirling of the machine behind the chair and a few mutters from Jae.

They looked into her mind using tech to create images of memories and thoughts. Very accurate

Jae took me off the machine. The glass wall slid into the floor and the interns finally looked at me. Like, how proper humans look at each other.

One of them, *desc* raised their hand.

“Dr. Robins, will we have a chance to interview her?” The excitement in her voice was uncanny.

He looked placidly at me. “Of course. But for now I think Ms. Algiers would like to retire. She arrived here but a few days ago. You have had time to familiarize yourself with the program but she will need a debrief. Immediately.”

She started to buzz like a kid who just learned about airplanes or something. “It’s just, the technology is incredible. I knew Happy Waters had a *name* but this far exceeded my expectations.”

A guy besides her scoffed. “It is impressive but I have had the opportunity to use one at my time studying at *college.*”

Another chimed in. “But that is a prototype. It’s grainy and only shows the present.” He seemed flustered like he was defending his favorite fandom. “There’s no subconscious or interpersonal feelings in those things.”

“Well you wouldn’t know would you?” He retorted.

“The *name* is one of Happy Water’s proudest innovations. It was created here by *name* but we have not released the formal blueprints to anyone. There is indeed a feasible prototype at *college* and I was rather intrigued to hear someone was able to piece together a demo with a small likeness to our *name* even though it only touches the surface of what we accomplished.”

The guy swallows and modestly says, “Well I majored in biochemistry. I didn’t look into the process of making the *name* as much as I should have.”

Jae lets out a small laugh, the first time I think I’ve seen him genuinely happy. Actually, he looked pretty happy when I showed up on his front door wrapped like a present. He seemed like the youngest by a lot in this group. *desc*

“That’s a bit embarrassing if I may speak plainly *name.* *college* boasts of its biochemical students but even a undergrad without experience would know the basic history of the *name.*”

Mikeah smirked like he hated to agree with Jae. “Now now young grasshopper, not all of us lock away in our offices to study *blank.*” The others had a collective “haha” and “hmmm” and I could tell Mikeah had tried to establish a Jae vs The Other Blockhead Nerds rivalry. Didn’t

Jae ever get sick of being around the 30 and up club? By the looks of he never had any interactions with children unless they were to be put under the scope. I hated him with all my lazy ass worth but I felt the same at races and with *her friend who knows she races who works the entry fees* I couldn't tell Braelin but at least I had her.

I was standing in front of the chair grappling for the arm rest. The drug has not entirely worn off and I was using the chair to hold up my whole body. I wondered if had I the ability to speak, if yelling for help would do anything. Surely one of these people was normal. Obviously they weren't from here. Their little name tag lanyards made them look like campers. But I was woozy and it felt almost as bad as having half your blood drained from your fingers.

I guess I must have looked pretty bad because one of them looked concerned. Thank God.

"Is she alright?" One of them looked at me head cocked to the side. He tapped the dots at his wrist to close his *tech*

Mikeah acted like this was perfectly normal. "Perfectly. Ms. Algers was administered a mild sedative before the procedure. It helps us see her mind more clearly." Mikeah stepped closer to me. He took my arm in his cold bony hand and pushed me to the door we came in.

Another intern turned rigid. She brought a flowery hand to her chest. "Am I seeing she is missing a finger?"

Mikeah and Jae both flushed at this. Mikeah made sure my other hand was concealed in his lab coat.

"Well she suffered a serious in—" Jae started.

"As you might remember, Charlee is from Manhattan, New York. Most crime filled city in the United. She lived in a less privileged neighborhood than most of you could understand and an unfortunate event of gang violence caused her to lose her finger. She's lucky she lost only a finger. You told us all about it didn't you?" Mikeah looked down at me. I nodded and flashed the interns a crude smile. Jae keeps proving he has piss for brains. If any of these schmucks found out perfect little Happy Waters couldn't do something as basic as save my finger from infection or give me a *blood freezing/changing method* the moment my broke ass came in the building, they'd lose their fancy reputation. And, if Jae actually believes I succumbed to infection of both my middle fingers, I don't know how he got his college level education before he hit puberty.

They unanimously melted. Rich people love to believe anything about Rations. We eat mud, we don't bathe. These people probably haven't had to live a day without *tech words.* I'm sure they're eating up the idea I got in a gang fight and lost a few limbs. Maybe I have scars or mental trauma. In reality, if I let anyone close enough to slice off my finger, I'd fail my standards. I've seen the lower class romanized in movies usually a Ration being saved by some rich military brat or CEO's kid. I've hid my status and home from everyone except Braelin. If anyone found out I didn't sip from platinum straws or wipe my ass with *expensive fabric* I'd be kicked out of my dumb rich kid school cause I don't actually live in the district. Just cuz we don't have cars or head implanted *tech* doesn't mean all of us are struggling. My mom isn't Mr. Monopoly but just because we have appliances from 3140 doesn't mean we're scum. We're

the mighty slightly lower than middle class. I hardly ever actually cash in my ration cards and me and mom aren't the worst off in my neighborhood, not by far.

"Charlee needs more time to settle in. She did only arrive yesterday night." Liar.

Mikeah guided me to the door and almost shoved me out. He fled the room so fast his lab coat almost snagged a door hinge. He stuck his head at the interns one last time and said, "I'm sure you will have lots of fun during interview time with Ms. Algers. There will be plenty of time to get to know each other."

Interview time. More like being integrated by people who kidnapped you because you're literally strapped to a chair and your best friend is being dangled above a radioactive shark.

Mikeah gave me a subtle kick to the back of my leg, that bendy connective part here if you kick it you wobble, so it would look like I was as stumbly and out of it as he insisted. I tried to twist my head around to look at the interns and I don't know, wave my tongue around in distress, by Mikeah grabbed me firmly by the shoulders and pushed me out the door.

"She is so enthusiastic isn't she?" He said sweetly.

Then he rushed out the door behind me and slammed the door.

He brings me back to my room. Back through the crisp white hallways and dizzying stairwells.

"You're probably wondering, why don't I just take a *magnet elevator maybe chart thing* but I wouldn't want anyone to see you would I?" He doesn't look like he wants a response and I don't want to make him feel like he ever piques my interest. He rushes us through abandoned halls. "And a *chart that's like a hoverboard thing* would be on Happy Water's communal *mind thing everyone has* map so I can't do that either. We'll have to walk. It's good to get exercise isn't it?" He pulls me along so fast I knock into him more than once which is awful in the sense that I get multiple whiffs of him. His short crop of hair smells heavily like a water themed men's cologne and his clothes, even though it's the end of the day, have the air of being freshly laundered. It's all nice and clean scents that waft from him but too reminiscent of my dear old dad.

When we make it to the room, it feels cramped and chilling as ever even though it's likely twice as big as my room back home. The dull bed sheets have been replaced with duller pale blues ones that only add to my sneaking suspicion this place is a giant hospital cloaked in the disguise of a science facility. *more desc and house at home*

"You did swimmingly Ms. Algers," Mikeah says through tight lips. "I'm only sorry that couldn't have ended more pleasantly."

I really want to punch his motherfucking cock sucking face but all I see when I feel like being defiant is Braelin's scared face as she's pushed into a vat of bubbling acid. Her limbs being torn apart by Zanny the fluorescent shark. Airika butchering her fingers starting with ripping off her nails then skinning them to the bone. I don't know what that bitch would do but seeing what she's capable of makes my mind run wild.

I stood there in the middle of the room looking at Mikeah's punchable face, the most punchable face in the history of the world next to Jae's, thinking of all the things I wanted to do

to him if I ever got hold of a knife. I was fair at self defense and basic fighting moves when provoked. I wanted to see what could become of my restless hands if given a weapon. Maybe I could steal one of their scapel's the next time I was on their table of death. Or maybe if I saw Demetri again he could loan me a wrench.

I stood there imagining ripping his nose from his face or his dick from his groin but I didn't say a word.

"I best be back debriefing the interns. They're sure to be a tinsy bit confused." He smiled like he'd just given me an amazing tour of a new college and slipped out the door, making sure he locked it. I heard the internal gears of it shift into place and green lights flare at the door frame. They must have added a mechanic lock as well. It would be nearly impossible to get out with that. Especially since they took away the computer and TV. I didn't know exactly where I was in relation to the exit because this place felt like one big Wonderland walking to but based on the amount of stairs we took I was high. Top floors were hard to escape. I did have the advantage of they probably wouldn't put me near the highly trafficked areas because I was their dirty secret that could get them thirty plus years in jail but it was impossible to know where I was due to the hologram windows and endless identical halls.

It was something I could figure out later. I had plenty of alone time. But now, as much as I hated to give in, I still felt the effect of tiredness from the drugs so I laid down in the twin size bed thinly mattresses but warm. I pulled the coarse sterile blanket over my head and fell asleep.

....

*It's morning. Charlee is back in her room sulking again when Jae comes in to tell her he's giving her a keycard.

JAE: (he holds two cups of coffee and a lanyard wrapped around his wrist) How's your day going?

CHARLEE: (looks at him with her head leaned to the side and like she's living in a storm cloud. Jae is all smiles and Charlee wants death) Great. I really enjoyed the hot towels and self serve breakfast.

JAE: (fully serious) Oh did Mikeah bring your continental breakfast already? I was going to grab it but I passed the kitchen and darn. (he walks around Charlee's room and sets the coffee down on a table. Charlee is sitting up in her bed and cursing him for waking her up) It seems you like your new room. I'm so sorry about the first one, we were a bit frantic and I just popped you in somewhere. This is much more comfortable. (he gets some clothes out of the closet and gives her some toiletries) I'm really excited for today. I know your first activity was a bit overwhelming but I'm going to take you to a more comfortable space for a much needed conversation. I know you feel confused and defeated right now. (gets a new band aid for her)

CHARLEE: (ignores him) What time is it?

JAE: O five hundred.

CHARLEE: The hell's that mean?

JAE: Oh I forget myself sometimes. A fifth of the morning *look up how people said times*. I've only ever lived in Happy Waters and I've only seen New York on the TV. Things are very different in your country.

CHARLEE: (he said it like a question but I was more concerned about "country") My country?

JAE: (like he flubbed up) Um yes. Technically Happy Waters is a country. Uh not actually Happy Waters, I mean our island. (like he really flubbed)

CHARLEE: Island?

JAE: ...

CHARLEE: We're on a fcking island? Where?

JAE: I regret to say I should not have told you that.

CHARLEE: (stands up and wraps her blanket around his neck) You brought me to a fcking island? In the middle of nowhere?

JAE: (he gags. He chokes out the words and it's mangled) At-lan-ick-

CHARLEE: What? (chokes him harder. Assumes since no one's watching this is fine for now)

JAE: (sputters) Stop-

CHARLEE: I could kill you. It'd be one asshole in this place. Like squishing ants but still.

JAE: Cam-camera.

CHARLEE: (stops) Does anyone monitor that?

JAE: (shakes his head no)

CHARLEE: Wipe the tape.

JAE: We're in the Atlantic.

CHARLEE: The Atlantic? That must mean... (realizes which island it is and explains its history)

JAE: (clutching his knees and huffing air) I'll let you get ready.

(leaves. Charlee describes what he brought and gets ready. She uses the fancy bathroom and notes things she can use to get out. It's like they tried to make it homey but it's unnerving. She takes a really weak nail scissor and some alcohol mouthwash which is a minor problem bc its one of the only legal alcohols and plans she can throw or spit it in someone's eyes. Jae comes back and they go to a cafeteria-like room but it's empty and they eat.)

JAE: I apologize for earlier.

CHARLEE: (eats. It's better food than she's had in a while. Quiet for a second) Are there any in here?

JAE: No. Not in communal spaces only labs-

CHARLEE: (grabs him by the hair) My room is a lab?

JAE: Well yes technically-

CHARLEE: (slams him down) Explain.

JAE: Wh-what?

CHARLEE: You said you would explain.

JAE: (shaken up) Of course. You are a Savant.

CHARLEE: Aren't those mentally disordered people?

JAE: Our world has a bad habit of assigning gifts as diseases.

CHARLEE: (briefly tells us about Savants. It was like polio but now it's rare. To Char society tells her it's very dangerous so she's freaked out) I'm not sick. If I had Savant syndrome I would've known when I was a kid. Everyone gets checked and the vaccine—

JAE: The vaccine can be faulty. Every medicine has a chance of failure.

CHARLEE: (shakes her head) How am I supposed to believe you?

JAE: (pulls up his screen. He shows her candid pictures of her as a child. Also a scanned picture of her results from the doctor she goes to) The tests they do on kids when they're young, it does nothing.

CHARLEE: You're full of shit.

JAE: Once Savanthood is gifted to someone, you can't take it away. Doctors detect it but they don't say anything because there's no way to get rid of it. If the vaccine ends up failing after an eight year period there's not going back. And they don't tell anyone because there's nothing to do and besides, it would ruin the reputation of the country. The vaccine is supposed to make citizens feel secure. For years Savant syndrome has been considered eradicated and no one wants to believe otherwise. I mean, what would you do about it? But here at Happy Waters, we wonder why would you want to give away a gift?

CHARLEE: Whoa back off. It's literally illegal to not tell the patient. Do you expect me to believe every case of Savant syndrome is never told to any parent?

JAE: It's not a disease. It's a gift. The shame of parents realizing they had damaged goods was too much of a strain on humanity. They would disown or put up their kid for adoption if they knew it was a bigger crisis than being a Savant. (Char listens) It's too subtle of a condition to be noticed so no one really bothered to try and make anyone aware of it. It's too much of a hassle. (leans closer) They hid your gift Charlee. You have so much more potential here. We can help you.

(Charlee silently agrees bc she also knows there was a spike of adoptions bc people really don't want mentally or physically ill kids)

CHARLEE: Helping me by kidnapping me?

JAE: That was an unfortunate result of the process of Project Revelation.

CHARLEE: (bangs the table) I'm so done with you people. It's like talking to a customer service bot.

JAE: A what?

CHARLEE: (groans. Mocking Jae's voice) Oh I forget myself sometimes. I've only ever lived in a normal place with free will and regular human stuff and I've never seen this batshit crazy place, not even on TV.

JAE: I'm sorry I don't understand.

CHARLEE: Like when you're on the phone at a store or doctor's office? You get a robot voice instead of a person to help you and it's really annoying because they're redundant and do literally nothing to help you.

JAE: Oh.

CHARLEE: Ok keep going.

he explains more

Jae ran a hand through his hair. "Well anyway, here's your key card. It will give you access to most rooms on this floor. I don't want you to feel like a prisoner here..."

Charlee stared at him wide eyed as he rambled on. He was focused on the card; turning it over his fingers and pointing out serial numbers.

(then he gives her a keycard so she can have some free reign and leaves her. She goes to try and find Dimitri)

"So," she said as she licked her sorbet. "Did you ever do like normal things? Or have always walked around like a forty year old man with your hypothesis and science stuff." Charlee held up an imaginary test tube and poured invisible chemicals into a pretend beaker.

Jae looked up from his notebook. "What do you classify as normal things?"

Charlee sprawled back in her seat. "See, that thing you do. You talk like a living physics book. This room this the closest you've shown to being an actual human." She gestured to the game room. Pinball machines and skeeball games lined the far wall against a bright window.

Details. It would've been a lovely view if it'd been real and not a hologram.

Jae nodded.

"Right, and like I mean, playing video games, eating chips, riding bikes, going outside, being with friends." Charlee blinked rapidly at him. "Interacting with humans that you didn't kidnap."

Jae looked meek. He blushed slightly.

"You have friends right?" She asked.

Jae had gone back to scratching in his notebook. He looked up again. "I don't play video games because too much screen gives me headache, hence why you see me with paper most of the time, junk food is wretched for your stomach you should know that and the food industry is disgusting because it profits off conditioning us to want chemically grown food rather than simple and clean natural sources. Capitalism has really made a business out of everything but that's a long story. We really would be better off if we were used to eating basic foods and it would help the environment out a lot because food has been turned into something to be commercially sold and it's entertainment now not survival. I don't know how to ride a bike. I don't go outside much because it's gross and I'm allergic to bugs and grass. And the island isn't big so seeing the same grassy area isn't my cup of tea."

Charlee swung on her hanging chair. She went back and forth and rolled her eyes at Jae. "I'm Jade and I'm smart and I'm better than everyone else because I can do calculus and I can't do fun stuff because I'm," she coughed critically. "*allergic.*" She swung her chair closer to him. "Anything else you have against living?"

Jae watched Charlee swing and eat her frozen dessert. "I did have a friend once."

Charlee gasped in melodrama. "Listen up folks he had a friend. At one point in time Jade met the basic necessities of life and had a singular friend though from the look on his face and didn't last long."

He folded his arms and sat up.

"Oh he's getting serious guys he's sitting like a big CEO boy."

"As a matter of fact, I have friends."

Charlee cocked her head. "Airika? Bosses don't count dummy."

"Airika is my mother."

Charlee's eyebrows raised and her eyes widened. "Oh. I didn't see that one coming." Charlee politely studied Jae's dark complexion. He looked middle Eastern or a mixed African even and Airika was white as a sheet. While Airika looked like she would catch fire in the faintest of sunlight, Jae's skin was as if he sported a natural tan his whole life.

"My father was supposedly *insert Jae's ethnicity* and very dark."

"Right, thanks." Charlee said with her native accent showing through.

"His name was Eli Feelds and his hair was brown like toffee. He had eyes that caught the light like a prism and he was tall." Jae seemed to be lost in thought of this boy. "He was about our age but he was a decent foot taller than me. I knew him when we were in our puberty stage and I was left behind a bit. He was growing to be fair looking and had a bright spirit while I was still an ugly duckling etc."

Jae describes his only friend Eli very vividly.

Charlee stared at him like she was trying to pretend to be interested. To be honest she'd zoned out a bit. "So is that some kind of farm or something?"

Jae audibly groaned. "No. He was a guy who I thought was my friend but it turned out he was a liar and a jerk."

She leaned back in her hanging chair and crossed her arms. "It's just," she took a bite of her chocolate sorbet. "The way you described him made it seem like he was a peach farm or something."

"Eli Feelds," he muttered. "Christssake Charlee, why do you make everything so humorous? Do you take anything in life seriously?"

explains entire friendship with Eli

Charlee sat farther back in her chair. "And how did you know this boy again?"

Jae stiffened. “He was a participant like you.”

Charlee’s eyes glowered. She stood so fast Jae flinched as she pounced to the table he was at. She looked like a lion coming onto her prey.

Charlee pounded the table with her fist, her hand held closed in an awkward manner to accommodate her missing finger. She’d insisted on not getting a prosthetic.

“Don’t call us that,” she barked. She looked right into Jae’s eyes. She’d dropped her sorbet. Charlee started to swing an arm at Jae’s stupid fucking face.

She was getting flustered. “Don’t you even fucking dare, just...” A heavy pang clutched her chest and she sat back down. She knew she wouldn’t be able to get a good hit without her middle finger and she didn’t want Jae’s cry baby aftermath or him to go running to his mommy.

“I’m sorry...” Jae tried.

“No, you don’t get to be sorry. People who think it’s normal to use other people for your science bullshit don’t get to say sorry. People like you should be in jail or fucking dead.”

He looked hurt. Like, actually sad. More emotion than Charlee had ever seen him exhibit crossed his face. The wrinkles in his forehead tightened, his eye vaguely watered. She didn’t let herself feel bad for him but she almost did. Almost.

But then, he readjusted his posture. A hard shell came over him. He looked like he was about to say something logical to redeem himself when a sharp, *ba-ding*, came from his wrist.

He looked from his wrist to Charlee. “I am appreciative of this time I’ve been able to have with you. It has helped my studies greatly. But it seems I have an urgent matter to attend to.”

He threw his notebook in his bag and grabbed Charlee’s forearm.

“Pardon my reach but I need to go.”

“And? What does that have to do with me?”

Jae’s expression was taunt. “It’s clear where your loyalties lie. For now, I can’t have you roaming about right now.”

drags her out and locks her in his office

Charlee 19

“Let me out you son of a bitch!” I pound on the door. Jae’s stupid little bob of black floofy hair bounces as he prances away leaving me locked in a godforsaken closet. Actually, it’s more like a top tier research office. Monitors line the back wall and a single white desk facing the monitors like a command station sits in the middle. Stacks of Jae’s sciency paperwork sits in a neat pile on the desk. It has pens, notebooks, and all kinds of weird stuff I didn’t recognize. I went over to it and picked up a squishy pink rectangle. He also had a clear box with twisted metal and shavings of something inside it. I didn’t understand why he used ancient writing supplies. For such a genius he sure was a moron.

I yelled a few more obscenities at the door but quickly slumped into Jae's squishy desk chair. If I knew how to work the extra fancy screens I would turn on some TV but I settled for spinning until my head went dizzy instead.

I was onto my 200th spin when I thought the brat forgot me and I'd be stuck here until they needed to torture me but I heard a keycard swipe at the door. It wasn't Jae.

"Charlee?" A deep Russian accent filled the room. I tried to focus on the person at the door but I was really into spinning at this point and they looked like a grey blur.

"Do not disturb me, peasant," I said. I felt like I was going to throw up but it was the most entertaining idea I'd had in a while. This place really was making me crazy. Or maybe, it was bringing out the crazy. Either way I was satisfied.

A tall grey peppered haired man stopped the chair. He was greeted with me knees to my chin. I'd needed to lift them for the best aerodynamics.

"Demi?" I said.

He was wearing a grey grease stained t-shirt and work boots. The epitome of a dad look I might say.

"What in the hell are you doing here?" He rolled my chair away from the desk and got me to my feet. "You're in no condition to be monkeying around like this after the procedure."

I almost snorted at that. "I'm also not in the condition for having my brain sucked out of my skull in front of a bunch of hippy dippy preppy science dorks." I was on my feet now but dizzy from spinning and also whatever shit they did to me. I'd meant what I'd said as a joke but I guess it came out bitter because Demi took my shoulder in one hand awkwardly and frowned. He looked in my eyes and checked by arm where the blood transfusion had happened.

"I'm so sorry this is happening to you," he said quietly. "I don't like to see this. I bet it happen every year. You're the first one I see real proof of."

I didn't want to but my eyes were shining and my lip was quivering. The last thing I ever wanted was for anyone in this hellhole to think I was weak but I'll admit it once and only once, I was goddamn scared.

"Then let me go," I said in my most puppy dog-like voice.

Demi shook his head. "They'd kill me Charlee I know it. I'm sorry."

I wanted to punch him. I barely knew him but this strange mustached, Russian man was my last hope for leaving. And I did, I started punching him in his muscular stomach though he didn't move one bit. He was big and even with my experience in the streets of Manhattan all I was doing was being a whiny kid.

"Hey, hey kiddo," he hushed me. I embarrassingly started to wipe tears away. "Just because I can't get you out now doesn't mean I won't try. I have big plan. In Russian we are like bull. And I will make you like bull. Now, let me promise you something and you will remember forever. I might not get you out this week, I might now this month or year even. But I need you to be strong like bull. Ok?"

I hated myself but I was being a blurring mess. My head hurt and I felt nauseous from the experiment and spinny chair. I felt like a little kid who went on the tornado ride too many times and needed to go home and take a nap.

“Say ok.”

“Ok,” I told him.

“Ok. Let’s go see my bike collection now.”

Demi opened the door. He led me down countless flights of stairs, I didn’t understand this place with their insistence on using ancient means of technology, and dozens of halls that all bore the same white paint job. It wasn’t helping my headache to quickly walk past the same mental doors and false window holograms. Demi told me to walk quick and not look anyone in the eye. As we left the only wing of the building I’d known, it got busier. More people with shiny plastic ID lanyards, more people with cold science faces and glasses. It must have been a punishment for being a bad student for me to end up in a hellhole of nerds.

“They shouldn’t recognize you since you ain’t supposed to be outside your section,” Demi muttered to himself. He had a strange accent, Russian but with old American country words. “Don’t even know you exist I reckon,” he said more to me this time. “I barely know anyone outside my department and I shouldn’t know about you.” He stopped and looked me up and down. “You might draw a bit of attention with that though. And not many kids here outside of Revelation.”

“Is this about my hair again?”

“No, it’s about the big white gauze wrapped around your arm and the bruises on your head.”

I smirked a little. “Why are you doing this? You don’t even know me.”

We started walking again. It felt like the longest walk ever and my head was pounding. The ice cream Jae gave me was sitting heavy in my stomach.

“Because. You are a child. And kids need fun.” He seemed very satisfied with this answer.

By the time we finally get there my small bit of excitement to see something that isn’t an sterile looking office has melted. But Demi swipes his card and opens the doors to the most badass collection of bikes I’ve ever seen.

“Holy shit,” I whisper.

Demi leans against the wall like a proud dad. “I know.”

I start going down the line of bikes starting from the oldest one.

ok i dont know jack shit about bikes why do i keep writing about stuff idk about insert made up details

they sit down and Demi gets her an ice pack

“Jae wasn’t always like this, you know.”

I raised an eyebrow beneath my ice pack that currently soothed a headache he inflicted.

“Really cuz he seems like a pretty big douchebag to me.”

Demi crossed his arms and gazed at his bikes. “When I first met him he was a sweet little boy. Big brown eyes that wanted to study everything and dimples.”

Oh boy we were going to do a backstory about a pretentious little asshole. I tried to imagine Jae as anything but brooding and a psycho kidnapper.

“Airika didn’t make it easy on him. She was not exactly motherly. I often saw him walking the halls with nothing, no friends, no toys.”

“What is her deal even?”

Demi shook his head. “That is another very long story for another time.”

I accepted this. Mostly it seemed like Airika had Jae under her cold manipulative thumb. I knew she was to blame for all this but it was hard not to want to constantly punch Jae.

“So I see him one day and I am not supposed to because most times departments do not interact. This keeps Happy Waters smooth sailing you see, each genre of people stay together. Happy Waters is like a big high school and the grades don’t get along well. And so I see him wander into the engineering and I think ‘A child at Happy Waters?’ I knew I am not supposed to do this but I start saying hi. He is scared at first but still young probably four or five and trusts me easily. I am kind to him and give him toys. I teach him to play soccer. He is happy and acts like a kid. But he is brilliant. He talks to me about physics and the space time continuum and stuff kids do not talk about. But I am happy too and he is the only kid I ever get to take care of. He starts to sneak out more and more to find me. I show him to the outside and Charlee you wouldn’t believe it, he has never been outside! Airika keeps him in his little world of school and whiteness and holograms. He is amazed you should have seen his face. I gave him a soccer ball and we play. He laughs and smiles. For once he does not seem focused only on learning school but also wanting to play. He told me one time he wanted to be a soccer player as his job and I told him he should go for it.”

Demi pauses and adjusts his position. He seems like a father looking back on his son’s first steps. I only wonder how such a sweet boy turned into a raging bitch.

“Nice,” is all I say.

“You don’t understand. He had no one. Airika was too cold. But one day, he is about seven or eight now, and we are playing soccer and he collapses. He can’t breathe and I don’t know what to do. I am an engineer not a doctor. So I run and get Airika, I know this is his mother because she is all he talks about, and she is furious with me. For a while I stand in her office just pleading with her to do something but all she can do is yell at me for corrupting her son. She says it’s my fault I have done this and starts to cry angry tears. Finally I drag her outside and she brings this shot thing with her and stabs his thigh. He has asthma, she told me. And he cannot play outside.”

Demi stopped and ruffled what remained of his thin grey peppered hair.

“She snatched him away and told me never to talk to him again. We had a big fight later and I tried to explain how I was just trying to give him a normal childhood without textbooks for bedtime stories and a hobby for reading line graphs. For a few years I didn’t see him no more. But when he was ten, I ran into him. I was so happy to see him and I gave him a hug but he was

like a brick in my arms. His bright curious eyes were focused and dim. He gave me a polite greeting but quickly waved me off because he was just cutting through to find the *lab thing* he said. I told him he should come say hi more often but he said he needed time to work, study. That was all he did. He said he had a friend though. He told me he was fine and happy but he wasn't the same. After that I only saw him in passing. He was stoic and couldn't be bothered by soccer or games. He told me his body was made for research. Lately though he's been stopping by. He's still not the same but I think he got tired of being alone. He's really lonely Charlee."

I shrugged. My ice pack was melting. "That's what you get when you're a kidnapping psycho."

"I just want you to understand him is all. He isn't the worst of us."

Although I agreed I still snorted. And finally it dawned on me that Demi might not have been trustworthy. What was he even doing working here if he didn't like all this shit? I think I just picked the least of the evils.

I didn't say anything to him though. We sat there for a while just staring at the bike collection.

"You know we have a racetrack?"

"Really?" Hell yeah.

"I'll take you sometime. Pick your favorite."

I was starting to plot the best joyride of all time. I had my pick *fancy bikes names* all they were all better than my *name* at home.

"How are those fingers of yours? Gotta keep them moving."

Suddenly self-conscious, I fiddled with my fingers, well what was left of them. It wasn't like I forgot I only had eight fingers left but strangely, compared to the other events of my life this wasn't the first thing that came to mind. It didn't hurt really, the laser healed the skin cleanly and I still felt like they were still there. But as I wiggled my fingers I realized my ring was gone. Obviously since someone had chopped off my fingers but I hadn't had time to think about it. It was my favorite thing I owned. A thin black onyx ring that Braelin gave me for my thirteenth birthday. It was the year my parents forgot about my birthday.

"I can make you prosthetics. Happy Waters specialties in prosthetics. It'll be like you never lost them."

"Demi I lost my—"

The door opened with a ferocity that shook my bones. I snapped my head to the door to see a red-faced Airika.

"What in the hell Demitri?" She walked fast in her spike stilettos to me and wrenched my arm. My ice pack fell to the floor and burst. As Airika dragged me out the door I slipped on the puddle of ice and water.

"Now, wait just a minute Airika—"

She was pulling me off the floor. I tried to make my body slack, forcing her to pick up my entire weight. It was strange that she always came for me directly. Usually a guard or two was sent but she seemed dead set on manhandling me herself.

I kicked and leaned into the floor but even in her pencil skirt and tight bun, she managed to scoop her arms under my armpits and lock me into her hold. Even with my experience flipping pickpocket assholes and elbowing sore losers from bike races, Airika was astonishingly strong. Demi stood by looking displeased but not doing anything.

“Airika can you let the kid go? She’s not a sack of flour. Come on—”

Demi tried to quell my flailing arms but I bit his hand.

“Charlee,” he said, sounding hurt. I didn’t care though, he was dead to me. He was like every other wacko here who stood back and let people get mangled for science projects.

Airika held me so tight I thought my arms would fall off from lack of circulation.

I was seething now. “How did you find me?” Even with her fancy cameras and team of psychos, this place was bigger than the Mall of America.

“Tracker. In your bloodstream,” she said. She didn’t sound winded at all even with my constant flailing. Her voice was smooth and confident.

I turned my head as far into her stupid thin neck. “Fucking hell,” I spat in her face. “You people chipped me too? What am I a fckin dog?”

I tried to stomp on her foot but she started to maneuver me out the door. I endured a very painful drag down the hallway screaming and thrashing but she kept a good hold of me. She took me down some hidden elevators that only revealed themselves for her keycard, probably so no one saw Airika lugging a screaming teenager around.

She took me back to my small pitiful room. Air threw me onto the floor and slammed the door behind her. She leaned down and grabbed a fistful of hair in her long sharp nails.

“I’m going to tell you one more time and one more time only, obey me or all the kids down there are goners.” She was uncomfortably close to my face, her breath was hot on my cheeks.

I grabbed her bony wrist and tried to untangle my hair from her grasp but she backhanded me with her ringed hand. A big jewel caught me in the eyelid and I felt it tear.

“Look lady, I don’t know what I did that bothers you so much but you’re gonna need to take a fckin chill pill.”

She slapped me again. “Don’t tell me what to do you ration scum.”

Great she was starting to play arrogant bully. This shouldn’t be too bad actually, just like high school.

“Is that all you got?”

Airika’s face got all weird. She smiled but not a smile that was normal or cruel even. Just a lopsided grin. She walked over to her desk and clicked until she pulled up live camera feed of the kids in the Fail basement. She walked back over to me and dragged me close to the screen, her nails digging into my neck forcing me to look.

“I told you I wasn’t messing around.” She didn’t let go of me but hit a button on one of the pictures of the kids. There were dozens of rows of them. Some were sleeping, some pacing. The one she clicked was a small boy no older than ten. He had warm brown hair was sitting with his knees hugged to his chest. A dark green gas started to fill his cell and he looked around. He

started to cough and choke. He grabbed his neck and gasped for air. Even in the small square I watched him in I could tell his face was red and he was gagging. This went on for a few seconds until he slumped to his knees and died.

I felt myself shaking in Airika's grip, shaking with rage and disgust. She took a life without so much as a hesitation.

"What...the fuck," I yelled.

She pushed me out of her hands. "Do not cross me again—"

"I didn't! Demi just came and found me after Jae locked me in his office—"

She slapped me. What was with this bitch and slapping me? Did she have a kink?

"Don't interrupt me. I will deal with Jae and Demitri but I told you one simple thing your first day here did I not? Do not go against me and do not leave your room. You will not let a Revelation member suspect you are not here by your will and you will do whatever activity we tell you to do without restraint. You have broken both these rules in a considerably short amount of time and will suffer the consequences." She checked her polished nails and touched a crack on one of them. "And," she started in a gleeful yet monotone voice, "Remember, no subject has ever left this facility. Dead or alive."

She left me like this, shaking and burning with hatred. I sat down on the floor and for the first time since coming here, cried my head off.

....

she explains ads she seen from HW about keeping USA safe with it's multi technology

Happy Waters was some fancy corporate hero in the USA. They made our military, our soda brands, our shoes. I think the Szid on my feet were a part of Happy Waters. They owned and made so much stuff it was basically a monopoly but plenty of people think they are working with the government so that won't ever matter.

explain what char knows about HW more idk

But I don't care about the economic power of Happy Waters Inc right now. I need to know where this red-headed cunt put my best friend. If she wasn't lying that was, probably rotting like the crazies downstairs and you know what, fck the crazies. I'll do whatever I have to, obedient or not, to save her.

My remaining fingers felt around the boney stub of my middle right finger for the ring that was always there. Even in the midst of all this crazy shit, I can't believe I didn't notice it was gone. I've been wearing it for years all because it was the year my parents forgot my birthday.

tells a story

"Ian, you have to stop being like this do you understand how hard it is being here by myself all the time? No actually you don't do shit do you even know our house address? Oh my God you don't what the hell is wrong with you," Kenni Algiers yelled over the phone the night of

my thirteenth birthday. I was sitting on the couch not really expecting anything but also a little hopeful. It was my first teenage birthday.

I listened to them argue for a while. Mom pulled a cigarette out of her pocket and smoked using the kitchen counter as an ashtray. It was crazy honestly how they couldn't even remember they had one kid. I slipped out of the apartment and rode my bike to Braelin's house.

"Oh my gosh hi," she said as she opened the door.

"My parents are being shit." I threw my bike against her railing and came inside. I've done this several times.

"Aren't you celebrating your birthday?" She asked.

"No. I don't even think they remember."

We went to her room. It was blue and had clouds painted on the ceiling.

"I have your present but it's not ready because I thought I wouldn't see you until tomorrow," she said. She shut me into her room and I heard feet pattering the floor. "Wait there!"

The door opened in a rush and she held a tiny wrapped box. I was still in a bad mood and brooding on her bed she was all smiles.

"Charlee Algers," she said in a comically romantic voice. She got down on one knee and unwrapped the box. She waved her hand aggressively for me to stand up.

"Charlee, will you marry me?" She grinned so wide I would've believed she wasn't joking.

I looked at the box and there it was. It was black and nothing else, a shining onyx that was slender but strong without stones or embellishments. Braelin stood up and slipped it onto my middle right finger.

Looking back I know that's the first time I knew I wanted to kiss her. Her golden brown hair that reminded me of brown sugar complimented her fair yet warm skin. All my eyes could focus on were her sweet innocent freckles and big blue eyes that were so voluptuous I believed I could dive in and swim in them. I was a shorty back then, about half a head shorter than Braelin but I would've tippy toed my way to her mouth. I knew I was a lesbian the day I could walk, only, Braelin didn't. No one did because I didn't want to have to deal with all that you know? Being gay wasn't punished or all that shit but I think America only did that so they didn't seem like China or Russia or Australia even. It wasn't legal but it wasn't not legal and you couldn't get married or share money or do that stuff and your family would probably disown you and Braelin's family was tighter than a sealed submarine on that kind of stuff so why even let myself dream? Every time I saw her I found myself thinking about how pretty she was or how sweet and funny she was. But I cut myself off when I meet her parents in about fifth grade and they made a remark about the "homosexuals" threatening their lifestyle or some shit and I never even told Braelin because she's devote, she loves God and her family and all that so I thought she'd just say I'm crazy. So I convinced myself to let her go, there were plenty of girls who weren't scared of being gay so why couldn't I just let her go? Most of the time it was fine. I remembered how we were basically siblings and her and her huge family made up for my only child one. I remembered how she fawned over cute boys or went to the school dance with the most popular

boy in our class. But moments like this made me forget all my rules and barriers and I just got all jelly legged.

After way too many seconds of me staring and her smiling, she nudged me. “Charlee? Are you gonna say something?”

I blinked over and over. “Yeah, course. Of course I’ll marry you idiot.”

Then I know she was playing but damn it hurt. She grabbed my waist and put my hands on her shoulders. “I love you Char. Happy birthday.”

We started doing an awkward dance to the sound of her air conditioner, a dance full of toe stepping and tripping. We laughed and smiled and I was still my grumpy pessimistic self and I told her about all my parents and my grades and she reassured me and patted my head. Braelin waa always the loving sort. She was nice to everyone and told all her friends she “loved them” and told me how much I meant to her a lot but she didn’t know how much that freaking hurt. Knowing she wasn’t serious, that that was her way to talking to everyone, it still gave me false hope.

So now I sit on the floor of my tiny white room wishing for a pink one full of laughter cursing myself for losing the one thing I have left from home.

Charlee 20

It’s about six in the goddamn morning when one of the weird interns I think it was, came in and patched me. Finally one of these Revelation nerds care about me not dying. She was a jittery little thing with big eyes and a bob cut. She asked me how I was liking the program and how I got hurt. I think the gauze on my forearm, band aids on my hands, and bruises on my face from Ms. Airika drew enough attention but what do I know?

“Nasty fall. The stairs are okay though.”

She gasped with her mouth so wide I thought she might be mocking me but she was genuine. “Oh awful. You poor thing, this place is rather large isn’t it? I have to keep my map handy all the time.”

I snorted. “Map?”

“Of course. They gave you one too silly goose. I can send another to your room. It’s nice, paper and the heavy kind.”

“Yeah, do that little thing,” I said fully knowing it would never make it to my room.

“Now, this might hurt a bit but I need to take a blood sample. I’m doing leukemia as my project. I find your blood very interesting because it’s not everyday I get to study blood. You’re hemophilic aren’t you?”

My face must have gotten real wide at hearing that because the intern stopped getting out her needle.

“Uh, yeah, correct. It’s just that’s kinda big isn’t it?”

“Are you afraid? There’s no need, it’ll take a second.”

It was more the fact that I would probably be deficient of blood if I suffered anymore withdrawals. And who knew how blood worked? Maybe she would only get the liter Demetri was able to give me.

I stiffened as she stuck me. She told me to relax but it was way too soon and I gripped her hand to keep from blacking out. The truth is, she was kinda cute and if I wasn't in such a mess I might've flirted or stole a kiss or two. My fear of needles and water was quite pathetic and embarrassing for her to see me squeal. I know I'm just a kid but I've had a decent share of girls. Even though Braelin had that special place in my pubescent heart I still had girlfriends what can I say. Honestly I think I'm way too horny of motherfucker because whenever I see a cute girl it just sends alarm bells up there like "Alert, alert. Stop drooling dumbass and say something cute."

Instead I said, "I think I'm gonna faint."

The intern quickly grabbed me by the shoulders as my head fell slack. She pushed me against the wall and my eyes flickered a few times.

"You poor thing. Oh, and your fingers I completely forgot."

I was feeling fine actually, I was just a bit shocked and I looked down to see the intern holding one of my bandaged hands. It was surprising how little it hurt honestly.

"Yeah, you should see the other guy."

She giggled a forced giggle and started unwrapping and rewrapping my hands. "I heard it was gangerous ZX *ah idk the thing where your finger can rot*. Have you had a replacement scheduled yet? It might be too soon."

A replacement? Airika wanted me to suffer. "No. Can you do it?"

She laughed for real at this. "No silly. Only Ms. Savitz can. She's the only specialist for amputees here. I'm sure she'll schedule you once she has time. She's a very busy woman. It's inspiring really. She researches and invents new procedures while being on the board all at the same time. She's the one I wrote about my application letter because I could relate so much. We're both from the East but we made our way to Happy Waters even with our conservative families isn't that neat?"

She was starting to piss me off so I just leaned against the wall and pretended to be dazed. I didn't give a shit about her application or how much she wanted to be here.

"And I'm doing leukimia because my little brother had it and I want to be a drug researcher someday. I think this institution will be perfect for that and maybe I could even come back and work here. It's wonderful all this is free isn't it? I feel so lucky for having gotten here. Oh, I'm sorry this must make you feel awful. I know all about you."

Yeah you and the rest of the psychos here.

"You must feel so lucky to end up in a place like this."

If I would've been drinking I would've spit my drink. "Yeah?"

"Obviously! All costs are taken care of by America, you get lifetime healthcare when you get home, and your samples are making a difference for the medical world. That's an honor. Was the application pool very competitive? I bet it was."

"I didn't actually apply."

Her eyes went wide. “Really? Your stats must have stood out a lot for Mr. Savitz to notice you. I even applied to be a subject when I was your age, silly dream isn’t it?”

“Very silly. So, tell me, what’s the agenda for today?”

“Oh, you don’t know? You silly goose must have lost your map and your itinerary. Today is a free day for you and the interns. I just came in because I’m a little overeager. Anyway, I know the struggles you had in New York. How did you get gangrene?”

She spooked me a little and I had to repeat her question in my head. “Gangrene? Yeah gangrene, funny story, crazy crazy fishing accident, yeah. Long story short they turned all sorts of weird colors. Didn’t qualify for the right medical care though, tragic story.”

She put a hand to her chest and gasped. “I am so sorry. My name is Yoko by the way feel free to talk to me whenever you want. I’ll see you at the next experiment.”

Whenever I want? That’s funny.

“Yoko. K. See ya.”

She smiled and nodded and started to pack up her doctor stuff. But right as she left I noticed her little bag of my blood and realized something.

“Hey Yoko,” I said as she was closing the door.

“Yes?”

“Did you happen to get my blood type by chance?”

“I did.”

I waited a second. She just smiled like an idiot. Do all sciencey people need to be so specific? “What is it?”

“A neg.”

And then she was gone.

I layed on my bed and simply cursed until my throat was dry.

Charlee 21

I’m no genius Savant or whatever they’re calling me but I know what happens when you mix the wrong blood types. You die.

Once Yoko left I tried the door but it was locked. I didn’t have an idiot like Mikeah to leave it open but I needed to find Demetri. Or maybe not Demetri. He was an engineer for Christ’s sake I don’t know why I ever thought I’d be fine. Maybe I’ll even go for Jae. He’s a freaky child genius, a real genius who would help me out of this cause he’s obsessed with me and everything. I would yell for Airika, I know she’s got me under surveillance, but she might just let me die and tell Jae to find a new toy.

Instead I just sit on my bed all day waiting for my cells to start attacking themselves. I’m not a good student or anything but I did listen in biology class that one time we learned about blood. Every kid has to admit blood is fascinating. Most of us have never seen it in real life. There were pictures and movies sure, but the Mega Vaccine as my mom called it, always made sure no one would ever bleed out again. No more nose bleeds, hemorrhages, or bleeding out. It was created for the military so the soldiers wouldn’t die as much but then the public liked the

idea of it so they added that to their Mega Vaccine. That's what my biology teacher told me at least. They even make stuff so that girls don't have periods until they want to get pregnant. I haven't had mine yet though and Mom jokes that I never will. I still kinda look like a kid, a fifth grade boy if you will, with my boxy hips and flat chest.

Anyway, the thing is, that one day in biology class the teacher told us about blood types and what happens if you mix.

"See class this is an image of a body undergoing reaction to a poor blood transfusion."

The teacher pointed to a man shriveling in pain with fever. A pile of vomit was beside him and his eyes were unfocused.

"Back in the Digital Ages, the time when the internet and cell phones were popular, people died all the time for a lot of reasons. People's cell phones would blow up in their face or they would eat laundry detergent--"

"Ms. Pline what's laundry detergent?" A kid asked.

"They used to use it to clean their clothes. It's like a chemical you put in a tub of water that swishes your clothes around. They had these things called washing machines but they were quite primitive and mixed all the clothes around with water and chemicals. People had things called wash day when they spent all day cleaning clothes."

The class laughed. Why would you have a washing machine when you could use UV ZX*idk something lol* Rays that took seconds?

"We're off topic. So people used to die of blood transfusions because by 2155 they started letting homosexuals and diseased people donate blood. They were in such a crisis with War World VI and the Splitting of the Nations they didn't have time to properly sort the types and people just died left and right."

Now I imagined myself cold but sweaty with vomit pouring out my mouth. My urine would turn into blood and I would die a pathetic death of illness. How lame. People never got sick anymore and I would be like an ancient dying of sickness all because of some psychos and their science stuff.

I layed on my bed all day thinking about that biology lesson. She talked about hemophilia and how it wasn't a problem anymore because the vaccine took care of all clotting issues. But then she said anything was possible and I knew I was the unlucky bastard whose hemophilia went through unfixed. I didn't get sick though. All the other miracle promises the vaccine made us like never getting things called "colds" and never getting cancer or allergies or infections, they meant nothing to me now because Happy Waters Inc. designed the vaccine. In New York City there were billboards galore lit with the benefits of the vaccine. Neon signs with "GET VACCINATED TODAY" were on every street corner and I didn't deny it. America was lucky to have a powerful vaccine. Countries like China wouldn't allow Americans to tell them about the vaccine after the Split when almost all the countries cut off access to one another. America didn't get much information out of current Chinese politics but we sure acted like we knew everything. It was all conclusions and speculations though, stories fit only for tabloids.

How did every ailment go treated but my hemophilia unaffected?

I must have gone through the whole day like this, doom thinking and making up symptoms. I felt hot, I felt cold, I was nauseous. But really I think I was fine and just scaring myself. I choked down Happy Water's delicious meal of grilled salmon, rice, and a brownie. Yoko wasn't shitting me the food really is good but whoever the cooks are I wanna nail them in the forehead for working here.

The thing is I'm fine with dying a million other ways, a street fight, a freak subway crash, being murdered even. I'll take bleeding out. But illness? It's something we only ever learn about and fear from other less privileged countries. It's strange and lasts way too long for me to handle. I don't want to ever not be in control of my body. I've gotten out of some tight problems but I doubt even Happy Waters could cure a disease. Ever since old Mega Vaccine came into the picture everyone stopped funding disease research because why not? We don't need medicine anymore unless it's to relax you or make you sleep. Mega was the answer to all questions.

I bet it's about eleven by the time an asshole comes to my door. I don't have a clock in here or window but I've managed to come up with a system of timing by counting how many episodes of Ugly Stupid Blue Dog comes on the TV. By the time I've heard him sing the theme song five times Jae will fetch me and when it shuts off it's bedtime which is apparently ten o'clock in their minds. Like anyone goes to bed at ten. So what feels about an hour later this dude swings open my door. At first I wasn't really startled because Happy Waters also shuts the lights off at ten and it's dark as shit. I only see his silhouette in the doorway and assume it's Jae or Demi up to shenanigans but then he walks over to me real fast and grabs my arm where I was just pricked this morning.

"Hey buddy what gives?" The instant he touches me I know it's a stranger. He smells like lab coat, I swear those things have a special smell, although he wears plaid pajama pants and a t-shirt. Point number one: Jae would never wear a t-shirt. He's too stuck up for that. I bet he sleeps in a three piece suit.

He drags me to the door and I don't fight him. I never know when Airika's watching.

"Could you tell me what the heck is going on?" By the time we're in the brightly lit hall, I see his intern name tag hanging from his neck. I keep pestering him with questions while we walk through the enormous building. At some point though he gets annoyed.

"Keep it down." He stops walking and lets go of my arm. We're outside the door of the Revelation lab.

I mess with my bedhead. It's crazy because I layed in bed all day, not because I was sleeping. "You're not supposed to work with me unsupervised." I recite what Airika told me the first day. "You need a permission form signed by Jae and you're not allowed to take me anywhere overnight."

I start to turn around and head back but he grabs my bandaged hand. I bite my tongue and turn back to him.

"Piss you psycho—"

He gets a better grip holding my wrist and drags me into the lab.

"Subjects aren't supposed to talk."

We're standing by the dental looking chair and he is furiously setting up the chair. He turns it on and unclips the straps.

"Remove your shirt."

I cross my arms. I've had enough of bossy bitches telling me what to do for a lifetime. And today was off day, kinda nice. No redheads trying to tear me apart creepy teenage boys saying they know everything about me. Now I just have a creepy twenty year old boy so go figure.

"Perv."

"This is for science I have no desire to see you in such a state—"

"Obviously you do."

He stops preparing the machine and grabs at the hem of my t-shirt. I elbow him in the neck and step on his foot. We freeze there in a awkward tango, me with my four-fingered hand ready to punch and him with fire in his eyes.

"What's your name sicko?" I ask.

"Devon."

"And when did your mom beg to be put down? She must have had a hell of a time popping you out."

Devon ripped the rest of my shirt off and shoved me into the dentist chair. I sat in front of him in a black sports bra and Happy Waters logo sweatpants. I started kicking and squirming but his skinny science loving ass somehow got my ankles, wrists, and head strapped in. I easily could have snapped his pathetic neck but everytime I hit Happy Waters scum I saw Braelin's sad ocean eyes looking at me. She was furious when she found out I snuck out to race almost every night. I had to hug her while she cried about how I'd get arrested for traitorous activity. I told her about every fight I'd been in and every race I'd won and lost. She asked me to take her once but I said no, never. What I can't imagine is Braelin lying dead in her house after Happy Waters' sniper hit her right in the heart.

Devon also tapes several circular things on my stomach and chest. I almost believe he isn't a perv because he looks away he does it but I wave it off as feigned manners. Once I'm all hooked up, he goes over to the computer thing and smiles an evil smile.

"Finally. I can work without that sniffing child leaning over my shoulder." Devon says all kinds of slander like how a teenager could be ranked higher than him or how he's found a way to get raw data. I just sit tight and think about nachos from Tom's Dinner and More because no matter how good the food is here, I'll take trashy nachos anyday.

ZX ok add description of how the machine makes her feel because I forgot lol

Just as I think Devon will stop, he turns the thing up even higher.

"Cool it hot shot! I'm being fried!" I feel my head pounding and my whole body twitches. Devon just smiles and takes notes. It seems to last forever but eventually Devon turns it off and leans over me with a crooked smile.

"You are one very special subject. I've never tested anyone alive before."

I wait a few seconds to gather up a wad of saliva and spit in his face. I'm proud to say my aim and timing was perfect and it landed in his stupid little mouth. Devon's face twisted and he punched me in the nose. I felt a crack and smiled.

"Devon, my guy, you don't even know which side to fight on. If this was pro-wrestling, I'd say you're losing your money."

Devon wiped his mouth. "Subjects don't talk."

He was a piece of shit but he was still kind of an outsider. "This one does. Guess what Devon, I didn't come here by my will. I was kidnapped and got my head in a bag--"

"So did we. The location of Happy Waters is top secret."

I paused. "You don't know where we are?"

"I know we're on an island. Everyone knows Happy Waters is on an island."

An island. Jesus fuck. I shook my head as much as I could in the machine. "Look, Devon, you seem like an asshole guy. A real creep but there's a few things you should know. I didn't apply for this, my parents don't know where I am, and Airika is using you. She's threatened my family and my friends and I bet all your data is shit--"

He hits me again. His little feelings must be really sensitive. "My work is from God. Happy Waters is the only way I can find out how humans function. We think we understand ourselves so well, that we're the smartest species. But we don't know anything past anatomy. You tell anyone what happened tonight and Airika won't be the only one you fear. I won't let anything get in my way. I will graduate from Columbia with a Phd in my second year."

I lean my whole body forward and rattle the machine. Devon flinches back. "New York boy are you? Me too. Now let me tell you, Airika doesn't care about your little projects and dreams. I've seen her office and she's told me her plans. I'm not even supposed to be talking to you because you're right, no talking to interns and you know why? Because she's a lying bitch. And she won't value your work and you'll end up like a sad slave like Jae."

I got his attention when I threatened his work. He took several more steps back and shook his head slowly.

"Yeah, believe it. How many interns have you seen go on to do other things? None. Most stay here and work here till they die. If they do go home, they aren't famous like you're wanting and they sure as hell don't use their research on Savants. How many people do you know in America who know a shit's worth of Savants? We're just another sad incurable disorder."

Devon grits his teeth. "What do you want me to do about it?"

"Tell the others. I don't give a shit what you do, you all are ignorant bastards who made questionable decisions. But let them decide for themselves. Ask Jae real questions. Like, what progress has he made with all this research? What will you actually do with your internship?"

He doesn't respond but I can see the gears turning. All he cares about is his success. So be it; I'll use his arrogance to my advantage. Before I know it I'm shaking like crazy, like really bad I can practically feel my broken nose coming loose. I fear it's the blood transfusion finally working.

I panic. Completely. "Devon, get me out of here. Now!"

He is startled but starts unhooking everything. He starts with the suction type stickies on my torso and pulls off the freaking pasties like ones. But before he can unstrap me Jae comes in.

It's just the person I don't want to see right now. I thought I made some progress with Devon but here comes Happy Waters' biggest moron mind washed since he was born kid. The look on Jae's face is just incredible though I gotta say. He opens and closes his mouth like five times and Devon just stares back.

"What is going on here?" Jae asks.

Devon curses and walks toward him.

"Go back to bed Jae." Devon puts a hand on Jae's shoulder, the wrong move. Jae looks at me and Devon back and forth. He decides to run to me.

"Charlee," he says with a quivering voice as if he actually cares about me. "What did he do?"

Before I can say anything though Jae's face darkens. He sees my shirt on the ground and touches my broken nose. He notices me shake and cough up a clot of blood. I want to tell him to stop staring and just unstrap me already but he turns and walks back to Devon and punches him in the stomach.

Doesn't he know I'm gonna bleed to death in a minute if he doesn't stop acting like an idiot soon?

"I'm reporting you to Airika," Jae says. "You'll be gone by morning."

Devon shakes his head and punches Jae in the chin. Jae's head whips back and his glasses fall to the ground in a pile of broken glass.

"You touch her again and I'll kill you," Jae says. He tries to knock Devon's legs from under him but it just hits his shins. Devon grabs Jae by the shoulders and pushes him into the wall. Kinky. And Jae slams his head into Devon's.

Just to clarify it's all a very shitty fight. Pathetic to watch really. I could have easily decked the both of them if I still had my fingers. They're both skinny as rails and weak in their punches from sitting in labs all day. I won't make you listen to all the details but just imagine a fight between two toddlers. They're siblings and they don't really know what they're fighting about and their flimsy little toddlers arms are just swinging everywhere and no one really gets hurt.

But they do make a lot of noise with their sad grunts and Jae defending my honor apparently.

"She's fifteen you creep!" Jae yells as Devon hits him with baby slaps. I wish it never ended because it was the most eventful thing about my day but then Airika came in.

"Out right now. The both of you." She grabbed Jae by the hair and Devon by the collar and separated them in the most cartoonish of ways I actually laughed. Airika looked right at me and sneered.

"Hey, it wasn't my fault this time lady," I said.

"Jae, bring Charlee back to her room." She let go of Jae and looked at Devon. "And you will come with me to my office."

Airika and Devon walked away, Devon in his band t-shirt and Airika in stilettos and a pantsuit. Jae came over to me wearing a polo and khakis. There, I knew it. The Savitzs never wore pjs.

“What is with you people? Don’t you ever go to sleep?” He undid my arms and legs but I pushed him away by his head so I could undo my neck strap.

Jae answered by taking off his shirt and handing it to me. I took it and threw it on the ground.

“The hell was that for?” I wish I could unsee his ribs and taunt skin. I kneeled down and pulled my Happy Water approved tee on and watched as Jae quickly put his shirt back on.

“Did he hurt you?” Jae said.

“He sure hurt you,” I said, gesturing to his reddened skin. “But then again I think a strong wind could take you out. Just get me back and get me a laser or something. I’m gonna bleed to death if we stand here all night.”

This seemed to wake him up. “Right, yes. I have an injection to help the bleeding.”

“Not another one,” I moaned. Jae just raised his eyebrows. He tried to guide me by the small of my back but I hit his hand away and followed him back to my room, my hands cupping my nose the whole way there.

When we’re back to my room after an excruciatingly long walk, Jae tries to help sit on the bed. I pushed him away.

“Does anyone know ‘keep your hands to yourself’ around here?” I sit by myself and turn away from Jae and close my eyes for good measure. We stopped by a medical room on the way back and I can’t see him but I know he’s standing there like a fool twiddling with his tools.

“Ok so this is ZX *fancy name* and it clots your blood. I’m going to give you too strong of a dose because your nose mostly has ripped skin which is close to the cartilage and less filled with blood.”

“Did I ask? Just stick me already and get out.”

“Should I count to three?”

“No surprise me.”

Jae slowly stuck the needle into my arm with hesitant hands. I bit my tongue and forced myself to not look at the little drop of blood on my arm. Jae quickly put a bandaid over it and gave it a pat.

“All done. Shall I go?”

“Shall?” I wrinkled my broken nose. Sometimes he just irked me in the perfect way that was nauseating.

“Right your nose.” Jae gave me a bandaid for that too but he said there wasn’t much he could do about it. I popped it back in place.

“Goodnight Charlee. If any of the interns do anything out of line again I promise—”

“You’ll come rescue me? How’d you even know I was gone?” I knew Airika had eyes everywhere but did Jae too? I doubted Airika found him smart enough for that.

Jae scratched his head. “I was coming to check on you.”

“Check on me? In the middle of the night?” I stood and he stepped back a bit.

“I was just worried is all—”

“How did you ever have friends?”

“I—”

“If you want me to like you you’re doing a terrible job of it you know. You’re literally just as creepy as Devon.”

It was as if I’d stuck him. “No I’m not. Charlee, I care about you—”

“Then let me go,” I said while backing him into the corner. My room was still dark and all I could see of him were the reflections of his glasses. I wanted to pumple this kid’s ass so bad. Airika wouldn’t notice would she? Maybe a punch or two would go unnoticed after his fight with Devon’s.

“I can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“Because we have thirteen weeks of the program.”

I lost it. I grab his skinny little neck and my hand almost fits around it. “Why are you people so obsessed with me huh? Cause I’m a Savant or whatever you call me? Well I’m not. You got the wrong kid. I do shit in school and I’ll end up living the rest of my life in my crummy Ration neighborhood.”

As I say the words only then do I realize it’s true. If I fail high school I won’t get to go to college and if I don’t go to college I won’t get to get a job good enough to get me out of the Lower West side. I’ll end up like my mom and maybe I’ll get a rich partner to drag down with me just like my parents. It’s plausible enough.

I have to let go of Jae because he sputters and gasps too much.

“Caroline ZX *her full name* —”

“Don’t call me that. Only my grandma calls me that.”

“Sorry. Charlee. I’m sorry if I come off as crude or cold. I’ve never lived anywhere but Happy Waters and mainly on the top.”

“And we’re on the top? There’s a bottom then?”

Jae goes pale like he’s slipped up. “Yes the top is the school and the bottom is for employee research.”

“And we’re on an island?”

“Did Devon tell you that?”

“Maybe. Keep talking.”

“I’ve never lived anywhere else—”

“You said that already.”

“I’ve never interacted with many kids my age—”

“Except the ones you kidnap.”

“Yes we pick subjects and the circumstances for choosing is harsh I admit but necessary and they always go home after the program.”

I want to snort and tell Jae they don't go home; they go to rot in the underneath but I remember Airika's jeweled rings smashing into my face.

"Why kidnapping?"

"Because it's the highest honor at Happy Waters. Project Revelation only allows *number* of interns and the subject is highly rare. We pretend to take subject applications but really I have to observe potential subjects for years before they can even be reviewed by Airika—"

"Fine. Next and I'll let you leave. Will I die if I did a blood transfusion?"

Jae laughs. "Blood transfusion? What did you need that for?"

"I performed one yesterday."

"Yesterday?"

"The gangrene. I lost lots of blood so I sneaked in and got some equipment. I didn't trust you psychos to ask for help."

"If you used the blood here you're fine. It's all been enhanced to be universal no matter the type. I would report you for unauthorized use of supplies but if we're going to be friends we need to trust one another. Deal?"

Jae stuck his hand out to me. I gave him a puzzled look in the dark.

"A deal?"

"I'll let you do whatever you want here, within reason, and explore the building. I'll have to put a tracker on you but I'll get approved by Airika and you'll have complete free roam all the time. And tomorrow we start lessons—"

"Lessons?"

"You've missed quite a bit in school your freshman year due to detentions. But it's all signs of genius. I'll be tutoring you and make you so smart you'll be able to graduate high school the second you leave. Maybe I'll even get you past your first two years of college. I don't know I've never taught anyone before but I'm sure we'll figure it out."

"That's the other thing, someone needs to give me a goddamn map and schedule. And a clock would be nice. And a lightswitch."

"Done. I'll have you moved to a more comfortable room. And I'll make lessons much more fun than Revelation experiments. I know those can feel exclusive. In turn for all of this, you'll teach me how to be a friend and what the outside is like. Deal?"

He's one funny kid. "What's your damage kid? Why do you act so nice when you're a psycho?"

I've put my hands on his neck again and squeezed a little. I feel him shrug.

"I need friends. Mine are either dead or old enough to be my father."

"So you give me better stuff, school lectures, and freedom?"

He nods. "Within reason."

"You all don't seem to have a lot of reason. But fine. I still wanna slug you but fine."

We shake and I pushed him out the door before he can beg for a goodnight kiss or something sleazy like that.

Charlee 22

I sat in one of those desks with the table connected to it and a wire basket on the bottom like it was fourth grade or something. Jae stood at the front of the room by one of those fancy boards you can write on with your fingers. He could move pictures, bring up charts, and there was even closed captioning to follow his every word. It was a board for school with a boatload of money, the schools that were definitely not like mine. Mom might've forged my entry papers to get me into a high school where not every girl is pregnant or has fights everyday but it was still public and in the city.

"Is this really necessary?" I scowled at the stack of lined paper and pens Jae put on my desk. He'd even given me a backpack and binder. Whoop, whoop I was a scholar.

Jae looked at me from behind his stupid little glasses. They were frameless and had silver bands so he looked like a stuck up old man which wasn't far from the truth really. He tapped on the board to signal that he'd started his lesson.

"A good student must trust their teacher."

I folded one of the papers into an airplane. It was about a twenty dollar airplane. "No one uses paper anymore for stuff like this. That's like wiping your ass with gold leaf. I'm not gonna use these things after your class is over."

"For efficient grading and learning I require paper. I cannot look at screens or holograms for too long due to my failing eyesight."

"You're going blind?" I got up and snatched his glasses off. "How many fingers am I holding up?" I had just my thumb up. I would've picked my middle finger but you know.

Jae took his glasses back without a hint of a smile. "Yes I am going blind."

"Oh jeez sorry man. I thought you were joking. I've only ever used my tablet for school though."

"You can write can't you?"

"Yeah sure. My name." They taught us writing in about third grade and I haven't written since.

Jae smacked his face with his hand. "It looks like chicken scratch."

"I know the alphabet and the numbers. I'm just outta practice."

Jae pulls up a picture of a right triangle. He goes into this lecture about basic geometry and right away I'm lost. I start drawing spirals and tic tac toe against myself on my looseleaf. I try a few problems, really I do, but none of it's even vaguely familiar. I learned geometry this past year supposedly but I wiggled by with a D and that was only because Braelin gave me answers.

Jae talked and talked for a long ass time. He seemed to be enjoying himself the whole while what with his hand motions and inverse angles. He seemed happier when he lectured, almost free. He didn't stop for questions though and seemed to be talking to himself more than me. I tried to arrange my "notes" in the binder but my notes turned into a pile of chicken scratch and even I couldn't read them well enough to make sense of it.

“And that’s all of freshman level geometry. I went fast because I’m sure you already know everything, think of this as more of a review. I will give you a quiz tomorrow over unit two and four—”

As Jae rambled about the joys of math, he came over to me. The second he looked down at my paper his jaw dropped but not in a good way.

“What is this?” Jae picked up my paper and was met with doodles of doberman pinschers.

“Yeah, he’s a little scrawny but I’ve always wanted one.”

Jae was practically steaming. He flipped through my binder. “Three hours of math and this is all you have?”

He held up my page that attempted to copy every word he said. My letters were crooked and smeared because I didn’t know how to hold my pen right.

“I couldn’t even begin to try and read this. It’s complete garbage. Can you read it?”

“No.” I smiled.

Jae took off his glasses and sighed. “I will bring you a set of notes. Maybe you learn better with them printed.”

“Nope. I don’t actually because I’m a shitty note taker and even shitter studier. You’re really wasting your time here.” It was true. I wasn’t even trying to be bad. I wouldn’t have listened to a thing this kid said being as he kidnapped me, but even if I wanted to, I didn’t catch a thing.

“Let’s try this, simple, what’s the difference between congruent and complementary angles? *ZX idk math stuff*”

“The complementary ones get more girls.”

“When do we use the law of cosines?”

“To make a co-payment?”

“When do you use the inverse of sine?”

“Dunno.”

My crumbly notes still in hand, Jae started pacing the aisles of the classroom. “I can’t believe this. You’re not a genius, you don’t even know basic math. What’s seven times six?”

“Bigger than thirty I think.” I really was trying my best. But also, if I was playing dumb Jae would be annoyed all the same.

“Think Jae, geniuses aren’t all genius in the same way. How do I get this girl to answer me correctly?”

I waved at him. “Girl is right here. Have you figured it out yet? You picked the wrong kid. I’m an idiot. Does this mean I can go home now?”

Jae stopped and stared at me with laser eyes. Or maybe not because he still clutched his glasses in one hand. “I know you’re smart. I’ve been watching you for a year. Everything points to you being a Savant.”

“Like?”

“Poor grades but excellent common sense, as in you sneak away at night to gamble on races and compete. You’re good with money because your mom doesn’t know your dad lost his job so you’re compensating with illegal cash—”

“Stop that. It’s creepy when you remind me how much you know about me. Just keep complimenting my roguishly good looks or dexterity.”

Jae clapped like a freaking toddler. “Yes! That too. You’re agile and calculating whether you know it or not. Your reflexes and estimation skills are top notch, I’ve seen you navigate the streets and think through a fight.”

“None of these things are math genius signs wise guy. You’ve got the wrong kid.” I bang my head on the table over and over to drown out his stupidity.

Jae sits at a desk next to me. He’s thinking it all through now. I bet Airika framed the way Jae saw me on their creepy little cameras and microphones. She probably showed me at my heroic moments but hid my complete incapability to do school.

“Poor grades, short attention span, tendency to hyperfixate on hobbies—”

“You’re describing every other kid in America.”

“But you’re, you’re different! Charlee I know it. You’re special. I’ve been watching you, studying you.”

I cocked my head to the side. How this man did not understand his creepy level was at expert I did not know.

J: “I’m done with the lesson. It’s your turn”

C: “My turn?”

J: “Tell me how to have friends because you assume I am a lonely smuck.”

C: “I know you had this Eli Strawberry Fields guy but spoiler alert, he wasn’t your friend first of all.”

J: Offended “How do you know?”

C: “Because my dear, no kidnapped person wants to make friends with you. Anyway, I have a real friend. I have lots of okayish friends at school and stuff but I just got a few good ones and that’s all you need okay? First lesson on friends, you don’t need a bunch.”

As I was saying it, I realized it was true. I’d spent so much time trying to be in with as many friend groups as possible, trying to get the scoop on as many people as possible. It worked mainly because I knew all the pretty words to say and all the right things to do. Want some friends your freshman year? Do something big and stupid, not stupid enough to be seen as dangerous but stupid enough to be funny and a legend. Keep your Ration status a secret and borrow Braelin’s clothes and that’s pretty much it. That’s at least how I justify my *insert cool thing here* the first day of school.

But then you have to keep at it. People talk about you in the hallways and on *their social media* and you can wiggle your way into groups. You have to keep acting cool and normal and laugh at everything they say and do everything they do.

I don’t tell him any of this though.

J: “Yeah?”

C: “Yeah. Friends are like people you’re around all the time but it’s better than family because family is a stupid construct and you don’t even get to choose. Like wouldn’t it be better if we just chose everyone we hung around? That weird uncle Joe wasn’t someone you chose was it? Nah, he’s just some random guy who says “You’ve gotten so big since I last saw you” and you’re supposed to love him even though you see him like once a year and don’t know a shit about him.”

J: “What’s an uncle Joe?”

C: She spits her drink. “Jesus Christ man. Do you know what an uncle is?”

J: annoyed “Yes I know what an uncle is. It’s just that Airika is my only family.”

C: blows raspberry “That’s rough buddy, growing up with a psycho bitch.”

J: “Don’t say that about my mother.”

C: “Whoa cool your tits my man; I saw you trying to fight earlier, wouldn’t want you to hurt yourself.”

J: “That was very rude Charlee.”

C: “She is crazy just like you. So anyway, if you want real friends though you need to feel the spark. Like it doesn’t have to be no romantic thing or nothing but it’s like a special feeling. Like friend love. And your best friend is better than any other friend because they know everything about you and have your back when you do dumb shit.”

J: “I do know what friends are Charlee.”

C: “Yeah?”

J: “Yeah I watch TV. Sometimes.”

C: goofy asshole smile “Really? I thought all you had was that detective dog shit.”

J: “I like true crime.”

C: “Oh that’s where you learned all the torture techniques.”

J: “Hey that’s not—”

I leaned on the desk. “That’s plenty about me; tell me about you.”

Jae wrinkled up his face. “I told you stuff.”

“Why do you wear glasses? I haven’t seen a pair since I visited the history museum.” It was true. In my whole life Jae was the first person I’d seen besides maybe some nursing home residents to wear glasses. He really was a grandpa inside and out.

“I have an eye condition. Lots of conditions actually.” Jae took off his wiry silver frames and handed them to me. I turned them around in my hands, swung the earpieces back and forth on the hinge.

“Ah, don’t smudge the glass.”

“What does the glass do?”

“It helps me see,” he said like he was talking to a five year old.

“How does glass help you see?”

“It’s a prescription, kind of like medicine inside the glass that helps me see.”

“Really? I thought the old folk wore these as a fashion statement.”

He rubbed his face and smiled. “No. And to my point, I can’t even see you right now. These guys,” he pointed to his eyes which were brown. They were very plain eyes, not to say all brown eyes are plain, but his were solid in color without rivets or freckles. “Are quite shot to be modest about it.”

I ran a few feet away from him and held his glasses above my head. “Can you see this? How many fingers?” I love it when I have wonderful ideas.

He put his hands on his hips. “Are you serious?”

“Just guess if you have to.”

“You are a tan and grey blob. I didn’t even know you had any fingers up.”

“That’s the best part. I don’t.” I shook his glasses. “See this?”

“What?”

Jesus he really was blind. His loss. I started running around the room in circles and probably would have ran away with them if the door wasn’t locked. I seriously considered smashing them under my flip flopped foot but that seemed a bit rude. Not as rude as kidnapping someone and making them do homework but still, got to respect my elders.

“Charlee, you’re being childish,” he gasped for air as he tried to catch me in vain. I was a fair basketballer at school before I had to quit. The traveling to games and tuition was getting expensive but I still shot some hoops in the park from time to time.

I kept running, dodging tables and taking quick turns to throw Jae off. It wasn’t fair I suppose, a nearly blind boy and rows of desks. I found myself laughing despite my best efforts when Jae tripped over my backpack he brought me. I slowed down because he was struggling to stand and it seemed like I actually winded the kid.

Laughing and snorting I admit, I pulled him up. “Don’t hurt yourself. I don’t want to bully a blind kid.”

He swiped his glasses out of my hands. “God’s Sake, your fingerprints are all over these things. I don’t know if its clearer with or without them.”

“So you really can’t see much then?” I knew tons of people who needed eye fixes. It was usually prescribed eye drops or if it was really bad, a quick surgery that did the trick. Some older folks preferred contacts, a concept that makes me cringe. Blind people could always get a detailed surgery series or sometimes strong drops could cure it. But I’d never seen someone like Jae.

“If I lived in a country and had citizenship, yes I’d technically be legally blind.”

“You don’t have citizenship? How is that possible?” Not saying undocumented kids didn’t exist but he must have been born somewhere and being born somewhere made you a citizen even without a birth certificate.

“I was born at Happy Waters. I’m the only person to be born at Happy Waters and Happy Waters is owned by James Happy, not by any country.”

C: “So you’re owned by a trillionaire?”

J: “If you put it like that. I doubt he even knows I exist though.”

C: “But he owns Happy Water Inc.”

J: “Not every rich person checks up on their investments. My mom is the real boss here. She’s the CEO. James is just the founder and a puppet ruler. We’re lucky if he visits us once a year.”

C: *explains that everyone in America thinks James Happy is still a working mastermind of Happy Waters* “Anyway, how come you're blind? Can’t you just get it fixed?”

J: “It’s not that simple. My eyes are highly delicate and so are my organs. I have to get them operated on and occasionally replaced and my muscles are frail. I can’t do too much physical activity on my own without getting fatigued. I use exercise machines to keep from growing into skin and bone because I haven’t stepped outside since I was ten due to sun sensitivity. I wear glasses because Airika is worried my eyes won’t survive a surgery and I use paper only because screens hurt my eyes if I look at them for too long. I take fifteen different pills twice a day everyday and I get shots every week. I’m in constant pain if I exert myself which is why I sit all day. Is that enough information for you?”

C: he was getting heated. “Airika does all of this for you? Does she double as your doctor?”

J: “What about it? She has the education to be a physician, biologist, chemical biologist, etc ZX insert.” Very offended

C: “Right. But you never see a doctor that isn’t your mom?”

J: getting defensive. “I have a very rare condition not many would care to help with.”

C: “How would you know you’ve never met anyone outside of this place.”

J: “Charlee I’m set to die at age 37 ok? My disease is an anomaly; if I went anywhere else in the world I would be forced to stay in a hospital stuck with tubes everywhere. Airika lets me work and at least make something of myself with what time I have. She makes sure I am healthy enough to work but doesn’t tie me down in a hospital bed. Class is over. Please do your assignments I put in your backpack and come here tomorrow before we do Revelation work.”

He turned from me, wiping his glasses on the hem of his shirt as he went. He slammed the door. But he came back in and grabbed my bicep.

“I forgot I took your clearance card. I will escort you to your room but know I am angry and annoyed you made me talk about that.”

ok sorry I was supposed to add Jae kissing her but this turned into trauma time so at some point he needs to kiss her and she needs to be disgusted

....

I sat in my room laying on my thin papery sheets, it’s like that weird cloth but cotton plastic thing they put doctor tables or pet exam tables, you’d think for being an evil billion dollar corporation Mr. Happy would afford his prisoners some better bedding, eating my cold instant mash potatoes and turkey dinner and watching the little blue dog prance around when one of the interns opened the door. I guess Jae was still too red in the cheeks after kissing a lesbian. You know he wasn’t even a good kisser, like he wasn’t giving me tongue or too hard or too pussy gentle, it was just like he touched his lips on my face and that was it. But what can I expect from someone who’s never kissed someone before?

I heard the click of the keycard and the intern came in. It was one of the grumpy looking ones.

“Can I help you? I’m kind of in the middle of something.” I shoved a spoonful of potatoes in my mouth. The food sucked balls but I was kind of a bottomless pit when it came to food.

“You’re scheduled for our next demonstration. Didn’t you see the weekly overview?”

These people and their schedules and overviews. I didn’t have any of that information my guy. “Oh right.”

“They sent me to remind you to come to the lab.”

C: “How could I ever forget?”

I: “May I escort you?”

C: “May you?” He was young but not as young as Jae or the other interns. He was working on a beard and looked as if he hadn’t smiled in years and his facial muscles were cemented in place after being set so long in a pout.

I: “Our meeting is starting now.”

C: “Let me at least finish my potatoes first.”

The intern stood there as I shoveled the potatoes down my throat. I didn’t hurry and he didn’t push me, only tapped his *tech thing* and checked the time. I threw down my tray and took his forearm with prancing energy.

C: “Escort away my dear sir.”

He didn’t look at me, just grunted and started down the hall. We went to the same room with the dentist chair and brain machine, the same room where I witnessed the most pitiful fight of my life. The interns sat in a circle on fold out chairs, their *tech* displaying a holographic screen and their fingers ready to type whatever garbage came out of Jae’s mouth.

I skipped into the room holding the guy’s arm like we were going to prom and displayed a huge smile. I sat in a chair in the center on my own accord.

Mikeah: “Nice of you to join us.”

C: “I know my presence is a beam of joy.”

Mikeah: Clear throat. “First things first, ZX*Name of Guy who Jae fought with* won’t be joining us today or for the rest of the program. Homesickness apparently beat out his desire for the research project of a lifetime.”

Mikeah kept talking but I forgot how to breathe for a few minutes. The guy who Jae beat like a toddler with pillows went home real quick if you ask me. My instinct was to get in Mikeah’s dumb little face and ask what the hell they did with him but for all I knew, Mikeah didn’t know about the fight or the nighttime experiment. He was punchable and ignorant but not guilty of much more than that.

Mikeah: “Yes I know. The workload is hard here but you knew what you signed up for. If anyone else has the same feelings as *Name* I suggest you leave now. You won’t get your time, money, or effort put into getting into this program but at least you would quit wasting our time.

Ten, just ten of you made it. Across a whole world of minds. You want a job here or you want a free pass into the school of your choice; fame or a jumpstart in your career? If that's all you want then you may leave."

After they get blindfolded and tranquilized that is. I snorted loud enough for Mikeah to shoot me a sharp look. Man, you guys really don't know how hard it is for me to be quiet and polite. You know, my cousin once told me there's a few kinds of people in this world: good, nice, and polite people. You could be two at the same time or none at all, but it's impossible to be three. I like to think I'm decent but I'm not nice or polite really, like I know manners and shit but I won't do things for other people for the sake of doing them. So I think Mikeah is none of them.

He didn't linger on me. He pointed at *describe an intern*

Mikeah: "You. Why are you here?"

Yoko: "I care

ok this is boring. Maybe have everyone say why they're there and their project but keep it brief and make Mikeah sound like a cranky old man

Mikeah: "By him leaving last night he wasted a spot that could have gone to someone else."

ok they do a little project Jesus fuck why did I choose to write a science fiction book I hate science don't be too detailed, channel your Mary Shelley. For mind studies we see how people react to things without bias, Brain Games type stuff

"That was kind of fun actually. Sort of like preschool with the colored blocks," I told one of the interns that walked me back to my room. He was antsy and kept twitching his head. He spoke with a stutter. As much as it was my goal to piss as many people off while maintaining a civil tone, I couldn't bring myself to be too cruel to this boy. And he was that, a boy. In his twenties but looking high school.

"Y-yeah, yes. I'm-I'm glad you thought-thought so."

He kept a good distance from me which I appreciated.

"What's that problem with your voice and all? Why do you have trouble talking?" I didn't mean it to be rude, which it definitely was, but it was just I'd never met anyone who talked like that before. Sometimes people in movies talked strange and it was called a speech impediment but they had ZX *idk if stuttering is mental or physical but explain a medicine/therapy that helps it* to fix it so I never met people with it.

He scratched his head in short strokes. "I-I-um, I, just-just do. Ever-ever s-s-since I was a k-k-id."

I nodded and that was that. I wasn't gonna torture him okay? I can feel your judgment right now. "*Oh no I hate the MC of this book now! Goddamnit.*" But I just say a lot of wrong things okay? And you can't blame me because I really did hate everyone in this stupid place even if they weren't Airika level awful.

The intern stopped. "Do you-you know the w-w-way?"

I shrugged. "Beats me. But getting lost in this place? Cool."

It really wasn't a surprise we were lost. Absolutely every hallway and wall looked the goddamn same it was like a horror movie motel. I looked in the room that had a swirling tank of green liquid.

"What's this?" I stuck my face in the glass of the door. It seemed to be glowing.

He looked furiously left and right. "We should-should go."

"Why?"

RALPH: "Because. I'm sorry I don't know my way. I'm new here too. R-r-ralph, Ralph."

They shake hands.

C: "You look a lot like Mikeah."

R: "Brothers."

C: "I would never have guessed." I could have though. The way Mikeah pushed and chastised the kid, always looking down and belittling him. He did that to everyone but Ralph especially. That explained why the others seemed to dislike Ralph so much, because they assumed his acceptance was related to Mikeah's job here.

Ralph starts panicking because they're lost and C thinks it's funny. Ralph's map doesn't work bc there's a short fuse cut and he freaks out. But it ends and they get back to Charlee's room

Ralph unlocked my door. I wondered if the interns all knew they were taking turns playing security guard for the kidnapped girl. For once, Ralph felt calm. Being lost with people is a great bonding experience I got to say. When he opened the door, however, he looked like he'd seen a ghost. And he kind of did. Because sitting on my bed was none other than Ms. Airika the paper pale little bitch with hair dyed with the blood of her victims.

"Oh not you again," I said as I threw my arms in exasperation. "Don't you have a whole evil corporation to run without me to worry about?"

Airika had been wearing a smile on her bright red lipstick but now it soured. She grabbed me by the hair.

"Hey watch the bangs they're delicate."

And put her hand on Ralph's shoulder.

"Thank you Mr. Gainer but I'll take it from here." She shoved him out the door and slammed it on his stunned quivering face. "Ms. Algiers. We have much to discuss."

Despite her hold on my very delicate wispy bangs, I flopped on the bed. "Can I at least take a nap first?"

Her eyes burned into my skull. "No."

"Well ok then—"

And she was grabbing more of my hair and dragging me out the door.

We were in the hall and Airika looked around to make sure Ralph was gone. She brought my ear close to her mouth. "Do you know how hard I worked to select ideal candidates? My darling Jae thinks he chooses all the interns but I am the one paging through thousands of boring applicants and making sure they aren't too unreasonable. Do you understand?"

We got quite far by the time she was done spitting down my ear and I was basically a dog being walked with my hair as a leash.

“Can we please not make these little outings a regular occurrence? This just isn’t working out.”

She yanked harder and I stumbled forward. “That intern was my favorite. And it’s all going to be ruined because of you if you keep up at this rate.”

I let out a squeak. “Was?”

“He’s dead now because of you.”

“Because of me? I didn’t kill him.” It was hard work trying to keep up walking and my brain with this crazy lady’s mindset. “Don’t tell me you killed him.”

“He died because you told him everything. There’s no way I could send him home after that.”

I wanted to drag my hands across my face. If I wasn’t mistaken Airika sort of sounded watery. Her mascara wasn’t as perfect as it was when she sat proudly on my bed.

“You’re one fucked up woman.”

“Quiet,” she whispered as she slapped me. Her rings against my teeth were ironically louder than any speaking we’d done.

“Jesus lady, you don’t need to be so bitter. They have help for people like you, you know.”

“You will be spending the night in here. I hope you like rats.”

I looked up from my spotted vision and realized we were in front of the basement door. The door where I’d tried to escape. I let out a cackle. This was perfect.

It turned out to be less than perfect.

Airika took all my hair in her bony jeweled little hands and took me inside. It was the same mess of a few screaming kids and a few vegetated ones. Each cell was still windowless and bathroom stall like but minus the head sized gaps in the walls. It was like a maze of cubicles. She stuck me in one and stood above me, door in hand. She wiped her eyes quickly and looked at me with a pleasant expression. Not a pleasant face though because she was batshit crazy and no expression could ever make her look pleasant or inviting.

“I want you to know it will be someone you love next time. And I won’t be so generous.”

She slammed the door and I sat in a dark corner with her sad sick face and auburn hair ringing in my mind.

Charlee 23

Apparently I did not like the dark.

Sure, I rode bikes at the ass crack crack of dawn, snuck out, and interacted with way too many people who lurked in dark alleys but I’d never experienced something like this. Something this cold, this lonely, this, well, dark. When I rode there was always street lights or the bright neons signs of clubs and bars that never dimmed. There were apartments that had lamps glowing in the windows or trains with warm yellow headlights. When I rode it was quiet save for familiar

hum of my engine. It was never noisy with crazed people banging on the walls. It was never so dark I couldn't see my hand.

Most of everything I could tell you would be boring so I won't do that. For hours and hours I just sat on the concrete trying to look at the windowless walls and see something. I tried to sleep but it was too dark. There was no difference between closing my eyes or not and so laying down and closing my eyes looked the same as keeping them open.

But it got interesting. Real interesting.

insert some crazy talking to self dialog for Addy. Do research bc what she did before is actually v offensive and not real

ADDY: Talks to herself outloud

I recognized her hysterical voice and fumbling words, the way she spoke like she was always trying to get too many things out of her head at once. And I wanted to smack her.

"Hello? Crazy girl are you there?" I sat up and leaned my head against the thin metal wall.

She giggled in return. "Are you there is the real question. Are any of us here?" She started laughing again and I heard her thump her head on the ground as she likely rolled over with glee.

"If I get the chance I'm gonna pummel you," I said as I slammed the wall with my middle fingerless fists. If it weren't for this girl I would have two more fingers and my normal life back.

"Pummel? You could pummel me in a tunnel. Charlee, I'm sorry."

So she did remember me. I'm not great with recognizing voices and if this girl didn't make herself so distinguishable with her manic laughs I wouldn't have known it was her. Every prisoner was faceless and guarded behind a small metal box that touched floor to ceiling. Before Airika tossed me in here, I got a look at the cubicles from hell. Rusty metal walls were bolted to the concrete floor and ceiling and a narrow food slot was the only thing distinguishing the wall that swung open from the other three. Some of the prisons jangled with prisoners throwing themselves against the walls but others were stoically silent meaning no one was inside anymore or they were quiet. There was absolutely no way to tell what the person inside looked like unless you were to open the small food slot. The only reason I kept hearing from this girl was how damn loud she was. I only assumed she was a girl because of her high pitched shrill voice. I couldn't guess if she was five or twenty, smart or actually an idiot.

I really did want to punch her. Not in the way I wanted to punch Airika or Jae, it was in the way I wanted to punch Demi. Because even as nice as he was he was still here. No matter how harmless as this girl seemed she was still here. And I hated everything here.

But since I couldn't, I chose to calm myself. "What's your name? How'd you get here?"

Was this where Airika threw her problem children? Her bad employees? It seemed a bit childish to throw people in the basement every time you had a hissy fit.

“My name is, ADALYN,” Adalyn yelled. Some of the other cells started shaking more violently when she yelled her name. “I Failed. I Failed, I FAILED!” She shouted, banging something that I disturbingly thought was her head against the wall.

She laughed a few times and then got quiet. “I’m sorry I’m like this tonight Charlee. I just had a bad bad bad day. No stars for me, none.”

I sat in my cell ear against the wall but flinched back. This girl was really giving me the creeps.

“Sorry bout that. What happened?”

“I lost my sword! I was rubbing it against my knee to try and cut off my pesky leg so I wouldn’t have to walk no more and then I was going to do my fingers and then my elbows. I was rubbing and hacking and sawing but it wasn’t working. And then my friend, my best friend came here and took it from me! And it made me sad!”

I shivered. The sight of a thin shaking girl with bulging eyes and greasy hair conjured in my mind. I imagined blood dripped from her knees. “I think that was for the best Adalyn.”

“Call me Ady. Or Adelle or Ads. Two and two ads to four and four and four to eight.”

I had to strain to hear her nonsense because sometimes she yelled but dropped to a whisper at others. “Tell me how you got here Ady.”

Something in her snapped on. “I was ten Charlee, ten years old. I had brothers and sisters, so many the house was always full of us. I had a mommy and daddy and a dog named *name.* We all had our own scooter and a lots of toys and a bright big house that was white and had yellow roses in the front yard. I went to school but didn’t have many friends but it was okay because I had so many brothers and sisters I didn’t need any. I watched TV on the weekend or played outside or walked with the dog. I know my mommy bent down on her knees and smiled at me and said, “I love you baby,” even though I wasn’t a baby, she had a baby. She had a big baby in her big belly and pretty light brown hair and blue eyes. And she hugged me and I hugged her big belly. But then I was at school playing with my scooter and I was the coolest because no one else could buy a scooter like mine because daddy said prices were high and metal was low and fuel was low so my scooter was a special gift but I was riding my scooter around the parking lot but then all the kids and teachers ran inside but I saw someone standing in the lot watching me and he was another little boy and he looked nice and mommy always told me to be nice to other kids who were alone and this boy was alone and looked nice and I reached out my hand to ask him if he wanted to ride my scooter and tell him it was a special gift and that he would be special if he rode it. But someone grabbed him and someone grabbed me and I was screaming but no one heard me and then I was gone.”

I leaned back in my cell. A ball of horror was inside me. “What then Ady?”

She took a few big breaths but resumed like I hadn’t even needed to ask. “And I was in a white room and it was bright and the little boy I saw on my scooter was looking at me. This lady started giving me puzzles like they had in the playroom and at home and I had to do them. And everyday was like this with puzzles and tests and reading and math and it was like school but no one but the boy was there and he did the stuff with me and I never got to have recess or my

scooter or my brothers and sisters and dog named *name.* And I did this for awhile and got smarter because the boy told me I was like fuel and metal and very special and rare until I didn't because the lady told me I Failed and that I was worthless and stupid. The lady brought me down here where it was cold and dark and I've never seen anything for the past four years."

Now instead of wanting to punch her I wanted to vomit. I wasn't the first kid the psycho bitch lady had taken. The other cells around me were probably filled with kids Jae and Airika tested with. What was most disturbing was learning I had an expiration date. When was Airika going to decide *I* was a failure? Probably sooner rather than later. I tended to fck things up rather quickly. I tried to think about how many cells I saw. Was it ten? Twelve? Thirteen perhaps for when I was a failure too.

"Ady when is your birthday?"

"We had birthday parties with cake and games and my scooter."

"Ady, please, think hard."

"*Insert date* at St. John's Hospital seven pounds *insert more baby details."

Year That meant she was fourteen now. Fourteen but with the brain of a child or a very deranged one at least.

C: "Ady, why are you here? Do you know why they did all those things to you?"

A: "Why? Why? They didn't all *happen* to me I did a lot myself and learned and did math and reading and tests every Friday. It was fun sometimes with the boy but then I started getting skin tests and needle tests. It was just me and the boy and the lady most of the time and they said I was special. They said I was Savant."

And there was that crushing, ear shaking word: Savant. The kids they picked were "Savants." But this girl didn't seem like a genius anymore than I did. She was crazy. None of the kids around them seemed like geniuses. If they wanted geniuses, why would they teach then stuff and then toss them down here? It was destroying whatever genius they had. Ady was the only half competent one and that was saying a lot.

C: "Ady, why don't you talk to anyone in here?" I asked even though the answer was quite clear.

A: Ady let out a sickening laugh. "Friends! My friends they were Charlee! But now they're Fails just like me! We did talk and talk and talk to drown the misery and the memoirs of the tests and needles and learnings but some got silent Charlee! Some got mad and start howling and never stopped. Some I think are dead Charlee. But I talk and talk and talk and talk."

Oh Jesus. After bitchface is done with the "intern" program she's gonna throw me down here where I'll start singing the ABCs for fun or maybe bash my head into the wall to stop hearing the screams. Then after vegetating me they'll kill me. But why keep the unfortunate souls in the first place? Jae believes all of us go on our merry way back to our lives and somehow he also believes none of those kids tell the cops or their parents what happened here. Somehow Airika gets away with kidnapping a kid every summer without causing a big fuss. But what fuss would be made anyway? Kids go missing all the time. And by Ady's French accent and the lack of news reports on kidnapped kids, she probably goes all across the world to get us.

And in a world of 10 billion people who would connect the dots between kidnappings so spread out? But why keep us and kill us later? What is Airika doing with us after the program ends?

And then there's the Savant thing. I've heard of them before, sure. But it's rare. So rare I probably wouldn't have even known about it if it weren't for biology class where we examine a brief crisis back in the 3000s when Savantism plagued the whole state of Nevada. For every one in four Nevada births there was a Savant among them and they showed *insert autism traits* but that certainly doesn't mean genius. It was eradicated anyway with The Shot.

C: "Listen to me closely Adalyn." And I did make her listen closer. I leaned in and made sure to put my mouth near a seam in the metal wall. "I'm going to leave this place and so are you. We're going to get out and you can have your scooter and load of siblings and all that okay? We're going to leave before the end of the summer."

I don't know why I said that. I really don't. I had no grand plan of escape since my first one failed and they were monitoring that route. But I couldn't stay here and end up like this girl.

A: "Really? Charlee is brave and will save Ady? Ady can ride her scooter and pet her doggy and hug her mommy. And what will Charlee do? Does Charlee have a family?"

C: I hadn't considered telling her about me just because I didn't know how much she'd comprehend. "Uh, yeah I got a mom and a dad. But I mostly just live with my mom."

A: "Brothers and sisters?"

C: "No but I have a best friend. Her name is Braelin."

A: "Charlee, I'm going to tell you a secret. You probably told secrets to Braelyn because she was your best friend."

C: "Is. She is my best friend."

A: Shook her head and laughed. "Charlee, you're never getting out of here. No one has ever gotten out of here. But that's not my secret. My secret is that I think if anyone can you can. You can get out. And kill the witch and save everyone and the boy, I want to kill the boy myself though. He is nasty and mean and evil and I will kill him."

C: Shakes in unnerved. "Ady that sounds like a terrible idea. I'm not here to kill anyone."

A: "But she is. She has killed many so many. And she is evil, so evil and the boy is evil too. Because he looks kind and acts kind but is sand on the inside. He is sand and dust and empty. He has killed too and needs killing back. They need to be killed because I saw them kill and I want them to bleed."

C: "I just wanna leave for heaven's sake." Aggressively throws herself on the floor and is angry. This kid has never even seen a PG-13 movie for Christsake and she's plotting a homicide in there?

Why does she have to be horrible? Why do all I people I run into in this place, and outside of it too admittedly, quite literally suck? My friends at the races turned out to not be my friends no doubt because Happy Waters paid them to sabotage my bike. Braelin rejected me and called me a dyke and I can't justify her by blaming her parents for every homophobic thing anymore. I didn't have any real friends at home except Braelin and I still know she's good she just can't see it. She likes me she has to. It wouldn't add up any other way.

I have a new plan and for it to work it requires this murdering singing thing next to me to cooperate. It'll be hard but still not as hard as Jae's calculus lesson. I wish I could trust Demi to help me out with this but he's so ify. He's all I love, Jae the stalker boy because he's broken and used and used to be a good little kid. He has blind spots to this place and would 100% pick that little twerp over me any day. So I can't risk him but I can't risk another intern because well, the last one died cuz I opened my big mouth. But this girl is dumb enough and easy enough to work with if given the right nudge. And if all does go to plan I really could save her and any other vegetable that might still be alive. I'm not much of a planner though so this might all go to shit.

"How many ways out are there?"

I imagined she was sitting in her box hanging her head backwards to stare at a ceiling she could not see. She was probably smiling like an idiot.

A: "Exits exits exist only to exit. How would I know I've only been in a few rooms here. The boy told me about the whole upstairs."

i dont remember if she knows they're on an island C: "We're on an island so the underneath where we are could very well be underwater. It would explain all the holographic windows and artificial light." Great so if we somehow could get out without going topside we'd be drowned. I would be drowned because I can't swim. But there must be some way to get out from the lower levels or we'd always be faced with a Titanic disaster. Unless that's how it was intended.

I let my head drop to my shoulder. "Jesus fuck I've never even been to the beach."

A: "What?"

C: "Nothing. Can you swim?"

A: "Of course. All of my brothers and sisters can swim and if you can't swim you are a big dumb dumb."

C: "Yes big dumb dumb. Do you know how to get to the top levels?"

A: "Why would I?"

C: "Just wondering. I know there's a huge loading door down here from the first time I was down here. There must be submarines or something."

A: "You could drive a submarine?"

C: "I can't even drive a car." It was true. I was of driving age but no one really learned anymore. Bikes were easy, go and brake. But cars were complicated and submarines seemed like they had a lot of buttons. The only people who drove were old people who liked having their "liberty."

I kept thinking about my plan because I had to get out. If I did I would hug my mom and I haven't done that voluntarily since being a baby probably. But then something I really didn't think would happen, happened.

A slow creak came from the huge doors at the entrance to the cubicles from hell room. Footsteps from clanky dress shoes hit the smooth concrete floor and came closer to us. The person seemed to crouch down and lean their head against Ady's box.

A: "You're back. I'm so happy."

R: "Are you ok? I brought you sorbet."

Sorbet? Was he the Doordash delivery? The voice sounded suspiciously familiar but smoother than I remembered.

A: "I have a friend who lives here now. She's my neighbor."

R: "You do? What's her name?"

A: "Charlee."

Even though I couldn't seem them, the person next to Ady's box jumped.

R: "Charlee? How do you know about her?"

C: "You!" It was the jittery intern guy with the stutter only he had no stutter now. Maybe it was an act so he seemed weaker than he was. Although I felt I could take him in an arm wrestle with my pinky, maybe he was hiding some special strengths.

R: "Charlee is that really you? What are you doing here?" Ralph came over to my box and I heard his hands slam against the metal. He actually seemed concerned. "This room is for the diseased."

C: "The diseased? Are you shitting me?"

R: "I shouldn't have said that. I'm not su-su-posed to tell anyone."

The more frantic Ralph got the more he got tripped by his words.

C: "Tell me everything Ralph. Now."

He swallowed very loudly and started a story I would have given my soul for not to be true.

Charlee 24

"You're literally kidding me. I'm hemophiliac, I've lost two of my fingers and my ring, I got kidnapped, I get treated like a fucking hamster, and now you're telling me I'm gonna die in the next few years is that it? I don't accept this."

Behind the metal wall Ralph was shaking with uncomfot. He'd opened the food slot halfway to tell me the horror story.

"And you knew about this Ady? Why didn't you tell me?"

A: "You didn't ask."

C: Charlee screams with frustration but isn't concerned because everyone else in the room is yelling all the time.

Here's the gist of it. I don't really feel like walking you through the whole sabang because frankly, the way Ralph put it was so hopeless. But I guess I'll just tell you so you can be just as horrified as I am.

R: "Happy Waters is bad Charlee."

C: "Really I didn't notice."

R: "Airika is hiding a lot from you."

C: "Wow, shocker."

R: "Just please let me finish."

C: "I can't believe now is the time for you to be all bold and confident."

R: Blushes. "I feel safe down here."

I gapped my mouth like a fish. He felt safe? Down here? In the kidnapper's ultimate torture room complete with rusted walls and cells?

R: "Airika might just seem like an executive board member for a big tech corporation but she actually specializes in diseases. She wanted to work for the government health *insert name* but they rejected her. She did lots of school for disease research but her projects were deemed too radical and unsafe. Somehow she made her way to Happy Waters where she charmed her way up to the board but after hours she still works on her projects. You're one of the projects Charlee. You, Ady, Jae and all the others are chock full of Anorona. It's a rare disease that's hard to catch until it's too late. I suspect she's done lots of projects on diseases and Anorona is her focus right now. I've seen her plans for a cure and she's close." Ralph shook his head. "But it's all wrong."

C: *processes all this* "What do you mean all of you?"

R: "All of the subjects. For Revelation. It's all a coverup for her cure experiments. Everytime we take your blood or test your cognitive abilities, that's for her data."

C: "Why would she go through the trouble? All that Revelation stuff when she could just experiment on her own?"

R: "I think part of it is to keep Jae busy and unsuspecting. He's a smart kid. And the money of course."

C: "But the internship is free."

R: "Yeah right. The application fee, the plane fee, the housing and meals. And not to mention generous donations from parents. They always seem to pick interns with generous parents. Airika has a budget from Happy Waters of course but she needs more. She's been working like crazy lately."

C: "What does this disease do exactly?"

R: "Airika knows she can't do this study publicly. Her old university expelled her for experimenting on people and one time it went too far and someone died. She's banned from almost every federal drug association and the only reason she's here is because HW keeps their employees private. I've heard that James Happy isn't a real charmer either. And she couldn't just go ask Anoroniacs for private testing because the disease has a sigma. No good doctor's going to tell parents their kid will die in eighteen years or less. It's bad for the medical corporation's image. The disease is awful really. It's all about the brain. It shows up as mild like ADHD or autism or other cognitive disorders but in its late stages it turns into mania or delusions or straight vegetation. You're hemophilic and that usually goes hand in hand. They're both hereditary diseases. And not many with the disease live past their early twenties and that's if they're lucky. It's usually seventeen or eighteen but there's only been a total of 500 cases in the past 50 years. That's why no one bothers to spend time researching it. I think that's what makes Airika tick. She thinks herself a medical angel. I've been keeping an eye on her for a number of years and she leaks papers into disease research labs anonymously and things are magically cured. I'm sorry I know this is a lot."

C: "And why are you here then Ralph?"

R: "Why am I here? Not due to a generous donation if that's what you mean. Everyone thinks it's because of my brother and that's true. I needed something to ensure I put on Revelation and looking like perfection after Micah was perfect. Everyone loves a legacy. But I didn't come for Revelation. Ever since Mikeah got his dream job here at HW I knew something was wrong with this research internship he helped with every summer. Something about the founder of Revelation, Airika Savitz was just so off. Out of pure curiosity I did a deep dive on her. It wasn't hard to hack into Mikeah's files because though he is a PHD student from Harvard, he still uses our old pets as passwords. Things just started looking wrong. I saw a correlation between the tests Revelation was doing to Airika's past research and I thought it would be something to come here myself. Now I've been able to sneak into Airika's lab and files and I have evidence she's messed up."

C: "So do I," I said, holding up my middle fingerless hands to the dark.

R: "It's stuff you wouldn't believe. And I ran into this problem because she truly is close to curing this disease. She just needs you for more data on how it works on you. That's why she's picked kids with some many age groups and races. She needs to make sure it works on all kinds of people and if there's a mutation difference in other kinds of people. I think she'll be done by the end of year and sure enough I found a document with her speech for the Revelation ceremony claiming "With a heavy heart this summer is the last of our cherished Revelation internship program." And I thought about it because I mean, wouldn't it technically be good if she finished the cure? She's done enough harm already. Once she's done with a chosen subject they're either damaged from testing and nothing can save them or she puts them down here until they succumb so she can study the last phases of the disease. Would all these kids suffering be waste if I exposed her now right before she finishes the cure? But no I realized. I need to expose her now. Once I have enough clear evidence for the media I'll leave the internship with copies of her files and get her arrested and all the kids still alive free. But the problem is they'd die anyway without the cure but if I wait any longer what else could she do? I can't show anyone what I've discovered until after the internship or Airika will be suspicious of me and kill me. She's killed one of us already and I know she won't hesitate."

C: "Take me with you when you leave."

R: "It's not that simple Charlee. I'll have to leave just like anyone else. Blindfolded and drugged on a plane."

C: "I have to get out of here."

R: "I'll expose Airika to the public and then we'll come back and save you. Then I'll be able to save all of you."

A: "You must be willing to do what you need to do when the time comes Charlee."

C: "When did you get so dark kiddo? I thought you were all about singing about puppies and sunshine."

R: "She's right. It will be hard when I tell everyone. This place will become a madhouse and you'll need to stay alive until we can get outside help. Airika will probably want to kill all of you so hunker down."

C: "How? You don't even know where we are right now."

R: "I've hid trackers in several places. The police should get here within a few hours."

I lean back against the metal wall. "I'm counting on you Gainer."

R: "Now it's my turn. How did you get in here?"

C: "The crazy bitch lady got pissed because I tried to tell one of the interns how crazy fucked this place is and she's been threatening my friends and family ever since I got here. She really needs to invest in anger management classes. She beats me up every chance she gets."

R: "Really? That's awful."

C: "Tell me about it."

R: "I'm sorry to tell you this Charlee but the interns are taking a week of the program to travel to Gaum and study other prodgies as Airika told us. I don't think you're of use to her right now but I hope she lets you out."

And then somehow I fell into a deep headache induced sleep.

Ralph 25

If Ralph had known Jae was in such a foul mood he would've taken greater care not to run into him in the hallway. But frankly, Ralph was shaken up at the idea of Airika putting an active subject like Charlee in the Fail room.

"Gainer, what has gotten into you?" Jae growled as he frantically picked up his skewed papers Ralph had knocked out of his hands.

The Fail room was his only escape from worrying about what else Airika was up to, Ady that is. Ralph had grown quite fond of the girl and not because of scientific fascination or a savior complex. He genuinely liked talking to her. She was funny and kind and surprisingly functional despite her circumstances although Ralph could tell she was reaching a phase of Anorona that led to death. He hadn't told her this though he did explain his discoveries about Happy Waters. Adelle Jean might have been the only person in the world Ralph could speak to without stuttering.

It was terrible enough with Ady locked in basement because even though Ralph knew he could find the keys, he didn't know where he could take her. It was his first time at Happy Waters and he didn't know the ins and outs better than Charlee did.

"So-so-sorry," was all Ralph could manage. He started picking up papers too but bonked his head against Jae when he bent over.

Jae grabbed his head and let out an annoyed, "Ow."

"Stop trying to help." Jae finished picking up his papers which now sat in an uneven heap in his arms. When he stood up he found himself unintentionally close to Ralph who didn't have the courage to take a step back. "Why're you even over here anyway?"

Jae flicked his head in the direction of the Fail room. Ralph laughed.

"What's funny?"

Ralph noticed Jae's glasses had gotten crooked during the encounter. "Your, you-your, glass-glass-es--"

“What about them?”

Ralph turned pink and decided to forget about the glasses entirely. He realized he'd never been this close to Jae. He was close enough to see his fluffy hair looking as aggravated as his face and his nostrils flared. He could see Jae's dark brown eyes and strong yet gentle jawline.

“You-you've ne-ne-never been down there be-be-before.”

“Down where?” Jae snapped.

Ralph swallowed and remembered Airika's harsh words about keeping the Fails away from Jae. But he couldn't believe Jae went his whole life not wondering why Airika kept a whole basement from him.

“No-no-nothing.”

Jae grabbed Ralph by his navy polo collar and set the top lense frame against the quivering boy's forehead.

“Listen here Gainer, and listen well. I've been the head of Revelation since before you could multiply. I don't need you and quite frankly, no one does. But your brother is really smart which compensates for you being on the contrary. You're supposed to babysit the subject and make a decent coffee and that's all. I don't need you getting in my way anymore because Charlee is my favorite subject. There's no one I've understood or been more fascinated by and I won't have a cripple minded idiot like you distracting me.”

Ralph leaned back as much as possible without being dropped. Jae held tight to his shirt and didn't look like he wanted to let go anytime soon. Ralph finally ripped Jae's hand away and stumbled back a few steps but straightened himself once he was a good several feet away from the veiny eyed wrinkled lip teenager.

“Shame on you,” Ralph said with syllables clear as day.

Jae turned from a Sour Patch Kid to a gaping mouth in a second.

“Ex-excuse me?” Jae wondered aloud how Ralph found his voice.

Ralph closed his eyes very tight and held his breath. “You stuttered.”

And then he walked away.

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Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Furry a Friend

I think we have all experienced the twisted tragedy of accidentally killing a pet. Common incidents include stepping on lizards, hugging bunnies, and squishing mice. Childhood pets are charming, fluffy, and a great way to teach kids life lessons. Your child will scream and cry “Bring him back Mommy! Bring him back! You told me you could do everything!” after you tell him “Sorry son, but Spots died at the vet last night” when really you put Spots down after a long battle with colon cancer. You can’t argue that pets make memories that last forever. For me, Sugar the hamster had to bite the bullet so I could get over my fear of dead bodies.

Here is a bit of background information on how Child Me felt about death. Death was a lingering taste in my mouth, every account pouring me full of rigor mortis. Sometimes it made me squirm in my skin. When I was very young, during summer camp, I took a field trip to the park and passed a flattened squirrel boiling on the pavement so intensely that I thought it would burst. I did all I could to suppress the chunks of vomit that threatened to slide up my throat and ended up standing in front of this thing crying and unable to look away. After that, I chose to blind myself to the dead every chance I could because I did not want to experience their nothingness. Bodies were nothing more than gruesome strips of deteriorating flesh and piles of limp limbs and cold blood. So dying, decaying, darkness, it all hugged me like a wet paper towel. I never slept without my nightlight or without a door cracked enough to let in a glorious triangle of yellow. In my pink butterfly sheets, I closed my eyes but didn’t let myself fall asleep so my vision would turn into the deep splotchy purple and greens you see when you close your eyes for too long, and I wondered if this is what I’d see when I died.

I didn’t like the way my room felt at night, all shadows of actual things and allowing the possibilities of terrible fantasies. Sometimes it followed me into the daytime, a glance at my smiling mother driving me to school would sometimes be a scenario of her dying in a car crash. My dad standing at his laptop doing salesman work could be him bleeding out from a slit throat. Every time I saw knives sitting in the sink with droplets of water, their ridges covered in crumbs, I thought of their potential to slice and dice human flesh. Sometimes my worries followed me to sleep as well; my grandma being carried in a funeral parade or a classmate bleeding out from his head.

Yeah, I was a messed-up kid.

But everything changed after I got my hamster. It was third grade and for my birthday my best friend got me a hamster, Sugar. We had a dog, of course, a cat at some point, and some fish that didn’t last long, but Sugar was the first thing to be wholly mine. I took videos of her every day and watched you run around in your pink plastic ball. Every morning I opened the top of her cage and inserted a brown almond-sized treat into her mouth. She took it straight from my fingers and her chubby blush-colored cheeks puffed in and out. And sleeping wasn’t half as scary with Sugar active well into the strange hours of the night. For one beautiful year, my room at night was filled with the earthy scent of hamster bedding and the sound of a hamster wheel. For one year, I had a furry friend the color of coarse sugar and pink teacup roses. For one year, death didn’t concern me at all.

That is until the morning I walked into my room and saw her die.

Honestly, I should’ve seen that one coming. Those little boogers can die of a sneeze. The kid who gifted me this little creature had lost about three herself: one to the air vents, one to the inside of a piano, and one that supposedly ran away and still lived happily doing whatever hamsters do after a great cage escape.

Sugar was climbing to the top of her cage to receive her daily treat but halfway up the rungs of the hamster-sized ladder, her small cream-colored paws lost their grasp and she fell into the soft bedding that was a sea of pencil shavings. I stood in the doorway watching as her eyes started to pop and her mouth formed a tiny O of confusion. I expected myself to cry or want to throw up or feel my insides turn to knots, but for the first time in my life, I did nothing. Nothing but come close to the cage and inspect her more thoroughly.

I contemplated the actuality of corpses. Already her fur seemed less furry, her eyes little more than beads laying in her sockets. How quickly a living thing became so dead. How quickly her bones became so delicate, so

easy to snap.

Sugar was scooped up by Mom. Only after I was relieved of her body could I cry, could I feel everything that came with the loss of her. I didn't go to school that day. We had to leave her in the downstairs freezer for a good long while because my grandma died next and human funerals typically take priority.

My grandma died in January and school that day was particularly good, though I'm not sure why, and I was all smiles as my parents picked me up. Parents, that was odd. They never came to get me from school together.

Looking back, Mom looked watery only I didn't realize it then. I was too consumed by my happiness.

"We have something to tell you when we get home," Mom said from the passenger seat.

I didn't cry. Even now I wish I did because it would have made everything more normal. I cried over a hamster and roadkill for Chrissake but not my grandma who lived with us for seven years? What the hell was wrong with me? I was nine and very oblivious to things that didn't revolve around me and Grandma dying wasn't cry-worthy I guess. I sat on the couch blankly as Mom broke into tears. I snuck a peak into Grandma's room. The lights were still on but her bed was stripped and empty.

At the funeral I expected my parents to want me to look at her remains because for some reason people always insist on looking at dead things and their ruined bodies and done-up faces. They expected me to say "goodbye" to a thing. But it was not the person anymore and it was not closure. If anything her room held more of her with its lotion, powder, medicine, and holy water. With its crucifix, overly dried Palm Sunday palms we forgot to burn every year, and TV still set to Wheel of Fortune.

Let me tell you, funerals and wakes in my family are as plentiful as weddings and birthdays. In my eighteen years of life, I've been a guest at at least eleven funerals (but who's counting) which I assumed was normal until I asked my friends about how many funerals they've attended. Every time I went to a funeral I would ignore the body laying in front of the room and take in the church. (Ok this is a really important sidenote, hear me out. Why do we eat communion host and drink wine with a dead body right in front of us? The priest really gives out the bread right with a corpse behind him. And don't get me started on wakes; wakes are like a half-business cocktail hour half-autopsy session with a buffet and drinks on one side and an open casket on the other. Who did this, like who thought "Let's eat with a dead relative in the same room because that's perfectly normal." At least the cheesy garlic breath won't bother one person in the room." I'm just saying it's got to fail a few basic health standards.) Some churches were modern-styled and minimalist, with a near barren box of white paint and straight-cut pews, while some were old and extravagant, with a vault filled with carved door frames and whimsical stone arches. I would look many places but I refused to look in caskets and behold myself to the mannequin-like forms of heavily made-up stiff faces. Whenever I saw a dead thing, roadkill, human, or otherwise, I didn't see a remembrance of life; I saw something dead.

But my parents never made me look at funerals and they didn't start. I usually stood in the back while everyone walked down the aisle to kiss the thing or hold its hand. I don't know what compelled me but of all the funerals, Grandma's was the first I dared look at. Everyone was saying how "good" she looked and how "life-like" a job those morticians did but I still didn't like it. I didn't agree. The lobes of their ears were always white, so white, their skin so papery. How did people coo over a thing so grotesque?

I didn't want to vomit or scream or cry when I saw Grandma. I didn't feel much of anything.

By the spring we could have Sugar's funeral.

"Sweetie, do you have any last words?" Mom asked me. She, me, and my two best friends stood in a semicircle around a garden stone with a cheesy quote about "remembering good times" that I'd picked out the hour before. Sugar sat in a hot pink gift box from Target a foot under our backyard next to the two fish, a cat, a couple of dogs, and Lord knows what other animals our family buried. But for legal reasons that last sentence is a joke and I have no idea about any pets buried in the backyard.

I shook my head solemnly. My eyes were watery.

"Does anyone have any words for Sugar?" Mom asked my friends.

The kid who'd given me Sugar looked down at the garden stone and said, "She sure was furry."

And then we all clambered onto the trampoline while we waited for the pizza. Sugar was celebrated the proper nine-year-old way, with a bang if I do say so myself.

Since Grandma's funeral, I think I've been to three or four. Every time I took a look without a feeling of impending doom. I got rid of my nightlight and I don't mind roadkill anymore. I stopped using a nightlight a few years later even though I still appreciated a bit of cracked door. I don't stay up to think about dying, at least not in a way that's scary. Sometimes I think about my own funeral and I don't mean that in a grotesque or depressing way. I just want it to be a party without anyone crying because I don't want to waste a bunch of people's time and money on a whole afternoon of intensely smelling flowers or pre-made food. Funerals mean a whole lot of people who don't actually know you will show up and they deserve a good time. I want everyone to wear their fanciest outfit and it doesn't need to be black but if you want to fine, but it doesn't need to be. I want everyone to look like guests of the

Met Gala and to eat and drink a lot and dance with a whole long soundtrack of my favorite songs but no sad ones. I don't even want to be there; I want to be donated and you can use casket and crematory money for something actually cool like a popcorn and skeeball machine. I don't need a big speech. I just need someone to say, "She sure was BLANK" and whatever adjective that one brave soul who speaks at my funeral thinks I was.

Honorah Brozio

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Nerinx Hall High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Jennifer Staed

Category: Critical Essay

The Problem With Sex

Vagina. Sex. Lube. These words often make people uncomfortable. If someone were to yell, “penis,” in a room full of high school students, there would be unanimous giggles. But why? Why are people so antsy when discussing body parts and sexuality? The answer is school. More specifically, Catholic school. Catholic sex education consists of traditional religious teachings that can be emotionally damaging and factually incorrect. Nerinx Hall High School, an all-girls school located in the predominantly Catholic city of St. Louis, is an example of inadequate Catholic school sex education. Despite the school’s motto “women must know themselves and their world” there is a considerable lack of students who know themselves or their world. Nerinx and other Catholic schools use religion as an excuse to withhold essential sex education from students which cause students, especially queer students, to go into the world without a sufficient understanding of their bodies and their world.

Catholic teachings of sexuality are fundamentally outdated and harmful because they do not discuss multiple forms of birth control. To begin, natural family planning is a form of birth control approved by the Church. This method tracks the female fertility cycle so couples can control when they want to get pregnant. Natural family planning, along with abstinence, is the only birth control technique approved by the USCCB (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops) (“Love”). (Please note, this paper utilizes several anonymous interviews to protect privacy.) The first anonymous source is Teacher 1. Teacher 1 is a theology teacher at Nerinx whose views on sex education can be considered more liberal. Regarding theology curricula, Teacher 1 says Nerinx relies entirely on the USCCB, a Catholic organization that believes artificial contraception to be morally corrupt. Natural family planning and abstinence are admirable to use, however, they are often the only methods taught in Catholic schools. Students need to learn about every form of birth control, artificial and otherwise, so they can come to their own conclusions. An anonymous student states in an interview, “I was taught false information that wasn’t factual. They told me [all] contraception was abortion. They said all forms of birth control were against Catholicism” (Anonymous Nerinx sophomore 1). This student received warped information because the Church is not against all forms of birth control. Teacher 1 even says, “It is very important to present this information to students as often they are only presented with abstinence to avoid pregnancy although there are other methods out there that are in line with Church teaching.” A survey using data from 255 students (all attended Catholic school at some point) says 45% of students received abstinence-only education. Teacher 1 also says, “As Catholics, we must be properly educated regarding modern women’s healthcare, even if it’s not something we specifically believe in or will use.” This quote shows how Catholic schools should at least acknowledge birth control options like condoms, the pill, and birth control implants. Although Catholics may have special sexual virtues to honor, they still need to learn all options of birth control to avoid learning misinterpretations.

The best way to be an independent and intelligent young adult is to balance Catholic morals with real-life situations. Schools cannot pretend young adults will not have premarital sex. “My education was don’t have sex or else you’ll go to Hell” (Anonymous student 1). Religious morals aside, it is inevitable teenagers have sex. About 40% of Americans between the ages of fifteen and nineteen have had sexual intercourse according to a survey (Martinez). Although this is less than half of all young people, it is still quite a high amount because people born in the years 1999 to 2020 make up roughly eighty-six million of the United States population (“U.S.”). In short, teens need sex education because millions of teens are having sex regardless of what the Catholic Church teaches. Of 255 students who responded to the survey, 99% are disappointed with their sex education. “I feel like my Catholic grade school actually tried to keep us *uneducated* about sexuality” (Anonymous Nerinx student 1). Surprisingly, Nerinx Hall is known for empowering young women. Their motto “women must know themselves and their world” means for a Nerinx woman to be able to use critical thinking, she must be allowed every opportunity to make her own decisions. Even as a traditionally women’s high school (Nerinx has many students who do not identify as women), Nerinx cannot empower students and keep them in the dark at the same time. “They [my Catholic school] were more

worried about me giving away my “purity” than keeping us safe” (Anonymous student 2). This quote is an example of poor sex education causing a student to feel unloved and unaccepted. As beautiful as faith is, it is preventing schools from teaching diverse and substantial sex education. Students need to feel welcomed and safe in school and the current standards of sex education are not meeting this expectation. Overall, students deserve to be thoroughly educated even if the Church does not agree with some facts.

Another important component of sex education Catholic schools need to recognize is the queer community. (Please note, this paper will use the term “queer” and “LGBTQ+” interchangeably.) The laws of the Catechism of the Catholic Church explicitly state, “Among the sins gravely contrary to chastity are masturbation, fornication, pornography, and homosexual practices” (“Catholic” 576). This shows that homosexual relationships are clearly unwelcome in the Catholic Church. It also states, “homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered” (566). Since these are the stances the Church has towards homosexuality, it is no surprise Catholic schools do not have discussions about queer relationships as a part of their sexuality curriculum. But the scariest part is these teachings are not tucked away in a large book most people never open. They are taught openly to Catholic school children. Teacher 2 is another Nerinx theology teacher whose views on sex education contrast Teacher 1. Teacher 2 explains in an interview that marriage and sexuality should consist only of traditional Catholic teachings. “[C]omplementary of the sexes is something I’d never leave out. We have to talk about how men and women are different ... sexually speaking, [sex] is binary.” Teacher 2’s teachings express a rigid way of viewing sexuality. These teachings are negative for students because it suggests strict gender roles and does not encourage students to explore identity options outside of heterosexual and cisgender. Furthermore, *A Catholic Handbook on Sex* is written by a priest who proclaims that sexual intercourse is only for married couples. He further explains that “[Same-sex couples] are not seen as possessing all of the qualities necessary to constitute a marriage” (Graham 34). This ideology is detrimental to queer students because they are not allowed to be themselves. The Catholic Church has a history of dehumanizing the queer community and these morals bleed into schools. These teachings need to stop because they enforce the damaging idea that homosexuality is not an identity loved by God.

Moreover, traditional Catholic views of the queer community are damaging to students because they ignore, scold, and treat them unfairly. No matter how strongly Catholicism tries to ignore and dehumanize the queer community, the gay cannot be prayed away. More than half of the surveyed 255 students say they identify as part of the queer community. This high rate of young people identifying as queer shows that schools need sex education that is not heterosexual-focused.

“I think it’s important to discuss Church teaching regarding LGBTQ and I always like to define the terms for students and ensure everyone is aware ... I also think it’s very important to remind everyone that LGBTQ peoples, like all people, have dignity and are made in the image of God. I am not uncomfortable with including LGBTQ topics in my teaching because the LGBTQ community exists and we cannot pretend it doesn’t” (Teacher 1).

Schools need more teachers like Teacher 1 because Catholicism should be about diversity and inclusion. After all, the word “Catholic” literally means “universal.” Traditional values can cause religious schools to lose sight of the fact that the center of Christianity is love and unity. The way Catholicism tries to justify its teachings is unacceptable. “The Church does not consider it wrong to be a homosexual person. They are careful to distinguish between homosexual persons and acts” (Graham 33). This sentiment, that the Church hates the sin (homosexual acts) and loves the sinner (the homosexual in question), is often brought up to justify homophobic teachings. An anonymous student says, “I hate how they [Catholics] say oh I love gay people, just not their actions. Like how can you separate that?” (Anonymous Nerinx student 2). Another anonymous student tells an instance of homophobia in school. This student identifies as bisexual. The student explains that one day in religion class the teacher gave the class links to homophobic websites. The articles on the websites say homosexuality is a mental illness that needs to be cured. The sites include the promotion of programs similar to conversion therapy. “I just like cried and wanted to run out of school. It was the most disturbing thing the school did [to me]” (Anonymous Nerinx sophomore 2). This bluntly homophobic example demonstrates why schools need to discontinue lessons that upset queer students. Catholic schools need to end practices like this because beliefs aside, it is false information. Medical experts even say homosexuality is not a mental illness (“Being”). Therefore, telling students homosexuality is a mental illness is simply factually incorrect. Undoubtedly, these examples illustrate that the Church’s homophobic teachings in school need to change because they are harmful to the growing number of queer students.

Religious schools need to teach sex education more openly because the current teachings leave students confused, frustrated, or ignorant. Sex is a normal and necessary part of life and almost everyone will experience it. The average age for a person to have their first sexual experience is fifteen or sixteen (Mackay). Since humans tend to become interested in sex at a young age; this means teenagers need to understand their bodies and safe sexual practices. Catholic schools, however, limit the availability of the information they share with students. One student is especially troubled by her sex education. “I didn’t know what a penis was until I went to public school. I didn’t

know what LGBTQ+ was until I went to public school. Catholic school sex ed is absolute shit” (Anonymous student 3). Logically, a religious school teaches sexuality according to its beliefs, and there is nothing wrong with religious schools teaching their stances. However, when the values taught cause students to go through life without a basic understanding of human anatomy or the existence of the LGBTQ+ community, there is a problem. Additionally, Sandy Dove (her real name is omitted for privacy), a St. Louis native and Catholic school alumni, shares a time when she felt her Catholic school was hiding something. She is an adult who attended Catholic school in St. Louis her whole life. She says she did not receive a sex education class but they did show her a video on puberty. However, she was dissatisfied.

“There was a film for girls and a different one for boys ... the girls watched only the girl's film, and the boys watched both the girls' and boys' films! I felt this was not equitable ... I asked the teacher why we couldn't see both films too. She said that the girls didn't need to see the boys' film, but had no answer for why the boys' needed to see ours. [B]oys were given more information than I was being given about how our bodies work in puberty and that somehow it was ok for boys to know more than me or that I wasn't supposed to be thinking about those things outside of what was happening in my own body” (Dove).

This story demonstrates how a Catholic school made a student angry. Sandy's school did not include her in all the discussions taking place which made her confused. When schools hide topics that directly impact students, they are not being honest. St. Louis Catholic schools need to stop teaching sex education as a taboo secret because young people have sex, body parts, and minds to notice when they are being lied to.

Along with hiding essential information, schools trust parents too much when it comes to educating their children. An instance of a misguided teen is Lana Glen (her real name is omitted for privacy). She is a sophomore at St. Francis Borgia Regional High School, a private Catholic school. In her interview, she speaks passionately about body positivity and quality sex education. Lana proudly considers herself Catholic and is devoted to her faith, however, she has concerns when it comes to the way her Catholic schools handle sexuality. “They aren't very clear or informative because well, Catholic schools” (Glen). Lana's school left her in the dark about menstruation which made her very insecure and confused since she started puberty at the young age of ten. Lana grew up just expecting Catholic school to leave out crucial details. Furthermore, a similar pattern is seen with adults who attended Catholic school decades ago. Sandy Dove says, “I was super confused when I went through puberty and experienced feelings of sexuality for the first time. I thought there was something very wrong with me since no one seemed to be talking about it.” These examples show that when neither one's school nor home discusses sexuality in a clear and supportive manner, it makes students feel alone and desperate for explanations. Moreover, of the 255 surveyed students, about half say their parents give them sex education. Of the half, only three say the sex education they receive at home is informative and helpful.

“Sex education is extremely important for teenagers because not everyone is lucky enough to have parents who can teach them. Especially with the topics of LGBTQ+ inclusion ... we should normalize sex talks and not treat it like some horrible sinful thing, because everyone deserves to know how their bodies work” (Anonymous Nerinx sophomore 3).

This student says they do not receive proper sex education from home or school. They are another example of students being disappointed in how sex education is handled. Teacher 1's opinion on the matter is “[S]chools should ensure that students have at least a basic education regarding reproductive health before reaching adulthood.” On the other hand, Teacher 2 thinks sex education should primarily be at home. Teacher 2 also said parents usually do not want to teach sex education due to the “awkwardness” of the topic. Home would be a great environment to learn about sex, however, it is evident well-rounded sex education needs to be discussed in school because parents are not managing to teach at home. There is also the issue that some students don't feel comfortable with their parents due to abuse, lack of communication, or many other reasons. Sometimes school is the only place students feel safe to express or explore their gender or sexual identity. Catholic schools cannot rely on parents to educate their children about sex because there is too much evidence parents are not ready to teach sex education.

Although poor sex education may seem like a temporary inconvenience, its issues leak into young adulthood. For example, fifty-eight-year-old Mary Moore (her real name is omitted for privacy) says she did not figure everything out until her late twenties. “I went to the GYN for the first time, she explained everything” (Moore). She is referring to how the female reproductive system worked. This is a sad result of poor sex education and an example of how no one should not have to wait decades to fully learn about the human body. Furthermore, she says, “I learned about sex from my friend. My school and parents never said a word about it.” The root of this problem is that an alarming amount of people learn about sex informally and unrealistically. Nearly 60% of the 255 surveyed students say they find most of their sex education information from friends and the media. 20% of the students say they learned more from shows like *Family Guy*, *The Office*, and *Big Mouth* than from school. Furthermore, an anonymous interview says, “I learned most of everything about periods from talking with friends and the internet” (Anonymous student 4). These claims show how Mary's experience in the 1970s is prevalent today because teens

are still using inaccurate sources. If schools gave students good resources, they would not have to resort to cartoons. Moreover, a Catholic school alumnus who is now in college says, "They [Catholic school] lied about so much. In college it's better but it's just too late" (Anonymous college). Students should not have to wait until college to feel their sex education is adequate. Most humans go through puberty well before college which means they need sex education sooner. In summary, Catholic schools need to teach sex education to prepare students for adulthood.

Overall, Catholic school sex education proves to be close-minded and uninclusive. Nerinx Hall students deserve to know themselves and their world. For them to fully be able to do this, they must be given access to all information. Young adults should not have to learn about sex through *Family Guy* or go through decades of life without knowing how their bodies work. The reason behind the epidemic of lackluster sex education is religion. Nerinx Hall's mission statement is about teaching young students to be aware and informed which means they need to live up to the standards they set for themselves. The stories and statistics of St. Louis Catholic school students prove that keeping information such as birth control, the queer community, and puberty a secret causes them to be confused and unprepared for life.

Honorah Brozio

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Nerinx Hall High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educators: Sarah Hoeynck, Jennifer Staed

Category: Dramatic Script

Ten Kids on Haddock Drive

EXCERPT: *Ten Kids on Haddock Drive*

SCENE 1

It's the family living room. The front door is center upstage. A couch is stage left center and a kitchen table is upstage right. ROY and FIONA are sitting on the couch.

ROY: Fiona, you look beautiful!

FIONA looks like she's just been crying. ROY puts flowers, headbands, and ribbons in her hair.

ROY: See? You can still braid it.

FIONA: It's ugly!

ROY: No no no! Lots of pretty girls have short hair. Like, Audrey Hepburn or Diana Ross—

FIONA: Roy, I don't look like any of those people!

ROY: Your hair is beautiful no matter the length. And look *(picks up a mirror)* You can still put it in a ponytail.

FIONA: I guess it isn't terrible.

ROY: You're the most beautiful person I've ever seen! Don't tell Kiera or Briana or Viola I said so.

FIONA giggles.

ROY: And you can always grow it back. I bet it grows back crazy fast. And mostly, I'm proud you tried something new. It's scary to cut your hair but you did it. Most people never even try anything new.

HUGO and SEAN walk in.

SEAN: What did you do to your hair? You look like a boy.

HUGO: Yeah, like Peter Pan but ugly.

FIONA starts bawling.

ROY: What is wrong with you? Don't listen to him, he's mean.

FIONA: Yeah you're right.

HUGO and SEAN sit on the floor and start arm wrestling, rock paper scissors, etc. Like random games.

They are getting really competitive. VIOLA and BRIANA walk in wheeling JOEL, eighteen with cerebral palsy type symptoms due to a car accident.

BRIANA: Are we going to Leoni Bennet's party tonight?

VIOLA: Briana you're still grounded.

BRIANA stops abruptly.

BRIANA: What did you do to your hair?

FIONA starts crying again.

VIOLA: Did Sean cut off your hair in your sleep again?

ROY: No no it's okay! They're just joking right? *(to BRIANA and VIOLA)* Right?

BRIANA: But you look like a boy.

ROY: No she doesn't!

ROY comforts FIONA, SEAN quietly sneaks over to FIONA's doll. He exits with it.

ROY: I can't have all of you bullying our little sister! She already hates it and knows it looks bad so chill out.

FIONA: You think it looks bad?

ROY: That's not what I meant!

HUGO: It'll grow back after a few years I guess.

FIONA: *(horrified)* Years?

ROY: Hugo!

BRIANA: Anyway, the party. We're going.

JOEL: I didn't get invited.

BRIANA: It's probably because Leoni doesn't know you.

JOEL: It's because I go to "Special School" and nobody knows who I am.

VIOLA: That's not—

JOEL: It is. I'm a senior this year. I need to go to at least one party before I graduate and live the rest of my life at home.

BRIANA: You won't live the rest of your life at home.

JOEL gives her a look.

BRIANA: We'll take you. But we have to be sneaky.

VIOLA: We wouldn't have to be if you hadn't gotten grounded *again*.

BRIANA: *(to JOEL)* We wait until 11. Mom won't be asleep but she'll have already gotten you in bed *(thinks)* I

know! Then we go out your window.

JOEL: And how will you do that exactly?

JOEL gestures to his legs with his head.

BRIANA: I'll need to keep thinking.

JOEL: Don't hurt yourself.

HUGO: Fiona, it took you forever for your hair to recover from last time.

ROY: Will all of you stop it!

BRIANA: My little sister looks like a Gremlin. I'm so glad we don't go to the same school.

SEAN walks slyly on. He has FIONA's doll with her hair cut off.

SEAN: Look Fiona.

FIONA looks up from ROY's hug. She screams.

FIONA: Julie! It's hideous!

SEAN is genuinely surprised.

SEAN: I was just trying to make her look like you.

SEAN goes back to playing with HUGO.

BRIANA: Come on, let's go get ready for the party.

JOEL: Go on, I'll wait here.

VIOLA wheels his chair around in circles excitedly.

VIOLA: You can help us pick out our outfits.

Before the girls and JOEL can leave, ADA, FINN, and KIERA enter carrying the most grocery bags you've ever seen. They start organizing the groceries on the kitchen table.

ADA: Can you believe he said we're out of credit?

KIERA: We are out of credit. It's a miracle he keeps taking your "money."

ADA: So? We still need groceries.

FINN: Mom, I bombed that interview. I don't think I'll ever get a job at this rate.

ADA is too busy to really listen to FINN.

ADA: You tried your best. Thank you for coming to the store with us. Kiera dear, hand me that.

ADA starts organizing the groceries with KIERA.

FINN: Maybe it's the suit. Can I get something spiffier?

FINN *examines his powder blue suit.* ADA *pats his shoulder.*

ADA: Darling you look spiffier than any man in St. Louis. Now, go get the rest of the groceries before they melt all over the car.

FINN *exits out the front door.*

SEAN: Ha! I beat you again!

HUGO: How is that possible you're in ninth grade—

SEAN: This would be so much more fun if we could afford to buy Auto Race.

BRIANA: *(trying to be sneaky)* Come on let's go to my room.

BRIANA *grabs VIOLA's hand.* FINN *brings more groceries and leaves again.* ADA *puts the groceries away.*

ADA: Aren't you in a hurry?

VIOLA: We need to get ready for a par—

BRIANA *slaps her hand over* VIOLA's mouth.

BRIANA: —park. The park. We're taking Joel on a walk. Poor boy needs some fresh air. He is such a homebody.

JOEL: It's not my fault I got hit by a car.

ADA: And you need to get ready to go to the park?

BRIANA: Obviously.

ADA: Have fun. But Briana you are not going anywhere you're still grounded.

BRIANA: Mom—

ADA: Grounded.

FINN *comes back with the last trip of groceries. He starts ranting to* ADA. ADA *focuses on the groceries.*

FINN: I mean this lady was a piece of work, kept asking me about my hobbies, my past jobs—which was just Long John Silvers—and she asked me our income. She didn't believe me when I said we had a single mom and we lived off social security and told me good day! I can't believe these people. I just tell them the truth and they reject me. And I don't know when I'll be able—

ADA: Don't be discouraged. Someone will see your potential.

FIONA *finally leaves the comfort of* ROY. She goes over to ADA. She hits her head back and forth on ADA's shoulder.

FIONA: Mom I hate my hair.

ADA: You look beautiful love.

HUGO: No she doesn't.

ADA: Hugo I outta—

FIONA: Why'd you let me do this?

ADA: I told you it would be a drastic haircut.

FIONA: I'm not going to school tomorrow.

ADA kisses FIONA's forehead.

ADA: But it's your first day of eighth grade. My last baby is almost all grown up—

ADA hugs FIONA tight. FIONA hangs limply in her arms.

FIONA: Ugh, mom.

ADA: What? You're the last one. The last one *not* in high school. *(to herself)* Almost done, almost done.

FIONA: That's the problem! I can't let anyone see me like this.

ADA: It'll grow back.

FIONA starts crying again.

FIONA: In like twenty years!

ROY: I got it.

ROY takes FIONA and exits. SEAN and HUGO start conspiring.

SEAN: Mom, we're going to the park.

ADA: My, that's been an exciting place lately. You aren't to leave the house though I'm sorry.

SEAN: Mom! The girls are going to the—part, uh, the park.

ADA: The girls are older than you. You still have a school book to finish don't you?

HUGO: *(a little braggy)* I don't have school tomorrow.

ADA: Yes congratulations Mr. Med School. Maybe Hugo can go and tell you all about the wonders of the park. Apparently it's exciting tonight.

SEAN: Come on mom, please. I barely see Hugo and he's going back to college soon.

SEAN gets on his knees and does begging hands.

SEAN: *(in a terrible British accent)* Please may I have time with my brother.

ADA playfully shoves his head away.

ADA: Less reenacting, more reading Dickens. Your teachers wrote to me and said you must have some terrible reading allergy. Go finish your work and you can hang out with Hugo.

SEAN, defeated, exits with HUGO.

ADA: *(exhales loudly and leans on the table)* It's going to be an exciting year isn't it?

SCENE 2

It's evening. The living room again. ADA sits on the couch playing chess with JOEL.

ADA: Rats. You've taken my knight.

JOEL nods excitedly. They move pieces around.

ADA: My queen too? You're a sly one.

The phone on the side table rings.

ADA: Pardon me a minute. *(picking up the phone)* Hello. This is she. No, I would not like to hear anything about "placing him in a more suitable environment." You've been calling for eighteen years and he's been perfectly well for eighteen years. No, I don't think I need to be taking him to *those* doctors anymore. No, I would not like any more of your professional advice. I am hanging up now.

JOEL: What was that?

ADA: Just the same cooks who promised me you'd never speak a word in your life. But look at you, you're just fine. Smarter than they'll ever be.

JOEL moves another chess piece. He nods his head a lot and gets very happy.

ADA: You've beaten me haven't you?

JOEL smiles.

ADA: That's the third time today. You want another go?

JOEL: Only if you're up for losing again.

ADA: Hey, I think I might be getting better. You can't let your confidence peak too soon. I've got to do some things first but I'll be back ok?

JOEL nods. ADA starts to exit but BRIANA comes out with a backpack.

ADA: What are you doing? You're still grounded young lady.

BRIANA: Argh! I literally can't have a life can I?

ADA: Back to your room please.

BRIANA: *(to herself)* Kiera said you'd be at the bank by now.

ADA: I'm going there now. And you're going to your room.

JOEL: Mom—

ADA: Just a minute Joel—

ROY enters. He has a piece of paper.

ROY: I call for a family gathering!

ADA: Roy, can you save that for later.

ROY: But the presidential elections are tomorrow. I need to practice.

BRIANA: If you go to school dressed anything like that no one's going to vote for you.

ROY has a very attention grabbing shirt on.

ADA: Briana, that's not nice.

BRIANA: Can you just go back to reprimanding me and we can get it over with?

JOEL: Mom—

ADA: A minute, I am not scolding you. I just need you to learn from your mistakes for once.

BRIANA: It's just me though right? You don't corner anyone else for doing perfectly normal stuff.

ADA: TPing your own house is not perfectly normal—

BRIANA: It was Halloween.

ADA: Just go to your room.

JOEL: Moooooomm—

ADA: I will be there in a second.

ROY sits on the couch. He starts practicing his speech. He is very theatrical about it.

ROY: Hello, I'm Roy Donovan and I stand before you as a sophomore. I am honored and happy to be giving this speech because I love this school, and yet, I have many ideas on how to improve our school.

JOEL: Mom, I gotta use the bathroom!

ADA: Could you take him? I'm late for a very important meeting.

ROY: The election is in less than fifteen hours. I'm nowhere near ready.

ADA: Could you please just do it?

JOEL: Yeah could you please do it?

BRIANA: Have you forgotten me already?

ADA: Why are you not in your room?

ROY goes back to practicing his speech.

ROY: I want to start a system for anyone who wants to talk about their problems. It would be a secret, wait no let me change that.

ROY erases and writes more stuff.

BRIANA: How is Viola allowed to have friends over? She's supposed to be in trouble too.

ADA: You can have friends over, you just can't leave the house.

BRIANA: You're crazy.

ADA: You can't call me crazy.

BRIANA: OK ground me again then.

JOEL: I really gotta go!

ADA: I will talk to you about this later. Roy, take him to the bathroom. I need to go now.

ADA leaves through the front door. ROY and BRIANA look at each other.

ROY: Not it—

BRIANA: Not it—

ROY: I said it first.

BRIANA: You're the boy!

ROY: I always do it.

JOEL: Come on Roy the Wiper Boy. We have serious business to attend to.

ROY: Why me?

JOEL: Because I love you.

BRIANA leaves through the front door. ROY stands.

ROY: Hey!

BRIANA slams the door. JOEL looks at ROY. JOEL smirks.

SCENE 3

The stage is changed into a schoolroom. Rows of desks and a chalkboard comes on. The chalkboard says "School President Elections." And a list of names of those running for president: JAN, GREG, ROY. A podium is center stage. The sound of laughing kids and chatter.

BRIANA is sitting next to VIOLA. BRIANA is doing homework and VIOLA throws a ball of paper at her. BRIANA sneaks glances at her crush (invisible)

ROY sits nervously with the other "candidates." ROY looks nervous and reads over a piece of paper in his hand. ROY wears earrings he stole from his sister, sparkly socks, and a floral belt.

VIOLA: Hey.

BRIANA: *(fake annoyed. Doesn't look at her)* What.

VIOLA: *(giggles)* You're staring at Chris again.

BRIANA: *(defensively)* No. I'm doing homework *(looks around)* Say it a little louder would ya.

VIOLA: *(rolls eye)* I bet you're planning your wedding right now.

BRIANA: *(embarrassed)* Viola—

VIOLA: Go talk to him. Homecoming is this weekend and you're the only loser without a date.

BRIANA: (*amused*) Viola—

VIOLA: We're big kids now. What are ya not going to go to homecoming? Don't be a wuss.

BRIANA: I can't. I don't even think he likes me.

VIOLA: BRIANA—

BRIANA: (*mimics*) —VIOLA.

VIOLA: I think you're forgetting a very crucial fact. You're a Donovan and Donovans don't quit.

BRIANA: Why do you care anyway?

VIOLA: I'm your twin sister. I got to have your back. And he definitely likes you. (*tries to lean closer. Says CHRIS's name teasingly*) Briana and Chris sitting in a tree—

BRIANA leans over and pushes VIOLA's face without looking up from her homework.

VIOLA: Hey!

BRIANA: I thought you said we were big kids now.

VIOLA: Clearly not all of us.

BRIANA: Here comes Sister Otiosum.

The whole room goes quiet real fast. The girls and ROY look straight ahead as if the teacher has arrived. It's like Peanuts Style where the adult is there but we don't see them.

VIOLA: Oh no I don't want to hear a presidential speech from Jan.

BRIANA: Why is she bribing us with candy? Again?

VIOLA: Wait, I bet she'll mention how she's the captain of the cheer team.

BRIANA: Fantastic.

They all clap politely.

BRIANA: Here comes Greg.

VIOLA: A jock with no brains.

BRIANA: Oh, that was a short speech.

VIOLA: All he did was promote the football team's homecoming game.

They clap.

VIOLA: It's his turn. Go Roy!

ROY was walking to the podium. He flinches at his name being yelled BRIANA looks at ROY.

BRIANA: Cut it out. Do you wanna get him killed?

VIOLA: I'm being a supportive sister.

BRIANA: He's got no chance. I tried to talk him out of it.

ROY stands nervously at the podium.

ROY: Hello. Um, I—I'm Roy Donovan. I'm standing before you as a sophomore. I am honored and happy to be giving this speech because I love this school—but I have many ideas on how to improve our school. First I would like to—uh, I want to start a system for anyone who wants to talk about their problems. It would be a private messaging system where you write a concern down and put it in a box for student officer members to read and it's completely anonymous, you could report bullying or just tell someone about your week—

BRIANA and VIOLA look around. They pretend like the rest of the class is reacting poorly to ROY's speech.

BRIANA: They're all laughing at him.

ROY shakes a little.

ROY: Because—because—

BRIANA gets up and goes to the podium.

BRIANA: Do you all think this is funny? Would you like to come up here and be laughed at? Whoever's interrupting my brother's speech better come up here and tell me why you think this is funny. Roy Donovan is the kindest person you'll ever have the privilege of meeting. He's smart, funny, and he's a blockhead too but he's special. Unlike some of you, Roy actually wants to make something of our school. Oh, Sister Otiosum, you look angry. *(pause as she listens)* Yes, I will get down immediately. *(pause as she listens)* Oh you think I'm acting like a silly goose? *(pause as she listens)* You think my brother will be disqualified from becoming president because of my attitude? Well sister, I think you're a bitch.

Honorah Brozio

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Nerinx Hall High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Jennifer Staed

Category: Short Story

ily

Time dips into the butcrack hours of the night, those hours that are too late to do anything but too early to fall asleep if your mind is buzzing. I sat up under the covers, my body making a tent lit with the glow of my phone. With every passing hour, I grew more invested in the making of *The Shining* after allowing myself just one Google search before bed to quell my awakesness. As I lay in bed trying to sleep, all I could think was, *how did they make The Shining?*

As I watched an interview with Shelley Duvall explaining the traumatic filming process, I nodded with support. Just as the camera focused on her, however, a text notification covered up her face with a loud *ping*. I swiped the notification away and backed up the video. But less than a second later there was another loud *ping*. My thumb moved to swipe it away but then I realized who it came from.

ily

That was what the second text said. The first was a jumble of letters and periods like she'd made a mistake typing three letters. And this was a mistake too. "Ily." That was probably "Lily." She had a little sister named Lily.

lol this isnt lily

I typed back. I giggled a bit to myself. She rarely texted me and never this late at night. It was an unspoken rule that we only hung out in person. Usually it was in an empty classroom after everyone else had left. I should've called her. But in my haze of delirious addition to *The Shining*, I closed my messages and went back to Shelley.

My alarm rang in my ear. I shot straight up and found my face tangled in the sheets. I'd fallen asleep figuring out all the details of *The Shining*, very confident I could relay the whole plot despite never having seen the film.

Groggy and eyes burning from a rough couple of hours of sleep, I threw the blankets off and stumbled into my fluffy white slippers. I yawned a big yawn and scooped up my cat who'd wandered in and settled herself on my rug.

She looked at me and hissed. "Oh hush," I said, petting and nuzzling her.

I thought about what I'd eat for breakfast. It was really the most pointless meal because I was never hungry. I almost made it out of my room without the cat trying to jump out of my arms when my phone erupted in *ping, ping, ping, ping!*

I turned toward the bed which vibrated furiously with *pings*. The cat jumped onto the rug and settled once again.

I picked up my phone and opened my messages. They were all from the class group chat. I groaned and hit the settings to mute it because my class, though made of only thirty kids, was a very opinionated class. But before I hit "mute" I read a few messages. I opened the group chat.

CATS OF 2014 :P

did she send you one too????

yeah it said thank you for being there and a heart emoji whatever that means

i cant believe she did this

how do u think she did it? i think she sliced herself

omg dont say that thats so mean!

do u think well get school off today

I wanted to throw up. “Ily” was I love you, not “Lily.” My phone was soon on the rug with a soft *thunk* and the cat jumped up and walked away with her paws tapping the floor.

“Honey, are you up?” Mom yelled from the bathroom.

I felt the fluff of my slippers between my toes. “Yeah.”

“You good?”

“Good,” I yelled in a singsong voice.

I bit my tongue but cried all the same. I thought about my mom who was currently brushing her wet hair. I knew she smelled clean and like Dove lotion. Her hotter-than-art-thou shower steam always sneaks into my room like a hug. I knew dad was downstairs and that he’d been up since very early in the morning with an energy drink and the TV volume on high to combat Mom’s hair dryer.

I looked down and realized I’d picked up my phone and started typing. It was a long string of *are you there?s* and *please responds* to her. But even my lousy*lol this isnt lily* hadn’t been opened. I went to the class group chat again.

CATS OF 2014 :P

that emo girl tried to off herself for attention

ugh i bet she’ll come back from the hospital w her bands on for sympathy

shes def fine everyone stop worrying fr

yeah we have the homecoming game tonight #GOCATS

And then there was a text just for me. I didn’t recognize the number.

- ### -

i know what you are

I clicked off the phone and started getting ready for school.

Honorah Brozio

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Nerinx Hall High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Jennifer Staed

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Ada

I want to tell you about the coolest person in the world. She wasn't physically strong or the doer of grand heroics. She didn't discover a new element or serve in a war or anything else you might consider cool. Her name was Ada, a name she absolutely dreaded. It's the name that was given to my mom and she was able to dread it too. Ada, the first one, was my grandma. I call her the coolest because she was. She was radically liberal for being born in the 1930s and she really liked hats. Ada was a stay-at-home mom who did laundry and cooked and other stay-at-home mom stuff but she was cool because she had nine kids, no job, and a husband living in the psych ward.

Her husband, Grant, reacted poorly to surgery anesthesia causing him to die on the operating table for a few minutes but come back to life. This left him very much not right in the head. He came home but had a spotty memory and acted differently and well you know when you start chasing your eldest daughter out of the house with a knife it's time to be sent to live in a home full of other people not right in the head. During all this insanity, pun intended, Ada was pregnant with my mom, also named Ada, and not long after her youngest son got hit by a car and was left with severe mental and physical disabilities. This son was my uncle, Joel. Grandma always just told people Joel had cerebral palsy because that was the closest way to describe it to nosy people. The doctors said he would only have the brain capacity of a teenager and never be able to think properly.

By now I'm sure you've observed that Ada was quite busy. This all meant she couldn't get a job and stayed home to make sure her son got every opportunity any other kid had. She also had to take care of my infant mom and a lot of moody puberty-age kids. She took Joel to physical therapy every day and read lots of books about his condition. Soon she knew more about disabilities than the doctors.

"You're going to need to put him in a home. He's not capable of learning or living on his own" was basically what every doctor told her. "You're a single mother and there's no way caring for him is possible. He can't attend school with your other kids."

It was a good thing she didn't listen to these crazy people because her son Joel was the second coolest person in the world. I wouldn't really know though because I don't remember too much of him. He died when I was very little of a heart attack. But I heard he smoked cigarettes and told jokes and loved going to hockey games. Apparently, he snuck out of the house one time and was escorted home by a cop. My mom always told me people would say they couldn't understand a word he was saying and Mom would just say, "I can understand him fine."

The ten of them lived off a government pension and can recall many days without power or heat and arguments Ada made with grocery store clerks over store credit. She wasn't shy about scolding school nuns for being total assholes and I'm allowed to say that according to my family because back then, nuns were terrible. One time my uncle called his nun a bitch to her face. She really did deserve it because she hit people in the face and didn't let my other uncle be voted class president.

Ada had to meet with the nun to talk about her son's "rude" behavior. The nun demanded a written apology from the kid.

"Sister, my son only said what I say about you behind your back."

One time I asked my mom, the second Ada, what Grandma's weakness was. I knew so many stories about her being the coolest and the strongest but never the weakest. But I knew everyone had a weakness.

"She loved her kids so much she couldn't live without them. When people asked her how she did it, she said it was her kids. She said she'd go crazy and that she could have everything taken away but she needed her kids."

My aunts and uncles said her weakness was positivity. She might have been strong but she was always happy.

"I remember when Joel was in a coma after the car accident and we asked her how he was doing and she said he was doing fine. And then we found out he was in a coma and we were like, Mom he's not fine. She was always just so positive no matter what happened. Even when Joel was in a coma for three months and Dad didn't get

better she said everything was going perfectly fine. She believed she had the best life ever. She visited Dad every Sunday and she never stopped loving him even when he didn't recognize her."

I always wondered why grandma never got a job but once I learned Grandma's weakness I knew that if she didn't take care of her youngest son and make sure he became strong and smart like her the doctors would take him away. And if she was seen as a bad mother her other kids would be taken away.

Grandma was positive and happy even in her old age when I knew her. But what I think is that Grandma's weakness was love. Her husband Grant used to be so well off the family was ready to move to a really rich part of town right before the surgery. Instead, they all lived in a one-story three-bedroom house. I think love is the only thing that would have kept someone like Grandma from believing her life was the best life in the world.

Her kids turned out to be quite spectacular if I do say so myself. My mom didn't attend high school full-time by her senior year. All of the kids had jobs since they could remember and I always wonder how they never ended up bitter about it. My mom had to quit gymnastics and never finished her community college classes because she had to work. Despite this, I've never heard any of them having negative words toward Grandma and they say she made it seem like they had money because she managed to send them all to Catholic grade school and let them do an activity.

My aunts and uncles went on to have great careers like law and medicine. One lives in a brownstone in New York City and another in Texas. And these kids had kids whose kids had kids and let's save the pain of counting and say I have more than twenty cousins. Even after her kids were grown, Ada didn't stop. Grandma made it to every single wedding, baptism, and funeral. And that's a lot. She lived alone for a long time but eventually, she moved in with us when I was really little.

I always think about what I could've done to get to know her better. I could've heard stories about my mom's childhood from a perspective only Grandma could offer or learn what it was like to meet her husband. But I was young. Too young to think any of that mattered. I didn't go into Grandma's room unless it was time to count her pills and put them in an ice cube tray looking box. I liked the shiny purple ones shaped like torpedoes best. I think grandma wanted to talk to me but I was scared of old people. They were a different species of loose skin, white flaky hair, and the smell of powder.

"Huh. This is better than the stuff I watch," Grandma told me while we watched Spongebob. Mom always suggested I do things in Grandma's room more often. Grandma Ada was six floor tiles away from my room and the door was always open.

"I like the stuff you listen to," I said. It was true. When I did my homework in the dining room just a carpet and three tiles away I could hear the gruff voice of a man reading James Patterson.

"Ah, it gets old. I need something cheerful once in a while."

Grandma always had the volume at the highest possible volume and sat so close to the TV only her glasses separated her face and the glowing screen. She had huge glasses with lines on them like ruled paper but still couldn't see much. She loved reading mystery novels but only listened to them now. I wondered how much of the TV she could actually see and if she liked Spongebob because he was yellow.

Mom told me yellow was Grandma's favorite color because it was the only one she could see.

So that was what color all my classmates used when the teacher made them write cards.

I never really understood what my mom went through that year or any of the years she and Dad gave up their comfy new mattress to move upstairs and live in the attic on a futon sofa with my stuffed animals and Barbies that watched them in their sleep. I didn't notice what Mom sacrificed when she gave her mom who could barely walk a shower every night or when she cleaned up adult diarrhea in her fancy work clothes minutes before she had to go to leave or when Dad carried Grandma down a flight of stairs at the hockey game because there was no wheelchair ramp or why he only let us eat low sodium food. I didn't know Grandma's pills meant she had about four fatal diseases and it only took one. I didn't know Mom wanted me to spend time with Grandma so much because Grandma had lived about six years longer than she was supposed to.

And my childhood was cozy and warm with Grandma's loud TV and her medicine filed neatly in its box. But one night, an apple red tin box pulled up to the house. It made loud, blaring noises with lights and had stern-looking people hanging on the sides. They came in. Lights in Grandma's room were on and my parents were awake. People in blue pajamas held cold metal things to Grandma's heart.

Grandma was loaded into the bright red tin box and rushed away in a symphony of ear-splitting sirens louder than any TV could ever be. In her room, I looked at holy water and palm leaves tucked within the crucifix on her dresser. There was lotion, pills, a magnifying glass. Crumpled tissues, a powder-covered remote, one of those "Help! I've fallen and can't get up!" necklaces that was also very powdery. She had about a dozen things of holy water in delicately carved frosted glass. I picked one up but put it back because it was musty.

I didn't realize what it meant when Mom and I visited Grandma every day. Mom would go inside the room and kneel by her bed for hours and hours while I watched. Mom always brushed the peppery gray hair aside and

kissed a pale veiny forehead.

I didn't realize Grandma had a stroke until many years later. I did know the loud red tin box came twice more. We gave the firefighter people cookies when they came during Christmas time. They walked through my house and got milk too. Mom tried to smile and make small talk but it's kinda hard to be a hostess when your mother was in the next room being loaded on a stretcher.

"What do you want for Christmas Mom?" I heard my Mom asking Grandma.

Whenever I think of Grandma it's of her sitting very close to the TV in the clothes from the previous day with her medicine tray on the foldable table next to her.

"I don't need anything and you know that." Grandma didn't say it unkindly, just honestly. Like she didn't want my mom to go through the trouble. But often the way things went was Grandma was still used to living off nothing and now my mom wanted to give her everything.

On Christmas morning that year, I helped Grandma open lots of red boxes filled with clothes and jewelry that is now my jewelry because about a month later she died while I was at school.

I didn't realize my parents and aunts and uncles were all at home that day standing around in my parent's old bedroom praying and holding whoever's hand was closest. I didn't know Grandma told my mom she was ready and happy to die but when it was finally time she cried and said she was scared. I didn't realize my Mom's shaking hand held a cup the size and shape of a mouthwash cup from the dentist's office filled with poison. And I didn't realize Mom didn't realize she couldn't do it and dropped the cup next to the holy water and lotion.

I didn't realize Mom and Dad let me enjoy the rest of my day at school before telling me. By the time I got home her room was cold and the new comfy mattress stripped.

Although I told the story of her death I wish that was not the clearest thing I remember about her. I wish I hadn't been nine years old when she died because I was very stupid when I was nine.

I tell you this part of her life because it's the only story I have. It's all I know of Ada who didn't like her name but loved her nine children and mystery novels but needed something cheery once in a while. It's the only thing I know of Ada who loved God but wasn't scared to speak her mind to nuns who beat kids up.

And even all of that was a fragment of what really happened because my mom, Ada, somehow shielded me from knowing I grew up across the hall from someone who was dying.

Honorah Brozio

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Nerinx Hall High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Jennifer Staed

Category: Novel Writing

IDEKA.

Brief summary:

“I’m definitely going to regret publishing this.” Joan Roux is used to being ambitious and unstoppable but when high school comes around, she becomes even more determined to be a success. A famous writer, a professional artist, a social life, she wants it all. To her surprise, she gets it all and more. But Joan’s life changes when homecoming arrives. At her first dance, Joan talks to the weird boy out of pity, goes to her first party, and discovers she’s sorta into a girl named Peyton. The worst part is, Joan accidentally enters her diary into a national writing contest. If it wins first prize, all of Joan’s worries, crushes, and dreams will be on display for the whole country to see. Struggling with the need for perfection, teenage love, and her nosy mother, will Joan ever survive freshman year?

Excerpt:

Excerpt: *IDEKA.*

10 26 19

4:28 am

See technically, I guess it’s still the night of homecoming but I’m being proper and saying it’s the next day, Saturday, because days change at midnight and it’s definitely past midnight. I think I’m trashed right now but I don’t know because I didn’t think being trashed would feel this good.

Pictures before were good, dancing was good, eating chips alone on the couch was good. But the best part of homecoming was talking to Peyton M. for a whole two minutes. It wasn’t like I was that freshman. The one who tried to kiss up to the super popular girls. I knew people like that. People who made it their mission to have two thousand Instagram followers by sophomore year or become besties with the class president. Yeah, Peyton M was popular. Like, too popular for me to just casually be in her personal public bubble. But she drew me in. Maybe it was just because she was popular. I don’t know. Popular girls glowed. They naturally made you want to be around them. But I know it wasn’t just that. Peyton, Peyton M, was the only popular girl I ever stared at. I wanted to be her friend.

She has what would be considered normal assets. She has freckles that splatter her like constellations, wild curly hair that’s more on the frizzy unruly side than the neat and wavy side, and incredibly thin lips. Every feature she has that tries to make her appear average only stood to make her seem real.

The dance was a psychedelic mix of lights and confetti. Jerry and I just stood next to each other side by side like dolls at the American Girl Doll store. Packaged and perfect and stiff. My heels dug into my feet from standing rigid for so long but I didn’t know what to do. Jerry peaked over at me a few times but I always pretended to look at someone passing by. My friends said hi and called Jerry cute but not in a nice way. I stood there, wanting to leave him to join the swarm of girls that were my friends. When I invited Jerry to the dance I’d assumed he’d be too caught up with his friends to pay attention to me but he never left me even for a second.

He asked if I wanted to dance a few times. I said yes a few times. He did a funny little wiggle thing to try to get me to move.

“Come on.” He grabbed my hands. “You have to dance at these things if you want to have fun.”

He bounced while I was a rock. I glanced around nervously. I knew no one cared what odd movements I made at a party but I was still hyper-aware of all the people. Jerry wouldn’t stop with his chaotic arm flails so I obliged with a petite sway. A smile flashed across his face. Even with the braces, he looked so much older than he had the last time I’d seen him. He took my grudging shimmy for an invitation to waltz and started to twirl me until we

were in the center of the chaos. We danced the old fashion way for a while because it was all we knew. There's nothing like doing box steps to the rhythm of "Truth Hurts." Still, for about two seconds I was glad we'd been forced to learn ballroom dancing in fifth grade.

Jerry dipped me low to the floor and gave me one more twirl. I saw an oddly large amount of happiness in his eyes. "See? Fun."

But it was hot and all the people and light were making me anxious and kinda scared. I told Jerry I was going to put my heels downstairs. But actually, I went to the vending machines to get a snack and breathe air that hadn't been circulated through a thousand people. And then I saw Peyton M leaning against the machines.

"Hey..." I said dumbly.

"Hi." She smiled at me.

I cleared my throat. It felt like I couldn't form sentences around girls like her. "What are you getting?" Her head was against the machine's glass. Snacks lined up in neat rows were lit in a bright yellow light. She sighed.

"Nothing. I'm just vibing."

"Same," I said even though I wanted a Twix.

She looked at me. "You ever just want to leave somewhere? And not have anyone follow you?"

"Totally." I stared at her hair. Blonde highlights glittered against her dark roots. Her hair which would've normally been frizzy and free was tamed neatly tonight. She looked gorgeous but something about her didn't match the carefree vibe she usually had at school.

She looked at me. "I just want to leave this dance and get some rocky road."

"Same." I said quickly even though I didn't know if I thought the same thing. I was looking forward to the after party.

She smiled at me and left. She was probably creeped out because I don't think I blinked during the whole interaction. I really found it fun anyway. More fun than dancing at least.

I didn't go back to the dance. I spent the rest of the time by the vending machines replaying my brief encounter with Peyton M. I replayed the look in her honey-brown eyes as she told me about rocky road. I stared at a shiny Twix bar thinking about the place Peyton wanted to go until it was over and Jerry came and found me to drive me to the afterparty.

And at the after party, interesting times. Peyton F hosted and had this annoying boyfriend she'd brought along. She's already gone through two boyfriends this year. Homecoming was the first night she'd ever even seen him in person. They've been texting for a week but apparently they're inseparable. He kinda seemed like a jerk to me. He trash-talked just about every girl at my school, probably because he's dated all of them, and raided Peyton's, Peyton F, parents' liquor cabinet.

Peyton F met him through a girl named Tara so idk how long it'll last because Tara sets everyone up and they don't usually work out.

Peyton F's latest and greatest boyfriend was a blond noodly kid. He had lots of acne. His hair was styled in a mushroom-ish way, the way that was popular among boys right now. He had his suit jacket slung over his shoulder when I first saw him. I didn't talk to him but I got a feel for who he was just by looking at him. He was one of those f-boys who played video games in a rat shit covered basement all day.

"Joan," Peyton said. She was drunk. She dragged her boyfriend by the collar. "This is Oliver."

I waved. The whole after party I'd been sitting on the couch playing Panda Pop.

Oliver nodded without really looking at me. Peyton continued dragging him across the room and started pecking at his cheek.

That was about five hours ago.

Things changed rapidly.

So I had been on the couch. We were in Peyton's basement surrounded by a cultic circle of chip bowls and high heels. *The Conjuring* was playing on her flatscreen TV in the background but no one was watching except me. I'd say it was boring to not be actively with anyone but it was nice. I like just being around people. I like seeing people having fun and being alive. Jerry ditched me to blow up soda bottles or something with some of the other boys and my friends were all talking to people I'd never seen before so I didn't really have anyone to talk to.

The night was fine. Well, I was fine. Everyone else was being kinda weird. I sat on Peyton's couch just eating chips for a solid hour before I finally moved. I would've stayed there just listening to people talk, seeing people laugh. But I had to pee.

Her bathroom was nice. Shiny tiles and plush towels. I did my thing, washed my hands in silky lavender soap and grabbed the knob, but I heard something.

I stopped. Turned around, and looked at the shower curtain. A thud. I pulled the curtain back and there was Peyton. Peyton P, I told you it gets confusing, high as a bird in the sky laying in the tub. A half-empty bottle sat

beside her.

“Peyton?” I said. “You good...”

She gave me a fat grin. “Roux, I’m great.”

She looked pathetic. Her hair was knotted and mascara was smudged all over her face. She’d unhooked her dress and her straps had fallen off her shoulders. I was planning on helping her out but she passed me her bottle.

I drained the rest of her drink, climbed in the tub with her, smoked a few joints and all I remember is that at some point, I kissed her.

10 28 19

4:10 pm

Look I’m not going to go into all the embarrassing details I faced at school today but let’s just say it was a day. I texted Peyton P and she acted like she didn’t remember a thing. After school, my friends planned to go do “homework.”

“Hang on, I left something in the library,” I said as they urged me to get in a shining BMW. Tara was friends with seniors and seniors meant cars.

“I didn’t know you could read Roux,” Peyton F snickered. I lovingly but forcefully pushed her into the wall.

“I’ll meet you there alright? My dad can drive me,” I said as I turned to leave.

I thought the library was empty but I heard a chair clatter on the wood floor. The library was probably bigger than my house if you put all the rooms right next to each other. I spun around.

“Hello?” I said.

It was quiet but then I looked up at the second-floor balcony, (I told you I go to a fancy private school) to see Peyton M holding a spray bottle.

I squinted. “What are you doing up there?”

Peyton M looked like she’d been caught robbing a bank. “Just work study.”

Work study? Peyton M did work study? I must have looked extra shocked because Peyton M put her hands on her hips and said, “What?”

“Oh no nothing. Do you uh, need a hand?”

Work study was for kids who couldn’t pay to go to school here. I’d seen kids lined up at the maintenance closet waiting for brooms and rags but they were always the ones I’d expected to be there. Peyton M wasn’t the kind of girl I’d thought would need work study but here we are. I’d never noticed her here before but then again I never go in the library after school. Or ever really.

It was a bunch of bullshit in my opinion, making students who needed financial aid be the school’s janitors. It didn’t make sense really because the same fate happened upon kids who earned detentions. I mean, my family isn’t hurting or anything but we live in a two-bedroom city house with one bathroom. I’m definitely a spoiled brat but if I weren’t an only child, I wouldn’t be going to a school like this. I’d always pictured Peyton M as a suburban big white house kind of person with a driveway, two BMWs, and two golden retrievers but work study suggested otherwise.

Peyton M picked up the chair and started organizing the others. She made the tables and chairs into the neat rows the library always had.

“You really don’t have to. I know you have better things to do,” she said. I started going up the stairs to the balcony anyway.

“Do you do this all the time?” I asked. It was a dumb question I knew the answer to.

She nodded. “Every day. I try to get done fast enough to make it to ice skating on time. It’s a shame I get the biggest room in the school to clean.” She threw the spray bottle and rag at me. I didn’t catch either. I picked them up and started to spray and wipe the tables. We worked quietly, me spraying and her making sure the rows were neat and picking up trash from the floor.

“No vacuum?” I said.

“No. And the little broom doesn’t do shit at all; it must be a hundred years old. Ms. Plinth,” our librarian, “told me to clean up better and make sure the chairs were perfectly straight.”

“That’s a fucky system,” I said, scrubbing the table as hard as I could. I didn’t want Peyton M to get in trouble for my inadequate cleaning.

She shrugged. “It gives us half the tuition.”

We went back to cleaning until we were on the first level. Peyton M started pulling chewed gum off the bottom of tables.

I noticed how oddly silent it was.

“You know you should play music while you clean,” I said.

Peyton M kind of scowled. “What?” She had a very intense face while she cleaned. Kind of like how she

did during math but this time she was more determined.

“You know some tunes to make the medicine go down.” I was aware I sounded like a complete dork. “It might make the process feel shorter.” I set down the spray bottle and went into Spotify. I clicked shuffle on my playlist called “Joan’s Random” which really was Joan’s random. It had mellow songs, parodies, rock, classical. Anything I vaguely liked really. It was seven hours long.

I set my phone on the table and turned the volume on high.

“Tonight I’m gonna have myself a real good time. I feel alive. And the world I’ll turn it inside out, yeah I’m floating around in ecstasy...”

I got on the table and started dancing. Don’t ask me why. “Don’t, stop me noooow,” I sang in an agonizingly bad voice. “Cause I’m having a good time, having a good time...”

Peyton M looked up at me with tight eyebrows. “What are you doing I want to get finished with this—”

Please, please don’t ask me why I did this next thing because I really couldn’t tell you myself. I jumped a few times then reached down from the table and grabbed her hand which was probably germly and sticky with chewed bubble gum but I didn’t care.

“I’m a shooting star leaping through the sky,” I sang way too loudly. I pulled Peyton M onto the table and she dropped an empty chip bag she was holding. “Like a tiger defying the laws of gravity...” I kept singing and did the weird dance move where you shake your hips and pull your hand that is holding two fingers across your eye. Peyton M looked like she was getting secondhand embarrassment from me. But I didn’t stop.

“...there’s no stopping meeee!”

I grabbed Peyton M’s hand again and swung her arm. She swayed a little and I think she cracked a little bit of a smile. I intensified my dancing and soon enough she started singing along. Not as enthusiastically but still.

“That’s why they call me Mr. Fahrenheiteeeeit!” Peyton M stopped singing and laughed at me but not in a mean way.

“You’re such a dork,” she said. And then she kept on dancing.

We danced on the school’s fancy, probably thousand-dollar wooden tables and felt the room shake beneath our feet. We weren’t particularly good dancers but it didn’t make a difference. I mainly danced in my own little world, sorta to give Peyton M some privacy, but once in a while I opened my eyes to see her ringlets of golden brown hair and tie that had come loose. I saw her shy smile and squinted brown eyes and thought: if she’d danced like this at homecoming she would’ve been a lot happier. Maybe she wouldn’t have wanted to leave.

My phone started ringing the *Star Wars* theme song and the music stopped. I bent down on the table and answered.

“Hey where are you? We’re totally gonna leave unless you come in the next I don’t know, ten minutes,” Tara said.

She didn’t sound mad, just a little impatient.

“Oh my God you’ll never believe it,” I said in a buttery sweet voice. “I totally forgot to tell you Ms. Vetrski wanted me to do some extra math after school.”

“Oh. Ok. We’re going to dip soon, is that alright?”

“Yeah,” I said right into the receiver. “Sorry.”

Then dad called.

“Joan, what in the hell are you still inside for? School ended twenty minutes ago.”

I’d forgotten about him.

“I totally forgot to tell you I had math homework to do with the tutor because I’m so bad at math you and mom paid about a million dollars for me to be slightly less stupid at it. I’m coming now.” I threw my phone in my backpack, grabbed my lunchbox from the bookshelf I’d stashed it on, and jumped off the table which was no small feat considering we had those tall fancy ones with oddly tall chairs to go with it. I would’ve stayed longer but there was no making dad wait.

“I gotta go. Sorry about the table.” I looked at the table we’d been dancing on. It was very dirty. “I’ll help you clean actually well tomorrow!” I said as I ran down the hallway.

Peyton M rushed to the library door. “Thank you! For the music!”

“Anytime!”

I turned back one time to see her pretty hair swinging out the door frame and tripped over literally nothing; the air I guess?

“Fucking hell,” I muttered to myself and I raced to dad’s car.

Kylie Brunkhorst

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Rolla Senior High School, Rolla, MO

Educator: Star Hargis

Category: Poetry

Where I Am From

Where I am From

I am from Grandma's animal plates from the early 2000s,
oh how I longed for those animal plates.
Silly,
care-free,
flexible,
I am from lunches served on pigs, bears, and tigers
and my grandma's voice echoing through the kitchen,
an escape from my parents grasp for a little while, feeling so free.
I am from Christmas,
sparkling lights all about.
Opening presents I was, craving for only one present truly.
Ladybug pillow pets.
soft,
comforting,
companions who were there for me when I was restless at night with anxiety.
I am from anxiety,
so intense and scary.
Anxiety so intense that mom bought me a weighted blanket.
The feeling of the weight over my body felt like
a
big
warm
hug
that encapsulated me head to my toes. Eased my anxious mind.
I am from the packed fall festival,
shoulders to shoulders,
barely any room to walk.
Booths everywhere selling from
jewelry,
food,
and soaps.
I am from my sister's wedding,
everybody there so happy and cheery,
dancing the evening away.
Lots of food consumed,
mango flavored cake,
chocolates,
and even sparkling grape juice.
I am from my first concert,
down in Arkansas,
Twenty One Pilots is who I saw.

The feeling was
euphoric,
movie-like,
it truly was one of the first times I felt: alive.
I am from the “golden” years of Youtube,
from 2012-2016,
back when Youtube was less professional like.
The years of
brightly colored hair,
crystal necklaces,
truly my favorite era of Youtube.
I am from when pop punk was more mainstream,
the sounds heavy guitar riffs,
the emotional heavy hitting lyrics.
From All American Rejects,
To 5 Seconds of Summer,
To even Twenty One Pilots.
All of their songs immediately became earworms.
I am from mother’s homemade potato soup,
the frigid winter nights,
cuddled up in fuzzy soft blankets.
Oh how I crave this potato soup,
its chunkiness,
its cheesiness,
and its overall comfortness I get when I consume this soup.
I am from the times my bus driver would hand out jolly ranchers,
a great big bag upon his lap,
many flavors.
I was always drawn to take a grape jolly rancher each time,
the stickiness,
the sickly artificial grape flavor that I adore,
My mind has been plagued by this candy ever since.
I am from the nights not knowing what to eat,
the nights of Chinese restaurants,
the night of Chinese buffets.
Oh how Chinese food has been my favorite cuisine,
the umami flavors,
the fortunes from fortune cookies,
how it overall itches my craving for Asian cuisine.
I am from the quiet moments spent in libraries,
reading for reading count points or,
for just pure pleasure.
As I read, the smell of the library would encapsulate me,
From the smell of freshly printed books with that new ink smell,
to dusty worn down old books with their aged pages,
one of the earliest memories I have from childhood.
I am from the misty and wet days,
the soil dampened,
water puddles here and there.
Rainy days I have always been drawn to,
that smell,
misty,
musty,
the smell that all Midwesterners are used to.
I am from the family event days,
we became prim and proper,
with dresses and suits.

The awful rich concoction of perfume and cologne,
from sweet smells,
to masculine smells,
mixing in the air around me causing a headache.
I am from...
I am from...
I am from...

Clarke Campbell

Age: 16, Grade: 12

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Megan Zmudczynski

Category: Short Story

Oblivion

“As if the winter-jays and juncos don’t make their noisy cries throughout the frozen months just the same!” Nelia whispered forcefully, struggling to keep her voice from bouncing up and around the sides of the marble archway where they were sitting. “No, the songbird’s tune doesn’t tell of a new spring’s arrival. I’m telling you, it’s all in the stars. That’s what my Da says. If they’re lined up just right... that’s when you know to expect greening in the leaves.” Princess Helena, already flushed from the chill of the nocturnal winds that crept from above the citadel’s outer ramparts, crimsoned even further with embarrassment.

“Oh... alright. I suppose it was a silly guess,” the Princess murmured softly in response, “but you are always mentioning the songbirds. What else does your father say? Mine gives advice all day, but it is never relevant to me, I fear.” Princess Helena tried to stay engaged, but her body was still pumped with adrenaline from the expedition she had just undertaken. She recalled crawling through those claustrophobic, dried-up water tunnels that led away from the palace kitchens, feeling the jagged limestone tear at her lilac nightgown as she made her escape – and she shuddered. Usually, Nelia would make the treacherous journey, and their conspiratorial whispers were confined to the Princess’ drawing room. At their last meeting, however, she had offered to show Helena the quaint leatherworker’s workshop and quarters just across the outer courtyard of the citadel, where she lived with her father. Thus, in the shadows of the palace proper’s wrought-iron portcullis and its arched marble frame, they had converged paths, and now sat waiting to cross the moonlit courtyard.

But before Nelia could respond to Helena’s query, her mouth poised open and her dark brows raised under her cropped hair, they heard the metallic rustling of chainmail and urgent, clinking footsteps just above them from atop the palace gateway. Helena’s azure eyes widened and her pupils contracted as she suddenly lost her balance, then righted herself by grabbing at the grooves in the marble beside her. Watching the Princess struggle to appear composed, a grin snaked across Nelia’s face. “What’re you so worried about?” she whispered eagerly. “That guard’s exactly what we’ve been waiting for. He’ll do a full loop around the wall before he’s back here again, looking out at us!” Grabbing hold of Helena’s sleeve, Nelia peeked out from around the archway’s corner, swung her head left and right, and drew her head back into the shadows, satisfied with the perceivable lack of life around. As the last fading footsteps atop the wall were replaced once more by the soft susurrations of the courtyard’s grass blades in the breeze, Nelia tugged hard on the Princess and gave the all-clear: “Go!”

Laughing and stumbling across the grassy expanse, the girls felt the soft, dew-covered lawn tickling their feet as wind howled in their ears. This kind of exhilaration was refreshing for Princess Helena; too often, she found that only her imagination could wander beyond the palace walls, while she stayed locked within them. And yet, she reminded herself, she would one day have a duty to her house, and to her people, as the reigning Queen; it was only natural that her Father kept her as safe as he could. Unlike the Princess, Nelia had been crawling across this green since before she could speak, and so her thoughts naturally turned to those memories of old. She traced lines in the grass as she ran and recalled those windy summer days when her Da would retrieve the pigskin kite he had fashioned from underneath his workbench, and entrust her with its care for the afternoon, for better or for worse; she watched her home draw ever nearer, like when those vernal thunderstorms would force her back inside on springtime afternoons; and she looked up into the sky, reliving those autumn nights with her Da spent out under the stars. “See there,” Da would say, gesturing with his crude leather sheets, each pockmarked with pinpoint holes and constellations drawn between them, “that’s just what I was looking for. If I line up this chart with the sky...” and in those moments, he would be lost in his own little world of exploration.

Finally, the delinquent pair reached the opposite end of the courtyard, and raced up to the front door of the citadel’s tannery. Nelia, breathing more deeply than usual after their brief exercise, began to open it –

“Wait!” interjected Helena breathlessly, huffing and puffing from the marathon they had just completed, “isn’t

your father in there, asleep?"

"Oh, no," Nelia replied casually. "He's out with the Kingsguard, fighting in the War. He'll be gone awhile, I reckon." While nobody had really explained to Nelia why her father had left with the Kingsguard's reserve force just a few days prior, Nelia guessed those moments with his eyes to the sky had something to do with it – and she felt the same tug of excitement and adventure that he did. In acknowledgement, the Princess nodded firmly, then motioned for Nelia to proceed. With the door swinging open, Nelia raised her hands and waved them around her, welcoming the Princess to her chambers, for a change.

With only the light of the moon, the instruments and furniture of the quarters remained draped in shadows. Once Nelia lit a wrought-iron candelabra, however, the room sprang to life. In one corner lay a book-binding press, topped with piles of blank binding covers, and haphazardly draped with neglected saddles and other knick-knacks. In another, a neatly laid-out row of boots sat arranged by size, replacements on-hand in case of footwear emergencies. Along the walls of the chamber were wardrobes filled with leather apparel, ranging from functional pants to fashionable hats – all in the same style, of course, that Nelia herself wore. And at the center of it all sat her father's workbench, on which one could just make out those leather star-charts from autumn nights past. In awe of the evident craftsmanship on display, Helena paced slowly around the room, tracing her fingertips on tabletops and ruffling through the clothes, as Nelia beamed on. As she passed the window opposite the doorway, Helena could just make out the outlines of animal carcasses of all types, illuminated by the moonlight and suspended from clotheslines in the back yard – and she moved quickly past it. When she had completed a full lap around the quarters, she stopped at the other side of the front door, where a plethora of tools sat hanging from a bolted rack. The Princess tried to identify them: she noted a mallet, a strange tool with spikes on all sides, a shovel, and in the very last spot on the rack, nothing.

"Is something usually hanging from this hook?" she enquired, turning towards Nelia. Without missing a beat, Nelia walked over to where she was standing near the rack and furrowed her eyebrows for a moment, before relaxing her face once more.

"Oh, aye, that's where Da's axe usually hangs. I suppose he decided to take that with him to the front. A mighty fine thing; the blade is engraved with your lion sigil and everything. I think he uses it mostly for carving up the animal parts –" Nelia faltered, noting the queasy expression on Helena's face, and decided that was enough description. "The animal parts, and all that." Helena nodded firmly again, grateful she had been spared the gory details. After a moment of silence, Nelia ventured timidly, "so, what do you think?"

But Helena didn't get the chance to respond. Suddenly, from the direction of the palace, came the clanging of the church-bells in their tower, signaling a wake-worthy emergency. Helena's stomach dropped. "They must have noticed I disappeared. Oh, dear. What have I done? Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear..." With each repetition of the phrase, Helena's breath got shakier and her words spilled out faster.

Nelia tried to mask her own fear and maintain the appearance of unbothered tranquility. "Don't worry. How will they know where you are?" She racked her brain for more solace to give, but Helena was no longer in her usual patient state.

"Those guards probably saw us run across the courtyard! How many other girls have a nightgown like this one? They will know I am in here simply by looking through the back window!" As if to confirm her suspicions, a faint rabble of voices could be heard from the courtyard, slowly increasing in volume. Quick on her feet, a solution formed in Nelia's mind.

"I've got it. Give me the nightgown, hide in the wardrobe, and when the guards come looking through the windows, they'll see me, all alone, and move on. Once they're gone, you can make your way back into the palace and convince everyone it's a false alarm!" After a moment's hesitation Helena gave her signature curt nod of agreement and they quickly began to swap clothes, conscious of the commotion of voices growing ever closer outside. After they finished, with the leather seams of her new attire chafing at her sides, Helena stumbled over to a wardrobe, squeezed inside, and shut the door, with only a keyhole to peep through – and without a second to spare, for just moments after she had shut herself in, the front door swung open, illuminating the room. With new light glinting off the gold-leaf highlights sewn into the lilac camisole she now sported, Nelia jerked her gaze from Helena's wardrobe to the door. There, occupying most of the doorway, stood a hulking, armor-plated man with a bushy brown beard and a bloodied cut across his cheek. From behind him, one could hear the crackling of flames and a continued hubbub of shouting.

"Princess, is that you?" the man drawled. "We've been looking all over for you, we have." Nelia grinned. How was it that this soldier, presumably an officer of the innermost palace Kingsguard, didn't know what the real Princess actually looked like? She decided to play along; the guard would get quite a shock when the King, or someone else, noticed his folly.

"Oh, thank heavens you found me! Yes, it is I. Worry not," Nelia declared, gesturing at the commotion outside, "you can call off all that clatter. I am right here, safe and sound." She stood up straight and smiled as she

thought Helena would. Confusion flashed across the face of the mountainous man, before it was replaced by a sneer and a strange look in his eyes.

“Aye then Princess, come along now,” the man beckoned, offering an outstretched arm to Nelia. “It’s time for us to leave.” With his other hand, he relaxed his grip on the axe that was sheathed at his left side and wiped away the blood that streaked from his cheek laceration.

From within the closet, Helena narrowed her eyes. What was Nelia playing at? The plan had been to lay low, not get herself right into the thick of it! Furthermore, she didn’t recognize this warrior, which imparted an odd feeling upon her; after all, she spent hours every day interacting with the palace guardsmen, and sometimes inspected their ranks alongside her Father. The soldier didn’t even look like he came from any of the noble families that sent their sons to the palace Kingsguard! Perhaps, she conceded, he was a common-born guardsman from the outer citadel or one of the substitutes for the men that were away at war. Regardless of the soldier’s provenance, Helena thought, she hoped Nelia knew what she was doing.

“Thank you, good sir,” Nelia replied, moving to accept his upturned palm. Suddenly, she hesitated, and her face contorted with a sympathetic pained expression. “Actually, sorry. I had better blow out the candles first. Just one moment.” Before the man could object, she turned and walked towards the flickering candlesticks in the corner furthest from Helena. The soldier stepped into the room, as if to follow her, but only took a few steps in her direction before stopping again, his hand still outstretched. In the wardrobe, Helena’s eyes widened – for as the man had stepped out of the doorway, she was now able to see past him into the courtyard. The crackling flames that had lit up the chamber were not from the fires of search-party torches or bonfires; rather, the citadel was aflame!

All around the courtyard, flames raged along the citadel walls, and even the portcullis gateway of the palace itself had been reduced to rubble and embers. Helena watched as men dragged bloodied soldiers around the grassy expanse and knelt over strewn bodies. Even the field itself was speckled with burned patches of dead grass. As the shock finally subsided, she realized: the War had come to their home. The Princess began to panic. Why hadn’t the guardsman told them what had happened? Was her Father alright? Her mind racing, Helena’s gaze shifted back into the room, where Nelia was blowing out the last of the candle flames, and reassessed the unknown soldier. Strapped across the man’s back was a longsword – strange, considering he also carried that axe, which, from the side, she could see in its entirety. Engraved on the head of the axe, peppered with dark-red bloodstains, were two regal-looking lions: the emblem of her royal house, and the same symbol that Nelia had described her father’s axe sporting. Helena’s stomach dropped. This man was no Kingsguard.

With all of the candles extinguished, Nelia turned back towards the soldier with a smile. This time, when she accepted his hand, he clasped her arm and turned towards the door. As they walked across the room, Helena panicked. Shouldn’t she warn her friend? But, if she did, what would happen to her? Perhaps he would release Nelia when he realized she was not the Princess, she reasoned; would that ever happen if Helena gave herself up?

The two of them reached the doorframe, and Nelia finally noticed the carnage and destruction that had occurred outside. Taking in the horror, her smile vanished and her eyes widened. The soldier, noticing her reaction, laughed heartily, his shoulders bouncing up and down. “What’s the matter, Princess?” he choked out between his chortling. “Not what you expected?” As she tried to wrench her arm away from him, he tutted, “don’t worry darling, no reason to run. You’ll see your daddy soon enough, you will. Let’s go!” Nelia stopped her struggling, her face still contorted with fear, and the soldier stepped out through the doorframe, tugging on her arm for her to follow suit. One last time, Nelia looked around the room, then straight at the keyhole of Helena’s wardrobe with a plea of help written in her eyes.

With lines of tears running down her face, the Princess pursed her lips and softly cleared her throat. No, she decided coldly, she wouldn’t intervene. She would one day be the Queen of her people, and she couldn’t sacrifice that now – especially not now, as her Father might be dead. And so she broke her contact with Nelia’s vulnerable gaze and stared past her, out into the night sky, until Nelia was pulled through the doorway. Once she had disappeared, Helena sobbed silently once more.

Out in the courtyard, Nelia squinted, her eyes not yet adjusted to the bright flames atop the buildings that surrounded them as he pulled her along. Hopefully, she thought, he would lock her in the palace, from which she knew how to leave undetected, and the whole mess would be over. Suddenly, however, the soldier stopped walking, grabbed Nelia with both hands, and slung her over his left shoulder. The last vestige of her hope for an easy escape vanished when her captor turned in the other direction from the palace and began striding quickly towards the citadel’s outer drawbridge. Where was he taking her? Was her Da there?

After some time, they passed through the citadel’s entrance and entered the surrounding forest, where the sound of roaring flames faded into the rustling of trees and whistling of songbirds. Unsure of her future, but beyond the citadel’s walls for the first time, Nelia looked to the skies above her, at those stars that her father cherished so dearly, sighed, and closed her eyes.

Clarke Campbell

Age: 16, Grade: 12

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Shannon Koropchak

Category: Critical Essay

Fundamentally Adrift

“Because you’re mine / I walk the line.” This refrain from Johnny Cash’s 1957 hit, ‘I Walk the Line’, is emblematic of a constant struggle, and failing, of the characters in Jhumpa Lahiri’s breakthrough novel, *The Namesake*. In the novel, protagonist Gogol Ganguli and antagonist Moushumi Mazoomdar both struggle to ‘walk the line’ between their Bengali heritage and their adopted cultures, American and French, in the interest of themselves and their relationship. Gogol, for example, feels American in all respects and frustratingly can’t view India as the *desh* that his relatives do, while Moushumi is determined not to become the ideal, submissive Bengali woman that her parents always groomed her to be. Neither character truly reverses course nor embraces Bengali culture by the end of the novel – however, Gogol eventually returns to his family, despite permanent cultural & perspective differences, while Moushumi abandons hers and suffers the consequences. Through Moushumi’s creeping, downward spiral in *The Namesake*, Lahiri shows the tangible danger in abandoning your familial roots and inherited morals in favor of your own synthetic ones.

After constant self-scrutiny and self-consciousness in adolescence and early adulthood, Gogol has permanently rid himself of any notion of Bengali culture in his worldview by the time he and Moushumi are together. This is most evident when he attends the “ABCD” panel at Yale, “ponders certain awkward truths”, and confesses to himself that “he avoids [other Indian-American students], for they remind him too much of the way his parents choose to live...” (Lahiri 126-127). By this time in his life, Gogol already recognizes his aversion to and lack of Bengali culture. One might rebut that Gogol’s relationship with Moushumi shows his deference towards his Bengali culture and roots. After all, their courtship begins as a result of Ashima’s “ask[ing] him if he might be willing to call someone” (Lahiri 205), at the request of Moushumi’s parents – seemingly ‘arranged’. Literary critic Benjamin Austen pokes at this idea of Gogol’s relationship/marriage as a cultural reinvigoration in his 2003 piece “In the Shadow of Gogol”, but finds shallowness, contending that “[Gogol’s] eventual marriage to one of the Bengalis who used to attend birthdays and holidays at his parents’ home, and his subsequent acceptance of all things Indian, reads like an unearned form of redemption...” (Austen 32). Austen correctly observes that what he sees as Gogol’s ‘reconnection with his heritage’ feels undeserved. However, he does not go far enough to find the real root of this perceived superficiality, choosing instead to define it as simply an unsatisfactory ending to Gogol’s character arc. Really, there is no cultural reconnection – Gogol doesn’t “subsequently accept” all things Indian – and he never returns to his culture. Gogol’s relationship with Moushumi *actually* forms as a result of each of their romantic failures, particularly Gogol’s loss of Maxine and Moushumi’s fiasco with Graham, and a desperation for companionship drives them together. Their previous semi-acquaintanceship, their “very familiarity” (213), is what convinces Gogol to see her again, rather than the prospect of satisfying Bengali norms. Even at his wedding, Gogol “thinks of his parents, strangers until [their marriage], ... and he is astonished by his parents’ courage, the obedience...” (235). Clearly, Gogol does not strive to replicate his parents’ Bengali experience nor bend to/adopt the norms that compelled them to be married. Even in the most culturally-charged moment of his life, Gogol overlooks his “traditional” culture; it is clear that his “Bengali-ness” is all but absent.

Moushumi also purges herself of any Bengali culture, and does so even more radically than Gogol does, building an entirely new persona to serve her cultural avoidance and repression. Similar to Gogol, Moushumi begins slipping away from her Bengali culture in adolescence, but initially remains outwardly submissive to her parents, with “her obedience, her long, unstyled hair, her piano lessons and lace-collared shirts.” (Lahiri 229). That changes in college, when, “[w]ithout telling them, [she] pursued a double major in French... and [she] moved to Paris.” (229). At this point in her life, she has gone so far as to synthetically insert herself into a new culture in the pursuit of “transform[ing] into the kind of girl she had once envied, had believed she would never become.” (230). Through her French life, she “ha[s] reinvented herself, without misgivings, without guilt” (248); and as David Bromwich writes in

“The Man Without Qualities”, “[t]he academic-bohemian milieu in which she moves is deftly rendered, bourgeois, postmodern, turning everything to style, instructed in all the relevant forms of care of the self.” (Bromwich 37). What Bromwich fails to recognize, however, is that this ‘milieu’ has entirely been constructed by Moushumi with the intended purpose of permanently severing her connection with her Bengali culture. Lahiri expressly declares that “[i]mmersing herself in ... a third culture, had been [Moushumi’s] refuge—she approached French, unlike things American or Indian, without guilt, or misgiving, or expectation of any kind. It was easier to turn her back on the two countries that could claim her in favor of one that had no claim whatsoever.” (Lahiri 229). Moushumi’s innate desire to erase her Bengali culture is also explicitly indulged when “[students] assume she herself is French, or half-French. She enjoys their looks of disbelief when she tells them she is from New Jersey, born to Bengali parents.” (270). From this anecdote and Lahiri’s description, it is clear that Moushumi wholeheartedly hates any association with Bengali culture, as she rejoices when her attempts to mask and repress it are in any way successful.

Evidently, both Gogol and Moushumi have either passively or actively rejected most of their inherited Bengali *cultural norms*. However, only Gogol eventually redresses his adolescent evasion from his *family*, and does so well before his marriage and the climax of his adult life, while he is dating Maxine. Initially finding solace in the degree of independence and autonomy that Maxine, Gerald, and Lydia enjoy in their household, upon the sudden death of his father, Gogol realizes that he has abandoned the people that seek his companionship the most – his family. Drawn back home, he once again participates in the Bengali customs, alongside his mother and sister, that he generally scorned throughout his early life. Lahiri describes how Gogol used to feel about such customs: “Gogol remembers having to do the same [obligatory meal ritual] when he was younger, when his [father’s] parents died... He remembers, back then, being bored by it, annoyed ...” whereas “[n]ow, ... this meatless meal is the only thing that makes sense.” (194). His father’s passing has jolted Gogol out of his previous adolescent disdain for spending time with his family and partaking in Bengali culture, though he still doesn’t incorporate a shred of Bengali culture into his life. After this change in mindset, back at his architecture firm in New York, Gogol maintains a generally constant level of connection with his family, and tolerates all of his quasi-related *mamas, masīs, pises* and *pisīs*. Gogol has resolved his struggle and “guilty-by-association” mindset towards his family in relation to what he treats as disagreeable Bengali cultural norms, and he has struck a balance between reconnecting with his family and leading a new life.

By contrast, Moushumi never seeks to recreate a healthy relationship with her family after her adolescence. Her parents and family are rarely mentioned throughout her narration, generally relegated to anecdotes of when she ‘hated herself’, and she certainly does not appreciate them as Gogol grows to appreciate his mother and sister. This lack of connection is especially visible in regards to the fallout of Moushumi’s disengagement with Graham. Lahiri discloses, through a conversation between Donald and Gogol, that “it was ... with Donald and Astrid, that [Moushumi] spent her darkest hour. That it was [with them] she’d mourned for another man...”, as opposed to her own parents, or her own brother (258). Where Gogol reunites with his family in his time of need, after his father’s death, Moushumi further entrenches herself into her academically-created life. Clearly, Bromwich’s ‘milieu’ is not just the bare, societal environment in which Moushumi grew into adulthood; rather, Moushumi’s ‘bourgeois, postmodern’ personality is an artificial creation, not just borne specifically out of disdain for her Bengali culture and family, but serving as her makeshift moral compass and refuge in their absence.

It is this entirely synthetic persona that creates, as Bromwich describes, Moushumi’s “gathering recognition that she is fundamentally adrift” (Bromwich 37), which ultimately leads to her cheating on Gogol, and their divorce. Moushumi has been so dedicated to her new personality through her whole adult life that she can’t kick the habit of distancing herself from anything, or anyone, culturally familiar. Even when they’re married, she constantly chases the anonymity that she fled to, after college, in Paris. As she falls into adultery with Dimitri, she finds satisfaction, as “there are no Bengali fruit sellers to greet her on the way from Dimitri’s subway stop, no neighbors to recognize her once she turns onto Dimitri’s block. It reminds her of living in Paris, for a few hours... she is inaccessible, anonymous.” (Lahiri 281). It is this sensation that compels her to continue to cheat on Gogol with Dimitri, snowballing into the eventual destruction of their marriage and divorce. Despite this obviously tangible negative effect, there is no self-introspection or sign of recognition of its causes by Moushumi anywhere in the novel, because Moushumi has lost the ability to judge her new moral compass against that of her inherited familial norms. Bromwell writes, “[it] is ironic in the sense that we are made to see things about Moushumi that she does not see about herself.” (Bromwell 37). This is a well-founded observation; that irony is only possible because Moushumi lacks a system of comparing herself and her synthesized perspective on the world against those of her family members, looking instead to the superfluous facets of the persona she has built around herself.

Gogol and Moushumi’s initial trajectories in life are not vastly different, as they both attempt to break away from the culture they’ve inherited and the family that subscribes to that culture. As the novel progresses, however, Lahiri voices a clear pattern through her portrayals of these characters: Gogol and Moushumi are both lost without the influence of their families. Gogol wises up and reconnects, but Moushumi, in her attempt to build a new artificial

version of herself, loses sight of real values and morals – and this is never resolved. Lahiri, through Moushumi's deterioration, shows how distancing yourself from your heritage and the values of your family in favor of something else comes with the great risk that you never regain those values, nor a healthy and dependable moral compass – and you might find yourself “fundamentally adrift” forever.

Simon Chacey

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Blue Valley North High School, Overland Park, KS

Educator: Storm Shaw

Category: Poetry

CopyCat

Copy Cat

I see it every day,
The ways that people change.
No one knows who changed themselves first,
But no copycat could have been the first.
No one knows the original shadow,
You can not tell the second first,
One thing still stands, painfully true,
They make themselves for others to approve.
This craft they have truly refined,
Like an ancient song,
Or a long-lost rhyme.
They build themselves off of others
Off our peers and off our brothers,
All to form an outer cover,
Of a "perfect" lie to shelter us from one another
But a copycats dance is full of danger,
It's a gambling game, our identity the wager.
We mustn't slip off our cat walk beam
Or we might lose ourselves to an endless sea.
For this is what a CopyCat does.
Hate it we might, we dace it because,
The thoughts of under-achievement and self-disgust,
Line our brains like a corrosive husk. Whether from whispers deep within from a silver-tongued liar,
Or an evil friend.
We've crafted a prison that we call our "disguise"
We were given a mountain made of hate and lies.
A boulder of pressure, heavy with the idea,
That being enough is an idiotic idea.
But we made the thought, the punishment for ourselves,
That we must push it to the top, and live Sisyphu's hell.
Why it is we transform ourselves to fit another's life,
Why it is we change ourselves, with so much pain and spite,
Why it is we playing a character not meant for us to play,
Why it is we craft a mold of fools' gold and pain?
We add in all the little things that might be desired,
Where Careful not to miss a single thing that is required,
By carefully analyzing the one that we truly admire.
We've now just made a crypt and lit ourselves on fire,
Using the burning hatred that our real self is not desired.
When we arise from our crypt "anew"
We have the same internal fire

But now we have the shell that we believe that they desire.
We have it all but still aren't done
For this is the curse, the CopyCat's "fun.
I'm sorry to inform you,
I broke the only rule,
I wasn't careful and I slipped
I feel like such a fool.

Jackson Chou

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Mary Institution & St Louis Day School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Tex Tourais

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

The Unfamiliarity of Family

It is December of 1967. My mother stands outside JFK Airport, and sees snow for the first time as it lightly frosts the unfamiliar landscape of an unfamiliar country. She was born not too far away from where she stands now at four years old. Yet, to my mother, this is not her home. Her home lies thousands of miles away in Taiwan where the bright sun and perpetual heat are a far cry from the winter that lies before her now. My mother is wearing a thick, black, hooded cape that her Taiwanese grandmother made for her. She remembers her grandma telling her how cold America is and attempting to describe snow to her. The Mandarin word for America is “mei guo,” which translates literally to “beautiful country.” But my mother doesn’t focus on the frigid beauty around her; she is too busy looking at the people. For the first time that she can remember, she sees her parents; they are waiting with a group of their friends. Despite never seeing them in person, she recognizes her parents because, in all the different homes in Taiwan that my mother lived in with her grandparents, there always were the same two black-and-white studio portraits of her parents looking down at her from high up on the walls. Whenever my mother looked at those portraits, she would see deities instead of doting parents because they were the source of the wondrous gifts that arrived from the glorious land called America. The irony is lost on her in the moment, but my mother is now standing in that glorious land itself, and as she sees her parents for the first time, the snow heralds the upcoming Christmas holiday season and the many gifts to come. Her mother calls her over to take a picture. Her grand fur coat and red clothes for good fortune contrast heavily with my mother’s black cape which engulfs her as if to shield her from this foreign country. Instinctually, my mother understands that her admirers are watching her closely with adoration, waiting to see how the cute little girl will react to snow. Living with her grandparents as an only child had made her accustomed to attention, so she begins to imagine her parents and their friends as a clamoring crowd and her as a grand movie star. She indulges them by acting extra surprised about the snow to give them the perfect picture of an awestruck child as they ooh and ahh in Chinese delight. In reality, she feels no great excitement or wonder towards the novelty of the snowy environment. The festive spirit of the holidays and the foreign nature of a new country are bittersweet as my mother remembers the traumatic events leading to her arrival.

In Taiwan, she had gone to the airport with her grandparents and a Chinese couple who were family friends. She recalls the adults leading her onto the plane to see what it looked like on the inside before boarding. It was only when the crew made an announcement in Mandarin signaling takeoff that my mother realized her grandparents were gone. In an attempt to quell the tide of tears that burst from my mother, the couple told her that they were taking her to America to see her parents. But my mother was inconsolable, and the idea of meeting her parents did not alleviate her wailing because all she could picture were the formal, stylish portraits that she saw hanging on the wall. As the flight went on, my mother calmed down. One of the adults even took a photo of her. In it, my mother smiles in the window seat, facing the camera, with a half-eaten meal on a tray that is almost as large as her four-year-old frame. She seems to be in good spirits: a cherry sits submerged halfway in a dessert that my mother is enjoying. Someone seems to have pulled down the window, as if to take a glance at the world outside. But as I observe the photo longer, I begin to see the stress showing through my mother’s tentative smile. The best in-flight meal would be unable to fully appease my mother; the creamy swirls of the melted dessert do little to replace the grandparent-sized hole in her heart. After they landed in Japan, my mother stayed in a hotel room by herself. Unable to drift off to sleep during that night, my mom was overcome by the sudden fear that she would wet the bed. She had never wet the bed before, but the sense of loneliness that accompanied the feeling turned to a paranoia that meant something else entirely. It was a manifestation of the realization that she wouldn’t be going back home, that this was only the first leg of a long journey, that she was going farther and farther away from home.

I have never known anything like that displacement that my mother felt that day. My childhood was spent not only in the same country but in the same city, in the same house, on the same street in the same neighborhood. After I was born, my mother spoke to me in Mandarin. When my paternal grandmother visited and heard her speaking to me, she incredulously inquired why my mother even bothered to talk to me when I was a baby devoid of any comprehension. When my mother told my father what my grandmother had said, my father told my mother to keep speaking to me, and she persisted. As I grew older, I began to converse with my mother in Mandarin. Occasionally, I would ask my father for something in Mandarin, and when he looked confused, I would forlornly exclaim out loud, also in Mandarin, “Daddy doesn’t understand, go find Mommy.” Then, I’d run off to look for my mother. But my English began to develop too. Naturally, my first English word was “Mom,” delighting my mother and father alike. I can imagine that my father’s delight was diminished slightly after my second word was “golf cart,” and not “Dad”; he could hardly blame me since we lived next to the fourteenth hole and I spent my days sitting by the window watching the many carts pass by. As I spent more time in grade school, I began to use English more and more and Mandarin less and less. When I was in first grade, my mother enrolled me in a Chinese school that would meet on Sundays. I was appalled. In the eyes of a first grader, two hours on a Sunday every week during the schoolyear was akin to solitary confinement in the depths of Guantanamo. The Chinese school was in a drab, beige building in Maryland Heights that was the former headquarters of Panera Bread Company. The school board seemed to have made zero renovations after acquiring the building; each classroom had placards denoting each room as a different type of bread. The result was a dimly lit learning experience that smelled of focaccia and despair. During classes, I would always try to sit next to the window to see life passing me by. All I saw through the thick blinds was the sparsely populated parking lot, its sandy pavement sprawled under the hot sun that was only interrupted by the rare mirage of cars passing by. Unfortunately, I soon found that the boring exterior was a façade when it came to the workload. It didn’t take long before I was slaving away at a seemingly endless pile of Chinese homework. It was supremely unfair. Why must I toil away at homework on the dinner table as my other monolingual friends were free to frolic about? Although my Chinese improved greatly as a result, I saw my mother as a “tiger mom” who was set on tearing up my leisure time with the claws of education.

My mother knew two words in English upon arriving to America. The words were “brown” and “ok”, and my mother only knows them because those were the only words her grandfather chose to teach her. She added the phrase “Happy New Year” to her lexicon after hearing it many times shortly after arriving. She assumed that it was used as a general exclamation for happiness, so the phrase sticks and she uses it inappropriately, itching to shout “Happy New Year” whenever something mildly jovial occurs in the summertime. Other than that, my mother knows no English when she enters kindergarten in Kingston, New York. When the class does a game of show-and-tell, my mother doesn’t understand what they are doing. One of her classmates chooses to talk about their dog as an example. My mother doesn’t understand most of what she hears, but she recognizes the word “dog,” reminding her of the little brown terrier that she had in Taiwan. When it is her turn, she assumes that the assignment is to talk about dogs, and she fabricates a story about her parents getting her a new puppy to play with. But this is merely a lie; her dog is still eons away with her grandparents in Taiwan. At the end of the school year, her teacher talks with her mother and advises her to let my mother repeat kindergarten, because she just simply isn’t understanding what is going on during class. During the drive home, she overhears her mother staunchly declare in Mandarin, “My daughter is not stupid. She simply doesn’t understand English,” and somewhere behind her stern gaze, the matter is settled: my mother will move on to first grade. All young children are especially fast at picking up new languages, and it soon becomes evident that my mother is no exception.

It is May of 2022. The room is soft with the low hum of the air conditioning as my mother finishes telling me about her childhood. My mother waits as I jot down the last few notes to our interview; my tired fingers work clumsily at the keyboard. The silence is especially welcome for my father dozing in the adjacent bedroom. The corner of my computer shows an hour that makes me want to perform a trust fall into the soft and springy hotel pullout. If not for the sly whispering of procrastination, I would have finished this interview hours ago. I silently curse my aimlessness when I realize that I have no free period to save me tomorrow, that I will have to drag myself to school in mere hours. This schoolyear seems like it will never end. My griping seems trivial as I study my mother. I had always heard about how my mother moved around many times as a child, but I never realized the true extent of my mother’s relocations until now. I glance at my notes from our interview. After arriving in America, my mom only lived in Kingston for one year until her father takes a job at a different IBM in Poughkeepsie and moves the family with him after my mother’s first grade year. My mother interrupts me as I try to imagine her childhood through my computer screen. She jokes that IBM was known for moving its workers so often that people coined the company “I’ve Been Moved.” The moniker is witty and accurate; my mother had indeed been moved by the omnipotent corporate grasp of IBM. But as I try to imagine the fear and stress of my mother as she tried to cope with yet

another displacement at such a young age, I can barely muster a weak chuckle. Trying to recap my mother's childhood, I check over my notes again. I have just read one sentence when my grandfather's department gets transferred to Gaithersburg, Maryland and my mother must start making friends again to start off third grade. Merely three bullet points later, my mother moves to Fishkill, New York in the middle of third grade; her stay in Fishkill only lasts another three bullet points before my mother finds herself in Hyde Park just in time to finish her fourth grade school year. I close my eyes for a beat and mentally picture my notes as a timeline of my mother's childhood. Four sections of neatly bulleted notes represent the four separate moves my mother made during the time between second grade to fourth grade. A warm wave of shame washes over me when I try to imagine the numerous farewell parties, goodbyes, forgotten friends, and awkward introductions that my mother has gone through. The longest time my mother stayed in one place was in her house in Hyde Park from fourth grade until tenth grade, which was when "She'd Been Moved" once again back to Poughkeepsie for her junior year. I have always lived in my beloved ranch from infancy. In fact, the only reason that we aren't at home now is our malfunctioning air conditioning unit; with a flourish of frugal Chinese magic and some frequent traveler points, my mother got us a room at a nearby hotel for one night. The irony of this revelation only flood me further with embarrassment. Our home's faulty air conditioning pales in comparison to the fretful night my mother had in her hotel in Tokyo. Displaced all her childhood, my mother literally never got to experience any semblance of security compared to the home that I take for granted. She had to cope with the culture shock of a new country coupled with the distance between herself and her parents, not to mention the many other moves from school to school or even. Yet, my mother persevered; she eventually developed from "brown" and "ok" in Kindergarten to a dual major in English and Finance at a college so prestigious that I feel underqualified even uttering its name. Contrastingly, my lack of motivation grows more and more obvious to me every day as I lose sleep doing homework night after night. This behavior could be easily explained under any one of the conditions that my mother experienced, but nothing could be further from the truth. I have never moved houses, much less cities or countries. I have never spent more than a sleepover's duration away from my parents. I have never moved schools other than the time when I moved about 10 minutes from my elementary school to my current school where I made even more friends than before. In Chinese school, I had to learn a foreign language, but this was hardly out of necessity as my mother forced me to do it. I even stopped going to Chinese school after I started my new middle school in fifth grade; since then, I have forgotten almost all of the Mandarin I knew. My head begins to spin as the air conditioning hums on. My mother overcame the unthinkable challenge of constant movement and displacement as a child to build a better life for herself; I was gifted the most stable childhood possible and I can't finish my homework without getting an obscenely low amount of sleep. I cannot escape the truth: I am a failure. I almost feel my grandparents frowning down upon me. Countless generations of Chous and Suns who, like my mother, faced the toughest odds and overcame them had culminated in me, a sickly branch at the end of a mighty family tree....

My mother notices my distress and asks me what's wrong. I dump the ugly truth before her, that I am a failure, and that I'm sorry for turning out this way compared to her. I tell her that I don't deserve any of the childhood that I grew up in, that I have been spoiled beyond belief. With a small smile, my mother looks at me patiently. She reminds me that, in most cultures, the main goal of each generation is to give the next generation a brighter future. My despair lessens as I consider the implications of her wisdom. I think back to my grandparents, who had to escape a war-torn China to Taiwan before riding boats to America to start new lives. I think of how my grandfather was the only one on his journey to America not to get seasick in the unforgiving Atlantic, how the conditions in the boat were worlds away from the in-flight meal and tasteful interior of the jet my mother rode from Taiwan to America. I think of how my grandparents sent money back to their families in Taiwan, how the reason they had to send my mother to live in Taiwan was because they were busy working in medical school to support more than just themselves. I think of how, when Rawlings wanted my dad to move to Japan, my mother adamantly refused to move until I had finished fourth grade because she didn't want me to experience the same feeling of unfamiliarity that she had grown so used to. I think of how that move never fell through, how I stayed in the same house so long that I had to adjust to someone simply removing a rug that I had grown used to. Through the frostiness of the guilt in the back of my mind, I think of my mother outside the airport, an apprehensive little girl who would end up building me a home that she had dreamed of herself all those years ago in the snow.

Suzan Clinton

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Lindbergh High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Grace Jones

Category: Short Story

Orpheus

Soft, golden light cascades over the room, twinkling across the ruby tiles. I feel all eyes turn to me as I walk toward the staircase, extending my hand toward the gilded banister. I turn to my head and observe the room before me. A crowd of people, all dressed in their finest clothes, await me expectantly around an empty dance floor. Candlelight from the magnificent crystal chandelier above me shimmers down and sets the distinguished ballroom aglow. Delicious smells of rich chocolate and fresh bread beckon me forward. Farther from me, in the host's quarters, are my friends, beaming up at me. Henri gives me a double thumbs-up, and Kerry signals, "Good luck!" Tomas bows elegantly low, and my sister flashes me a proud smile.

And there, at the bottom of the staircase, stands Kayden. He looks beautiful. His hair is tousled, precise yet imperfect. He is wearing a trimmed, grey suit with a pink pocket square. The pocket square is the same color as my dress, the same early-morning shade of pink. He allows a sophisticated smirk and nods his head. To my right, the members of the orchestra, dressed in polished black, raise their instruments and begin to play Bach's third orchestral suite. I feel a grin creep over my features as I start to make my way down the long, curved staircase. *He requested our song.*

The velvet carpet cushions my footsteps. I take measured, even strides, the way I had practiced for so long. I seem to walk for an eternity. My flushed fingers trace the cool railing, providing a sense of stability. My heart is racing, but finally, *finally*, I reach the bottom of the staircase. My breath becomes shallow as I pause, two steps before Kayden. He bows, low and graceful, offering his hand to me. I mirror him, dipping into a smooth curtsy as I lightly place my palm in his. He takes my hand, guiding me upward and to the dance floor. His hand is warm, and he doesn't let go.

We walk to the center, balancing our steps with the beat of the song. His steady preparedness is all that is keeping me walking now. Although I'm trying my best to hide it, it must be obvious that I'm nervous. Kayden glances at me: I must be shaking. By the time we reach the center of the floor, my stomach is doing flips. Kayden turns me to face him, but I don't meet his eyes. It is all I can do to stare at the floor. *What if I don't belong here? What if I never have, and I never will? All these people must be so disappointed, the intelligent Ohtori heir fell in love with a nobody, and a commoner, of all people. She isn't smart, and she isn't wealthy: she will destroy the family name! Get rid of her, get her out now-!*

"Mae." I look up at him. He is calm, his gaze is cautious but soft. "You can do this. You know how to waltz." He places his hand on my waist, and I raise my quivering hand to his shoulder. We extend our connected hands and he takes the first step. I follow his lead slowly, *down-up-up, down-up-up*, and we're off.

Though it's a slow waltz, we glide and twirl across the ballroom. It's all so fast, but my heart begins to beat with excitement. I realize that I'm finally where I'm meant to be, after all this time. It wasn't easy for Kayden and me. Heck, it wasn't easy for any of us. So many times, we almost broke, we almost left, we almost gave up entirely. But we fought for each other, we kept our broken little found family together through all the crap in the world. And here we are. We're alive. We're happy. And we're *finally* free.

I can't help it: I smile up at Kayden. I'm so proud of us. I think he's sharing the same pride because he smiles back before he spins me, causing my rosy dress to twirl around me. I laugh as I turn to meet him, because it's not part of the dance, but it was perfect anyway. But I look up, and he's gone.

Instead, I'm staring up at my stained, gray ceiling. Dirty sunlight oozes through the broken window behind me, gleaming like oil over the greasy smears that cover my walls and floors. A shabby old cat yowls in the street, somehow audible over the city traffic. Instead of a gown, I'm blanketed in ratty, yellowing bedsheets peppered with gaping holes and an even dirtier nightshirt. I quickly realize the bright, sunny feeling I had been experiencing didn't exist. *It was just a dream.*

I let out an exasperated, disgruntled sigh. I throw off the covers, scowling, and march across the green, crunchy

carpet of my bedroom to my closet. It smells like mold and mothballs as I dig through the misshapen hangers holding my dingy clothes. I find what I'm looking for, a weathered, cardboard box filled with tediously folded, untouched, pure white letters. The nicest thing I have. I tuck it gingerly under my wing and walk to the bathroom. I stomp over the broken tile, not caring what damage it does to my feet now. I yank open the medicine cabinet, pausing to catch a glimpse of my reflection. I don't see the beautiful girl I was minutes before. I see a thin, disgusting shell of a person. Her stony eyes are sunken and void of any light. Her dark hair is choppy and matted. Her pale skin is dirty and aged beyond her years. She looks like trash. *She is trash.*

I feel a wave of rage swell in me and I scream, punching the mirror. The glass shatters, falling to the floor, filling the sink, scratching my skin. I don't feel it.

I grab a bottle out of the cabinet and tear off the cap. I take the box, which I had dropped a moment before, and set it gently on the black, cracked toilet seat. I make sure its contents are safe and pick off the letter on top. In my best handwriting, the word *Kayden* is scrawled on top. I tuck the note, the smallest of all, into my bra. I take a deep breath and give a final thought to my life: the dresses, the ballrooms, my friends. The warm safety of that world calls me from far away. I look at the mirror, a single shard of glass left in place, which reflects a single eye, vibrant green and full of light. I smile, I *laugh*, as the bright, warm world I love comes closer. I raise the bottle to my lips and swallow the little white beads inside like candy. *Dream on.*

Eli Clubbs

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Jackson Senior High School, Jackson, MO

Educator: Abigail Beckwith

Category: Short Story

Dennis Down-Low

"Hello everyone and welcome back to the 'Dennis Down-Low'! My last post about a motel I stayed at brought my blog... fifty new readers! So a BIG thank you to any new 'Down-Lowers' reading now! This week I'm staying at a motel called the 'Wind-Down' in Merkel, Missouri! So far it's less impressive than the 'Sleep Inn' from the previous post, but we'll see! The next part of this post will be written in an hour or so after I've had time to take in the atmosphere" Dennis Murkwater had been writing his blog for years and had hundreds of posts under his belt. Punctuation had always been the bane of his writing. The cursor flashed imposingly in front of him. He just needed to add an exclamation mark. His posts received two more readers on average if he had a joyful tone. He always had to struggle to hold the shift key. It inevitably jammed whenever he needed it most. Though he collected and sold antiques for a living, the shift key always reminded him that some things should never be bought second-hand. The key finally crunched down under the pressure of his pinky. He slid his left index finger onto the '1' key, *"to take in the atmosphere!!"* With the punctuation complete, he slid his legs out from underneath the cramped desk and clambered out of the stiff wooden chair that had been his "writing throne" since arriving in room 27 approximately two hours ago.

His eyes needed a break from the bleak, human-manufactured light radiating from his ten-inch screen. He could find nothing better to do with himself than to pace the confined room. After setting his glasses down on the desk by his chunky gray laptop, he gazed around the room. In all of his travels, Dennis developed a theory that every motel room was shaped like a P. Of course, the floor plan is technically a rectangle. But it always had a bathroom placed in the corner, leaving residents with a P worth of living space. Dennis ended up just pacing on the line of the P. Tucked into the bottom curve of the P sat a bed covered with an ugly-looking comforter. The tiny wooden desk pressed up next to it completed the outside of the hump and connected to the bottom. The single dingy window rested on the wall to the left of the desk. The window was made to look even more insignificant from the bulky air conditioning unit haphazardly strapped onto it. The window-air-conditioner combo completed the top of the letter-shaped room. The weak gray light that was cast from the window drearily lit the spindly walkway of the room. The light twisted and reflected its way to the door across from the window at the other end of the room. Surprisingly, no television set existed anywhere within the room due to a lack of space. That docked some serious points from the overall review in Dennis's mind. His readers would be hearing about it too.

He began to work himself into a sort of flow state of pacing and thinking about his writing. How could he get more readers? When would advertisers reach out to him? How much money could he honestly pull in? This line of thinking terminated once he started to feel the overhead lights begin to beat down on him. A sudden yet terrible migraine formed against the back of his head. He quickly completed another lap of the room, reaching the window and briefly gazing out into the overwhelming blackness of the night. He swiveled on his back foot, briefly adopting the stance of a power-walker. Once he had paced back toward the light switch by the door, he reached out and shut off the lights in the room while maintaining the rhythm of his movement. In his mind, any disturbance to the beat his feet were keeping would result in disaster. Feeling his way back through the unfamiliar space, he bumped into the bed and flopped onto it face-down. The room began to rumble as he did, causing him to pop his head back up and stare out at the creeping darkness. He searched the room for a sign of what could've caused such a sound.

"The air conditioner must have kicked into full gear," he conceded to himself quietly. He allowed his eyes to close once again. The warm waves of sleep began to lap at his sides. Despite the bed being stiff and lumpy, the peacefulness of an oncoming nap stood as an oasis from the pain of the migraine growing at the back of his head. As he began to sink into the sea of sleep that flowed all about him, he felt something skitter across his back. Agonizing chills shot down his spine. He involuntarily jerked up and then began to probe up and down his back, searching for any form of irregularity. He concluded his search after feeling nothing especially out of the ordinary. He chalked it up to old age creeping upon him. Turning 40 hovered above him like a guillotine. He needed to get his back problems

checked out. He had filed that down on the list in his head titled, “Things I Need After I Can Monetize my Blog” about two months ago. It will happen eventually. It will all fall into place. He just needed to give it enough time. His part-time job of selling discovered antiques became less and less fruitful as the months went on. Merkel had ended up being a profit wasteland. It had been a long shot in the first place. But Dennis was surprised that absolutely nobody hunted antiques in the area.

While pondering the end of his antique-selling career, he heard footsteps up and down the hallway. Normally he’d remain in bed with the assumption of kids getting restless in a cramped motel. But something compelled Dennis regarding the quality of the footfalls. The booming resonance behind the steps made Dennis unconsciously stand up and walk to the doorway. It sounded as if Atlas himself stomped down the hall beyond the door, the weight of the world coming down with each step. How could the floor be able to maintain such a force of nature? Something enchanted him about the rhythm of the steps, the earth-shattering weight behind them, and the way the door shook in the frame from the tremendous force. Dennis’s hand trembled as he reached for the door handle. He knew instinctively that whatever roamed behind the door existed as a threat to him. Yet he was unable to restrain himself from reaching out and discovering what lies beyond it. He grabbed the golden handle that seemed to be glittering out at him through the darkness. The door wanted to be opened. The handle was showing him the way. He had to know. He had to know what was beyond the door. His hand seized the glowing orb before him and twisted it with an irresistible spasm of motion.

The hallway revealed nothing. A quick up-and-down glance sticking his head out of the frame confirmed this. The hall stood desolate with the lights flickering just like the lights that had been gnawing away at him. The walls were covered with sickly brown wallpaper and the floor had been sloppily covered with a thick purple carpet decades ago. Just the brief sight of the light had made his head throb. He retreated from outside the door. He slowly moved it back into place with a creaking protest from the hinges. He looked in the direction of the air conditioner in the blackness of his room, only able to identify it from the streetlights outside the window. The bulky machine stared at him and shook from its force. Dennis stared back in silent trepidation. Maybe it had been struggling to pump cool air into his room. Air conditioning can be loud sometimes. He had never heard an air conditioner boom like that though. His readers needed to hear about the terrible quality of the air conditioning in the *Wind-down*. Especially with all the trouble it had been giving him.

Walking over to his bed, he reached under the abnormally large lamp that hung over the sides of the insignificant bedside table. He fumbled around until he found the switch against the side of the lamp. After struggling to turn the switch, a dull orange light emitted from under the shade of the lamp. Though dim, Dennis thought it presented a much more comforting aura than the overhead fluorescent lights that beat down upon him mercilessly. Satisfied with the new source of light, he stepped over to his desk and slid down into the wooden chair once again. He’d have to put something into his review about how uncomfortable his chair felt. He smiled to himself. Things weren’t looking good for the *Wind-down* if this review came out. Bad reviews always do well on travel blogs... or so he had read from various sources. It wasn’t hard to believe. People love to be negative, even if they don’t admit to it.

He closed and opened his hands in a stretching motion, the start of his writing ritual. Upon pressing down the power button, he heard the clunky fans inside begin to whirl, and he heard the whole laptop rumble and groan from the discomfort of its age.

“I know. Me too, buddy,” he endearingly said to the laptop. He lifted it and moved it closer to the edge of the desk. The screen finally turned on and Dennis put it in his password, “*graNnyMaY1596*.” As it went through the final log-in sequence, he began to compile everything he would need to say into a mental draft. His word processor finally appeared on the screen.

The words that had been left there from his review glitched and appeared in a jumble on the center of the screen. They had bundled together in a way that looked like a sort of black hole. He stared into a backlit void filled with carefully selected words. Dennis had never seen this glitch before. He tried hitting undo, redo, tapping on the screen, and then closing and opening the tab. The hole remained, staring back at him from the screen unchanged. He tried using the backspace to delete everything he had previously written. He could easily just rewrite it. Nothing changed except that the mass of black-gray text began to pulse. Rhythmically, as if it were vital to its survival to keep a steady pace. It seemed to grow on the screen, taunting him. Having enough of this Times New Roman-styled black hole, Dennis closed his laptop. The hole slid out from underneath the laptop and gazed up toward its author. It sat in silence. Dennis sat in silence. He lifted his hands to his face and gently rubbed his eyes. Maybe the void was the sort of “floater” the eye doctor had told him he could start to expect as he got older. How long had it been since that visit? He really should go back. Another thing to add to his list. Satisfied with his diagnosis, he parted his fingers and allowed his eyes to peek back out into the dimly lit room. The mass of nothing remained exactly where it had been. He blinked and shifted his gaze to the wall next to him. The hole slid up onto the wall and waited. It rested there, ridiculing him.

Dennis leaped out of his chair and ran to the bathroom to grab a towel to wipe up whatever sort of stain this was.

He glanced back in horror to find the hole trailing beside him. He grabbed one of the towels embroidered with *WD* and jerked his hand up to the wall. He wiped furiously, like windshield wipers fighting against a heavy downpour. He pressed down hard, convincing himself that the hole was just some sort of dream. Or nightmare. He felt as if he was making good progress. He continued wiping until his instincts told him that the stain was gone. He removed the towel from the wall. The void remained, unchanged, and goading him. For one terrible moment, he imagined that he could see the void growing in size. A terrible force seized him from behind, a sudden spasm of his muscles collapsing forward, and he found himself falling endlessly toward the wall that contained the vast darkness. Then, there was nothing. There was nothing at all.

The housekeeper of the motel, a 19-year-old girl named Gene, carted her supplies from inside room 26 to the hallway outside of room 27. The door stood in front of her. Jiggling the handle, she found that it wouldn't budge. She knew that the entire right side of the hall was meant to be checked out by 11 A.M. She rapped on the door. No response from within. She pounded this time. Nothing stirred in the room.

She cried out, "Housekeeping!" in the hope of waking the guest within. Gene had always refused to give a guest more than three tries to rouse. She produced a master key from her back pocket and slid it into the dull doorknob with ease. Gene cranked the key to the right, and the mechanism clicked from within. She turned the handle and pushed the door open. The walls of room 27 groaned and shifted as she entered. Gene had long ago tuned out the groaning within the walls of the motel. The young housekeeper analyzed the room, searching for the guest. Inspection of the bathroom, bed, and small closet revealed nothing. She turned to leave the room, but as she turned, something caught her eye. An aging, clunky laptop rested on the desk. Gene moved to the desk and opened the ancient piece of technology.

The laptop whirred and booted instantly. Opening to a webpage "*The Dennis Down-Low! With Dennis Murkwater!*". Compelled, the housekeeper scrolled through the site. She found it odd that only one post existed on the run-down-looking page. She double-clicked on the post and began to read.

The Perfect 5-Star motel: Why YOU should stay at the Wind-Down!

By: Dennis Murkwater

7/21/12

Hello everyone and welcome back to the 'Dennis Down-Low'! My last post about a motel I stayed at brought my blog... fifty new readers! So a BIG thank you to any new 'Down-Lowers' reading now! This week I'm staying at a motel called the 'Wind-Down' in Merkel, Missouri! So far it's much more impressive than the 'Sleep Inn' from the previous post, I can't wait to see what makes it stand out! The next part of this post will be written in an hour or so after I've had time to take in the atmosphere!!

Let me just start with how friendly the staff is here. From the moment I entered, I knew that this was a place where I could stay forever just from how welcoming everyone was. The man at the front desk knew my name before I could even say it! He walked me to my room and told me to ask Bernie if there was anything I needed! Bernie was the pinnacle of hospitality, down-lowers. It was a great way to start my stay.

Another great part of the stay was just how comfortable the beds were! There is nothing like plopping down on a comfortable mattress after a long drive! Down-lowers, I'm being honest when I say that this bed is one of the best I've ever had! The pillows must have been made out of the most memorable memory foam that there is! Consider my back pain gone! But enough raving on the bed, it pales in comparison to how peaceful the motel is!

This entire post was created in the quiet solitude of room 27 in the motel. Normally I expect there to be an abundance of noise and annoyance within a motel's atmosphere. You'll encounter none of that here! You can wind down from the stresses of life for just a moment in the beautiful, sixty-dollar-a-night, atmosphere!

To summarize my stay here in just one word, relieving. If you're bogged down from the everyday hustle and bustle, take a little excursion to this cozy Missouri motel! You'll find the much-needed rest that you need! I think I might just have to stay here forever!

Eli Clubbs

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Jackson Senior High School, Jackson, MO

Educator: Abigail Beckwith

Category: Short Story

Hercules

It all started in the dreadful summer of 2017. I was 12 years old and awkward. So.. so awkward. I have a theory that you fall into a wallowing pit of awkwardness in the tween years and don't crawl out of the pit until you're at least 80. Those who disagree with me are liars and I hate them. But I'm losing focus, I tend to do that once I put pen to paper. (Or rather fingers to keys) My papers for school end up looking like a mix of the ramblings of a man named Philip who simply adores chicken parmesan and an essay about the crime rate in the suburbs of New York.

Before I lost focus, I was talking about the dreadful summer of 2017. I don't use the word dreadful lightly. Or maybe I do. I don't know, honestly, that's for you to decide. Whoever "you" are, I'm honestly not sure why I'm writing this account. Maybe I feel it's my obligation. You know, like I'm just obligated to write down everything that happens to me ever due to my rights as a Free American. It's what the founding fathers would do, after all. Didn't ol' Benny Franklin have like six million diaries or something? Well, there I went again. Another bit of word vomit for you, Dear Reader. Okay, so where was I? Right. Ok.

PICTURE IT: Dreadful summer of 2017. 12-year-old Narrator. I had no friends and serious intentions of playing World of Warcraft and Runescape all summer and ensuring my skin turned the same hue as a fluorescent light bulb. My parents were working almost every day, of course, I didn't pay much attention to their comings and goings because I was 12. I woke up bright and early on one very fine Wednesday afternoon. Wednesdays were very fine because around 2 PM that day my whole Raid Party on WoW (World of Warcraft for any video game illiterates that happen to be reading) would be online. I had to get some breakfast before my hot video game date with approximately fifteen middle-aged basement dwellers. I went into the kitchen to fix a bowl of Fortunate Tokens, sometimes the generic brand tastes better than the actual cereal. This was not the case with Fortunate Tokens, the marshmallows were as always hard as a rock and the actual cereal part of it wasn't any better.

There I was in the kitchen, a bowl in one hand and a box of cereal in the other. I was getting ready to set both of the aforementioned items on the kitchen table when I saw him. Or at least I saw a smallish figure that looked a smidge like a cat. Or rather looked like a kitten. The figure was tiny and I mean seriously minuscule. He was sitting by the front door, I still have no idea how he got in. But there he sat, gazing at me. The bowl and box in my hands were completely forgotten and hanging limply by my sides. Thank God there wasn't any cereal (or black horror... MILK) in the bowl yet. I approached the little guy cautiously, my feet sliding across the tile floor in small, undetectable motions. Well, I thought they were undetectable at least. The little kitten could detect them very easily, I saw his ears perk up and his eyes start to glow in the way that only cats' eyes can glow. I halted, at this point in my life as unfamiliar as I was with feline creatures I knew to be wary about even the smallest of them. I didn't want to end up with scratches all up and down my body. So there I stood, frozen like the statue of Davey, or whatever that statue the Ninja Turtles made is called. The kitten just remained planted by my front door. As if he owned it or something. He did not own it. My parents owned that door and the house he was comfortably residing in. Didn't he know that? I could've called the police on him. Honestly, in hindsight, maybe I should've. But could you imagine how that call would've gone?

"911, what is your emergency?"

"Uhhhh... Yeah, hi. There is a cat sitting by my front door and he looks very menacing. I don't like the way he's mean-mugging me. Could you send at least two police officers? He might be a biter."

"Young man, there are people with real emergencies, where are your paren-"

Click

Yeah, now that I think about it, I definitely don't think that would've been the way to go. So back to the story, I know you must be on the edge of your seat in anticipation. There I was, standing there and I realized that I really only had two options at this point. I could either: A. Continue towards the little creature or B. Go back to the kitchen table and eat my breakfast and act like he's not there. Neither of them were really calling to me. I didn't

have a gut feeling, you know? We all get those gut feelings when you're taking a test and the answer is just calling to you, right? Well, either way, nothing was calling to me. So I created a new option: C. Continue standing there like a nincompoop. I was satisfied with my problem-solving skills. I stood there and tried to have absolutely no facial expression whatsoever. But you know I wouldn't be telling you this story if it ended there, with me in a stand-off with this miniature stuffed animal-sized kitten. Unless, of course, I was a jerk who enjoyed wasting the time of unsuspecting readers. But I'm NOT a jerk who enjoys wasting the time of unsuspecting readers. You trust me, right?

As I was getting used to my power stance, the kitten let out a tiny little mew. If I was any older or any less attentive, I probably wouldn't have even heard it. As soon as I recognized the sound, the kitten was up. Now your first thought when I say "up" is that the kitten stood up. I wish that were the case, but no, when I say "up" I mean that it was up like... in the air. You definitely think I'm lying at this point and yes I certainly could be. But please keep reading I'm going to prove, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that I'm not lying. Seriously, this kitten went on to do stuff that someone couldn't possibly make up.

"What the h-", I started to say something a 12-year-old considers very explicit when I was cut off by the loud boom that the kitten produced. It sounded like the mew it made before, except it seemed to be coming from the loudspeakers of a baseball stadium, and the speakers were right against both of my ears. My house shook around me, and I nearly lost my footing. The "power stance" I adopted was not so powerful after all. I ended up looking like a baby giraffe stumbling about the living room. The bowl and box of cereal I had been holding slipped out of my grasp and clattered onto the floor. The loud mew continued to resonate against the walls of the small room. It got quieter and quieter though, and eventually, the shaking subsided. I wanted to know what that Cat-Catastrophe would rate on the Richter Scale. The cat didn't seem to realize that all the noise and shaking came from him. He had a perplexed look on his face and was vibrating from fear. If someone would've been watching the two of us at that point, I think they would've noticed that we both had the same reaction. I was shaking so much that it almost felt like the cat-quake hadn't stopped.

"It's okay, little guy, come here." I tried to use the same tone of voice I had heard my parents use countless times when I was scared of something. I outstretched my arms, the universal body language for 'bring it in, man'. The recognition in his eyes made me believe that he actually understood English. He floated right over to me and bumped into my chest. The way he bumped off my chest reminded me of a kitten astronaut, floating around in his space station, bounding off the walls. I brought my arms back and gently held him against me. Understanding that I had him and that he was safe, he released his float and I could feel his weight against my arms. Well, actually there wasn't much weight there. If you have held a tiny animal before, it really does feel like you're holding a little bundle of fur filled with helium. Maybe he could float so well because he practically was weightless.

The rest of that summer went by like a blur. Somewhere along the way, I started calling the little guy "Hercules". Seemed like he liked it, so the name stuck. World of Warcraft was the last of my worries after meeting him. He grew so fast and it seemed like he got more powerful every day. It was hard being friends with a super-cat. I didn't really have to care for him. He'd go fly away to take care of his business and he found food while flying outside too, I guess. Or maybe Hercules doesn't even have to eat. I don't know.

Though being friends with Hercules certainly did have its benefits. A moment from that summer that I remember in vivid detail was when he prevented me from certain doom. I was sitting in the tub, taking what I considered an "ice bath". Really it was just room-temperature water with a cup's worth of ice dumped in. It was a well-deserved cup of ice though. Hercules and I had spent all day playing "cat-ball". It was basically me just throwing a baseball as far as I could and Hercules zooming to catch it. Nothing else really matches the thrill of cat-ball. It was so exciting to watch him zoom in after the ball. Anyway, I had been in the bath long enough that all eight of the ice cubes had melted and I finally decided to do the actual washing part of the bath. I had a new bottle of soap next to the sink and I reached for it. It was the kind of reach where you lean your whole body toward the object you're trying to grab. I almost had it when the door blew open at the speed of light and I was propelled backward. Despite the heavy force I landed gently back in the tub. Hercules was floating innocently beside me.

"What was that for?" I asked. I fully expected Hercules to answer too. I stared him down for quite a while before I realized that there was no way for him to respond. So instead I look around the bathroom for something that would clue me in. It didn't take me long for me to deduce his reasoning. Right beside the soap was the hair dryer. I traced the cord from the hair dryer with my eyes and realized that it was plugged into the wall. My sister was definitely going to get an earful from me. I could've died!! Death by pink hairdryer!! I guess Hercules must have some sort of "Bath-Danger-Level" sense. It's a good thing too because I'd be a cooked narrator if not.

Before I knew it, I woke up and it was the first day of school. I can't even remember shopping for supplies. But I grabbed my backpack and went to rub Hercules's head. That's when I realized that he wasn't in my room. He was always in my room whenever I woke up. He had good timing like that, I guess. But not then. I discounted it, thinking that maybe it was a weird morning for both of us. I left the house and went to school. My first day of 8th grade certainly wasn't noteworthy. Mostly, I was worried about Hercules. I hadn't seen him all day. I thought maybe he'd

fly by and say hello while I was in school. After eight hours of misery, the bell went off, and the school day was over. I rushed home and there was no sign of Hercules anywhere.

I'd love to say that he came back that night, or even at some point that week. But I can't, that would be lying. I want this entire account to be truthful. You might be thinking that the story ends here. But there's one more mysterious thing that happened...

PICTURE IT: Dreadful 8th-grade year, just after Christmas break. 13-year-old narrator. I wasn't exactly popular and to some extent, I was kind of hated. When you're funny like me, there's a chance that some people won't like your jokes all that much. I made some enemies with my jokes. One of those enemies really had a bone to pick with me. I won't name any names. But there I was... just sitting on the playground, minding my own business when all of a sudden I feel a hard blow against my face. The next thing I know I'm on the ground and I see the guy standing over me. I decided to just allow it to happen. I'm a jester, not a fighter. He raised his arm to strike me again when all of a sudden he flew out of my vision. Like seriously flew. One second he was there one second he wasn't. Still dazed, I looked around the playground and finally spotted him after a few seconds.

To the casual observer, it might look like he was taking a nap against a tree at the far end of the playground. But I could tell by the way he was slumped that he wasn't napping by choice. The impact must have knocked him unconscious. And in the corner of my eye, I swear I saw a gray blur speeding into the sky.

That little blur in the corner of my eye was the last I ever "saw" of Hercules. I miss him so much. But he certainly served as a source of inspiration for me. If a little cat like Hercules can have super strength? I definitely have the strength to get through high school. I find myself thinking about him all the time. Little things remind me of him. Things like.. Fortunate Tokens or Hair Dryers. I've seen some stuff pop in the news about local crimes being stopped in their tracks by "a blur". Witnesses will say that one second they were being held at gunpoint and the next the criminal would be unconscious on the floor. The news likes to spice it up and say things like "divine intervention" or "fate being on their side". But I think that I know what's really happening. I just think that Hercules is on our side. Which is probably good. Can you imagine an EVIL magic, flying cat? Scary thought.

I guess now is the part where I wrap everything up in a little neat bow. I can already imagine what you're thinking: "Flying cat? No way, man. Impossible." Honestly, if I hadn't seen him fly with my own eyes, I wouldn't either. I never had the idea to record him and Hercules was really shy so I don't have anyone to corroborate my story. Basically, I know that I can never prove any of this, but I thought the world needed to hear my story. Thanks, Reader.

Eli Clubbs

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Jackson Senior High School, Jackson, MO

Educator: Abigail Beckwith

Category: Poetry

Reap Your Rewards

Passing through fields of gray and black.
Outstretching my hand and letting it pass against the roughness of
The Stalks.
That roughness that sands and whittles.
The roughness that takes and takes.
Depriving, Stealing, Reveling in what has been snatched away.
Their seeds were planted, a decision made,
An exchange.
Two for Them and a half left for the planter. A spark ignites.
Meager rewards left to reap, more planting.
Four to One, not content.
Sixteen to Two, still filled with the hunger for more.
A ravenous appetite,
Fire now all-consuming, left to roar.
Sowing seeds in a garden, a field growing,
The legacy of that exchange.
The poisonous field remains with planters filled with desire.
They come in droves,
I wonder, will they be content or
Let their fire raze them back into the ground?

Eli Clubbs

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Jackson Senior High School, Jackson, MO

Educator: Abigail Beckwith

Category: Poetry

Lifted Spirit

Something I've never felt before.
Laying my head after what I had to endure.
Has the sky always been so beautiful?
All this looks pretty suitable.
I don't think it has been, that shade of blue.
I should be gone by now, there must be a long queue.
Like a film, this is the final shot, filled with meaning.
I feel it coming, no longer dreaming.
Here is my fade-to-black, bitter-sweet end.
I hope my father finds the letters I didn't get to send.

Rising, rising.
Breaking past the clouds.
Now I've arrived.
Nothing could have prepared for this.
But there is no need for preparation.
Peaceful.
Peaceful at last.
No more struggling.
No more fighting.
Now to rest.

Christ, I'm still here?
Ah-
The medic must have found me.
Too late, bud.
I knew you were bad at your job.
But-
Not this bad.
Yeah alright,
Jostle me around.
Carry me back.
What a scam.
Wonder if he'll feel the letters
In my pocket.
Blast.
Crack.
Pop, pop, pop.
Right.
Seems fitting.

Eli Clubbs

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Jackson Senior High School, Jackson, MO

Educator: Joyce Theiss

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Double Agent

Ranch. The tastiest of dipping sauces and the partner in crime of deep-fried food everywhere. Could dipping fried pickles into copious amounts of buttermilk ranch be good for me? Absolutely not. Did it taste fantastic? Absolutely yes. But I found myself in a dilemma. I had asked for ranch with my french fries when ordering but had not received any. No problem, I knew that the wait staff simply could not get the order right every single time. The solution, of course, was simple. All I needed to do was walk up to the counter and request a cup of ranch. In a perfect world, I could regard this situation with no hesitation. But unfortunately, we live in an imperfect world and no amount of ranch can fix that. I sat in the booth and stared at my beige tray, hoping to summon the sauce without needing words or uncomfortable interactions. I glanced at my friends across from me. "Look at them", I thought, "eating their food without a care in the world, experiencing no inner turmoil regarding condiments". They wouldn't need to go up to the counter for any reason. I realized then that I would have to brave the unknown experience of asking for my ranch... alone.

I slid out from the booth and walked to the front of the store. I breezed past the fountain soda machine and trashcans. But, when I turned the corner toward the register, I froze, a bottomless pit opening deep within my stomach. An employee stood behind the waist-high counter, a chunky black machine was placed in front of him. I would like to say that he smiled at me but that would be lying; however, he also wasn't scowling. The neutral employee, black apron donned, was stationary behind the register. I approached the register, nearly having to pull my legs up for each step, and not just because of the floor tiles that were gummed up with a thick layer of sugar from years of overturned beverages. My whole body felt heavy and goosebumps covered my arms. I planted myself as close as I could manage, nearly 10 feet away from the register. I opened my mouth to speak.

"Hey, can I-," Alright, I had made a brief pause, but it's okay I can recover this. "Could I get some..." Well, now the situation seems totally unrecoverable. It would have been better if I had just walked up to the guy and impersonated Tarzan of the Jungle: "Me. Ranch."

"What did you want, buddy?" he asked with an unfazed, neutral expression. This guy acted like a chiseled chunk of stone that could talk. I continued in my anxiety-filled fugue state, shifting from foot to foot. My weight went left-right, right-left, left- wait. Had he called me buddy? Nobody calls me buddy and gets away with it unless their full legal name is Dad! Now not only was I nervous about this whole interaction, but I was also filled with a seething rage toward the person I happened to be interacting with. I tried my best to keep it under control because I did really want that ranch. The seconds were starting to dilate and distort now. I could not decide if I had been standing there staring for two seconds or two minutes, but I knew that it was time to try again.

"Yeah, can I just get a- uh? A- uhhhh," I stumbled over the words. This interaction was beyond the point of return and I had to start deliberating on the nuclear option of self-destruction. Maybe I could just start counting down like the phones in secret agent action movies. If it was between continuing to stutter and stumble over words or imploding, the better option was very apparent to me. But given that I do not actually have the option to self-destruct, I had to try and squeak out the rest of my questions. Just as I was finally working up the courage to ask, a third party entered the interaction.

"Hey there, did we forget your ranch? I brought your order out and saw it on the receipt but I didn't see any on the tray." I turned to see that these words came from the kindest man I had ever seen. Maybe I was just filled with relief over finally being able to release myself from this tortuous exchange. I saw the ranch in his outstretched hand and a grin on his face. Surely if there was a perfect depiction of an angel, here he stood. Grabbing the ranch, it felt like a crushing weight had been lifted from my shoulders.

"Thanks, man," I said, tears welling in my eyes. Never had someone earned my thanks in a truer manner than this.

“Yeah, don’t worry about it, boss,” he said with the kind of coolness that I thought only movie stars were capable of. He turned and ambled over to go and do some other miracle of fast food grace. I lifted my previously rooted feet and started to stumble away. The adrenaline was still wearing off and when I finally made it to my booth I felt as if I had just run a marathon. I was like Phidippides of Athens, only if Phidippides was just meant to go and get the ranch. The plastic top of the cup came off with ease and I dipped my fry into the blessedly cool dressing. That first bite felt like an herbaceous symphony through my mouth.

From that moment I decided that, like Batman, I needed to become what I feared most. Rather than training to fight crime, I needed to train my interpersonal communication skills. To do this, I would get a job in food service. The only thing holding me back was regulations, for most positions an individual had to reach sixteen years of age before they can work. So after a wait of nearly four years, I applied for a job at Culver’s. I had a friend who worked there. When I was contacted about an interview, I looked at the incoming call on my phone with great trepidation, but finally picked up and gave the hiring manager my availability. On the day of the interview, I showed up right on time and the hiring manager got called out from the back. I sat down in one of the booths and prepared myself to be drilled with questions. When the interview started, my fear of the questions quickly turned to interest. It felt more like a conversation than a step in an application process. The next thing I knew, I was asked when I could start!

My first day came and they had me taking orders from customers in the dining area. It was truly time for me to test my interpersonal communication and social skills. I cowered behind my trainer as I watched them easily manipulate the screen while taking orders. It was like an art form almost. The ancient art of order-taking eluded me though, and when the trainer offered to let me take control, I nearly broke down. Unfortunately, my anxiety was not enough of a reason for me not to get trained on the register, especially because this was something I accepted as part of the job when I was hired. I stumbled through a lot of orders, unable to make myself understood. My trainer had to jump in to save me for the first hours. But, after four hours, I completed my first shift, and my first step to becoming a better communicator!

I made it through a lot more shifts and my time at Culver’s flew by. It did not take long for me to master the order-taking position and even move up to taking orders in the drive-thru. I tried my best to let my smile be heard through the crackly speaker. It didn’t matter what my position was, if I saw a customer who needed assistance, I wouldn’t be afraid to approach them. I had my opening line for taking orders, “what can I make fresh for you?” But I also had lines for customers who seemed to be having trouble, “everything alright?”, or, “what seems to be the problem?” and a few other stand-bys.

Working at Culver’s has been great for my interpersonal communication skills because every interaction typically revolves around food. Most of the customers frequent the store and often know exactly what they want to order before walking through the door. Some customers need some time to figure out the menu and assistance when ordering. But, I have to admit there have been a few that are the type I feared when I started working here: those customers who just want to watch the world burn and they decide to start with a small-town Culver’s. The pinnacle example of this type of person walked in on one very fine Tuesday.

I was positioned behind the counter with my hands on the edge bearing the brunt of my weight.

“Hey there! What can I make fre-,”

“I JUST CAME THROUGH THE DRIVE THRU AND I DIDN’T GET MY CHEESE CURDS,” she bellowed in my general direction, jamming a receipt in my face.

“I’m sorry about the ma’am, what size were they?” I spoke with a sympathetic tone, attempting to soothe her.

“CAN YOU NOT SEE THE RECEIPT?” she was yelling at me like I had kicked over her child’s lemonade stand. I glanced at the receipt and saw they were supposed to be large. I turned around to look to see if the curds had been left forgotten while bagging her order. Sure enough, a large sack of cheese curds sat there. I scooped up the cheese curds and placed them in a small brown bag with the Culver’s logo emblazoned on the side.

“Here you go, ma’am. Sorry about the inconvenience.” I said, handing her the bag.

“THIS IS THE WORST FAST FOOD EXPERIENCE I’VE EVER HAD. I WILL NOT BE COMING BACK HERE.” She howled, to no one in particular. I watched her stomp away, cutting off any reply I might’ve been able to give her. As I watched her storm out, I noticed that a child had been standing behind her patiently. Though perhaps a bit shaken by the interaction he had just witnessed, he trudged up to the edge of the counter, barely tall enough to see over it. He gazed up at me with deep brown eyes and opened his mouth to speak.

“Excuse me, sir, could I please have a-” he paused and I could tell that he was going over the script he had created for himself in his head. “A... uhm-” I had taken his family’s order earlier and was running through the possibilities of what he could want. I vaguely remembered a two-piece tender meal with ranch and fries. I thought that would be the most likely contender. He looked to be on the verge of tears.

“Did you want a Ranch?” I asked quietly, trying not to scare him more.

“Yes please, thank you.” He replied, barely speaking above a whisper. I smiled and turned to grab the ranch,

quickly swiveling back to place it in his hand.

“You got it, boss.”

Eli Clubbs

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Jackson Senior High School, Jackson, MO

Educator: Abigail Beckwith

Category: Poetry

Covered Body

Hand reaching,
Grasping,
Swiping
At the thick, billowy tendrils
Of the inky blackness
Hand foreign,
Unwelcome,
Trespassing
In the bedroom where
It is not supposed to lay

Shaking with the same intensity as one with a great sense of stage fright
The Hand Bearer lowered Its grasp down to the waist, now was the time to set things right.
Finding their victim's deliverance, wrapping the unsure hand round
Smooth handle, delicately searching for the proper balance, soon found.
The blade attached to the end, typically used in this house for preparation
Instead was adjusted, pointed, and angled for penetration.

Eyes focus,
Settle,
Clear
The fog of darkness
Lifts and retreats
Eyes lock,
Dead-set,
Tunnel-vision
On the resting body
In the expected place

Bloodshot pupils dilating, the Eye Bearer begins to breathe steadily
For the first moment since entering to fulfill their self-selected destiny.
They would regret, They would understand, They lay so peacefully
Drying out, the Eye Bearer flickers Its lids, refocusing easily.
Tunnels form, illuminated only by the goddess of the night, the resting form grew closer, larger
Suddenly creeping forward, a mesmerizing bloody target formed before the searcher.

“O God, for the first, it is mine own hand that will seal my fate,
Stay up in your prideful palace as I strike down your beloved!
O Mother, where are you to speak down on me? Watch and hate,
Observe with your God and utter silent clamors at me, your unloved!”

Heart beats,
Skips,

Beats.
Anticipation rising
Beats forget their place
Heart pumps,
Swells,
Expands,
Sweet adrenaline
Flows and courses

The trapper has laid its masterwork and the unknowing prey
Stumbled in, fate sealed, they rest while the work is underway.
The Heart Bearer barely contains their great groans as they feel compelled
Some great force surges forth, It knew Its own greatest art awaited them as this feeling swelled.
Picasso did not have the great scarlet palette that lay before,
Canvas untouched, the gushing color that will come from this great store.

Instrument rises,
Arcs,
Peaks
The great silver
Length catches light
Instrument bright,
Transcending,
Flashing
Now a guiding beacon
Leading the way home

Rocketing down, like guillotines of old, the instrument drops
With the same steadiness with which a scythe shears through crops.
The great blade grows close, time-spanning, distorting
Try as He might, Time had no power, despairing.
Letting out a great sigh, the Instrument Bearer exalted
An executioner's plunge completed, the honed blade sank in unthwarted.

“O.. God...
O Mother..”

Robyn Davies

Age: 15, Grade: 9

School Name: Mary Institution & St Louis Day School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Jennifer Sellenriek

Category: Flash Fiction

The Pocket Poet

Olivia still remembers her first pocket-poem. Fifth grade seemingly washed away in a storm of youth and middle school, but the poem remained rightfully embroidered on her heart. After all, a first love is not easily forgotten. And oh, to love a poem... there exists no greater joy! It's an ardor tattooed on a poet's wrist, engraved on their mind; a love Olivia would chant like a prayer each night and tuck in the back pocket of her jeans each morning. Decades of deserved warmth in her pockets. A love so pure, requited.

But it –

It's been a long time since Olivia wrote a pocket poem. To lose a love like that... How do you ever recover?

Still, she holds her faith that her love will return.

The neighbors call her crazy. In ten years of neighborhood, not a summer has passed that they haven't watched her garden overflow with dandelion weeds and her porch painted a new shade of mad-woman.

They're good neighbors, really; only good neighbors could keep quiet about such an unkempt lawn. And someday Olivia wishes she got to know them. They've got a baby now, a cute one too.

But it's okay. Some lives aren't meant to intersect.

Maybe one day she'll write a poem about it. About aloneness and loneliness and the difference between the two.

Maybe one day when I understand it, Olivia tells herself, as if she hasn't lived in the former and now in the latter without her prose.

She chased the poetry back to her books. Pleaded for their forgiveness, for whatever terrible crime she must have committed to deserve their disdain. Screamed her apologies for taking their fickle love for granted. In turn, the floorboards tore open, cackled as their sonnets wrapped around her neck, the shriek of the ceiling fan drowning her senses. The wallpaper began to peel, dissolving to expose the hundreds of poems she'd failed to write. Ink and excerpts and sticky notes and shaky green highlighter suffocated her lungs, and barricaded the room. She threw herself against the window, knowing her escape by the shards of glass piercing her skin, and fled with poems clutched in her fist. Tore through their pages, scattered the verses she once loved across dirt ground. She searched, but the rhymes seemed to each be hidden between the lines, written in the subtext and the similes.

She searched harder.

How –

How do you find yourself in a graveyard of poetry?

The sun shines over the Mississippi River. Years ago, Olivia might have thought it was something romantic: the way metallic drops of sunlight bleed into the river bay and freckle her cheeks with golden stardust. Perhaps she'd have grabbed a pen and scribbled down a haiku, something about a river that could only be so beautiful through a poet's eyes.

At first it was a week without that love. But the weeks bled into months of alone, to years of loneliness, and now? Anything, *anything* to drown out the lonely.

She takes a step into the water, until the river meets her calf. As the soft chill of the water bites her toes and the sharp snap of the wind pinches her cheeks, she searches the river for a sign. It doesn't matter what kind. Just something, something, *anything*. Weren't those the same trees that once made her heartbeat tremble, made her legs race for a notebook and pen? It all used to be so familiar – the rocks the trees the water the sand – what treacherous creature betrays its creator?

Another step deeper. Deeper, until the tide swallows her hips.

When did her love turn unrequited? And *why*. *Why* did the words run dry, *how* could the pen stop writing if a heart

was still beating?

Deeper.

Eyes tilt up and she can see: each of her poems hung in the mid-afternoon sky with typewriter ink smearing through the clouds. The black ink spills into a murky pool swirling over her mind; it blinds her eyes; it trickles down her back. The ink swamps even the sun.

Deeper, deeper, deeper.

Water to her chest. collar. lips.

Taste the Mississippi. Isn't it lovely? Isn't it bitter? Bitter like... like...

Isn't there a metaphor for this? A simile? A verse, a line, a word, *something* to explain what comes next.

The water rises. The inky sky shallows. Its reflection surrounds her, until the ink's poison reaches her heart. The sky is black. The night is black. There are no words. And still, the wordless poet searches.

Hand to her chest. Her pocket – Empty. A pocket should never, never be empty. The mad woman searches, she searches, she *tries* to search. She closes her eyes and reaches out for the slip of paper that has to be there, because it's *always* been there.

It's –

Not.

The poet closes her eyes. *One Mississippi*. The water engulfs her body. *Two. Three*. The river fills the lungs of yet another daughter of Polonius.

Ten Mississippi. Twenty. Her arms flail around her, but they don't search for air, they search for a verse *Twenty-One*.

Thirty. Thirty-Four.

Forty.

Hey non nonny, nonny, hey nonny...

The lonely poet sinks.

Sometime in another life, somewhere amidst the storm of youth and middle school, a poet falls in love. "Under a golden sky and a bright, summer day," she writes, "metallic drops of sunlight bleed into the river bay and freckle my cheeks with golden stardust."

It's poetic, she thinks, tucking the verse in the back pocket of her jeans *Beautiful in a way that ought to be fondled over and beloved, recited to strangers on long walks around the boulevard*.

She's only in fifth grade, but already she knows: to love a poem...

There could exist no greater joy.

Ansley Davis

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: Basehor-Linwood Middle School, Basehor, KS

Educator: Erin Tegtmeier

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

That One Little Thing

That One Little Thing

On a Friday night, I was watching the stars, when a small gust of wind blew on my face. I was outside by myself, as the fire was burning. I was roasting marshmallows and listening to the crickets sing. As I looked up at the night sky, I saw a shooting star. It was a beautiful but simple thing. I immediately made a wish. What I wished for was a secret; I really didn't know myself. It was about my future, and what was to come after this night. Living on your own isn't the most entertaining thing. The night was getting late, and it was time to go to bed. I decided to sleep outside and smell the fresh air when I woke up in the morning. I dreamed about that shooting star, and what would happen when I woke up in the morning. That one star I might not see ever again in my life. I never knew that one star would have made such a huge impact on my life.

When I woke up bright and early the next day, I was excited to see what was to come. It was hard getting up, and I was very tired from the night before. My eyes were still closed when I got out of my bed. When my foot touched the floor it wasn't the crunchy grass in my yard. The floor felt more soft. Why would the grass suddenly change? As I opened my blurry eyes, I saw this beautiful red, blue, and green object. When my eyes adjusted, the object was a bird. It was a beautiful bird. It looked delicate, and in wonderment of what I was. Sadly, that bird mystically flew away, and I couldn't keep my eyes off it. I lost eye contact with the bird, and then realized I was in a forest. As I looked all around me, every plant was bright, healthy green. It was a happy, calm, and peaceful place. I didn't think that shooting star would grant my wish. I always believed in them, but not fully. Not until you get to experience the power those stars have.

I walked around to each plant I saw, and I studied each one. Each of them was uniquely different from the others. One flower had bright purple petals with a pink middle. Many bugs were getting nectar and pollen out of the flower. Including a butterfly, it was black with orange dots and stripes on it. The wings were a perfect shape. Everything in this place was perfect. Seeing how everything is in an orderly, perfect way gave me peace. When the butterfly flew away, it flew toward a path. I felt this pull towards the path. I started walking on the path, and I saw this deer. It was a baby deer with white polka dots. It looked exactly like the deer, Bambi. I stuck my hands out so the deer could smell me. She slowly walked over and smelled my hand. I started to pet her, and surprisingly she didn't get scared. It was like she knew me already. Darling, the deer, followed me through the path. It seemed like every flower got bigger when I walked past it. As I got sucked into the beauty of each flower, I saw a door at the end of the path. I couldn't describe how it looked quite yet though. I slowly walked toward it. I didn't know what would be behind or around the door.

When I got to the door, I saw the rusty and amazing woodwork it had. There were designs on the door of flowers and vines. I had doubts about opening it, but I felt like it was important. I turned the doorknob slowly. When I opened the door there was a woman in a rocking chair, but it was my mother. She was sitting there in the rocking chair that she had since I was born, and it looked like a ghost. She was staring at me like she was waiting for me to walk through that door. I walked closer to her. She looked absolutely perfect like she always did. She said, "I've been waiting for you. I've been here before, and I told you stories about this place when you were younger." That's why this place seemed familiar, and that's why all of the plants and animals weren't scared of me. This is the best wish I could ask for. I got to be with my mom in this beautiful forest. I started talking to my mom about how I felt and how she feels. I couldn't believe I was talking to my mom. I was so grateful I got down on my knees. I told her how much I had missed her. Her death was so unexpected, and I was so depressed. I closed my eyes and laid my head on her knees. I just lay there, crying.

When I opened my eyes back up, though, I was back at home. I was outside with the bright sun shining down on my face. The smell of old fire. Why did I have to come back here? I want to see my mom again. But I couldn't

believe it...I got to see her one last time. I got to see her beautiful face. I got to talk to her face-to-face. I never knew that one shooting star would make a big impact on my life. That simple star that I might not see ever again.

Dani Dessau

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Mary Institution & St Louis Day School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Tex Tourais

Category: Short Story

What Darkness Hides

The silence was almost suffocating.

The group continued to walk on, hunched over within the small space. Casey's black shoes and worn blue jeans had long since fallen victim to the abundance of dust in the corridor. Even his navy-blue jacket and gray backpack were showing its inarguable presence. As they continued on, Casey felt his hand along the wall, sharp and jagged with limestone. When the passage opened, he brought his hands together to wipe off the layer of dust the rock had left on his fingers. Despite the visible absence of dirt on his hands, he could still feel it caked within every wrinkle of his palm. It felt like the dust would never leave, and that feeling made him sick.

"Can you see anything?" Anna asked from behind. The opening of the tunnel had led into a large chamber; one that Gavin's weakening flashlight could not reach the boundaries of. Somehow, this was far worse than a tight, narrowing corridor, for at least in those spaces there was only one clear way forward. In here, the darkness could hide anything, and they wouldn't realize their faults before it had already claimed them.

"No," Gavin answered curtly.

Anna huffed behind him. Casey took a few steps forward towards the light. He could just barely make out the tall figure of Gavin. Dust layered his dark pants and his worn red backpack sagged against his hunched shoulders. Anna was moving slowly behind him, likely in an attempt to map out the walls of the cavern while Gavin waved his flashlight around aimlessly. The dim light did nothing but illuminate the small clouds of dust he created as his legs moved restlessly. It was forming a layer along Casey's throat and lungs, making it increasingly difficult to breathe. But he was too preoccupied by the light to notice. The stale air had allowed the dust clouds to remain floating, forming hypnotic patterns in the yellow light. Eventually, Gavin's sporadic flashlight moved away. When Casey looked up, he noticed that he could no longer see Anna.

"Anna? You still with us?" Casey called out.

Although the room was very large, there was little echo. It was hard to imagine how long the chamber had sat in silence. That lack of practice made every sound seem just a little off. Casey turned to see Gavin's outline looking away from where Anna had been.

Anna's voice came from the left, "I think there's another opening over here."

Gavin continued to point his light in the direction opposite Anna's voice. "We should look around the whole room first. Maybe there are more," Gavin answered.

"We don't have time. Your light is almost dead, and mine won't last forever," Anna said. Casey could just barely make out her figure with her pale green jacket. Anna's arms were crossed over her chest. She was leaning against the wall, and Casey noticed the bandage around her calf was beginning to disappear against her dark pants.

"I understand that, but that path may not be our best option," Gavin responded easily. He continued to search the room with the light.

"We're out of options Gavin. Either we keep moving or we wait until our flashlights give out and we get stuck here," Anna yelled. She was staring intensely at Gavin. She now had her entire weight leaning against the cave wall behind her.

Gavin bit the inside of his cheek. As he was about to respond, Casey cut him off, "She has a point, Gavin. We don't have time to be choosy anymore. If we have an opportunity to move forward, we should take it." Gavin turned his flashlight to Casey, and in spite of the harsh light, he made no move to hide from it.

The group sat in silence for a few moments before Gavin finally turned his flashlight and began to move towards Anna. He and Casey had just made it to the opening when Gavin's flashlight began to flicker. He hit it against his palm a few times, but the light eventually gave out, leaving them in total darkness. Casey felt his hand move instinctively to take out his own light, but the feeling of cold metal never came. In the total darkness, every other presence had completely disappeared. He knew logically that Gavin and Anna were within arm's reach, but without

any visual, all he could be sure of was the feeling of the ground beneath him. Despite the lack of human presence, however, he didn't feel as though he were alone. In the pure and utter darkness, he felt as though something were calling to him. As though pulling him to walk forward and leave logical thought behind. Casey found this sentiment to be sickly reminiscent of the feelings which had brought him here to begin with.

When Gavin had finally brought him and Anna to the cave, there was something about it that had seemed different. Besides the visibly rusted tracks and rotting wooden beams, the cave had seemed strangely dark. It wasn't the kind of dark that came from switching off a bedroom light. It was the kind that seeped into every crevasse, sinking into your mind, revoking all your senses. It was the kind that promised you were never alone. Anna had wanted to turn back, find another cave and continue the journey elsewhere. But Gavin was insistent that they had to stay, and for some reason, Casey had agreed, leaving Anna with little option but to follow.

Anna's light flickered on suddenly to Casey and Gavin's left. The sudden addition of visibility in the space caused a brief sense of nausea to form in Casey's stomach. The light itself conceived a feeling of disgust as though it were an invasion of a sacred space. The light illuminated a hole about half the size of a door. Anna shined it down the corridor, but the light only managed to penetrate through a few yards. Gavin stretched out his hand next to her but was met only by a cold stare.

"I'll lead this time," Anna stated. She cast a glance at Gavin for a few moments. Gavin looked expectantly to Casey, but Casey made no move to revoke Anna of her light. He stared back at her, meeting her eyes for only a second before they moved to the ground. Casey took this opportunity to fall in line behind her, forcing Gavin to move to the back of the group. Anna steadily began moving through the opening, and Casey took one more glance at Gavin before joining her. His jaw was tight, and his eyes were hard. His dead flashlight was still gripped tightly in his hand.

The three moved cautiously through the ever-narrowing opening. Casey's jacket rubbed against the walls, breaking through the silence with its irritating rustle. The light bobbed up and down as Anna raised and lowered her hands. She moved slower than Gavin had before her. Though she made no verbal comment of it, Casey could tell that her leg was hurting her. Once they had traveled down the abandoned shaft, Gavin had found an opening not unlike this one. Except, unlike this one, the last had been far less stable, and its subsequent consequence had been the cause of Anna's injury and the loss of Casey's only flashlight.

Anna slowed in front of him. Casey was about to ask if everything was alright when Anna said, "Do you feel that?"

"Feel what?" Casey answered. He stopped and focused on the feeling of the cave around him, but nothing registered beyond the dust on his hands. Casey turned to ask Gavin if he felt it, but his outline had not quite reached the boundary of the light. The sound of shuffling soon alerted him to Anna's continued movement, and he kept moving in order to remain in pace with her. In the following minutes, Casey noticed what Anna had been talking about. It was a small draft flowing through the small space. The idea was promising, but something told him that it shouldn't be trusted.

Anna's light had grown farther away from him, and Casey struggled to keep pace with her. Soon, the yellow light spilled beyond the confines of the small space, and Casey again called out to her, only to receive silence in response. As Casey crawled into the open room, the draft intensified, now the size of a small breeze. The strange geography of the room produced currents, making it difficult to decipher the direction of the wind. Yet, as Casey looked into Anna's light, he noticed something odd. The yellow light which illuminated the rock beneath their feet, at one point, simply stopped. It appeared almost as if the darkness itself had swallowed it, kept it from reaching any further than it allowed.

"It's coming from over here!" Anna's silhouette echoed. She was now sprinting towards the darkness, and it had every intention to accept her.

"Anna, wait!" Casey yelled frantically. But all that answered his call was a shriek as the light disappeared and the clank of metal resounded against the dull rocks. He heard a low thump in front of him before the world returned to silence.

Casey stared into the darkness where Anna's light had just been and thought to himself how easily it had just gone out. In the course of a few seconds, Anna had been right there, and now, she was gone. The utter darkness that surrounded them now was strangely even more claustrophobic than the two-foot-tall openings they had traveled through previously. It felt as though it were pressing in on him, holding him and keeping him still. The small draft formed whispers along the cave walls. Whispers of those before who also thought themselves capable of conquering the Earth's depths.

In spite of Gavin's desperate calls, an answer never came, and somehow, Casey just knew she wouldn't be coming back. The darkness had taken her, and they too were at its mercy now. Whether they made it out or not was no longer their decision to make. Maybe it never was. But now, it was up to the walls around them to decide if they would be led to light or if darkness would be their last and only memory.

The cave had control now, and wherever it led them, Casey and Gavin would have no choice but to follow.

Sarah Ding

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educators: Jeanne Gillanders, Peter LaBerge

Category: Poetry

Bruises

Bruises

Fair, ivory, slightly-yellow—they mask
my body. More peachy, undertones of caramel
drizzled in Missouri summer. Patches
of winter white shining, spanning an inch
on the left wrist. Natural blush when sunscreen is
forgotten - only on the face. A darker, mysterious
pecan colored indent appeared on the bottom of
the chin, slightly oriented towards the left - Thanksgiving,
during the fifth grade. A similar colored splotch
adorns the right wrist - slightly above the tip of the ulna. A signal
of leaving the dream of playing on Center Court
in Wimbledon behind. The constant blister never leaving
the right side of the right thumb - platelets always working
hard - after being abraded against the neon pink grip
of the field hockey stick. The cosmetic addition
of a wart-like welt on the tip of my ring finger [NEXT: FEATURED SCHOLARSHIPS](#)
on my right hand. From gripping a pencil too tight.

Sarah Ding

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Jeanne Gillanders

Category: Poetry

Seed, Seed, Seed

Seeded Grapes

The sweetness penetrates your mouth.
No other fruit fulfills the standard of grapes.
Black, green, red, and purple.
Merlot, Muscat, Barbera, and Pinot Gris.
Your mother brings them home from Schnucks.
And you're in heaven. Until you eat a seeded grape.
When you bite, you expect to break the layer
Of thick skin and give your mouth a shock of sweetness.
The flavor explodes in your mouth as your teeth sink further
And further into each grape. Until you hit a bump in the path.
When you spit out one of the many seeds nestled
In that first grape, you realize
You no longer enjoy eating these grapes. In fact, you dread them.
You're no longer happy, no longer cheerful.
Your mom brought home bags and bags of these grapes
From Schnucks. Each time you bite, you get
A moment of happiness, but the moment is over
Far too quickly. The new normal: your tooth hitting a seed.

2020, your brother's graduation year.
Happiness at the end of January.
Third place in the Disney Showcase.
But the sweet taste is gone in a glimpse.
China shutting down travel to the U.S.
As your grandma recovers from surgery,
As your dad is there with her and your grandpa.
Little does your dad know it is his last visit.
You hit your first seed.

The luscious flavor is no longer there.
As you spit out the seed after seed.
The process of recovering begins.
Your dad flies home on the last flight
Back from China, wearing a mask.
He has to quarantine two weeks when he lands.
You don't know this will soon become a lifestyle.

You get two extra weeks of spring break.
Another bite into the grape.
The refreshing flavor fills your mouth.
Your best friend moved to college.
Crunch!

The person you've seen everyday since birth.
The person who used to play the little games you made up.
The person you get to call brother, the brother you can count on.
Seed, seed, seed.

Then: a new grape.
Expecting a better taste.
But 2021 is the same -- worse, actually.

Another battle between your teeth and a seed.
One January day, your dad comes home
To announce he's on probation at work.
Your family lifestyle changes.

You would expect this grape to taste better.
It doesn't.

Another seed to conquer.
Your best friend -- your brother -- has Covid.
The sleepless nights you spend listening
To your mom and dad.
What can we do?
How can we help?
He isn't getting better.
He needs to come home.
He can't get her sick.
In quarantine for your birthday -- the second year in a row.
This time, you can't even leave the house.

You hit a big seed.
One that takes a long time to wrestle from the grape.
Your dad finds a new job.
The moments of flavor permeate your mouth.
Until -- there's the seed.
You find out the job is 800 miles away.
Your dad moves to Houston.
It's like when he was in quarantine, but forever.

Then, the hardest seed to spit.
Your grandpa is diagnosed with Alzheimers.
He's in and out of the hospital.
You and your dad can't visit -- travel restrictions.
Ten days before his 86th birthday, your grandfather goes to sleep.
Your father's last wish: for him to make it to his birthday.
Your dad and brother come home.
A taste of the old normal, just for a moment, returns.

Sarah Ding

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Steven Espada Dawson

Category: Poetry

It's Raining at Sportport Stadium

It's Raining at Sportport Stadium

The hard, cold pellets of rain beat down on us, the stadium lights shine like the world's biggest fire -fly. Every other student from school is here, packed into the bleachers like crayons in a new Crayola box. I can't recognize anyone, but Boom's gameday mohawk, sticking out of the pack. This is my home: where my journey started. The smell of rain, with the distant smell of a landfill waft through the air. Reminding me of Sportport. My hands slide down the shaft, trying to grab hold of my vibrant, neon green grip. That stands out like a comet in a field of stars. As I push the ball down the line, it skips down the turf field. With every step, water is squishing out of my shoe. I hustle, forcing myself to push. Steam is rising off of me like I am water being boiled. Hearing Boom lead our school's chant, dribbling past my dear friend on the other team. Tapping the ball through her legs and running. Sprinting away like I committed a crime. I look up to see Grace, her bright blonde hair swinging with the ribbons intertwined. She stealthily steals the ball by putting her stick down. Total control over the trapped ball. Nothing worked that night, even with the crowds in their wild blue wigs, bundled in jackets and blankets. Shivering. The gold hats in the crowd and the decorative posters being raised. The crowd bobbing with every shot at the goal. Even after Grace scored two goals in 3 minutes, one of them slightly lofted in the air as it zoomed through a crowd of five white jerseys. Seeing our goalie dive along the white line of the goal, the ball knocked into her pads, blocking a stroke. At the end of the game, we drop

our sticks and hunch over.

As the sticks hit the ground, water
splashes back up into our faces.

Rain meeting sweat meeting tears.

Everyone in disbelief. The last game
wearing jerseys with our own names.

Sarah Ding

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Peter LaBerge

Category: Poetry

ONE MORE TEST

ONE MORE TEST

I.

One singular test bears the questions and answers
to my mother's, her classmates', and her future
husband's destiny. A world of strangers
all competing for the golden ticket to Peking
University. All those who say, *One test doesn't
define you*—they are wrong. Carrying the weight
of preparing eighteen years, of her family's heritage,
and her future, everyone is trying to make the leap
to the promising side of the gifted, or narrowly missing
the margin of idealized success, heartbroken. Forced
to attend Sichuan University, my mom rose to yet
another test of her intellectual ability, if she was
the true product of my grandparents, or if she was
just another failed attempt. Another test, another month
of insomnia, another chance: the chance of living out
the American dream. One more test.

II.

Eyeing the clock down, it flips to say 7:08 pm, which means
five hours of studying minus the hour for dinner, but still
there are four more units to learn, two more practice tests
to complete, and an A to earn. Summertime Sadness
by Lana Del Ray—full volume in my left airpod. *It's you, it's you, it's
all for you*, channeling me to shatter. "Mom. I can't do this anymore."
But Lana and my mother both lift me, two angels, and my stress
dissolves once I hear the story from June 18th, 1988, her story—
the day my mother's world went quiet. In disbelief, that one test
determined millions of people's futures, everything I carried
on my back, my shoulders, in my mind, all withered, and I channeled
my mom's fire, watching the moon rise, the moon set, and the sun
rise, remembering the words my mother whispered, *One test does
not define you. Look at me.*

III.

Everyday, it's the same routine. 7 am - 10:30 pm. Each day, everyday
it's the one hour of time that her frown is upturned and she releases relief
in a long sigh. She has successfully taken care of me another day
in the painful life of a single mother. Having to wake up
to make breakfast, sending me to school, working overtime for a job
promotion, then picking me up in the afternoon, bringing me to practice

and from practice, and then cooking dinner, doing the dishes, finishing the laundry, working on slideshows for work, and then finally the one hour where she calls my dad. Unable to keep bottling her exhaustion, her spirit quiets like a candle. No longer hoping to wake up to a miracle of change—my mom knows nothing will change, no matter how hard she works. But each day she continues to devote her best to raising me and prioritizing my future over hers, yet I'm the one cowering in the shadow of my math final. When will life be fair? In the words of my mother, *life is never fair. Look at me.*

Sarah Ding

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Peter LaBerge

Category: Poetry

St. Louis Children's Choir, 2014

St. Louis Children's Choir, 2014

Walking down the red-brick path
to the paint-chipped staircase that led
to the door, I grasped my mother's hand

as I took my first step into the building. This was
all my mother's idea—she lured me into trying
out for the Children's Choir with a new outfit

for my American Girl Doll and a scoop
of World Class Chocolate from Baskin Robbins. Also
the constant reminders: Your brother loved choir! Don't you

remember going to Fox Theater to watch him
perform? That could be you one day! As my mom checked
in, I glanced around skeptically at the strange

assortment of chairs: office chairs, wooden chairs, folding
chairs. Away from my competition, directly across
from the clock, I crept over to the corner. Resorting to

my anxious habits: my knee began to jitter. I came up with
an ice cream flavor for every letter of the alphabet
all while waiting for my mom to finish

checking me in. I started judging the other people
in the waiting room. A few were warming up
their voices with exercises. Another read out loud

from *Where the Sidewalk Ends*. Sometimes, when I am
nervous, I freeze and then overthink. I should have
practiced those stupid noises the other girls were making

in the waiting room. "Sarah, can you please
sing these four notes and repeat after me?" The room
seems smaller then it did when the auditioner trapped me

inside it. It's dead silent with an occasional
tick of the clock. It should be my voice that fills
the room, but the tension between me and the music

standing in front of me is unbreakable. Seconds turn
to minutes before the auditioner asks me, "Sarah? Do you
like to sing?" What should I say? What should I say?

"No." "Then why are you here
today?" "My mom." She took my hand—gently, though
it felt like a yank in my heart—and she led me

out of the prison to get my mom, who led me
outside. Then, the never-ending brick path. Soon, I memorized
every detail of the gas station across the street: the six pumps

with the one always broken, the blue and orange
planet logo watching expectantly as we pass.

Sarah Ding

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Steven Espada Dawson

Category: Poetry

Tell Uncle Dave to Stay Away from Drosophila; The Edge

Tell Uncle Dave to Stay Away from Drosophila

The dark black caps that encapsulate
the abdominal of the fly are like the ends
of used cigarettes. The black caps
show that the fly is male. The black caps
of a cigarette show an easy way
to cremate someone's lungs.

The Edge

Being on the edge of a friend group,
is like taking drugs.
Each time you're included,
You forget the pain they've caused.
The nights you cry yourself to sleep.
Waking up with your eyes puffing. From,
crying so hard into your pillow.
Or the times you are so used to being left,
That you have no tears to let out.
Everytime your brother asks,
Why aren't you hanging out with your friends,
You have to lie and say they are busy.
When truly they aren't.
They are having the time of their lives.
But you continue to talk to them.
Everyday.

Sarah Ding

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Jeanne Gillanders

Category: Poetry

July 10, 2022

July 10, 2022

swiping through countless snapchat stories, posts /
on instagram, TikToks, news articles. all / the same:
plastered with white / hearts, angel emojis, sunset
pictures, the same / photo over and over again.
countless news / websites: STL Post Dispatch,
KSDK, STLToday. some / add an additional picture
of the two of them / in addition to the gofundme
you should / swipe up on. on occasion, it's someone/
who lives in your city, a student at a school / you've
briefly heard of. you try to constellate / how you
could possibly know this person. one time / it's your
close friend's brother's hockey teammate. but / next
it's a mutual on instagram. someone / your friends
from other schools have partied / with, in your grade
at a school you've played against / in field hockey.
car accident, boating accident, it just keeps / orbiting
closer and closer around you.

Sarah Ding

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Robert Henningsen

Category: Poetry

Fried Eggs; Lies

Fried Eggs; Lies

Summer 2019

Often, with one poke of the yolk--one
Nibble--the vibrant sunset drips out.
I cannot stand those eggs.
Eggs must be fully cooked--
Bright-sun yolks, rusty-Mars shells.
Crunchy--of course.

Sitting at the Shack with my family, I flip
Through the plastic menu. I'm drawn
To the "Do it yourself, Meg Ryan".
The egg options: scrambled, over easy, over
medium, over hard, sunny-side up, whites.
"Could you make sure my eggs are especially well done?"

A steaming platter arrives. I eye
The eggs. The eggs steam back.
With my natural instincts, my fork
Gently pressing the yolk. Squish. A sea
Of yellow flowing out. Another lie.

One year later, my friends hang out
Maskless. At school, one says, "This girl
I know, she never wears a mask. She thinks
COVID is a hoax." But my friends
Only wear masks at school--never
With each other. She's over-easy and my friends are
Over-medium. I'm over-hard. I wear my mask
At school, while carpooling, at people's houses...
That friend: "I'm so glad we're taking
COVID seriously." Another lie.

Yichun Duan

Age: 14, Grade: 10

Home School, Louisiana, MO

Educator: Shang Shang

Category: Critical Essay

Do leaders make events or events make leaders?

Do leaders make events or do events make leaders?

2000 words

According to Gruner and Walsh, a historical event is "an object which is in states and whose states are being changed" (1969). This essay adopts this as the definition of events and examines political leaders (which meant executive Heads of States) due to their direct influence and ability to create significant events. The question centers itself upon how leaders and events change each other, relating to this definition that discusses "states being changed". I will discuss how executive powers rise and fall due to the events and how leaders create or dismantle them, further categorized into man-made events, specifically war, natural disasters, and the hybrid between them, a pandemic.

"man-made" events: case study of Adolf Hitler

Adolf Hitler's invasion of Poland and the subsequent declaration of war by England and France was the start of an unprecedented conflagration. However, it was his codification of Aktion T4, referred to as a "euthanasia degree," that transformed long-held racism into the Holocaust, an organized extermination of the German-Jewish community. However, Hitler rose to power largely due to the remnants of hatred from World War I, without which, it would be unlikely that Hitler would have become a leader that had such a significant impact on the world.

Hitler was seen as the "offspring" of World War I, according to historian Ulrich Herbert (Schwabe 2014). Harsh terms of the Treaty of Versailles were largely criticized by the German population: £6,600 million and 10% of its European land, along with all its colonies, in reparations. It also made this militant state that once viewed its army as a source of national pride limit it to 100,000 men. The intense economic burden of the reparations and transferred of half of its iron and coal industry led to hyperinflation in Germany. The middle-class family savings that could afford a house in 1921 could not afford a loaf of bread in 1923 (Walsh, 2021). During this period, two major conspiracy theories had rooted themselves in German society and provided the basis for Hitler's rise to power. They were the "stab-in-the-back" theory and "war guilt lie" theory (Schwabe 2014). The "stab-in-the-back" theory centered itself upon how the German army wasn't defeated on the battlefield, but were betrayed by the Jewish politicians, in Berlin who demanded an armistice. The "war guilt lie" opposed the war guilt clause in the Treaty of Versailles, instead blaming the allies for making Germany responsible for starting the war (McDougall, 2022). Both conspiracy theories provided the basis for Hitler's rise to power, since the conspiracy theories both targets the Weimar republic along with the Jewish population, encouraging the public to overthrow the government. In Hitler's Mein Kampf, he noted that his enemy is "Jewish Marxism"; using this conspiracy theory, he strengthens his authority by appealing to the antisemitic public (Broschowitz, 2022). Hitler became the Chancellor of Germany in 1933, and he later used antisemitism rooted in the German society that enabled him to cause the holocaust.

Due to Germany's heavy influence by the Greco-Roman and Christian cultures, hostility towards the Jewish race was rooted in its culture (Halpern, 1981). From the Carolingian period, the Jewish population were targeted during the crusades, being accused of "poison[ing] the wells" and conducting "ritual murders" (Weitzman, 1994). The tradition of antisemitism was being added on with animosity towards Communism. According to Timothy Snyder, because the Soviet Union had one of the largest Jewish populations in Europe, post-World War I antisemitism had grown as a result of the threat of a Bolshevik revolution in Germany (2012). Adolf Hitler successfully utilized Germany's already rooted antisemitism to establish the terrible Holocaust. He started the event by the Aktion T4 campaign which persecuted disabled groups and other minorities, this was later being extended to persecution of Jewish population.

Hitler's rise to power and creation of the Holocaust can demonstrate both how an event produced a leader and how a leader made an event. However, the decision to not give Germany a say in the Paris Peace Conference and pay massive reparations was the most significant causes of Hitler's rise to power. The existing animosity in German society fuelled antisemitism, as in the "stab-in-the-back" conspiracy theory. Furthermore, Hitler's creation of Holocaust relied on embedded antisemitism and outrage after World War I, without which Aktion T4 and his subsequent decrees would not be easily passed. This reflects how the ability of a leader to make an event primarily relies on the historical and cultural background on top of his or her leadership.

In conclusion, the rise and establishment of leadership is produced by the events that predicate it, and events created by a leader, such as genocides, are heavily reliant upon the historical and cultural events a society has experienced.

"natural" events: a case study of George W. Bush and Hurricane Katrina

George W. Bush was a controversial US president; the public criticized his policies, notably the response to Hurricane Katrina. His administration was blamed for slow response to the disaster and causing the death of thousands. The consequence of the disaster contributed to making the population consider Bush's presidency as a partial failure; by the end of his presidency in 2008, 63% voted disapproved on the poll of how well "Bush [is] handling the economy". A month before Katrina, 53% voted disapproved on "Bush is handling his job as president", two months after Katrina, it rose to 55% (Crawls, 2009).

Katrina was one of the storms that caused most damages on record, with damage estimate of \$108 billion (Gibbens, 2019). Due to his questionable judgement and slow responses, Bush was held responsible for Katrina's unnecessary casualties and amplified economic damage. President Obama stated: "what started out as a natural disaster became a man-made disaster—a failure of government to look out for its own citizens" (Gibbens, 2019).

The day before Katrina landed on US coasts, National Weather Service had warned that the area would be "uninhabitable", giving a clear warning of the danger to come (Walsh, 2015). In comparison, President Bush was still vacationing at his Texas ranch and didn't get back to the capital until August 31, two days after Katrina made landfall. This portrayed Bush as unsympathetic to the victims and not giving enough attention to the matter, deteriorating his public image. The most significant problem was the mismanagement of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), its poor coordination with local authorities and slow response, causing its director Michael Brown to later resign (Sobel & Leeson, 2006). FEMA operations were limited under the federal system; particularly the "lengthy and unclear" (Birkland & Waterman, 2008) National Response Framework (NRF), released in late 2004 by Bush. The NRF made it even more difficult for responders to help the scene during Katrina as misallocation of resources and staffing caused significant delays for rescue: in Texas, a team of 30 medics, whose numbers have been more valuably used elsewhere, were assigned to treat minor cuts (Sobel & Leeson, 2006). Additionally, a predominance of inexperienced officials (five out of eight top FEMA officials had no previous experience in disaster control) hindered FEMA operations, which was underestimated by Bush appointee Michael Brown. Further, Bush's 2003 merger of FEMA within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) meant incumbent director James Lee Witt's warning that "we [will] not have [be] as responsive and effective during disasters" held true (Sylvester, 2006). The ineffective rescue operation amplified casualties caused by Katrina; about 2000 people killed, and over 1 million people were displaced around the coast (Onion et al., 2009). From evidence presented above, it's clear why in a poll discussing blame for Katrina, 65.5% of the Democrats and 21.6% of the republicans chose Bush as the responsible party (Malhotra and Kuo, 2008).

Compared with a "man-made" event, natural events appear less controllable by leaders as they can only limit the scale of destruction after the event. However, a leader's political decision making can greatly influence their public image and future political longevity. In the case of Hurricane Katrina and Bush's amplification of the disaster (albeit not direct causation), the event *destroyed* rather than *made* his leadership. Following his poor handling, his support rate dropped significantly.

"Hybrid" events: case study of Donald J. Trump and Covid-19 pandemic

President Trump's decisions during the Covid-19 pandemic prolonged the spread of the pandemic and shaped the world through his economic policies. Furthermore, his social media activity during the pandemic expanded his political influence through misinformation he spread.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, Trump administration distributed \$400 unemployment supplement to the public per

week but required local states to cover at least 25% of the cost, reducing budgets for healthcare workers and teachers. FEMA's contribution of \$44 billion was proposed to make up for the remaining 75% up to September 2020, making local states covering all costs after September (Greenstein,2020). The policy was overly ambitious, which added the financial burden on local states and removed funds needed for the healthcare system to help combat the pandemic. However, the medical supply chain was even more poorly handled: Trump did not activate the Defense Production Act that could have relieved production demand. Instead of distributing resources across states, Trump insisted that each state should purchase its equipment: "we're not a shipping clerk," announced Trump in a press conference. Consequently, competition between states for these limited resources proved disastrous: Massachusetts Governor Baker revealed that three of his orders for medical supplies were outbid by the federal government. Trump's inappropriate reply was indicative of his apathy: "price is always a component of that also [sic], and maybe that's why you lost to the feds" (Relman, 2020). Antiviral medications were also distributed poorly, often to hospitals without Covid patients and ignoring those with immediate need. The only FDA-approved drug (at the time) wasn't shipped to New York, despite their disproportionate fatality rate: the Wyckoff Heights Medical Center had a record 230 deaths (Sommerfeldt, 2020).

The pandemic negatively affected Trump's support rate: his presidential approval ratings plummeted to 34% by January 2021 from 44% a year prior (Gallup, 2016). On top of Trump's political mismanagement of Covid-19, his comments on the pandemic had also backfired. On a press conference in April 2020, he suggested injecting disinfectants into the body that "knocks [the virus] out in a minute" (BBC, 2020). Doctors and medical agencies including the CDC had rejected Trump's suggestion, damaged his reputation, and noted that "calls ... increased sharply at the beginning of March 2020 for exposures to ... disinfectants" (BBC,2020).

Despite the hybrid causality of events like pandemics and famines, their damage is arguably amplified by a leader's policies, which in turn determine the extent of 'state-change' that for Gruner and Walsh delineates a historical event. In this case, Trump's response caused the outbreak to evolve into a pandemic that lasted for about two years in United States (CDC, 2022). Again, outcome for Trump's leadership is complex: like Bush, his reputation suffered consequencely; conversely an intensified loyalty of his supporters led to the storming of the Capital, protesting the subsequent election. Regardless, this controversial response proved that events are both capable of destroying leaders and creating them.

Conclusion:

Leaders undoubtedly impact events across all three types identified in this essay. Hitler's immense power and influence codified the Holocaust, though it ultimately relied on a pre-existing climate of antisemitism. Though Bush's poor decisions amplified the impact of Hurricane Katrina, he did not cause this natural event. Perhaps the development of geoengineering might change this relationship of causality for future leaders. Hybrid events do allow for greater leader input, like Trump's mishandling of the Covid-19 virus, but ultimately, they are natural events caused by nature and leaders could only react to the event that has happened.

Though the causal relationship between leader and event is somewhat complex, what is certain is the capacity to events to destroy as much as make a leader. Though Hitler came to power in the aftermath of World War I and the Treaty of Versailles, in both cases of Bush and Trump, their respective event devastated their leadership.

Jack Duncan

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: Robert H Sperreng Middle School, Saint Louis, MO
Educators: Megan Roegner, Justin Villet

Category: Poetry

Twenty Feet Under

Tonight's the night, today's the day.
We've been working for months, tunneling through clay.
8,000 pounds, 320 kegs, quite a lot, I'd say.
Ah, well, once this siege is over, we'll all feel gay.
We've been far too long, twenty feet
under.

We can leave once it blows,
We can go home where it snows,
We can go back to the shows,
I've been under so long, it's wonderful I didn't decompose.
Under too long, twenty feet
under.

It happens incredibly fast.
First a rumble, then a flash.
Then comes the all-out blast.
The wind, unbearable, is what came last.
I say a silent goodbye to my underground home, twenty feet
under.

"Up and over boys!"
Are the first words I hear after the great noise.
I have to oblige, to bring back my poise,
We don't have time to sit around like little boys,
Like the time we had, twenty feet
under.

The Confederates are on the other side.
I didn't know what to do, but I must decide.
Unfortunately, we made the worst decision, I must confide.
Straight into the crater, we were forced to slide.
Down again, below the surface, twenty feet
under.

But as we reached the center, there at the top!
There were some boys up there, then the telltale POP!
All around me, my comrades began to drop,
But then I felt a pain in my chest, and I began to flop.
There I was, back again, twenty feet
under.

Right then and there, I knew I was done.

Well boys, it certainly has been fun,
But I was shot by another boy with orders and a gun.
I don't blame him, he's just like anyone.
For all I know, his brother is down here, blasted twenty feet
under.

Perhaps I saved a soldier to fight another day.
The thought occurs to me as I lay here, sinking in the clay,
I really did quite well, I'd say.
I think about the happy, the thoughts that make me feel gay.
Now, to this day, I am probably still there, twenty feet
under, the unnamed soldier.

Niah Fei

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: City of Fountains School, Kansas City, MO
Educators: Idean Bindel, Brandi McFadden

Category: Poetry

Lost and Forgotten

I Forgot

A while back,
I forgot how to make art without embracing the mind of colors

Even before that, I forgot how to be entertained by the simplest moment
the trash truck, a dog bark, thin strands of golden hair.

Three birthdays ago, I forgot how to travel through a world
where I was the fierce warrior guarding my kingdom.

And today,
I forgot my guitar the one day I promised
I wouldn't.

Luckily, memories anchor me to life's floor
keeping me in place
even if I have forgotten all the rest.

Lost and Found

I lost my favorite pair of mittens

relief instantly swept over me
seeing the periwinkle purple floral knit
resting peacefully at the top of the pile
in the
brown box

I lost my treasured dream

disappointment washed over me
knowing the vivid blue mystery parcel
taken by
the dreaded beeping at 7 o'clock
won't be
waiting loyally for me like mittens would
there's no lost and found for dreams
is there?

Reaghan Gaffney

Age: 15, Grade: 11

School Name: Pembroke Hill School, Kansas City, MO

Educator: Caro Thomas

Category: Poetry

American Life

The journey to get here wasn't easy
But the expectation of a good life was enough to get you through
When the going got tough, you thought of the city that never sleeps,
The brilliant people you would meet,
The fairytale you would finally be living,
All of that kept you moving

Now that you are here, does it feel like a fairytale?
Getting pushed around while walking through the city
Barely scraping up enough money for rent
Feeling so lonely you want to curl up in a ball
Is this American life? The dream?

Driving your two-seater
Silent tears stream down your face
You stop at a red light and watch as people walk in front of your car, across the street

A woman waves and gives a kind smile to you while walking by
And even though this wasn't what you expected for the American dream, you remember

You came here for a reason
A small act of kindness like this filled you back up
The thought of leaving the city now was absurd

You had so much more to see
So many more people to meet
And although the journey has been challenging, it's not over yet

Ella Graf

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: Basehor-Linwood Middle School, Basehor, KS

Educator: Erin Tegtmeier

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Flashbacks

Flashbacks

My life flashed before my eyes. The next thing I knew, my car spun straight into a semi-truck. January 17th, 2019, I almost lost my dad to a car accident. It was a normal day in 4th grade, and I was watching my brother's middle school basketball game. My dad and I were leaving his game early to go to Kane Brown's concert.

We left, and I was super excited to see my favorite country singer. I was all glammed up with my favorite outfit and purse. I sat in the front seat with my dad on our way to the concert. We were so excited and had no worries, while on our way to the Sprint Center. Suddenly, while we drove along K-7, a young girl was driving in front of us. She did an illegal u-turn right in front of us while going full speed. My dad tried his best to swerve her, but we hardly clipped her. I couldn't even comprehend what was happening, so I just shut my eyes.

I heard a big crash, and our car goes straight into a semi-truck. With my eyes still shut, I felt the airbag fall on me, and it felt like the whole windshield just fell on me. I couldn't even comprehend what just happened. I looked over and saw the most traumatizing thing of my life. My dad was unconscious in the driver's seat, but in my eyes, he looked dead. Something no kid would ever want to see with their own eyes. I screamed, and screamed, and screamed.

My mom's a nurse, so blood has never really bothered me as a kid; therefore, blood wasn't my main concern. My first instinct was to hold the cut, so immediately I was holding my dad's cut-open head. My hands couldn't even cover how big his cut was, but I still tried to put pressure on his head. This cut was from the middle of his forehead, all the way back to his ear. It felt like only seconds until I heard the ambulance sirens, and they were suddenly there, in front of me, and searching me for injuries. I was completely fine physically, but I was injured mentally. I left all of my belongings in the car because the blood ruined all of them. I got in the ambulance with my dad, and just looking at him broke me. It was clear he had a concussion because he kept repeating everything he was saying like he hadn't said it yet. I don't remember much because 10-year-old me was so freaked out, but all I cared about was that my dad was not dead.

We got to the hospital and got put in a big room together. The doctors checked me, and the only injury I had was seatbelt burns on my waste. As I sat in the hospital bed the only thing I could feel was the guilt of me having almost no injuries, and then I looked over to see that my dad hardly survived. A lot of my family showed up and comforted me while my dad was being taken care of. I went home that night, but my dad didn't get home until I was long asleep.

I hardly got any sleep that night. Just replaying the scene in my head, and even though I knew I did the best I could to help my dad, I still felt that guilt inside my stomach. I stayed home from school for a couple of days to help take care of my dad. He broke his thumb, got a very bad concussion, and cut almost his whole head open. It took him a while to recover physically of course, but it took me a while to recover mentally. That gut feeling would not leave me alone; however, I had great support from my friends and family that helped me get through it all.

It's now almost four years later, and I still think about that event. Now my dad is healthy and normal again, but I don't think I will ever be mentally normal again. Those traumatizing dreams I still get at night bring back flashbacks. Not good flashbacks. Flashbacks of me screaming and holding my unconscious dad. Flashbacks of my body covered in my dad's blood. Flashbacks I never want to see again, but I know flashbacks will never go away.

Sejin Hahn

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Blue Valley North High School, Overland Park, KS

Educator: Diane Morris

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

On a Bridge

The swooshing sound of cars from narrow roads. People drying their clothes in the decks of the 32-story apartments. Getting chased by pigeons.

Since my visit to South Korea 3 years ago, I have forgotten how different its cities were compared to Overland Park City. As I walked down the streets of Sang-dong, I could not walk more than five feet without touching shoulders with someone. For such a small town, there was so much to see and even more to smell. To my right were lines of restaurants and street vendors that seemed to go on forever. People were lined up-- couples talking to each other wondering what to get and little kids impatiently waiting while holding their tired mothers' hand. The temptation to walk into one of the small shops and ask for corn dogs covered in fried potatoes or spicy rice cakes was too strong. Every once in a while, I could not resist such temptation arising from nostalgia I never had, but most times I let the pebbled path guide me to my destination. Continuing down the street, I would finally come to Sang-dong Lake Park.

The park was rectangularly shaped with pebbled sidewalks next to roads-- surprisingly, with no lakes to be found nearby. There were a lot of people. Some were walking, while the kids were roller skating, but no one was running. I laugh about it now, but back then, I felt special. After all, I was running faster than anyone. Sometimes, it almost felt like I was running at the same speed as the cars driving next to me, which was funny because the cars were going less than five miles per hour due to traffic. Thanks to the huge 15-foot trees located every two meters blocking the road, I was able to become Usain Bolt in my imagination. As I stopped to catch my breath, I looked around the park that I used to go to every day 10 years ago. For some reason, I felt safe and at home. As a toddler I would sit in the stroller surrounded by my parents, siblings, and cousins, passing benches swarming with pigeons or beverage carts in the middle of the park. At least that's what my parents keep reminding me. However, no matter how hard I try to hop on my DeLorean Time Machine, all I can remember are benches covered up with phones, while their owners are playing a game of tag over the huge grassy field. The thing is, South Korea barely has any grass. It was almost as if I had entered someone else's body and soul, with my own brain intact. This was the moment I questioned who I really was. I was confused because their faces resembled mine, but their behaviors and culture were so different. The large signs outside the park had "Sauna," or "All You Can Eat Barbecue Restaurant" in my native language, and yet the buildings were speaking another-- three times the height and size of what I was used to back in Overland Park. Although it was something so simple and obvious to Sang-dong residents, I was fascinated by the fact that there was a 7-Eleven on the right end of the park selling banana milks. It wasn't the unfamiliarity that made me uneasy. I was filled with mixed thoughts of comfort, and nostalgia, but at the same time, fear and confusion.

The people were also very different. While I was running, what seemed normal to do in the US, they looked at me awkwardly as I nodded or smiled at them while passing. Other times it was my turn to give them the look when I saw sandals, jeans, and even button up shirts, that should belong in a mall instead of a park. What was even more striking was that the middle of the park was populated by faces of those no more than the age of 15, glued to their phones. While phones would occupy the benches as kids played tag in I-Lan Park on the green American soil, Korean kids were all sitting down with shades above them, holding their phones on one hand and mini handheld fans on the other. And I thought *I* was addicted. "Wait until mom sees this," I smiled. It was the few days that I spent at the park that I realized the people who looked so similar to me on the outside, were so culturally different on the inside. I felt lost because I could not figure out where I truly belonged.

This feeling was not just limited to when I was at the park, but later this loss of self identity would linger throughout the whole trip. On one hand, I felt relieved that the faces around me were identical to mine, and for the first time I was not on high alert. I no longer had to face the anxious stress that arose from immigration stereotypes/biases. Physically, I fit right in. On the other hand, however, when it came down to exchanging conversations or watching

their behaviors, they would take off their mask, revealing a new point of view. Yes, it is sometimes cool when people are fascinated that I am from two different cultures. Sometimes though, it gets lonely and scary to think that I'll never completely belong to anywhere, stuck on a bridge between two worlds.

Sania Hammad

Age: 16, Grade: 12

School Name: Thomas Jefferson Ind Day School, Joplin, MO

Educator: Laura McDonald

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Of Gerties and Me

It may come as a shock to some, but there are two things that I quite hate: chocolate-chip Eggos and peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. They represent everything wrong with the world, and it has been four years since I have touched either.

2018. My fraternal twin sister Sis and I turned thirteen and were ready to live our Disney-channel-influenced teenage dreams: visions of parties and dances and games as we approached the beginning of eighth grade.

In matters of health, nature has not dealt my sister and me an even hand—high card hand for her, royal flush for me. She has had a multitude of problems starting from the moment she was born. I, on the other hand, would be hard pressed to describe a cold. To add to her problems, eating disorder entered our family that year, and chose to dwell in my sister's body. As I continued to grow, my sister seemed to shrink. For treatment, our mother and she had to move to San Diego while our father and I stayed behind in Kansas.

With dad at work until late evenings, my only companions were my dog Watson and my stuffed animals, each incapable of breaking the pervasive silence of a previously bustling home. As if that were not enough, I saw my role in the family being catapulted from full-time dependent to honorary matriarch: cleaning, laundry, even cooking became my responsibility. Well, cooking was not my thing. So, for each breakfast and lunch, I relied on the two things I knew how to make. In less than six months, I had exceeded the lifetime per capita consumption of chocolate-chip Eggos and PB&J sandwiches in America (I am sure)!

As stress continued to grow, arts came to the rescue.

First there was catharsis through writing. Pouring my soul into every journal entry, essay prompt, and creative writing assignment, I released pent-up feelings. A couple of years later, I was to carry this love for writing to penning fiction, editing for Polyphony Lit, writing manifestos for girls' right to education worldwide and for awareness campaigns for autoimmune diseases.

Then there was music and drama. When "Oklahoma" was announced as the musical for middle school, I dove in headfirst. I *had* to be Laurie. I practiced, Watson and the stuffed animals in attendance, late into each night until audition day when disaster hit: I forgot the lines, I froze. Worse than rejection, the next day I saw my name at the end of the cast-list: Gertie, the comedic relief. Gertie was loud, nasal, and obnoxious, all the things—I hoped—I was not. I soldiered through my disappointment at rehearsals. And slowly it started to come together. When I was on stage, I was not me, I was Gertie, annoying laugh and all. On the day of the performance, something magical happened. When Gertie came on stage, she exclaimed through my voice, pointed at others with abandon, and cackled at her own jokes; the crowd loved her.

When Sis came home several months later, we both looked different. As she detailed her recovery, I felt warm with gratitude. She was well. Family was together. At least one trial was over, and it had taught me something. Though past life could have been gentler for us, I have since been excited at the prospect of facing the unfamiliar in the life of the future. It brings the possibility of finding new Gerties in me—deeper dimensions to the wealth of emotions and capabilities inside me. Perhaps, when facing the next tribulation in life, I will laugh it off with an annoying cackle.

Valorie Hayward

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: Basehor-Linwood Middle School, Basehor, KS

Educator: Erin Tegtmeier

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Don't Forget

Don't Forget

Forgetting your family, friends, childhood, and even who you are is one of the most depressing things that I could dream about. But for my great-grandma, this concept is a reality. My great-grandma has Alzheimer's disease, which means that she cannot remember the things that she used to know, even the things she used to know by heart. Her condition used to not be as serious, she would just forget the little things like, for example, what she did yesterday or that she had a doctor's appointment one morning. However, slowly but surely, the disease started to get more and more serious.

One of the first things to go, after the first signs of forgetting the little things that I mentioned earlier, was her memory of her extended family that she doesn't see often. At first, we kept denying the fact that she had Alzheimer's. We told ourselves that it was just a sign of her becoming older. But then, she started forgetting about people that used to be really close to her. She couldn't remember me, my brother, my cousins, or my mom. She doesn't remember anything about us anymore. She doesn't remember the countless times we went over there to visit her and sit in the garden or play with her cat and dog. She doesn't remember our names or even that she has ever seen us before. It seemed as if more and more people were slipping away from her like sand running through her fingers.

Then, she started to forget to do the important things to do throughout the day like take her medicine, eat, or feed her cat and dog every day. Her memory got bad enough that she had to move in with my grandma, and her daughter, and was forced to give away her dog and her cat. My grandma has to constantly go down there to check on her, to make sure she has taken her medication, and to make sure that she has eaten. Now though, my great-grandma can't even move on her own. She doesn't remember how to walk, talk, or do other simple everyday things like that. We have nurses there now and hospice, too, to help her around when she needs to go to the bathroom or get to bed. I still remember when my great-grandma used to be able to talk with me and walk around and show me all of the beautiful flowers in her garden that she loved so much. Now, I can't even remember the last time I saw her standing.

I feel that so many people take for granted just being able to live everyday life. They don't appreciate being able to move or talk. I've learned that those things themselves are a gift to be cherished. And so is the time you spend with the people you love. You never know how much you'll miss it until it's already gone. I've heard that saying a lot, and now I truly understand the meaning of it. Always make the best out of the time you have with someone and take advantage of being able to do even the simplest things.

Megan Hubbard

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Lindbergh High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Grace Jones

Category: Poetry

Trick of the Light

When bright eyes
turn weary from tears;

When a smile
is made hollow from lies;

When rosy skin
turns raw against whispers;

When flesh
shrinks away in fear;

When a beating heart
freezes over as a shield;

When a vibrant soul
dims itself to camouflage;

When the light
is snuffed out—

How do you know when
it flickers once more?

When weary eyes sparkle of joy and not tears?

When a hollow smile is full not of lies, but of truth?

When raw skin is healed as the whispers cease?

When shrunken flesh again consumes the fruit of life?

When a frozen heart has thawed?

When a dimmed soul allows itself to glow once more?

How do you know
when the darkness has truly passed?

Do you know
if I can trust the flames?

Do you know

if I can breathe again?

Do you know
if I'm free yet?

Or is it still —
Just a trick of the light?
—A flicker that gives hope just before
I'm snuffed out again—

Megan Hubbard

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Lindbergh High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Grace Jones

Category: Poetry

The Art of Life

My life sits a canvas –
Marked by years
Of color,
Brushed with memories
–lines etched by scars–

A picture –
Redrawn –
Time and time again,

Erasing away the
Sharp edges,
The stray marks,
The smudges of gray,

Darkening the parts
Good enough
To stay behind
–embolden the beauty –

A portrait –
Painted over–
Again and again,

Blending pigments –
To dampen
Colors too vivid,
To brighten
Colors too dark;

Brushing over –
Memories too raw,
With a reality
More palatable.

My life sits a canvas --
Etched with scars,
Marked by years,
Drawn and redrawn,
Painted over again and again –

*But all you see–
–is art.*

Megan Hubbard

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Lindbergh High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Grace Jones

Category: Poetry

Grief's Sad Smile

A smiling face, lost in the wind,
Suddenly seems so great
After it's gone;

One less body in the hallways
Becomes a chasm—a void—
That sucks in all the laughter,
Replacing it with silence;

One less photo in the yearbook
Sits a cruel reminder
Of the hundreds of photos
Captioned—rest in peace—

One less name called at graduation
Holds a sorrow so vast,
Within the two words
That should have filled the arena
—With tears of joy—
But that now only hold heartache;

Death with its vicious gaze,
Leering at those who wait,
Taunting us with mere memories
Of what it has torn from our grasp;

Grief with its sad smile—
Holding one's who've lost,
Embracing us with its iron grip,
Leaving a mark impossible to erase—

A moment of black,
And now—the world shudders
In gray;

The birds have no tune for hope,
The sun hides its puffy eyes
Behind closed doors,
The autumn leaves,
Once so vibrant
And alive,
Fall silently to the
Earth, echoing in their

Release— the thread that has snapped
In all of us—

The world outside—
Drained of color—stagnant—
Silently begs for an answer,

And finds nothing.

Megan Hubbard

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Lindbergh High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Grace Jones

Category: Poetry

I'm Fine

When someone asks,
“How are you?”
my reply is always the same.
I always say “I’m fine”—
not because that is the truth, but how can I say that I am not?

How can I say that I am in so much pain?
That I am breaking apart?
That piece by piece, I am losing myself--
And I’m afraid that I won’t fit together again.

The only relief I feel is when I do not feel,
because then at least –
I do not feel the sadness,
I do not feel the fear,
I only feel numb.

This way I do not want to die but I also do not want to live;
I feel neither pain nor pleasure,
but at least then, I do not cry.

Of course they believe me,
or at least choose to.

They don’t see what this is doing to me.
They do not see the bags under my eyes
or my ribs beginning to show again,
the clumps of hair left in the shower drain.
I want to look as sick as I feel, but no one can catch on
because then the game is over and I am only left
with myself again.

I smile and laugh,
but on the inside I am crying,
no, scratch that—on the inside I am dying.
But when they ask,
I always say “I’m Fine.”

Megan Hubbard

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Lindbergh High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Grace Jones

Category: Poetry

Sticks and Stones

It's said that
Sticks and stones
May break bones,
But—
What if I only splinter from within?

Words don't hurt me
When spoken aloud,
But—
When they turn to whispers
That fester in my mind,
They rip me apart,
Shredding the fabric
That lines my thick skin;

Fire arrows at my heart,
And I stand unphased.

Spit insults at my face,
And I don't flinch.

Duck behind me when a shot rings out,
And I become a shield.

But —
Don't expect
My guard to go down.

Don't think I'll believe
The "I love you" and "I cares".

Don't wonder when
I walk away.

Your sticks and stones
Mean nothing;

Your words don't cut deep
When my heart already rots
Away from the inside;

I do not fear
Your empty threats

And hollow fury—

There's an end to rage,
When the words run thin
And the anger seeps away.

But —
Doubt latches on,
Hooks its vengeful claws on
things soft and fragile,

Tearing away until
All that remains
Is shreds—

—Every arrow—
—Every insult—
—Every bullet—

Feeds the monster,

Its filthy venom invades its host,
Poisoning us until
It's mere shadows whisper
In our minds;

Sticks and stones
May break bones;
Words may sting;

But —
Fists do no damage
To a heart that's already deemed itself —
Unloveable.

Megan Hubbard

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Lindbergh High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Grace Jones

Category: Poetry

When the World Falls Away

When falling embers
turn green to black,
Charring the sturdy oaks,
Turning wildflowers to ash,
Filling the sky with smoke;

When the world caves in—
Forests crumbling away,
So many years lost—
Life vanished—in an instant—
Replaced by
Shrill cries and shadows;

When all is gone—
Bleak silence—in the wake—of death,
Soot covering the Earth
In a blanket of sorrow—
—Color gone—
—Life gone—
—Beauty gone—

We rebuild
From the cracks in the Earth,
Green stems emerge,
New life takes hold,
Nourished by the flames.

From the ashes,
beauty rises—
A lily blooms once more.

In the wake of sorrow,
Beauty remains—
A monarch flits across the ashen sky.

When all else has gone,
Beauty remains—
A stork flaps its wings

The sky returns to blue,
Embracing the world
In unwavering sincerity.

***Despite everything,
Beauty remains.***

Megan Hubbard

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Lindbergh High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Grace Jones

Category: Critical Essay

“Death and Hell”: A Discussion of Deviance and Imprisonment within *Wuthering Heights*

Wuthering Heights by Emily Brontë follows the members of the families living in the Heights and Thrushcross Grange over two generations as they are forced to live within the limits of trauma and prejudice. It explores the twisted passion between Catherine Earnshaw and Heathcliff, the safe but confining love between Edgar Linton and Catherine, as well as the nurturing and evolving relationship between Cathy Linton and Hareton Earnshaw. The heartwrenching effects of death, and the grief that follows, are littered throughout the novel as characters cycle through loss, despair, hatred, and revenge. An examination of the novel brings into question the societal structures in place, arguing that humans live in an inescapable carceral network in which punishments are not only given to those who commit horrific crimes but also those who deviate from the social norm. Although characters are displayed in a slightly different light, both the novel by Brontë and the *Wuthering Heights* 2009 mini series portray the dangers faced by a society that stigmatizes and punishes those whom it does not deem conventional. Those who do succumb to societal pressures and force themselves to fit in a box face imprisonment by the labels and limits of prejudice, but those who do not mold themselves to fit societal expectations are deemed deviants and suffer intensely within themselves and with others.

Each character in the novel moves through life in a distinct prison of the roles in which they are forced into. Upon Linton's marriage proposal, Catherine Earnshaw faces extreme torment within herself, culminating in a nightmare in which she feels trapped, realizing that she has “no more business to marry Edgar Linton than [she has] to be in heaven” (Brontë 81). Catherine, in theory, should feel safe, but instead feels trapped in a heaven in which she does not belong. Although Catherine claims that Heathcliff is ““more myself than I am. Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same,”” she cannot admit her love for Heathcliff as it would “degrade” her (Brontë 81). Catherine is trapped within the confines of the heteronormative expectations of a society that punishes that which is not ideal.

The idea of entrapment continues across a generation as Catherine and Edgar's daughter, Cathy, is bound in a marriage forged through Heathcliff's obsessive desire for revenge. Although Cathy believes her affection for Linton to be a sign of love, it soon becomes apparent that Cathy's spirited desire for the world to be “awake and wild with joy” cannot survive within Linton's desire for an “ecstasy of peace” (Brontë 148). The needs and desires of an individual cannot be satisfied through conformation, thus individuals soon become trapped in a repressive and suffocating snowglobe-like reality. When one is unable to fit in the glass dome of societal bounds, the glass shatters, and the individual's world shatters with it.

Furthermore, in the relationship between Heathcliff and Catherine, there are dual extremes of passion and anger so intense that they cannot possibly be contained in limits set by others. When these limits destroy them, a grieving Heathcliff is left empty and alone, imprisoned in a world where he is not accepted--a world without his soul. He feels that “[t]he entire world is a dreadful collection of memoranda that she did exist, and that I [Heathcliff] have lost her!” (Brontë 324). While living, Heathcliff and Catherine cannot love freely as they are contained in a classist and racist carceral network that “does not cast the unassimilable into a confused hell; there is no outside” (Foucault 1496). Heathcliff is perpetually shunted to the side, stepped on, and put down, thus Catherine can never be free to love him lest she should choose to be demeaned as well.

The idea of imprisonment is duly represented within the 2009 mini series with the juxtaposition of lighting symbolically used as its portrayal. Prior to the death of Catherine's father, soft light warms the surroundings of Heathcliff and Catherine. However, upon Earnshaw's death, the sky darkens, the lights dim, and the color drains from Catherine's features; she becomes dull (*Wuthering Heights*). Without her father's protection, bigotry is able to infect the previously untainted love between Heathcliff and Catherine. The light only brightens again when golden beams shine down upon the two spirits standing together in the window of the Heights (*Wuthering Heights*). Only in

death are they free from the diseased influence of society.

This duality of light and dark can also be applied to the colors and the architecture of the houses themselves. The Heights outwardly appears dark and dilapidated (*Wuthering Heights*), reflecting the collapse of the family structure within. The brightly depicted Thrushcross Grange with a sheath of blooming flowers and lush grasses, in contrast, portrays an environment of nurturing and love that allows for growth and individuality (*Wuthering Heights*). Without the opportunity to find oneself, to grow, and to make mistakes, one is trapped in a vicious cycle of pain and punishment.

In the television adaptation, Heathcliff becomes so desperate for any interaction with Catherine after her death that she appears to him as a ghost-like entity whose arm breaks through his window. Upon the arrival of morning, the glass is unbroken (*Wuthering Heights*), portraying that Heathcliff can never free himself from his prison of grief and hatred. The carceral system “takes back with one hand what it seems to exclude with the other...It is unwilling to waste even what it has decided to disqualify” (Brontë 1496). Heathcliff may be irreparably broken, but he can never be free because he has been tarnished with the label of a deviant.

Accordingly, the carceral network pervading society does not just punish criminals but also any “departure from the norm” and, thus, a society has been created in which “the social enemy [is] transformed into a deviant, who [brings] with him the multiple danger of disorder, crime and madness” (Foucault 1495). Heathcliff, for instance, is not punished because he is evil. He, initially, is only guilty of being a “dark-skinned gypsy” (Brontë), and it is only upon being maliciously and cruelly punished by society, that he becomes malicious and cruel.

The consequences of irregularity are best manifested by the tragedies of love within the novel. The love between Heathcliff and Catherine spews forth bright and hot, disintegrating all that lies in its path. It sees no reason nor rationality. Heathcliff would have “torn out his [Edgar’s] heart out, and drank his blood!” for Catherine, believing “existence, after losing her, would be hell” (Brontë 148). This intensity could not exist in a heteronormative relationship, so existing in a deviant relationship ripped apart by pride and reputation would be impossible; it would destroy them.

Linton and Cathy’s love would not burn bright nor light a town on fire, but, rather, it would crumble. Linton, an already frail product of deviant love, would become even more feeble and dull in the presence of his father. Linton would become a shadow desperately hanging on to life as his eyes hollowed, with his once languid expression, “transforming to haggard wildness” (Brontë 261). Linton would impose upon his company disorder and madness that would not cease until his death.

Unlike the unchanging nature of love born within a box, a love without limits is free to evolve and grow. Hareton, initially likened to “good things lost amid a wilderness of weeds” (Brontë 196), had the potential to be good if only he would not be poisoned by the cruelty produced by generational trauma. This proved true; with the vengeful Heathcliff soon to go, and the delusional Catherine, the restrictive Edgar, and the prejudiced Hindley all gone, there was no longer any influence of society and its constructs:

Earnshaw was not ready to be civilized without a wish; and my young lady was no philosopher, and no paragon of patience; but both their minds tending to the same point--one loving and desiring to esteem; and the other loving and desiring to be esteemed--they contrived in the end to reach it. (Brontë 316)

The box was removed entirely; there was no sense of deviance nor heteronormativity in and of itself. Thus, the two were free to grow and flourish.

Similarly, in the mini series, Heathcliff is portrayed and treated as a deviant. Heathcliff and Catherine, under the shield of Mr. Earnshaw, are carefree and light with warm colors and soft music surrounding them. Upon Hindley’s return, Heathcliff is forced to take up the status Hindley feels he should bear: that of a servant (*Wuthering Heights*). Hindley describes Heathcliff as a “moral poison,” (*Wuthering Heights*) and, consequently, Heathcliff fills this role, supporting the idea that “delinquency is for the most part produced in and by an incarceration which, ultimately, prison perpetuates in its turn” (Foucault 1496). Heathcliff is born as innocently as any; it is only upon being labeled as a villain by society that he fulfills this role.

The mini series’ representation of Linton varies slightly from the novel in that he does not abuse Cathy, he is merely imprisoned by the shackles Heathcliff has placed upon him. He grows weak and he fades away (*Wuthering Heights*). His death is as nonchalant and meaningless as his existence, as the existence of any deviant who is born into a world in which they can never belong.

In all respects, Hareton and Cathy’s love should be destructive, vengeful, and devastating. However, despite their familial history of hate and revenge, the two end the cycle. Following so much death, Hareton and Cathy learn to forgive and grow, free from the scrutinizing lens of society and the hatred it has fostered (*Wuthering Heights*). Deviance has always permeated every aspect of the lives of Hareton and Cathy; upon its exit, the two have the capacity to evolve.

Brontë depicts the dangers of madness and disorder that stems from deviance through the motif of mental illness. Catherine starves herself, refusing to eat, as a desperate attempt to punish Edgar and Heathcliff (Brontë 121).

Catherine, in a prison of expectations and condemnations, is starved of her heart's true desires, and so, she starves herself and withers away.

As the effects of Catherine's illness ripple outwards, Heathcliff's descent into madness is a manifestation of the intense obsessive love between himself and Catherine. Heathcliff exclaims to Nelly in a state of anguish:

I cannot continue in this condition! - I have to remind myself to breathe - almost remind my heart to beat!...I have a single wish, and my whole being, and faculties are yearning to attain it. They have yearned towards it so long, and so unwaveringly, that I'm convinced it *will* be reached--and *soon*--because it has devoured my existence. (Brontë 325)

Heathcliff's alienation from all but Catherine creates an unhealthy obsession that devours his sanity. The danger of madness is not caused by deviance itself, but, instead, it is the result of society's treatment of deviance.

Similarly, Hareton, likened to a "dog" or a cart-horse," being uneducated with a "blank, dreary mind" would be reduced to an animal (Brontë 310). In "Hareton Earnshaw and the Shadow of Idiocy: Disability and Domestic Disorder in *Wuthering Heights*," Baldys claims that Brontë utilizes Hareton's disability as a representation of the instability and collapse of the families within the Heights and Thrushcross Grange. Brontë writes of Hareton having "an honest, warm, and intelligent nature" that "shook off rapidly the clouds of ignorance and degradation in which it had been bred" (Brontë 322). Hareton's brightened mind rids itself of idiocy as though it were a dog shaking the water off its fur. The idea of deviance is no longer relevant as the authority of society fades, thus, Hareton has no reason to remain in the cage he has been forced into.

In the mini series, however, Catherine is portrayed as becoming delirious (*Wuthering Heights*). She cannot live in her reality and, so, she becomes infatuated with a fantasy world where she can live beyond society's prison. Heathcliff's monomania is amplified further in the television adaptation as he becomes so possessed by the idea of being with Catherine after her death that he digs up her bones and lays with them (*Wuthering Heights*). This depiction of pure desperation epitomizes the insanity that is bred in an environment of isolation and alienation.

Heathcliff's monomania is amplified even further in the 2009 adaptation than in the book. He becomes so possessed by the idea of being with Catherine after her death that he digs up her bones and lays with them. This act of pure desperation portrays the insanity brought with grief that cannot be displayed as it could through the subtleties of a text. Catherine is his soul; there is no differentiation between the two. Heathcliff kills himself with a gun in her bed because he cannot live without his soul. Heathcliff and Catherine's love could never survive in life. They are too much a part of each other and their love is too large to be imprisoned.

Hareton's depiction in the mini series is distinctly different than in the book. He is a constant source of normalcy throughout: he speaks fluently, he looks average, and he is kind and good (*Wuthering Heights*). The love between Cathy and Hareton does not have to remove the box because it already fits. Their love *is* heteronormative. This simple transgression from the novel creates the notion that the devastation felt by all characters was not caused by the imperfections of a society based upon labels and stigma, but rather by the deviances themselves.

Both the 1847 novel and the 2009 adaptation portray a carceral system that confines multiple generations within the construct of heteronormalcy. Deviations from this normalcy result in immense suffering, represented as mental illness, and, ultimately, death. However, while the mini series suggests that the love between Hareton and Cathy could survive because their heteronormalcy allowed them to fit within the box, the novel alternately suggests that the dangers of societal pressures can only be overcome when the construct of the box itself is removed entirely, and individuals have the ability to grow and change and to cultivate growth and change.

Rajeshwar Jaladi

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Parkway West High School, Ballwin, MO

Educator: Debra Klevens

Category: Journalism

Ransomware Cyberattacks on schools are on the rise: What can we do?

Ransomware Cyberattacks on schools are on the rise: What can we do?

Cyberattacks are no longer an activity of high-profile companies and national security but have become a daily reality for schools. According to an FBI Alert, 57% of all reported ransomware attacks in August and September 2020 were targeted at U.S. K–12 schools, an increase from 28% from January through July 2020. The average ransom was around \$50,000, but the highest has crossed \$1.4 million.

Cyberattacks have hit schools and colleges harder than any other industry during the pandemic. Two school districts in Missouri had to close due to ransomware attacks this summer. October was Cybersecurity Awareness Month, and this year's theme is 'Do Your Part. #BeCyberSmart.' We can start with the question: what are we doing to keep our school safe from these cyberattacks?

Parkway's Chief Information Officer Jason Rooks is on the alert every minute to stop and mitigate cyberattacks and provide teachers and students with safe, stable technology services.

"In such cases, someone from the outside used either a system vulnerability or a user account to access the district Information Technology (I.T.) infrastructure. Once they have access to the network, they can extract data, deploy malware and encrypt systems," Rooks said. "I think the important thing we can learn from these attacks is that anyone is vulnerable."

School districts are at high risk for cyberattacks due to a high volume of users that may lack security awareness, heightened use of technology and remote access during the pandemic, and lack of resources to stop and mitigate attacks.

"Protecting students and their data is meaningful work. School districts are especially vulnerable to attack due to a lack of resources. It creates a very unique challenge," Rooks said.

The end-user is the most common entry point for ransomware cyberattacks, according to Rooks. End-users include all students, teachers, administrators, parents, and everyone using the school's computer systems and network.

"Typically, someone clicks on a phishing email and enters in their credentials. This gives the attacker an entry point into the network and an opportunity to compromise other systems," Rooks said.

A typical phishing email tries to create a sense of urgency and asks to do something. Rooks says an example of a common phishing attack is when the attacker sends an email pretending to be a principal using a made-up email address such as headofschool@gmail.com. The attacker might say something in the email like 'Are you there? I really need you to email me.' When the victim replies, they will ask the person to go to the store and buy gift cards. Then they will ask the victim to scratch off the back of the gift cards and email them the numbers to redeem the cards.

"The goal is to create a sense of urgency so that the victim doesn't have time to think," Rooks said. "The whole time, the victim thinks they are doing something to help the principal. This is a common attack and one we have seen be successful at Parkway. The easiest way to combat this attack is to verify the source email address or pick up a phone and call the principal."

Rooks encourages everyone to be skeptical of suspicious emails or websites and not click on random links. "Take the time to learn the basics of cyber security and programming. You don't have to be a programmer, but learning the basics will help you understand how the bad guys do what they do," Rooks said.

Although we hear about the attacks that have caused damage, many are successfully blocked on a daily basis. There are a number of different tools that schools use that block activity identified as malicious, such as anti-malware applications, as well as regular scanning and reporting.

"We once had an entity attempt to access our data warehouse, they were most likely based in eastern Europe or Russia. They gained access to a publicly facing server through a protocol left on by mistake. The entity then tried to launch an application to help them gain access to other directories and services," Rooks said. "Fortunately, the application's language was not supported on the server. Also, our advanced malware protection identified the malicious activity and blocked the application and the user. Ultimately, our protections worked as they were supposed to."

One key to keeping yourself and the school cyber safe is to educate yourself on the basics of cybersecurity and understand how to protect yourself, according to Rooks. Senior and president of the Cybersecurity club Luc LaRocca, says the club aims to promote cyber security awareness by allowing students to compete in CyberPatriot, a competition run by the Air Force Association in which students evaluate virtual scenarios for security vulnerabilities and try to fix them.

"I joined the Cybersecurity club because I was curious about how cyber-secure I was with my devices. I figured if I knew a thing or two about cyber security, then I could do this. I discovered that many of my accounts were at risk and that everyone can become more cyber secure," LaRocca said.

LaRocca's three big cyber tips for students are to create secure passwords for every device, including your phone, use two-factor authentication on accounts that offer it, and never click on a link sent by an unknown source, including a bit.ly or TinyURL.

"A simple way to do this is to think of a statement that holds meaning to you, abbreviate that, and incorporate different characters, capitalizations and numbers into it," LaRocca said. "If that makes it too hard to remember, try using topics from an interest of yours. For example, if you like the TV show Friends, you could use jO3y_3b4n! for one account, and bpHe0b3! for another one. This helps you to remember your passwords but still be cyber secure."

While cybercrime grows exponentially, we are facing a severe cybersecurity talent drought, according to Forbes. A Bureau of Labor Statistics report states that the growth rate for jobs in information security is projected at 37% from 2012 to 2022. For students interested in exploring or pursuing a career in cybersecurity, Parkway has offered a semester-long cybersecurity course since 2018 for all interested high school students through the virtual campus.

"A student interested in cybersecurity will have opportunities in both the public and private sectors," Rooks said. "There are many great opportunities in all areas of cybersecurity."

Rajeshwar Jaladi

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Parkway West High School, Ballwin, MO

Educator: Debra Klevens

Category: Journalism

Journey to Oxford

Journey to Oxford: Alumnus Abdullah Kuziez receives the Marshall Scholarship

Alumnus Abdullah Kuziez, class of 2018, was one of the 41 students to be named a 2022 Marshall Scholar.

Awarded by the British Government, the Marshall Scholarship offers exceptional American students the opportunity to pursue two years of advanced study in any field at any university in the U.K.

Barring any COVID-19 issues, Kuziez will be pursuing a master's in Biomedical Engineering at Oxford University this October. He is a premedical-doctorate student, and the track involves two years of medical school, followed by four years of research and another two years of medical school.

"I picked that [Oxford] because I'm interested in research with one of the faculty at Oxford, Dr. Ruozheng Wang. The goal of the project is essentially to engineer bacteria to treat cancers. So you attack these bacteria, they aggregate up the tumor, and then they produce chemotherapy agents, which I think is a very interesting and very unique approach to cancer therapy and something that's only really done [at Oxford]," Kuziez said.

Kuziez is currently a senior at Washington University in St. Louis, majoring in Biophysics and Biochemistry and minoring in computer science. His passion for Physics and Chemistry started while he was in high school.

"My high school teachers were the people who shaped my interests the most. I had [former physics teacher Ellen Wilke] and [former chemistry teacher Jan Keller] who were both phenomenal teachers. They gave me the faith and the freedom to pursue my interests. Coming out, I felt strongly towards physics and chemistry," Kuziez said.

Kuziez says he started to see the intersection between various subjects while in high school, which became more apparent at the nanoscale level when he started doing research. As a senior in high school, he was selected for the Students and Teachers as Research Scientists (STARS) program. One of his first research projects involved nanoparticles.

"They [Nanoparticles] have these chemical properties based on which you attach to the surfaces, but because they're macromolecular objects, they also have physical properties that impact the way they operate. So I started seeing a unique blend of physics and chemistry, which meant a deeper understanding of things and a potential for innovation," Kuziez said. "It was the springboard for everything. I worked in the lab, and it was really valuable for me. But everyone has to start somewhere and just get your feet wet. Back then I thought it was really fun. It also gave me a connection within the research community."

According to Kuziez, this experience led him to choose the biophysics-biochemistry track when he joined Washington University.

"I ended up taking a really interesting biophysics class called physics of living systems. It was really intriguing. One of the examples that stood out to me was E. Coli chemotaxis," Kuziez explained. "E. Coli can find food. How do they do that? If you talk to a biologist, they'll tell you they have this receptor that recognizes food. But that's not how they do it. That's just one part of that mechanism that you realize when you look at the same process from different disciplines. For me, that was just exciting."

Kuziez looked for opportunities to advance his learning and research. However, the pandemic posed several

hardships. He planned on completing summer research abroad during his sophomore year and studying abroad during his junior year, both of which were canceled because of COVID-19. The Marshall Scholarship was another opportunity for in-person learning overseas for Kuzeiz. With an acceptance rate of under 4%, the Marshall Scholarship is one of the most competitive graduate-level scholarships awarded to 50 U.S. students every year. The criteria for Marshall selection is based on three categories: academic merit, leadership potential, and ambassador potential. One must be nominated by their university to be considered for the scholarship. The selection process involves submitting an application, a personal statement, and a set of essays on one's program of study, why one is pursuing it, and why it is unique. If the university nominates the student, the application is submitted to the Marshall Scholarship's national committee, which reviews the application and decides to select candidates for an interview. The interview is the final step in the process.

"I wrote the essays over three weeks, which was shorter than WashU's suggested time of 10 weeks. Although it was tedious and I was relieved to be finished, the process helped me reflect deeper into my future goals," Kuzeiz said.

The Parliament of the United Kingdom created the Marshall Scholarship in 1953 as a living gift to the United States in recognition of the generosity of Secretary of State George C. Marshall and the Marshall Plan, which was an economic recovery plan for Western Europe in the wake of World War II. The goal of the scholarship was to strengthen the special relationship between the two countries for "the good of mankind in this turbulent world."

"I am honored, and I feel incredible for getting the opportunity. It's like a shot in the wind. You don't expect it to come back. Then when it does, it is a great feeling and at the same time a bit stressful, but that's a good type of stress," Kuziez said.

Washington University in St. Louis refers to Kuzeiz as a polymath, someone who becomes competent in at least three diverse domains and integrates them into a top 1-percent skill set. In the future, Kuzeiz plans to pursue the Doctorate of Medicine and of Philosophy (MD-PhD), which is a dual doctoral degree for physician-scientists. Marshall scholarship is the first step, he says.

"Although it is a long path, I am looking forward to the experience at Oxford and combining the training in medicine and research to find newer and transformative treatments for cancer," Kuzeiz said.

Rajeshwar Jaladi

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Parkway West High School, Ballwin, MO

Educator: Debra Klevens

Category: Journalism

From Longhorns to Big Greens

From Longhorns to Big Greens: senior Elliot Krewson's college admissions journey amidst the pandemic

Senior and shortstop Elliot Krewson knocked the ball out of the park during the COVID-19 pandemic, earning admission to Dartmouth College, a Division I Ivy League program, to pursue his dream of playing baseball.

Krewson made school history as the first-ever to play on Dartmouth Big Greens.

Krewson, who has been playing baseball since preschool, says being accepted to Dartmouth is one of his biggest accomplishments.

“My whole life, I’ve always wanted to go to an Ivy League school. That moment for me came when I got the athletic offer from the baseball coach; it was a dream come true,” Krewson said.

Krewson’s inspiration to play ball came from his grandfather, who tried out for the Cardinals and played with them in spring training.

“My grandfather] died when I was around nine. I missed many moments that I wanted to have with him. But, I felt like I’d play for him. When I got on the field, I felt like it was for him—having him there in my heart, even though he’s passed away. It’s been meaningful to me to have someone to look up to,” Krewson said.

Krewson says that he had to overcome several obstacles to achieve his goal. One of the biggest challenges was his height.

“I’m a smaller guy. I’m only 5 feet 9 inches [tall]. So it’s hard to be noticed by coaches when you’re not very big in size, especially by division one coaches. And I’d always be fighting against people who are, like 6 feet 4 inches or 6 feet 5 inches, and it’s hard to be better than them,” Krewson said.

The selection process for prospective student-athletes is different from regular college admissions. For baseball, one waits to hear from the University Baseball Scout, who evaluates the students’ athletic strengths. The admissions board then considers how the student’s talent on the baseball field aligns with their academic strengths, leading to an acceptance or denial. For Krewson, the process was competitive, challenging and mostly virtual.

“[COVID-19] and the economic downturn took away money that schools will be able to offer to kids. So, Division I schools were not making scholarship offers to kids [in] my grade. That was a disappointment,” Krewson said.

“However, just around that time [of the pandemic], I had shifted my college focus to only Ivy League schools because they weren’t accepting seniors to return to the fifth year on the team. So it worked out that way for me.”

When Krewson was recruited by Dartmouth, math teacher and head baseball coach Andrew Jett was proud of his accomplishment.

“He worked very hard to get to the place that he is and deserves all of the recognition that he gets,” Jett said.

“Many kids think that [college] coaches are just looking for the best athlete or the kid that throws the hardest.

However, when coaches come and watch players, they are watching how the kid warms up, how the athlete communicates with their coach and teammates, how they hustle on and off the field.”

While the pandemic became an obstacle for all, Krewson did not view it as such. Jett recognizes Krewson's perseverance as he rigorously continued with his practices and search for colleges.

"It could have been very easy for him to settle with a college after our season was cut short last year [after the pandemic]. However, he continued to push and work hard through the summer, and he ended up getting what he deserved," Jett said. "Elliot is a leader. He is always pushing his teammates and leading by his actions. Elliot is the last one at practice almost every day. He leads by example. It is easy for [upperclassmen] students to get a big head and think that the underclassmen owe them something. Elliot does not approach his team that way."

Even though the most significant factor leading to his acceptance may seem to be baseball, Krewson believes his academics and ACT score helped him stand out.

"I had to get a good ACT score. I studied a lot. This year, I had to take up a very tough class load. It's stressful, but that's one of the things that they look at the most is your strength of schedule. So I had to load my course load with AP classes, that'll show them that I am also competitive academically," Krewson said.

Getting accepted into a Division I baseball program along with being accepted into an Ivy League college is a prestigious and a rare feat since most Ivy League schools have less than a 10 percent acceptance rate. To achieve this, Krewson had to learn to balance sports and academics.

"It is difficult [to find a balance]. I'll be in school until right around 1 p.m. and then right after that, I'll hit [baseballs] and then I'll work out. I do this every single day. So I don't get home until 8 p.m. every day [and] then I do my homework," Krewson said. "There's not a lot of room for social life. You make a lot of sacrifices. It's the sacrifices that get you to the next level."

Majoring in Computer Science and minoring in Business, Krewson has set two career path choices for himself: a software development career and a professional baseball player. He plans to play baseball with the goal of continuing as long as he can.

"[My future] depends on how I do in college. If I get drafted [to play professional baseball], I would love to play. But if I don't see [my baseball career] going anywhere, I feel like having a Dartmouth education would be great. So either way, there is a win-win."

Krewson, who is now a Dartmouth commit, would like to encourage his fellow students to continue to work hard.

"Don't ever stop working. And if you think you're working enough to get [somewhere], you probably are not. If you find a hardship, or you feel like you've hit a brick wall, find a way to adapt and work around it," Krewson said.

Ava Jenkins

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: Basehor-Linwood Middle School, Basehor, KS

Educator: Erin Tegtmeier

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

The Dark Room

The Dark Room

It's dark, cold, and lonely. I'm alone, and I hate it. It's taking over my mind, and it's taking over my thoughts. It's taking over my everyday life, and I don't know how to fix it. I don't know how to make it go away. I try to hide it by putting a smile on my face, and sometimes I even forget it's there. But whether I know it or not, it's always there. I try to ignore it, I try to work past it, but it sucks me in. Now I'm stuck. There's no way out. Oddly enough, I start to feel safe because I can be myself. I don't feel insecure, and I don't feel judged, but I still don't feel loved. I often feel alone even when I'm not in that dark room. I often feel alone even in my own home.

There, the love and attention are hardly on me. My brother and I are being raised by a single parent. My brother isn't the best kid, and I'm the kid that my mom doesn't need to worry about. Which also means that I'm the kid that doesn't get worried about. I still get the hugs and the love yous, but it doesn't feel real, it doesn't feel genuine. I've tried to talk about it and express how I feel, but that's always been a struggle for me. It started a couple of years ago when my mom started working from home. I know she's in there, I know she's working, and I know that she's not thinking of me. Knowing that she isn't thinking of me isn't what's bothering me, it's knowing that she's loving me, but also knowing that the loneliness is overpowering.

Sometimes it makes me wonder. Would she care if I disappeared? Would I be missed? Would anyone really notice? I don't have thoughts of actually disappearing, just what would happen if I did. What hurts the most is knowing my brother is loved more. My mom always says she doesn't have a favorite and she loves us both equally. She always lies when she says that. It's the little things that show it. Like how he's always the one who gets to make the decision when we have a choice. Like where we go to dinner or whether I get to go to the football games on Fridays. It's like I'm being overlooked like my opinion doesn't matter.

Most of the time, I feel overlooked in school, too. I can tell that my friends don't do it on purpose, but it definitely feels like they do. I get left out and left behind on things almost all the time. I do admit that I'm not the loudest person, so it is a little hard for me to actually be noticed. But I also don't want to be known as the crazy, loud girl, which is the complete opposite of what I'm known as now. People have even told me they forgot I was there because I'm so quiet. Or that they think of me as the quiet kid that doesn't talk much. I'm the quiet kid that nobody ever notices.

So even though when you see me, I may not be jumping up and down, or talking loudly, or even saying anything at all, I'm here. Please don't ignore me. Please notice me. I'm around just like everyone else; I'm just yearning for someone to see the real me. The quiet me. The internal me. The introverted me. The amazing me. Because even if no one else notices, I know I'm here. I know that I will do great things. And I know that I'm irreplaceable, present, and important. I just want others to see that, too.

kareena kanumury

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Mary Institution & St Louis Day School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Tex Tourais

Category: Critical Essay

The Creole Humanity: An Investigation on the Modernization of a Blended Culture

It's typical when taking a standardized test or filling out a demographic-related form to inquire about someone's identity. As one should check the according boxes regarding their country of origin, ethnicity, and generational history in America, a commonly accepted norm defines identity as to a certain country or ethnic group. However, Patrick Chamiseou's *Creole Folktales* works to resignify the terms of identity to a string of collective histories. As Chamiseou's works define the Creole identity, it's understood through Chamiseou's interview *Re-Imagining Diversity and Connection in the Chaos World: An Interview with Patrick Chamoiseau* and Lewis Siefert's *Orality, History, and "Creoleness" in Patrick Chamoiseau's "Creole Folktales,"* the Creole identity is the concept of modernization through adapting a collection of cultures and erasing labels, which essentially relates to the Marxist lens in literature. Chamiseou not only erases these lines when discussing cultures but intertwines multiple languages, communication methods, and story structures. *Creole Folktales* explores transcultural hybridity and attempts to redefine the Creole identity. Basing the fables at the peak of slavery and the usage of Creolness, Chamiseou's stories stray from the traditional concept of how we define our identity from one ancestral line and represent the concept of identity through rhizomatic representations. As the concept of identity is redefined, Chamiseou highlights the specific advantages and disadvantages of attaining a global identity, *Toute Monde* ("Whole world").

Before understanding the open community the Creole identity tries to achieve, it is important to distinguish the Creole identity from other cultural identities.

"In historical and sociological terms, Creoleness is distinguished from "Americanness," which designates the *adaptation* of Western European populations to the natural resources of the "new" world without significant interaction with indigenous cultures. By contrast, Creoleness is not unique to the Americas and refers to the abrupt *me of different cultural and ethnic groups on islands or otherwise isolated regions, resulting in the creation of a new cultural organization that makes cohabitation possible* (Bernabé)" (Siefert 216, emphasis added).

Primarily, the Creole culture is a combination of fragments: a horizontal identity. It's important to establish that the Creole people lack a historical background with a single ethnic history, they share a mixed past of western colonization mixed with an African heritage. As many traditional communities share "the solidification of a community; all traditional communities created a genesis story, an explanation of the creation of the world," the Creole people's hybrid culture lacks a singular traditional genesis story (Morgan and Chamiseou 446). Chamiseou continues to describe that "there is no absolute--not linguistically, not racially, not culturally, not historically; we are in an extreme relativisation of traditions, a chaos of diversity--that's what characterizes our populations here, not a monolithic story" (Morgan and Chamiseou 447). However, "the chaos of diversity" is seen as all the rooted cultures in the Creole identity compound through orality and the structural construction of the fables.

For instance, when discussing the fusion between the issues commonly faced in the Caribbean and during the era of slavery, we see these problems arise in personified characters that interact with the protagonists. In *The Pumpkin Seed*, a kind-hearted old woman, who consumes nothing but watercress, is described as "famine's best friend, which proves without a doubt that a friendship is not necessarily one of life's true pleasures" (Chamiseou 31). The glorification of hunger occurs not only in *The Pumpkin Seed* but throughout *Glan-Glan the Spat Out Bird*, and *Ye, Master of Famine*. In *Glan-Glan the Spat out Bird*, we see that the bird that once satisfied the hunger of a rude wife is externalized and then commands the couple to rebuild itself that was once destroyed through consumption. Viewing the exotic bird as a mode of famine and an issue that is unable to be conquered, demonstrated through the inability to consume the bird, we see how hunger is glorified into a character: Glan-Glan, the spat-out Bird.

Similarly, in *Ye, Master of Famine*, we see how a cursed entity, a representation of famine, allows the hunger and suffering of the family. As Ye finally understood how to release the curse he and his family endured, it's mentioned,

“His old friend famine soon stopped him beneath a few clusters of guavas...” as a mode of temptation (Chamiseou 82). The personification of famine as a ‘friend’ in this story pushes Ye to fuel his family’s suffering as he succumbs to the temptation of the cursed foods. With the cycling of hunger’s personified character fueling famine, as seen through these fables, the combination of cultural concepts with literary aspects of personification and the literary structural concept conveys the rejection of diaspora. Chamiseou indicates that he rejects the idea of diaspora as the Creole identity is meant to be a collective, open community and mentions in his interview:

“The problem--Glissant says it in *Le Soleil de la conscience* (1956,1997) --when he, as a Martiniquais, arrives in France, he says “I have the vision of the son”--everything he sees in France, he recognizes, etc.--”and that of the foreigner”; so, at the same time he is in the culture and outside of it” (Morgan and Chamiseou 448).

Personifying hunger-- cultural dilemmas-- from within a cultural context allows for an open community as it invites people to erase their foreign views of the relationship between hunger and people. By putting outsiders in the perspective of viewing hunger as a person, they also gain a cultural understanding of the French Caribbean people. Merging the cultural aspects regarding normative issues (hunger and drought typically) of the French Caribbean people with this newly invented orality of the fables brings forth to a new perspective of an open community. In addition to incorporating an open community through combining cultural dilemmas and literary patterns of personification, the fables incorporate all sorts of realms across time periods, nature, and diverse methods of traditional communication methods; ultimately, the blending of such realms from within the fables to the structure of the fables add to this already open community. As mentioned in the preface, these fables were originally “Our Storyteller for a people enchained: starving, terrorized, living in the cramped postures of survival” (Chamiseou xii). Ultimately, the fables are intended to be a survival guide for slavery and are told in a recently invented method of communication, “that of oral storytelling from the period of French colonization and slavery--in order to explore and promote an emerging literary aesthetic. Embracing oral storytelling through writing, and thereby inventing it as a tradition, Chamiseou’s Creole Folktales maintains an ambivalent relation to the past. It at once attempt to recreate an redefined oral narratives. So doing, as we will see, creole, folktales, recast what it means to invent a tradition of oral storytelling through the form of literary fairy tale” Siefert (220). Combining the perspective of a folktale with collective fragments from the western structure and oral and written methods of storytelling adds to the collective nature of the Creole identity, also known as Creole humanity. For example, Chamiseou combines the languages of English, French, and Creole throughout the book but emphasizes important texts using Creole as its the main cultural origin:

“It is surely no accident that the parrot’s supernatural phrase is pronounced in Creole, a language that is primarily oral. Again and again throughout Chamiseou’s collection, the most crucial and the *most powerful words spoken by characters are in Creole*, set off as such in both the original and the translation *The power of their speech is, thus, the power of Creole and the power of orality*. Beyond various characters’ speech, Chamiseou highlights orality on the level of narration as well. It has often been noted that his writing deliberately takes liberties with French grammar, syntax, and vocabulary.” Although far from a simple “imitation” of the regional speech of the French Antilles, Chamiseou’s writing makes prominent use of its turns of phrase and especially of its vocabulary (e.g., “manman” = mother, woman; “déveine” = misery; “morne” = hill; “bougre,” “nègre,” or “négril-Ion” = man, without pejorative connotations)” (Siefert 223, emphasis added).

Fundamentally, the usage of Creole allows for the subtle meanings within the Creole language to be interpreted correctly. Moreover, the added language complexity not only enhances the collectivist viewpoint of Creole humanity but also brings the spotlight to one of the most vital aspects of oral communication: the passing down of culture to future generations and maintaining the interpretation of the text as well. Utilizing the Creole language enables a more intimate feeling historically and culturally and ultimately fuses a connection between the storyteller and the audience. It’s essential to note that most of the fables within this collection include animals or forms of nature: *The Most Beautiful One is Under the Tub*, *Madam Keleman*, *A Pumpkin Seed*, *Lil Fellow the Musician*, *A Little Matter of Marriage*, and *The Accra of Riches*. In addition to the incorporation of nature, there is a pattern of having so-called happily-ever endings. For example, in *The Most Beautiful one is Under the Tub*, the woman is saved by her prince charming, and the parrot is free enslavement by his own words:

“Intrigued (naturally), the gentleman dismounted and, despite the protests of mother and daughter, went over to peek under the tub, where (of course) he found the most beautiful one--bound and gagged by her mama! After a kiss, they never looked back as they galloped off to the fancied delights of unknown destinies. Then the parrot dropped like a falling tear upon the wooden tub, as if free at last from the words this protracted mystery had compelled him to repeat (without understanding a single one of them) for almost twenty years (Chamiseou 16).”

Another prime instance of a happily-ever-after would be in the story of *Madam Keleman*. Madam Keleman is finally defeated by the determined crabs, and the story concludes harmoniously in nature with the mistreated girl being free of poverty:

“The toads changed into more little girls, all warbling joyously, while the mabouyas and small-fry snakes swelled up

into startled boys, who stood blinking at the onrush of their belated dreams. As for everything else, great riches took its place: patches of everlasting yams and groves of blue breadfruit trees, crystallized tears with the promise of diamonds, seeds of fertility, a pile of money swindled from Madame Kélé-man's victims, ka-drums all resonant with ancestral memory, and forgotten Creole words that Madame Kéléman had clapped into calabashes so that she might listen to them with intoxicated delight. *The little girl, they say, lived a happily-ever-after life with the big set-pent, who turned into quite a fine fellow.* Everyone is so welcome in their home that even vagabonds like me stop by there after story-time to raise a glass in honor of the lovely lady of the house (Chamiseou 26-27, emphasis added).

In western fairy tales, having animals functioning as spirit guides or having the job of aiding the protagonist is a frequently common occurrence. Additionally, in western fairy tales, the concept of happily-ever-afters with every story is an integral aspect of what makes a fairy tale a fairy tale. Thus, applying western fairy tale structures to Chamiseou's short story collection, it can be concluded that a fragment of his method of storytelling includes the adoption of western storytelling; this adoption is an added fragment to the collective, horizontal Creole humanity identity. For instance, in *The Most Beautiful One is Under the Tuḅ* the parrot that was "free from its last words" entails the life and purpose of a slave but also a message that is easier to digest. The mixture of animals, the parrot, guiding the protagonist, the mistreated woman, to find her prince charming and ultimately achieve a happily-ever-after intertwines the realms of humans and animals, good and evil, and western and Creole orality. Moreover, Chamiseou invents his own method of communication, which is the accumulation of both written and spoken storytelling. As Chamiseou's goal of centralizing Creoleness by compounding orality and writing to a singular invention, he aims to bridge the gap in the interpretation of the stories across cultures and between the storyteller and the audience while also creating a collection that can survive through history.

"Chamiseou's conviction that Francophone Caribbean writing must display a continuity between orality and writing, between the storyteller and the writer. Whereas Western cultures affected a long and gradual transition from orality to writing, contends Chamiseou, writing was thrust upon the cultures of the French Antilles, and their oral traditions were consequently marginalized and devalorized ("Que faire" 152-53). What resulted, then, was a "cultural deportation" that left Francophone Caribbean writing unable to "touch the authentic and to make literature one of the means of expressing our collective soul" (152). To reconnect with Creole authenticity, the writer must, "across the centuries and the denials, extend a hand to the Master of the Word," the storyteller (153)" (Siefert 224, emphasis added).

As Chamiseou's version of orality was created in order to maintain an open community by inviting the mixture of several cultures through language, orality, and structure, there is also this open idea of survival: one must invent something new for the Creole culture to survive and this being Chamiseou's methods of storytelling. This creation of a "collective soul" by the creation of a new invention of orality brings forth the idea of modernization. Modernizing to survive can be advantageous (similar to the idea of natural selection in the natural sciences), nevertheless, modernizing also means sacrificing traditionality. Thus there are advantages and disadvantages of modernization. Diverging from the traditional concept of identity allows for specific advantages as the Creole identity attempts to modernize. As previously mentioned, modernization into an open community (a blend of language, orality, and literary structure) ultimately blends cultures together, rejecting diaspora labels. This Marxist lens on literature and society opens up to the ideal of unity across cultures, fundamentally achieving Chamiseou's idealistic concept of *Toute Monde*. One is the rejection of colonial history. For instance, in *Glan-Glan the Spat Out Bird* the consumption of the bird does not only represent the inability to conquer cultural issues regarding hunger but also can suggest the rejection of prior colonization. In the short story, Glan-Glan is an exotic bird, foreign, which then commands the couple to follow his orders as he shows his authority by calling the couple "my lil' son" and "my lil' daughter" (Chamiseou 72-73). As the husband and wife obediently perform the commands of Glan-Glan, we can view the bird as a form of colonization, specifically the French colonizers of the Caribbean. Ultimately, this story ended with a happily-ever-after ending, as "the act of denigration and rejection is transformed into an act of recovery and self-acceptance. The recreation of the bird begins with the wife spitting it out, then piecing together the bits of her meal" (Siefert 226). The rejection of historical colonization and the ability to accept and piece together a new future with numerous cultures exhibits the resiliency of Creole humanity; this, in essence, nationalizes and glorifies the Creole humanity. As Creole humanity is able to overcome a period of enslavement and colonization, the ability to modernize into a new culture by implementing a horizontal identity allows for the Creole culture to survive; however, there is always a price to survival.*

Modernization is defined in this context of the Creole identity as surrendering traditionality, vertical rootedness with a colonial past, and attempting to assemble a new future; however, what is the purpose of creating an identity, rebranding, when there will be fewer followers than deniers? Chamiseou even mentions that these stories represent a larger ideal of "a system of counter-values, or a counterculture, that reveals itself as both powerless to achieve complete freedom and fiercely determined to strive for it nonetheless" (Chamiseou xiii). As he explains his stories

should “strive for freedom” they “admit to their own failure” the stories instead simply question authority and stray away from French colonialism (Siefert 220). Unable to strive for freedom and liberate themselves from their prior shackles of slavery can allow Creole humanity's rebranding to fail. As mentioned earlier, modernizing comes at a cost; without the complete surrender of the Creole people's historical past, modernization would be unable to be achieved, hence the death of the Creole humanity. Moreover, Chamiseou remains doubtful regarding the global acceptance of the Creole identity and essentially believes the concept is unachievable-- too idealistic.

“Alongside hunger, the oneiric also figures prominently in the thematic Creole Folktales. Less a specific trait of the French Caribbean cultural experience than hunger, the insistence on dreams and the dreamlike quality-of folklore narratives recalls the heuristic questioning of existence and entity so central to Creoleness. This significance is suggested in the open-sentences of "A Little Matter of Marriage," in which the oneiric is linked to something resembling time travel: "I saw this tale go past my hut in the all hours of a sunny night; a big dream had left me with little insomnias, I my hut finally up and quit this time for another where time was lost I tempest-tossed" (57).

Equating the tale with a dream-or at least with a dreamlike state--the narrator casts his storytelling as a discovery of a different temporal sphere, outside of chronological time, outside of predictability of past-present-future, or as the repetition of “time” suggests, inside a time that is outside a time. It is as if the folktale becomes the dream of the time yet to be achieved Creoleness (Siefert 222).

Analogizing the Creole identity within the story to be a dream-like state chiefly suggests that the true achievement of Creoleness is unable to be achieved and is something only aspired for. And if the Creole humanity cannot be achieved, how would one or generations to follow resemble the so-called “Creole humanity?” Without a following to the Creole identity, the, Creole humanity cannot be attained. Likewise, if there lacks a following to a culture, then questions come forth as to what is the model behavior? If the foundation of the Creole humanity is modernization and the elimination of labels through the blending of cultures, will the Creole identity be futuristic, where it can survive without the traditional roles practiced?

Chamsieou's answer:

“Even fashions today sure, there are still big fashion trends, but if you look around, you see ways of dressing and hairstyles that recapitulate styles from every era practically- so individuals are alone and each one must construct his own scale of values-from which comes our contemporary anxiety, because we no longer have the kind of collective comfort that gives us the key to our behavior. Before, when one was a Sioux Indian in a Sioux tribe, there was no metaphysical problem. *Today when one is born, one has to define oneself personally, and neither the family nor the place where one lives is sufficient to give me the overall model of the behavior that I should have. Not to mention that women today are moving out of the traditional behavior for women and that the differentiations between males and females are no longer sufficient to give the roles that people should follow.* It is not the sex that determines; more and more we are simply human beings between a feminine pole and a masculine pole, and each one positions himself or herself between the two poles as he/she sees fit according to personal history, one's potential. So, everything is becoming much more complex, more situational” (Siefert 446, emphasis added).

Thus, Chamiseou believes that although this idealistic inclusive identity can unify culture, the actual practice of it seems unethical based on how several cultures today rely heavily upon a traditional foundation. Even considering the Creole culture, a part of this new identity means surrendering old storytelling methods. So is losing a component of the original culture to develop a modern, sustaining culture worth it? The inability to move from tradition, and modernize as a globe, prevents populations from practicing Creoleness, thus becoming a part of Creole humanity. Creoleness is fundamentally defined as the culmination of cultures and is a new identity that adopts fragments of tradition and attempts to modernize. *As Creole Folktales* investigates the blending of cultures and attempts to modernize to essentially survive history through a rebranding with a horizontal identity and the invention of their own oral methods, the ability to live up to this newly founded identity is questionable. Despite the Creole identity incorporating and unifying cultures, eliminating labeling through the Marxist lens, and being used as a mode of survival, the practicality of following a concept that is ‘too modern’ seems unachievable as numerous cultures today are founded on the basis of tradition. Hinduism is a religion with distinct roles for women and men and set the basis for society today. As a first-generation Indian-American in my family, I am considered modern. I don't have a Telugu accent, eat Indian food daily, or completely understand my Indian heritage, as I was born in an Indian home in an Americanized “modern” society. Although I love my culture, aspects of my culture place women who are found traditionally caring for the home rather than generating money and spreading societal influence. Being considered modern and developing a life where I can be more than a housewife is an advantage for me; however, does leaving those traditional aspects of my culture make me less Indian and more modern? Is being more modern make you less of a culture? I say no, yet, based on the ingrained traditions at my house, while my brother and father do the more manual straining work for cultural festivals, my mom and I are in the kitchen or cleaning. So am I modernizing at all if I am still tied back to my religious and cultural roots in some way? Will ignoring one of the fundamental aspects of Hinduism strip me of my right to identify as an Indian-American Hindu?

Kennedy Kramer

Age: 14, Grade: 8

School Name: Basehor-Linwood Middle School, Basehor, KS

Educator: Erin Tegtmeier

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

On The Sideline

On the Sideline

I am confident we have all had an experience where we have been left out. Whether you are being left out at home, with your friends, or anywhere else, it has happened to all of us in any place imaginable; however, sometimes it happens more than others. Incidentally, certain people become left out unreasonably more than others; it isn't fair to those who are left out because all they want to do is fit in. No matter what they do, they are pushed to the side by others. They feel like whatever they do is wrong because it does not feel right. If they were doing the right thing to fit in, they would be in, but they are not. I, for one, have been left out before. It is not as bad as some people have experienced, but it still hurts.

I am currently in 8th grade, and even though I still have a lot of friends, I feel like this is my worst school year. I have never been the most popular or prettiest person, but I have always been fortunate enough to have some pretty good friends; however, as I have gotten older, I noticed a few changes. I was not as close to some of the people who used to be my close friends. When I realized this, I decided to make a few changes.

I went into 6th grade pretty confident and gratifying to everyone. I would talk to people I had never met before. I figured 6th grade would be a good year because there would be many kids I had never met. I assumed I could make a lot of new friends; I was right. I made many friends, and in my opinion, 6th grade was the best year in middle school. Then in 7th grade, I still had a lot of the same friends, and nothing changed; however, I did not have a lot of people in classes that I did in 6th grade. I did make two besties, though.

Then summer came around. I was not in contact with anyone from school; the only person I talked to was my cousin. When I returned to school for 8th grade, I lost a best friend because she stopped talking to me. I guess she thought she was too good for me now. I did not mind it too much since I still had my newer best friends. I ignored her right back. Now I am about to finish the first quarter, and I am consistently out of things involving my friends. I was doing Cross Country, but I had to stop because I fractured my leg. My whole team was running without me and having private practices without me because I can not run. No one wants to invite me to active events because I probably can't do everything that they are. One of my friends had a sleepover with my two best friends but did not invite me. She also asked around five of my other friends to come, too. When I'm spending time with my friends, I have pushed aside in pictures or videos. Cross Country made a group chat with all the 8th graders involved, but I am not in it. I asked my friends if they could add me to it, and it was either, "Oh, I do not know how," or, "No, ask someone else." I even asked the creator, and he said no.

I'm constantly feeling like what I say will be the wrong words because it is weird or offensive, then I will lose the friendships I currently have. Then I will be left out way more. I think society itself should find a way to include everyone. We need to open our eyes and see that there are people left out. My feelings get hurt when that happens, and my case is not that bad. There are so many other people out there who do not even have friends like me.

Ultimately, we all make it through middle school; however, it may be more challenging for some than others. Being left out is hurtful, but it happens to everyone. Some may not experience it every day, and some people may experience being left out more than once a day. I hope some people out there notice if someone is not involved, and maybe try talking to them; talking might help.

Emma Li

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Jason Lovera

Category: Critical Essay

Making Headlines: Evil Disguised as the Pursuit of Truth

Dust in the air, dust in my lungs, dust sitting in the cracks of my red uniform. Dust under my feet encased in worn, bright green shoes. The rocks under the dirt crunch against my spikes, digging into my soles. I go faster. There's nothing else to do, nothing else as completely under my control as my own beating heart.

The dust is so bad that there are girls sitting at the finish, sprawled on the ground. I help a girl from another school up before she hurts herself doing that, tell her good job. I walk back, legs weak no longer from fear, but from accomplishment.

"Cool down mile, everyone," I call out, taking off my spikes.

"The dust was horrible, I felt like I couldn't breathe."

"Oh, I didn't even realize."

Half a mile later: "Why do you like cross country?"

"Because of the runner's high," I said. "I feel like I can do anything, and everything will be alright."

When I came home that night, I checked the shoes in the foyer to make sure the house was empty. Then, I screamed like the world was going to end. My ears blew out. I microwaved some noodles.

I went to sleep with my heart in my throat, ready to burst.

"In Econ yesterday, Brandon said that for the story you guys wrote for the paper, you said you didn't want to use more gender inclusive language. Why?"

Hands cold, I faced Anika's glare. Three and a half years of Speech and Debate emanated from my closest friend of the last nine years. This was a topic she knew, and would fight for. My chest tightened, my breath became short.

"Because our writer had no research to back up the effects that Roe v. Wade had on all people in the country, because there was no more space with all the research already done, and the story was nearly complete by the time anyone could look at it," I said in a rush. "When we were editing the abortion story, I suggested changing the phrase 'women and girls' to something else, but there just wasn't enough time to make the rest of the story fit in that context, when all the time had already been spent on just one side of a really large issue."

I paused, breath catching. My heart and lungs were still tight in the center, with my stomach rising to join. It was still cold.

"Okay, 'cause it isn't like you to say something like that," Anika said, leaning back.

My stomach eased its journey.

"What else did he say?"

"He's really mad at you for saying that—"

"—I didn't say anything like that—"

"—He made it sound like it was you and Ms. Smock against everyone else—"

"—It wasn't, most people are too scared to say anything on something this controversial, and they're obviously a lot smarter than me, shooting my mouth off—"

"—Yes, well, you know how Brandon gets about these things, and I think if you want to talk to him, you need to convince him from a practical perspective. Your argument makes sense that your writer only had a page, you would need more research you didn't have in the time provided, and it wasn't even you who wrote it."

I steeled myself.

"Who else heard?"

"A lot of people in third block, he was talking really loud. He said, well, 'I'm not mad at her,' then, 'actually, I *am* mad at her,' and he thinks you're transphobic for saying something like that, which is obviously not true to anyone who knows you."

I sighed.

“We’re not *The New York Times* - I wish we were, but we’re not. Even *The Times* makes mistakes. We’re just a high school newspaper.”

“Hey Brandon, I need to talk to you later-”

“Yeah.” His voice dripped acid rain. “You do.”

He kept walking, as if no number of steps could be enough to separate him from the monster that he thought I was.

I walked to class, uncertain of the companion I’d had for the past year. I thought of the days when I was that grammar police freak who took Newspaper as an independent study, and my only communication with the newsroom was through carefully annotated and edited paper issues once every six weeks. I missed the sixth period in which I sat in the corner next to the window, blasting K-pop as I churned out stories according to deadline, with no mistakes or complaints from anyone, free to leave whenever I pleased to get interviews done before eating lunch at my chosen hour.

However, this freedom that I had made me an easy target. In an article from TIME Magazine, “Evil is anyone outside the tribe. Evil works by dehumanizing the Other. A perverse, efficient logic: identifying others are evil justifies all further evil against them” (Morrow 50). It became easy for those in the primary Newspaper block to dislike me because I held them to high standards in my critiques. I was the Other who rose to a position of power as Co Editor-in-Chief, although hardly anyone knew me. My status as a strong writer who held everyone to the same standards I hold myself to made it easy to resent me. Growing thick skin made me confident and ready to lead new faces, but that also means putting on a persona such that others don’t think I’m human. This accidental dehumanization of the self is terrifying because “If membership in a tribe is the way you ensure yourself good, family and protection from predators, being blackballed can be a terrifying thing” (Kluger 58). Membership in a school grants stability, belonging to a club brings strength. But leadership ensures a future, where the reputation I build has the potential to guarantee success. We hadn’t written anything so controversial in a long time, and that “blackballing” nearly got me cancelled, to use a 21st century turn of phrase.

But Brandon was the one who filled me in during the five minutes before AP Lang started about the drama with our Editor in Chief and the seniors who didn’t care. He’d tell me about calling a senator for his latest story, asking if I’d look over it, or even just showing a new layout. He was the one who told me about Ms. Smock getting West Newsmagazine’s Teacher of the Year, and told me to skip the beginning of fifth block for the surprise. For our first issue of our senior year, he’d been the one to communicate as the go-between of the people who critiqued the stories I’d written since they had all been hesitant to find me.

Brandon was committed to the truth, and I respected him for that. I also felt for him when he didn’t get Co Editor in Chief, and I did.

In a vein similar to Shakespeare’s Iago, Brandon was operating under the belief that “nothing can or shall content my soul / Till I am evened with him” (2.1.320-321). The motiveless malignity began here. Maybe if he had gotten the position, I wouldn’t have had to find out his thoughts from someone other than him. His theoretical pursuit of justice makes him a hero in his mind, but there was no justice to be won. I may be more politically centered, but I agreed with every word of that editorial. Like Iago, Brandon was simply jealous of the idea of an Other earning a position that he was capable of filling, save for the fact that both were sore losers about the result.

I tapped my fingers on the rectangular table. We usually pushed them together for edit circles, or sat spread out while going through the printed pages. There was just one table today, since it was just three editors and our advisor.

“I’m not mad at you,” I said emphatically. “I promise you I’m not. I’m mad at all the people who are using you instead of just talking to me. And for the abortion story, editorials are meant to be specific, and we didn’t have any more space to talk about this huge topic. It was difficult enough as it is for her to write it, and we had no more research to back up a change of phrase that Ms. Smock has even said that she’s never seen in professional news.”

“Okay,” Brandon said. “I’m not mad at you either.”

That didn’t appear to be the case earlier that day, but I decided to let it go in the interest of remaining civil.

“Your voice carried, which is unusual,” Ms. Smock said. “Unfortunately, people in the halls only heard part of the conversation when they walked past, and blew it up into something it wasn’t. You did nothing wrong.”

Brandon’s deception had reached the point that he would turn to Iago-like methods of using my hard-earned positive traits against me. The ability to speak up in difficult conversations has been a process that has taken years, and Brandon decided to “turn her virtue into pitch, / And out of her own goodness make the net / that shall enmesh them all” (Shakespeare 2.3.380-382). My ability as a leader to be open with my opinions was used against me to twist my words out of their original meaning.

From François, Duc de La Rochefoucauld in *The Atlantic Monthly*: “Only great men can have great faults”

(qtd. in Shattuck 75). My fears that led me to insist on speaking further on this topic were based on the image of the entire paper, and not just myself. Although the paper last year wasn't taken seriously, I didn't know if I could handle being the one who brought shame to its name. My words and actions as a representative of the school's news source can reach far more than a block of text on the average teenager's private story. I began to question myself and my own capabilities. In Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Satan does the same, wondering:

While they adore me on the throne of Hell,
With diadem and scepter high advanced
The lower still I fall, only supreme
In misery; such joy ambition finds. (Milton 4.88-92)

Not just a face in a crowd, my gain in voice and preeminence throughout this school can bring power and infamy in the same hand. Doubt festered within me. What if I was wrong?

Shattuck continues to analyze different interpretations of evil to become Dostoevsky's "radical evil and its self-justification" (77). Similar to Milton's Satan as a Byronic hero who engages in radical individualism, I wanted to make our writing better and hit harder. Words have the ability to transform, and transform it did. Satan can shape the world however he wants: "The mind is its own place, and in itself / Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n" (Milton 1.254-255). What if, instead of me, the cruelly deceived Othello to Brandon's ruthless Iago, I'm the power hungry Satan to Brandon's benevolent God? Radical individualism speaks to the idea of remaking the world as one sees fit. A school newspaper, on a smaller scale, can spread ideas for students to consider, and if framed in a certain manner, be highly convincing on major topics such as ours. I wanted to remake the paper to be a source and a force to be reckoned with, and being controversial yet honest was just one prong of many in my multi-step plan. A good thing in my mind, but upsetting the status quo to some. Most say the paper has become better this year, and if reputation is the price of ambition, so be it.

In the newsroom, I stared at the posters on the walls encouraging journalists to speak the truth and do our best to tell others' stories. My story wasn't Brandon's to tell.

"Anika!"

I found an ally in mardi gras beads in the crowd of teenagers. Pink and blue shirts speckled the gym like a gender reveal party, complete with high schoolers dressed up as superheroes, Disney characters, and even a hot dog. Armed with a camera for the day, I was tasked with gathering pictures of Day of Service for the journalism department. Unfortunately, all the walking around campus meant trying to hide every time I saw the Econ teacher who had probably heard all of the horrible things Brandon had accused me of, and carefully avoiding anyone I thought was taking Econ or was LGBTQ+ who probably thought I wanted them dead.

In one of his many moments of deception, Iago tells Othello to "Mark the fleers, the gibes, and notable scorns / that dwell in every region of his face" (Shakespeare 4.1.99-100). He then goes to talk about Bianca with Cassio, but Othello cannot hear the words, and thinks it is Desdemona. Like Othello, I began to look for and see things that weren't there. I thought people looked at me differently, and every time I saw anyone I associated with possibly being in Econ, alerts went off in my head. At the time of Iago's capture, he says "I told him what I thought, and told no more / Than what he found himself was apt and true" (Shakespeare 5.2.212-213). Iago claims to speak within reason, and in a way, that is completely true when only heard from Othello's deceived perspective. In a vulnerable moment, I was able to find much more reason to think that every person I saw that day despised me than I would under normal circumstances.

"I've decided that I'm mad at Brandon!" I shouted over the crowd.

"Okay, good for you!"

"Yeah, it doesn't make any sense why I wasn't mad in the first place. He's the reason that I'm literally scared that everyone hates me."

"No one hates you, and even if they do, that's their problem."

"Thanks for listening," I said, walking back outside to find some bubbles and Disney music.

Moving on is difficult for someone used to being on the right side of things. There are ways where we are both wrong, and leadership, in a way, requires some measure of power through which the method of gaining "is no crime to the intellect," according to Ralph Waldo Emerson (qtd. in Shattuck 78). There is an attractiveness to evil that drew both me and Satan in; accomplishment of a specific vision cannot be attained in any other way. But although both of us remain deeply convinced that there is no alternative method to achieve our own respective definitions of greatness, my innocence of any crime and lack of understanding of evil is the line in the sand.

In a way, "Evil is the Bad elevated to the status of the inexplicable. To understand is to forgive. Evil sometimes means the thing we cannot understand and cannot forgive" (Morrow 50). I will never get the hours of sleep I lost back, and the fear that nearly swallowed me remains an unpleasant memory. Iago's motiveless malignity is the same:

without meaning, without purpose. I can dictate my purpose, and the evil in my life cannot. That is the difference.

On the other hand, Milton's Adam, left in wonderment, says, "Full of doubt I stand, / Whether I should repent me now of sin / By me done and occasioned, or rejoice / Much more, that much more good thereof shall spring" (Milton 12.473-476). Although I entered the academic year motivated to better the paper and change its reputation from simply fluff to media with range, spite is not a worthless spur. My persistent resentment fuels my writing, and the fact that I haven't quit for fear of criticism means I have proven myself worthy to stand as one of two heads. Morrow asks, "Does the good become meaningless in a world without evil?" (53). The pre-fall world from a modern perspective is freakish in its utopia: Adam and Eve have no personality besides loving God and each other, and their awareness of their own free will appears slim to nil. Perfection disgusts the modern reader because there is nothing to push against, nothing to push for. A world where evil not only exists, but is a tool for creative output, is infinitely more desirable than a purposeless world. Like Adam, I want to carry the burden of the evil in the world. Unlike him, I am capable of doing so because I can accept that evil will not leave. I do not understand evil; evil is not my friend. However, evil defines a purpose for the good, not necessarily to eradicate evil, but to keep it at bay.

I step out of my house, keys and gloves in hand. Jogging slowly against the bracing wind,

I use mile one to think about the time that the brother of an Econ student asked me if I was okay, and when another friend in Econ said at work that she didn't need to know what the drama was, she just wanted to know if I was doing fine.

As I crossed the street for the second mile, ears finally warming up, I thought about the argument Brandon got into with one of our sophomores earlier this week about affirmative action. I'm proud that we can talk about these topics, and even prouder that our new writer never backed down.

By the third mile, hands warm, heart steady, everything was alright.

Emma Li

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Christine Stricker

Category: Journalism

Old Conflicts Flare Up

From May 10- 21, 2021, the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflicts flared up once more. Centuries long conflicts over land settlements have restarted with the firing of rockets from land possessed on both sides.

Palestinian families have continued to face home eviction due to building permit restrictions implemented after WWII, when the United Nations promised Israel its own land. Land settlements have been a source of consternation for many years since, with Palestinians claiming it is wrong to force people out of their homes, while the Israelis have never had land that belonged only to them. On maps in the United States, Israel is a country, but Palestine is not. Legally, there is no Palestinian flag, passport, or other identifier recognized by the law.

At the start of the conflict on May 10, Jerusalem Day, a court hearing was held on the home evictions. For Jews, Jerusalem Day is significant because it commemorates the reunification of Jerusalem in 1967, which other parts of the world may not consider official. The day is marked by a march to the Aqsa Mosque. The Aqsa Mosque is also called the Noble Sanctuary by Muslims, and the Temple Mount by Jews. However, it was raided by Israeli police, and the court hearing was postponed for 30 days. That evening, rockets were fired from the Gaza Strip by Palestines, while the Israeli government began airstrikes. Gaza is controlled by Hamas, which is the major political Palestinian group, which Israel and the U.S. consider a terrorist group.

The attacks caused hundreds of deaths and property damage. 243 Palestinians were killed in Gaza, at least 21 Palestinians were killed in the West Bank, and 12 Israelis were killed. More than 70 of these people were children.

Usually, past conflicts were resolved with a cease fire, either agreed upon by both sides, or internationally. This time, a ceasefire was decided upon. However, major causes such as the home evictions were left unsolved.

Social studies teacher Albert Peterson volunteered at a Palestinian high school while studying religion in the Middle East.

“That experience drove me further into the Palestinian issue and the Israeli issue,” Peterson said. “Especially hearing their stories, what they’ve endured, what they’ve seen, witnessed themselves. It was just eye opening when it comes to learning, because I’ve learned all this stuff, but it’s different when you talk to someone who’s experienced it.”

Junior Jamie New works at her synagogue in the preschool, goes to services on Saturdays, Sunday school, and Jewish summer camp. While she has found ways to see both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian issue, she finds social media a source of hurtful bias.

“What the Israeli government’s doing is wrong, but I think people are blaming Jews altogether and I think there’s sides to both stories,” New said. “The media is often one sided. There’s a lot of pro-Palestine things which is totally fine, however, people have been turning pro-Palestine into anti-Semitism. It’s not a Jewish issue, it’s an Israeli government issue.”

Another common cry on the internet is to have the difficult conversations which most people would rather avoid, and this fear is not without basis in fact. New has tried to respectfully express her opinions, but has been met with hostility.

“When someone got mad at me for saying it was an Israeli government issue and not a Jewish issue, I started crying because I didn’t want to offend anybody,” New said. “I don’t like being confrontational, but the fact that somebody told me that my opinions were wrong and that the information I’m getting is not true, it really hurt my feelings. I know a lot of people in Israel, and they’re saying how nobody agrees with the government there. Most Israelis don’t agree with the government, so saying it’s Jewish people is wrong.”

This school has a large population of Jewish students, causing the topic to be particularly sensitive. However, it makes for a large gathering of students in the Jewish Student Union (JSU). Rabbi George Shinn founded JSU in 2003 after observing that teenagers had a lack of interest in incorporating religion in daily life after bar and bat mitzvahs, their coming of age ceremonies. Each year, the JSU provides an opportunity for a gap year in Israel for high school graduates to see their homeland.

“Those who are being killed are my spiritual brothers and sisters,” Rabbi Shinn said. “We’ve had alumni there this year. I have a red alert app on my phone that goes off every time a rocket is fired at Israel. Every time it goes off, I stop and try to find a place to hide to feel what it’s like.”

Rosie Day is a district substitute teacher for this school district. She immigrated to the U.S. at the age of seven from the Gaza Strip in Palestine because of a war between Palestine and Israel, and graduated from North High.

“My country is being stolen,” Day said. “Many innocent lives of Palestinians are being taken. I live here with my parents and siblings, and the rest of my family all live in the Gaza Strip. It breaks my heart hearing my family members talk about how they live in fear. I try as much as I can to spread awareness so people can know the truth.”

The damage done to civilians is not lost on people from all sides.

“It’s complicated. It is so, so complicated,” Peterson said. “ Hamas and Gaza do launch rockets into Israel, and Israelis completely demolish whole buildings. The Hamas rockets, they’re completely homemade. It’s not like you’ll necessarily know where it’s going to land. Israelis have pinpoint precision as to where they strike bombs. I don’t necessarily like that power dynamic, because civilians are getting caught up in the crossfire.”

In the end, people are just people.

“It’s important to look at people as people,” Peterson said. “Take the politics out, take the religious elements out. Think about it as though you’re sitting down to dinner with someone, would you be willing to do harm to them or hurt them in any way? You probably wouldn’t. And so, just remember that people are people. Most people just want to be happy. They just want to live their life, and we want to keep that in context when we talk about these big issues. Because that’s really what matters.”

Emma Li

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Christine Stricker

Category: Journalism

Making Voices Heard

On Sept. 23, students walked out to the administrative center parking lot during third block to protest the racist, xenophobic, and discriminatory messages graffitied upon multiple boys' restrooms at this school. These messages were found on Sept. 22 in restrooms both at this school and this other school. Students for Progressive Change, along with seniors in the Class of 2022, organized the walkout as a criticism for not passing a zero-tolerance policy on discrimination drafted last school year.

"I shouldn't be out here," Student 1 (10) said. "I should be in there getting my education, but I have to sit there and be in fear of what's going to happen to me in this school. I should be in that school getting my education but I'm not. So how's it going to change?"

Photos circulated across social media following the incident. The defacing of public property with messages of hate targeting multiple groups spread rapidly, and struck fear into some, but simply disappointment for others.

"The first picture I saw was, 'I hope all Black people die,'" Student 2 (12) said. "That was just so scary cause I'm Black, and someone wants us to die. It wasn't really shocking, but it just hurt and it's just stupid and it's embarrassing."

Over the course of the senior class's high school experience, a racially-motivated hate crime occurs nearly each year, so often that it is not a question of if it will happen, but when. The only ambiguity is within lasting school policy changes.

"I just hope that something happens," Student 2 said. "I feel like the senior class, class of 2022, we're doing the best we can. And I hope the future classes do what they can do, but it's not gonna stop. I feel like it's gonna keep happening."

The organization of the protest was simple yet effective.

"Well a group of my friends, when we heard about it, weren't surprised," Student 3 (12) said. "We're all used to it, but this is unacceptable, and this can't keep happening. So we said we're gonna walk out Thursday during third hour, so we spread the word, 'blackout' and it just happened. This is a school community for everyone to be loved here, but we don't feel that way."

The efficiency of organization was not lost on underclassmen.

"And it's gotten to the point that in my section in marching band, seniors are putting in the group chat how this works," Student 4 (10) said. "When we go outside, what happens when we go outside, what you need to wear, what you need to do. This should happen so rarely that when it does happen, no one knows how to deal with it."

Although the protest started with the seniors, multiple students of all backgrounds voiced their opinions throughout the approximately four hour long walkout. Megaphones, and later handheld microphones with a wireless speaker amplified students' voices who were empowered to voice their concerns. Students told their stories of discrimination based on race, gender, sexuality, and mental health to the crowd that gathered outside the district administration building, while those in the back watched from others' Instagram lives.

"Hearing all these stories of people who have been going through all this, this is not okay," Student 5 (9) said.

Words have power, and with the aid of the internet, have irretrievable force.

"I felt really bad," Student 6 (10) said. "I'm not Black, I'm Indian, and I felt that. It hurt me very deeply and personally because I know people who have been hurt by the racial slurs that were written, and it's not right. This happens a lot and I feel like now there should be something done."

Student 6 later went up to speak out about her experiences with loneliness due to harmful stereotyping, along with many others. The intensity of the crowd noticeably increased as speakers became more bold with the microphones, yet others were still quietly sad.

"It hurts to see people hurting," Student 7 (10) said.

Yet others were silent for different reasons.

"I am white, so I feel like I shouldn't be saying that much," Student 8 (10) said. "I should be using my voice because I have one in this circumstance, but I feel like I also shouldn't be using it because it's not my area to talk about. I'm here to add to the people to show that I care. It's not personal, just skipping school. It's aggravating when people do that. It diminishes what this means."

While some spoke up, others took the time to reflect and listen.

"I really wasn't that affected," junior Student 9 said. "I'm kinda desensitized to this kind of stuff. It doesn't really pull my heartstrings. But just because it doesn't affect me, that doesn't mean it shouldn't affect anybody else. You have a right to be offended by whatever offends you, and what's going on here today is a really good thing. It shows that people still care about this kind of stuff."

Onlookers were also looking towards the future, but beyond policy changes.

"This reminded me of a discussion we had in English not that long ago, and I wrote a question that kind of created a moment of pause," Student 10 (11) said. "The question reads, 'how do we look into the starry eyes of young people of marginalized groups that shall precede us, and describe unto them the reality of the deep hopelessness intrinsic to their lives without making life itself seem a pointless and cruel endeavor?' And it's a tough question. But more than anything, I realize that being scared of the toughness of that question is what inspires events like this. It's a question that prompts us to pause, and certainly a question that has fearful implications but it's one that I think we ought to answer. Either we must be told the way to do this to our children, or we must make it so that it doesn't happen to our children. There's been a lot of pain, perhaps there'll be more pain in the future, but I believe that it's something we can do."

Caring for each other was a large motivating factor for attending the protest. The future may be uncertain, but it is the fuel for change.

"I hope for the people that come after me, that have to go through the same school, don't have to experience the same things that I did," Student 11 (11) said.

Fears of the future lead to the passion that fuels effective change, which comes in the form of students creating new policies against discrimination.

"I was told last August it would be passed by May," Student 12 (12) said. "It's September."

Unfortunately, this district is large and well known, and therefore difficult to change.

"There's lot of procedures, and policies, and even those that dictate how to change policy," Counselor 1 said. "There's procedures for that, there's a committee for that, you have to take it to this person. And so what I'm encouraged about is I see students who are willing to engage in that right now. So, we have a group of students that are meeting after school to prepare some talking points to take to the assistant superintendent, for the deputy superintendent, to then take to the Board of Education. Lasting change will come from policy changes. Policy changes, unfortunately, in a big system like this, do not come about very quickly."

Many agree that change comes from authority figures.

"We're all just kids," Student 13 (10) said. "The fact that we have to be doing this because the adults in our lives aren't doing this, is so sad. The fact that we have to stand up for ourselves, and the adults aren't standing up for the kids is not okay."

The irony of this school's status at a National School of Character is not lost on the students. To qualify, the school must embody the 11 Principles listed by the organization. These principles guide school culture, student engagement, student achievement, teacher morale, ethics, and more.

"We're a National School of Character until someone writes slurs on the bathroom walls and posts them on social media," Student 14 (11) said. "It feels like a coverup of how much we can force this idea of how great we are and how wonderful our environment is, while we turn around and see this happen every single year. We're a national school of character, and yet people are still judged, not by the content of their character, but by the color of their skin. We're a national school of character, and as much as [this district] would like to hide behind that title, it's time that we step up and we earn it."

Although most students called for immediate action against the perpetrator, a few hoped they would learn just as the other listeners.

"I hope that the person or people responsible for this learns from what they did, and will be able to do better with their lives, and what they have done and affected everybody right now," Student 15 (11) said.

However, the majority of the speakers demanded a change in students' roles in school as listeners, rather than masters of their own fate.

"If you're somebody who's part of any marginalized identity, know that it's your school," Student 16 (12) said. "Take the power back."

Students using the power that they have attracted the attention of multiple news sites, and eventually, a candidate running for one of Missouri's Senate seats in August of 2022. First Name Last Name is a Democratic candidate who grew up in St. Louis. This candidate arrived while speaking students gathered near the administration building at

the stairs, handing out water and snacks in defiance of teachers marking them absent. However, after the events of that day and the following Monday, administration decided to excuse all absences.

“You are the reason that I am running,” this candidate said. “I am so sick and tired of us dealing with the same problems now that we were dealing with when I was your age. 20 years ago I was standing like you are now, at my school, complaining about the same things. You guys will be the future and you will make the change that we need. Do that, stay strong.”

Multiple counselors were outside that day to support students in a challenging time. Counselor 2 has been at this school for seven years, with a similar incident each year.

“I don’t think we’ve done enough,” Counselor 2 said. “We haven’t done enough for you all as students. It’s sad, I’m angry, I feel terrible for the kids that this is an environment where they’re supposed to feel safe, and be able to learn, expand, and grow, and this just hinders that.”

Multiple protesters were concerned that the person who wrote the slurs, or people who secretly agreed with the words written, were at the protest. There were several instances when students called for those people to go back to class, but some adults who came to support their children in the protest thought differently.

“Kids are taught,” a parent said. “They live with what they’re taught. Until we get change in the hearts of some, it won’t matter.”

Others agree that change comes from within, and fuels the conflicting emotions of that day.

“I want people to see my friends how I see them: genuinely really good people who I want to spend time with, not somebody they judge,” Student 17 (11) said.

After hours of standing outside, listening to numerous speeches and statements filled with every emotion, there was a lot to take home.

“You’re here today,” Student 18 said. “You put in the work after today. Today’s not the end, today’s the beginning.”

Whether the day was successful or not is up to interpretation.

“I appreciate everyone who came, walked with us, and listened to me and everyone else who spoke their mind,” Student 19 (12) said. “I’m proud of everyone who spoke their mind, and I thank everyone who stands with Black lives.”

Whether the perpetrator's goal was to strike fear, skip school, or any number of other reasons, the unity that was demonstrated that day would mark the attempt unsuccessful. In less than a week after the day’s proceedings, a Black student came forward to confess to the misdemeanor after several questionings.

“I am African American and I’m pretty proud of that,” Student 20 (12) said.

Emma Li

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educators: Sarah Burgess, Sarah Burgess

Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy

Upstairs

I sat in one of the window seats overlooking the front of the house. The autumn winds blew the leaves about, racing to the end of the road of neat, suburban lawns. A solitary crow swept over Natasha riding on her bike. *One for sorrow, two for joy*. My mom had told me that Natasha was “going through a rough time” and that I should “talk to her more often.”

I wasn't quite so sure if I wanted to reconnect with only a few more years left of living in the same hometown, but I wondered if I should still bake comfort food for her. She used to be allergic to eggs, but sometimes these things change. I decided to leave it alone, or at least leave eggs out of the equation.

I took a cup of microwaveable pasta and walked to her house. The white door swung open, and I saw a lot of blue. It was Natasha's lipstick.

“What do you want, Alexander?”

“Do you want some pasta?”

“Why do you think I would want pasta?”

“You look like you want pasta.”

“Fine, maybe I do want pasta. Come in. Shoes off.”

I kicked off my hiking boots that I wore despite not hiking, and stepped onto polished dark wood floors. Natasha's home was large in a way that suggested wealth, but messy enough to hint at a long-awaited return to former glory. It was definitely cleaner the last time I visited. I tried to remember what was missing from the last time I was there that might have held it all together, maybe a plant that had died in the intervening years, or a replaced clock, or perhaps just the aura of home from the scattered array of toys.

She led me to the spacious red kitchen with what some may call white accents, with an array of dishes in the sink. They were delicate porcelain dishes, blue and white like the ocean.

The microwave popped as the pasta rotated on the dish, the scent of melting cheese wafting across the room. The silence would have been awkward, except that the noise was clamorous, layer upon layer. I was grateful for this, since it meant that I didn't have to speak. I stared at the windowsill, lined with Russian dolls. Each was precisely the same as the one before it in paint, color, texture, and even facial expression. Nothing distinguished them from each other beyond size. I recalled playing with them as children, when Natasha was taller, and claimed the fourth from the left, while I was always the third, just slightly smaller.

As the seconds ticked by, the microwave made more distressed noises. I braced myself for whatever small talk I had brought upon myself, and began crafting the polite way to ask for my tupperware back.

“Why are you here?”

“You looked sad. I like pasta when I'm sad, so I thought you might be happier by now. Maybe I should've brought cake. Are you still allergic to eggs?”

Natasha glared at me through a mouthful of bow ties with cheese. She slowly ate half of the contents with a pair of white chopsticks while sitting on the swirling marble countertops, then set it down. She still held her chopsticks wrong, with two fingers in between the center, even though I'd shown her a million times before. I opened my mouth to speak, probably to correct her finger positions, closed it, then took a breath.

“Can I have my tupperware back?”

Natasha continued to glare at me in silence. Then I heard a dull thump come from above.

“Hey, your family isn't harboring any fugitives or anything, right? If you are, I promise I won't tell, just don't kidnap me and if you want to save the leftovers, please give the tupperware back to my mom.”

She turned to leave, and the thump turned into knocking. Persistent knocking.

“If you've got Bertha's cousin locked up there, I think I'll see myself out now!” I called as I inched backwards towards the door.

“No!” she commanded. “Stay there.”

“You can’t order me around,” I said slowly. “I brought you pasta. You are in my debt.”

“Come upstairs with me.”

“Ohmygod,” I breathed. “You really do have someone locked up there.”

“No, I don’t,” Natasha frowned. “Not technically. She wants to be here. She’s the one who won’t leave.”

I followed Natasha’s long, white-blonde ponytail swinging up the stairs, infinitely cheerier than herself. Her house had no pictures, only deep red painted walls. It did not vary from the kitchen, the hall, and even one of the bathrooms with the door cracked open. The deep red made the hall seem smaller and closer, as if each step took us closer to the end of a dark wood. Rather than staring at the expanse of red that surrounded me like a dull, sore throat, I bent my head down to look at the wall trimmings and was faintly disturbed by the messy paint job, flecks of red, paint or otherwise, on the dark flesh of the wooden floors. The light from the small, circular window at one end of the hall got smaller and smaller as we got closer to a door at the far end. It pulsed with hits in the beat of an inconsistent heart. We were above the kitchen now. I thought I could smell soap, distinctly moldy from lack of use.

In the semidarkness, her pale face looked ghostly, except for the dark blue of her mouth. It looked like a deep pit.

“I want to go home. I am going to take my tupperware with me. Thank you for your hospitality.”

“No!” She grabbed my sleeve, eyes wide. “You have to see this.”

The knocking continued as I tried to wrench my arm away.

“If you need help, I can get someone else, but I’m not qualified to deal with whatever’s up there. Let me go.”

“Alexander,” Natasha spoke deliberately, quietly, yet in a manner that suggested danger. “We are in a dark, narrow hall. You cannot leave, and no one will hear you if you scream. Here is the situation: you need to get the person, for lack of a better word, out of there, because you have no ties to her and I do.”

With that, she turned, jerking my sleeve along with her as she used a key with her other hand to unlock the door. We stepped into an attic of sorts, covered in mold and dust, and smelling faintly of the outdoors despite the obvious fact that we were not outdoors. Cobwebs hung from the beams in the ceiling, swaying with the movement of rats. Splintered pieces of matching furniture sets created an apocalyptic skyline of skyscrapers and bridges.

Searching for the person or otherwise in question, my gaze landed on a small blonde girl sitting demurely at the edge of an unbroken blue, moth-eaten sofa. She wore a dull red peacoat, buttoned up to her chin. Her hands were shoved in her pockets, and it appeared as though she were asleep, as one would be on a long train ride home. I realized I was absolutely in over my head once I realized why the family had no pictures in their house. Because I had pictures of us in my own home, and memories in my own mind of a small blonde girl who was wearing a worn red peacoat the day we met on the first day of school in an unseasonably cold autumn; the girl *was* Natasha.

“What’s wrong with her? Do you have a sister you never told me about? Why is she locked up? What do you mean, you want me to get rid of her?”

“Natasha!” Natasha called out in a ringing voice.

At Natasha’s command, the girl started up and ran, or rather glided, or simply transported herself towards us. Her hands were still in her pockets, but I could see a small hole at the corner of one. Something sharp and silver glinted. I took a few steps back. She smiled a sharp-toothed smile. She drew arms.

“Alex,” she whispered. “Remember? You promised. You said you would do this for me, and you can’t go back on your word. A promise is a *promise*.”

I stared at nine-year-old Natasha’s knife.

“You’re a bully, Tashi,” I said to her. “And give me the knife, you’re too young to be handling kitchen knives.” I turned to the sixteen-year-old Natasha. “You may not be now, but we’ve grown a little and I know what I want now, and it’s to do things together, and make those decisions together. You may know exactly what you want all the time and I’m still working on that, but you can’t control everything, much less everyone. You may have ordered me up here, but I listened because you’re still my friend.”

Natasha was wrong; I had all the ties to her in the world, both past and present, but I was okay with unknitting them.

Some time later, on a visit home, I returned to Natasha’s house. Dodging her mother’s comments on how much I’ve grown and need to eat more, and what a pity I just missed Natasha whose break had just ended, I deliberately made my way upstairs once more. I returned to the last room, and I climbed across the mountains and valleys of rotted wood. I reached the small, circular window that created a pool on the jagged surface beneath me. Staring out, I could see a small blonde girl riding a bicycle through the deserted streets.

Emma Li

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educators: Sarah Burgess, Sarah Burgess

Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy

In the Clearing

The wind wailed outside of the old manor. Branches of trees allowed to grow for far too long lashed at the windows. The saying goes that hard rain never lasts because the sky ought to run out soon, but it had been an unusual season.

Six year old Ella May looked up at the painting of the old General. Within the manor, with only the light of the oil lamps and windows, the storm cast ghastly shadows across his painted face. His shattered features spoke to her.

He won't return.

She fluffed her white chiffon dress and gazed at the painting with equal hauteur.

“Tell him to come home *right now!*”

He smiled sadly.

You know he won't listen to me anymore. You go.

Seeing as there was nothing better to do in the old empty house, Ella May put on her white boots, white travelling coat, and white bonnet. Opening the door to the torrential rain, she glared back at the old General and stepped out.

Gliding through the gates of the manor and through the woods, Ella May knew exactly where he was. She remembered the days of pleasant weather, maybe two weeks or four months or six years ago, when she and her father would go outside and walk to the pond. She'd pick flowers, and he'd make flower crowns for her and call her a princess.

Shaking off the memory, Ella May squinted through the rain. The relentless sheets obscured her vision, but at least it didn't hurt anymore. The raindrops used to pinch and sting, but Ella May had figured it out. She didn't like being weak, but memory couldn't quite leave her alone. This would happen more and more often as time passed, so she figured she'd take a quick detour to the pond.

It may be overflowing, you fool! she thought to herself. *If you go and it doesn't look like how it used to, what'll you do then?*

Snaking her way through the cragged, beaten trees, she quickly found the old pond. It wasn't overflowing at all. In fact, it was dry. Not only was it dry, but it felt as though the rain was no more, although she could still hear it in the distance.

A figure crouched a little ways from the pond, remaining in the clearing.

Father!

Ella May shouted with joy, suddenly looking like her six years. She flew at him, giving him a hug.

Her father did not move.

Father, it's me, I'm home! Ella May shouted.

The old gentleman took off his hat and bent his head towards the ground, where flowers lay on the small stone by his beaten brown leather shoes. Rivulets of rainwater dripped from his coat as tears streamed down his face. He gently traced the letters on the plaque.

Ella May squinted at the words, distinguishing her name.

No! Father! I'm here, I'm here!

“Goodbye, Ella. It's your father. It's been ten years. You would have been a fine young woman by now. I miss you every day. Please don't forget your poor old father.”

Emma Li

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educators: Sarah Burgess, Sarah Burgess

Category: Dramatic Script

Hotel Room

CHARACTERS

WIFE, 40s, retail manager

HUSBAND, 40s, businessman

HOUSEKEEPER, 20s

PLACE

Hotel in Chicago, Illinois

TIME

The present.

(Lights up on a middle aged HUSBAND and WIFE as they argue in an elevator up to their hotel room. It's old and creaking, slowly moving up. There are mirrors on all sides, paneled like windows. The floor is wood and scratched.)

WIFE

My fault? How is it my fault we forgot the tickets?

HUSBAND

You're the control freak in this household, that's why.

WIFE

Me? How about when you practically decided our kids' majors? And what are they doing now? Ignoring us.

HUSBAND

And that's my fault? How is it my fault I wanted them to have a good future?

WIFE

I don't know, you just want to live through them, and it's getting on my nerves. I should've done more to protect them.

HUSBAND

From what? From me? Since when am I the one that people need to avoid?

WIFE

Ever since you started thinking you were better than everyone else.

HUSBAND

And you don't?

(The elevator dings and the two step into a dimly lit narrow hall. The sconces lead the pair to their door. There is a cart of cleaning supplies in the front, and the door is closed, with a sign that says "Cleaning in Progress.")

HUSBAND

It's closed.

WIFE

Yeah, no kidding.

HUSBAND

Do we wait to go back later? We can't interrupt them.

WIFE

Of course we can! We're paying for the room. If we interrupt the room service, that's our money anyway. It doesn't matter.

HUSBAND

But isn't that rude?

WIFE

Rude? What do you care about being rude after shouting up eight stories in an elevator?

HUSBAND

But it's uncomfortable, and unusual. Hotel etiquette, and all that.

WIFE

That's stupid, whoever heard of 'hotel etiquette'? and it's our room. We can do whatever we want on vacation. (The WIFE opens the door quickly. The HOUSEKEEPER looks up from the floor where she is wiping the sidetable of the bed and looks politely confused as to their rage. The room is small and cramped, with one bed and minimal furniture.)

WIFE

We're just here to pick something up, then we'll leave.

(She begins the search, looking through drawers and table counters, flipping nearly everything out of their suitcase, muttering that she knew it was somewhere, etc. She becomes rather a tornado of a mess that the HOUSEKEEPER will now have to pick up after. The room is small, so she can't really resume cleaning until after they leave. They are also in close quarters, getting in each others' way.)

HUSBAND

You'll have to excuse us, it shouldn't be much longer.

WIFE

It wouldn't be taking this long if you'd help me for once.

HUSBAND

What did the paper say? There's a possibility I may have mistaken it for trash.

WIFE

They're two tickets to the theater, it should have today's date on it. Good thing we left so early, if we hurry, we can be back before the end of the first scene.

(The HOUSEKEEPER finds the tickets in a pile of clothes, heads them to the WIFE who gives a perfunctory, stiff thank you, but the husband is profligate in his thanks.)

HUSBAND

I'm so sorry you have to clean up after us like this. In fact, you don't have to finish. We'll take it from here once we get back.

HOUSEKEEPER

Sir, it is my job to-

HUSBAND

No, I insist.

WIFE

Just let her do her job and let's leave.

HUSBAND

No, really -

WIFE

- and who's actually going to do the cleaning? For once in my life I'm going to have a nice vacation where I don't have to clean, and you have to interfere like usual -

HUSBAND

We can take this outside, she doesn't need to hear all this -

WIFE

- her? Why do you care so much about her? She's paid to take out our trash! Why all this, all of a sudden? Where's the offer to help when I'm bent on the floor, scrubbing at the stains and corners with dead spiders with their legs falling off? You, standing there - you think you're all grand, offering to help this woman out like she's so lowly and poor, but you know what? She's paid to pick up your socks, and I'm not! How 'bout that, huh? How about that.

HOUSEKEEPER

Ma'am, I'm going to have to ask you to step outside while I finish up.

HUSBAND

Hey, I'm really sorry about this. I'm sure we've pulled you behind schedule. Here's a 20, just go. We'll take care of this.

WIFE

Really.

HOUSEKEEPER

Thank you, sir.

HUSBAND

Of course.

WIFE

Oh, I see. You care more about how strangers see you than those who actually know you. Because I know every

tiny disgusting detail about you and she doesn't. You get a clean slate with every stranger you see, and that's why you can't resist them.

HUSBAND

Really, I'm -

WIFE

- Just trying to be nice? Where's the 'trying to be nice' when you complain we've had the same dinner two days in a row? When I have to take time off work to take care of the kids when they get in trouble? When I clean the floors and wipe the counters and change the sheets, day after day after day, just like her? You think I wouldn't like some appreciation too?

(The HOUSEKEEPER begins to take small steps towards the door, but the room is so small that she brushes against the wife, who grabs her by the arm.)

WIFE

Look at her, trying to leave with the dirty money you gave her. She can leave, but I can't. I'm stuck with you, stuck-stuck-stuck with you til death do us part. But she can leave, at least once you stop paying her. Lining up those fresh white apron pockets with Jacksons and Franklins. So there! She checks the tickets are still in her purse, which they are. Let's go.

(The HOUSEKEEPER stands still in shock.)

WIFE

Well, aren't you going to go? Or are you waiting for a tip from me? Well here's a tip: if you think you can get more from him, you can do better.

(The HOUSEKEEPER turns to go, but the HUSBAND puts out a hand.)

HUSBAND

Wait.

WIFE

Oh, a knight in shining armor, too.

(The HOUSEKEEPER stops and turns slowly, carefully. It is to be noted that throughout this exchange, she reacts very minimally, but she is not clueless.)

HUSBAND

I'm really sorry we've been treating you this way. Please know that none of this is your fault, and if you're uncomfortable cleaning this room for the rest of our stay, I'm fine with that, and I'll let the management know in particular not to call you up here.

WIFE

How touching. Now, if you two are done, I'd like to go and see my show.

HUSBAND

Honey, the play started 15 minutes ago. If we call an Uber, we'll be lucky if we get there before intermission. There's no point now.

WIFE

And why is that? You! You and your dawdling and fake chivalry towards that woman! Apologizing and making yourself out to be a hero, a savior, compared to the crazy lady he's married to. Yeah, it's all a farce.

(To the HOUSEKEEPER.)

WIFE

Girl, do you want to know what he called me on the way up here? A madwoman. That's right, a madwoman.

HUSBAND

There's no need to air our dirty laundry out like this -

WIFE

So you admit it! See, this man isn't perfect, he's not going to save you from your mindless job in a dead end career which is all more than a decade of college debt got you -

HUSBAND

You're reeling making this all about you, huh? When can it be about me and my job I have to drag myself to because without it, I'm back to nothing again! You don't even have to work with that inheritance you've got.

WIFE

Me? When you come home from work, what do I ask you about? 'How was your day at work?' Then you go on and on about business, and I stopped listening five years ago and you haven't even noticed! What do you know about my life?

HUSBAND

But you like working in retail, don't you? Would you really rather work as a cleaning woman in the cheapest hotel in Chicago than what you're doing now?

HOUSEKEEPER

Sir, I am requesting you do not bring your perception of my position into this argument. I am once again asking to leave and continue with my rounds.

HUSBAND

But of course.

WIFE

Ask? You haven't asked to do a thing! You've been trying to sneak, sneaking out like a bad, bad girl who knows she's been caught doing something wrong. So what is it? Out with it!

HOUSEKEEPER

My position is not a job to take lightly. I am on a schedule. Move away from the door.

HUSBAND

Let her go!

WIFE

No! You see? He wants you to leave, now that you've taken a stance. You're not the quiet cleaning lady of his fantasies, but a real, real person. See? He wants someone weak, who won't talk back. Ha!

HUSBAND

You really are crazy! I know there was something wrong with you from the start, but I couldn't place it. But now I can. You're heartless. I can't even call you a madwoman, because even then you'd have to be human.

(The WIFE catches sight of herself in the full-length mirror hanging on the inside of the open closet door.)

WIFE

Oh, this is who you're married to.

(She slowly makes her way closer to the mirror.)

WIFE

Look at her. Hair askew, shoddy eyeliner, clumpy mascara, same old shoes. But the inside: I can see everything. Everything I've ever known and more that I've known all along and had no name for.

(She begins touching the mirror.)

WIFE

Gorgeous, isn't it, destruction. The slope of the neck, the crooked posture. What a snake, this woman is. She's eaten everything inside of you.

(She screams.)

WIFE

I can see you inside of her, eating her from the inside out like a parasite, you, pretender of pretenders, an actor in a show.

(She turns to the HUSBAND.)

WIFE

Have a look. It's like that mirror in those kids books, where you look in the grand old mirror and you see everything you've always wanted. It makes one so happy, doesn't it? I want to share that with you.

(The WIFE pushes the HUSBAND to the mirror.)

WIFE

(breathing oddly)

Do you see it? Do you see us?

HUSBAND

I, I -

WIFE

Yes?

HUSBAND

I promise I'm not lying, and don't fly off the handle again, but -

WIFE

Yes?

HUSBAND

I'm only going to say this once, but I need you to not think I'm losing it.

WIFE

Anything, just tell me what you see.

HUSBAND

(after a pause)

I don't see anything.

WIFE

Liar!

(The WIFE raises her hand to hit him, but the HOUSEKEEPER slams the door shut, hiding the mirror.)

HOUSEKEEPER

Stop it, both of you. Although it is my job to make our guests here at the Hotel as comfortable as possible, I see that my presence can do no good. Stop blocking the door, and let me leave.

(The WIFE crosses to the wagon of cleaning supplies, grabs a bucket of dirty water, and dashes it across the HOUSEKEEPER, who says nothing, merely flinching very slightly. The WIFE opens the door.)

WIFE

There's the door, now get out!

(The HOUSEKEEPER looks out the open door, her gaze unwavering. She looks, stares long and hard at each person in turn. First the wife, then the husband.)

HOUSEKEEPER

No. No, there's something about you - both of you - that's familiar.

WIFE

I'm you in 20 years, darling.

HOUSEKEEPER

No, not quite. But your anger is understandable somehow, as crude as it is. Silly, is it not, that something as small as a misplaced ticket to the theater can boil up like this? Now, if you please, I am going to continue with my job, and you two will continue with yours. Now, go on.

(The HUSBAND and WIFE leave slowly. The HOUSEKEEPER crouches and continues cleaning from the same spot from the beginning of the play. She sings softly.)

HOUSEKEEPER

The man had longed for love until the end

The wife in turn believed he was the one

But doubt crept in their minds that cannot mend

Unspoken truths that two could not attend.

Isobel Li

Age: 15, Grade: 12

School Name: Olathe North High School, Olathe, KS

Educator: Deirdre Zongker

Category: Poetry

Anna

the drive to her house always felt infinitely long
highway nausea like headaches induced by milky way candy
like dry heat capable of disintegrating concrete
crossing the state line felt like crossing a rubicon
with no consequences but a growing desire
for something unattainable

some houses undergo metamorphosis
but her house seemed nearly static

a kitchen of bland macaroni
milk in crystal glasses
small bowls and polished silver spoons
white cabinets
tile floor

red matryoshka dolls lined up on the piano
an amethyst geode on a shelf
wind chimes on the porch

those things never changed
but in the living room
the fishbowl was replaced by a mouse cage which was replaced by dog toys
which in turn was replaced by nothingness

thus my first experience with change in her house was death

when i moved schools, i stopped going to her house
but we would call often
and at the end of every phone call
a ritual of false goodbyes would ensue
never hanging up
back and forth
with bated breath
both of us holding on
hoping for continuity

but inevitably, one of those phone calls became the last

and all along
it was the fear of impermanence
that made me feel worse than the impermanence itself

Isobel Li

Age: 15, Grade: 12

School Name: Olathe North High School, Olathe, KS

Educator: Deirdre Zongker

Category: Poetry

afterlife

raw blue, an undiluted sky

you stand with your hands outstretched towards
her ukulele like a child begging for a toy,
hair dripping liquid silver and fingertips pruned
palms the color of london fog
sunlight bleeding through your black curls
the scent of chlorine and home in the still air

she shakes her head,
strums a solitary chord
while you shrug and fall backwards
dissonant splash, soaked towels

your eponym parted the sea and
drowned the oppressors,
forty years of walking
and more years of promise;
there is rhythm in our steps
all 63 from the pool to the chapel
and harmony in our worship
where eyes close of their own accord

and your eponym led the people to safety
but
when i walk behind you
your destination is no Sinai

my distance from the sky is deafening

Isobel Li

Age: 15, Grade: 12

School Name: Olathe North High School, Olathe, KS

Educator: Deirdre Zongker

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

In Control

I am terrified of knives and sulfuric acid. Whether I'm holding a kitchen knife or a beaker of concentrated sulfuric, it's a guarantee that my grip will be deathly tight in my efforts to feel "in control." Nervous thoughts simultaneously crowd my head — What if I drop this knife on my foot and lose my toes? What if I accidentally dump acid onto my forearm and fall victim to an unwanted bone reveal? — and yet I proceed, wrists stiff and fingers rigid. But these tense battles for control don't even compare to the grasp I try to have over my time.

During junior year, I developed an addiction to my planner. It began as a way to manage my extracurriculars without neglecting any schoolwork, but I soon found myself obsessively scheduling my future down to the minute. The flimsy pages of my cheap planner became worn and gray from smeared pencil marks and aggressive erasing. In the evenings, I would lay in bed like a deceased fish. My life was not a picture of control. In fact, I was being controlled by my fear of losing control, and an unhealthy planner dependency was only a symptom of my unease. When I attended the Kenyon Young Writers workshop this summer, nothing I wrote seemed to click. It made me feel guilty about my time usage. It made me feel like I wasn't in control of my creativity. It made me feel like I was falling irreparably behind, especially compared to the poetry prodigies that surrounded me. In my desperate attempts to shave first ideas into perfection, I left Kenyon insecure about my written work.

But good things did come of these anxious two weeks. For me, my magnum opus was not a poem, nor was it prose — it was a collection of photographs. And that's when I truly gained a new understanding of the principle that says air will naturally flow from high to low pressure. The intensity of my grip on my time had squeezed every drop of inspiration away from my writing abilities and toward my camera lens. My nervous attempts at being in control of my creative output had been counterproductive all along. I realized that I had to change the forcefulness of my hold around time.

My attempts at relaxing my grip require me to be very intentional about my mindset and actions, but it's been worth it. It takes form in the ordinary, like my decision to use a pen instead of a pencil when making to-do lists so I can't obsessively erase and rewrite, and my embrace of using school study hall to talk with friends instead of frantically trying to beat out the answer to a math question, and my recognition of sleep as a good answer to overwhelming nerves late at night. It takes form in things I never imagined doing, like impulsively attending a Lumineers concert despite my laundry list of back-to-school tasks. I remain mindful of my capacity, so I make good choices when taking on more or delegating certain responsibilities. My boundaries have strengthened, and with them have my relationships with other people and my emotional capacity. Loosening my grip on time has taught me what sustainable productivity looks like. I give myself room to breathe. I forgive myself when a poem doesn't come out quite right or when I miss a self-imposed due date.

I would be lying if I said I am a completely relaxed person now. It still makes me slightly nervous when I feel my time management slipping from my grasp. And I'm still wary of both knives and sulfuric acid. But I have learned to be okay with not being perfectly in control of my time. Can you imagine how boring life would be if that were in our power?

Isobel Li

Age: 15, Grade: 12

School Name: Olathe North High School, Olathe, KS

Educator: Deirdre Zongker

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

the sixth love language

Food is the love language of my culture. This vernacular manifests itself in the fruit plates my parents cut for me and my siblings. It's the reason why I often fight for the bill at restaurants. Most importantly, it's the reason why visits to Shanghai have always been marked by elaborate meals with relatives from all branches of my family tree.

My first recollection of one of these dinner parties is from the vantage point of the floor. Everything about the room felt crowded, from the number of people to the elaborate dishes that covered nearly every inch of every tabletop. I was very young, and quickly grew bored of sitting still. After sliding out of my seat, I began crawling between the legs of both people and furniture, watching the adults interact above me. The babies in the room were being passed around buoyantly in between bites of lotus root and Peking duck. The uncles shared cigarettes and lighters; wispy trails of smoke and laughter hovered in the air. Eventually, I settled beneath one of the tables, partially hidden by the tablecloth. One of my aunts used her chopsticks to feed me quail eggs. Another passed me wedges of scallion pancake. And all this time, the sound of lively chatter filled the room and every crevice, enveloping me in its energy. My mother later came to coax me back into my chair and when I finally emerged from beneath the tablecloth, the noise level hadn't faltered one bit.

It was always loud at these meals. When I grew older, I quit crawling in favor of listening to the adults' conversations. Over steamed fish and soup dumplings, they would laugh and bicker, occasionally pausing to spoon food onto a child's plate. The chorus of chopsticks tapping lightly against chinaware only added to the rowdiness. My siblings and I were never able to offer much to these conversations. We would sip at cold orange juice or coconut milk while watching tipsy faces turn pink and the previously white tablecloth become stained with various sauces. Serving platters were gradually emptied. Hands released their holds on their utensils. Only the colloquy continued, unchanged.

And that was how all dinner party reunions went.

One summer, my cousin and aunt came to visit America. My parents picked them up from the airport at midnight and we all sat at the dining table together, eating McDonalds french fries. My cousin and aunt didn't complain, yet I wondered if they expected a legitimate meal after so many hours of nauseating airplane food. I wondered if they were too tired to care. I wondered if they were too tired to complain.

Were we giving our relatives the affectionate welcome that we had received so many times in China?

But as I observed their backlit figures, I realized it once again. Food doesn't need to be complex cultural cuisine to be meaningful. Because all food is a love language. And how lucky I am to be on both the giving and receiving ends of it.

Lucia Li

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Ladue Horton Watkins High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Shruti Upadhyay

Category: Humor

Mice to Mercury

It happens as most incidents happen: happenstance and miscommunication. As we speak, Dr. Bernard Bertrum, head of NASA, is having a video conference with his top two minds about their next big project. It's very important stuff. Millions of dollars of funding and the efforts of some of the brightest minds in the world are at stake here. Let's listen in.

DR. BERNARD BERTRUM: Thank you for all your suggestions today. But out of all the proposals, I'm most interested in the one regarding ice on Mercury.

DR. LESLIE LOPENHAGEN: One from my team?

DR. BERNARD BERTRUM: Well not to name names but...

DR. ROBERT REDDINGTON: Oh come on! We all know it's his. You just want to kiss up to the guy who won a Nobel Prize in hopes that he can shit out another, like some sort of scientific golden goose.

DR. LESLIE LOPENHAGEN: You're just jealous. Unlike you, I'm actually getting something out of my funding. Remind me what happened to your last rocket? Oh right, it blew up. It exploded into bits.

DR. ROBERT REDDINGTON: Well you know what else blew up? Your marriage.

DR. LESLIE LOPENHAGEN: Shut up!

DR. BERNARD BERTRUM: As I was saying, I think further research into Mercury is our most promising option. But I have some modifications to the original plan. We should switch out telescopes...

Now let me redirect your attention to something else for a moment. The esteemed Dr. Bernard Bertrum is currently speaking from his home. Unbeknownst to him, his house is infested. With mice specifically. There's a whole colony of them living in various nooks, crannies, and crevices. One young mouse from the colony is out exploring. Yes, see him scampering now? Out of curiosity, he's drawn to the tangled mess of wires and decides to nibble on one very specific and very important wire. That's the wire of Dr. Bernard Bertrum's wifi box, and for precisely five crucial seconds, his internet is out until our young mouse stops chewing. Let's return to the meeting of utmost importance.

DR. BERNARD BERTRUM: Of course, the greatest change will be that we need m-*krsshk*--ice on Mercury. Alright, meeting over! This is quite a simple project, and I have faith that I'll see results in a month.

DR. ROBERT REDDINGTON: But-

HOST HAS ENDED MEETING

Perhaps the whole thing could have been avoided if Dr. Bernard Bertrum had been just a bit less eager to be done with the meeting and had excused himself to take a nap or if Dr. Robert Reddington had been just a bit faster at asking an important clarifying question. But that's life for you. Unless Dr. Robert Reddington manages to get his "rocket" (secret time machine) working someday, there's no changing what will happen or how it spirals. Just take a look at a few emails between two rivals.

TO: llophenhagen@nasa.gov
SUBJECT: mice on mercury???

leslie,

r we actually launching mice into space? like a spaceship full of mice to mercury? bertrum cut out there for a second but i'm prettyyy sure i heard him say mice. as the idiot who came up with the original plan, what's ur take?

sincerely,

The Guy Who Thinks You Definitely Bribed The Nobel Prize Committee

TO: rreddington@nasa.gov
SUBJECT: Re: mice on mercury???

Hello Robert,

I am certain that Bertrum wants to send a spaceship full of mice to Mercury. He seemed very sure about that. It's a...far leap from my initial proposal to deploy a simple rover to Mercury but I will admit, I can see the scientific merits. Experimentation and all that. We can pull it off in the time frame he wanted if you and your team cooperate with me. I've already sent an intern to grab a batch of lab rats. Or mice I suppose.

Kind Regards,

The Guy Who Thinks You Should Quit Your Job And Never Enter A Lab Again

TO: rreddington@nasa.gov
SUBJECT: Launch Day

Hello Robert,

Have we finalized all the details for the launch tomorrow? My team gave me the go ahead on any technical stuff and I've checked in on the mice themselves. All healthy and, oddly enough, excited. I know that they won't actually be the mice on Mercury, but at least their offspring will be making history.

Kind Regards,

The Guy Who Hopes Never To Talk To You Again After Tomorrow Even Though He Knows He Will

TO: llophenhagen@nasa.gov
SUBJECT: Re: Launch Day

leslie,

we r good to go. shut up abt mice dying, it's making me sad. see u at the control tower tmrw, this month could not have gone slower.

sincerely,

The Guy Who Loooves Making Your Life Hell But Would Also Looove To Stop Sending You Emails

The launch, of course, goes smoothly. Dr. Robert Reddington and Dr. Leslie Lopenhagen each pat themselves on the back for a job well done and embark on new projects, mice practically forgotten already. But what the two of them don't know is that their collaboration is far from over.

See, the intern who picked out the mice, Paul Paulinski, did not pick out a normal batch of mice. Paul Paulinski had gone down to the lab of Dr. Rebecca Reddington, who had been running some experiments on the effects of zero gravity on mice, to ask for some. She'd handed him a cage full of seemingly innocuous mice and wished his team

luck.

Reddington...does that ring any bells? Because that name should be ringing alarm bells. Ever wonder why Dr. Robert Reddington and Dr. Leslie Lopenhagen hate each other? No? Well I'll show you anyway. Just look at this collection of Dr. Leslie Lopenhagen's search history.

2 years ago

How to make a golden retriever like you
What to do if your golden retriever keeps biting you
How to convince wife to get rid of a pet
What to do if your wife is mad at you for trying to get rid of her dog

1 year ago

What to do if you hit your dog with car
How to tell if your dog is still alive
What happens if you accidentally kill your dog
Will my wife divorce me if i accidentally killed our dog
Adult male golden retrievers for adoption
Pet shops near me
How to hide secret from wife
How to hide non-affair secret from wife
How to dispose of dog remains

11 months ago

How to convince my wife i'm telling the truth
Tips to deal with pet grief
Argument resolution tactics
How to avoid divorce
Divorce lawyer near me

9 months ago

What to do if your ex-wife is your colleague
How to avoid your ex at work
How to deal with ex in-laws
What to do if your ex brother-in-law is your coworker
How to handle bullying at work
Good comebacks
List of insults

This ex-wife is no one other than Dr. Rebecca Reddington, whose younger brother is Dr. Robert Reddington. The Reddington siblings have never forgiven Dr. Leslie Lopenhagen for the slaughter and replacement of Pookie, the golden retriever who was turned into roadkill. It's one hell of an office drama.

But how is this important? Well, the thing about Dr. Rebecca Reddington is that she's been using her zero gravity experiment as an excuse to explore her true passion: implanting human intelligence into mice.

So when Paul Paulinski entered her lab and asked for mice, Dr. Rebecca Reddington saw an opportunity for revenge. It was in honor of Pookie, for her poor dog had always hated her ex-husband.

Dr. Rebecca Reddington had not given Paul Paulinski just any mice. She'd given him mice whose brains she'd combined with human brains, rendering them advanced life forms but with one massive flaw: they were single mindedly focused on the acquisition of cheese, the thing all mice desire most.

Hey, do you hear that flapping sound? Yes, almost like the beating of some very tiny wings. It's the butterfly effect, laughing its ass off. But trust me, it's only going to get worse.

Those weren't just any humans' brains. The brains spliced into those mice belonged to various former astronauts,

rocket scientists, and top talents who'd donated their bodies to science.

Usually, this wouldn't make much of a difference. A mouse is a mouse is a mouse. A genius and an idiot would fare about the same as a small rodent trying to commit petty cheese theft. But the distinction is a lot more obvious when you plop a genius and an idiot in a space shuttle.

We're about to see just how distinct the distinction is. In fact, here come the mission logs from the Squeaker.

Mission Log #1

The mice have already broken out from their cages. Most are wobbling about in the air, unused to zero gravity. But one mouse, a large albino with a mean scowl, is tapping the camera.

ALBINO: Testing? Testing? It's been a while since I've been in one of these things, and the controls look a bit different. Nothing we can't figure out though.

Another mouse, a small brown one with massive bug eyes, suddenly smashes into the camera, his face pressed right into the lens.

BUG EYES: %&@*! \$#%&&*%\$!!!

He kicks off from the camera and goes flying backwards, right into another mouse

ALBINO: Well. We're still adjusting to the current climate. Not all of us have been up here before. Anyways, I'm confident that we'll be able to break out of autopilot soon.

Mission Log #8

ALBINO taps the camera. In the background, two mice are using a wrench to unscrew something from the wall. BUG EYES is typing furiously on a computer by using a pen to hit the keys. Loud clanging can be heard throughout the ship.

ALBINO: We've just disabled autopilot and cut off any interference from NASA. It's gone slower than expected due to...physical limitations.

There's the sound of an explosion from somewhere on the ship and frantic shouting and squeaking

ALBINO: It's hard to maneuver with claws.

Mission Log #25

There's cries of celebration and jubilant squeaking in the background. ALBINO's scowl still remains.

ALBINO: Is it on?

BUG-EYES squeaks

ALBINO: Important update, we've just...

Mission Log #26

BUG-EYES' tail can be seen swooshing in the corner. ALBINO is much closer to the camera and lecturing.

ALBINO: ...turns off when you hit the red button. Ah, I see it's back on. The important update is that we've successfully redirected our course to the moon. If all goes to plan, we should reach our destination in a few days. We're about to prepare the drill.

As you can see, putting those mice on a spaceship was an awful idea. Once an astronaut, always an astronaut. Now let's go see if Dr. Robert Reddington and Dr. Leslie Lopenhagen have realized that as well.

TO: llophenhagen@nasa.gov

SUBJECT: u messed up

leslie,

remember those mice on the spaceship? yeah u sent mice with HUMAN BRAINS in them. and not just anyone's brains, ROCKET SCIENTIST BRAINS. rebecca told me that she gave ur intern, paul, some botched mice. y'know, to mess with u bcs u deserve it u sick freak. idk what she's doing w mice w human brains but the main problem is that the spaceship went AWOL today and i think i know why. thx a lot for killing her dog and screwing us over, idiot.

sincerely,

The Guy Who Thinks You Just Lost Us Both Our Jobs

TO: rreddington@nasa.gov
SUBJECT: Re: u messed up

Hello Robert,

This is no time to fling accusations (but if we are then it's Rebecca's fault). I just checked up on the situation and they've completely locked us out. We can't control the ship anymore and it appears they're attempting to chart their own course. I have a horrible feeling about where they're trying to go. We need to stop them.

Kind Regards,

The Guy Who Is Trying To Keep His Job But Wouldn't Mind If You Lost Yours Because You Don't Do Anything With It Anyways

TO: rreddington@nasa.gov
SUBJECT: Mice on the Moon

Hello Robert,

I was right. They're headed to the moon.

Kind Regards,

The Guy Who Is Always Right Even When He'd Rather Not Be

Now, you might be wondering, why do these mice want to go to the moon? And why is it so significant that they are? Well I'll let you in on a secret. One of the biggest secrets of all in fact. Here, come closer. I'm going to whisper it in your ear and you must promise to never tell anyone else.

It is common knowledge that the moon is made of rocks and other such debris. However, that is a lie. When Neil Armstrong first landed, he wasn't stepping on lunar silt. He planted that flag on a vast expanse of gruyere. The moon is actually made of cheese. Really, I'm serious! Orbiting us right now is the largest known ball of cheese in the galaxy.

Well why would they hide it, you ask? Imagine being the world's most respected space program trying to tell the entire world that the moon is gruyere. And then having no explanation for why that could be. To this day, the most brilliant scientists in the world still haven't puzzled a thing out.

Anyways, that's beside the point. Remember those mice and how their main motivation was eating cheese? Well get out your fly swatter because I just saw the butterfly effect take a fat dump.

I wouldn't worry too much though. These things often have a funny way of resolving themselves.

TO: llophenhagen@nasa.gov

SUBJECT: Re: Mice on the Moon

leslie,

let's go shoot some cats up into space. i'm picking them this time tho.

Sincerely,

The Guy Who Is About To Save The Moon So We Can Keep Having Normal Weather Until Climate Change Catches Up

Lucia Li

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Ladue Horton Watkins High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Shruti Upadhyay

Category: Short Story

The Death Certificate

Jacob Hall woke up with a white sheet laid atop him. It was cold: his blankets were gone and the late autumn chill of the morning had seeped into his poorly heated room. Jacob wrapped the thin sheet more tightly around himself and stuck his head out of the ineffective cocoon.

Standing around his bed was an unfamiliar group of officials in crisp white uniforms. Jacob had no idea what department or purpose they served but trusted their legitimacy immediately: their expressions were properly dour for a lifetime of vaguely unpleasant governmental work.

“What’s the meaning of this?” Jacob asked. “Has something happened?”

The officials looked awkwardly at each other, as if he had just committed some social blunder and they were all embarrassed for his sake.

“Well,” one of them began, a stout man with square glasses. “I’m afraid....”

The official paused suddenly and looked to his comrades. Whatever confirmation he had wanted had been given, and he continued.

“I’m afraid you’re dead, Mr. Hall.”

“I’m *what*?”

“Dead, Mr. Hall. Deceased.”

The other officials nodded, and Jacob clutched the sheet even tighter.

“Clearly, I’m alive,” Jacob protested. “I’m speaking to you right now!”

The official shrugged. “I’m sorry about your passing, but there’s nothing we can do. We’ve got your death certificate right here.”

Another official, a stout man with round glasses, produced a clipboard and held it in front of Jacob. Jacob peered closely at the document and found that it did, indeed, proclaim his death.

“Died in his sleep sometime late last night? ...nonsense! How could I have woken up if I’d died in my sleep?”

“It’s signed,” the official holding the clipboard said. “It’s a perfectly valid legal document.”

Jacob leapt from his bed, still partially tangled in the sheet.

“Were you people planning to take me to the morgue or something? I’m clearly alive!”

“With all due respect, Mr. Hall,” another official, a stout man with half-moon glasses, said. “Your death certificate states you’re clearly dead.”

Jacob's alarm clock began to ring, and he struggled to get his arms out of the sheet for an embarrassingly long time, long enough that the official nearest to his bedside turned it off for him.

"I'm going to work," Jacob announced when he was free from the sheet. "Get out of my apartment."

The officials all began to make protesting noises.

"But our orders were to put you in the casket!" an official cried, a stout man with cat-eye glasses.

"It's right outside," the official with the clipboard said. "It'd be a waste not to use it." The officials all nodded in agreement.

"I'm not getting into a casket!" Jacob shouted.

"Well, you are supposed to honor the dead's last wishes," the first official said. "Maybe the casket's not necessary."

"Get out! All of you!" And without waiting for a response, Jacob marched into his bathroom and locked the door. It was a small bathroom but clean by a bachelor's standards. The tiles were cold on his bare feet as he flicked the light switch.

Jacob wasn't an unattractive man. Under certain lights, he could even look quite dashing. But as he looked at himself in the mirror, the flickering yellow lights gave him a wan and worn out look, like a bad wax sculpture.

Good grief, Jacob thought. Could I really be dead?

He touched his cheek. It was warm and slightly rough with new stubble. His pulse beat steadily and soundly when he pressed his fingers to his neck. Investigation over, Jacob concluded that he was definitely alive and ought to get on with his morning routine.

Jacob brushed his teeth, washed his face, and shaved with the vigor and satisfaction of a man whose world had been set to rights once again. His mood improved when he exited the bathroom and found that the officials had all vanished. They'd taken the sheet with them and, much to Jacob's annoyance, had tracked a few boot prints on the floor. But when leaving his apartment, Jacob found that his door was still locked. Strange men, Jacob thought. But that's just the government for you.

As Jacob entered the office, he noticed there was someone already sitting in his cubicle. His cubicle was right next to the door, so that whenever anyone came or went, a gust of cold wind or muggy heat would blast poor Jacob. It was also hard to get any privacy with so much foot traffic surrounding him and the worry that someone was always looking over his shoulder. But despite whatever ill feelings Jacob held for his cubicle, seeing someone else sitting in his chair and working at his desk sent a possessive sourness throughout him. That was his spot after all, no matter how undesirable it was.

The man in his chair was hunched over, squinting over a stack of documents that towered over his already small body. Jacob stood right behind him and cleared his throat very loudly. The stranger ignored him.

"Hello," Jacob said curtly. "I'm afraid you're in the wrong cubicle."

The stranger finally looked up at Jacob, but remained unphased.

"I'm sorry about your passing," the stranger said. "My name's Jacob. I'm your replacement."

"What passing?" Jacob demanded. "What replacement? Are you sure you're in the right place?"

"Quite," the stranger replied. "You, however, are the one in the wrong place."

Jacob stared at him. The stranger, also named Jacob apparently, only stared back indolently. I'd have been fired on

the spot if I'd spoken like that on my first day, Jacob thought. The absolute disrespect!

"Clearly there's been a mistake," Jacob said. "You'd better watch your tone. That sort of attitude won't fly around here."

The other Jacob only raised his eyebrows and went back to his tall pile of documents. Jacob huffed and prepared to journey through the byzantine maze of the office, determined to have his horrible cubicle back.

The office where Jacob worked was not particularly large, but it was particularly packed. It possessed a special quality of being able to pack in more people than a far larger office while still not being a fire hazard. Most workers on the main office floor were squeezed into identical cubicles that looked and felt like sardine cans. Jacob squeezed through throngs of men in suits, all smoking, gesticulating, and clogging the walkways like schools of fish, until he reached the corridor where the real offices were.

Jacob straightened his tie and knocked on his boss's door.

"Come in," Jacob's boss boomed.

In all his time at the company, Jacob had never seen his boss out of his squeaky leather chair. He was practically melded to it, his large body fitted perfectly to every curve and gap of the chair.

His boss sat behind a large oak desk, smoking a fat cigar over an overflowing ashtray.

"Oh. Jacob. What are you doing here?" his boss asked. He shook his cigar, and ash spilled onto the table.

"I really don't mean to bother you," Jacob said. "It's just that this new hire seems to be confused about whom he's replacing."

"No," his boss said. "Jacob is quite right about whom he's replacing. You're being replaced, Jacob."

Jacob stared at his boss in disbelief, who sat in silence. Was I fired? Jacob thought. But when? And why? I've been a model employee, really. Never got sick, always stayed late, and never complained. Really, the way I've been treated has been unfair. All this work just for a measly paycheck and no promotion. But what else would I do? What else?

"What did I do?" Jacob asked. "I don't understand."

"Well you haven't done anything," his boss said. "That's just the problem, actually. You can't do anything anymore. You're dead."

Jacob only barely stopped himself from screaming.

"I really am sorry," his boss continued. "The office is coming together for a bit of a memorial service. We're all pooling in to buy some flowers for the funeral."

"Lovely gesture. I'm touched," Jacob said desperately. "But I'm not dead. Really I promise. So I feel this new addition to our staff is quite unnecessary. It'd be great to get my desk back."

Jacob's boss put out his cigar and sighed. "No can do, Jacob. I'm afraid my hands are tied."

"Why?" Jacob begged. "I'm alive. Why can't you just give me my desk back?"

"You're officially dead. It's legal stuff now. They've got it all in writing," Jacob's boss said, shaking his head. "You can't be employed when you're dead. It's just not done."

"BUT I'M NOT DEAD," Jacob yelled. "I'M STANDING RIGHT IN FRONT OF YOU, PERFECTLY ALIVE!"

“You’ve got a death certificate and everything,” Jacob’s boss said. “Denial is the first stage of grief, and I suppose it is only natural to grieve your own death.”

“YOU’RE THE ONE IN DENIAL!”

“I think it’s best if you’re on your way now, Jacob,” Jacob’s boss said, making a shooing motion with his hand. “I’ve got to get back to work. But you can just go on and rest, huh? ‘Rest in peace’ and all that.”

Jacob grabbed the overflowing ashtray, threw it at his boss’s face, and slammed the door to the office as hard as he could. Then, he ran, shoving through the clusters of people until he got to his old cubicle.

The other Jacob had made seemingly no progress in his papers. Yet he gave Jacob a smarmy look of smug self-satisfaction.

“I told you so,” he sing-songed. Jacob’s only response was pushing the large pile of papers off the desk and leaving.

The autumn air had only gotten colder, and Jacob shivered, both with the weather and left-over adrenaline. He collapsed on the bench outside the office, a wiry uncomfortable thing still wet with the rain from last night.

I’ve always wanted to do that, Jacob thought. That ought to teach the old bastard not to blow smoke directly in my face! But what now? What’s left for me?

Jacob watched as people passed on the street. What does a dead man even do, Jacob wondered. Surely they can’t just expect me to roll over and die for them? Those men in the morning had brought a casket—good lord, there’s a casket!

And indeed, there was a casket rapidly approaching Jacob. It was held up by a team of those officials from the morning, all clad in identical crisp white uniforms. The others on the sidewalk didn’t seem to notice them even though they took up most of the space on the pavement.

Might as well find out what they want, Jacob thought, defeated. Maybe they’ll actually explain this whole mess to me.

“Hello again, Mr. Hall,” one of the officials said as they came to a stop near Jacob, blocking the door to the office. It was the first one from the morning, the stout man with the square glasses. “I’m afraid we have to take you with us this time.”

“What’s going on?” Jacob demanded. “Why does everyone think I’m dead?”

“We were wrong today,” another official said. He’d been the stout man with round glasses who had shown Jacob the death certificate that morning.

“You were wrong, I knew it,” Jacob said eagerly. “I knew this was a mistake! Could you get rid of the death certificate now?”

“You misunderstand,” an official said, a stout man with half-moon glasses. Jacob now realized that all the pallbearers were the same officials that had been in his room. “You’re dead. You’re supposed to go in the coffin.”

“What do you mean ‘go in the coffin’?” Jacob asked. “What do you mean?”

“We weren’t supposed to let you walk about,” the first official said. “Our boss said we had to put you in the casket, on account of your being dead and all.”

“What happened to respecting my final wishes?” Jacob said, getting up slowly from the bench.

“Sorry, an order’s an order,” the second official said. Jacob began to sprint towards the street, but two officials

lunged and tackled him to the ground.

“You madmen are going to kill a living man!” Jacob shouted. “You’re just going to snuff me out because of some piece of paper?”

The officials opened the casket and began to hoist Jacob in, despite his kicking and wriggling.

“Please, just calm down,” the official with round glasses huffed as he tried to evade Jacob’s knee in the eye. “You’re dead. You haven’t got a real say in these things.”

Jacob was finally wrestled into the casket, and the lid was quickly shut, heavy and final. Jacob pounded at the top even as he heard the latches click.

“Let me out, you brutes,” he shouted. “I’m alive!”

The officials didn’t respond, and Jacob felt the casket being lifted.

“Please, someone please. Please believe I’m alive,” Jacob begged. “I am. I really am living.”

The officials were moving now, and Jacob heard a loud thump. He felt an unbearable sharp pain in his head, and he howled with the agony. Jacob K. died, as suddenly and strangely as the issuing of his death certificate.

The pain was gone now, and so was the casket. Instead, Jacob found himself standing in a large office cluttered with cubicles. There were no windows and the only light came from a door next to Jacob. It was attached to nothing yet bright, almost blinding, light spilled out from the sides.

Well, Jacob thought. I’m glad that’s over. I suppose I really am dead now.

Jacob reached for the knob of the door, feeling that was the proper way to progress things. Suddenly, a hand swatted him on the wrist. Jacob turned and saw a stout man wearing the same crisp white uniform of the officials.

Odd, Jacob thought. He hasn’t got any glasses.

““YOU CAN’T JUST ENTER WITHOUT CHECKING IN,” the official said. He did not speak particularly loudly, but it was as if a hundred other voices were saying the words with him. “IT’S AGAINST REGULATION.”

“I’m Jacob,” Jacob said. “Jacob Hall. Say, am I in the right place now?”

“YOU WILL BE AFTER YOU OPEN THE DOOR,” the official said, pulling out a large binder stuffed with papers. He flipped open the binder and began to search through the jumbled pages.

Jacob waited patiently, eyes glued to the door. The light seeping through it promised infinite possibility for Jacob. His death only felt like a step in a journey that stretched far beyond his understanding. It isn’t so bad, Jacob thought. I won’t have to slave away for ungrateful bosses and awful cubicles in offices like this ever again.

“JACOB HALL, JACOB HALL, HMMMM,” the official said. “ARE YOU SURE THAT’S THE RIGHT NAME?”

“Very,” Jacob replied. “Why?”

“WELL, JACOB,” the official said. “I’M AFRAID YOU’RE ALIVE.”

The official flung open the door. The light vanished and Jacob now saw his bedroom, full of officials. Two of them holding a white sheet, approaching his bed. Jacob felt himself shoved and he stumbled through the door.

Jacob Hall woke up with a white sheet laid atop him.

Maya Li

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: Lakewood Middle School, Overland Park, KS

Educator: Jennifer Tavernaro

Category: Poetry

The day I decided I was tired of living

I pulled my heart out of my chest and watched it burn,
Leaving my chest a hollow shell, numb.

I basked in its smoke,
Letting it collect on my clothes,
The acrid fumes consuming my empty head and this empty room.
The flames brushed against my skin, licking in blistering satisfaction.
Pain seems good in a dull world.

My lungs fill with the dense, ashy air.
So here I drown in this empty room,
The remaining embers of my heart
Pleading for rescue,
But I ignored their cries
Until all that was left were ashes,
And a smoke that fills my head,
Drifts into my chest,
To the hole my heart once was.

But I was still here
All alone,
My lungs flaring up, still gasping for air,
My chest still numb,
The room still drowning me.

Valery Liang

Age: 14, Grade: 9

School Name: Rolla Senior High School, Rolla, MO

Educator: Trina Fitch

Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy

In Pieces, We Carry On

Her mother used to visit the battlefields to pray.

It was always at the setting of the nearest star, if there was one, and the relative time of dusk on their home planet, if such a celestial body did not exist.

Crisp white skirts brushed with rust and dirt, legs scratched with shrapnel, the old iron of bullet shells always the same no matter where they traveled across the universe—they were as thoroughly a part of Celia's childhood as the old textbooks she had knelt over every day, whispering broken bits of useless knowledge to herself, as the thin brown liquid they would often drink in lieu of sustenance they did not have, as the screams of the fallen in the distance that clung to them like drying blood wherever they went.

The gods were a long-forgotten dream in so many parts of this world, cast away centuries and millennia ago, their altars crushed and overturned by that ceaseless warfare that living beings were so inclined to, their temples burned in place of the more immediate manifestations of violence and conquest. Their shapes had been mangled, molded and stretched to near-nonexistence, fitted to how cruel fate saw fit.

If they did exist, then it was now only in shattered dreams, in the loveliest, most horrible desperation of the monsters this world made of them all.

And there was something about the sheer *emptiness* of deep space that made all figures wicked and divine seem like a silver-pale sky that was so very, very distant.

There were only two beings lighting a resource-churning path in the small stolen spacecraft she had traveled on for three weeks now.

Two strangers, against a universe broken by a trillion reaching hands, ground to shards fine as dust and shadows.

Celia stared unseeingly out of the round window inlaid deep into the wall, a polished, clear blankness that held all the dying stars of their galaxy within its grasp.

It was a sort of loneliness that existed within forgotten places, within shells of hollowed-out stars.

You could be everything.

You could imagine this coldness into existence.

You could be nothing but a nightmare lost to history.

You could be infinite, and nonexistent, and everything in between.

Somewhere, in the distance, the first few notes of a lilting, unfamiliar melody began to ring in the air.

This existence had two axioms:

One: all civilizations were perpetually at war.

Two: "all civilizations" excluded a single planet, a miracle of a sin hidden from the fighting, a bright blue jewel that simply *did not care* about the rest of the world—

Earth.

Her mother was dead now. Her, her old friends, the ship captain who had once taken her in and let her keep trinkets that the refugees he ferried between star systems dropped.

Everyone she had ever known, really.

Almost funny, how they had winked out one by one like empires, like the stars.

... She was so sick of being powerless.

"Hey," that low, soft voice she had learned the tune of over the past months murmured from behind her, accented by the soft *creak* of the door swinging open at his hand.

She made herself turn, slowly, and wave, mimicking the human gesture—palm and fingers splayed slightly, causally, wrist loosened, upper arm raised and bobbing slowly in a back-and-forth motion.

Hello, goodbye.

Good to see you. Good to never see you again.

“The music is lovely,” she whispered by way of greeting, tilting her head, silvery hair brushing against the steel of the ledge she perched on.

Troy’s face was soft as he smiled, with an edge that seemed so very *mortal*—was that what it was like to be raised in peace?—and lovely in the way the fragilest of flower buds were lovely.

“*La Traviata*,” he said, opening and closing thin fingers around a plain square of metal where the quiet, mournful music trickled from, “by Verdi.”

His grasp of the Common tongue that was standard across this swathe of the world was stilted, patchy, weighed down with a lilting accent, but his months of immersion had managed to make his vocabulary and diction significantly smoother.

She could speak human English, of course. Spanish and Italian, as well, and scattered bits of Japanese and Mandarin. Languages came easily to most of her kind, and she had not much else to do but study for months.

Though, she had never told him that.

Celia nodded, and a muted sort of silence fell over them both.

Earth: the sole bloodless planet or planet-functioning body known to exist.

Her mother had called it *Heaven*.

But this being standing before her—that breakable sculpture of dark hair and depthless eyes, bronze skin still scraped with scars from when the refugee camp had been attacked and her world had fallen apart ...

Him. The other envoys the humans had sent out of pure, disgusting *curiosity* to the fringe of the carnage, the researchers and bright-eyed pilots who slipped in and out of combat zones like curious tourists—they all seemed so very, very unlike those angels she had revered so.

She supposed, though, that even the most divine of creatures, cast down from the skies, would be inevitably corrupted once forced into this senseless world of theirs.

“How are you progressing with the weaponry?” Troy asked, settling down onto the metal bench beside her.

The worn fabric of his military fatigues brushed her own old white uniform for a fraction of a second before slipping away, leaving a bit of emptiness where they had been in contact.

Celia gazed flatly at him. At the eerie *depthlessness* in those human eyes, as if they held a thorned, bloody path to their bearer’s soul, if only you tread far enough. “I’ve mastered the basics of the human short-range arms and missiles.” She tapped a jagged nail against the clumsy, unrefined ridges of the handgun slung at her waist, wrapped her hand around the scratched metal. “How are you healing?”

... No, she had decided, long ago. Humans were not any greater than any other existence in their galaxy. Just a species of fools unknowingly caught in the embrace of sheer, unthinking luck, so greedy and cruel and destructive with their every breath, only protected by meaningless fate and circumstance.

“Nearly all better.” He smiled a little at that, crookedly, a small twitch of the corner of his mouth, before sighing and tipping his head back, closing his eyes and shutting out the infinite, terrible stars.

She wondered how he saw her.

Celia’s kind was often compared to statues: flesh cold and smooth, ears peaked at the ends, faces symmetrical, eyes emotionless chips of crystal, plain yet lovely, nails hard as claws. Their senses were too sharp, movements too fast—*unnatural*.

When she was younger, she had longed to be different. *Human*.

But it made no difference now, did it?

They were all monsters, in the end. Mirrors who donned similar masks of different builds.

“Ah, so ...” She paused to fidget with her fingers, to adjust her belt here and there, to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. It was forced, meditated—but she had learned that those small movements calmed others more than natural stillness. “About my proposal. Will you ... ”

Will humanity aid us?

She had lost everything years ago, in a slow and unimportant succession. Fate had spit her out at a small, unnamed desert planet that housed five cities and a single refugee camp notorious for accepting anyone who would fight for it, no matter their history or appearance.

Those cities were gone now, bombed to ash and shrapnel during a meaningless battle that had changed nothing.

But the camp had survived and merged with the mercenaries of the Red Moon System—a sprawling collection of planetary metropolises that focused more on entertainment than warfare. A hellish place of sin and crime, of dark shadows blinded with bright lights and rotten blood covered by liquor and piercing music.

Yet ... the closest thing to peace she had ever witnessed.

And the place that human missionaries had liked to frequent.

Troy let his eyes flutter open again, slowly, reluctantly, as if unwilling to release his illusion of silence and nothing.

That smile still shone across his face, though it trembled a little, falling at the sides. “It’s not my choice to make. Celia.”

Celia. He spoke it using a similar sound in his own tongue, the syllables rolled strangely to the point of foreignness. It wasn’t her real name, of course.

She wasn’t sure she had one.

Even when her mother had been alive, they had switched names and identity like clothes, like homes. Neither of them had ever quite had a mind to care about the preservation of any one alias—just another empty mask, another ever-changing element swept up in the arms of their inconstant axiom of a world.

She had sometimes been called *my daughter, my child*, before her mother had died

But it was only another title.

Whatever they might mean to anyone else, names held no importance to her.

“But what do *you* think?”

Most of the humans had never ventured much into the towns, preferring instead to be sequestered inside of Monarch, a sprawling underground base etched into the heart of the third planet from Red Moon’s central star, where they had been allowed to stay and do as they wished.

As for her ... she didn’t quite know, really.

Her life was just a collection of uncertainties. In a universe that changed so much, she had never had anything in particular to hold onto. Not alone.

The cities had been entertaining enough; a dizzy blur of memory, of distant drinks and laughs and nights spent flitting through towers of iron and dark alleys, listening to the sound of life burning all around her. She could have said she *liked* it.

But she didn’t know what she wanted from life. Didn’t know what she was looking for. Question after question stretched into inquiring, meaningless infinity, a disgusting, reprehensible search for something more than a life of taking and being taken, something more than hunting and being hunted and—

Blank. Most of it was muddled blank.

But it didn’t matter.

The gods were dead. And the Red Moon System was gone, like everything else.

“Celia ... you’re asking me to march my people to death. To let them be smashed to pieces over a war no one can possibly win. To *erase* my entire species.”

Neither of them were sure what had happened.

A coup. A betrayal. A rival warlord. Maybe several rival warlords.

One day, she had simply woken up to find Monarch on fire, nuclear weapons being dropped over the cities. So she had just *run* and moved on, like she always did; crashed into Troy, stolen a ship, and fled to deep space with little more thought than of faint mourning and escape.

She spoke slowly, mechanically, laying out the laws she had always held to her heart. “This is a universe entrapped in a war none of us can escape from. We will all be erased one day.”

He lunged forward suddenly, and she barely kept herself from flinching before he clasped her icy hand with his own warm, scarred fingers, raised it up between them. “You see it as a prolonged death sentence? Fine, then. I will fight to avoid my day of judgement until I fall.”

Then his lips were brushing across her knuckles, a light tap against skin pulled too tight over hard bone. “I believe there’s a reason humanity survived for this long. No, I—I *choose* to believe in hope. In survival.”

A tremble crept up her spine, settled into a place where she had felt nothing in such a long, long time.

He set their hands down. “Start a new life with me, Celia. Leave this all behind. We can do it.” Troy’s eyes were too sharp, too vibrant, too *alive*. “You understand, don’t you? Just ... doing what we have to do—how I will always, *always* prioritize the survival of my own people over the fates of a trillion strangers from a doomed land across the universe.”

She tipped her head forward. Let her hair spill over his arm, brush their entwined hands. “Won’t you try? For me?”

That smile again, gracing his face. A fallen angel, so lovely in its pain. “... We’ll find a new way. Because that’s the brilliance of life, isn’t it? How we keep walking on, despite everything. Keep trying to ... to find ways to be beautiful.”

She dipped her head.

That’s where you’re wrong.

We all try to find ways to keep going.

... We all try to find our own freedom.

But ...

“Yeah,” she whispered, breathless, as he leaned forward. “Yeah.”

But sometimes, there’s no liberation. Only a future promised and lost. Only warring ideologies that will

always, always break each other into bitter ruination.

His eyes fluttered closed again, shutting out the worlds, shutting out their futures, spelled out so long ago in the stars.

Her own stayed open, unflinching. “But I don’t want to be beautiful.”

When she raised her hand, she did not hold back. When she gently placed her fingers between their mouths a moment before their lips were set to collide, her movements were fast and unnatural and without warning.

She might have been crying. He might have been crying.

She was only sure of how his eyes flickered open and widened when she pressed their faces together, when she gazed at those irises blacker than the universe a final time.

When she lifted her gun against his temple, the cold bite of steel kissing bone.

When the music from the recorder in his hand rose and unfurled, strings and bass clashing in a violent crescendo.

“I just want to live.”

Bang.

Troy simply crumpled, like a trampled, beautiful blossom in unforgiving space.

... Almost funny, how they all winked out one by one like empires.

Like the stars.

One of the main reasons Celia had been on the run for so much of her childhood was because her species, long persecuted, could only survive by eating the flesh of another sentient being.

Dreamcatchers, they had been called, in ancient times.

But they didn’t just catch dreams.

They caught *minds*.

It was a twisted type of evolution—something that had been studied to near-perfection in her home village before it had been destroyed in the war. Before she had been forced into a life of constant fear and hatred before she turned four with her mother, who had been so trapped by her nightmares that she had simply resolved to *forget* it all.

Cast away their culture.

Forget their past.

Burn their histories.

Survive however they could.

From what she understood (from what she had witnessed herself, from how she had constructed her own current body), dreamcatchers could take on the physical form of anything they ate.

Including brains, it seemed.

Cutting up Troy’s main body was simple enough. She knew anatomy, knew the biological makeup of humans. Could slice away flesh from bone and organ from tissue, pool the blood into plastic bowls, divide it cleanly and evenly with scalpels.

Consuming it all was the hard part.

She considered how to do it, for a while, sitting there in that silence.

In the end, she just packaged all the meat and took it to a holding cell in the back of the ship. Chained her own hands behind her back, threw the key to the ground, where she could find it later, free herself.

When she ate, she tried to do it quickly.

Celia didn’t know how long she had spent in the dark. It was a blur of endless pain and *memory* from the adjustment period—the flashes of him and her and everyone else she had taken from, the collision of doomed galaxies, a mad, glittering fever dream.

Eventually, though, the screaming eased.

Eventually, there was no *him* or *her*—only the single entity she had always been, grown, stretched curiously over a new skin, with a bit more of knowledge inside it.

Just doing what we have to do ...

She unlocked herself from the prison, put on that old human uniform, and waited by the front of the ship, where that small, round window stared out at the infinity of stars.

Her body was weak from the change and the time spent in space when the blue planet (*home?* a part of her that was still him whispered, before fluttering back to the darkness it had come from) emerged from the ink.

When she landed in a sea of sand and fire (*the Sahara Desert*, her stolen memory supplied), the music box was clutched in her hand, its tune unchanging and mournful.

Grasping fingers lifted her gently from the cabin, placed her body in a stretcher, clamoring and murmuring amongst themselves.

She gazed up with a stranger's eyes at a smiling face that pushed through the crowd to lean above her, all glittering brown eyes and sweeping hair in braids.

Annie. A comrade, a former alien researcher who now worked in space-ship design.

"The music is lovely," whispered that friend, that stranger, wonderstruck, as if her very survival was a miracle.

Just doing what we have to ...

"*La Traviata*," she—he—*they* said, opening and closing exhausted, trembling fingers around the plain square of metal, "by Verdi."

Anya Liu

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Lydia Smith

Category: Flash Fiction

Sink

This morning I woke and couldn't stop scratching at my arms, my hands and my thighs, body tingling with an insatiable itch that, no matter how hard I rubbed, refused to cease, my skin red and raw. I ran to the toilet and heaved over the porcelain bowl, the ache scraping into my lungs, seeping through the bone. Bent over, I held my hair back and thought about the last time someone held me; my mother, how she gripped my shoulders and begged me to be good, to be better, to be more. How she wouldn't say it out loud but we both knew that I couldn't stay there anymore. I stood and limped to the kitchen, my ankles swelling, feet blistering, desperate for a reprieve. I spotted the sink, adorned with soaps and sponges, their neon hues glaring at my strangled gait as if to warn me away, as if to scream *we don't want you either!* I jumped in and scrubbed until I bled, scrubbed until I could no longer feel anything at all. My whole life all I've ever wanted to be is clean, but now that I've done it all I can think about is how small this sink is. How badly I wish I could crawl back out.

Anya Liu

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Lydia Smith

Category: Poetry

open palm

When my mother hits me it is always with an open palm. Outstretched fingers, calluses straining against the skin, tearing bone-white. Her arm is steady. Pupils dilated, eyes watery with rage, bleeding her sorrow and her mother's sorrow, and her mother's mother too. Generations of grief all unto me in one swift strike. Heart of her palm to the heart of my cheek. She has told me that she loves me, whether I want it or not.

Anya Liu

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Lydia Smith

Category: Poetry

good boy

i'm waiting for you to throw the stick
again. have i done well? your feet are
dragging through the mud,
back and forth, back and forth,
like you can't decide whether to stay
with me, my dirtied coat, my matted
locks, or run away as fast as you can, so
quick the cartoon steam trail you leave
in your wake feels less comical and more
sad. have i been too much? i know i
whined for you once, whimpered twice,
tail-wagged when you gave into my
pleas with a sigh. i know that you wished
you didn't need to, but you know that i
needed you to. you know more about me
than anyone. i know that when we went
to the vet for my irregular pulse, off-beat
devotion, the x-ray came out looking
less like a heart, more like a chewed-up-
spat-out twig in the mud, and you let out
one, singular sob. did i make you cry?
i'm sorry. you know i never meant to.
please throw the stick again,
even if i can't run to it anymore.

Sophia Lu

Age: 17, Grade: 11

Home School, Clayton, MO

Educator: Lan Yang

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

A Rebellion Against My Nature

“Fight against the stereotypes.”

I would repeat this to myself throughout elementary and middle school. I had been exposed to stereotypical comments throughout my entire life, each one another scrape at a cut that would just not heal over. Ever since I learned about the gender pay gap as a six-year-old, I have yearned for a world where minority groups were on equal footing with everyone else. So I fought.

I decided I had to get rid of anything feminine, lest I present myself as “weak,” “demure,” and too much of a girly girl. At the time, my favorite color was baby pink, the color of a lipstick I got for my birthday. But like many female classmates, I sacrificed it for the universally appealing “turquoise.” I hid my collection of charm bracelets I had meticulously collected over the years behind the metals I had won from math competitions. At night I dreamt of ballet slippers and princess movies and unicorns. I hid my longings under my pillow when I woke up. In my mind, people only saw me by my sky-turned eyes and heard how each sentence I said lifted up as if I were asking a question. I asked my mom to order me lunch from school because I didn’t want my friends to see me with rice noodles or pork buns. When I would eagerly raise my hand whenever I knew the answer to a question, those became less frequent. After all, who would consider me anything but wise? Honey-coated words in Mandarin slipped from my throat as I rejected my mother language.

I did everything I could to prove myself. I wanted to yell to the world, “Look at me! Not your typical Asian girl, am I?”. I tried to be clever and honorable and funny; I longed to not fit into the mold society pressured me into.

But along the way, I lost myself.

My flip-flops bedazzled with blue plastic rhinestones and my cheesy romance novels and my love for soy sauce and green onion noodles. These were vital aspects of my identity that I had shoved away in the name of “rebellion against implicit bias.” I became one-dimensional. In fighting against stereotypes, I had started to fight myself. I had started this journey in a reach for self-actualization, but I came to a point where I sacrificed my identity to appeal to others.

I once believed I had to do everything in my power to fight against the stereotypes that held others like me back. And while I cannot retract my original statement, I’ve realized that this rebellion is more than just rejecting everything that fits into the bias. Although they might apply to you, stereotypes do not define you. Empowerment is not rejection. It’s about embracing parts of yourself and realizing that your identity and background do not decide who you are.

Though my attempt at fighting stereotypes led me far off the path I planned on taking, I am no longer holding back the parts of myself that I used to be ashamed of. I and those like myself shouldn’t have shed parts of our identities to be considered “worthy.” You can be feminine and still be strong. You can celebrate both Lunar New Year and the solar new year. You can be an Asian girl and still be outspoken, witty, and brilliant. And if you’re none of the above, it doesn’t make you any lesser than those who are.

Mohini Mahajan

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Clayton High School, Clayton, MO

Educator: Raychelle Martin

Category: Short Story

two hundred seventy-three degrees

The letters smudged at the corners of the typeface so that the 'i' looked like an 'l', and the list of potential suspects left smoky, unidentifiable footprints on the witness statement. The rookies at Stanchion Police called it the 'Kelvin' case, named after the first victim to be dredged up from the local stream. It was curious how they labeled these investigations retroactively, after who could've been saved, while in science, Detective Pollock noted, they named theories after whoever made the discovery. Quite optimistic, really. Whether one or the other, in both instances, it was one person, Keith Kevin, who not only anchored a fishing boat for fifty miles downstream but also might've solved the biggest cold case in Missouri history.

"Is it the chemist or the actor?" Detective writhed in a rickety swivel chair, scratching the leather with his starched trench coat. With this lousy back of his, he had to crane his head to see the report. A figure-like blob shuddered in his glaucoma-weakened peripheral. Fluttering in the haze.

Trapped 'neath the pale, lime office lights, the girl before him seemed sickly. Her neon parka sparkled with water droplets dripping from the damp hair clustered around her eyes. Unlike the Cowboy Journalist, he'd heard all about.

"The actor... I think?" Cowboy Journalist's voice heaved as she was still catching her breath. She barged in here moments ago in a hurry but now stood trembling.

"The press releases from the last two weeks say 'Kelvin'," he said, nodding to his eclectic wallpaper. Sun-tanned newspaper cutouts from *The Boston Globe* to the local community college layered in a glow around the office. Behind his long wooden desk and wide silhouette, there was a maddening carelessness in how their edges mingled or rather thrashed. She could see bold headlines ranging from Lennon's assassination in the '80s to the most recent - 'New Sheriff Discovers Flaw In Nation-Wide Stanchion Case!'

"I know, sir, I didn't catch it 'till the crowd started chanting outside. 'Kelvin says. Kelvin says. We're raising the temperature!'" An applause of thunder broke her train of thought.

"Has Mr. Scott been released yet?" he mumbled.

Detective faced the long window overlooking the parking lot. Usually, there was some hazy light streaming onto his desk and knick-knacks. However, during this storm, it fogged up from all the smokers on the patio.

Cowboy Journalist looked up at the clock, "He's set to be at around eight 'o'clock tonight. But with the weather, it could be delayed."

The protestors out in the cold wouldn't like the wait.

"Well, what's one more day?" he chuckled. She bristled at that and swayed from side to side as if the union wind was trying to knock her down, not the whole police station.

"Child, this report is nothing new to me. If that's all..." Detective motioned towards the door. Many colleagues brought him these exact words in an attempt to witness the spark leave his eyes. And now he sat still in this chair for

hours, clutching a thirty-year-old letter of resignation. Waiting. Maybe waiting for her.

"No," Cowboy Journalist shook her head. "I came here to see some of the original reports from the day Kevin went missing."

Detective still faced away from her.

"I just need to make sure-"

"Oh? You're unsure? Running out here-" he stared into her eyes, "-three hours before Mr. Scott's release for *extra* evidence? Let me hypothesize; your Chief doesn't know about this. And Cowboy Journalist strikes again."

In one swift move, Detective bent over the desk with such force that the chair swiveled two rickety rotations. The flashes of lightning shined on the letter clutched in his hand. He couldn't believe that the wildest wind from the west shot him down, revolver style, after all these years.

Cowboy Journalist scoffed. "It's all about you *losing* your job. But sir," she spits on the ground. "You locked the wrong man in. In fact, the only Indian, or better yet, non-white person to come within fifty miles of the body." She snatched the paper from his hands. "I wanted to make sure that all the loose ends are tied. Give. Me. That. Evidence."

He couldn't ignore the radiating disgust she had for him. They all knew he had worked on this case for several years after it was supposedly closed. A suspicious obsession. They figured he was covering his tracks 'till the final day when he would be exposed.

Detective rubbed his forehead. "Ok."

He took her downstairs to the basement, where they kept all the uncoded DNA samples, locks of hair, and duct tape. All the ingredients to send the wrong people to prison. If someone felt like it.

Sitting on an empty file cabinet, Cowboy Journalist searched and searched. She muttered to herself.

"I don't understand how Kevin's body was the only one branded with the insignia!" She yells with the thunder, breaking her silence. When Keith Kelvin was found years later, he bore a triangle groove above his ankle. It would take Cowboy Journalist, a simple rookie, many years later to notice that it was done by a hot iron found at a local serial killer's residence.

"It won't make sense, Cowboy" Detective stood in the doorway, keeping a lookout. "Nothing will prove your new guy did it."

Detective leaned on the wall, groaning from the crick in his neck.

"I was like you thirty years ago. Intrepid. My sister was the first after Kevin to go missing, so I cracked open the file. My Chief back then, who funny enough happens to be your Chief now, pried the case shut." He slammed close the file in her hand.

"Mr. Scott became a victim of the Chief's wrath because of some money he owed, and there he went off to prison. The Chief threatened me and gave me a career death sentence to hold over my head if any of this came out. Look at my resignation letter; you'll see his signature clearly. He's been covering it up for decades."

Cowboy Journalist had been tearing the letter apart unconsciously for the last hour, but she could still make out the harrowing name from the scraps.

"Why?" she whispered.

"No one's watching close enough to notice."

In that small town of Stanchion, they liked leaving things at the bottom of the river. It was safer that way.

"But Scott didn't do it."

"Scott didn't kill Kevin; your fancy serial killer most certainly didn't. Someone pulled the Chief's strings to forget. And we forgot."

At the end of the day, the 'i' looked like an 'l' and the letters smudged just so that the potential suspect flashed in the dark, damp basement.

Emma Malter

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Jason Lovera

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Revenge in My Own Voice

I wish I could say I remember the moment I was told exactly. That I fell to the ground or started crying, that I punched something or cursed the world out loud. But I don't, what little I do remember is blurry. I remember my mind just going blank as I tried to depict my sister's words, as they went through my head over and over again.

"Ellie, did you hear me? Roe v. Wade was overturned." I looked at my sister's face. I could see the sadness and anger coursing through her eyes. Everything went quiet, the only thing I could hear was my heart beating loudly in my chest, and the way my eyelids fluttered a million beats per second just trying to comprehend what she was saying. And then it just clicked for me. I was mad, I was angry.

"What are you talking about? How is that possible?" My mind was racing. Roe v. Wade protected women's rights to an abortion.

Although at this moment I am not being directly affected, the heartbreak I felt, and continues to affect me, knowing this right is no longer offered to me if some day in the future I would need to use it, is overwhelming. It feels as though my rights as a woman have been stripped away. The government is failing me and the millions of other women in the U.S. I was furious, I wanted to scream and fight. How was it possible that something could be so out of my hands that had everything to do with me? I was defenseless, unheard. I looked at my surroundings. I was in the happiest place in the world, I was at camp. Goldman Union Camp Institute was a place I went every summer for a month, no Wi-Fi, no phones, nothing. It was a little secluded area in a small town in Indiana, and I couldn't have loved it more. Camp was this little bubble for me, away from the outside world, and that bubble just popped. At this moment there was no way to describe my feelings as anything other than helpless, in an article "Ever Wanted to Get Revenge?" written by Caroline Cox. Tiffany Towers, a clinical and forensic psychologist, says "A person who feels wronged, betrayed or damaged by another person, group or system, might have lost their sense of personal power," (Cox 2). Cox describes it in words that I struggle so hard to get out. Getting rights taken away, and not just something like a phone being taken away or getting grounded for the weekend, but rights concerning one's reproductive system, is the most powerless feeling. I am a fifteen-year-old girl from St. Louis, Missouri. I have no power, I can't vote, I can't drive, I can't just call up the supreme court and tell them how disheartening it feels to have my voice be inadequate when it comes to my own rights about my own body. I am overall powerless.

I was shocked, I knew this was coming, but to hear the words being said was a whole different thing. I hugged my sister, I felt like crying, but no tears came up. I was exasperated, that's for sure, but I was also in mourning. Mourning the loss of my rights. I said goodbye and walked over to where my cabin was sitting. My counselors looked at me, and I knew they could tell what my sister had just revealed.

"So, we were waiting for you all to be together to tell you. This morning it was voted on and Roe v. Wade was overturned," I looked up and around at my cabin mates, the girls I have grown up with for 8 years. Surprise, despair, and anger written all over their faces just like it was on mine seconds ago. My counselor, Kacie, continues, "I know how difficult it is for you to hear this, we want you all to know that we are here for you, if you have any questions please don't hesitate to come talk to us." The minute she grew quiet the questions started sprouting out, everyone trying to get a word in at the same time, voices laced with fury were overlapped by other voices laced with hurt. After a while we quieted down, everyone seemed to be in their own heads with everything going on. I couldn't blame them, I had no words for how I felt, we were just sitting in our anger. This would be a moment that was engraved in my brain. I don't think I will ever forget the feelings and thoughts going through my mind, and I wonder if the pain, hurt, and anger will ever go away.

Often when someone is wronged, it can be a black and white situation. Revenge or Forgiveness on someone can be simple. But when it comes to larger decisions in life, when the supreme court decides to overturn Roe v. Wade, it is not simple. No, they did not do this to specifically hurt me as an individual, it was not one specific person who did it, so how in a moment like these, do I choose revenge or forgiveness? In an article "Revenge", Jim Thornton talks about that period of time after being wronged, and not only does the actions hurt you but "making things even worse was my sense that my nemesis was no longer thinking about me at all. The fiscal harm he'd caused was compounded by images of him skipping merrily through life while I remained obsessively waylaid in anger and bitterness" (Thornton 116). A part of forgiving that can be so hard is when the party who did wrong isn't sorry. The people who voted on taking this down most likely went along with their lives like nothing had ever changed, while millions were now put in a place that made them vulnerable. This is what made this situation so hard for me, I could not, and will probably not ever be, able to understand how these people we place so much power and trust in could make negative life altering decisions for so many people and not think twice on it. I don't want to be bitter, I don't want to carry this with me through my life, but it seems like there is no other option. I understand everyone has different opinions, I respect that, but I would never choose to take away someone's choice, that isn't respecting opinions. That is not something I'm sure I can forgive.

The rest of the day it felt as though there was a black cloud over us. Our lunch was silent, no one uttered a word, everyone stayed in their own heads. The silence was deafening. Throughout the day no one really spoke of it, a few things muttered here and there but no one dared to bring up the conversation. We were all processing it through our own heads, the rage and despair just radiating off of us. When it came time for nightly services, we sat together, still drowning in the same emotions as the whole day. Then it was the silent prayer, the minute of services everyone went quiet and prayed to God. That night I closed my eyes and prayed that I could do something to help change this horrible situation the supreme court put us in, that my voice, a small little teenage voice, would be heard among the millions of other voices protesting this overturn, and that I could put my anger somewhere where it could make a difference.

A piece that stuck out to me in "An Unnatural Act" is when Phillip Yancey said, "Forgiveness puts the forgiver on the same side as the party who did wrong" (Yancey 38). This sentence brought up lots of questions, and honestly I can not say I will ever understand what he meant. But it does bring up one particular feeling, annoyance. I know that I will never forgive the supreme court for taking away my rights, it is not something that is even a possibility in my mind. But if by some chance in the future I did decide to let go of my anger and "forgive", how would it put me on the same side as the party who did wrong. Forgiveness is not a clear thing, it is not straight forward. But forgiving someone does not make one like that person. At least I hope it doesn't or my forgiveness will now hold a whole different meaning to me. If I forgave the supreme court for this act, it would not mean I agree with their decision or even respect it, it would not take away all the pain I have felt, just like Yancey later says that forgiveness, "is achingly difficult. Long after you have forgiven the wound lives on in memory" (Yancey 36), in this instance, yes, forgiveness is a very difficult thing for me to stomach. If Yancey means that in order to forgive, I would have to put myself in their shoes, that is not something I can do. How someone could so easily make this decision for someone else is not something that I can accept. So as long as I breathe, this will be a wound that lives on in me.

I may not have power, or be able to vote, or even drive, no, I can't just call up the supreme court. But I have a voice, and I plan on using it. I've decided I am going to get revenge, and my revenge would be not staying silent.

Hannah Mathew

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Jason Lovera

Category: Novel Writing

The Weaver

Brief summary:

It's 1940, and twelve-year-old Maria Weber despises her life in Munich, Germany. It is the reign of the Nazis, and everyone was living in fear. One day, Maria walks into the market one day, to buy bread from a kind-hearted man, the Baker. He was always kind to Maria and gave her free cookies. As Maria leaves the market, it leads to a chance encounter with a Jewish girl, Mila Mayer, who is on the run. Maria and her family hide Mila but sheltering her has its dangers. Nazis knock on Maria's door, threatening Maria's family to turn in Mila. During Mila's hiding, Maria teaches Mila how to weave. Soon, Mila reveals to Maria her true identity. She also reveals a secret that she knows the Baker, and he is the Nazi who knocked at the door. This secret leads Maria to question who the Baker truly is, and how her family is related to Mila's family. Mila and Maria weave the ultimate masterpiece and reveal it to the Nazi(also known as the Baker)when he comes for Mila again. The masterpiece intertwines the Cross, the Star of David, and the swastika with the baker in the middle. The Baker realizes he is at a crossroads, he can either march towards his doom and follow the Nazi regime or repent and walk towards the Star of David and the Cross. The novel craftily reveals the ultimate compassion of a twelve-year-old girl when she saves a stranger from the Nazis.

Excerpt:

Chapter 9

Family History

Maria started to pace her room.

"You were running away that day in the market because you saw the Nazis. You trembled at the sight of the Nazi yesterday because you were afraid we were going to turn you in. Is your real name even Mila? Oh no! I sent you right into a Nazi den at the market. You are afraid of the baker, because somehow, somehow..."

"That baker and my family have a long history together," Mila began, "If you are willing, I can tell you the story." Maria sat on her bed, in shock.

"My full name isn't Mila. It's Mila Mayer. My family name, Mayer, used to be a well-known royal name. Due to a series of bad decisions, my great, great, grandfather and his wife were shunned from the royal court. They sold their land but had no idea what to do with the money. My great, great, grandmother had learned how to bake, and she was good at it. Thus, they started the bakery, and life and business seemed to work well. However, after our bakery had been running for some time, animosity started to develop between my family and a bakery a few blocks away. My great grandfather's and the baker's great grandfather got into a bitter feud as the baker's great-grandfather did not get the same fame and notoriety as our bakery did. The baker's great-grandfather tried to sell his goods in the market, but he still could not compete to achieve the same fame as our bakery. The worst part for him was that his bakery was now stretched thin with the stall in the market and his run-down baker shop. Out of anger, he poisoned my great-grandfather and killed him. The Beckers were charged, but there was a rumor that the Beckers paid a hefty amount of money to silence the press. To this day, there is a bitter feud between the baker's family and mine. Until someone changes that, I'm afraid I can't be near that stall at all."

"So that was why you were terrified of the baker when I took you there," Maria began. "Oh my goodness," Maria's eyes widened, "I've put you in so much danger."

"No, Maria, you did not know," Mila replied.

"No, no, you don't understand. Today, I got some bread for a poor lady, and the baker asked if I was getting food for you. He called you a disgusting rat."

"That is to be expected," Mila sighed. "That isn't even the worst part though."

“What could possibly be worse?” Maria exclaimed.

“As the Star of David shows you, my family comes from a Jewish origin. The Nazis stole our bakery and ordered us to go to the hard labor camps. In fear that we would die, my parents and I decided to split up and go our own ways. If we are to meet in public, we pretend we are strangers and talk in low voices so there will be no suspicion.”

“I never knew how much trouble you were in,” Maria murmured.

“Now you know the truth, Maria, and guard it with your life.”

“I am so sorry,” Maria’s cheeks became wet, “I have put you in so much danger.”

“Maria, you are the most caring person I have met. You gave me a home while I lived on the streets. You gave me food and trusted me when everyone else would have told you to do the opposite. I have a question though.”

“Whatever is it?” Maria asked as she wiped away her tears

“Why do you help others?” That struck Maria on the face harder than any rock. She didn’t understand why people asked questions like that. It was what her parents did, it was the thing that seemed right.

“I know why Maria helps others,” a voice said, coming from the doorway of Maria’s room. “While others have learned to become angry and bitter, Maria has learned to treat others with dignity and respect and most importantly, kindness.” Two figures came out of the shadow. One was wearing glasses and the other had round eyes that shone like the sun. Maria gasped. The lady with round eyes was the same lady who Maria had given bread. Gone were the streaks of dirt on the lady’s face. She looked calmer now as if everything was right with their world. When they saw Mila, their smiles were radiant as the sun and reminded both girls how sometimes the world wasn’t full of evil. Mila was the first one to speak.

“Mom, Dad....”

Chapter 10

The Reunion

“Mila,” the joyous parents replied as they ran to their daughter. Maria ran to her parents. Her mom didn’t look so tired anymore.

“Mom, Dad, how did you find Mila’s parents?” Maria asked.

“We stayed up after you had gone to bed,” Mrs. Weber whispered. “We had already known Mila. My grandmother’s sister had married Mila’s great-grandfather. However, when Hitler rose to power, we lost contact with them.”

“So where does Dad play in the story?” Maria asked.

“We had known their last location a few years before the terror began. I pulled some strings with some of my friends. We contacted them again using the secret code that your mother’s family and Mila’s family had made so long ago.”

“Are we noble-blooded then?” Maria asked.

“Well, technically you are related to some royals,” Mr. Weber laughed.

“How much family history have we taught you?” Mrs. Weber cried.

“Very little to be exact,” Maria said. The Webers let out a joyful laugh. Maria could hardly remember the last time they had laughed like this. As the pink clouds vanished from the sky, Mila and Maria decided to weave two more symbols. Once inside, they fell asleep right away. Maria didn’t know though, her parents had seen the sign she had weaved with Mila.

Chapter 11

The Masterpiece

Maria had forgotten to put her weaving away and so while all the grown-ups were chatting away, Maria’s mom went over and looked at the cross, the Jewish Star, and the Swastika all mixed with a baker in the middle.

“Who made this?” Maria’s mom asked.

“It wasn’t me,” Mrs. Mayer said.

“It certainly wasn’t me,” Mrs. Weber said.

“Then, who was it?” Mrs. Mayer asked.

“Was it Maria and Mila?” Mr. Mayer asked. There was dead silence after this idea. Everyone knew what that signs were. The cross was for Christianity, the star was for Judaism, and the Swastika was for the Nazis, but the baker? Where did the baker fit in? “What is the baker supposed to mean?” the grown-ups murmured to themselves.

“Is there a baker we know of?” Mrs. Weber asked. *Bang, Bang*, a person knocked at the door.

“Who is it?”

“Whoever it is, hide. We will call you when it is over,” Mrs. Weber replied. Mr. Weber went to the door, and the Mayers hid.

“Who is it?” Maria whispered to Mila.

“I don’t know,” Mila said.

“We can hide behind my door and look out,” Maria replied. The girls tiptoed over to the door and looked out. This time, both of them held their mouth open, but no sound came out.

Chapter 12 The Revelation

Mr. Weber opened the door and the Nazi stepped inside. The weaving was tucked away in its little corner so no one would see it.

“Guten Nacht sir,” Mr. Weber said. “Would you like something to drink?” The Nazi stepped swiftly into the room and scanned the room as if he were looking for something.

“That would be fine,” said the gruff voice. Mr. Weber went to get some water and Mrs. Weber brought him to the living room. Soon, it came down to business.

“I have reports you have an artistic daughter. Is that correct?” the Nazi asked.

The Nazi must be the baker! Mila was right, Maria thought.

“Yes, that is correct, and she is very talented,” Mrs. Weber replied.

“Hmm, can I see some of her work?” Mr. and Mrs. Weber looked uneasily at each other. Maria and Mila peered silently out the door.

“What are we going to do?” Mila asked.

“I have small pieces of weaving. I think that might work,” Maria replied hesitantly.

“No, you need to show the Nazi your work,” Mila replied.

“What do you mean?” Maria looked with disbelief at Mila.

“If my hunch is correct, that is the baker. Now is your chance to confront him, Maria!”

“Mila, your idea is crazy!” Maria’s voice started to rise, but she went back to a whisper.

“Do it, Maria,” Mila looked courageously on at Maria.

“Hurry up now, I have more work to do,” the Nazi looked impatiently on.

“Let me just get my daughter,” Mrs. Weber turned towards Maria’s room, but the door opened.

“I will show you my work, sir,” Maria replied in a cool, collected voice. She was dressed in her Sunday best. She wore white gloves and she looked like she was going to a wedding. Everyone seemed to be awe-stricken at this moment. Even the Nazi seemed to stare at her. Maria walked delicately to her spot on the couch. She folded her arms nice and neat and sat down. The Nazi recovered his senses and went back to his gruff self. He chose his words carefully because he knew something that might end the whole charade.

“Let me see your work then,” the Nazi replied.

“Let me just get it,” Maria got her weaving from the spot on the shelf. She clutched it to her chest.

“While we are here, let me just ask you, do you know anyone by the certain name of Mila?” the Nazi asked cautiously.

“I know a lot of people by Mila,” Maria said keeping her eyes locked on the Nazi. She was terrified on the inside. Her heart was hammering and her palms were sweating. *It feels like the dream I had,* Maria thought.

“Do you know anyone by the name Mila Mayer?” the Nazi asked with a little more ease in his voice.

“Do you know anyone by the name of Mr. Karl Becker? The person who has a stall in the market and is competing with a friend of mine?” Maria countered with collected confidence in her voice. She knew who was behind that mask. She didn’t need to tell anyone. It was Mr. Becker who had a stall in the marketplace and was competing with Mila’s family for decades in the baking business. The Nazi cried aloud and ripped off his mask to show the baker himself. The room went silent.

“Mr. Becker,” Mrs. Weber gasped into the silence. “It can’t be!” The Nazi was trembling from his head to his toes. He knew that Maria had outsmarted him. Everybody was shocked. The only person who moved was Maria. She called Mila from her hiding spot and revealed her masterpiece to the baker.

“I know you wanted to see my work,” Maria replied innocently. The baker screamed. He knew exactly what the weaving represented. Maria and Mila smiled at each other. They knew exactly what was going on. The baker realized his plans were ending. He was at a crossroads now. He could continue to march down towards the Swastika, only to encounter his doom or he could take the other path, towards the Star of David and the Cross, and

his life would shine anew. The baker stared at the symbols and tears streamed down his cheeks. He realized at that moment how cruel he had been by being a part of the Nazi regime.

"You can change Mr. Becker," Maria said into the silence, "or you can fall astray. The choice is up to you."

"Please forgive me. I knew who Mila was the day you came to my bakery. I wanted to get rid of her and came to your home that night. Please, please forgive me."

"Why did you come here today? Did you come looking for the Mayers?" Maria asked.

"I came here today because I intercepted the secret code. You know one part of the story, but do you know the other?"

"What other part do you know?" Mila scoffed.

"When my great-grandfather poisoned your great-grandfather, it never killed him. No, it made him fall into a deep slumber. Do you really think a funeral was held? No, of course not, because Mr. Mayer's wife saw the entire thing. She forced my great-grandfather into a promise where my family protected Mila's family. Because of my great-grandfather's act, we were forced to become the protectors of your family."

"Take him away," Mr. Mayer replied. "He does not speak the truth."

"Wait, let him speak," Maria replied. The baker gave Maria a grateful look; Maria's face was impassive.

"Go on with your story," Maria repeated.

"As I said, the promise my great-grandfather made with Mila's great-grandmother forces the Beckers to protect the Mayers. This protection, however, also grows the animosity between our families. My father had told me that if I could find an opening, I could break the cycle and eventually end the Mayers once and for all. I was going to do that tonight after I received the code. Lucky for you, Maria has saved us all."

There was a slow clap from Mila.

"Wonderful story, just wonderful," Mila replied mockingly.

"It's true," Mr. Becker replied in earnest.

"Why should we believe that? You said it yourself that you wanted to end the cycle," Mrs. Mayer replied coldly.

"I told you though, Maria has saved us," Mr. Becker replied. "I am now incapable of hurting Mila because I know this action would hurt Maria. I may despise the Mayers, but I cannot hurt Maria." Maria watched the unfolding scene impassively but her thoughts ran as fast as trains. *How can I save both of them? Mila hates Mr. Becker, but Mr. Becker does not want to hurt me.*

"Fine," Maria replied, "you have understood your actions today, Mr. Becker?"

"Yes," Mr. Becker replied in earnest.

"I request you to make a promise. Protect the Mayers with your life, just as my family has done for them."

"Yes, I promise," Mr. Becker replied.

"Then let it be done," Maria replied simply and walked away.

Epilogue

Ten years later...

"Good morning Mr. Becker!"

"Ah Maria, how are you?" Maria smiled at the baker. The baker had started to develop laughter lines around his eyes. His eyes sparkled brightly now.

"Good, Mr. Baker, I mean Mr. Becker," Maria replied.

"Please, call me Mr. Baker," the baker laughed.

"How are your children doing?" Maria asked. Mr. Becker had two kids and they would be off to middle school.

"They are doing well. They are in school right now, or else I would have called them. How are you and Mila doing? It feels like forever since you last came and visited."

After the war came to an end, Maria and her family decided to help with restoration efforts in Germany. Mila and her family had miraculously survived the final solution thanks to the Baker's ingenious hiding shelter for the Mayers. The Mayers had left Germany for England after the war ended, but Maria still kept in touch with them. Germany had hurt so many people and killed so many more. It was only right to help restore and rebuild the lives of innocent people.

"The restoration efforts are going well! Mila and her family are building a new life in England. In her last correspondence, her father was a journalist for a local paper in London. I miss my friend, but it is only right that she has a new life elsewhere. "

"Yes, Germany has caused so much suffering for the people. However, look at the people's resilience. The war was a brutal scar in all our lives, but it is the kindness that seems to grow back, not the fear and jealousy felt during the war."

"Just like my kindness to Mila during the war?" Maria asked.

"Just like your kindness to all the people you meet," the baker smiled.

“Here, have a cookie before you leave,” the baker pressed a cookie into Maria’s hand.

“Just like the old times,” Maria replied.

“Better than the old times. Before I was a miserable baker in a prosperous market stall. Now look, my shop is run-down, but my heart is lightened with joy.”

“Kindness is a funny thing,” Maria replied.

“Yes, kindness is,” the baker replied. As Maria and the baker laughed, the sun reached its zenith. The light touched and banished the shadows from Earth. The light touched the people too. They stopped and admired the sun that still shined down on them, happy that the black, inky shadows of the night gave way to the bright, beautiful rays of the morning.

Author’s note:

While there are references to historical places and figures, this novel is not historically accurate. Instead, this novel tries to shed light on the true meaning of compassion which some people did show during World War II.

The Weaver

Summary: It's 1940, and twelve-year-old Maria Weber despises her life in Munich, Germany. It is the reign of the Nazis, and everyone was living in fear. One day, Maria walks into the market one day, to buy bread from a kind-hearted man, the Baker. He was always kind to Maria and gave her free cookies. As Maria leaves the market, it leads to a chance encounter with a Jewish girl, Mila Mayer, who is on the run. Maria and her family hide Mila but sheltering her has its dangers. Nazis knock on Maria's door, threatening Maria's family to turn in Mila. During Mila's hiding, Maria teaches Mila how to weave. Soon, Mila reveals to Maria her true identity. She also reveals a secret that she knows the Baker, and he is the Nazi who knocked at the door. This secret leads Maria to question who the Baker truly is, and how her family is related to Mila's family. Mila and Maria weave the ultimate masterpiece and reveal it to the Nazi(also known as the Baker)when he comes for Mila again. The masterpiece intertwines the Cross, the Star of David, and the swastika with the baker in the middle. The Baker realizes he is at a crossroads, he can either march towards his doom and follow the Nazi regime or repent and walk towards the Star of David and the Cross. The novel craftily reveals the ultimate compassion of a twelve-year-old girl when she saves a stranger from the Nazis.

It was a grey, misty morning. *Click, click, click*, the Nazis' boot heels rang on the pavement. 12-year-old Maria woke up with a start to the quietness of her room. Her midnight black eyes scanned the room, calming her racing heart. After confirming this, Maria wiped the sweat from her brow and did her morning routine. Maria lived in Munich, Germany, but she hated every day of her life here. Her family disliked Hitler and his treatment of the Jewish people. Hitler always seemed to enjoy the torture of innocent German people. He made it evident during his radio address that he felt superior to the Jewish people. *I wonder how he would like it if the Jews were in his place and decided to kill all of the German citizens*, Maria thought bitterly. Treat others the way you want to be treated, the rule Maria had learned ever since she was in kindergarten, yet nobody seemed to follow it these days. As these thoughts were racing in her mind, she went to the kitchen. The smells of breakfast wafted into her nose.

"Good morning, Mother! Good morning, Father!" Maria called.

"Good morning, Sweden," her father, Mr. Weber, said as he folded the newspaper he was reading. Maria's nickname was Sweden as Sweden was a neutral country during the war and did not side with anyone. Maria on the outside pretended to like Hitler but on the inside, she despised him. Thus, she got the name Sweden.

"You're up early," her mom, Mrs. Weber, exclaimed as she looked up from what she was doing.

"What do you mean?" Maria asked.

"Today school is closed. Today is the day Hitler came to power about four years ago." Maria froze.

"It can't be," she murmured. She ran to the calendar and sure enough, it was January 30, 1940, four years since Hitler came to power.

"Nooooooooo. It can't be. Please let this be a nightmare," Maria begged.

"Oh honey, don't get upset." Maria's mom said stroking her hair with her fingertips.

"Sweden, you know there is nothing you can do," Maria's dad came to Maria's side.

"Why? Why is an evil man in power?" Maria asked bitterly. There was no answer.

Chapter 1

The Market

Maria and her family finished breakfast in silence.

As the breakfast plates were cleared away, Maria's mother said, "I need you to get some things from the market."

"Yes, mother," Maria replied. Maria's mom handed the list to Maria. Maria grabbed the basket used by the family to shop for their meals and went out the door.

Maria walked swiftly to the market near Marienplatz. As Maria walked past, she could not help but gape at the buildings. *How beautiful the buildings look*, Maria thought. The buildings swept up to the sky, decorated with engravings on their roofs, and pretty pieces of glass. Soon, she was greeted by the smells of the market. From the delicious smell of coffee to the sharp tang of nutmeg and cinnamon, Maria loved them all. Maria could hear the merchants calling from their stalls saying, “try this coffee powder, freshly grounded,” or “hurry up these sausages won’t last forever.” When Maria arrived at the market, she went toward the bakery. The autumn smells of cinnamon and nutmeg greeted her, reminding her of peaceful times before Hitler’s terror began.

“Good morning, Mr. Baker,” Maria called.

“Maria, what a pleasant surprise! What do you need from me today?” The baker stepped out of the shadows and gave her a warm smile.

“My mother asked me to get some food from you,” Maria replied.

“Ah, two loaves of bread. Coming right up!” The baker handed the bread to Maria as Maria paid him.

“Here, have this cookie,” the baker said as he pressed a freshly baked cookie in her hand.

“Thank you,” Maria said as she went to the next stall. Maria ate her cookie as she bought the remaining items from her mother’s list. As she treaded back home, her arms sore from carrying the basket, something made her jump. It was a flash of light running at full speed, her limp hair flying in the wind. *Who can that be?* Maria thought as she ran after the girl.

Chapter 2

Mila

Maria chased after the girl as far as her little legs would take her. *Oh my*, she thought, *that girl is fast*. Soon, she caught up to the girl. As Maria came closer, she could see that the girl was very pale and had traces of blood and dirt on her skin. Her hair was thin and wispy. Her clothes looked like she had been wearing them for days.

“Are you alright?” Maria asked as she caught up with the girl. The girl moved her mouth but no sound came out.

“Excuse me,” Maria insisted. The girl burst into tears and replied,

“My name is Mila. I am 12 years old and I am running away from the camps.”

“Shhhhhh,” Maria said softly. “You can come to my house. My parents would be glad to help you.”

“Wait, how do I know this isn’t some trick?” Mila asked as she started to back away.

“Trust me. I won’t let the Nazis hurt you,” Maria replied as she took Mila’s hand and went back to the market. They walked in silence until they reached the bakery.

“What brings you here again?” The baker asked, turning his dark blue eyes towards Mila. Mila stifled a gasp.

“Can I have another loaf of bread?” Maria asked.

“Is it for your friend?” the dark blue eyes stared suspiciously at Mila’s face. Mila hid behind Maria.

“Why yes, it is,” Maria replied calmly.

“Coming right up,” the baker called from the oven. Soon the bread was ready and Maria paid again. The baker also gave her a cookie to take along for the walk home.

“My, you have an appetite,” Maria remarked as she saw Mila eat. Mila blushed and soon they reached the apartment. Maria opened the door and went inside.

“Thank God you’re safe,” Maria’s parents cried as they saw her enter. “We thought the Nazis had taken you.”

“Mom, Dad I met someone today.”

“Who is it?” Maria’s parents asked.

“Mila, you can come out now,” Maria called as Mila stepped out of the shadows. Maria closed the door to make sure that nobody would hear her. Maria’s mom gasped when she saw Mila.

“Where are your parents? Can we take you home?” Maria’s dad asked Mila.

“I don’t have a home,” Mila said as tears started streaming down her face.

“You can stay with us,” Maria’s mom replied. “Maria, why don’t you bring some clothes for Mila? Do you still have your sleeping bag? Mila can use that while she stays with us.”

“I think so,” Maria said as she ran to her closet. Sure enough, her sleeping bag was still there.

Later in the afternoon, after Mila had settled into her new home, Maria asked, “what type of artwork do you like?”

“I like to draw,” Mila said, “do you do any artwork?”

“Yes, I like to weave,” Maria replied. “Let me show you some of the artwork I have done.” Maria went back into the living room and showed her work to Mila. Mila was in awe.

“How do you do that?” Mila asked.

“It’s really easy,” Maria explained. “I can teach you if you want.”

“Really,” Mila gasped.

“As soon as I finish this I will teach you how to weave.”

“Thank you so much,” Mila exclaimed as she danced around the living room. Maria smiled at Mila.

Chapter 3

The Night

Throughout the afternoon, Maria taught Mila how to weave and it was going well. As the sky turned blood red, and then inky black, Maria and Mila were about to fall asleep when Mila started sobbing.

“What is it, Mila?” Maria asked.

“Why are you so kind to me?” Mila asked.

“What do you mean?” Maria asked, stunned by the question. “Shouldn’t everyone be kind to each other?”

Mila sighed and muttered, “not always.”

Looking at Maria she asked, “Could I tell you a secret?”

“What type of secret?” Maria asked uneasily.

“Well-” Mila never finished the sentence. **Bang, Bang**, there was a knock on the door.

“Get your pajamas on.” Mila obeyed. Maria’s parents went to the door.

“Guten Nacht,” Maria’s father said. “Why a knock so late?”

“Mr. Weber, bring out both of your girls. **NOW**,” a gruff voice answered. Mrs. Weber ran to get the girls. As Mila and Maria stumbled forward, Mila started trembling. The gruff voice belonged to a terrible figure. His face was white and his gloves were whiter. He had big, black, beady eyes and a swastika on his right arm. The resemblance to Hitler was uncanny. *Please don’t take us away*, Maria screamed in her thoughts, *please don’t take us away*.

“Mr. Weber, are these two girls yours? I have reports that one of them does not belong to you.”

“No, you must be mistaken. These are both my girls,” Mr. Weber said calmly.

“Prove it,” the Nazi sneered. Mr. Weber went to the family album and took out a picture that resembled Mila. However, this picture was of an aunt who had died a long time ago. Mr. Weber showed the picture to the Nazi. The Nazi examined the photo for a long time. Finally, he looked up.

“Your story is believable, Mr. Weber. Regardless, to prove your loyalty to the regime, report any sightings of a girl called Mila. She is about twelve years of age and has long black hair.”

“Yes, sir. I will report it to the closest Nazi patroller.” Mr. Weber appeared tense, but he said the words calmly. With that, the Nazi slammed the door and removed his disguise, producing the baker.

“Oh, this will end the cycle I am stuck in. That scum will soon be mine.” The baker chuckled to himself as he walked out of the apartment block.

Chapter 4 The Dream

Mila started crying. Nobody said anything. They let her cry until she cried herself to sleep.

“Oh, that poor little girl. If only we weren’t at war with the world. It would be so much better,” Mrs. Weber replied with grief in her voice. For the first time, Maria noticed how tired her mother looked. She had dark circles underneath her eyes, and her face was pale. *Time flies fast, Maria thought, especially during war.* Maria went back to bed and fell asleep immediately.

She was at the bakery once again and the baker had given her the bread. A while later, she was walking back home and saw a Nazi calling a girl profanities. He was hitting her and pointing a gun at her head. When Maria stepped closer, she realized the girl was no one but Mila. She was crying out for someone to help her, but nobody would. The Nazi hit her harder and said that her parents were worthless Jews. He would kill her if she did not say where they were. The girl was crying hysterically. Maria went forward. She wanted to tell the Nazi to stop, that his abuse would get him nowhere. She went up to the Nazi and summoned her courage. The Nazi turned and saw her. Maria gasped when she saw his face. The Nazi was no one but the baker. The baker was going to pull the trigger. He had a snarl on his face. Maria stopped him.

“Guten Tag,” Maria said coolly, her heart beating frantically. The baker looked up, his hands dropped the gun, and he trembled with rage.

“Don’t kill her. That girl has done nothing to you.

“That girl is a Jew,” the Nazi replied coldly.

“That girl has done nothing to you,” Maria repeated.

“Do you not understand? We are all in danger because of her,” the baker’s voice trembled with anger.

“Would you like it, if your child was treated like this?” Maria asked. The baker ran away from her and went back into his little stall in the market. Maria helped Mila to her feet.

“Thank you,” the little girl said in her high-pitched soft voice. She dropped her head and said, “I owe you my life.”

“No, you don’t. I owed you something anyway,” Maria said. She took out a chunk of bread and gave it to her. “Take it and eat.”

Maria woke up with a start. *That was a very weird dream, Maria thought. I am glad that this is a dream because the Baker is the kindest person I know.* As she heard sobs coming to her left. She heard that Mila was crying again. Maria got out of bed and went to her.

“Mila, are you alright?” Mila looked up at her. Her face was stained with tears and her face was pale and ashen. She had an idea. She went to the kitchen. She got some of the now-rationed hot chocolate powder and a bit of milk and made Mila some hot chocolate. She went back to her room and gave it to her. She drank all of it and the color returned to her face.

“ Thank you,” Mila said drowsily. It was the last thing she said before she went into a deep slumber.

Chapter 5

The Idea

Dawn approached and the world awoke from its slumber. The birds were singing and the Nazis walked to their posts. *Click, click, click* the Nazi boots’ were hitting the pavement. Maria and Mila woke up. Maria quickly wiped away any hints of hot chocolate left on her face. Since it was Saturday, she could start on her next project nice and early. Her parents were still asleep. *They must be tired*, Maria thought as she went to get her weaving loom. Maria stared at the cross that she had weaved. *What can I add to this?* Contemplating her work, Maria had no idea how to start. *Wait, I know*, Maria thought as an idea struck her. She grabbed her yarn and started weaving like there was no tomorrow. The whole world slowed as Maria worked. The birds stopped chirping and the Nazis’ boots hushed. The sounds of Munich quieted and it seemed like it was night all over again. Unfortunately, she was in for a major surprise.

Chapter 6

The Facts

Soon, the church bells rang nine times. All of Germany seemed alive again with the bustling of people and the shouts in the market. Maria stopped her weaving and decided she would wander around the marketplace. She scribbled out a note to her mom, she was at the market and she shouldn’t be worried. As Maria was about to leave, Mila came out of the bedroom.

“ Where are you going?” Mila asked. Maria never realized that Mila seemed to have an airy-sounding voice.

“ Oh, I need to talk to the baker about how much I enjoyed his...cookies! Yes, cookies! I am going to the market to tell the baker how much I loved his cookies!” Mila’s eyes seemed to hollow out as Maria said this. Her lips started to tremble and her skin became pale.

“ Oh dear, whatever did I say that would make you act like this?” Maria asked Mila. Mila clutched the couch and sat down.

“ I have a terrible secret that I need to tell you,” Mila whispered. She folded her hands together and held them to her stomach as if she were trying to steady herself.

“What is it?” Maria asked uneasily, sitting down on the wooden chair next to her.

“If I told you a secret, would you believe it?”Mila asked.

“Maybe,” Maria replied uneasily looking at the chocolate brown eyes of the girl.

“What if I told you that the Nazi who came to your house yesterday was the baker we met at the market?” Mila asked.

“What!” Maria was stunned. It was Maria’s turn to hold her hands to her stomach. A rush of emotions overwhelmed her.

“How do you know?” Maria’s voice cracked.

“If you recall, the Baker was menacing when he looked at me,” Mila stated.

“No, he wasn’t,” Maria burst out, “Mr. Baker is the nicest person I have ever known!”

“It is true, Maria,” Mila replied earnestly.

“No, it isn’t,” Maria cried. She walked out and slammed the door.

Chapter 7

The Lady

“How dare she say something like that!” Maria muttered to herself. As Maria walked to cool her thoughts, her footsteps took her toward the market.

“Excuse me, miss,” a soft voice said.

“Yes,” Maria turned around and stared. The voice belonged to an older lady, her dress in tatters. A thin, tattered shawl was the only thing that seemed to be keeping her warm.

“A-A-Are you going to get some food?” the lady was so thin. Her face was dirt-streaked, and she wore no shoes. Her black hair tumbled down her shoulders. Her eyes were round.

“Oh, no, I was just wandering around,” Maria said, but felt disappointed.

“Oh,” the poor lady started to turn away.

“Wait, I can try to get something from the baker! He is always so kind to me,” Maria called.

“Oh thank you, dear child, thank you!” the lady cried out. Maria hurried over to the Baker’s stall.

“Mr. Baker,” Maria called out.

“One minute,” the kind baker stepped out from the shadows.

“I need some bread, but I forgot to bring money,” Maria said.

“Well, I need to run this stall,” the baker replied gruffly. *Strange*, Maria thought, *this voice is similar to the one I heard yesterday night.*

“Please, Mr. Baker-” Maria began.

“It’s not Baker, it’s Becker,” the baker replied, in a softer voice.

“Mr. Becker, please, I will pay you back. I need some bread,” Maria pleaded desperately.

“Is it for your disgusting rat friend?” the baker’s eyes seemed to sneer at her, but his mouth was smiling.

“My rat friend? I don’t even have pets,” Maria replied.

The baker laughed. “I meant the girl you brought here yesterday.”

“Mr. Becker, that girl needed my help and it would be cruel to turn a blind eye to her suffering.”

“You are too kind, Maria. I will give the bread to you, from one loyal German citizen to another, but I hope you pay for the bread,” the baker replied.

“Thank you, Mr. Baker, I mean Mr. Becker,” Maria cried out.

“Good luck, child. Oh and Maria-”

“Yes,” Maria called.

“Please forget the conversation we just had.”

“Um, okay,” Maria replied. Maria ran as fast as she could back to the lady.

“Bless you, child,” the lady replied when she saw the bread. She took her shawl off and wrapped the bread.

“Do you have a daughter?” Maria asked.

The lady, startled, and replied “Why do you ask?”

“You seem familiar, but I do not know why.”

“Oh child, don’t be silly. My daughter is long dead,” the lady said bitterly.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean that,” Maria replied. The lady started to walk away.

“Oh, do you want me to walk you home?” Maria called. The lady turned and smiled and shook her head.

“Can I at least give you my cloak?”

“No dear child, I will be fine. You know, you remind me of my daughter. I may not have a daughter now, but you remind me of her.” The lady walked away, and Maria was left alone with her swirling thoughts.

The baker watched the spectacle from his stall.

“Tonight,” he murmured mysteriously.

Chapter 8

The Truth

Maria trodded home and shut the door behind her. Her mother was waiting for her.

“Maria, where were you?” Maria’s mom rose from her spot.

“The market,” Maria replied.

“Maria, you had me worried sick. Did you think that a note would satisfy me?” Maria’s mom cried out. *My mother looks so tired*, Maria thought.

“I’m sorry, Mother,” Maria’s voice was constrained.

“Maria, slamming the door like that, wandering in the marketplace, I...I don’t know what’s gotten into you.” Maria couldn’t take it anymore. The tears started to roll down her cheek.

“I hate it here, I hate it so much! The baker is evil, Hitler is evil, and I hate everyone. Why did I take Mila here? She has caused us nothing but trouble.” The tears started to flow freely now.

“It’s awful here, Mother,” Maria whispered. Maria’s mom sighed and held her in her lap. The sobs were the only sound that filled the room.

“Maria,” Mrs. Weber began gently, “I know life has been difficult these past few years, but you have learned how to be kind to others. As Hitler massacres millions of people, you take innocents under your wing. I am so proud of you, darling, that you have learned to treat people with dignity and respect when the world teaches you to view the world with jealousy and anger.”

“I thought the baker was my friend,” Maria’s voice broke as her emotions poured out, “he gave me delicious cookies every time I went to his stall. I asked for bread for a poor lady today, and he seemed so gruff. It was frightening. The kind baker I loved now seems like some sort of evil person.”

“The war has been hard on all of us, Maria. While you have grown up to become kind and generous, others have revealed their true colors. While you cannot change them, Maria, you must learn to keep your kindness. One day, I promise you, it will pay off.”

“Thank you, Mother,” Maria whispered.

“Being kind and respectful also means you tell your mother where you are going,” Maria’s mom said jokingly. Maria laughed and went to put her things away. Mila was sitting on her sleeping bag, trying to weave. Maria couldn’t control her laughter. Mila looked exactly like her when she was learning to weave.

“Let me help you with that,” Maria said. Mila quickly looked up but did not say anything. After working together for a few minutes in contented silence, Maria gasped.

“What have you done?” Maria asked as she gazed at the Star of David.

“I’ve shown you the truth,” Mila replied firmly.

Chapter 9

Family History

Maria started to pace her room.

“You were running away that day in the market because you saw the Nazis. You trembled at the sight of the Nazi yesterday because you were afraid we were going to turn you in. Is your real name even Mila? Oh no! I sent you right into a Nazi den at the market. You are afraid of the baker, because somehow, somehow...”

“That baker and my family have a long history together,” Mila began, “If you are willing, I can tell you the story.” Maria sat on her bed, in shock.

“ My full name isn't Mila. It's Mila Mayer. My family name, Mayer, used to be a well-known royal name. Due to a series of bad decisions, my great, great, grandfather and his wife were shunned from the royal court. They sold their land but had no idea what to do with the money. My great, great, grandmother had learned how to bake, and she was good at it. Thus, they started the bakery, and life and business seemed to work well. However, after our bakery had been running for some time, animosity started to develop between my family and a bakery a few blocks away. My great grandfather's and the baker's great grandfather got into a bitter feud as the baker's great-grandfather did not get the same fame and notoriety as our bakery did. The baker's great-grandfather tried to sell his goods in the market, but he still could not compete to achieve the same fame as our bakery. The worst part for him was that his bakery was now stretched thin with the stall in the market and his run-down baker shop. Out of anger, he poisoned my great-grandfather and killed him. The Beckers were charged, but there was a rumor that the Beckers paid a hefty amount of money to silence the press. To this day, there is a bitter feud between the baker's family and mine. Until someone changes that, I'm afraid I can't be near that stall at all.”

“So that was why you were terrified of the baker when I took you there,” Maria began. “Oh my goodness,” Maria's eyes widened, “I've put you in so much danger.”

“No, Maria, you did not know,” Mila replied.

“No, no, you don't understand. Today, I got some bread for a poor lady, and the baker asked if I was getting food for you. He called you a disgusting rat.”

“That is to be expected,” Mila sighed. “That isn't even the worst part though.”

“What could possibly be worse?” Maria exclaimed.

“As the Star of David shows you, my family comes from a Jewish origin. The Nazis stole our bakery and ordered us to go to the hard labor camps. In fear that we would die, my parents and I decided to split up and go our own ways. If we are to meet in public, we pretend we are strangers and talk in low voices so there will be no suspicion.”

“I never knew how much trouble you were in,” Maria murmured.

“Now you know the truth, Maria, and guard it with your life.”

“I am so sorry,” Maria's cheeks became wet, “ I have put you in so much danger.”

“Maria, you are the most caring person I have met. You gave me a home while I lived on the streets. You gave me food and trusted me when everyone else would have told you to do the opposite. I have a question though.”

“Whatever is it?” Maria asked as she wiped away her tears

“Why do you help others?” That struck Maria on the face harder than any rock. She didn't understand why people asked questions like that. It was what her parents did, it was the thing that seemed right.

“I know why Maria helps others,” a voice said, coming from the doorframe of Maria's room. “While others have learned to become angry and bitter, Maria has learned to treat others with dignity and respect and most importantly, kindness.” Two figures came out of the shadow. One

was wearing glasses and the other had round eyes that shone like the sun. Maria gasped. The lady with round eyes was the same lady who Maria had given bread. Gone were the streaks of dirt on the lady's face. She looked calmer now as if everything was right with their world. When they saw Mila, their smiles were radiant as the sun and reminded both girls how sometimes the world wasn't full of evil. Mila was the first one to speak.

"Mom, Dad...."

Chapter 10

The Reunion

"Mila," the joyous parents replied as they ran to their daughter. Maria ran to her parents. Her mom didn't look so tired anymore.

"Mom, Dad, how did you find Mila's parents?" Maria asked.

"We stayed up after you had gone to bed," Mrs. Weber whispered. "We had already known Mila. My grandmother's sister had married Mila's great-grandfather. However, when Hitler rose to power, we lost contact with them."

"So where does Dad play in the story?" Maria asked.

"We had known their last location a few years before the terror began. I pulled some strings with some of my friends. We contacted them again using the secret code that your mother's family and Mila's family had made so long ago."

"Are we noble-blooded then?" Maria asked.

"Well, technically you are related to some royals," Mr. Weber laughed.

"How much family history have we taught you?" Mrs. Weber cried.

"Very little to be exact," Maria said. The Webers let out a joyful laugh. Maria could hardly remember the last time they had laughed like this. As the pink clouds vanished from the sky, Mila and Maria decided to weave two more symbols. Once inside, they fell asleep right away. Maria didn't know though, her parents had seen the sign she had weaved with Mila.

Chapter 11

The Masterpiece

Maria had forgotten to put her weaving away and so while all the grown-ups were chatting away, Maria's mom went over and looked at the cross, the Jewish Star, and the Swastika all mixed with a baker in the middle.

"Who made this?" Maria's mom asked.

"It wasn't me," Mrs. Mayer said.

"It certainly wasn't me," Mrs. Weber said.

"Then, who was it?" Mrs. Mayer asked.

“Was it Maria and Mila?” Mr. Mayer asked. There was dead silence after this idea. Everyone knew what that signs were. The cross was for Christianity, the star was for Judaism, and the Swastika was for the Nazis, but the baker? Where did the baker fit in? “What is the baker supposed to mean?” the grown-ups murmured to themselves.

“Is there a baker we know of?” Mrs. Weber asked. **Bang, Bang**, a person knocked at the door.

“Who is it?”

“Whoever it is, hide. We will call you when it is over,” Mrs. Weber replied. Mr. Weber went to the door, and the Mayers hid.

“Who is it?” Maria whispered to Mila.

“I don’t know,” Mila said.

“We can hide behind my door and look out,” Maria replied. The girls tiptoed over to the door and looked out. This time, both of them held their mouth open, but no sound came out.

Chapter 12 The Revealmnt

Mr. Weber opened the door and the Nazi stepped inside. The weaving was tucked away in its little corner so no one would see it.

“Guten Nacht sir,” Mr. Weber said. “Would you like something to drink?” The Nazi stepped swiftly into the room and scanned the room as if he were looking for something.

“That would be fine,” said the gruff voice. Mr. Weber went to get some water and Mrs. Weber brought him to the living room. Soon, it came down to business.

“I have reports you have an artistic daughter. Is that correct?” the Nazi asked.

The Nazi must be the baker! Mila was right, Maria thought.

“Yes, that is correct, and she is very talented,” Mrs. Weber replied.

“Hmm, can I see some of her work?” Mr. and Mrs. Weber looked uneasily at each other. Maria and Mila peered silently out the door.

“What are we going to do?” Mila asked.

“I have small pieces of weaving. I think that might work,” Maria replied hesitantly.

“No, you need to show the Nazi your work,” Mila replied.

“What do you mean?” Maria looked with disbelief at Mila.

“If my hunch is correct, that is the baker. Now is your chance to confront him, Maria!”

“Mila, your idea is crazy!” Maria’s voice started to rise, but she went back to a whisper.

“Do it, Maria,” Mila looked courageously on at Maria.

“Hurry up now, I have more work to do,” the Nazi looked impatiently on.

“Let me just get my daughter,” Mrs. Weber turned towards Maria’s room, but the door opened.

“I will show you my work, sir,” Maria replied in a cool, collected voice. She was dressed in her Sunday best. She wore white gloves and she looked like she was going to a wedding.

Everyone seemed to be awe-stricken at this moment. Even the Nazi seemed to stare at her. Maria walked delicately to her spot on the couch. She folded her arms nice and neat and sat down. The Nazi recovered his senses and went back to his gruff self. He chose his words carefully because he knew something that might end the whole charade.

“Let me see your work then,” the Nazi replied.

“Let me just get it,” Maria got her weaving from the spot on the shelf. She clutched it to her chest.

“While we are here, let me just ask you, do you know anyone by the certain name of Mila?” the Nazi asked cautiously.

“I know a lot of people by Mila,” Maria said keeping her eyes locked on the Nazi. She was terrified on the inside. Her heart was hammering and her palms were sweating. *It feels like the dream I had*, Maria thought.

“Do you know anyone by the name Mila Mayer?” the Nazi asked with a little more ease in his voice.

“Do you know anyone by the name of Mr. Karl Becker? The person who has a stall in the market and is competing with a friend of mine?” Maria countered with collected confidence in her voice. She knew who was behind that mask. She didn’t need to tell anyone. It was Mr. Becker who had a stall in the marketplace and was competing with Mila’s family for decades in the baking business. The Nazi cried aloud and ripped off his mask to show the baker himself. The room went silent.

“Mr. Becker, ” Mrs. Weber gasped into the silence. “It can’t be!” The Nazi was trembling from his head to his toes. He knew that Maria had outsmarted him. Everybody was shocked. The only person who moved was Maria. She called Mila from her hiding spot and revealed her masterpiece to the baker.

“I know you wanted to see my work,” Maria replied innocently. The baker screamed. He knew exactly what the weaving represented. Maria and Mila smiled at each other. They knew exactly what was going on. The baker realized his plans were ending. He was at a crossroads now. He could continue to march down towards the Swastika, only to encounter his doom or he could take the other path, towards the Star of David and the Cross, and his life would shine anew. The baker stared at the symbols and tears streamed down his cheeks. He realized at that moment how cruel he had been by being a part of the Nazi regime.

“You can change Mr. Becker,” Maria said into the silence, “or you can fall astray. The choice is up to you.”

“Please forgive me. I knew who Mila was the day you came to my bakery. I wanted to get rid of her and came to your home that night. Please, please forgive me.”

“Why did you come here today? Did you come looking for the Mayers?” Maria asked.

“I came here today because I intercepted the secret code. You know one part of the story, but do you know the other?”

“What other part do you know?” Mila scoffed.

“When my great-grandfather poisoned your great-grandfather, it never killed him. No, it made him fall into a deep slumber. Do you really think a funeral was held? No, of course not, because Mr. Mayer’s wife saw the entire thing. She forced my great-grandfather into a promise where my family protected Mila’s family. Because of my great-grandfather’s act, we were forced to become the protectors of your family.”

“Take him away,” Mr. Mayer replied. “He does not speak the truth.”

“Wait, let him speak,” Maria replied. The baker gave Maria a grateful look; Maria’s face was impassive.

“Go on with your story,” Maria repeated.

“As I said, the promise my great-grandfather made with Mila’s great-grandmother forces the Beckers to protect the Mayers. This protection, however, also grows the animosity between our families. My father had told me that if I could find an opening, I could break the cycle and eventually end the Mayers once and for all. I was going to do that tonight after I received the code. Lucky for you, Maria has saved us all.”

There was a slow clap from Mila.

“Wonderful story, just wonderful,” Mila replied mockingly.

“It’s true,” Mr. Becker replied in earnest.

“Why should we believe that? You said it yourself that you wanted to end the cycle,” Mrs. Mayer replied coldly.

“I told you though, Maria has saved us,” Mr. Becker replied. “I am now incapable of hurting Mila because I know this action would hurt Maria. I may despise the Mayers, but I cannot hurt Maria.” Maria watched the unfolding scene impassively but her thoughts ran as fast as trains. *How can I save both of them? Mila hates Mr. Becker, but Mr. Becker does not want to hurt me.*

“Fine,” Maria replied, “you have understood your actions today, Mr. Becker?”

“Yes,” Mr. Becker replied in earnest.

“I request you to make a promise. Protect the Mayers with your life, just as my family has done for them.”

“Yes, I promise,” Mr. Becker replied.

“Then let it be done,” Maria replied simply and walked away.

Epilogue

Ten years later...

“Good morning Mr. Becker!”

“Ah Maria, how are you?” Maria smiled at the baker. The baker had started to develop laughter lines around his eyes. His eyes sparkled brightly now.

“Good, Mr. Baker, I mean Mr. Becker,” Maria replied.

“Please, call me Mr. Baker,” the baker laughed.

“How are your children doing?” Maria asked. Mr. Becker had two kids and they would be off to middle school.

“They are doing well. They are in school right now, or else I would have called them. How are you and Mila doing? It feels like forever since you last came and visited.”

After the war came to an end, Maria and her family decided to help with restoration efforts in Germany. Mila and her family had miraculously survived the final solution thanks to the Baker’s ingenious hiding shelter for the Mayers. The Mayers had left Germany for England after the war ended, but Maria still kept in touch with them. Germany had hurt so many people and killed so many more. It was only right to help restore and rebuild the lives of innocent people.

“The restoration efforts are going well! Mila and her family are building a new life in England. In her last correspondence, her father was a journalist for a local paper in London. I miss my friend, but it is only right that she has a new life elsewhere. ”

“Yes, Germany has caused so much suffering for the people. However, look at the people’s resilience. The war was a brutal scar in all our lives, but it is the kindness that seems to grow back, not the fear and jealousy felt during the war.”

“Just like my kindness to Mila during the war?” Maria asked.

“Just like your kindness to all the people you meet,” the baker smiled.

“Here, have a cookie before you leave,” the baker pressed a cookie into Maria’s hand.

“Just like the old times,” Maria replied.

“Better than the old times. Before I was a miserable baker in a prosperous market stall. Now look, my shop is run-down, but my heart is lightened with joy.”

“Kindness is a funny thing,” Maria replied.

“Yes, kindness is,” the baker replied. As Maria and the baker laughed, the sun reached its zenith. The light touched and banished the shadows from Earth. The light touched the people too. They stopped and admired the sun that still shined down on them, happy that the black, inky shadows of the night gave way to the bright, beautiful rays of the morning.

Author's note:

While there are references to historical places and figures, this novel is not historically accurate. Instead, this novel tries to shed light on the true meaning of compassion which some people did show during World War II.

Maverick McDonald

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Smithville High School, Smithville, MO

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Critical Essay

The Importance of Personal Development Versus Academic Achievement

Maverick McDonald

Mrs. Perkins

AP Language

7.12.22

The Importance of Personal Development Versus Academic Achievement

Qualifications for jobs are getting higher and the need for better jobs is increasing as the federal minimum wage has not increased since 2010 but inflation has increased. The hourly income needed to rent a two-bedroom apartment/house ranges from \$14.89 to \$40.63 in the 50 states(Statista). Over 257,000 college graduates with bachelor's or associate degrees worked at or below minimum wage in 2021(Statista). Education is undoubtedly one of the most important things one must do in their life. Why is that, when drop-outs like Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, Oprah Winfrey, and more have started multi-million and billion dollar businesses? What is the difference between the education difference between these prolific drop-outs versus a person with a bachelor's degree?

Personal development in a school setting is essential for a child's growth and development and it is also prevalent throughout all age group settings in school. From teaching social skills in preschool to lifelong personal connections and developing one's path in college, personal development is found in every aspect of schooling. Shrouded by academic achievement, personal development happens without most realizing it and taking or missing these opportunities can alter one's life entirely, shaping the peaks or valleys in life. Education is more important for personal development than it is for academic achievement, supported by the personal connections formed, student mental health, and the foraging of one's path in life not being determined by a degree.

The personal connections formed in a school setting, whether it be from teachers, mentors, or other students, is one of the most important parts of personal development education has to offer. The three C's, care, conversation, and connection are what Valerie Ruckes lives by as a first grade teacher in Michigan (Ferlazzo). "Attempting to understand our students is not a simple process because every child is an unique individual," Ruckes stated in an interview with Larry Ferlazzo who is a high school teacher in California. She believes that forming connections with students is one of the best investments a teacher can make. Forming relationships and personal connections with students can help inspire and believe in themselves.

Mentors can also have a positive impact on relationships, not just academic performance. A positive mentor to student relationship can have a contagious effect(Zaremba). The contagious effect can improve pre-existing relationships with family and friends, as well as help build and improve social skills. Student self-esteem has also been shown to increase with the help of a positive mentor. This relationship can also help deter the student from the path of risky and unhealthy behavioral habits, such as illegal drug use, while promoting benefits to lead to their well being and success (Zaremba). Outside of teachers and parents, mentors can serve as a healthy adult figure in a student's life to help guide them down the right path.

The help and guidance of classmates is an important part of personal development and is a big proponent why personal development is important. Some successful companies that were founded with the help of collaboration between college students are Microsoft, Yahoo, Reddit, and Google. A benefit of collaborative work is the development of a deeper level of thinking(Cornell). A deeper understanding of subjects can be attained through outside point of views brought in by peers through collaboration. Working with other students can also help with leadership skills and help prepare students for real life collaboration situations that will be encountered through jobs. Collaboration with peers can also help a student surround themselves with like-minded peers who can help each other build their paths in life.

Student mental health has been put in the limelight recently as a crisis has emerged throughout the nation. Why has student mental health turned into a crisis and what is its effect on personal development? Stress can be good, it can

push one to do work and get it done by deadlines. In a way stress can keep one in check by making sure to stay on top of tasks to not get overwhelmed. However, once stress overwhelms someone is when it can become dangerous. Stress overcoming someone can reduce academic achievement, increase drop-out rates, and cause negative health implications (JED Foundation). These health implications can be substance abuse, depression, and anxiety. An OECD study found that 55% of students felt anxious about school testing, 37% felt anxious and tense during studying, and the study consistently reported girls having greater anxiety about academics than boys did (Pascoe, Hetrick, Parker). Similarly a study provided by NCBI, concluded that 42.3% of students at a Canadian college testified to having devastating levels of stress and anxiety (NCBI).

Students who have these symptoms and signs are likely to spiral because they tend to have lower levels of self-affirmation and will consider themselves failures. Depression can lead to a loss of sleep-quality and students may turn to drugs or smoking to help them sleep. These unconventional counters to the illness can lead to health implications on their own, such as cancer and the risk of death. Personal connections can play a key role in helping students by helping students out of their hole having a good support system around a person can make sure they stay on the straight and narrow.

Some studies have actually suggested that the greater the anxiety, the greater the academic performance (NCBI). While there may be some outlier cases to where this proposition is true, ultimately there is no significant correlation between stress and grade improvement. The mental toll depression, stress, and anxiety put on a student is not worth it in the long run for a student's mental health and they will eventually be at risk of spiraling. Many students, in fact, feel an unwillingness to learn, have a negative impact on learning capabilities, and gain stress from academic pressures (NCBI). Another study concluded that the three main sources of stress in a student's life are grades, homework, and getting into college with female stress levels being higher than male stress levels in most areas except for relationship and mental health based issues (Less High School Stress). Depression, stress, and anxiety can inhibit one's personal development. These mental illnesses can lead to low self-confidence, guilt, a reduced ability to enjoy life, and can change the way we think, feel and act.

The foraging of one's path in life should be something that person wants to do and is good at. Having a degree does not mean you are not successful or that you are successful, rather a stepping stone in the making of one's path in life. Bill Gates, Oprah Winfrey, and Steve Jobs all dropped out of school and started their own businesses based off of what they wanted to do and what they were good at. Sometimes to be truly educated, you do not need to be in school. Trade workers, such as construction workers, welders, and plumbers do not need four year universities to assist them in their schooling. They need to earn certification in their field of choice to continue to do their job. Doctors can be in a university for as long as seven years to be able to earn a doctorate to get their job. Everyone's path in life is different, and failing at one thing doesn't mean you will fail everything else. It just means you have to find your true passion, and sometimes you will need some help to find your path.

One way to find your path for personal development is to find the things you care about. Things you care about should be things you are passionate about, good at, reasons why you care about your community and skills that you have that you think are useful. For some people a skill they have could be cooking, others might like film and photography, and some people might want a job being a police officer. Some people may be unsure about what they want to do, and that is where people like Joan Hillsman can help. Hillsman is a music educator, music historian, author, music producer, consultant, as well as a radio show host that has traveled the world through her teachings. She has been to Paris, Sweden, and Gambia. She herself, a prominent music teacher figure, went to college to be a French foreign language consultant (Olsen). Joan Hillsman has been a teacher since the 1990's and she has helped many people find their path through music. "You develop the whole person, the whole mind," Hillsman stated, "...I want them to understand what they want to do in life, what they want to do in this field." Hillsman also states, "I tell them, 'Find your place, find your purpose.'" Hillsman is someone everyone needs at some point in their lives, a person who can lead you on a path to success and who is willing to help their students find their paths to come into their own.

To build one's path with personal development, you have to recognize what your strengths and abilities are. Some students are good at math and struggle in English, and other students can be the opposite of that. The important thing is to recognize what you are able to do and how effectively you can do it while also enjoying it. One's strengths and abilities help form their unique personality, as well as their weaknesses too. One must learn to embrace all aspects of themselves to develop truly and fully. If you want to develop a new strength or improve a weakness, you can look up to an idol or a person you admire and try to imitate what they do well. Cultivating your personality and constantly trying to improve yourself, even by a little bit, will reinforce yourself with positivity and certainty about what your path is. However the importance of academic achievement should not be discounted. It is not smart to drop out of school without having a solid foundation. Bill Gates, Oprah Winfrey, and Steve Jobs are very talented people who led the industry in their respective professions. They are very smart individuals who, with the help of personal development, can be described as an exception. Their minds and work ethic are what set them apart. Good grades are very

important to get, as they can enter you into better universities and set up better job opportunities(Singh). Having good grades causes very little stress in the student body and they will boost one's self confidence. However the process of struggling to get them can be overwhelming and cause high levels of stress. Getting good grades gives you a better chance to get into better schools as well as a chance to get your schooling paid for. Getting into better schools can lead to a better job resume and job opportunities(Singh). A bachelor's degree from Harvard looks better than a bachelor's degree from the University of Arizona on a job resume. While personal development is more important for an individual, academic achievement shouldn't be cast aside as that could hurt your future detrimentally. The reason why dropouts Bill Gates, Oprah Winfrey, and Steve Jobs were able to succeed was because of personal development. Personal development happens from every aspect of your life and in a school setting is essential for a child's growth. From being taught social skills in preschool to the personal connections formed in college, personal development is embedded into our way of life as humans. Shrouded by the prestige of academic achievement, personal development occurs without us even realizing it. These opportunities are important to seize as they can form the peaks and valleys of life. Education is more important for personal development than it is for academic achievement. This assertion can be succored by the importance of forming personal connections, the decline in student mental health in the world, and the foraging of one's path in life not being determined by a degree. It is time for personal development to break free of it's shroud that's concealed by academic achievement and for it to take the foreground in importance.

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Lauren Meixner

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Blue Valley West High School, Overland Park, KS

Educator: Zachary Gall

Category: Poetry

Grieving the Living

The grapefruit I cut bleeds down my palm,
its bitter juice staining my sleeve.
I wince as I bite into its spongy flesh,
but it reminds me of you, as everything does these days.
I take another slice.

The sun we dreamt of only charred our skin.
We hoped it would mean freedom,
of exploration to galaxies far, far, away.
It instead left us tumbling back towards the black dirt
that once caked my fingernails.
You refused to turn back,
away from the sun that melted our wax-coated wings,
and as you inevitably fell,
you grabbed onto my foot,
dragging me back down with you.

Either it was both of us or none of us, we always said.
Whispers were spoken in a foreign tongue that I no longer remember,
but only faintly hear in the middle of the night
when your cries are ripped out of your mouth
from nightmares that are too morbid to explain.
Their images haunt you even in the daylight.
I have them too, you know.
But in mine, *I lose you.*

Your claws dug trenches into my skin.
My words, sharp as knives,
cut into your ribcage.
Dad would ask us to hug it out
and you'd just wrap your arms
tighter and tighter
until the air left my lungs.

I want to let you go.
Fly. And this time don't come back to Earth.
I'll rule the land and you'll rule the sky.

I was told there were five steps to all of this, to losing a person.
I don't know if it applies to the living,
or the memories you watch disappear from your grasp.

Denial would protect my mind from reality.

Maybe that's why I returned,
time and time again,
bruises littering my covered arms.
The guilty fingers
stayed crossed behind your back.

Bargaining didn't happen.

Or at least that's what my words,
rougher than the beach's sand implied.
The rivers that once poured from your eyes stopped years ago,
once you learned that I no longer had the ability
to craft words gentle as the bay's tide.

Your anger scared me less than mine did.

When did I start crying?
When did my throat close up?
I have notes to sing, ones you don't deserve to hear.
So I'll hide away,
back into the closet where I learned to belt octaves,
and burrowed in when your gunshots ripped through my room.

The depression overtook us both.

Look at our matching prescriptions if you're unsure.
Do the pills lodge in your throat as they do in mine?

My acceptance has set in begrudgingly.

My kids won't have close cousins.
Not from my side, anyway.
I hope they don't hate me.
It's better this way,
I'll try to say.

Good luck.

See the stars for us.

I hope-

Nevermind.

Lauren Meixner

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Blue Valley West High School, Overland Park, KS

Educator: Zachary Gall

Category: Poetry

Love, Contaminated By Rage

When did I last see you?
Was it yesterday through the phone?
Our thread is a history littered with text messages
you cut short.
Was it Friday?
When I sped to your home,
the summer sun beating down
on the scraped-up Subaru?
My brother is mad about that, by the way.
He's a raging perfectionist, his car included.
He doesn't find the dents as amusing as we do.
But for as little as we care about him and his "egocentric opinions",
I can't help but think that he's right about you.
"This relationship isn't real.
Don't you see that she only focuses on the hallucination who shares your face?"

Before I let the words leave my damned mouth,
you could pretend that I didn't fall
down
 down
 down.

I know you've never liked pet names.
I slipped up a few times, calling you babe in dimly lit theaters.
Eventually, I only used them because I liked seeing you wince.
So sorry to inform you darling,
the daily paper's headline details how I hit the sidewalk
next to your dad's '00s van.
I would apologize that you have to vacuum up my guts,
but honestly you should have ripped up the letter I gave you
if you knew that you were not able to handle the inferno.

If you look at the editorials,
you'll see that the best summer of my life
had nothing to do with you, the acclaimed "first love".
It had nothing to do with your eleven day silence.
Nor the *dears, loves, and babies* that you spewed
to tame the blood-thirsty beast
clawing its way out of my chest.

I hope you lock the doors, because I'm letting her free.

Lauren Meixner

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Blue Valley West High School, Overland Park, KS

Educator: Zachary Gall

Category: Poetry

Puppet Without a String

Why did I say that?

My tongue burns
like too-hot black coffee
was swallowed in haste.
Your face stays still as marble
while my hands tremble by my side.

Can't you see the rot?
Fungi grow around my ribcage,
moss in my hair,
and mold between my teeth.
I am nothing but a corpse,
a decomposed and buzzard-eaten stray.
But their chests rumble with laughter
when I spit out a joke.
It's my living mask,
switching between tragedy and comedy on command.

Your tea is too bitter,
you don't fancy milk and sugar
the same way my mother and I do.
So I restrain pouring the cream
and scooping into the white sand.
My wrists creak when I dip the teabag
 in and out,
 in and out.

Do not look behind the velvet curtain.
It's a battlefield of crying girls
and faded costume jewelry.
A crumpled poster hangs from the blacked-out window,
Director Wanted.

I beg you,
tell me how to be.

Lauren Meixner

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Blue Valley West High School, Overland Park, KS

Educator: Zachary Gall

Category: Poetry

English Refuge

Every time I pick up a pen,
blood drips out of my nose.
I'm lulled into thinking that words can heal me,
then sucker-punched.
But for as much as I hate how it stains my desk,
the hunger to escape into my scribbled stanzas
eats at me until you can count my ribs.

Seventeen journals fit in my bottom dresser drawer.
Occasionally I'll rummage through their pages,
and suddenly I'm transported
to six, to ten, to fifteen.
I wonder how I could have been called a child
when every page is lit aflame by adult despair.
Because despite being loved,
she feared being heard.

When you came crashing in
and listened to my depraved ramblings,
the little girl in my head screamed for me to stop.
Her voice was a nasty thing,
steeped in venom.
She didn't want to hurt you too.

Thus I'm afraid to verbalize
the things I have seen
in my dreams.
*Last night we were on a rollercoaster,
and we turned for a loop.
You fell off,
and the sight of your bones
piercing through bruised skin
haunted me until I saw you alive and breathing.*

You beam,
like the shooting star I prayed on,
wishing for you,
while reading my half-crumpled notes
and hastily drafted poems.
The avoidance of language with its written sister
lets me forget my fatal flaw:
The jumbled lines of code that prevent my lips

From curling to express how much I love you.

Lauren Meixner

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Blue Valley West High School, Overland Park, KS

Educator: Zachary Gall

Category: Poetry

True Crime

WANTED FOR FRAUD.

the newspaper reads.
You laugh as you look at the article,
before turning to me,
pearly whites glinting in the overhead light.
“*Did you hear?*” You ask.

I nod, taking a sip of my coffee.
I hope you skim over the police sketch,
as it’s strikingly similar to the image of your love.

*A suspect is wanted for theft.
Fooling those around her about her character,
she was once seen as hardworking, determined, and ambitious.
The woman has maneuvered her way into receiving the benefits
someone like her never deserves.
For it isn’t her strength and discipline,
but luck and a criminal plan,
that robbed everyone that loves her of a chance to be genuinely happy.*

You look my way, an eyebrow arched.
“*Is everything okay?*”
I nod, weak from the pounding of my head.
You look through my veil,
as you always do.
Pouty lips grab my attention as your chair scrapes hardwood.
The floors cream with each step you take
until I feel your breath,
hot as the desert behind my childhood home,
and pick up on your whisper.
“*You can always rely on me, you know.*”

I kiss your temple and shoo you back to your seat.
“*You won’t have time to finish the crossword.*”
You laugh, hearty and full,
the same way you did the night you bundled me up in your coat,
and placed a beanie over my frost-tipped ears.

I’ve scammed you, I think.
You pick up the newspaper and your ballpoint,
and devour the pages of the breaking-news article
as your eggs go cold,

forever unknowing that the mastermind eats her breakfast in front of you.

Lauren Meixner

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Blue Valley West High School, Overland Park, KS

Educator: Zachary Gall

Category: Poetry

Playlist: Better Than Ever

Playlist: Better Than Ever

Shuffle?

The wrinkled paper that holds my teabag is seaweed green.
It's hideous really,
with an outdated Microsoft Word font
and nutrition information too small to read.

Green Tea Detox

I prefer black tea,
diluted with milk and spoonfuls of sugar.
My best friend likes Sweet 'N Low,
and I tease her for "drinking cancer",
while sipping on a Diet Coke.

But I'm enamored by detox

Detox

Detox.

I'd like to think this oceanwater tea
Would flush away all of the things that led me here.
But I know that it won't.
No product can wipe away the hipbones that pierce through my skin
or the number on the scale,
ten under where I should be.
No product could have prevented my mother's trembling hands
that rubbed up and down my back
feeling for a protruding spine.

I'm in my "bad bitch",
"that girl",
matcha latte at 5 am era.
At least that's what I say
when my 8-hour nights are interrupted
by ghosts,
ripping me out of dreams
and straight into my nightmare.

It's part of the healing process.

The first woman who ever viewed my paintings
as more than just a child's scrawl
used to tell me that my progress was never linear.
I ride down the alpine slide,
twisting and turning away from my end goal,
sliding up and down the sides.

*I grasp onto the cart,
Trembling.*

But eventually, I reach the bottom,
joy flushed in my cheeks.
So as I take this turn and spit my hair
caught between my lips,
I'll breathe in the evergreen mist
and holler.

Nathan Montemayor

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Olathe North High School, Olathe, KS

Educator: Deirdre Zongker

Category: Short Story

The Heron

The Heron

On April 27th, just two days into her college break, Sara spotted a dove on her morning walk. At first, she didn't notice it as it sat perfectly still on a branch. However, right when she was about to pass by, it let out a single chirp, alerting her of its existence. Startled, Sara's eyes darted about, searching for the source of the sudden noise. She looked up at the tree and saw the angelically beautiful white dove perched just above her head. Sara gasped. It was the first bird she had ever seen, and, as far as she knew, the first bird anyone had seen since the Great Flight fifteen years ago, when all the world's birds simply vanished. And yet, here sat a dove, staring down at Sara curiously.

This could be big news, Sara thought. Slowly, she pulled her phone out of her pocket, opened the camera app, and lined up to take a perfect photo of the dove. *Hold still*, she silently urged it. Once she was at a perfect angle, Sara pressed the button and took a picture, which was followed by a flash. *I left the camera flash on!* She'd successfully taken a photo, but the bird seemed to have been startled by the brightness and began flapping its wings to fly away. Sara's panic was punctuated as she marveled at the sight. She'd seen birds fly in old documentaries and videos, but never in person. The dove, now about seven feet above her, began to fly away. Sara's heart skipped a beat, and she clutched her chest in confusion and unexpected sadness. *I don't know this bird. It's the first one I've ever seen, so why do I feel like part of me is getting away?*

Though she wasn't quite sure why, Sara started chasing after the bird. She chased it out of the park and down the street, dodging the few people who chose to walk as early as she did as she desperately followed the small white creature making its way to who-knows-where, barely aware of why. She hardly noticed when she left the city of Alexandria entirely and made it to a forested area instead. She just kept running, never tiring, never stopping to catch her breath.

Sara had always been more of a walker than a runner, but she found herself able to keep pace with the bird easily. Soon, she found that she was no longer chasing the bird, but running alongside it. The dove flew all around her as she dashed through the trees, swooping above, darting from side to side, but mostly gliding just in front of her. Despite this, Sara found that she knew every twist and turn the two of them made, as if guided by some invisible force. She still didn't have a clue why any of this was happening, but somehow, Sara didn't care. All that mattered now was running, running to wherever she was being called to.

After much time had passed (or perhaps not, as she had lost track of time), Sara's footsteps slowed, and the dove perched once more on a branch marking the entrance of a forest clearing.

"Thank you," Sara told the dove, which nodded its head as if to say, *you're welcome*. Turning to face the clearing, Sara suddenly became aware of an odd humming sort of sound. As she stepped closer, the sound became more noticeable and more powerful, with lighter and deeper tones joining in to create a heavenly harmony. Sara reached the center of the clearing and realized that the trees surrounding her were full of birds. There were small hummingbirds and robins. There were exotic toucans and parrots. There were even majestic hawks and eagles. And each and every one of them was singing, creating a powerful vibration that moved Sara's heart. Somehow, she could sense that they were not just singing *at* her, but *to* her.

As she looked around, marveling at all the birds, Sara suddenly heard a majestic cry that rose above all the others. Turning to the back of the clearing, Sara noticed a small path leading farther in. The birds on the trees seemed to be leaning towards it, beckoning her to go deeper. Taking a deep breath, Sara got down on her knees and began crawling through the path. When she made it about halfway through, she heard the cry again, louder this time. It sent chills down Sara's spine, but she wasn't frightened at all. Reaching the end of the tunnel, she picked herself up and faced the source of the powerful call.

There was a small pond of water, just about eight feet wide, and at the center of it was a floating nest. *Pyramidion*, Sara thought, though she had no idea why. Sitting inside the nest was a beautiful gray heron. It had a long, narrow

beak and legs, which seemed almost golden rather than yellow. Noticing Sara, it let out another cry and flew out of its nest in front of Sara. Up close, Sara could see that it was much larger than her textbooks in school said it was. It was taller than her, even. Suddenly, it bent its legs until its head was just slightly below her and gestured to its back. "You want me to get on?" Sara asked, and the heron nodded. Carefully, Sara walked behind it and swung one leg over, then sat down and placed her hands on the base of the heron's neck, which she found to be quite smooth and soft. It was, she realized, the first time she'd ever felt a feather. "I'm ready," she told it, and the heron let out one last cry before flapping its wings and taking off into the sky.

Sara held on tight as the heron flew higher and higher, picking up speed as it flew above the treetops. Soon, the leaves down below only appeared to be a large mass of green. Sara turned around and saw that behind them, the majestic bird seemed to be leaving a sparkling trail behind it, almost like a shimmering rainbow. They continued to fly away from the forest and closer to what seemed to be a blue line down below.

"It's the Nile!" Sara realized suddenly. She'd visited it once, but never got a full scope of just how big, how wide, how magnificent it was. The heron looked back at her almost playfully before swooping down towards the river. Though she might normally scream in fright at such a turn of events, Sara found herself remaining strangely serene as they soared downward, eventually hovering just above the Nile. Sara took one hand off the bird and ran it through the water. She left it there for a moment, just gliding through as they continued to soar, then lifted it up. She placed the soaking wet hand on her heart, urging it to remember this moment for as long as she lived. The heron let out a joyful cry, and Sara felt its name as a whisper deep in her soul: *Bennu*.

Bennu eventually flew back into the sky and started making his way back to the forest. As they soared away from the Nile, Sara turned back and watched as the sun began to set. The water changed from a sparkling blue to a warm orange as the dazzlingly bright sun sank out of view. The darkness of the sky only caused Bennu's shimmering trail to stand out more, though, and Sara smiled dreamily as she stared backwards into the night sky, watching the strand of sparkles grow longer as the moon rose into view.

Though she knew the ride could not go on forever, it still felt quite bittersweet when Bennu landed in the forest clearing once more. He lowered himself to the ground for Sara to step off, and she placed a hand on his beak and stroked it. As she did, she felt a wave of life course through her, giving her energy and strength. In that moment, she felt like she had been reborn into a new person, the best version of herself. Running her hand across one last time, Sara bade Bennu farewell, crawled back through the tunnel, walked out of the forest clearing, and prepared for the journey home.

The dove was waiting for Sara at the entrance, and it chirped at her when she approached.

"I'm ready to go home," she told it, and it took off from the branch and prepared to fly through the forest. Grinning, Sara began to run again, feeling herself becoming wrapped up in the excitement. She dashed by the trees, eyes following the small dove as they traveled as one. Soon, she became aware of a presence around and above her, and she looked out to see that the dove was not the only bird accompanying her home. All the birds, every pigeon, every bluebird, every raven and goose, were soaring out of the woods with her. Leading the massive flock was Bennu, letting out another eye-wateringly beautiful cry as the girl and the birds returned to the city and the world. Soon, everyone would wake up to the sorely missed birdsong, and the people would rejoice. They would remember tomorrow. Sara would remember today.

Katie Murphy

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Shawnee Mission East High School, Prairie Village, KS

Educator: Dow Tate

Category: Critical Essay

Stop Overreacting

Don't bother stopping for the five newly-installed and obviously homemade bright red road signs while driving down Mission Road to Shawnee Mission East High School.

Our city's newest "stop signs" are really "Stop Rezoning Prairie Village" signs — an over-the-top reaction from local families in response to the city council's housing recommendations promoting inclusivity. Yes, mere recommendations were enough to cause a sign-printing spree from our city's most traditional families.

Miscommunication between residents and officials has caused the city council's actions to be over-dramatized by some community members — effectively slowing progress on lowering inflated housing prices.

The city's June recommendations include enabling more multi-unit building types and considering revising accessory living quarter standards, aimed to help "preserve access to attainable housing," according to the committee.

Prairie Village has become less accessible for middle-income workers like teachers and police officers as home prices in the area accelerate faster than wages.

If enacted into policy in some neighborhoods, the recommendations would mean allowing more multi-family homes that are cheaper per occupant and the construction of unattached "granny units" to house extra family members. It's an imperfect — but well-intentioned — plan that should've received a sensible response and opened a reasonable discussion.

Instead, the reaction to the suggestions is confusing — yard signs reading "Stop Neighborhood Rezoning!" have been erected with no clear call to action for a law to veto or a politician to remove. Residents have yelled over Teen City Council members attending the city council meetings who were trying to explain that concrete policies haven't even been made yet.

To be fair, the city council has some blame for miscommunication. They mention only once online that decisions about housing policy updates won't be made until spring 2023 — deep on their website under a drop-down menu of FAQ's.

Plus, opposing organizations, like the Stop PV Rezoning group, have a point: the recommendations aren't perfect and could devalue properties in some districts. But the front page of their website reading "CITY COUNCIL WANTS TO REMOVE OUR RIGHTS AS SINGLE FAMILY HOMEOWNERS!!" in bold text is a vague and aggressive way to get their point across.

Or the point isn't coming across at all.

Eighty-one percent of community members have seen the signs with only 40% knowing what issue they refer to, according to an Instagram poll of 166. Plus, 68% out of another poll of 152 students have no idea what housing issues are being discussed in city council, even though the conversation can directly affect their neighborhood.

Clearly the messages from both the city council and anti-rezoning organizations haven't been conveyed effectively. City-issued notices appear daunting in paragraphs of official legal language compared to the opposition's overly-

blunt and nonspecific, bulleted talking points online — two extremes that fail to educate residents.

Both sides should work to spread understandable information through concise posts tailored for the average viewer, or else recommendations will continue to be blown out of proportion.

Especially since rising housing costs aren't slowing while the city argues. And medium-income families continue to become less likely to buy property here. If less community energy was put into organizing a 582-member Facebook group and instead given to revising the recommendations, Prairie Village could find a compromise.

Instead of complaining about the revised recommendations, concerned residents should list realistic and specific modifications to the document. Solutions can be pitched at city council meetings, like the upcoming one at 6 p.m. on Nov. 21.

The council already proved they are willing to listen when they revised housing recommendations after the initial backlash in October — deciding to exclude multi-family home options in some areas.

Shouting at city council meetings and making bold signs might draw more attention now, but Prairie Village needs productive conversations to solve its housing exclusivity in the long-term.

Katie Murphy

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Shawnee Mission East High School, Prairie Village, KS

Educator: Dow Tate

Category: Critical Essay

Teachers With Tacticals?

Thirty-four seconds — how long it would take for 11 armed and trained Prairie Village police officers to run to East in the event of an armed intruder. Not to mention the three armed SROs already in the building. Thirty-four seconds that teachers should spend barricading their classroom doors and corralling students into a safe corner of the room — not fumbling with a padlocked cabinet to retrieve a handgun that they only trained with for eight hours.

If an intruder with a gun came into East, on-site SROs Seth Meyer, Tony Woolen and Larry Fries would either be running to or already at the location of the threat in less than 34 seconds. Their 230 hours of training would have kicked in — they've run through scenarios of shooting while moving, around barricades, in low light, bright light, inside and outside.

A teacher wielding a gun at school with permission from SMSD and a concealed carry license (that can be earned with a mere eight hours of training) wouldn't compare. Still, talk of arming teachers comes up in classrooms, faculty meetings and political campaigns after yet another year of nationwide gun violence.

Currently, no East teachers have permission to carry from SMSD. However, school employees in Kansas are legally allowed to carry guns with a concealed carry permit and specific permission from school authority, as outlined in Chapter 75 of the Kansas Statutes.

Arming teachers could be a possible solution to prevent school shootings at schools in rural areas where the nearest police station is a dirt road and 30 minutes away, but East's police station is only 800 feet away from our main office.

Instead of the focus being on arming teachers, we need to divert attention and funding towards more necessary changes like gun control and providing emotional and social support at school to ensure threats don't come from within the building.

Plus, armed teachers wouldn't have adequate training to bear the emotional toll of brandishing a deadly weapon. Eight hours of gun training won't prepare a teacher to shoot a kid, especially a potential student of theirs. Even Meyer, who was a responder at the Highlands shooting, grimaces when recounting the experience of drawing his weapon on site of an elementary school.

Teachers shouldn't be expected to carry that responsibility.

Not to mention, SMSD already purchased eight semi-automatic rifles for our SROs in 2015 — the necessary weapons to fight intruders are already in the hands of the people who are trained to operate them. We don't need teachers with less training and a greater potential to mishandle a weapon carrying them too.

However, some continue to argue that we do. A common argument in favor of arming teachers is that it has historically been 100% effective in preventing attacks, citing the zero cases of injuries and deaths from shootings at schools that let teachers carry guns between 2000 and 2018, from a study by Crime Prevention Center analyst John Lott.

This initially shocking and pro-gun-convincing fact is debunked with a closer look at probabilities. Shootings have occurred at 0.1% of schools in the US, according to the Washington Post. Since 6.2% of teachers are willing to be

armed, there is a less than 0.0062% chance that a shooting would occur at a school where teachers are armed, according to studies by the California Research Center — such a low chance that it would be surprising if an attack had occurred at a school where teachers are armed.

Instead of pointing to misleading evidence to justify giving East teachers glocks, let's focus on upholding the new restricted access procedural changes enacted this year involving keeping exterior doors locked and speaking up when we hear warning signs of potential threats.

If you hear anything about someone's potential plans to cause harm at our school, report it on the anonymous hotline on the school MacBooks or to an SRO in-person. Walk those extra two minutes around to the main office when you're late to school, instead of getting a friend to open a door locked under restricted access. That way, potential attackers can't slip in through a casually propped-open entrance.

We already have the setup, equipment and professionals to handle attacks, and the last step is to follow procedural changes that are designed to prevent shootings — it's not to arm teachers.

Let's stick to securing who comes in and out of the building instead of giving algebra teachers handguns.

Kathryn Myers

Age: 16, Grade: 12

School Name: David H Hickman High School, Columbia, MO

Educator: Nancy White

Category: Poetry

And Aphrodite will say her prayers...

I wear a green nightgown in my kitchen,
cotton traces my spine like the pearl rosary you find in your mother's purse.
I am a cowboy drinking coffee out of a tin cup,
and my boots are sinking into the tile.
My body is a kiln while it bakes my fictile bones.
The heat of the fire holds me
but my feet are frozen to floor.

My name is uncomfortable
a seven-letter word that looms like a filet knife over my collarbones.
When I hear it call to me,
I can only respond with gravel from my mouth
In a year I'll put it back in its drawer,
become a Sadie, a Joan, or a Patti.

I stand here and wait for my hair to get longer
So long it peeks through the top of my shoes
I'll be a wild beauty,
and Aphrodite will say her prayers.

When my hair is long I'll be ready
and I'll hear the sound of
each foreign word
In my mother's tongue.

I will break through the tile and meld with the dirt,
my feet not covered with leather or suede,
but with worms that live in my cupboards.
I let the filth seep through my fingernails
and dance on the wet, callous ground.

No worries of washing or wishes,
I'll soak in a pool of clear mud.
A genteel queen of the dirt I'll become.
My precious green nightgown now a
cloak of moss-covered clay
covering me in its gray-faded beauty.
My hair will hold pieces of
crow's golden treasures—
buttons and ribbons and hay.

I'll jump wildly to a pool of broken guitar strings,
pricking out notes that have never been heard.
Each twang stiff like a bone in my oven—
The noises of horses eating their corn
of angels as they descend on the earth
of children tucked in their beds.

Come back to the kitchen beneath me
My hair has grown but an inch since I left

“When will it reach me,” I ask the beauty.
No response do I get.
I suppose my hair is not long enough
and I can’t make a goddess cry.

Adeline Nevins

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Maplewood-Richmond Heights High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Kris Roudebush

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

The Secret of a Broken Brain

Our bodies have funny ways of protecting us and our minds, especially as children. Sometimes, when we experience something that is too much, our brains break. The nerves that send signals between the memory storing parts of our brain, the danger sensing parts of our brain, and our 'system control' become damaged. They continue to grow damaged as we age, and they don't fix themselves. They endure the brutal force of the trauma so that we don't have to. It is a defense mechanism; a built-in security system.

When my mom became sick when I was three years old, my brain broke. The wires that structured my adolescent brain took the brutality of surgery after surgery because my mind wasn't yet mature enough to comprehend the pain. I couldn't understand why 'mommy was throwing up' or why 'daddy was crying again'. I only knew that things weren't normal. When my mom fell out of remission and got sick again, my hope was shattered. My brain broke again. Then a third time, she was better, and as quick as she was, she wasn't. Growing up, I didn't know my brain was physically breaking and becoming more and more fractured, no one did. This was something that only affects veterans, as far as most people knew.

After her third time falling out of remission, her being sick became my normal. I grew up in and out of the hospital, and as I got older, taking care of my mom. I knew that cancer was not curable in some cases, but I was still able to cling to some hope from the shell of the child I grew out of. I watched my mom go through round after round of chemotherapy, which seemed to only make her worse. I watched her suffer a kind of suffering I wouldn't wish on anybody. There was a civil war going on in her body, slowly killing the vessel it was protecting in the process.

That morning she let go, my brain broke again, probably more than it ever had before. As I missed her last breath, my brain was hit with a bomb, shattering the remains. As I watched her try and hold on with everything she had for an entire month, my brain fell victim to my trauma. I endured more than my mind was created to handle, and in response, it broke. I couldn't feel this, not nearly as vividly as I could feel my own heart being smushed into a mush of cells and blood after watching it be ripped from its home behind my ribcage, but looking back I can pinpoint the exact moment I endured this injury. My brain now couldn't process someone being sick, without believing they were dying. Not even I knew the extent to this until it came creeping up on me 4 years later.

The echoing sound of coughing interrupted my thought process as I was editing an essay. My classmates looked up, confused, and some even giggled. The coughing was intense, sounding wet, followed by a parade of splatters. The stairwell outside of the classroom quickly became a hazard zone, like one you would find in an elementary school, not a highschool. At first, I laughed it off. I mentioned something to my neighbor about leaving the random puking in the hallways in kindergarten. The coughing slowly started to echo differently, instead of throughout the hallways, it filled up my mind. My thought process flooded with emergent signals telling everything in my body that something was severely wrong. I looked up and noticed everyone else had gone back to their work, no other panicked faces to match mine.

My head started pounding, my mind screaming at me not to cry, although I didn't know why I even felt like I was going to. Nothing had happened, just a middle schooler unable to make it to the bathroom in time. My heart was beating ferociously, almost as if I had just finished a marathon, but I hadn't. I had been sitting at a desk for over an hour. My vision became blurry all too quickly. I hoped that my mask would hide the tears that I couldn't prevent from falling. I just needed to wait until the bell rang, and then I could figure this out.

When the bell did ring, I felt a barrier between me and the door. I couldn't leave. Every cell in my body was preventing me from walking remotely near the exit, let alone through it. I walked up to my teacher to ask if I could just stay in her classroom for a bit until this intense feeling passed, but instead everything came crashing down. I tried to ask to stay but instead I broke down. How could this little incident that I didn't even see impact me this much? I couldn't breathe and I couldn't stop crying. I hid my face from the crowd of students who came flooding through the door. I didn't want anyone to see me. All I wanted to do was leave, to get out, but something was

keeping me from it. Flashbacks ran through my mind of every time my mom got sick. My head spun, memories overlapping, the sound of the hallway replaying in my mind over and over again. I couldn't get up.

The next time I opened my eyes, there were counselors there to try and remove me from the classroom. I couldn't speak. I couldn't tell them that I couldn't move, or what the problem even was. I couldn't escape the intense state of panic I found myself trapped in. It was humiliating to be that stuck in front of so many people. The only thing I could do was sit there and relieve the worst pain I had ever felt in my life over and over again.

It wasn't a coming of age movie scene where the girl is romantically broken and everyone wishes to be her, but a state of suffering while everyone watched, humiliated by one's own broken brain. A brain that is broken in a literal, physical sense. A brain that sees reality connect to a glimpse of a memory and goes into a full out panic mode. A brain that foresees every loved one dying just by the slightest trigger. A brain that no one can fully comprehend, not even itself. To live in a broken brain is to live in a house where the electricity is wired completely wrong. One wrong lightswitch flipped, causes the power to completely short out.

Adeline Nevins

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Maplewood-Richmond Heights High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Kris Roudebush

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Dancing in the Big Bright Room

In a big, beautiful, white party room dances a little girl, no older than 12, twirling in her long dress. The flowery and music filled environment welcomes her to the open space she makes her very own dance floor. The ceiling is speckled with diamonds, the orange glowing bulbs from the midriff of the walls reflecting little shards of light around the room. She faces the colossal chandelier, her eyes closed as she spins, the lights dancing around the freckles that litter her skin. She takes in her surroundings with a deep breath. The air is thick as the air conditioning units try to keep up with the amount of people in the room. The loud buzz of people talking and laughing. She mimics it, her own laughter echoing off the pristine walls. The vibrations of the sweet music shake her eardrums. The clinking of glasses almost blends into the scene. She spins for only a few seconds, yet her senses take in her environment for what feels like hours. Her bare feet stick to the floor a little bit, the sweat between them creating an adhesive like barrier. She feels secluded, as if no one in the world could possibly be watching her in this moment, yet all eyes tend to wander her way at some point in curiosity. As she hears the sounds of LP's voice singing through the speakers, she drifts away from reality, feeling the freedom in every movement she makes. Her hair spins out, synchronized with the movements of her body. She looks free, as if she is lost in a space pocket in which time does not exist. She feels as if nothing even really matters in this moment, a freeze frame of pure bliss. Her friends sit, watching in amazement, but not in her beauty. They share a shocked look on their faces at the way she feels in this moment. It shouldn't be possible for one to feel pure bliss at a time and place the girl finds herself in.

From an outside perspective, the room looks like a party, a passerby might not even stop to ponder on why these people are gathered here like this. They would be so focused on the girl in the middle of the room, spinning and laughing, that they would miss the sign on the door; "Karen Lynn Nevins ... born July 8, 1969 and died Sunday, October 8, 2017, surrounded by family and friends in her home..." She danced to keep her mind off of the events of the evening and memorial. She danced because she knew that if she would stop spinning, it would all flood back to her. She felt herself in a warzone with her own memories, dancing as a way to escape. Every time a memory tried to hit her from one direction, she spun the other way to dodge any fleeting thought of her mother. When she stopped spinning, she danced her way around the room, never pausing her movements for even a fleeting second.

Eventually, her dancing slowed, the night came to an end, and she found herself pitifully alone. The noise around her came to an abrupt stop as soon as she closed her bedroom door. The silence that waited for her in her own loneliness would consume her. For the first time in weeks, she was by herself, with no one or thing to fill up the background noises to keep the thoughts in her head distracted. She felt alone in both a physical and emotional sense. The fog filled her brain and everything came in a rush. Every emotion she was hiding behind her dancing figure came out of the dark, showing itself on her face. Her world began to spin and spin, but not in the way it was when she was dancing. The silence ran around her brain, sounding not so silent as it ricocheted around in her skull. All she wanted was peace. Peace with herself and the world around her that she had begun to experience in a way she wished she never had. Peace with the grief, the love, and the loss. The peace she sought for was never held, always fleeting, and she found that she could never catch up to it. It was when she slowed down, working through the thorn bushes of her brain, that she found it hidden away.

Adeline Nevins

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Maplewood-Richmond Heights High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Kris Roudebush

Category: Poetry

A Piece of Her Sorrow

“she will forever live
in your heart”
is a phrase i hear
far too often
if she really does
live in my heart
why does it feel
so empty?
if my mother were
truly
a piece
of me
why do i feel
more like my father?
if my organs
my bones
and blood
are mine
where is her place
in my body?
if a stupid
stupid
stupid metaphor
was made to make me feel
better
why does it make me feel
so empty?
so angry?
so lost?
why does it make me want
to scream
and throw
and kick
and break
everything in my sight?
is it because
it is a pitiful way to tell me
“i don't know
what else
to say”?
do you say it
to feel better
about yourself?

because people need
the validation
of a thank you?
are they using
my grief
as performative acts?
are they using
a phrase
with empty meaning?
are they using
me?

Adeline Nevins

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Maplewood-Richmond Heights High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Kris Roudebush

Category: Poetry

Would Be

“your mom
would be
so proud of you”
as much as it sounds
like a lovely praise,
to a motherless child,
it is just a reminder
of the hurt
the pain
the agony
and the loss.
“would be”
my first volleyball game
on the varsity team.
“would be”
my first recovery milestone
from a disease sprouted
by the death
of the woman who
“would be”
proud.
“would be”
my first day of junior year
and also my last.
“would be”
most improved player
on the soccer team
“would be”
a random reassurance
“would be”
first team
all conference
“would be”
following
i love you
“would be”
a gold medal
“would be”
a national award
“would be”
carnegie hall
“would be”
please

“would be”
shut
“would be”
up.

Adeline Nevins

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Maplewood-Richmond Heights High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Kris Roudebush

Category: Poetry

Defining my Pain

dolor
noun
a sadness
so deep and emptying
of a loss of
something or someone
loved.
dolor
the o's look me
straight in my
eyes
a stare so deep
so hungry
for anything other
than anguish and pain.
dolor
if a word
is just
a word
then why does this one
feel
so
damn
empty.
dolor
simply a word
to you,
but a reality
for me.
a word to describe
a lifelong feeling.
dolor
a cage
locking in
a beautiful bird
begging
to be set free.
sitting on its perch
which is the same shape
as the dreadful word's
center letter.
dolor
noun

a sadness
so deep and emptying
of a loss of
something or someone
loved.

Lexi Newsom

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Blue Valley North High School, Overland Park, KS

Educator: Maria Worthington

Category: Short Story

Color of the Sea

KINDERGARTEN: Closed eyes were school-bus yellow. Kindergarten, and all Anita could think about was the pink, leopard-print backpack sitting at the base of her bed; the red folder in it—she was proud to say—held one sheet of homework. Her favorite folder was blue, pale and powerful like the sea. Waves roared a couple of blocks away, salt hanging in the air, crisp and flavorful, but Anita wouldn't dare venture there by herself. The sea was terrifying.

So instead Anita sat on her bed, reading *Who is Jane Goodall?*, the backpack on the floor and the homework inside completed in green pen. Why not green. Green was different; green got people to talk to her on the rug before nap time.

Nobody liked that time though, an hour spent in the dark, laying on the hard wood of the desk and feet inches off the floor. Ms. Yu was new, and the classroom had become empty space, so the desks were taken from the fifth-grade wing. 200 steps away. Anita had counted. Ms. Yu would be proud. But laying heads down wasn't natural; none of the kids were tired, simply exchanging silent, wide-eyed looks for a half hour, waiting to play with blocks.

1ST GRADE: Ms. Hensley lost her room at the end of last year to what Mama calls "budget cuts," which, as Anita explained to her friends, meant that there wasn't enough money. Now the art room has four, grey, muted metal walls made out of drawers; now the room has wheels.

"Hi, children!" Ms. Hensley said, eyelids painted a bright green. She says the color is *money*, but Anita doesn't understand. People can't wear money on their skin, and besides, it's lime green, like the color Anita's first grade teacher taught the class to associate with envy. Anita doesn't understand envy, but some of her classmates say they do; those classmates don't talk to her as they change rooms for spelling, them going to the phonetics room, Anita going to the sentence-building room. They call the room-changing the s-word, and the first grade teacher reminds the class that "stupid" is not a kind thing to say. Anita wonders if Ms. Hensley and her money-green eyeshadow would agree.

"We—your principal calls this 'art on a cart,'" she said, gesturing to the cart. "Now, our first project will be drawing paper hearts. We have paper here and scissors, and your teacher has given us permission to use her colored pencils, too. Let me know..."

Last year, the kindergarten's first project was to paint a starry sky with their hands, but the cart doesn't have paint, just colored paper and scissors and two crayons, pink and blue. Ms. Hensley smiles at the type of paper Anita chooses: the color of envy. The color of freedom.

SECOND: The thing you learned in second grade was that the school didn't have air conditioning. The teachers weren't allowed to buy fans, but sometimes, Anita thought she saw a little green one, battery-controlled and plastic, noiseless, behind Ms. Gly's desk. Sometimes the class would grab it and pass it around, but if the principal asked, it didn't exist.

After two months of school, Ms. Gly walked in with a traffic light poster and its attached black arrow, and many mini-posters with mini-traffic lights but without mini-arrows. The large one went on the board, and the mini-posters were passed out to each desk, the corners taped down so the traffic lights didn't fall off. Ms. Gly said it's so the

class doesn't cut itself but rolls her eyes, swearing green without words. Suddenly, Anita was thinking about the art-on-a-cart, still coming around with its four walls of muted-grey walls, with Ms. Hensley in dull metallic shoes and money-green eyeshadow, and how all of Ms. Gly's green pencils have long-since run down.

"What is this?" Tommy said, without raising his hand. The quiet chorus of childish whispers starts: *What's the light for? What do we do with it? Can we take it off?*

Ms. Gly sighed, the soft sound filling the room, and explained that it's a noise monitor because the talking was making the hallways too loud. Everyone started in the green, but every time spoken out of turn was a black tally, and three of these tallies meant you drop to the next color. Yellow gave a warning; red took away recess.

Tommy filled all of the green in one day, black lines across the bright color in straight rows, and at recess, the others all laughed and said it looked like a prison. Another day gone by, and Anita thought she saw a red fan behind the desk.

Ms. Gly never mentioned that one, and no one went behind the desk anymore. If someone were to ask, probably raising their hand, the others would all nod as Ms. Gly said it was never there at all.

THIRD: There was a paper on the cupboards, the side of the room far away from the desks and front board so no one would look. That was the cast list, the thing the class had been waiting for, fidgeting in seats, while Ms. Kaylan explained the play. It was about space, and eight people would be planets and eight comets and eight asteroids, and the other classes would sing the same songs on Performance Day, about a month from now, and—

"Anita, could you speak with me in the hallway please?" Ms. Kaylan asked.

"You're in trou-ble," the class sang, but Anita just rolled her eyes and called them "stupid" on her way out. That wasn't the real s-word anyway.

"So, I know you wanted Uranus, but you're so dramatic, I was planning to cast you as Neptune instead. Is that alright with you?"

Anita nodded, already thinking through her closet for anything blue and not bluish-green. "Yeah, completely."

The cast list came out, and she couldn't help the twinge of envy that came when the rule-follower, Aidan, got the part instead. The day of the play, he got to say that he was so beautiful, despite his Uranus being more of a blackish blue, almost as dark as Anita's Neptune, rather than a turquoise green. Anita didn't remember what she said; she put a hand to her forehead and said words about feeling cold, like the deep sea.

FOURTH: STUCO was easy enough to get into: help people with classwork during the day, and be kind, and it seemed that they were inclined (new word!) to give votes. But STUCO officer elections were a different story, meaning Anita needed to make a speech. She wrote it in her mind in the car that morning, ran for secretary and was elected. It didn't seem nearly as difficult afterwards; if she could do it, anyone could, right? Besides, the position wasn't so hard. All Anita needed to do was take attendance.

Attendance, it turned out, was the easy part; vying against other positions to do her job was hard. There were leaders and there were followers, and the more Anita let the president take the clipboard, the more she felt her own power, her own limited control, given away. But she was only the secretary, and it was easy for her to get, and soon, the president called it easy altogether.

"Anita, I'll do the attendance today."

Anita did nothing.

"I'll do the attendance."

That was the day Anita told her "no."

FIFTH: There was a panda notebook behind one of the bookcases / a green scarf wrapped around its neck and its eyes like a ninja / like a visor, lime etched into the brown of the cover / along with pale grey dust. / There were pages torn out, leaving it blank, / and Ms. Andil let Anita write her name in it / in green pen, and tuck it / in her bag next to her gradient / of blue folders.

Ms. Andil had a poetry workshop, / or short stories or essays or what have you, / the only fifth grade teacher to do so.

“Write about time, Anita— / try to take on the abstract,” / Ms. Andil said. At the silent, / begging *how* in her eyes, / her teacher continued. “Do it however you’d like. / Editing is what I’m here for.” / Ms. Andil smiled.

Anita wrote through the first three untorn pages that night / about the forever passing of the sun and the moon and the tides, / about purples and blacks and greens that formed a starry night sky. / About hide-and-seek. / About a bonfire in the grass / that burned ash to the heavens.

SIXTH: Years rolled together in elementary school, but they said that fifth grade was jumping ‘cross a cavern / from one cliff to another, and it was all step-stones from there. They told her / *sixth grade, wow!* and Anita could hear the waves somewhere in the hazy purple below; *just take a step, and you’ll be fine* / and Anita took her step, her poetry journal her bridge / to hold her suspended. They told her / to write a sonnet, because what girl wouldn’t write about love? They told her / to make her messy poems rhyme. They told her / about the end-of-quarter slam. They told her / to scream into her mirror every night, reciting a love poem that wasn’t hers.

A girl almost threw up in the bathroom next to her stall, / then another and another; only Anita actually did. / Every girl performed a poem about body stigma, / the importance of / difference and / acceptance and / a proud presence, while Anita / read about dust-coated love and rhyme that she didn’t believe in.

Yes, this was different from fifth grade. Yes, there was another cliff, a rockier one, a series of pebbles, and yes, it was there (it was in sight), it was there it was there it was there— The crash of the waves overcame Anita, a pounding warm, a pounding cold. Blue ink. Green algae was out at sea, somewhere in the distance, somewhere far away from the cliffs.

SEVENTH: Ox eyes are kept in formaldehyde and green plastic packages, taken apart by silver tweezers and adult-sized child’s hands. The boys thought the smell was cool; the girls stepped into the hall, scrubbing their hands raw with purple-foam soap as if the preservation fluid was rot and the green bags, poison. The girls took turns dry heaving in the stalls, congratulating those who acted well enough to be sent home. Some started vaping in the corner. The waves became louder and louder, and she learned that algae kills.

EIGHTH: *Feminism*: the pursuit of gender equality. The word stared at her from the social studies board, a presentation on 19th- and 20th-century reform. Someone in the class laughed, called them man-haters, called them frauds. The teacher said otherwise, talking about workwomen and Sarah Chapman, left them to write an essay on feminist contributions. The girl named Anita saw a boy draw breasts, make a girl laugh.

Country music played in the background, something about having sex with whores in pick-up trucks. The teacher said that he couldn’t play rap because drug references crossed a line.

NINTH: I started writing again / in that dust-covered / green notebook / I had loved so much as a child, / as a “young adult” / (a dated word for an old soul / in youth’s gentle body). / There are no ox eyes and formaldehyde in online freshman biology. / Class happens on a computer / with a hotspot, on the beach. / There is *Catcher in the Rye* and *1984* and *Fahrenheit 451*. / For the first time, discussion / of depression and oppression and censorship, / and for the first time, girls can talk about sex / in a class. Outside of country music / it’s as if it doesn’t exist within those halls / where sexism wanders like a visible ghost, invisible fog / and where closing a class means opening up the *Post* and the *Times* for death-count numbers.

I started writing again: / writing about sexual assault and fallacies of love / writing without rhyme, dependent on the rhythm of the sea at my feet / writing about the cliff’s edge and falling / over and / over and / over; / writing about the depression I desperately want to forget / writing about loneliness, I be / the only person out on the sea / the rest of my friends waving to me / from the shore, like before—

shit, i’m rhyming again, trying again

Outside of numbers, / I gave up on expectation. / The panda on the notebook smiles, it smiles / green.

TENTH: June 24 was the day / I first felt the full effect / of deeply rooted, long-neglected sexism. / Sexism in the name of a god, not a court, / but the decision made by the latter. / It was the day i felt / angrysaddenedhurtbrokenignoredempty / worthless worthless worthless. / It was the day of nationwide perpetual mourning. / It was a day of grief.

Followed of course, as it was / by a day of fight / a protest, a march / all the way down to the sea. / Bloodstained hands and green faces, duct tape drawn across child-sized mouths / turned to motherly breaths, exhales of not-yet inhaled air / “poison” air—yes abstinence, sex beware. / We shouted down the patriarchy. / We shouted for our lives, for our air / for exhales through still-child-sized mouths. / We shouted with the sea roaring at our backs.

And afterwards followed / in the form of strong, warm arms. / A boy’s arms, a boy’s hands / whose name sings unsung on my tongue. / To him I brought the sea / through salty tears. / In the dark, / I let him hold me.

ELEVENTH: The permanence of formaldehyde in a classroom begins to be more appealing. There’s freedom in the order, the method, the sameness; one answer leads to less complexity, lets you confer with everyone else. Uniformity in a green-wrapped package. Within the standards, it’s a small rebellion. For STEM university programs, all-As is no longer a choice but a necessity, and pressure its constant companion. Perfection and ox eyes preserved in plastic, green packages.

There are panic attacks—silent ones, waves of salty tears roaring behind closed eyelids and closed bathroom stall doors because this isn’t English, and Holden Caulfield gets kicked out of schools, and it seems like everyone else is holding it together. No, if anyone asked, those panic attacks never happened, the shakiness in my hands never existed. *Breathe. Check your grades, you’re okay* The sea gets just a little quieter after that.

TWELFTH: At my first college visit, I was an exception; the teachers have started saying that word with smiles, now, and the color yellow, or a yellow-ish green. I did something that the other, bluer, more-perfect students did not.

I used a green pen.

And I guess maybe that admissions officer noticed me—the small one, the quiet one, writing in dreams about dreams on an application sent somewhere I do not know. In the ultimate sea of paper souls, in a virtual line to a pearly screen, someone noticed me.

The ED came back today, and I imagined that I encompassed the whole world, and the whole world encompassed me. My car in the parking lot at the beach didn’t feel as small, as stuffy, because there was Sarah, my lab partner, in her car, opening her computer. She was in front of a coffee shop. And there was Lily, someone I had seen but hadn’t known since third grade, and she was in *her* car. And there was someone I had never known but will know in the future; maybe we’ll ace the biochem final after studying together, or maybe we’ll work at the same lab, submitting our work for judgment together with hazy *dejà vu*. And there was someone I had never known and will never know, their future hanging before their eyes behind a stormy cloud of history and possible promise.

And here is the now, greeting me. It is a collective opening. It is a collective crying, for different reasons, private yet shared, but here it is: the culmination, the calm sea.

The car door shuts behind me, something pushing my back and my feet. The beach stretches in every direction, and the water comes to meet me—more welcoming than before—and for a moment, I think I see the horizon.

I break:

in their eyes, i see me as they do: / undefined and distant, flying / forwards on wings of glittery green / and finally, finally / that is okay

With dry, happy tears plastered to my cheeks, I drive towards the setting sun.

Katherine Nguyen

Age: 14, Grade: 9

School Name: Clayton High School, Clayton, MO

Educator: Raychelle Martin

Category: Short Story

Intergenerational Trauma

“Your parents prob had it tough back then,” a boy in the back of the classroom commented casually. His words traveled to me, at the front podium, as a jumbled mess--unintelligible sounds to my native Vietnamese ears. Yet, I still felt strangely unsettled despite my ignorance. There was something about his tone and nonchalant slang that reeked of American—an indescribable accent containing hints of privilege and condescension.

Nonetheless, I ignored his remark the best I could, pushing my discomfort aside and continuing my poor presentation of the Vietnam war. But even so, my feeble attempt to forget only kindled the flame of distaste further. Soon enough, the little boy’s words were permanently planted within me, engraving themselves into my maturing mind.

Thirty years later, I look back and finally see why I let such a meaningless statement bother me so much: it was my first taste of bitter American ignorance.

Being only eight years old at the time, the tropical taste of Jackfruit still fresh on my tongue, I could barely understand his foreign language. Only after the English was forcefully shoved into my mouth could I accurately detect his subtle misunderstanding.

You see—he noted my parent’s past battles, completely oblivious to our present ones. It seems that everyone forgets that fighting is not only on the frontlines, pain is not only felt from bullets or exploded limbs. The true battles of war transcend beyond mere ephemeral experiences; it’s the parasite of trauma that is most vicious. Its venom finds a way to latch onto its victims forever, inevitably brought home to continue its torment. Naturally, my infected parents unknowingly brought it home to me—an innocent child.

This is what the boy didn’t realize: like my ancestors, I too, “had it tough”.

At the ripe age of ten, I finally understood my heritage. A paper packet with a messily scribbled “C+” in the corner roused an unexpected reaction from my mother. At home, she stared at me with horror and disgust, her eyes snarling, *who is this failure?* Without skipping a beat, her calloused hand flew across my mouth.

“We didn’t come to America for you to be stupid! We fought and sacrificed. Provided you with opportunity!” My mother’s raging Vietnamese bombarded me, soon coupled with the projectiles of blows and objects. Her furious vitriol instilled constant reminders of my worthlessness: I couldn’t even be a “good Asian”.

Leaving me with purplish-blue welts scattered like polka dots across my skin, my mom marched into her bedroom and slammed the door. Seconds later, a soul-stopping wail resonated throughout the apartment. Stunned, I froze and listened to the hysterical sobs coming from my mother’s bedroom. It was as if an oppressive restraint had been unchained from her throat, releasing a tsunami of agony.

Each deafening wave was a sharp dagger piercing my heart; the emotional damage from hearing my mother’s raw desperation exceeded any form of physical abuse. It caused part of me to die that day. The blood of innocence and

joy seeped out of me, replaced with the parasitical liquid of tears and trauma; my mind became less child and more soldier– the “good Asian” my mom wanted me to be. I absorbed her pain like a sponge, not knowing that I would soon drown in it. I was infected. And so, I started fighting harder in school, hoping to squeeze out my family’s poison. Foolish.

The burden of my family’s welfare weighed on my not-yet-fully developed shoulders, a suffocating pressure for a child who hasn’t even graduated middle school yet. Though I must admit, my parents–or commanders–trained me well. With each slap and punishment, each savored word of praise, they conditioned me to be a mindless soldier just as they were. Like a puppet, I let myself be strung along, my fate created to please American society– the dictators that decided if we were to be hungry or not, shunned or accepted. Doomed with our slanted eyes, olive skin, and automatic tone in our voices, we had to fight for the tiniest sliver of approval; it was my job to fight.

Each day contained hours of combat between textbooks and headaches. My commanders sent nonstop work my way, and before I knew it, my academics piled so high that I was practically imprisoned by the scribbles of numbers and words. The pain of stress and sleep deprivation consumed me.

Unfortunately, the merciless battlefield didn’t end there. Beyond school, I had to work a part-time job to put food on the table; I had to translate for my parents who stubbornly refused to learn English; and on top of all that, derogatory terms constantly assailed me, degrading me to the ground until I never wanted to get up. But I *had* to. For my family, I persevered until I reached the success of an American degree, a piece of paper granting prosperity as a doctor or engineer—a piece of paper proving that we deserved a spot in a country that treated us indifferently.

Well, I have “made it” in this “dreamland”. I’ve succeeded in attaining the coveted degree, made enough money to provide stability to my parents, and am whitewashed enough to avoid the dirty looks that used to follow me wherever I went. I’m living the “American dream”. I’m happy.

I lie: ultimately, these sanguine words are just empty affirmations to keep myself sane. I try to hide the fact that psychologically, I’m scared and bruised, far from my purported appearance of the “model immigrant”. Rip the layers of white picket fences, designer clothes, and deceiving smiles off of me and I’m still the curled-up child drowning in pain. The venom of the parent’s parasite continues to flow through my veins; I am yet to find a cure for my mental debilitation.

I was created from sorrow, guilt, and suffering, the trauma inscribed into my psyche. The boy didn’t understand what it meant to be an immigrant Vietnamese child.

Katherine Nguyen

Age: 14, Grade: 9

School Name: Clayton High School, Clayton, MO

Educator: Raychelle Martin

Category: Critical Essay

Natural rights against normality: building a free society

Unbeknownst to many, in our minds are a multitude of conceptual pillars. Built off the bricks of societal beliefs and connected by the mortar of our compliance, hundreds of social norms are continuously fabricated within us. We subconsciously internalize these unspoken principles starting from the early ages of childhood: what color clothes to wear, who to play with, or who you'll want to be when you grow up; girl or boy, white or a minority—our lives interchangeably translating into a never-ending list of social norms. But unfortunately, this is only the foundation. Brick by brick, we unknowingly adapt to further external expectations and conventions later on in life, eventually giving rise to a barbed box incarcerating our every will and judgment: normality—the silent stunner of a free society—our prison.

Normality, as Yana Tavanier defines it, is the collective average for specific characteristics. In America, supported by our history and institutions' lack of diversity and representation, these averages are commonly seen in a specific form: Christian, white, straight, and a plethora of additional data points addressing all facets of our existence. As unthreatening as this may sound, these simple statistical averages are often manipulated into toxic criteria on the judgment of individual validity; they turn into distorted perspectives of “norms”—oftentimes mistakenly considered a euphemism for “good”. Soon, numerical normals and abnormal generate contrasting connotations—positive and negative, respectively. Because of this wide chasm of the dichotomy between perceived right and wrong, the minorities who are unable to fit inside the narrow box of norms are unjustly facing many more consequences and disadvantages than their normalized counterparts. From brutal hate crimes to subtle, albeit impactful, microaggressions, embracing one's atypical traits means simultaneously risking life and well-being—challenging the borders of deeply established and predominant orthodoxy.

Yet, it is not only in this maltreatment that normal is corrupt; the consequential pressure of conformity also fetters many. Condemned to an unforgiving box of social rubrics grading our every move in accordance with normal, many find themselves valuing “fitting in” over their fulfillment—volition overpowered by the fear of exclusion or punishment. Whether it's trying to abandon ethnic culture to avoid racism, males acting more “masculine” to avoid judgment, or literally and figuratively attempting to fit into high school social norms by unhealthy weight goals, dynamic cycles of chastisement, adaptation, and acceptance constantly orchestrate our life.

When every faction of our life is dictated by this stifling box of normality, we lose the very core values our country was founded on: a free society. As Adlai Stevenson—former United States Ambassador—describes it, “a free society is one where it is safe to be unpopular”—the polar opposite of our “majority rules” mentality. Thankfully though, this imprisonment of our free will can be reasonably unshackled with already existing doctrines in our constitution: natural rights. In its simplest form, these “inalienable rights” classify that which each human is undeniably granted: life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness—so long as they “do not interfere with the liberty of others.” In today's modern world, they can be understood as the right to freedom on the basis of sexuality, culture, beliefs, etc—our “god-given” right to righteous individuality no matter the norms. In the words of Thomas Paine, “... rights of acting as an individual for his own comfort and happiness which are not injurious to the rights of others.” Conclusively, natural rights are supportive of idiosyncratic lives, however, normality is not.

These powerful principles hold the capability of guiding our society to liberation, but of course, stay theoretical without the necessary respect and understanding. It is only when we, as a country, unite and adjust our outlook, that we'll be able to demolish our prison of “normal”. We can use natural rights to re-educate ourselves against ingrained

beliefs of rigid conventionality, ultimately destroying the instilled pillars within our minds. With an open-minded slate devoid of skewed judgment—the suffocating expectations, standards, and conventions merely remnants—we'll rebuild a society unrestricted by “normal”: a free society where all identities and beliefs are respected.

Malia Noel

Age: 16, Grade: 12

School Name: Savannah High School, Savannah, MO

Educator: Carole Bunse

Category: Poetry

things i wish you'd never asked

“

- tell me a secret
- what kind of secret?
- any kind.

(you are chaos and order and all inbetween. a smile like sunshine kept back by clouds. it is as if the entire world has imploded inside you; patterned constellations sewn unto your gilded skin. you are filled with soft, dark music—a beautiful melody I could listen to forever. and I will.)

- i don't have any secrets.
- that's a lie. everyone has secrets.

(you have haunted my thoughts and dreams since the moment i laid eyes on you. i have memorised the slant of your nose and the furrow in your brow, the sweep of your lashes and the glint in your stormy eyes, the rhythm of your steps and the freckles that dot your face. i could recognise you by touch alone, by smell. i would know you blind, deaf, numb, in this world or any other.)

- alright, here's a secret: i'm afraid.
- of what?

(eternity. oblivion. failure. crowded rooms and authority figures and being alone too long. and you, i'm terrified of you. because you have the power to destroy me and you don't even know it. i'm less afraid of dying than i am of losing you and that scares me, too. and of love. i am afraid of falling in love. you make me feel like I'm on top of the world and, that's a very long way to fall).

- heights.
- you're joking.
- no, really. it's the falling, i think. not the height itself.
- tell me another one.

(i love you).

”

—things i wish you'd never asked.

Malia Noel

Age: 16, Grade: 12

School Name: Savannah High School, Savannah, MO

Educator: Carole Bunse

Category: Poetry

lessons of the heart

it would have been okay

it would have been okay, if it weren't for the loneliness. i liked to be alone — i liked the summer sun peeking her head over the lily-thin wings of dragonflies fluttering along with the breeze. i liked the creaking and shifting of the quiet woods, and the stirring of wildlife within. the thin little bodies of crocus flowers. the silent wisdom of the trees. i could spend hours in silence, listening. stirring my darjeeling. knowing myself and the language of the world, in the way that being alone allows — as if nature says *i'm showing only you this, are you watching, my darling?*

but i was still lonely. not in the places i expected, but in private, horrible moments. a snatched in-between state that would bundle up inside of me, bristling — unannounced, the *lonely* just simply arrived, without knocking, full and hungry. it saw me come out of the shower and said *no one would know if you hit your head, my love* it saw the golden browning edges of my perfect muffin tops and said *you can never eat enough to fill this ugly, empty, gaping hole inside your very soul*. it scooped me up in one giant arm and hung me from a noose in these otherwise tranquil moments, choking me sweetly, and said *will anyone notice if you're gone? and if they did, would they even care?*

a shifting, horrible thing — loneliness without escape. loneliness without shape. loneliness swallowing me with a single, gaping yawn. loneliness tightening the noose.

this is how i remember being young

in this dream, we are 16 again. august is eating us alive, but no one is noticing nor do they care. we spend the days sleeping on pillows stained with sorrow and the nights on our knees praying to made up gods in the hopes something, anything would change.

i'm getting sick, but i don't know what that means, yet. my dad and his mother (my grandma unknown) continue to scream over the phone and my gums bleed everytime i say family. i've never met his parents. never known his family.

how many times have we prayed love was enough to fix someone? 10th grade still lives in my bones and it hurts every time i walk, knees cracking, feet bleeding, back breaking from the burdens i never should have had to carry. the summer of chapstick flavoured lips and cracked knuckles. crying in your car and braiding your hair until it feels like a noose around your neck, tightening so sweetly. and the boys. their swiss army knives dissecting pretty girls in parking lots, then swallowing them whole. spitting the bones out to chew on later. serial killers in the making.

this is how i remember being young: sitting by the window at night holding my breath. hoping to choke on dying breaths and tears and i close my fists and sit still. mom says let go. i try to let go. i can't let go. i don't know how to let go. no one taught me to let go. *how do i let go—*

It's not that I don't love you

It's not that I don't love you. It's the sound I heard when I was nine and my friend's father slammed the front door

so hard behind him I swear to god it shook the whole house. For the next 3 years, I watched her mother break her depression-stained teeth on vodka bottles. I think she stopped breathing when he left. I think a part of her died. I think he took both their hearts with them when he left. Their chests empty now, just a shattered mess of cracked ribs and anxiety pills swimming in pools of blood.

It's not that I don't love you. It's all the blood in the sink. It's the night I spent 12 hours in the emergency room waiting to see if my sister would be okay, after the boy she loved assaulted her. It's the crying, and the fluorescent lights, and white sneakers, and too-polished white hospital floors, too clean smells, and pale faces and shaky breaths and blood. *So much blood.*

It's not that I don't love you. It's the time that I had to stay up for two days straight with my best friend while she cried and screamed and threw up on my bedroom floor because her boyfriend fucked his ex. I swear to god she still has tear streaks stained onto her cheeks. I think that when you love someone, it never really goes away.

It's not that I don't love you. It's the eight weeks we had a substitute in History, because our teacher was getting divorced and couldn't handle getting out of bed. When she came back smiling, but her hands shook so hard when she held her thermos, you could see that something was broken inside. And sometimes when things break, I'm not sure they can be fixed. Nothing ever goes back to how it was.

It's not that I don't love you, it's my mother's whispered warnings about men in the dark veil of night. It's the turning on the television and seeing another young woman kidnapped, raped, and murdered. It's the walking to the bus stop and seeing missing posters of young girls stapled to every telephone pole. It's the feeling I get deep within my bones whenever a man stands too close or walks a little too fast behind me in the deserted parking lot.

It's not that I don't love you. It's that I've heard too many stories, known too many women, who have been brutalised by the hatred of men masquerading as love. It's that every woman I know has a scary story about their male co-worker, a classmate, an ex-lover, or the neighbour next door.

It's not that I don't love you. It's that I do. And that alone terrifies me, because you're going to break me too.

Malia Noel

Age: 16, Grade: 12

School Name: Savannah High School, Savannah, MO

Educator: Carole Bunse

Category: Poetry

if the train comes

i know we're both just messing around
pretending to be whole.

i know we're both shattered shards
of what we once were.

but look at me, darling.

if the train was coming,
would you move?

if the ground was falling
from underneath your feet,
would you even notice?

or would it just be
another tuesday for you?

if somebody stabbed you,
twisting, twisting, and twisting still,
could it hurt worse than you already do?

what i'm saying is that

i love you.

but i think we both drive
over the speed limit
when it's raining.

what i'm saying is that

you have me to bandage you up.

and i understand about how
sometimes you just have
to sit down in the shower and cry.

what i'm saying is that

i'm here for you, and —

if the train comes, please move.

Madee Omran

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Anita Hagerman

Category: Humor

A Divine Exposé

A Divine Exposé

“We passed rapidly along; the sun was hot, but we were sheltered from its rays by a kind of canopy, while we enjoyed the beauty of the scene, sometimes on one side of the lake, where we saw Mont Saleve, the pleasant banks of Monalegre, and at a distance, surmounting all, the beautiful Mont Blanc, and the assemblage of snowy mountains that in vain endeavour to emulate her; sometimes coasting the opposite banks, we saw the mighty Jura opposing its dark side to the ambition that would quit its native country, and an almost insurmountable barrier to the invader who should wish to enslave it” (Shelley 139).

-Victor Frankenstein

It's beautiful, isn't it? I'm talking about what I just read to you from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Doesn't it make you feel nostalgia for something you've never experienced? That's because it's about nature. Humans are connected to her, their life force is intertwined with her's. Emotions rise and fall like the tide, a person can be icy like the Arctic Ocean, or green and vibrant like a meadow full of wildflowers. One day you could feel like a storm, and the next, you could feel like the mountains in summer. Either way, nature is a profound, primal force who makes the Earth, Earth. She makes you feel like nothing else matters and envelops you in her warm embrace, taking all of your problems away.

Ha! Scratch all that, I was joking. So, here's the thing... None of that is true, Mother Nature is a petty, jealous, needy, narcissistic brat who could not survive without me but pretends like I'm the problem, ugh! Hi, I don't think we've been properly introduced, my name is Adlkjhipuhfoiuhooqwiefnsjrktqeprewugefmvjoiqwigrjkqptmfwpu, but I don't think you can pronounce that, so you can call me by common name, Sun. Yup, you heard me right, I'm that Sun, The Sun, as in the star that gives you life. But anyways, back to the passage. I'm mentioned for a split second, at the very beginning. Stupid Victor, he's vilifying me, making it seem like it's a bad thing that I warm the Earth, that I am the bringer of light, that I am in charge of Earth's survival, but noooo that doesn't matter to him, the powerless mortal. Look who he turns to for shelter. Surprise, surprise, everyone's favorite primordial being, Mother Nature. I've had enough of that though, so today I'm going to be talking about why Mother Nature is an overrated piece of... sorry, I'm better than that. Where was I, oh yeah... Today I'm going to be talking about the real reasons why Mother Nature does the things she does, hint, it's not for you humans. I will be using a few real-world examples to illustrate my point. They are well known because stories were written about them. For some unfathomable reason, writers always choose to craft their stories with dumb themes like, “embracing nature is the key to happiness”, or “nature mirrors the characters' inner turmoil”, yeah I'm looking at you, Victor.

Let's begin with the story of why Mother Nature decided to create the mountains that Victor is looking at. It's not because she wanted to make him happy, or because it would provide an amazing habitat for countless species. It's because she fell in love... with a cloud. It hurts me to even think how stupid she had to be to fall in love with a cloud. Science time! Clouds are made of water vapor. They form when my rays cause liquid water to reach a gaseous state and clump in the sky. When the air can't hold any more gaseous water, the water condenses into a liquid form, but these tiny droplets of water are so minuscule that gravity has no effect on them, and wallah, they float. Clouds also accumulate mineral dust that helps hold them together. Keep in mind that part of Mother Nature's form is the water on our planet, as well as the surface dust that covers up the fiery depths of the Earth. So both things that clouds are made of are part of Mother Nature (from here on I will be referring to her as Ma, I can't keep saying her full title). Anyways, back to the story, one day Ma was admiring her largest boreal forest while eating a baby Siberian Tiger (it had fallen in one of her tar pits) when a large cloud slowly drifted above her. At first, she didn't think anything of it, but as she looked a little closer, she became very attracted to it. Something about it just

looked appealing, she couldn't tell what it was, but in my opinion, it probably just reminded her of herself, what a narcissist. She called to the cloud, "Hey, come down here bud!" The cloud didn't respond, so she yelled again, "Talk to me, I love you, please, I'm begging you." The cloud finally responded with a thunderous boom, "I was formed yesterday creep!" . But Ma wasn't having it, so she raised the Earth to reach him, and up came the mountains. She was able to touch him one time, and very soon after, he started raining, which meant his death. Ma created a large basin in the ground to catch most of him, and for the most part, it worked. The lake that Victor is looking across from is actually Ma's true love. I purposefully shine the sun stronger there so the water can turn back to cloud form and keep rejecting her. If he's always water then he can't escape her clutches. Time for the next story!! It will be a little shorter because your side of the Earth has almost turned away from me.

If by your art, my dearest father, you have
Put the wild waters in this roar, allay them.
The sky, it seems, would pour down stinking pitch,
But that the sea, mounting to the welkin's cheek,
Dashes the fire out. O, I have suffered
With those that I saw suffer: a brave vessel,
Who had, no doubt, some noble creature in her,
Dash'd all to pieces. O, the cry did knock
Against my very heart. Poor souls, they perish'd.
Had I been any god of power, I would
Have sunk the sea within the earth or ere
It should the good ship so have swallow'd and
The fraughting souls within her (Shakespeare 1.2.1-13).
-Miranda

Did you like that? I sure did. Sweet, sweet Miranda was finally right about something, Ma. Is. EVIL. But... you probably noticed that Miranda is blaming Prospero, not Ma. If you've ever read or seen the *Tempest*, you would know that the pathological liar Prospero doesn't deny it and pretends like he actually caused the storm. Oh wait, you're not omniscient like I am, Prospero LIED. William Shakespeare believed him when he was writing *The Tempest*. Just like Mary Shelley, he fell victim to the simple-minded, unfulfilling theme that human emotion/inner turmoil runs parallel to Ma, well just nature to him. Fortunately, you're about to hear the real, unedited truth of what happened to the ship, and it involves the weirdly complicated cloud situation.

As you now know, I am constantly trying to turn the lake back into a cloud so he can float away from the mountains. Well, one day, after a huge sunburst, I succeeded for the second time (you'll hear about the first time later). This happened long before humans settled in the mountains, but one very confused black bear witnessed the whole thing. All the commotion woke Ma from her 100,000-year nap, so she wasn't too pleased. When she saw her cloud escaping at a frighteningly fast pace for a cloud, she followed. She shot more mountains up out of the ground, but he was too fast. She blew wind in his face, but he was too fast. She rose the ocean to meet him, but he was too fast. Eventually, he made it to an island, where he saw a teenage girl with horror on her face and a ship getting wrecked by rising ocean waters and strong winds. The cloud realized the only way for him to escape was to rain into the ocean, and he had to do it fast. So... down came the tumult, and a combination of Ma's winds and swirling waters, plus desperate rain made for dangerous conditions. Eventually, after a few years, she found his water in the depths of the ocean and moved him back to the lake. But this story just shows the lengths Ma was willing to go to get her beloved cloud. The storm seems even more malicious after realizing the fact that Ma didn't even notice the ship, proving she had no regard for human life. I still don't know why Prospero lied, he might have just wanted to look like he knew what he was doing in front of his daughter, mortals are so self-conscious. It's not just mortals who have some negative traits though, I can think of a few Gods who do too, Zeus and Hermes for example (I'm not even going to get started on Apollo that copycat). This next tale involves them and Ma of course.

PHILEMON

I'd hate to see my wife's grave, or have her weep at
Mine.

NARRATOR 2

The gods granted their wish. Arrived at a very old age
together, the two stood at what had been their modest

doorway and now was a grandiose facade.

ZEUS

And Baucis noticed her husband was beginning to put forth leaves, and he saw that she, too, was producing leaves and bark. They were turning into trees. They stood there, held each other, and called, before the bark closed over their mouths— (Zimmerman 10.70-79).

Wow, isn't that neat? Let's all give a hand to Mary Zimmerman for writing *Metamorphoses*, a spinoff of traditional stories, like the tale of Baucis and Philemon. But, what is up with these themes of "nature and the human condition running together"? KILL ME NOW... actually, that's impossible, you'll be stuck with me for another 5 billion years give or take. Enough about me though, I think you can already tell that this story is going to be about Ma's cloud. It always is... When she doesn't get what she wants, strange things happen. I would also like you to know that I am an incredibly reliable narrator of this story because Baucis and Philemon (I will be referring to them as BaP* from now on) have been using me for photosynthesis for many years now. As well as this, I can see everything from my vantage point.

* BaP also happens to be the symbol of Benzo(a)pyrene, which is a component of tar. It is another symbol of Ma's evil because as you know from the tiger example, she uses tar pits to catch baby animals.

When BaP let Zeus and Hermes into their home, the cloud drama was already beginning. You see, the first time that I turned the lake water back into a cloud Ma did not wake up. The cloud floated as fast as he could until he reached Greece, where he heard that he could get hired by Zeus, which is exactly what happened. For some reason, Zimmerman left out the part of the story where Zeus and Hermes flooded the entire village after turning BaP's house into a temple. Ma's cloud had to do the dirty work. Well, after the cloud had rained himself onto the village, he got soaked into the Earth. This is where Ma comes in. BaP had just asked to die at the exact same moment as each other, so Zeus and Hermes were formulating a way to do this. They turned to their ditzy friend Ma because sometimes she had good ideas. Eventually, she learned that her cloud was in the ground at the village, and she came up with a plan. If BaP were to become trees, then she would be connected to them, as they would be part of nature. Trees need water, so they would soak up the water in the ground, which would be made up of Ma's cloud! That's exactly what she did, and Zeus and Hermes kept their end of the deal. It seems super smart until you think about it a little. Ma could have just as easily made hundreds of trees in the village, and that way she could get all of her cloud soaked up, but I don't know why I expect anything better from her anymore.

I guess that's the end of it. After I witness a few more things and read a few more books based on them, I'll tell you what actually happened. Remember... you can't trust authors to understand anything, they're too blinded by their devotion to Ma and what she represents. Also, you better run, that cloud is moving way too fast.

Madee Omran

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Megan Zmudczynski

Category: Short Story

Remember?

Remember?

We never stood a chance. From the very beginning, we were bound to fail, like two doves with their wings tied together plummeting into the ocean. I just wish we knew sooner—before we made contact with the ice-cold water. Now we're like dewdrops in the morning, ones that once sparkled in the sun's warm light, but dissipated into the air before anyone knew they were even there.

I liked you from the moment I met you. I know that was a long time ago, but I liked you nonetheless. I still remember the first time you talked to me. You were complaining about your dad, you said he would kill you if you got a B on your math test. I thought you were only joking, but at this point, I know you weren't. You had problems, but that wasn't a problem for me. I thought if I could fix you, if I could save you from yourself, then we could be happy together, it's not till now that I realize I'm the one who needed fixing. In a way, it was the fact that you needed to be saved that made me like you.

I've been rescuing things ever since I was little. There was this one time that a beetle was on its back, trapped in a plate of olive oil at my family's favorite restaurant. We were dining with our friends. All the other kids laughed at the beetle, they whipped it with their napkins. I yelled. Yelled at them to stop, yelled at them to have compassion for another soul. While they continued to chuckle, I extended my hand. The beetle grasped for my finger desperately, it clambered on, and after its elytra dried, it flew away. My mom called me her little angel. My dad said that if giant aliens ever came to stomp on humans, I would be the only one spared. It was sick in a way, taking pride in the fact that everyone around me would be slaughtered, while I would be the beneficiary of the universe's twisted sense of justice.

You were like that beetle to me... trapped in the olive oil of your own making, and me, the outstretched hand yearning to save your life saw you there. No one else noticed you. You didn't have any friends, I didn't either, that's how I knew we needed each other. Throughout elementary school, you read during recess. You enjoyed these amazing, complex books about dystopian societies. It's funny. Your life was dystopian, and your only escape was books where everything was wrong...

Remember when we started dating in high school? We were our own clique, never fitting in with the popular people, the nerds, or the jocks, we were simply us, and that was ok. Shortly after we began dating, you came to a school with a black eye. You said you got hit in the face with a softball while you were watching the team practice. I believed you, I shouldn't have.

I never liked your dad. He scared me. I think it was something about his eyes, how deep and blank they looked all at once. The only thing that could excite him was cooking. He loved to chop the meat that he made you get from the store. With his giant knife, he would cut through the raw, bright red flesh. His pupils would get wide, as he smiled slyly. Sometimes I wondered what else that knife had cut.

During our senior year of high school, you cried every single day. I couldn't figure out why, and that hurt me. One time when I was driving to your house with a box of donuts, hoping to put a smile on your broken face, I hit a dog. I could tell I didn't kill it, but as I bent down to read his collar, I saw that his ankle was twisted in the wrong direction, and his eyes were glassy. I drove him to the address on his collar. I cried on the way. I gave the donuts that were supposed to be for you to the dog's owners, along with a pile of cash to pay for the vet's bills. I knew there was no chance the aliens would let me live anymore.

College was hard for us. We went our separate ways, but somehow we made long-distance work. That was when I knew I had to marry you. We were eating at the four seasons, a couple of weeks after our senior year of college ended. I proposed, right then and there. With shock on your face you said yes, it might have been the proudest moment of my life. Later that year we moved in together, and then got married. Our wedding was perfect, I mean of

course it was, you planned it. Giant white balloons studded the cathedral, where an organ played the music. Your dress was long, and billowed in your wake, how could it not? During the dance, a cardinal hit the stained glass. It fell a long way down to the ground. We saved it, you and me. We skipped our honeymoon to nurse the bird back to health. Everyone thought we were crazy, including you, but I convinced you that we could always travel later. Humans were responsible for the cathedral, so they were responsible for the cardinal's pain, so we were responsible for taking care of it. It made me feel good. I convinced myself that I was doing it for the bird, so it could live to sparkle in the sun once more, but really it was more for my ego. It made me feel like I was special, different from the rest of the human race. Selfishness lived inside me and simply projected itself in the form of selflessness.

By my 50th birthday, our life was perfect. We co-owned a flower shop because you loved to garden. Our entire backyard was filled with colorful blooms all year round. You knew exactly which ones to choose so even in winter some would survive. It attracted all kinds of birds and insects. My favorites were the bees. It was the way they worshiped the flowers and their queen, how they communicated with wobble dances and buzzed excitedly in spring. It might have been the most awe-inspiring day of my life when a tree fell on their hive. There was a large flurry of activity in the colony. Each bee carried a larva as they flew, while multiple had to help carry the queen. Even amid disaster royalty was prioritized. I rushed to home depot to buy a beehive meant for honey farming. Of course, I wasn't going to use it for that, but they needed a new home. I put it outside where they would find it, and quickly it became inhabited. You weren't very happy with me. That makes sense though as you were stung multiple times trying to garden around them. I wish those days still existed, but now they are nothing more than shreds of memory, tinged blue, lost to the ruthless void of time.

We retired when you got brain cancer and everything fell apart. We went to the doctor because you were getting migraines almost every day. They did an MRI, and very calmly stated that there was a mass on your cerebrum. I still haven't forgiven them. It's not their fault, but it's their fault we knew about it, I wish we never found out. Your condition declined rapidly from there. You couldn't garden anymore, because you forgot how, so the shop had to be closed down. A piece of you died when that happened. But soon it didn't matter, because you forgot about almost everything. The doctors said it was starting to affect your Hippocampus, that it would have the same effect as Alzheimer's, except it would be destroying the rest of your body too.

Your name is Mary, I call you Mae, remember? I am your husband, we are both 70 years old, we like that we have the same birthday. This is our house, you are on our bed. I know you don't know what I'm talking about, you've forgotten everything. Mae, don't worry, today is the day I save you. Today is the day I make sure that the beetle finally gets out of the olive oil and flies away. You have to take these pills Mae, don't worry, they'll help you get home. They'll help you soar like a dove, out of the ocean, into the sky--far away from your earthly troubles, you will be free, and I will have finally saved you. You'll remember me next time we see each other---when the morning finally arrives again, and our dewdrops can sparkle in the sun forever. Goodbye Mae...

Hannah Paalhar

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Marcelline High School, Marcelline, MO

Educator: Julie Sheerman

Category: Poetry

Just Breathe.

Just breathe.

Just breathe.

The teacher would tell her after she failed her math test.
After she stayed up for hours in the night,
Eat, sleep, and breathe the various formulas is what she did.
Relearning how to use her calculator she bought three days before.

Just breathe.

Just breathe.

The person on the phone muttered when she found out the news.
The news that she wouldn't be accepted to her dream school.
When the little girl that had the Harvard hat on her dresser,
Would be crushed after her life is thrown off track.

Just breathe.

Just breathe.

Is what she told herself when all she could think about was the end.
The steady decline that her life had taken.
The fall of her health, care, and effort.
And how often she thought of how far the car would go if she closed her eyes.

Just breathe.

Just breathe.

Hannah Paalhar

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Marceline High School, Marceline, MO

Educator: Julie Sheerman

Category: Poetry

Her Future Since She Was Sixteen.

One more step until her life had changed completely.
Two more days until her honeymoon would sweep her away.
Three more years until she had her first daughter.
Four different people that would tell her he cheated on her.

Five times he would tell her that it meant nothing.
Six times she would threaten to call the police if he didn't leave.
Seven years old is how old her daughter turned the previous day.
Eight days until she would go live with her mother.

Nine months of therapy would not solve this heartache.
Ten times he would leave a voicemail begging her to take him back.
Eleven more years of child support he had to pay.
Twelve days of Christmas she would sing alone with her daughter.

Thirteen months she's been in her new house.
Fourteen days she's been with the new love of her life.
Fifteen minutes till he would be coming home to her.
Sixteen times he would give her daughter a story before bed that night.

Aubree Pestano

Age: 17, Grade: 11

School Name: Smithville High School, Smithville, MO

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Poetry

Pieces

Pieces

Not being around him feels uncomfortable,
It feels lonely.
Not the pretty and peaceful kind of lonely
The scary and isolating version of lonely

You never really notice that the people in the past have damaged you,
Until you are living with their scars that still open up from time to time.

They haunt you,
like the monsters that you never really see in the dark
Or the ones that are hidden in the deepest darkest depths under your bed.

Sometimes I think something is just wrong with me,
I always have the idea that I will never get my happily ever after at the end of my story,

It's engraved into my brain

Until this boy came along, he showed me love, he showed me kindness, he showed me happiness

And yet, the scars still haunt me

The constant thoughts,
They own me more than I own myself

You're not good enough,

You don't deserve love,

He will forget about you,

He is just pretending,

Their words tattooed on my skin, like a shadow that covered a once beautiful tan, white with a little hint of orange and yellow.

...People didn't just hurt me
They haunt me

They are like nightmares that I just never seem to wake up from,
Pinching myself until my skin starts to bleed
Screaming and yet no one can hear me

I was loving, I was sweet, and yet I'm chained up inside of my head
With the constant screams, reminding me if I wasn't ever good enough for anyone else...

Why would this time be any different

Getting rid of these monsters were like forgetting how to breathe...

There is only one way to get rid of them,
But with them
The light, the colors, the memories...
With them, would come me.
Dragging me with them, the same way they have my whole existence,
Following me to wherever I might go.

And even though I can barely walk,
I fight the urge to run.
I gain the strength to open my eyes and find
I have not escaped the monster,
I have only ran from the people that care

This is when I learned running from yourself is impossible

Caroline Place

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Blue Valley North High School, Overland Park, KS

Educator: Diane Morris

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

The Theatre, The Theatre

THE THEATRE, THE THEATRE

For as long as I can remember, I have loved costumes. (The two-year-old with leopard-print sunglasses and a matching spotted romper? Topped off with a set of leopard ears? That would be me!) Whether playing dress-up with my siblings, or planning a themed Halloween ensemble with my friends, I am all about the outfit. I especially love fancy clothing, sparkles and ruffles, beautiful shoes, and creative accessories. To me, one can never be overdressed. As a preschooler, I wore my pink plastic Princess Aurora high heels daily, to prove it; I was a total diva for costumes. My parents used this knowledge as one reason for toting me, along with the rest of our family, to see live performances. As a five-year-old, I sat through all three-and-a-half hours of my first Shakespearean production: *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at the Heart of America Shakespeare Festival in Kansas City. Little me was awed by all the beautiful people – and one very funny donkey – dressed so exotically, spouting funny words I didn't quite understand. I was transfixed. Though none of us comprehended it fully at the time, I know now that I had found my place. My love of costumes led me straight to the theatre, and even more specifically, to the stage. I am the happiest version of myself when I arrive there, as either a member of the audience, or a performer in a production.

The theatre is a delight for each of the senses. As a young adult, I am still fascinated by the sight of swashbuckling men jabbing their swords at each other; gorgeous ladies twirling in gorgeous gowns; and ghosts, witches, and fairies (and all the other costumed characters a playwright has dreamed up) stealing across the stage. At an outdoor theatre, the sky darkens to a dusky gray, then black, and the theatre's lights dance in the air. There are even fireflies, if you are lucky. And in the theatre, you will hear so many lovely or angry or heartbreaking or hilarious lines the actors speak. At times, you will also hear strains of music, the sounds of scenery shifting, or even the scramble of an actor to make an entrance. You can "feel" the theatre, too. You may sit in a luxurious velvet seat in a theatrical palace of sorts, or you may lie back on a cozy blanket outside. If you are an actor, you literally feel the energy of the other actors onstage with you. I feel the most alive I have ever felt, when I am delivering my lines and moving to my marks. My physical progression is as perfectly choreographed as a ballet, but with words and reactions, and even the applause of audiences to spur me on. Finally, there are wonderful things to smell and taste at a theatre, too. At intermission, audience members find coffees, drinks, and treats in a beautiful lobby; or kettle corn, lemonade, and even full restaurant meals served in tents at an outdoor production. The theatre engages every sense of the performers and audience members, and gives all an experience unlike any other: A story unfurls, right before the audience's eyes in real time, performed by live humans skilled at portraying real human emotions. The audience's reactions affect the actors' performances, and those performances in turn affect the audience's emotions and even their thinking, sometimes. Theatre has the power, literally, to change one's mind.

Ultimately, the very best thing about the theatre, however, is its openness and inclusion of absolutely everyone. Regardless of your background, where you come from or what you believe, which identities you embrace, or abilities you have or don't have, you belong in the theatre. It may be on the stage performing, in the audience attending, working as a stage manager, director, or costumer, or playing any of the many other roles that must be filled, for the show to go on. But you (and everyone else) *belong* here. Theatre prioritizes making a place for everyone. I personally have met the most diverse and kind groups of people at the many different theatres I've performed at and attended. Whether I'm in costume on stage, or sitting in the cheapest seat in the highest balcony enjoying the show, I am in the happiest place I can be. I am so thankful for every opportunity to share my love of this great form of art in person, in writing, and every single time I am under the bright lights. It's "the theatre, the theatre," for me.

Makayla Plunkett

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: St Joseph's Academy, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Amy Hanson

Category: Critical Essay

Ignorant Desire

Ignorance is a privilege no one can be aware of until it is something they no longer hold.

By luck, I was born into a world that catered me to a happy ideology. Unaware of the realities that the world possessed, protected and entranced by the beliefs of what I was told. What was told to me was the reality I was happy with. Was the best part of my life when I was in an ignorant bliss?

As a child, I was ignorant that I won a genetic lottery: race of the majority, gender and sex aligned, home in an area rarely ever stalked by fear. My identity was never judged prematurely by looks. My beliefs were encouraged to be practiced. My table was always prepared with enough food to fill me. My ignorance was a privilege because I never had to pray for the best possibility, I expected it.

I expected only good, and good was all I received. I thought it was a reality that would never change until eventually, fear sparked awareness of my perfect life. I began to fear that one day, all of life would become upheaved. I believed my perfect reality would become uprooted by my loss of physicality, but I found it wasn't a loss of physical desires that would come to affect me but rather, challenging my long understanding of purpose that fabricated my reality.

I began to imagine women in ways that could only be seen shameful in my mind. In the minds of the people surrounding me, it was wicked; so in response, I used oppression to suffocate the poison. *This isn't attraction, this is the want for attention. You are thinking this because you think you should. Thoughts like this are wrong. You can never tell anyone about this. You will never be accepted.*

The thoughts started to weave together until eventually, my mind became a web of lies. Lies I would tell to myself to keep my life within the lines of the world that was laid out for me. For the first time in my life, I was scared of unacceptance. I became scared of people in every aspect of my life. My school, my family, my church, my friends—I feared their judgment. Unacceptance became my biggest fear. I didn't just fear the world, I feared myself because at the end of the day, the greatest source of unacceptance came from my own.

My ignorance no longer played to my advantage. The walls built around my mind started to become less of a device of defense, but a jail to my consciousness. My mind became a prison, I didn't know what to believe, what I wanted to believe, or who I wanted to be. I thought that I was alone...but that's just ignorance.

Growth of *my* understanding made me realize I was never alone. My ignorance made me believe I was the only one whose identity challenged the faith they always followed. But challenging the common understanding made me realize, our value isn't contained inside the physicality of everything we love, but rather the love we hold for our innermost self. The world sees ignorance as a set back; something that prevents us from the concept of understanding—but how can it be a set back when the most extraordinary part of our lives was when we were in an ignorant bliss?

As children, our minds were unmolded, perfect for creation of new understanding. The potter of a child's mind is their greatest influence. It is most widely believed that the duty of a child's guardian is to give shape to their understanding. But rather, the ambition of parenthood is to support its creation.

A lack of limitation to one's belief is what allows faith to blossom. One can only find understanding of what they believe when there are no molded guidelines forced to be fulfilled. As a child, I was ignorant of the discrepancy of beliefs throughout the world. I was bullied for my lack of understanding of the world's realities. I was embarrassed for my ignorance; unknowing that ignorance would be something I'd forever come to desire.

I sit here today writing as a white, gay, woman of high class. To the world, those are the words used to describe me...but why? Why are we defined by the components of ourselves that make up our physicality? If our understandings of self differ amongst every person of the world, then why do our understandings of others follow a

molded stereotype? I sit here today writing as a *unique, talented, creative, expressive, compassionate, beautiful, ambitious, confident, determined, sensitive, uplifting, fearless* human. The world looks down upon ignorance, but ignorance is something that I desire. I desire to see the world with the eyes of a child, looking upon everyone for who they are, not the makeup of the physical form they take. My hope is that generations to come are graced with that ignorance, not for the sake of one's unknowing of privilege; but in the hopes that the unknowing of it is what leads to its extinction.

Catheryn Poe

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Blue Valley West High School, Overland Park, KS

Educator: Zachary Gall

Category: Short Story

Mood Indigo

“Look at yourself, if you had a sense of humor” Alex sang in the softest timbre he could coax from his tired mouth. *“You would laugh to beat the band”*

Day after day of full sets. Songs that stretched to the very ends of his range. Lounge singing was more of an act than an art. Jazz musicians played to the soul, Alex to the eyes. The stage lights left rouge melting down his cheeks.

He hoped it would add to his messy brand of charm. Women in black cocktail dresses gestured with jade cigarette smokers. The few men that were there averted their gaze too quickly when Alex looked at them.

“Look at yourself, do you still believe the rumor?” He glided down to stage right, flashing a practiced smile between phrases. *“That romance is simply grand?”*

A few even glanced down the blouses of the girls on their arms if they really wanted to sell their disguise.

But he could tell when it was genuine. It was a skill you picked up in this city, like hailing a cab or telling an earnest agent from a pickpocket.

This skill in particular meant survival. He raised his voice as he continued. Dynamics pulled emotion from the audience like a moon to the tide, and squinting against the light, he saw painted lips part as the song soared. He’d struck awe in the audience.

Something ran like lightning from the base of his spine. He could complain all he wanted. He hated the hours, the required sobriety, and the handsy women that crowded the backstage door. But he *lived* to be watched and admired, and when he sang, people gladly gave those to him.

Alex expertly dipped the microphone stand, nearly sighing the next line. *“Fools rush in, so here I am”* The front row could touch him if they wanted. No one did. It would break the illusion.

“Very glad to be unhappy. I can’t win, but here I am”

A young man, no more than a few years Alex’s junior, sat right in front of him. A girl clutched his arm, nails digging into the divots of his cheap corduroy jacket. The boy’s eyes were wide and dark, his cheek concave where he bit it.

It wasn’t simple admiration in his gaze, it was yearning.

Alex broke the stare, almost stumbling back as he righted the stand. That poor kid had so much to learn. *“More than glad to be unhappy.”*

He stepped off the stage and wandered through the aisles, winding through seats lined in crimson velvet, trying to forget the boy’s stare. The floor was a checker of tile and glass, with lightbulbs screwed beneath the panes. In a way, he was walking on fire.

Alex risked another look at the boy sitting in front, who was twisting in his chair to watch him. *“Unrequited love’s a bore,”* he sang, holding the note, letting his voice tremble, letting his gaze linger a moment too long.

That look could have been a death sentence. He knelt to kiss a woman’s hand before the chorus.

He couldn’t feel more out of place, his lips brushing the silken glove, her slim fingers grazing his palm. Her eyes were piercing, but in the crowd, she was just another nail in the bed.

He stood with a flourish and returned to the stage. *“I’m so unhappy,”* he sang. *“But oh, so glad.”*

The cold left his skin raw and knocking on the door stung more than it should have. A quick, hollow pattern in cut time. A tune in the cheap oak was a password in disguise.

He looked over his shoulder, squinting for figures in the night. Rising star Alexander Sieni outside an underground speakeasy? Newspapers would pay for that story, and journalists would earn double in royalties.

He knocked again, more urgently.

“Hold it,” a low, pretty voice ordered from the other side of the door. He couldn’t help but crack a smile hearing the familiar tone.

Parys Kapela. Her speaking voice rang like bells, but she couldn't sing. Alex had tried to teach her. It couldn't be done.

The door opened to reveal her. She pulled hair out from a knot at the crown of her head as she turned to lead him inside, letting it tumble to her shoulders.

This joint, nothing more than a kitchen leading into a church, was so unbearably beige. Cream tile that was once likely white led down an aisle to a bleached wooden altar, a bronze cross sitting atop it. He'd spent so much time pacing the pews that he could recite the obscenities etched into their wood on cue.

He turned his back to the church, his face to Parys. She shimmered against the plainness that surrounded her. Her navy dress was stitched specifically to hide her, but it failed. She glowed despite its efforts.

He really had tried to love her.

He slid his eyes to the corner of the room, to a tile missing its surrounding grout.

"Xander, can you take a look at these?"

He went to her and took one of the yellowing pamphlets she held. The gloss of her fingernails was chipped, and light danced over the spots of shine as she pulled her hand away.

"Church ads again?"

"Better," she said with a touch of a smile. "A do-it-yourself salvation guide."

Alex laughed as he flicked through it. "NO BIBLE REQUIRED, JUST AN OPEN HEART" was printed at the top of the page in crooked typewrite. It was one of the tamer printings Mrs. Kapela had commissioned.

"She'll save one of you yet." Parys threw the sheets onto the counter behind her where they fanned to nudge a postcard sitting on the edge. She shrunk when she saw Alex's eyes draw to it

"Your father?"

She nodded as she plucked it from the counter. This one had an illustration of sharp red canyons encased in an eggshell border.

"Not as pretty as the beach ones," she sighed. "I'll throw it in with the tender tonight."

After Parys's father skipped, her mother took up the church to support herself. She rallied for the prohibition on weeknights, set up food drives for those on the outskirts of the city on Saturdays, and held two church services each Sunday.

Charity didn't have a lot of money in it, so she rented out the basement to a mafioso who dealt in alcohol, swearing she'd convert his patrons.

As far as Alex knew, she hadn't saved a single soul down there. Still, he couldn't help but admire her persistence.

He cleared his throat. "Well, I love chatting, but there's booze and boys to attend to," he said, starting for the groutless tile and the staircase beneath.

She put out a hand to stop him, pressing it flat to his chest. His heart thumped pathetically. It would be so easy to be with her. They were best friends, what's one more step? No speakeasies, no alleyways. How freeing was it to hold someone in public, to walk by police and breathe easily?

"Be careful." Her hand trailed to his collar, folding it down perfectly, then graced his cheek as she straightened his mask. "And bring a girl around every once in a while, will you?"

The Indigo sweltered from the sheer number of bodies packed into the room. The stairs spiraled so sharply that Alex had to duck beneath the plywood steps as he descended. Tendrils of something, cologne or smoke, hooked you by the ear as you entered, and pulled you down, down down.

The entire floor was a theater in the round, and the stage in the middle housed the only lighting other than matches striking to light a cigar. The lights swing overhead, with blue gels over the lenses. It shifted the mood and kept the recesses of the room completely in shadow.

A woman was on the stage, dipping the mic stand like it was a lover, her raspy voice blanketing the crowd. A tan suit cut off at the wrists to reveal dark hands, and a matching hat sat low on her brow. Warm dreads framed her face, swinging as she turned to sing to every single person around her stage.

Alex was entirely enraptured by her voice. He would never perform something half as beautiful, or a fourth as powerful.

Anyone could take Alex's stage, it didn't take much to impress that crowd. This woman ensnared the room in a way he'd never be able to. If she sang to one of his crowds, men would weep.

He was jealous, sure. But then her voice would soar, or scoop down to a note most couldn't reach, or expertly stretch out a vibrato as she held out a word. He would never do anything as important as this single performance.

But he was so lucky just to hear it.

He didn't notice when the song ended and the applause around him crescendoed like an orchestra.

The band's pianist stood, and Alex's eye was caught. The man's head was already down as he bowed, his face

hidden by a mask that was feathered like an owl's. He turned and fell into the crowd, swallowed up by the mass.

The next song began. It was slower, and soft horns cradled the woman's voice as she lamented to the room.

But it was hollow somehow. Alex missed the chords, the trills in the quiet moments. He hadn't even realized how formative the keys were to the music until its absence rang louder than the actual song.

He wandered the whole club, looking for the white mask of the mysterious pianist, without a clue why. After his third spiral about the room, he couldn't take the incomplete music anymore and headed outside to listen to the howling of the wind instead.

That's where Alex found him.

"I loved your performance, it was really—" The pianist's glare shocked his jaw shut.

A cigarette was perched in his fingers, and the flame of a lighter rested just in front of it. His dark eyes flickered orange. "Whatever you want?" He took a drag and blew smoke from the side of his mouth. "I'm not givin' it."

"You're from Jersey?" Alex sputtered. The pianist's glare found him.

"Boston."

"That's what I meant," said Alex. "North, South, who can remember." He tried for a laugh.

The pianist's disinterest was palpable. "You a musician?"

"Singer."

This seemed to get his attention. "Sing something."

"Oh, um," he said. He cleared his throat, took a breath, and closed his eyes. "*Whenever it's early twilight,*" he began. "*I watch 'til a star breaks through.*"

He didn't know what he was supposed to be feeling with this song. Uptown, technical skill was enough. But this guy's playing had made Alex feel something. He had to return the favor.

Two verses were gone, and he hadn't even noticed. He risked a glance at the man. To Alex's surprise, his eyes were closed. His shoulders relaxed, his head tilted back slightly. He almost looked peaceful, with his sharp features softened as he listened.

"*Wherever you are, you're near me,*" Alex almost whispered. He had the urge to reach out and touch the man's hair. It was gelled straight up into mountainous spikes. He wanted to flatten them like sandcastles. "*You dare me to be untrue.*"

"*Funny, each time I fall in love. It's always you!*"

The pianist's eyes fluttered open. "You have to slack your jaw on the vowels, you're coloring the note with your accent."

A laugh ruptured through Alex's throat. "Thanks. What's your name?"

All the pianist's softness evaporated. "Not here."

Parys's warning echoed in Alex's head. *Be Careful.* "Then where?"

"Nowhere." Smoke escaped his mouth as he said it, obscuring his face behind a veil of gray. He coughed and swiped the cloud away. "I shouldn't even be playing at a club like this."

"Oh," Alex said, pulling back. "You're not?"

"Not aloud. Not in this city."

"Then where?" He almost repeated. Thank god his voice broke on the first syllable, choking out the question.

"I went to college for a spell," the pianist continued. He was talking to the sky. "You know the classics? The Iliad and Odyssey. Wilde, Whitman. There are guys like us."

Of course, there were guys like them. Alex came to this club to find them. "I don't follow."

"The Greeks had gods like us." The pianist was looking at him now. There was a desperation to his stare. "There's no reason we're supposed to be in the shadows."

He'd never considered that. His world had always been this way. A place where it wasn't? The realization pierced. He drew in a pained breath. "What happened?"

The pianist rasped a nail-scratching laugh. "Beats me."

Alex bit his tongue. This stupid, beautiful man had just turned Alex's perception of the world on its head, and he had the gall to laugh? Alex was falling further by the second.

He returned his gaze to the sky. "I grew up in the country," he said. "You could see so many stars there."

Alex hadn't ventured far from New York City. He couldn't imagine that the stars could be any more breathtaking than this city of lights, but the longing on the pianist's face made him wonder. "How'd you get here?"

He shook his head. "I don't like to think about it."

"No one's around," Alex started. "You could whisper your name—"

"You don't get it, do you?" The man spat. "Ever notice a friend hasn't come to your stupid club after a while? Where do you think he is?" He took his cigarette to his lips, but it had burnt to the filter. He cursed and threw it down before stamping it into the asphalt. "Got any on you?"

Alex reached into his pocket, pulled out his case, and offered it to the man. He was too dazed and enamored to

realize that the man took a cigarette and slipped the rest into his pocket.

“Why do you play here?” Alex demanded. “If you’re so afraid?”

The man shrugged, fumbling to spark his lighter. “Uptown, people watch my shows. Down here, people listen.”

Alex sighed. He couldn’t argue with that. Uptown shows were all spectacle. But at the Indigo, people felt the music in their bones. It thrummed through them as vital as blood.

“Believe me, you wouldn’t catch me dead sharing a stage with the likes of Alexander Sieni.”

Alex was flattered before he remembered to be afraid. He stood up and stumbled back in one ungraceful move. “You recognize me.”

The man cackled, hoarse with smoke. “Look,” he began. All previous kindness had been abandoned. “If you were smart, you’d never show off your pretty little voice down here again.”

Alex forced himself to stand straighter, to regain some footing, but his heart was tearing through his chest.

Anyone could have heard them, that name out loud in this place would’ve been the end of him.

The pianist still chuckled as he turned away and started up the alley with a slanted gait. “I have another set,” he called, his voice echoing off the brick that surrounded him.

“Hey.” Alex stumbled to catch up. “Hey wait, your name.”

“What’s it worth to you?”

“It’s only fair,” he sputtered. “I can’t explain, just...” He trailed off, shaking his head. Everything was racing, but he couldn’t let this go. “Please.”

They were back at the side entrance, the pianist’s long fingers hung loosely on the handle of the door. His nails were faintly blue as if bruised by his playing.

“Please.” The word came out in a puff of white breath and Alex shivered. How much had the temperature dropped in their conversation?

“I can’t.” His grip tightened on the handle so his knuckles turned white. “I’m sorry.”

He opened the door and slipped inside. It closed with a hollow thump, the metal against the wooden frame. Alex looked to his left, to the street that faded into darkness as you looked down. It promised secrets or demise, there was no way to guess. To his right, the light of the city beckoned him but threatened to spotlight him to the world. He had a price over his head, perpetually.

The siren of a police car wailed in the distance, crescendoing as red began to color the mouth of the alley.

Alex went inside and waded back to the stage.

Catheryn Poe

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Blue Valley West High School, Overland Park, KS

Educator: Zachary Gall

Category: Short Story

End of December

Even at the end of the world, August's favorite bar was bustling. The room was stuffy with the heat of so many bodies packed in, a relief stepping out of the cold. She tried to kick the snow from her boots, but the doormat was more slush than coir and rubber.

Jill was in her normal seat, her feet propped up to save August's. Her auburn bob fanned like a skirt when she moved and her hands danced as she spoke. It made her a dazzling storyteller. August was frozen in the doorway, nearly hypnotized.

Jill's BlackBerry sat beside an empty glass, its battery out on the counter to prevent interruption. There was no one around her to hear what she said. She was rehearsing.

A draft chilled her back, and August finally started toward the bar top.

"Hey," said August beside her.

Jill startled, but in a moment her arm was around August's waist, pulling her into a kiss.

"Hey, Auggie," she said on her skin. She pulled back and her eyebrows shot up. "Jesus, where's your coat?"

"Left it at the museum," said August, climbing into her chair. "I was too busy thinking about those Latin fragments I'm translating, plus my dissertation." She shook her head, buzzing with everything that needed to be done. "I was already halfway here when I realized."

Jill turned and cupped a hand around her mouth. "Jason! Get the lady a sidecar." She twisted to take her coat from the back of the chair. "Here, take this."

"I'm fine!" August laughed, batting away Jill's attempts to swaddle her. "It's warm in here."

"One sidecar," said the bartender, sliding a glass on the counter.

"Thanks, Lo," she said, smiling at the unfamiliar face. "Oh, sorry. I thought you were Logan."

Jill glanced at the man, at August, and back at the man. The room grew tighter with every second that passed.

"Logan left for the Train, sweetheart," said Jill, taking August's hand.

Of course. She'd already known that, she'd just filed it beneath all her work. It wasn't a shock, so why was the floor swaying?

"We don't have to think about it," said Jill, brushing a loose strand of hair from August's face. "There's still time."

"A week," said August, the words bitter. She took her glass and drained it to wash out the taste, and coughed into her sleeve. He'd gone heavy on the Cognac. "One more, please. And what was your name?"

"Jason."

"Huh," said August, a smile tugging at her mouth. "Like the Argonaut?"

His brow furrowed. "Uh, sure."

"Don't mind her," said Jill. "She memorizes encyclopedias for fun."

"And she memorizes theater," said August. She scooped her chair closer to Jill so their thighs touched. "Go ahead. Ask her anything, Ovid to Williams."

Jason looked between them. "Uh, Shakespeare?"

"Oh, be more specific than that," said Jill. "Tragedy? History? Maybe one of Puck's monologues?"

"I just mix drinks," he said, putting his hands up. "Speaking of, let me get you your sidecar."

"Thanks," said August. She turned to Jill. "I'll be right back, I'm gonna queue something on the jukebox."

"Alright." She squeezed August's hand before letting go.

She took out her wallet and felt for a quarter as she made her way to the back. This was an old one, with real records instead of discs. Legend had it that it stayed in the same spot through three changes in ownership.

"You going?" Someone near her asked.

"No way." August tried to focus as she flipped through the records, but the names were blurring.

"Me neither. Can you imagine starting fresh on a new planet like that? No way they'll survive the first few years."

"If they even get there. Remember the Apollo stuff? Rockets blow up all the time."

She found a New Wave love song Jill loved, and rushed back to the bar.

"You know my brother was on the original Mars mission," Jill told the bartender as August returned. "He was a test pilot."

"No kidding?"

"No kidding." Her eyes glazed over as she got lost in the memory. "He was way older than me, I only really got to see him on holidays. But I told him I wanted to be just like him, and he'd lift me into the air and swing me around."

She cleared her throat. "Anyway, he was one of the best. He was a final candidate for first contact."

"That's wild," said Jason, shaking his head. "What's he up to these days?"

August's chest seized as she looked at Jill. He died just a week before the plug was pulled on the mission.

"He retired," she said with a shrug. "He deserves the rest."

"I'd say so," said Jason. Someone else waved him down, and he went to take their order.

Jill's face fell as her audience left. August knew Jill for years before hearing the true end of the story. Had the program ended sooner, he'd still be here. Had it continued, his death would mean something. The tragedy was in the timing.

"What?" Asked Jill, nudging August.

"Nothing, nothing," she said. "You didn't cover your freckles today."

"Oh," she said, covering her nose. "Your eye for detail is uncanny."

"I love them," said August, pulling Jill's hand down.

"I know you do."

The TV over the bar screeched, and the whole room held its breath. Only the synths from the jukebox and the mechanical voice of the anchor sounded. "Heavy rains in Indonesia, Malaysia, Brunei, and East Timor. Flooding expected. The UN would send teams to the following cities searching for volunteers for The Train. Bandar Seri Begawan, Batam, Dili, Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur, Jakarta—"

The channel changed, and the tension dissolved into drunken chatter. A few cheers and whoops went around.

"God," said Jill, rubbing her temples. "I hear that sound in my nightmares."

"Me, too," said August. The worst they'd had were extreme freezes and power outages, but even those racked up a death toll. Nature seemed to be fighting back. It would either swallow them or drive them off.

"Look at those," said Jill, her voice breathy with awe.

August glanced up at the TV. The camera panned over the fleet of super rockets that were their ticket out, nicknamed "The Train." The plan was to take anyone willing to go to a planet called Kepler 452b, more than 1400 light years away. A quick cryogenic nap and humans would be moving into a brand new home.

A likeness of the Roman god Mars was stamped onto the side of each ship, serving as homage to the original missions to the red planet. August found it fitting. They'd destroyed one planet, so why not move to the next with a war god as their symbol? Be honest for once.

"Aren't they beautiful?" Said Jill. "I can't believe we can build something like that."

"Yeah," August lied. The rockets were cones of tin, all utility.

"Auggie?" Said Jill, taking her hand.

"Yeah?"

"I want you to come with me." Her eyes flicked about, searching August's face.

"I know." She took a sip of her drink.

"Just," she started, stumbling as she tried to string her thoughts together. "Just imagine the new cities we'll build, what Kepler's gravity will mean for architecture."

August thought of the Florence Cathedral that caved when she was just starting her master's. The blueprints were sitting somewhere, deep in the archives in an equally old building just as privy to falling.

"And imagine the night sky," said Jill. "We'll have to find new shapes in the star and make new stories for them. Like a whole new Zodiac."

The Zodiac they knew was a Greek reverse-engineering of the Babylonian constellations. Babylon had its myths and found shapes in the stars to match; Greece took the shapes and wrote the stories from there. It was like a weird, cosmic game of telephone where no one had all the pieces. But it was beautiful.

For eons, people have been looking at the sky and creating stories. August was lucky to be there on the other side, looking through the scraps.

"History is just the written word, right? We'll be at the beginning of history. Just think of what we can make. Our names will be passed down for centuries."

"You could be Homer," August said, trying for a smile.

"We could be Homer, August." Jill put her arms around August, squeezing her shoulders. "Can you imagine the

legacy we'd leave?"

"Can we talk about this later?" Asked August gently.

Jill's grip went stiff. "When? A week from now when I'm already frozen?"

"No," said August, pulling away. "Just not now. Not in front of our friends."

"What friends?" Jill demanded, gesturing down the bar. "They already left."

August followed her arm. No faces were familiar. "I need more time to think," she amended.

"It's been months, Auggie. We don't have much time left, you need to decide."

"Fine!" August forced herself to look Jill in the eye. "I'm not going."

Jill froze with shock, as if from the sting of a slap. Then her features softened as quickly as they'd tensed. "I love this song," she said, tilting her head toward the dance floor. "Join me?"

August let herself be dragged into the mosh. Jill guided her hands, and they held each other and swayed as they always did. But it was different, just going through the motions while everything else fell apart.

Jill sometimes played the same role for months at a time, reciting the same lines the same way again and again. Was this how she felt?

"I love you, Auggie," she said, closing the space so they were pressed together. One being, four legs and two hearts, like Plato's idea of the soulmate.

"You too," August breathed.

There wasn't much space on The Train. Fuel would take up the largest amount of space, the cryo chambers next. Then, medicine, tools, the minerals that make machines run. Then a million other things necessary for survival.

No room for preservation. The things that proved they were human. Art would stay tucked away in museums and music would be left in the record shops. Jill's precious Homer would fade; the names Achilles and Patroclus would finally be forgotten.

"What are you thinking about?" Jill mumbled into August's collarbone.

"Remember that tree on campus? Where we carved our names when we were juniors?"

"Sure," she said. "I ruined my best knife on that."

"I replaced it," said August, laughing.

"What about it?"

August imagined it growing over with moss, obscuring the letters. The song changed to a ballad with gentle, sad guitar strings. "*It's four in the morning,*" a man sang. "*The end of December.*"

"There's so much we'd be leaving behind," she said.

Jill pulled away but held onto August's shoulders. "There's only one thing I care about taking," she said, squeezing.

"We should get going," said August. "It's late, I have work tomorrow."

Jill looked as though she was going to say something, but changed her mind. "Let me grab my stuff from the bar."

They poured into the street, somehow fuller than before the mess with The Train began. Hardly anyone worked, everyone drank and danced in excess. It was a constant Bacchanalian, something August was sure future historians would take note of.

"What would we be leaving behind?" Jill asked.

"Huh?" Asked August. She'd been watching a group of girls a few years her junior pass hula hoops around, spinning them right in the middle of the street.

"You said we'd be leaving stuff behind. What?"

August sighed a puff of white sue. "History, art. Try fitting a Botticelli on the ship." She chuckled humorlessly. "Or any plays, for that matter. You think there's room for books?" Her colleague had called it The New Alexandria. A library of ashes and a world left behind.

"We'll be taking it with us," Jill said, brushing August's shoulder. "I have half of Shakespeare's repertoire memorized, someone has to have the other. We'll piece it together." She put her arm around August. "And with that head of yours? All that knowledge up there? It'll be a hell of a lot easier."

With every memory on every ship filled to the brim with humanity's gifts, they wouldn't begin to cover it all. "You know it's not enough."

"And *you* know more about everything than anyone I know," Jill insisted. "You'd really deprive the new world of that?"

August stopped in her tracks. "Don't do that."

Jill turned. "You're going to let your sappy historian self get all caught up in the mysteries of the world? No one on Kepler is going to remember the greats, the intricacies of Egyptian daily life, and all that other stuff you talk about."

"Jill, stop it."

Jill's hair whipped in the wind. People laughed and screamed around them. "The next generation is going to grow up without any of your precious history if you don't come with us." She pressed her finger into August's chest. "You'll be letting us down."

"At least I'm not a coward," August spat. "I mean look at you. You carry around a fucking BlackBerry, and suddenly you're all for the future?"

"No. You can't cut it here, with all your amazing actor friends, right? So you'd rather try your cards across the fucking galaxy where there's no one to look at but you." August sucked the icy air between words. "That's the only way you'll ever be remembered."

Every second after that was a needle in August's skin. She brought her hands to her mouth to breathe into them, willing them to warm.

"Here," said Jill, sliding off her coat. "Aren't we pathetic?" She wrapped it around August, holding it steady for her to slide her arms through. "You'll be dead by the time I wake up."

Jill might never wake up. The Kepler mission had one shot. Seventy percent was the chance that was given. Everyone knew it was a generous guess.

August's tongue was dead weight in her mouth. It burned to form the smallest words. "I wish I could do this for you."

"If I wasn't so selfish you wouldn't have to," she said, wooden.

"You aren't being selfish."

"I am," she said. "And you are too. We can't win."

As much as they loved each other, they loved something else more. Their passions, their futures. In another time, that wouldn't have mattered.

She flipped, as suddenly as she had in the bar. "Do you hear that?"

"Hear what?"

"That music," she said. "Follow me."

They wound through the streets, landing in a crowded park. A few people had dragged amps, banjos, fiddles, and guitars into the gazebo and played lively folk. No one had sheet music, and there was no clear melody, just a jumble of musicians wailing through whatever instrument they held.

"Can you believe how amazing they are?" Jill yelled over the music.

"Yeah," August yelled back. "I wish I had a camera."

Jill looked at her with a sad smile. "It's better this way. Knowing you'll never hear something exactly like this. Don't you think?"

She didn't look surprised as August shook her head.

"I'm seeing my family this weekend," she said, leaning into August. "I'm heading over tonight. I won't be back."

"This soon?" August asked. "Why?"

"They lost one kid to space," she said. Her voice wavered once, and she cleared her throat. "I want to give them time, at least."

August had nothing to say. Jill didn't seem to, either. Instead, she cupped August's cheek and kissed her one last time.

Someone on the street hailed a cab, and Jill ran over to get in with them. So few were running these days, it could be hours before another passed.

August watched dimly as Jill climbed in. The window rolled down, and Jill hung halfway out the side of the car. "I love you, August!" She yelled, waving as the cab started down the road. "I love you!"

Her voice echoed in August's head as she stood alone in the crowd, still wearing Jill's blue jacket.

Days passed. The Train left. The world felt too big for the people left on it. It felt too big knowing Jill was no longer in it.

But things began to shift. Most remaining people ran back to urban areas, and borders stretched into frontiers. Factories crumpled, and people started growing their own food and sewing their own clothes.

Smog dissipated overhead, and wolves went back to howling at the night. People wrote, made music, and painted. They laid the paper trail for future generations to uncover.

And when August looked around their home, she saw Jill's imprints.

Her mugs were placed handle-out on the shelves for easy grabbing on sleepy mornings. Her perfume sat on the nightstand, so she could coax herself out of bed with vanilla and almond. She stashed pens everywhere, in case inspiration struck.

There were strips of paint missing on the living room wall, where she cycled through posters of shows she'd done, was doing, wanted to do. The most current ones were still there, fluttering when the heating unit turned on. Her books and scripts were still on the shelves, their margins filled with her handwriting.

August still had so much of her there. She scrounged for pieces of Jill, wrote her dissertation, and curated galleries at the museum.

The world kept going after the end, and so did August.

As for Jill? She was on her way to the new planet, creating the most amazing plays, giving performances that brought people to tears by the end of Act I. Her name and legacy would stretch wider and last longer than anything August had ever encountered in her work.

That's what August believed, anyway. It's what comforted her when the TV screeched in the middle of the night, and August reached out for comfort in an empty bed.

Catheryn Poe

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Blue Valley West High School, Overland Park, KS

Educator: Zachary Gall

Category: Flash Fiction

Visions

The sounds of this place are scratched into the grooves of my brain like vinyl. It's fuller than it was when we used to come here, with a line stretching out the door. A barista with massive ear gauges moves in a flustered whirlwind: writing an order, tearing the sheet, barking "Next!" as his plugs flap, basset hound-like.

Emma clears her throat, and my eye is drawn back to her. Steam billows up from her mug. She still gets the same drink: black tea lightened with cream, flakes of lavender and lemon pulp sprinkled over the foam. Her cupped hands hover around the ceramic.

"The weather's something, isn't it?" I ask. Dimples sprout on her cheeks, loosening the knot in my stomach.

"You're such a dork," she laughs. Her fingers tiptoe toward mine, but stop just shy. I repress the urge to catch her hand. "It's so hot, can you even stand it?"

I nod, but gooseflesh pricks my arms. "It's been a while."

"Not for me," she says. "Time is different here."

"Here?" I ask, scrunching my nose. "You mean Seattle?"

She purses her lips. "Why are you here?" Point blank, as always.

"I missed you." It's true, distantly. But my chest forgets to ache with her in front of me. Waking up alone, reaching across the covers, finding them cool with absence. It's all an old, bad dream I'll forget by breakfast.

She doesn't reply. The toe of her shoe grazes my ankle. She takes a sip and curses loud enough for people to look over.

"It's too hot!" I shout, wincing at the pain on her face.

"Thanks for the warning," she spits.

I glance back at the counter. A man orders then turns to his friend. Blood drips from his eye, trailing around the bulb of his nose.

"Whoa, do you see that?" I ask. I reach for my purse, looking for tissues, but it isn't on the booth beside me.

"Hey," she says, tapping her fingers on the table impatiently. "Hey." Her jaw is tight, popping the tendons in her neck.

"What?" I ask, forgetting him. "Why did you even agree to meet me here?"

"I've missed you, too," she says. She blows on her tea. It's been minutes, but the steam won't slow. "You know why I had to do it, right?"

It, she says. I bite the inside of my cheek. We came here to hash things out, and she can only speak in innuendo. The fantasy of this brunch is splintering. I'm remembering that I'll walk out that door without her.

"No, not really," I say. I grip the leather of the seat, finding a break in the skin. The itch of the stuffing nips my fingertips.

"It wasn't you."

"What else could it have been?" My throat is closing. The air is getting stuffy, and I feel the heat she was talking about, so brash I don't know how I ignored it before.

"You know." She says gently, nearly whispering.

And don't I? In the smallest hollows of myself don't I know this was inevitable? No matter how hard I tried, she would've slipped away from me?

"Do you regret it?" I ask.

She stares at something above my shoulder. "I regret hurting you."

"That's not what I asked."

"But it's what I mean." She clears her throat and grabs her drink, scorching her tongue again. I have to hold mine to keep from warning her again. Too late, always.

We're silent. The café is too garbled and far away to truly count as noise. We're underwater, the tide is rolling

into me.

Across the table, Emma is still and sedate. More statue than girl.

“Did you catch the game?” I try. She throws her head back as she laughs.

She finally crosses the barrier to touch me. Her fingers are wooden in mine. “I love you,” she tells me. “You weren’t the reason I...” she trails off into a deep breath. “Ended it.”

Truth comes easily now. “I wish I believed that.”

She doesn’t meet my gaze but squeezes my hand. “Me, too.”

I stare at her drink, following the steam as it rises and curls. The ceiling swims as if inflicted with heat waves as it darkens from cream to burgundy.

I look back down at the table. A cone of incense sits where her mug used to be. A pentacle surrounds it and candles are arranged on each point. Sandalwood musks over the coffee that was in the air a moment before.

She’s gone. A woman replaced her, with soot in the deep lines of her face and bright over-lined lips.

I jerked up and knocked the table with my hip. Crystals scatter to the floor, reminding me of pills rattling in a bottle.

“Well,” she says with a crab-apple twang. She smiles with stained teeth. “How was it?”

“Where’s Emma?” I demand, searching wildly. I feel like an animal, cornered and frenzied.

“Oh, sugar,” she said, standing to meet me. She touches my face, and her rumped fingers are strangely warm. “She’s on the other side, remember? That’s why you came to me.”

She invites me to lie on the couch in her lobby and gives me a snickerdoodle wrapped in a napkin. “Soirees with the dead are taxing,” she tells me, rubbing my back as I chew. “But worth it for the closure they can provide.”

I feel cracked open. If an x-ray showed a spider web of fissures across my sternum, it wouldn’t shock me. I’m not sure anything would.

She leaves to attend to another client and I head for the door, slipping a business card in my pocket as I pass the welcome desk. I tell myself I won’t be coming back. I once detested mediums, called them predators for their exploitation of grief.

But tomorrow morning, in the hazy moment before I open my eyes, I’ll remember she’s dead all over again. My conviction will surely crumble.

Catheryn Poe

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Blue Valley West High School, Overland Park, KS

Educator: Zachary Gall

Category: Short Story

To Here Knows When

The streetlamps flickered and buzzed as I walked down to Missy's. I pulled my jacket to my chest, but there was no shielding against the bone-chill of the late November air. I heard the splash of steps over the slick road and turned around, but the dark stretched on uninterrupted.

I told myself it was nothing, but clutched the keys in my pocket the way I imagined a warrior clutched her dagger.

Just seeing the reds and greens that lined her house put me at ease. It stuck out against the tasteful golds and whites of the rest of the neighborhood, but her house was a haven to the queer youth of Salem. Overdoing holiday decor was a necessity for us.

The morning paper sat on the doorstep in a translucent blue bag, dewed by the afternoon rain. I knelt to pick it up and shove it into my coat.

I opened the door and a heat wave mixed with the smell of liquor and cinnamon washed over me. Missy beamed a snaggly smile my way as she balanced a plate of french dip sandwiches on each arm. Her fiery hair was decorated with barrettes and hair ties, her jacket with pins and patches.

"Jesse! How are you, sugar? Safe walk?" She asked, setting the plates on the mess of oakwood slabs we called a table. Her arms were extra warm when she hugged me and kissed my temple.

"Good," I said. As she let go, I ran a hand over my patchy hair, where my scar was buried in peach fuzz. "Super safe, cold out though."

"No trouble at all?"

I nodded, jaw clenched.

"I'll get you a hot cocoa," she said, already heading for the kitchen. "Spiked?"

"Please," I said. "And thanks."

"You betcha," she said, waving it off.

Dakota and Avery were on the couch in the den, swaddled in each other. Missy used to keep a five-foot-apart rule, but she turned a blind eye to the Lovebirds. She no longer felt safe with us out after dark.

"Where's my food, Missy?" asked Joe, folding his newspaper roughly and tossing it onto the counter. At fifty-four, he was the oldest man I knew. He had an infinite supply of exaggerated stories and parables he shared unsolicited. I would never admit it, but I enjoyed them immensely.

"You're not eating at my breakfast bar," she said. "There's a table right over there."

"You kill me, woman," he grumbled as he stood. An uncomfortable cold fell over the room, and for a second, I thought the furnace had tapered out.

Missy knocked on wood before bringing me my cocoa. "Here, baby. Why don't you go eat with him? I fixed some extra."

"I don't need no company," he said. His chair squeaked on the hardwood as he yanked it out.

"I do," I told him. I kicked off my boots and took the seat across from him, cupping my shivering hands around my mug.

He shoveled a few bites down, then sniffled and peered at me. His spectacles sat low on his crooked nose. "You seeing anyone?"

I squirmed. "Not since Becca," I said. Not since the accident.

He tsked, shaking his head. "You aren't seventeen forever, you shouldn't be alone."

"I'm eighteen."

"Eighteen?" He scoffed. "What the hell are you still doing in a town like this?"

"I ask myself that every day," I said, resting my elbows on the table as I picked up a sandwich.

"Stop that," he said, jabbing at my arm with a fork. I would've gotten a four-pronged stab wound if I hadn't moved faster. "It's bad manners."

"Tell me about Paris," I said, making sure my elbows hovered as I took a bite.

"No, you're too young to hear that one."

"You told it to me last week!" I protested.

His gaze turned stern, and I covered my mouth to chew. "You weren't too young then." He said, chuckling to himself.

"Did you take your meds?" Missy called from the kitchen.

"Yes," Joe snapped, making me flinch. I breathed a sigh of relief when he didn't notice. "I'll count," he said, brow furrowed.

"Josiah!" The chair grated on the wood, and suddenly Joe and Missy were nose to nose, squabbling about responsibility and timers.

"Jess!" Brett appeared at the top of the stairs wearing a Christmas sweater. His coarse dark hair stuck up in all directions, bouncing as he came down the steps.

"Hey, sleepy head," I said, grateful for the distraction. "Sweet dreams?"

He grimaced, and I knew my answer. The circles beneath his eyes were darker each time I saw him. "Come here, big guy," I said, meeting him at the bottom of the staircase. He crushed me into his soft middle.

"You should live here," he mumbled, swaying as we hugged.

Missy shouted and a pan clattered. A gasp escaped my throat, and Brett's grip tightened around me. "Jess?"

"I'm fine," I said, shoving him off. And I was, my body just couldn't tell.

"I'm leaving," Joe announced, throwing up his hands.

"Well, count your pills!" Missy shouted. "Jesus Christ, why'd dumbest one of us catch it?"

"AIDS, woman. The word won't kill ya." He hacked a cough before pointing a finger at me, his eyes narrowed. His face shifted from righteousness to pity, his voice turned soft. "Fear of a name is useless, don't harbor it." I braced myself for the shake of the window panes, but he closed the door softly as he left.

Missy straightened her hair and rolled up her sleeves. Her face was crimson, but she would hold herself together. While her kids were still awake, anyway.

"Can Jess move in?" Brett asked, trying to lighten the mood. "She's tiny, she can bunk with me." He rested his elbow on my head to illustrate his point and I ducked away involuntarily.

"Brett!" Missy shouted. "Are you alright?"

"Peachy," I told her. "Let's go upstairs." I couldn't stand another moment in that room, being gawked at. Even Dakota was looking over the back of the couch.

Fear and love seemed to blur together since the accident. They cared about me and wanted me to feel safe, and they were petrified of me startling. We all lost in this game.

"Hey, hey!" Missy yelled, and I jumped, clutching the rail.

I turned, and my heart seized at the regret in her eyes. It loosened as she smirked. "Door open, you two."

I shed my coat as soon as I entered Brett's room and threw the newspaper onto his unmade bed. "God, what's that smell?"

"Lavender," he said. "It's supposed to help you relax."

"Well it's making my nose run," I said, rubbing my eyes. The cold air pierced through my shirt, ruffled and wet. I hopped onto his bed and tried to undo the plastic knot, but couldn't. "I don't have nails," I groaned.

"Here." He grabbed the bag and sat beside me. "I'm sorry, about downstairs," he said, eyes down on his task. "I'm still getting used to it, you know?"

"I know," I said, rubbing his shoulder. In the old days, we'd rumble like toddlers, and I'd attack his neck with tickles until he called uncle. I missed our childishness. But one quick move could send me into panic, even from the person I trusted most.

"Voila," he said, handing me the paper. "Tear out the comics for me?"

I obliged him before flipping to the news and skimming. A car crash blocked an intersection on Main Street. The county fair was a resounding success despite the rain. There was a riot a town over, but that was nothing new. That town was teeming with counterculture, it felt like someone punched a cop every other week.

"A little girl beat out Big Pete for the pie-eating contest," I said, tossing the paper onto the floor. "Nothing else, though."

"Garfield still loves lasagna," said Brett, folding his sheet into a triangular hat.

"No way." I laid back, my neck bent against the headboard.

He laid back with me and nudged my foot with his. "Do you still check the obituaries?" He asked. "For her?"

I laughed. "Yeah, how fucked is that? It doesn't even make sense, it's clear she got away clean that night."

"Maybe she's stuffed in a wall somewhere."

"Don't say that," I said, shoving his shoulder. "And it wasn't a seasoned killer, it was a drunk with a temper and

an empty bottle.”

Brett stared at the ceiling, his dark eyes glassy.

“Don’t you feel anything? She was your friend, too.” He didn’t answer, even when I nudged him. “What?”

“Nothing.” He placed his hat on my head, then caught it as it slid off my hair.

“Not nothing,” I insisted. “You make that stupid face when you’re thinking.” I crossed my leg over his. “Tell me.”

“You know what I want to say.” The newspaper crumpled in his anxious grip.

I did, I’d heard it a million times before. When I got attacked, she bolted. She didn’t call for help, she didn’t come back. She left me to die, plain and simple.

I rolled over. “It’s more complicated than that.”

“It isn’t,” said Brett, putting his arm around me.

I squirmed out of his hold. “It is,” I insisted. I stood, and my vision popped with stars. “Okay? I don’t know. I loved her. I hate her. I want her to be safe and I wish it was her who got hurt instead of me. It’s all tangled up.” A swollen ache grew between my temples, but my eyes stayed dry.

“I found you bleeding into a storm drain.” It was strange, hearing such a small voice come out of someone that big.

“I know.” I crossed my arms over the jagged rock logo on my chest. He still sees me when he closes his eyes, limp like a rag doll. In nightmares, there was polyfill mixed with the blood. He’d called me too many nights to count, crying as he explained.

“She did that,” he said.

I cleared my throat. An uncomfortable itch was settling where my voice should be. I’d been bludgeoned, but I’d been sewn back up. Brett wasn’t so lucky.

“Do you wanna listen to music?”

I nodded and knelt to pull his record box from under the bed. I chose his favorite, set it on the turntable, and put the needle down. Roberta Flack crooned to fill the space between us.

Midnight was fast approaching, and I needed to get home. I ran down the steps and held onto the rail as I spun toward the door.

Becca sat at the kitchen table. A white coat fell around her, blending with her sallow skin. She turned to look at me, and her once bright eyes were a sullen gray. I could’ve mistaken her for a ghost.

I first brought her here three years ago. Back before Joe was sick, when I believed we were untouchable. The last time I saw her we were dancing under the Christmas lights on Main Street, spinning on the ice. I almost smiled before I remembered the rest. Waking up in Missy’s basement, dizzy from blood loss, searching for her.

“Jesse,” said Missy, rushing toward me. “I thought you’d gone home.”

I dodged her embrace. “Where have you been?”

“Honey.” Missy’s hand was on my shoulder, too firm for comfort. She was holding me back.

“Hey,” she said. She wiggled her slim fingers. “Let’s step outside.”

“No, I want to mediate,” said Missy.

“Please,” she said, her features stone. This girl was ages older than my Becca.

“Alright,” she said, heading away. She stopped in the den to put a blanket over the sleeping Lovebirds. I couldn’t help but remember when Becca and I were the ones being tucked in.

Becca went toward the door, and I followed. The cold seeped through my socks.

“You look so different,” she said, shoving her hands in her pocket. She used to fidget incessantly, but she’d stilled since I’d last seen her.

“Yeah, I have a punk-rock undercut going on,” I said, running my fingers over my scar.

“It suits you.” She pressed her lips into a thin smile.

“Why are you here?” I demanded. “Why now, after so long?”

“I needed time,” she said. “Remember my Aunt Jeni up in Denova? I stayed with her and my cousins. It was…” she trailed off, eyes unfocused at something over my shoulder. “Really nice, honestly.”

She used to spill memories of carnivals, campfires, and slotting in as a perfect third sister to her cousins. She threatened to run away and live with them often, but I never took her seriously. I didn’t even think to look there. “But there was a brawl, and I needed someone to talk to,” she said, waving her hand. “It wasn’t a big deal, but it scared the shit out of me.”

I scratched the back of my neck, trying to focus on the sting. “Did you even check if I was alive before going?”

“I called,” she said. “Missy and I talked a lot, actually.”

“What?” The word escaped me as if punched from my chest. “Why didn’t she tell me?”

“I asked her not to,” she said, her eyes downcast. “I needed time, you know? But I missed you,” she said, taking

a step my way. "I love you, Jess. Can we start over?"

I didn't say anything; I could barely think, let alone string together a sentence. She took my hesitation as an invite and closed the space between us, her lips on mine.

In a flash I had a key pressed to her throat, her back to the wall. Her mouth opened as if to scream and I wondered how much force I needed to break skin.

I must've looked like a beast. I felt like one when a sick glee tugged a smile onto my lips. Her eyes went wide and wild, doe-like. *Good*, I thought. *Feel what I felt*.

"I didn't hurt you," she managed to choke. "That man did, not me."

"You left me to die," I snarled.

"I didn't want to die, too." She clutched at my arm, her nails digging crescents into my skin. "I was afraid, Jess!"

"Don't call me that." I pressed harder, and she winced. "Brett can't sleep after finding me. Missy's a nervous wreck. Dakota and Avery can't go anywhere alone. Don't you see?" My vision blurs as I watch her eyes go wide. "You fucked up the one thing I cared about."

"I cared about them too!" She pushed at me, I wouldn't budge. "They were my family!"

"I didn't get to escape to Denova. I watch them suffer from what happened every single day."

"It happened to me too," she said. She was crying then, her tears running warm down my wrists. "It happened to me."

I finally pulled away, stunned. She stumbled, doubled over and coughing. A few drops of blood slid down her neck, staining the collar of her coat. "He wanted this. You're letting him win. "

Some part of me wanted to welcome her back as if it had never happened. But it was easier to blame her. If not her, the man without a face or name. If not him, his parents for raising him with hate. Then their parents, then theirs, all the way back to the first creature to crawl from the ocean and decide it was okay to love one person and not another.

I'd collapse if I tried to hold onto all that anger. "You need to go."

"I wish it hadn't happened," she said, reaching out to touch me. Her fingers were chapped and bitten pink from the cold.

I jerked away. "I'm glad I figured out what a coward you were," I spat.

She straightened, jutted her chin out. "I hope you'll be okay, Jessica," she said. "Give Brett my best."

"Don't ever come here again," I said. I jangled my keyring. She flinched.

Her coat swayed as she went. She became a speck, then turned into an alley and vanished.

The door opened, and I sprang to my feet, hands up and ready to fight. Missy stood there, clutching the frame with white knuckles. "Where is she?"

"She left."

She took a step forward, then stopped. I followed her eyes to my hand, the key, the blood beginning to crust on my hand. Her features shifted, at war with herself. Wanting to comfort her kid but berate the monster who'd stooped so low.

"I'll go," I told her, and she seemed relieved.

"Okay, sugar. Be careful."

As I walked away, her words echoed. Her tone said "don't hurt anyone" rather than "don't get hurt."

I didn't remember much from that night. Becca and I were walking under the Christmas lights, twirling each other and stealing kisses as dawn singed the horizon. I didn't remember the man coming behind me, hitting me over the head. I didn't remember Becca running away. I didn't remember Brett finding me, convinced I was dead, and hauling me back home. I only remember waking up to a different family than the one I'd fallen asleep with.

Missy told me once she'd rather die than watch Joe get sick. I said I wasn't so righteous. She patted my arm, but had nothing to say.

I wonder if she could see it in me, what was festering. Before seventeen I'd never known danger, and in a single night everything around me turned mortal. I now knew death, knew loss, knew how easily anything I cared about could slip away.

I blamed Becca, but I knew it was bigger than her. My little daydream of anger filled a void where my illusion of safety once was, so I clung to it. It gave me a twinge of power in a world where I had none.

Even with her right in front of me, I couldn't let it go.

Catheryn Poe

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Blue Valley West High School, Overland Park, KS

Educator: Zachary Gall

Category: Flash Fiction

An Old Movie

An open field, March of '07 or '08. I stood on the outside of a barbed wire fence, coaxing my courage. I did this almost every day, but it still spiked my adrenaline. I took a breath and ducked through. A pang struck my wrist as I straddled the line. Blood dripped down my arm, and I considered turning back.

I threw myself to the other side before I could lose my nerve, landing flat on my back.

"Took you long enough," said Brooke, appearing over me. She'd probably seen me struggling, and left me to fend for myself. *A teaching moment*, she would've called it. She'd lived just about everywhere, which made her the coolest person I knew. She cut her own hair, straight and choppy. She never picked fights, but she'd end them for anyone who needed it.

That's how we found each other.

"Sorry," I said. "I got caught up." I showed her my wound, beginning to scab.

She rolled up her sleeve, revealing an arm spotted with scars. "We'll match." She extended her hand, and I took it.

She hauled me to my feet and we started toward the sycamore at the far side of the lot. Brooke lived on ten acres of plains, overgrown with knee-high grass. We waded through and collapsed into the shade.

She took off her sweatshirt for a makeshift pillow and curled up on her side. "Would you ever run away?" she asked.

"What?"

"Would you ever run away," she repeated. "We could hitchhike and move to LA, become actresses. We're pretty enough for it."

"You are," I said.

She frowned. She used to scold me anytime I said I was plain or ugly. That day, she didn't bother. I should've stopped to wonder why she didn't fight.

"Would we need accents?" I said instead. My heart leaped when her face brightened.

"Of course," she said, stretching her vowels. "Go on, try."

"Alright," I said with an awkward Australian twang.

She giggled and turned her nose to the sky, and I did the same. "I think I was an actress in my past life," she said. "Old Hollywood, like Marilyn Monroe."

"That would explain why you're so dramatic," I teased.

She shoved me and I laughed, wrestling back until afternoon laze dragged us back down.

"Would you run away with me?" She asked again, soft as the breeze.

I didn't understand the weight of her question then. "I don't think so. I have my family, you know? And how would I finish school?"

She pressed her lips together. For a moment, I thought she'd fallen asleep. She was rarely quiet for more than a few moments. "You were definitely a writer," she said finally. "In a past life. Like Shakespeare or someone."

"Shakespeare?" I asked.

"No, no, wait, definitely a poet."

"No way," I said, nudging her shoe with mine. "I don't know anything about poetry."

"You need to marry a poet, then."

I rolled my wrist to a chorus of pops. "But I have my heart set on a chiropractor."

"Ew, stop that!" She said, kicking us into another wrestling match. The sun was warm and slow, and the air was alive with spring. We'd be speckled with bug bites later, but we couldn't care less.

"I think we were enemies in our last life," I said.

She looked over at me. No music, just the diegetic cicada buzz. There was hurt in her eyes. "You think so?"

“Yeah,” I said, scrambling to fix it. “That’s why we didn’t get along at first, but now we’re best friends.”

“Oh.” She always forgot those first months, when we circled each other at arm’s length. I was shy, she thought I was shunning her as everyone else did. Little did she know I found her edge intimidating, not weird.

Then one day after school, I was cornered by some of the older boys. I don’t even remember what they said, I was so afraid. Brooke came out of nowhere and clocked one of them right in the jaw.

It was the first time I’d seen a boy cry.

I couldn’t forget those days when we’d sit silently across from each other in class. I couldn’t stop fretting over all the time we missed.

“So we were destined to meet,” she said, smile blooming. “We had to make up for what happened last time.”

“Exactly,” I said, grinning.

“I think soulmates are real,” she said. “We’re all stardust, right? I think if your matter was close to someone else’s at the start of the universe, you’re drawn to each other.”

“Huh,” I said. The longer we knew each other, the more special I found her mind. She was an atheist who believed in ghosts. She loved romance in movies but hated it in novels. Then she’d sprung on me the most compelling argument for soulmates I’d ever heard.

She took my hand and squeezed it. “Our stardust was touching.”

She moved away without warning about a month later. Without her with me, I became a target once again. But her *teaching moments* had added up. Anytime anyone asked where my girlfriend was, my fists went flying.

I think I watched every movie that came out in the next few years. I snuck into theaters, brought every report card I had into Blockbuster, and caught made-for-TV flicks at every hour of the day. I thought maybe she’d make it to Hollywood after all, but I never saw her.

Every once in a while I snuck back into that field and dozed off under our sycamore. We’d crossed paths once, we’d cross again. I was certain that with enough time, I’d find my way back to her.

Catheryn Poe

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Blue Valley West High School, Overland Park, KS

Educator: Zachary Gall

Category: Short Story

Fanfare

Charlie grabbed Kendra's sleeve to drag her down the alley. "Move it, we're late."

"Hey!" Kendra shouted, nearly dropping the cigarette from her lips. She took one final drag, then threw the butt on the ground and stamped it out.

"Jesus, I thought you quit," Charlie sighed. He rubbed at his eye, further smearing his messy, punk rock eyeliner.

"It's herbal! And who are you, my mom?"

"Dude, what? No, I'm your brother."

"It's called a joke, Charles." Kendra's hands were already shaking from the nerves of the upcoming concert. She didn't know how bad it would be without giving in to her vice.

"We're up!" Yelled Shiloh, bounding past them.

"Yeah, come on," Charlie spat. "We can't be late. This is our biggest gig yet."

"Is that why you dyed your hair?" Kendra ran her hand over Charlie's blue locks, slicked back with gel. His entire scalp was aqua, but she didn't think the crowd would see with the stage lights.

"Get off me," said Charlie, ducking into the stage door.

"Grump," Kendra mumbled. Backstage was a minefield of amps, drumsticks, and discarded merchandise. She had to tiptoe just to get to the wing where they entered. "Where's Liam?"

"We're opening with Pillow Prince," said Shiloh, running a hand through her orange curls. She'd drawn eye-shadow hearts over her cheeks that blended perfectly with her freckles. "That song has no bass."

"Oh," Kendra scoffed. "So he gets to be late and I don't?"

"We don't have any songs without lead vocals, dummy," said Charlie. "Go!"

"Dummy, how mature," she said. He went off to fetch his guitar, and Kendra took the opportunity to pull Shiloh aside. "Hey, Shi, you look awesome tonight."

Shiloh looked up at her with wide brown eyes. Her makeup had gotten better over their performances, looking almost professional in design. Way better than what everyone else had going on at least.

"Don't flirt," she said. "After, maybe. We really do need to hurry."

"We're on! Go!" Charlie shouted before Kendra could reply.

Kendra grabbed her guitar and ran to the stage, nearly toppling the stand as she went. The crowd was a sea of chatter and red solo cups. They were just the opening act, so seeing a mostly full venue was like finding El Dorado.

Kendra went to the mic stand and fiddled with the height until it was level with her mouth, and slung the strap over her neck. Beside her, Charlie took his own guitar and tested the strings, twisting the tuning pegs and tilting his head to listen for the sound. As much as he annoyed her, Kendra couldn't help but admire his perfect pitch.

"Hey there," said Kendra. Feedback screeched through the speakers, and the crowd went silent.

"Yikes, wow," she said, tapping her ear. Roughly three people laughed.

"Thank you," she said, winking. "Thank you all for coming out tonight. We are Stereo Putrid." She held her hand out, gesturing to the rest of the band.

A few applause sounded and quickly tapered.

"Love the enthusiasm." She strummed once to give her band the starting chord. "This first song is called Pillow Prince, and we're gonna rock your socks off. One two three four!"

She launched into the first few notes, strumming 8th notes as Shiloh kept the beat on the kick drum behind her. Charlie went fast as lighting between chord changes, building the rhythm.

There was a lull, then a crash of cymbals before Kendra began to sing.

"Hey there," he sang, watching her hands to make sure she nailed the riff. "Whatcha doin' later tonight?"

She was too caught up in the performance to see the crowd beyond the stage lights, but she could only imagine they were watching her.

"I see you're looking at me and let me tell you you're a pretty sight!"

She ran her pick over the strings to create a squeal into the chorus. Her voice broke on the highest note, but she shook her head and willed herself to get back into the zone.

By the end of the song, she was drenched in sweat and sucking air. It was hard to imagine doing this for six more songs, but she always felt that way at the beginning of a set. Halfway through, she would get so pumped that she could go all night off of the adrenaline.

"Pillow Prince, everybody!" She said with a slight curtsy. Half-hearted whoops came from the crowd.

"Oh, and here's our bassist, Liam Lovings," she said as Liam ran on stage. He wore sweats and a Hawaiian shirt, and his hair was newly buzzed. "He's gonna be late to his funeral."

"Oh, I hope so," said Liam, sticking his tongue out as he situated his bass.

Kendra thought she heard a few laughs from the crowd.

"On that note—get it, music, note—this is our next song, Funeral Yellow." Kendra turned to look at Shiloh, whose hair was matted with sweat. Her eye shadow hearts were starting to bleed.

"Ready?" She mouthed.

"Yeah!" Said Shiloh, perking up. Despite having the most intense instrument, she never let her exhaustion show.

"Alrighty," said Kendra, grinning. She looked at each band member, then out to the crowd. "One two three four!"

"That went well," said Kendra, leaning against the truck she and Charlie shared. It had certainly seen better days: red paint keyed by too many exes to count, a bumper with more craters than the moon, and a door attached with duct tape and hope. It very well could fall apart anytime she exceeded 40 miles an hour, but she loved it dearly.

She fished in her pocket for her lighter.

"Yeah!" Said Shiloh. "I think they really liked us!"

"Hell yeah they did, carrot top!" Said Liam, holding his hand up for a high five. Shiloh jumped up and slapped it.

The three continued hyping each other up, and soon their yells echoed through the parking lot.

"Can we go?" Asked Charlie, coming up beside Kendra. "I loaded our amps already."

"No way!" She said. "I want to meet the other band."

"The Wreckers?" Asked Shiloh.

"They're called The Eagle now," said Kendra.

"So original." Charlie kicked a rock, sending it skittering over the asphalt. "It's not like that hasn't been used before."

"It's singular," said Kendra. "So it's different. And I just want to know what they thought. Like which song was the strongest, how we can improve."

"We don't need that," said Charlie.

"We aren't selling out venues like they are," said Liam.

"Exactly!" Kendra hopped up to sit in the truck bed. The night on her feet was starting to catch up to her. She flicked her lighter on and watched the flame dance against the night. "Can we stop at 7-Eleven on the way home?" She asked. "I'm out of cigarettes."

"Oh my god," Charlie sighed. "You're our singer, you can't mess up your voice like that."

"Fine, I'll get nicotine gum." She flipped the lighter shut and stuffed it back in her pocket. "I really am trying to quit."

"Heard that before," said Charlie shaking his head. "I'm so tired."

"You can sleep in the truck," said Shiloh.

"No." Charlie rubbed his eyes and went to sit with Kendra.

She rested her head on his shoulder, and to her surprise, he didn't shove her away. He really must've been tired.

They sat in silence as Shiloh and Liam bounced around each other in some game of tag Kendra couldn't figure out the rules to. They always seemed to have endless energy, and Kendra envied them for it. She was so wrecked after every show she could barely make it to class at noon.

Charlie didn't fare much better, so maybe genetics were at play. These days, though, Charlie seemed to drain way faster. Some days, he couldn't even stay on his feet for a full rehearsal. Kendra would never admit it, but she was starting to worry about him.

"Hey, look!" Kendra shouted, hopping to her feet. The Eagle's drummer was standing outside, his iconic red hair still standing straight up despite a full set.

"Hey!" Yelled Kendra, waving her hand. The Eagle's bassist, a tall, broad man with brown hair, looked her way and scoffed.

"Come on, be nice to the fans," said the lead singer, walking their way. He had his hands in the pockets of a black coat with fur lining and wore platform boots that made him a full head taller than Kendra.

"Thanks for coming to see us," said the singer, holding out his hand. He wore white, velvety gloves Kendra loved the look of. "We love our supporters."

"We, uh, opened for you actually," said Kendra, taking it. "We're Stereo Putrid."

"Oh! Well, it's nice to meet you anyways," he said, covering a yawn. "I'm Kyle, that's Joshy and Tyler."

"Come on!" Called the tall one—Joshy, Kyle had said. "We don't have time for this."

"Oh hush," said Derek, wrapping his arms around Joshy's waist. "You can be nice for a couple of minutes."

"Kyle Twist!" Yelled Shiloh, suddenly beside Kendra. "I love your work, even way back when you were in that duo doing bubblegum pop stuff!"

Kyle cringed at the mention of his past. "Thanks, uh, sweetie. That's nice of you."

Shiloh deflated at the nickname.

"Which song did you like best?" Asked Liam, suddenly on Kendra's other side.

"Oh, uh," said Kyle, running a hand through his ash-blonde hair.

"We don't watch the opening acts," said Joshy. "Now can we please leave?"

"Now, now," said the redhead. "We can play nice for a few minutes."

"Oh," said Kendra. "You really don't watch?"

"Yeah," said Kyle, shrugging. "It's nothing personal, we just need to rest before shows. I'm sure you were great though."

"Thanks," said Kendra. "Well, we'll see you around maybe?"

"Maybe," said Kyle. Kendra could tell the word was empty. He turned to go off with the rest of the band, leaving Stereo Putrid alone in the production boneyard.

"Don't meet your idols," Charlie mumbled.

"Shut your trap," Kendra spat. "They weren't idols, we just wanted some feedback."

"Kyle wore this look when he did a solo project back in 2018," said Shiloh, rubbing the eyeliner on her cheeks. "He didn't even say anything."

"Dude, I'm sorry," said Liam, wrapping an arm around Shiloh's shoulders. "You wear it so much better than him anyway."

Kendra felt a twinge of jealousy watching them embrace, but forced herself to stamp it out.

"It melted off, though." Shiloh held out her hand, which was stained black.

"You look rad!" Said Liam. "You're more of a rocker than those three put together."

"Really?"

"Yeah!" Said Liam. "Right, Kendra?"

"Right," she said. "Especially with those tacky gloves!" She yelled, cupping her hands around her mouth.

A flame stirred in her chest. She hadn't felt that way since she was a kid, learning guitar just to catch up to her older brother. She'd missed the thrill of competition.

How could The Eagle be so stuck up? They didn't even have more than 100k monthly listeners on Spotify, Kendra had checked. Besides, Stereo Putrid was good. Good enough to deserve respect from their peers

She couldn't help the smile that grew on her face. One day, her band was going to be even bigger than The Eagle. And she wouldn't skip opening acts or talk down to fans like those assholes.

"I don't like that look," said Charlie.

"They're doing Battle of the Bands at the end of the semester, right?" Said Kendra.

"Yeah!" Said Shiloh. "I already bought my tickets!"

"Sell them." Kendra rubbed her hands together. "We're going to compete."

"No," Charlie groaned.

"Yeah!" Liam bellowed. "Let's do this!"

The band piled into the truck and very carefully drove to the gas station, with only a few scares from potholes on the way. Charlie sang as he drove, his soft voice almost lulling the band to sleep. Kendra always begged him to sing on stage, but he always refused.

They woke up when the 7-Eleven sign glared through the windshield. Liam and Shiloh raced to the Slurpee machine, nearly tackling each other to the ground in their competition.

"So are you in?" Asked Kendra, grabbing a pack of cigarettes as they walked down the aisle.

"What do you mean?"

"For Battle of the Bands," she said, shoving him.

"I don't know," he said, shrugging. He stopped to survey the candy bars and plucked a Snickers from the box.

"Come on," Kendra begged. "Don't you want to rub your victory into their annoying little faces?"

His mouth quirked. "Maybe."

She whooped, jumping into the air. "We're going to crush them."

After they all got their drinks, Kendra slid the cigarettes back onto the shelf on her way to the register. She

needed her voice in top shape if they were going to win.

Harlow Porter

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: Basehor-Linwood Middle School, Basehor, KS

Educator: Erin Tegtmeier

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Just One More Time

Just One More Time

Just one more time. A saying that we tell ourselves. You catch yourself saying this more often. You do it once, and then it happens again. *I am going to hang out with them just one more time. This is the last time I promise.* You get caught in a cycle. You can experience this in different ways. Whether it's through destructive friendships, family issues, drug/alcohol abuse, or even physical and/or mental abuse, I have experienced this in a way some might say is traumatizing. I was too young to realize what the issue was. My mom had to take many pain medications due to various surgeries and pain. With taking many medications can come addiction.

Addiction: It takes lives. It takes pieces of yourself until there is nothing left. You aren't yourself anymore. I saw this affect my mom. Arguments after arguments. It never ended. I had no idea why my parents were constantly arguing. Now that I look back, I know. My dad would always count my mom's pills. There would always be more missing than there should be. I can remember coming home from school and seeing my parents sitting on the couch. They told me to sit down. My mom was crying, and I was very confused. All my dad said was that she was going somewhere to get help and feel better. She went to rehab, but at the time, I didn't know what that was.

While my mom was there, we got to visit her once. The one time we did, we had to go to this small room. I remember sitting in the chair in the corner and watching my mom walk down the hall through the window. There was a man walking with her. She came and sat down in the chair. The guy was standing outside the door. I was little and scared. I wanted to leave. I hated seeing my mom like this. She wasn't the same mom that I had for my whole life. She had changed. I never wanted to go back to that place. As a seven-year-old, you don't quite understand everything yet. Your whole world is playing with toys, happiness, and never having to worry about anything. That was not me. I got into the car after seeing my mom, and I cried the whole way home. I didn't cry because I missed her, I cried because I didn't know who she was anymore.

It won't happen again. This is the last time I promise. Just one more time, it won't happen again. All the things I kept hearing while my mom was addicted. She would always say, "I promise I'm going to get better for you guys." *If you wanted to, why is it so hard for you to stop?* I always thought. I wondered, too, *Maybe if she really loved me she would stop.* Addiction can take lives... Your life, and other lives around you. Addiction didn't take my mom's life, but it did take away a part of me every time I heard the words *Just One More Time*.

Quinn Prouty

Age: 15, Grade: 11

School Name: Lindbergh High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Megan Roegner

Category: Poetry

never better

shush

nothing much has happened,
neither good nor bad.
i close my eyes and hope
this mediocre stroke
becomes melodic but not
in the way the mess
in my head is or the cacophony
in my heart is.

and if my thoughts were color
they would come out with a splat,
quite organic but distasteful.
too stiff and uncertain.
for i have already learned
to distrust what makes me
faithful.

though my body is putrid,
i've learned to wash my hair,
so each friday i bathe
in a suit of skin.
the room smells like
melting limbs
and loose lips. i test
the waters as i do
of your patience. slip
underneath without a sound,
dragging and drowning.
my heart too heavy to go on,
a stroke away from gone.

frayed

i see the galaxy in squares
like a hand me down quilt,
waiting for me
to take a stab at it.
though i'm no good
with needles.
i can only handle those
dripping in scratchy yarn,

a knit scarlet scarf slung
around my neck.

yet i feel so dumb
when i lose
count. though my fingers know
the number. every time
i go to lick at my thumbs,
i taste the steam iron
burning, boiling.
the wrinkles are permanent now
but at least they are pristine.
at least they are pretty.

Jayla Pruitt

Age: 15, Grade: 9

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educators: Shannon Koropchak, James Lewis

Category: Short Story

Vicky: a Letter

1. hate. hate. hate!

I hate Vicky Vandorhof. I hate the way she gets to just prance around being happy. I hate the way she dresses. I hate how she speaks and how she's rich enough to buy cute clothes but chooses ugly ones instead. I hate the way she references vine at every waking moment, I hate the way she walks and presents herself, I hate that she is confident, hate the way she has friends, I hate the gigantic mole she has growing above her top lip and how she continues to call it a beauty mark when it clearly is not, I hate the way she thinks she can barge into a communal space, let's say a bathroom for example, and start singing *Don't Rain on my Parade* worse than Rachel Barry sung it when she knows other people are in the stalls. I just hate her. I have never hated someone more than I hate Vicky. She makes me wanna snatch the air out of my lungs so hopefully, I'll never have to hear, see, or feel her presence again. I hate her.

I hate when adults say "hate is a strong word". Now I hate you for saying that. Hate is the most perfect word in the English dictionary. It captures all I need. My parents say I'm *pessimistic*. Whatever that means. They are pessimistic for calling me pessimistic. Man, I hate drinkers. Not alcoholics, drinkers. The ones that don't have an addiction but still do it too often. Not for the taste but for the feeling. Especially parents who do that. Get a little too tipsy. Start singing and dancing, playing music way too loud. When they start being overly obnoxious. You are a little too happy. No one should be happy for too long. It is unhealthy. Be mad for a little while. Throw a few things. Why are you smiling? I hate people who smile all the time. The world could be ending and you are still smiling. What is there to be happy for?

I sat in social studies pitying my teacher because she has to teach this class. Though this might come as a surprise, I did like history. I liked how it was so sure of itself. Every question always has an answer. I hate unanswered questions like why Vicky is always there ruining my experience. And she's one of those open-mouth chewers. No one cares if you are chewing all vegan cruelty-free twenty-dollar gum from some *Etsy* seller.

"She's so annoying right?" Interrupting my thought I turned around confused but I guessed he noticed me staring into the back of her head with disgust.

"Oh yeah, she's *soo* annoying. " This was me attempting to reply *cooly*. If that is even a word.

"Haha yeah, did you see her when-" he continued to speak but I stopped listening. I hope he didn't notice. When he spoke he was twisting the drawstring of his worn-down hoodie. Whenever I saw him, which was usually in the halls, he was always wearing that red *Nike* hoodie. The bearings were a bronze type color you could tell it used to be gold. They had a hole in the right sleeve hem. I could tell that he nibbles on it when he is nervous or bored. Especially when we interact. The plastic covering from the drawstrings was bitten off as well. I didn't even know his name before that day. Rohan Alexander. I always thought that people whose first and last names sounded like first names were special. Rohan is special. He's the first person that I've met that I didn't hate. The feeling's mutual... I think. After that, I started acknowledging his presence. I found out we have a lot of classes together. I just never noticed him. I guess because we sat in two opposite corners of the classroom. My teacher joked and said we were one of the same. I didn't find that very funny. I hate her too. I hate English teachers. Kinda funny that I'm writing right now. Not by choice of course. Currently, I'm unwillingly submitting to the psychological traps of my English teacher from hell. We'll get into that, just not right now.

2. the truth

It's about time I explain the incident. The incident I am known for. Stabby Abby. That's what they called me. You wanna know who started it? Take a wild guess. Vicky Vandorhof. The story starts like most stories start; at school.

I had already been having a horrible day. I failed my Spanish test and my lab partner spilled dye on my clothes. Can you guess who my partner was? Vicky. I was wearing my brand new tee shirt that I got from the mall under my hoodie, which also got stained. My new red converse turned blue.

“aw omigosh are you ok??”, said Vicky.

I didn't want her pity. She offered to get paper towels but I declined. Now walking around with blue stained clothes, my science teacher felt bad and got me other clothes from the lost and found. It was an XXL school wrestling tee shirt from 2005 and some *lululemon* leggings a size too small but they kinda fit so I guess that works and maybe I could sell them or something. I walked around school feeling sorry for myself. They eventually called my mom but of course, she didn't respond, which was very on-brand for her. Then it was lunch. I sat with Rohan as I usually do at the tiny table in the courtyard. Vicky approached us and we just stared at each other for a second before saying anything. I find it important to mention I was of sound mind and she deserved it. Anyway, after we got done staring at each other for an extended period of time, she glared at my outfit doing the mean girl up-and-down stare, you know the one. “Nice outfit,” she said. I looked at Rohan and we had one of those moments where you just know what the other's thinking. “Mhm so is yours, I just love how you don't care what anyone thinks of you. You are *really* brave.” I had been holding that one in for a while. We had more banter that I can't even remember because my anger is clouding my memory. The last thing I could recall was that I stabbed her with my dirty metal fork. She was asking for it and I was so fed up with everything she was saying like comments about me and Rohan and how we liked each other but I have never liked Rohan little did I know he liked me. So after I stabbed her, Ms. Summers saw me, grabbed me by my arm, and dragged me to the office. I sat in the principal's office while they called my mom, but again she didn't answer. Mr. O'neil, the principal, came in and sat in his chair in silence. As if it was gonna teach me something. Silence is a filler. It's a sad excuse for people's awkwardness. He began to go on his rant about how I'm better than this and it's not me, but it is me. This is who I am. To sum up the story, they didn't press charges on the agreement that I go to therapy two times a week.

So now I'm seeing you, Ashley. I never understood the purpose of journal writing. I think it's stupid. Why write out my feelings when I can conceal them? If all my feelings got out I would be in an insane asylum. And you gave me the prompt “what happened, what do you regret, and what would you change?” I don't regret shit. I didn't do anything wrong, she deserved it. I guess that's what's wrong with me. Rohan thinks there's something wrong with me. We had a discussion after I got my sentencing. He said that he couldn't believe he liked me. I had no clue and I guess I hurt his feelings because he blocked me on everything and moved his chair to the front of the class so he couldn't see me. Why do I always ruin relationships? I can barely have them in the first place.

Nyla Pruitt

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Jennifer Salrin

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Castle Point

I have always gravitated towards a brush or a pen. My hands simply yearned for some instrument to mark any surface I could find. As a child, when I got my hands on crayons, I adorned the walls of my home with beautiful arrangements of violets and reds, blues and greens—mini masterpieces.

I took to paper as I learned that the murals in the hallways weren't...practical. I spent my days dusting sheets of paper in charcoal, bathing them in heavy acrylic. My Instagram was flooded with watercolors and my TikTok blackened with ink as the art world's "Inktober" rolled around. With every scroll, YouTube recommended video essays detailing the lives of amazing artists and their work. One video in particular, "The Ominous Black Paintings of Francisco Goya," struck me: its thumbnail was a haunting depiction of a man being mocked and tormented by another.

At first, it was a morbid curiosity that drew me to Francisco Goya and his work *Pinturas Negras* (The Black Paintings), a series of fourteen pieces painted directly onto his walls, decorating the inside of his home. I was fixated, not only on the hideous and grotesque nature of his late work but also on how the pieces told a story evoking an immense sense of doom, a doom that was reflected from within. His pain and distress shook me. When battling his darkest hours, an amalgamation of his paranoia, and alienation from society tragically accompanied by the onset of his deafness, Goya wielded a brush to resist the storms.

I too wielded a brush, facing the crimson lines that left my community in darkness: centuries of systematic disenfranchisement staining the pavement, leaving homes crumbling and vacant—houses barred shut and boarded up. The summer before my junior year I was accepted into an art apprenticeship program. I stood before an eight-by-four foot plank of wood meticulously crafting the mural meant to replace the plain lumber that engulfed a neighborhood called Castle Point. I drew inspiration from the African-American artist Aaron Douglas and his murals from the Harlem Renaissance. It was rare to see Black people depicted in the way he did. Joyful. Exuberant. Exalted. Heavenly. I scratched graphite onto the board, sketching the kinky texture of an afro, the upturned jaw of a young girl, the raised arms and bent legs of a child leaping into the air overcome with joy. For weeks, I bathed the plank in playful hues of orange, pink, and purple—bringing the silhouette of the child to life.

I was asked to represent myself and the other artists who had created pieces for the neighborhood on the day of installation. Members of the community gathered, watching as we replaced the grim lumber that encased the homes with portraits. Children hurried to the murals, mirroring the joy exuded by the silhouette of the girl, touching her legs, grazing the afro that crowned her head.

The bare wood planks that formerly sat on the cracking window sills told a story, one of a predominantly Black community, like many others, forgotten and left in the dark. Facing the smear of racism and systemic division that lasts within my community with a brush was a daunting task. It evoked a pitiful hopelessness within my chest. But after seeing the children admiring the portraits, and hearing the mothers and fathers express their thanks, I understood the impact I was making. The mural will not change the course of history, it will not alter the past and put members of my community at a better social standing. It will not uproot the claws of racism entrenched within the soil. The joyful girl will instead inspire hope, bringing light to days that are drowned in gray. She will reflect the light that comes from within those homes, the *Black joy* emanating from every inhabitant of Castle Point.

Farrin Rahaman

Age: 14, Grade: 8

School Name: Parkway West Middle School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Tracy Bouslog

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

The Ugly List

After a typical day at Ridgeview* Elementary School, I stood in front of the bathroom mirror with a puffy, ripe tomato-red face, and a new perspective on myself. *What is "ugly" about myself? My nose? My face shape? My eyes? My chubby body?* These thoughts zapped through my head after a day I never expected would come in my 11-year old life.

That specific February morning, my mood was as damp as a cloudy, sprinkly afternoon. My 4th grade class was heading to the cafeteria, the volume as deafening as it usually gets. The overpowering scent of soggy curly fries and breadsticks filled my nostrils, and the sight of dimly-lit rows and rows of wooden benches that would eventually be filled up by the 2nd and 4th graders. The chattering intensifies as another class of 21 students enter. I go to take my seat at the end of my class's assigned bench, isolated. I was pretty used to how it was in my own world for 30 or so minutes, but occasionally overheard conversations. As I zip open my lunch box, and take out its contents, my eyes briefly glance at the popular kids at the other end of the table. Dakota*, Evelyn*, and Kylie* were the main ones in the popular group. Evelyn* and Kylie* were inseparable. They did everything together; they wore pastel shirts with shoulder cut outs and the same brand of leggings, and their hair would always be flowy, neat, and let down. Dakota* was athletic, and everyone seemed to have an opinion about him, whether it was positive or negative. I never thought much about them nor did I ever have a longing to be with them. I was comfortable on my own, with my loose leggings and brightly patterned t-shirts that looked like it was made for 1st graders; and sweaters that resembled a grandmother's.

Starting on my usual schedule, I began chomping on my sandwich, the smooth, thin case of plastic in my hands, and zoning out, thinking of any random topics to linger in my mind. I must have been getting bored because suddenly I heard the popular kids chattering.

"Don't you think she should brush her hair? It's always tangled and messy!" I heard Evelyn* whisper a snarky remark to Kylie* about this girl on the other side of the bench.

"I know right! She would definitely be on the school's ugly list. Don't you think, Dakota*?" Kylie* commented maliciously while trying her best to not burst out laughing.

"It looks like her clothes have been thrown into mud and chewed by a dog! No doubt, she's ugly." Dakota* joked with Kylie* and Evelyn*, causing them to laugh hysterically. They started to get on the topic of ugly vs. pretty. The thought never occurred to me about my appearance in school— it never made sense. Why would people beautify themselves just to learn for a few hours?

"Am I on the pretty list?" I heard one girl ask to Dakota*. They began to sort out who in our class were on the "pretty" and "ugly" list, most names that were on the "pretty" list belonged to the popular girls, undoubtedly. They started to transition into the "ugly" list. *No way they'd put me on either list, I'm practically invisible!* I tried to reassure myself, starting to feel a feeling I thought I wouldn't ever need to, especially at the end of the bench, where I was all alone.

As they were listing off a few names, I suddenly heard what I thought I wouldn't hear. "*Far-rin.*" It felt like my whole world shattered; my heart seemed to be punctured with a sharp, invisible arrow. The group continued to list names and giggle, as if they never said anything so wounding to my world. *These are just silly words strung out in*

a silly way, but why does it sting so much? My mind raced.

Later that day, when I got home, I stood in front of the mirror in the bathroom, trying to discover faults in my 11-year old self. *What was it?* I tried to pinpoint what exactly made me 'ugly' to them, to the world *My nose? My face shape? My eyes? My darker skin in a dominantly white school? How I pronounced my S's and Th's?* My mind spiraled into a seemingly never-ending torment of what was found 'ugly' about me: it was everything.

The next day, I kept shielding my face and body from everyone else like a roly poly, hoping everyone's eyes wouldn't shift to me. I wasn't able to learn anything for that whole entire day. *If the popular group thought I was "ugly," then wouldn't everyone else?* I stepped through the school's doors with that thought that would keep agonizing me, even 4 years later. I still vividly remember how the words stung me. My name on the 'ugly' list may not have seemed significant to them at that time, but those words truly cut through me.

*Names changed

Madison Reseigh

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Olathe North High School, Olathe, KS

Educator: Deirdre Zongker

Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy

Wings on Wind

“Wait up!” Amalee stumbled over her feet clumsily, talons of her bird-like feet scraping against the rough stone.

Sol laughed, running head, “You’re so slow! Hurry!”

Amalee blew her hair away from her eyes as the wind fought her as she ran uphill, following Sol as he came to the summit of the small cliff. Sol stopped, folding his wings in front of him, feathers brushing against his collarbone and up his neck like Amalee’s. Amalee’s shoulders drooped low, leaving her wings to drag along the ground as she slowly climbed up behind Sol, breathless.

“You’re impossible,” Amalee spat, falling over onto the warm stone of the cliff.

Wind muffled Sol’s words, but Amalee didn’t much care for whatever remark he had to offer her. The sun peered its bright face out from the airy clouds above as they raced across the blue sky. It offered its rays down onto the rocky ground, warming Amalee’s skin. Sol’s talons pinned Amalee’s hair to the rock as he flitted about the cliff excitedly, “Hey! Move your foot! You’re on my hair!”

Sol glanced down and smiled apologetically as he stepped away from her. Sol offered his wing out as Amalee stood. She gazed out across the gorge that spanned in front of them. Its wide chasm descended into a mysterious darkness and its rocky edges offered adventurers dangerous ambition. The wind would whistle through it, carrying its eerie song along the grooves of the walls. Mountains hugged each side of the deep ravine, grasping for the sky like desperate claws of a hungry predator. Mist glittered like the dazzling diamonds of the night. Fog permeated the grounds below and Amalee sighed happily as she gazed upon the sight.

“Is this why you brought me up here?” Amalee breathed, unable to tear her eyes away from the massive expanse of the land.

Sol beamed, spreading his wing out in a large, dramatic gesture that swept out over the ravine below, “*This* is what beauty looks like.”

“I’ll say!” Amalee nudged Sol’s feathered shoulder with her own, “I’ve never been up here before. I’ve only ever seen this place when we fly over it sometimes. Remember when you almost fell in?”

Sol’s feathers fluffed up as he grasped for words, “I wanted that pear! How could I have known it would roll into the chasm when I reached for it?”

“Because it’s always windy!” Amalee laughed easily as the breeze brushed against her cheeks as if to prove her point.

The clouds rolled over the sun once more, eclipsing the expanse of land before the two in a dark haze that made the chasm radiate darkness ominously. Amalee shivered at the beauty of its mystery.

“I bet it would’ve been so good. It was so green,” Sol said, his face falling as he talked.

Amalee chuckled but pinned her eyes on the crisp white feathers of far off birds that rode the air currents above the canyon. She rolled out her shoulders a bit, feathers rustling against her collarbone.

Sol glanced over at her, his wind-bitten cheeks pink as clouds at dawn, “Where are you going? You don’t want to climb back down?”

“Why climb when you have wings? Besides, it might rain soon,” Amalee stretched her wings out on either side of her.

Sol’s face soured with skepticism, “You love the rain. What are you up to?”

Amalee innocently smiled and tapped Sol’s chest with the claw in the crook of her wing, “Tag! You’re it!”

She didn’t glance back to see Sol react, she spun and dove off the cliff, throwing her wings out to catch the wind in her soft feathers. The currents picked her up and drove her higher as she beat her wings to propel herself faster. Sol was overhead, glaring down at Amalee as she laughed, spinning and diving dangerously close to the chasm’s mouth that waited to swallow any curious creatures that drew too near.

“You’re impossible!” Sol yelled down at Amalee as she reached down and dragged her fingers across the rocky

edge of the ravine, reveling in the dust that she kicked up as she went.

Amalee laughed as the small bits of dirt and dust tickled her skin and she flew higher, dodging dry, barren trees as she aimed for the expansive sky. The sun opened up again and threw light across the ground. The rays danced across Amalee's body and she marveled at the warmth. Sol swung down low, directly in front of Amalee. She screamed as her body slammed into Sol's and she began to fall, the claws of the chasm scratched at her as she fell, drawing her in.

Talon's dug into Amalee's ankle and she looked up at Sol who beat his wings frantically. He groaned as he lifted Amalee over the edge of the ravine and dropped her. Amalee rolled, her wings folding over her body. Sol landed next to her and collapsed, breathing heavily.

"Don't ever do that again," Sol grumbled through breaths.

Amalee nodded, unable to speak as her heart pounded, threatening to leap from her throat. She chuckled as her nerves calmed from their spike. Amalee sat up and shook out her wings, sending clouds of dust rolling off her mottled brown and white feathers.

"Let's get back. Lunch is calling me," Amalee smiled, already preparing for flight again as Sol rolled over.

Sol brightened at the mention of lunch, "What are we having?"

Amalee shrugged, "Guess we'll just have to find out. I'll race you there!"

Sol laughed at the challenge, "Just don't go falling into the gorge again. You wouldn't want to be late for lunch."

"Like you wouldn't save me again," Amalee scoffed, but her smile persisted leaving an ache in her cheeks.

Amalee held her wings close to her, folding them and prodding Sol with her talons, "Come on, it's no fun when I have a head start."

Sol shook his head, laughing, "Alright, alright!"

Amalee offered her shoulder to help him stand and he took a moment to balance, shaking out his wings which scattered a few feathers at their feet.

"Listen," Sol said, turning his gaze away from Amalee, "I brought you up there for another reason."

Amalee tilted her head, confused, her wispy hair falling down her brow bone, "Really? You did?"

Sol nodded and opened his wings, stretching them wide to either side of him, "Follow me. I'll show you."

The wind rushed down onto Amalee as Sol took off overhead. Amalee soared after him, pushing herself off the ground.

Sol led her up to the cliff once more, and the hum of magic in the air soothed Amalee's excitable nerves. Sol suddenly swooped upward and Amalee faltered as she tried to follow. She wobbled as the air current shifted and her feathers adjusted to meet it again. Sol disappeared over the ledge that jutted from the face of the mountain. Amalee stopped before landing, her claws scratching stone as she flew. She beat her wings in place and watched as Sol beckoned her towards a large crack in the stone. Amalee cautiously landed and followed Sol as the tips of his wings disappeared into the slim opening.

"What is this anyway?" Amalee said as her wings grazed rock, "it looks like just....another...."

Amalee trailed off as her jaw hung low, her eyes widening. Sol stood in the darkness, a cave had opened up leaving more room for the two of them to stand. He had his back to an elliptical light, flickering and wavering at the edges like the sun. Amalee could hear the magic thrumming in her ears louder now, her heart matching its pace. Breathless, Amalee walked forward, Sol hopping excitedly.

"Woah," Amalee leaned forward, balancing on one talon as she reached out a claw to touch the rippling surface of the light, "What? How?"

Sol grinned, "I found it this morning. It just appeared here. I heard this huge rumbling and this crack split the wall open! I looked inside and I saw this."

Feathers flew as Sol opened his wing to gesture to the oval of light that pulsed and lit the dark cavern.

"But what is it?" Amalee cocked her head and her talon grazed the surface.

Yelping, Amalee's leg fell forward into the light. She jumped back, feathers fluffed up, frazzled.

Sol lunged for her and caught her between his folded wings, his brows tight with concern, "Amalee? You okay? What just happened?"

Amalee shook her head and blinked away the shock, "yes, I'm fine. I don't know what happened. I just...fell through."

"Fell through?" Sol looked from the light to Amalee.

Sol studied Amalee's face for a moment longer. Curiosity and fear glowed in his gaze as he pinned his eyes on her. Amalee pressed her lips into a fine line and she nodded.

Sol whirled around to the light and turned his head to glance back at Amalee, "We have to see where it goes."

"Where it goes?" Amalee said, bewildered, "It might not even go anywhere! It just tried to eat my leg!"

"What if it does lead somewhere though? We would have to tell everyone else so we can keep a watch on it so nothing comes through," Sol insisted.

Amalee huffed, "We could do that anyway! Let's go back."

Turning away to exit, Amalee only made it a step before Sol caught her wing between the middle of his own and he dragged her back. Amalee yelled as the pulsing magic light hummed deafeningly in her ears. Her skin prickled as the hair on the back of her neck raised and she shut her eyes against the blinding light.

Sol's grip on her loosened and she stopped screaming. She slowly opened her eyes and smacked the back of Sol's head with her wing, "What was that for? You could've got us killed!"

Sol had his back to Amalee and she glared at him, "You aren't going to apologize? What are you even looking at?"

Joining him where he stood, Amalee padded across the short grass and looked away from Sol's face. She was met with a wave of amazement. Before her, just below the rolling hills that she stood on, were towers of some kind of gray stone and shining transparent material. Everything was loud as dark paths dotted with yellow were crowded with some kind of gleaming modes of transportation of all colors. The familiar whisper of magic only came from behind Amalee as the oval light wavered.

"What...what is this?" Amalee breathed.

Sol was still as stone, "I have no idea. But it's definitely not home."

Amalee nodded, "Agreed. Let's go back. It isn't safe."

Amalee turned to see with horror the light flicker and wink out of sight, dispersing into the air.

"No!" Amalee gasped as she ran for the doorway home but only met air.

Sol pivoted, fear striking his features, "Oh no."

Amalee's eyes pooled with tears as she searched for the elliptical light but found nothing. Sol walked up behind her and fell to his knees, "We're...stuck."

Madison Reseigh

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Olathe North High School, Olathe, KS

Educator: Deirdre Zongker

Category: Poetry

Jane Roe and Our Tears

When hellfire reigned overseas in a foreign country
Killing and strewing destruction in the wake of the battle
A bursting light of hope named Jane Roe fought bluntly
For the bodies that were waved off as easily as cattle

Her baiting battle of bodies secured
As her word held true by some miracle
The “inferior” sex had been assured
Their fighting over: a happy ending to a lyrical

Another generation would rejoice
Sending special sporadic sparks
From themselves for now they had a choice
For they printed their happiness like birthmarks

Until the deadly dawn dipped darkness down
Into a misleading brightness of June 24, 2022
Dreams were interrupted, etching a frown
Woke everyone with the sound of their unholy gun.

Away went her justice, away went her pleas
For Roe’s effort tossed tastelessly toward a tortured future
Without much to do we got down on our knees
With shears of man they ripped the suture

Laughing and pointing at these estrogen beasts
While fondling breasts behind his desk
Instead they point to the priests
While we held our heads high, statuesque

Talking and walking objects they see
Holding and hiding behind a holy figure
‘You don’t know what’s best for you, don’t you agree?’
‘Your emotions cloud your judgment. To our ways: configure’

Shaking hands and shaking legs
Spirits shattered and weight settled in
Future mothers’ cries and begs
Wanting to unburden themselves from unwanted kin

Hands clasped together
Skin cracked and caked with tears
Hearts cry and take to a tether

Lips of choice voice their fears

Throats tear and burn
Rage and grief fuel fires of fear
Hands bleed, reach and yearn
While higher up men watch and sneer

The fight continues night by night
While the victims are to blame
You see not the purpose of our right
As you slip inside her slight frame

What will become of those discarded
By the "protectors" of those on this stolen land
Turned away without being regarded
We form together and take a stand

Strength in numbers will succeed
"We are here not because we are lawbreakers..."
Bring justice to the unjust creed
"We are here in our efforts to become law-makers"

Refah Reza

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Parkway Central High School, Chesterfield, MO

Educator: Jason Lovera

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

A Little More Faith

“Rachel, I think we’re lost,” Sidney sighed anxiously, and my stomach dropped.

“What do you mean we’re lost?” I asked in disbelief, my heart pounding against my chest. I took out my phone to check Google Maps, and my jaw clenched when I realized we had no service. We were in the middle-of-nowhere Missouri, and we had no service and no way of figuring out how to get to our friend’s party.

We pulled into a random farmhouse’s lot, and Sidney whipped out her phone. She had one bar of service, and we waited nervously for Google Maps to load again.

Please. I thought. Inshallah, we need this to load. Please, God, please.

For as long as I can remember, I have always been averse to anything having to do with Islam. I threw tantrums every time my parents tried to take me to Sunday School at the Mosque, and when they somehow forced me to go, I would spend the entire day puking in the bathroom because of how claustrophobic I felt in the hijab I wore. I looked up translations of the Quran because I couldn’t be bothered to learn Arabic to read it. I always made up excuses not to fast during Ramadan, because while I didn’t mind the actual fast, I felt incredibly uncomfortable praying, which is required as part of the month. Religion was always the lowest on the list of my priorities, and as Jesuit Theologian John Courtney Murray says it, I am mostly “just ‘too damn busy’ to worry about religion at all” (Toward a Hidden God 82). I would much rather spend time pushing toward my goals in a productive manner, like reading a book or doing my homework, than put time into religion.

Allah feels too far away from me to be intimate with him with prayer and tradition because I can’t explain his existence with hard facts and logic. I don’t know what he looks like or what he sounds like. Proof of his existence, for me, needs to be tangible. All I have, though, is the Quran and the word of my parents. According to Anglican Theologian David Jenkins, for many people, including me, “what cannot be known [with science and logic] somehow seems uninteresting and unreal” (Toward a Hidden God 84). I love science and math, and most things can be explained while adhering to those laws. Why do I need religion to explain anything that can’t? Satan from John Milton’s Paradise Lost states that “the mind is its own place, and in itself can make a heav’n out of hell, and a hell of heav’n” (Milton 1.255). I don’t need God or religion to make my life what I want it to be; I just need myself and a good mindset. Logically, that makes sense to me.

Yet, as I sat quivering with anxiety in Sidney’s passenger seat, I desperately recited any du’a or prayer I could remember. Even if it had nothing to do with getting to safety, I chanted it in my head urgently. There was no other way out of this situation. Logic couldn’t save me now.

“Wait, I got another bar!” Sidney exclaimed, and she quickly called our friends that had already reached. My prayers came to a halt as the dial tone echoed in the dim light of her dashboard.

“Hello?” Lily said, and Sidney and I screamed in relief.

“Lily! We’re lost!” I practically yelled. “We’re in a random lot and we have no idea how to get to your farm.”

“Okay, calm down. Are you near a blue shed?”

I squinted at a shed nearby. It was too dark to tell, but I thought, or rather hoped, that it was blue.

“Good! Everyone else got lost there too. Just pull out of the lot and turn right, and you’ll be by the lake. I’ll walk out to come to get you guys,” Lily instructed, and I grinned at Sidney. We were fine!

As Sidney shifted out of the parking gear, I relaxed in my seat. Sidney handed me her phone, and as she tried to turn out of the lot, a giant black truck sped directly toward us, not slowing down at all.

“Sidney, stop!” I screamed, and she let out a high-pitched screech as she slammed down on her horn. The truck came to a skidding stop and my heart nearly leaped into my throat and I clutched my chest fearfully.

“Oh my god, who is that?” Sidney gasped, looking at me nervously. I shook my head vigorously, too stunned to stay anything. Our mouths snapped open when we heard the truck’s car door open, and I could feel my forehead glisten with beads of sweat in the face of the blaring headlights. I watched Sidney fiddle with her cross necklace and

instantly went back to praying.

Inshallah, inshallah, inshallah, I chanted.

A middle-aged man dressed in black hopped out of the driver's seat and stormed angrily over to Sidney's window. He gestured for her to roll her window down, and I grabbed her hand as her window barely opened.

"What are you girls doing so late out at night?" he scolded, and Sidney and I held our breath in fear.

"W-we're sorry, sir, we're looking for our friend's house," Sidney stammered.

"You really shouldn't be out this late. Are you looking for the Pilzs?" his voice boomed. "There were a couple of other girls that got lost here that were looking for that house."

We nodded synchronously. He told us to follow him, and I glanced at Sidney as she had no choice but to follow the strange truck. He turned right, and we followed him down a one-way gravel road silently.

"Sidney, we're gonna die. This is it," I said, chewing my fingers.

"Shut up. Don't speak it into existence," she slapped my hands away from my mouth. "Jesus will save us," she joked anxiously, playing with her necklace. I laughed, but I desperately hoped that Allah was hitching us a ride to safety.

As we approached a crossroads, the man gestured out his window for us to turn left. He went right, and we hesitantly went down the dark path, still covered in gravel. The crunch of the road underneath our tires was the only thing we could hear until finally, we heard faint happy screams.

"Is that Lily and the others?" I asked hopefully, squinting into the darkness. The forest suddenly disappeared and I recognized the shimmer of the moon's reflection in the glistening lake now ahead of us.

Sidney squealed in joy. "We made it, thank god."

The rest of the night was filled with laughter and happiness as we roasted marshmallows, ate cake, and sang Taylor Swift and Phoebe Bridgers by the fire. It was perfect like it was going to be from the start. The eventful journey was repressed far into my brain, as I was focused on living in the moment of celebration with my wonderful friends.

As I laid restless with giggles and filled to the brim with sugar in my cot, I looked over at Sidney who was fast asleep next to me. Her cross glinted in the moonlight, and I thought to myself, Thank god, we got here okay.

There were so many ways that our journey could have gone wrong. The man could have had a gun, he could have led us astray, or he could have totaled our car, leaving us stranded in the middle of nowhere. I closed my eyes and breathed a sigh of relief to be in a warm bed surrounded by people I felt safe with.

Religion always creeps back into my life in my moments of necessity and despair. Before a hard exam, submitting a college application, or a first date, I whisper bismillah under my breath earnestly. It feels hypocritical, knowing that I don't pay any special attention to Allah in any other moment of tranquility or normalcy. You could call me a "practical atheist", or a "disguised nonbeliever who behave[s] during the rest of the week as if God did not exist" (Toward a Hidden God 83). When I should be saying bismillah before doing anything, even something as simple as getting out of bed, praising everything with mashallah, and thanking Allah afterward by saying alhamdulillah, I never do unless it's before something I am especially anxious about. Allah only comes into my life when it's convenient for me, otherwise, he barely exists to me. No Friday prayers for me, no fasting, and no reading the Quran.

I still don't quite understand my relationship with Allah. Do I even have a relationship with him if he never actually interacts with my life? Sometimes I feel like my moments of prayer in despair are brought on by needing to be with something familiar, and for me, that's Islam. I don't necessarily believe in the effectiveness of my prayers, because has Allah really taken any noteworthy action in my life? I study hard for every test I take, so naturally, I do well on most of them. If I don't study, I don't do well. If the college I'm applying to thinks I'd be a good fit, they'll accept me. Allah isn't on the admissions committee. My first dates depend on whether my date and I are compatible, not whether Allah thinks we're compatible. Dr. John Macquarrie of Union Theological Seminary says that "faith in God is more than an intellectual belief...It is a total attitude of the self" (Toward a Hidden God 85). If I want something in my life to happen, then I take steps toward it. The attitude of my "self" consists of believing that I have the power to direct my life as I choose, which in turn, reduces my faith, Allah doesn't hold my hand or stand in my way.

But what about the truly inexplicable that seemingly transcends facts and logic? What really saved us when Sidney and I took that terrifying road trip to Lily's farmhouse? Everything that happened was out of my control.

Maybe, just maybe, Allah was sitting in the backseat, after I prayed to him for help.

When Jocasta is consoling Oedipus about him possibly murdering Laius, she states, "whatever the god needs and seeks/ he'll bring to light himself, with ease" (Sophocles 799-800). Jocasta puts her trust that God will let everything play out as it should. However, while I believe Allah doesn't necessarily control my situation, he gives me the control I need in the form of free will. That's his way of "bringing to light" what he "needs". In *Paradise Lost*, God makes men "sufficient to have stood, though free to fall" (Milton 3.99). Perhaps throughout my whole life, he proves his existence to me by giving me the freedom to choose. I'm able to choose when and how I study and how I present myself to new people. I do control my life, but maybe it's because Allah lets me. He also plays a bigger part where he sees fit; he might've helped me that night, and protected me from harm that I couldn't protect myself from using my ability to choose.

While I still don't feel fully comfortable placing all my trust and spending so much energy toward a deity I'm not quite sure of, I have more faith that he exists now because I did nothing to ensure my safe travel that night. Free will didn't get me there; it had to be some outside force. My ability to freely choose guarantees the existence of free will, which means that it was given to me somehow. Nevertheless, like Dr. Claude Lévi-Strauss, a professor of social anthropology, I still find it "perfectly acceptable to spend my life knowing that we will never explain the universe" (Toward a Hidden God 82). It's intangible, after all, but now, I understand more why people rely on religion. It essentially explains the inexplicable, and while I'm mostly okay with the incongruencies and mysteries of our universe, and chalking up the events of that night to pure luck, some people depend on reassurance in God. It's still nice to have a little more faith, though.

Emily Rines

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: St Joseph's Academy, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Chelsea Layton

Category: Short Story

The Wrong Stitch

She wakes up to her dog tugging on her bedsheets, or rather, what remains of her bedsheets. Leo, her newly acclimated one-year-old puppy, already bit through most of what used to be her favorite silk sheet set. Now, she'll have to order a new one, like she did last month and the month before.

"Ugh!" she sighs, "Leo, I love you, bud, but right now, you are a headache." Leo barks in reply. With another sigh, she gets out of bed and starts toward her phone, where she will order new bedsheets again. Except, her favorite store to get them is out of stock. Great.

"CALL FROM SADIE!" her phone suddenly shouts at her. She immediately hits the decline button, spins around, and decides that today is the day to make her bed. Then, she second-guesses herself. Maybe tomorrow, but today is too hard for her.

Leo follows her down the stairs to the kitchen, where she darts to her most- prized possession: her coffee maker. She opens her cabinet, reaching for her favorite coffee, only to find a note. It is from Sadie. She screams, "How did she get inside? I locked all the doors, and she doesn't have a key...." Perplexed by the thought, she shakes her head and reads the note.

Love,

It has been a while since we've seen each other. Well, I guess that depends on whether 11 months and 26 days are a long time for you, but that's beside the point. I miss you, Love, and I was wondering if we could meet soon. I am in town this week. We could meet at the cute little bakery we used to eat at every Saturday morning. The one with the beautiful pink roses all year long and the freshly-brewed coffee that would fill our noses as soon as we walked in the door.

I don't assume you will forgive me, but I want you to hear my story.

XoXo,

Sadie

Love, she thought to herself. She hasn't seen anyone else say (or write) her name in a while. She has loathed her name since, well, the breakup, she guesses, or maybe she has hated it ever since—That's too much for one day.

She crumbles up the paper and throws it on the floor. Leo trots over to it and sniffs it. She bends to pet him, then walks to the fridge to look for something to eat. There's nothing. Of course, there's nothing. She hasn't gone to the grocery store in a month. She hasn't done anything in a month. Love's phone lights up with a text. It's from Jack, her—It's complicated. "Ugh!" she cries and falls on the couch.

Two hours later, after a brief nap, Love awakens to the sound of her doorbell. She rubs the sleep out of her eyes and gets up from her couch to walk over to her door. It's Jack. "Nope," Love says a little too loudly and turns in the other direction. As soon as she enters the next room, she opens the blinds just enough to see him. He has flowers and a box with him. Chocolates, probably. It bothers her to see him dressed very nicely while she mopes around in her robe all day. The doorbell rings again. Should she get the door? Love catches a glimpse of herself in the bathroom mirror. Definitely not.

He stands out there for ten minutes and twenty-three seconds. Love clocks it. She's surprised by his patience. It was never his strong suit when they were together. Maybe he's changed for the better. No, she cannot let him get to her. He caused so much pain in her life. The kind of pain that can't be revoked with chocolates, no matter how much sugar they have in them.

He leaves the chocolates and the flowers by the door, rings the doorbell again, and heads to his car. She feels terrible for him for a moment, but then she remembers what he has that she doesn't: a life, a job, a future. She has to stop spiraling.

Love feeds Leo his daily meal of "lamb and rice," as it says on the packaging. Now she needs to feed herself. Maybe she'll go to the grocery store today. Probably not. She might see Sadie or Jack there. "No, Love," she says to herself, "you're just making excuses." She clicks on the Doordash app, defying her previous thoughts, and orders Chick-fil-a at ten in the morning. Leo stares at her with disapproval. "Well, it's better than eating nothing," she says to him.

Her Chick-fil-a arrives thirty minutes later. She opens the door, noticing the flowers and the chocolate still lying there. She ignores them and shuts the door.

After receiving her food, she takes in its delicious aroma and starts to close the door when she sees a black BMW X5 down the street in her neighborhood. It's Jack's car. "Are you KIDDING me?" Love screams as she slams the door behind her, "He's stalking me!" Leo jumps up from his nap at the sound of her voice. Seconds later, there's a knock at the door. "Oh, no you don't, Jack," she says. She's fuming now. Love removes her robe, throws on a sweater and jeans, brushes her hair, and walks toward the door. If he waited ten minutes before, he'll do it again. Before she opens the door, she takes a breath and says, "Be calm, Love. He doesn't have power over you. You can do this."

"Jack, this is a surprise," she states. He tries to talk, but before he can say anything, she speaks again, "I am doing just fine without you, Jack, and I'm sure you feel the same. I have friends, family, and Leo, so I'm not alone. I don't need your pity, so if that's all you're here for, I suggest you leave in your fancy new BMW." He stares at his feet. Love is surprised she dared to say all those things. It must be the jeans. Jack opens his mouth to speak, then shuts it again. Without saying a word, he turns around and starts toward his car. Love watches him drive away. Her jaw is practically on the floor.

Twenty minutes later, after Love finishes her chicken nuggets, her doorbell rings again. It's Sadie this time. "Oh, absolutely NOT!" Love cries. She darts to her room and closes the door. She plops down on her bed and closes her eyes.

She's in Paris; beautiful, romantic Paris. However, she doesn't have a boyfriend or even a single friend to be with her. It seems unfair—to Paris, of course. Stunning Paris doesn't deserve her being there all alone. So many other couples deserve to be here, sitting under the moonlight, with the Eiffel Tower within eyesight. That's the thing. Often, people who most deserve things aren't the ones who get them.

Her mind drifts to when it all happened. Last year, on December 25, Love discovered that Sadie had been scheming with Jack for four months. They were conspiring about her fashion business, which took her five years to grow and many more to create. Sadie, her best friend, wanted to ruin the company. For what? An extra couple of bucks? It hurt Love deep inside of her that who she thought was her very best friend, Sadie, would destroy their friendship for money. Love thought Sadie was better than that. She was wrong.

After a couple of months of consuming and memorizing every element of Love's business, under the cover of friendship, Sadie found a partner in Jack, Love's boyfriend. That's when Love started to figure it out. Jack and Sadie were spending a lot of time together. At first, Love thought they were having an affair. Then, she realized they were trying to steal her clients, the ones she had worked so hard to get, through negative comments about Love. "She copies other designers," they claimed, "she doesn't pay her employees or her bills."

When Love found out, she was devastated. The claims were ridiculous! She locked herself in her home and swore she would never come back. Of course, that's when they both realized they'd made a mistake. "Let's go to dinner," they pleaded, "we can explain." Except they couldn't. Her company was gone. All her clients were with them. They won.

DING DONG! Too many people have rang the doorbell today. She is starting to hate that sound. "Go away," she mumbles. It rings again. She gets up, puts on her slippers, and starts toward the door. This time, it's Sadie. Love opens the door. Before Love can say anything, Sadie starts talking as though it's her last time to do so: "Love, I'm so sorry. Jack and I did not mean to hurt you. We had no choice. Johnson made us do it. Trust me, Love, we did not like one second of it, but we had to do it. If you give us a chance—" Love shut the door and fell to the floor. Johnson, her old partner. Her right-hand man. Why would he do this to her? How did he do it? Why did her best friend and her boyfriend believe him?

Sadie and Jack worked together at the same company. It was another fashion business, but it was more popular than Love's company. It's how Jack and Love met. They were at a fashion conference, and Jack gave the welcome speech. Love instantly knew she had to meet him. After it was over, she asked him if he wanted to "grab a bite" with her. Thankfully (or maybe not) for her, he agreed.

They were engaged, and they had set a date for December 20: today's date. Love broke off their engagement on Christmas last year when she found out her clients were leaving, prompting her to 11 months and 26 days of

seclusion in her house.

Love thought back to the days when her company was operational. Johnson was always there for her. He answered the phone on the first ring, set up meetings with other designers, and always offered to deal with the bills. Then it hit her. She opened the door and stepped outside. She could still see Sadie in the distance. She screams, "Wait! Sadie, please come back!" Sadie whips her head around to look at Love. She replies, "The cute little bakery? 11:30?" Love smiles, recalling the joyful times at the cute little bakery. They never remembered the actual name of the bakery.

Love enters the "cute little bakery" with a smile. She read its name as she walked in: Bakers Dozen. "That's perfect," she says to herself. "What's perfect?" she hears next to her. It's Sadie. She walks up to her and sits down at the table.

They both order cream puffs, their favorite dessert. Sadie wastes no time getting down to business: "It started with Johnson contacting us about new job opportunities," Sadie explained, "He wanted to get out of your company because he claimed he wasn't getting paid. At first, he thought it was a glitch in the system, but then he said he wasn't receiving checks for months."

Love takes a breath and closes her eyes. She paid Justin Johnson the total amount of money he earned. Love opens her eyes, signaling Sadie to continue. Sadie continues, "Jack and I thought he was confiding in us. We thought he didn't have the heart to tell you about the money issue. Then, one day, Justin told us you were doing it on purpose. He claimed you were corrupting the company. He asked us a favor: a big one. He said he would work on fixing the company, but for the time being, he wanted Jack and me to move all your clients to our company because he didn't want them involved in the corruption. Love, we thought we were doing you a favor. We had no idea Johnson planned on removing you and turning your business into his own."

Love thought back to those times. No wonder Johnson was so happy to help out with the clients or the finances. He wanted to find out the company's flaws and use them to his advantage. Now, she thinks about how naive she was. She ruined her relationship with her best friend and fiancé! All for a lie?

"Oh gosh, Sadie, I had no idea. I shattered my relationship with you and Jack over this. I never knew Justin was such a manipulative, conniving person," Love said. Sadie took Love's hand and looked her in the eye: "Love, we know. Jack and I forgive you. If anything, we should be the ones to apologize." At that moment, the bakery door chimes, signaling another person has entered. It's Jack, with the flowers and chocolates he left on Love's doorstep. The flowers look a bit limp, but she smiles anyway.

Love runs to Jack the second she sees him and hugs him. "I'm so sorry," she says. He squeezes her harder. They release, and his knee drops to the floor. Sadie squeals and Love's hands fly to her chest. "Love, I love you so much. I know it's cheesy, but I want to spend the rest of my life with you. This fight was just a bump in the road on our journey together. So, Love, will you marry me?" Her heart skips a beat. She replies, "Of course, Jack. Yes, I will marry you!" The whole bakery erupts with cheers and applause. Jack and Love smile at each other.

Five years later, Love and Jack are happily married in their new home. They now have two dogs: Leo and Creampuff, named after their favorite dessert from Bakers Dozen. After they married, they merged companies and renamed the company "Stitches." They fired Johnson, and Sadie became his much better replacement. Stitches' sweatshirts, sweatpants, jackets, blazers, and jeans are more popular than ever. Their business is thriving, and their relationship is soaring. Their fight was just the wrong stitch in a jacket. Love knows at that moment that everything will turn out for the better. She stares into her bedroom from the other room. She laughs, remembering what Leo did to the bedsheets. The next thing Jack and Love create will have to be new bedding, and it has to be chew-proof.

Camay Robison

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Blue Springs South High School, Blue Springs, MO

Educator: Stephanie Morrow

Category: Flash Fiction

Unsent Letters

10/26/20XX

Mom said you died. I think you're just playing a messed-up prank and that you're actually on vacation so I'm still writing in our journal like you're coming back – I mean, you are coming back, I just don't know when.

10/27/20XX

They announced over the intercom at school today that “we lost a member of our pack”. It's impressive that you managed to get the administration staff in on the joke. I hope you're enjoying your vacation, but I really need you to come back. Lunch is boring without you.

10/28/20XX

I got called down to counseling today. They were all giving me hugs and asking if I was okay, and how I was holding up. I guess I was confused enough that they sent me to a different office where a psychiatrist talked to me during lunch. She did take me to go get some burgers so I guess it's fine. Personally, I think convincing the counselors to get in on the joke is too far dude.

10/29/20XX

Okay, the funeral announcement is way over the line. You need to come back, now. This joke isn't funny anymore, and it's actually pissing me off even more every time someone comes up to me to “express their condolences”.

10/30/20XX

You're a lying sack of turds if you think that going off and dying is a good way to end our friendship. I know we were starting to drift apart and that we were arguing more than usual, but taking the easy way out is such a coward move. Screw you.

10/31/20XX

I don't care that there's memories attached to your stuff, I'm putting it all in a bin and setting it on fire. I refuse to be friends with someone that would rather die than admit to the fact that they were a shitty friend.

11/3/20XX

Your funeral was yesterday. I stopped writing because I was worried I'd say something that I'd regret. I'm sorry for everything I said – like, in my head and on paper.

I said a lot of mean things in my head.

11/4/20XX

I read a post about Hinduism that showed up on my explore page. They apparently believe in reincarnation for all Hindus. I hope you were a secret Hindu because I'd sell everything I own to be able to buy whatever cow you reincarnated into.

11/5/20XX

If I take back all my mean thoughts will you come back? I look like the freak who sits by themselves at lunch and it's embarrassing when people keep telling me they're “sorry for your loss”.

11/7/20XX

I hate you.

11/8/20XX

I don't mean it. Sorry.

12/20/20XX

My mom is making me go to a therapist. I guess lying in bed and sleeping all day is a really bad way to cope with death – or that's what I was getting from my therapist. She's nice. I think you'd really like her.

12/21/20XX

Apparently I have Major Depressive Disorder – not because of you, but it definitely did help get me on medication. They're having me take 100mg of Zoloft to start, and I have to report any negative feelings I have so they can switch my medication.

12/23/20XX

You asshole. Why didn't you tell me you were suicidal? We could've got help together.

12/24/20XX

For Christmas, your parents gave me your last sketchbook. I think they felt bad giving me a collection of your depression, but I feel you in every line you sketched. I really miss you.

1/7/20XX

My therapist read my entries from when you died. She said it was a good coping mechanism, but that I might feel bad about “defiling” a journal that we both wrote in. I agreed, so I might buy another journal to help write my depression out. I guess I'll come back eventually.

2/14/20XX

Your birthday is tomorrow. I'm dreading it. When it stops snowing in the morning I'll go visit your grave.

2/15/20XX

I'm a coward.

3/8/20XX

I think your mom is handling the loss better than your dad. He's...seen better days. My parents invite him over but I think he sees you instead of me.

3/12/20XX

Your parents got a dog. He's cute. Your mom wanted a girl, but she got a boy for the sake of your dad. His name is Ruger, and he's a Pitbull puppy. I think I saw your dad smile after watching him run straight into the glass sliding door. It's been a while since he smiled that big.

4/2/20XX

We graduate next month. They're asking me to write a memorial speech for you but the thought of it makes me feel gross.

4/8/20XX

My birthday is soon. Did you buy me a birthday gift in preparation, or did you think that you'd still be alive in time to see me turn 19?

4/17/20XX

I wish you were handing me my gift instead of your parents.

5/1/20XX

Our ACT scores came back. I think our study session paid off because I got a 34 – sorry you wasted all that time studying only for it to result in nothing. I can't believe I'm jealous of a dead person but you got a 36.

5/25/20XX

We officially graduated today. They folded your cap and gown on your chair and set your senior photo on top. I think the sun reflecting off your picture kept shining in Mr. Alvin's eyes.
Glad to know you still hate him from 6 feet under.

6/7/20XX

I'm going on that road trip we've been talking about – San Diego, California. I'm nervous, but I have a Polaroid of us on the dash so you can still ride with me. See you at the ocean.

6/8/20XX

How devastated do you think my parents would be if I killed myself out here?

7/1/20XX

I went back to therapy because I knew it's what you would've wanted – for both me and you.
It's a new month, and a new start.
I miss you.

Camay Robison

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Blue Springs South High School, Blue Springs, MO

Educator: Stephanie Morrow

Category: Flash Fiction

My Lover, The Sea

She first came to me from the sea – a pale mess of seal skin and pitch-black hair swirling around in the water, watching as I scraped seaweed from the dock. For 3 days we sat in harmonious silence, existing around each other. “You are quite beautiful,” she croaked in her salt hoarse voice as I sat at the edge of the dock one night, sun set low beyond the horizon. I could see the tendrils of her hair reaching towards my feet, drifting just a little closer when the water receded from the shoreline.

“One could say the same for you,” I whispered back. The strange woman smiled a grin too sharp to be anything close to human and sighed, leaning her head on her arms as we watched the sky grow darker and darker.

A fortnight passed and I still spoke to the woman in the water.

“Do you not desire me?” She rasped, fingers clutching my arm in a desperate grip. Her sharp nails left painful indentions in my skin but I refused to shake her off as this was the only time she had attempted to touch me.

And it was one of desperation.

“No,” I lied, turning my attention to focus on the stars above, watching as they twinkled in and out of my view. The way the woman seemed to tighten her hold on me should have worried me, but I felt nothing at the her. I ignored the despaired – or was it angry? - wail and the splash that followed, the bone cold fingers on my arm gone and sinking into the dark, murky water.

I pretended not to feel hurt when she didn’t come back that night, my oil lantern burning itself to the metal bottom. And despite how diligently I watched the stormy water rage and slam onto the beach near my home for days on end, I never saw a glimpse of the pale woman again.

Time had passed like a blur – crops grew and were harvested, fish came in and out of season, and the schoolchildren I used to wave to now had their own children.

Young men and women used to approach me with an invitation to marry them, but they eventually stopped coming when they realized my only lover was the lost to the sea. They’d fly into a rage and scream, saying that they could “treat me better than a damned rock in the water”.

I had grown old and out of their favors, the young grandchildren of past children steering away from me during my rush to get out of town, afraid I’d miss the breathtaking woman I saw all those years ago.

Even when my sight grew worse and I shriveled into my permanently-wrapped-in-blanket skin did I never stop in my watch for the dark-haired woman, sitting on the dock in my wheelchair from sunrise to sunset, watching the tides come in and sweep the sandy shells back into their liquid home.

Never did my heart stop racing when the seaweed clumps came swimming in, curling around the dock legs like a distant memory of someone I once loved.

Like seal skin on the beach and soft, gentle kisses pressed to foreheads.

Dark hair twisted around in my once-smooth hands.

A distant memory.

Ira Rodrigues

Age: 14, Grade: 9

School Name: Ladue Horton Watkins High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Sarah Kirksey

Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy

The Expedition

There.

I duck down below waving grass to hide from my target. My clothes are mottled with beige and irregular patterns so I blend in, but even so, I feel the irresistible urge to run away.

Planting my feet into the grass, I wait and watch, holding my tiny camera upright so my fellow scientists can watch with me. Although I doubt they can see much more than weeds.

“Found it yet?” my earpiece blares. It’s Cal, my supervisor.

“Quiet!” I hiss. “I’m about to.”

“Hurry up, you’ve been there for an hour. Nym wants to call off the mission.”

“Tell her that she should let me do my job. I don’t see her helping me find the starlet.”

“Touché.”

Something flashes in my peripheral vision. I itch to turn quickly, but crush the impulse, slowly twisting on my heel to follow it.

I choke on my breath. It’s even more beautiful than I imagined.

The creature looks like a magenta phoenix, if phoenixes had obsidian eyes like shiny mirrors, and feathers that look like they are carved intricately out of marble yet ripple like water.

The starlets are an ancient race, but they’ve never been captured before now. They are a smart species. As soon as hunters started trying to capture them to sell, they fled. My agency of scientists wanted to be the first to capture one. They had good reason; the blood that flows in the bird’s veins has healing powers. People are willing to pay top dollar for just one drop, because the bird’s species is almost extinct now.

“It’s magnificent,” I whisper.

“What? What’s magnificent?” Cal barks through my earpiece. “Naomi, you’re not showing us the bird!”

“Oh,” I say, clumsily picking up my camera, not daring to let my eyes off the starlet. It glides over water and slowly stops, ruffling its feathers. Watching it, I get an idea. I grind the wifi chip under my boot, ensuring that anything and everything my mates see will be too blurred to distinguish. Then I aim my camera at the starlet.

Nym’s slow voice drawls, “What are we looking at?”

I hate the woman so much, but I resist the urge to cut off my microphone. She’s my boss.

“Can you not see it?” I say, incredulous.

“No, foolish girl!” she snaps. “Show us the starlet! We must capture this creature!”

“I am!” I protest.

Nym growls, but I couldn’t be happier. Time to fake it so I can make it.

“My camera is failing!” I yell melodramatically. It’s fully charged and in perfect working condition, but they don’t have to know that. To make my story more plausible, I shake the camera, causing the screen to tremble.

Cal orders, “Restart!”

I hear Nym yelling, “Someone get me a techie!”

Techie? They’ll see through my lie in seconds.

“Yeah? What’s the problem?” someone asks into the earcom. My heart sinks- it’s Azul, my rival. I curse at myself for even putting my plan into motion in the first place. And the starlet is about to fly away...

“Can you fix her problem?” Nym asks.

I open my mouth to offer an explanation, but Azul cuts me right off- “I’m afraid it’s unfixable.”

Huh?

“Well, then- I’m aborting the mission,” Nym says snarkily.

“Absolutely not!” I roar into the microphone. “This is my one chance!”

I press my finger on the microphone and it squeals with feedback. A whispered discussion ensues which I listen to

unabashedly.

Finally, Cal says reluctantly, "Continue with your mission, but terminate the camera. Report everything you find." He pauses for breath and starts to continue again-

"Of course," I say. "Immediately." I smash my camera into the grass. *That was such a bad excuse*, I think. *I'm definitely getting fired.* I start to rip off my microphone, but someone yells, "Naomi! Stop!" in my earpiece.

My fingers freeze on the felt of the microphone. "Azul."

"I knew something was up with you," he says triumphantly. "Your camera isn't failing, is it?"

"Gloat all you want," I mutter, moving to tear the microphone off again.

"Wait!"

"This better be worth my time." I seethe.

"Calm down. I want to partner up."

"Are you kidding me?" I laugh.

"No! Just hear me out, okay?"

"You get thirty seconds to make me interested." I start timing him on my watch.

"How would you feel about owning a starlet... for yourself?"

"You just bought yourself another minute. Tell me more," I say.

"You know the agency wants the starlet's feathers and will use it for themselves, not for anyone else."

"So you propose taking it for ourselves."

"Yes," he says shamelessly. "To stop it from falling into the wrong hands."

I hesitate.

But then I look at the beautiful bird. It shifts, violet feathers gleaming in the sunlight.

"Mission accepted," I say grimly.

"Great!" Azul says. I can hear the smile in his voice.

"Don't get too comfortable. I might just drop you yet," I say, affixing the microphone back near my mouth. Then I crouch down into the grass and slowly prowl forward on my knees, trying not to scare the bird away.

The starlet preens with feathers the same color as an indigo night sky, and I'm transfixed with its beauty. I collect myself just in time to duck as it darts a glance at my hiding place.

"Naomi to Azul. Can you track my position and give me the quickest route to our target?" I whisper. I'm right at home.

"Sure," Azul says.

As quiet as possible, I go closer to the bird, holding a strong black net. I start to throw the net over the bird... and then stop.

The starlet turns with eyes wide, perhaps wondering if I am a predator too. I freeze, afraid my movements will scare it away. For a moment, we stare at each other, creature and human, and for a moment, we are the same. As I peer into the dark pools, I see something that I might call understanding if I didn't know any better. And I realize that I could never, ever harm this innocent creature. As soon as I realize that, everything falls into place.

I mute my microphone and rip it off. It sputters and dies. Azul yells my name, but I throw the earpiece into the grass and his protests fall on deaf ears... literally.

Seconds later, the starlet spreads strong, violet wings and flies away. Tears spring to my eyes at its departure, even though I never cry. I wipe it off and chuckle a little remorsefully. Then I duck into the grass and slither towards the agency's encampment.

Hidden among the weeds, I listen to Azul's high whine. "I thought I had her!"

Ah. There he is.

"You obviously didn't!" Cal roars back. "I have half a mind to fire you right now! She outsmarted us!"

"Find her!" Nym yells above them all. The agents quickly set to sweeping through the grass, trying to find me.

I smile. I'm a master of this sort of thing, and they're just scientists.

But, more importantly, the starlet flies free.

Marisa Rodriguez

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Truman High School, Independence, MO

Educator: Lynnae Andersen

Category: Short Story

Ways to Burn

Sneaking through the front door, Hiro let out a short breath when he noticed that no one was home. He silently stepped into the house, chuckling softly to himself as he did the twisting dance that he had memorized over years of practice, so as to not aggravate the aging floorboards. He swept into his room like a shadow, and the door shut behind him with barely a whisper.

He emptied his backpack quickly so he could access the notebook that was hidden underneath multiple science and math textbooks. He lit the candle that was sitting in a glass dish on the corner of his desk and smiled nostalgically at the warmth. He considered the notebook for a moment before gaining a look of silent determination and picking up a pencil. He had some time before she returned, and he wanted to make some progress in his story.

The room is silent except for the sound of frantic pencil pushing—but then Hiro’s pencil pauses against the paper as he grips his hair and groans. “This isn’t right either,” he agonizes; another paper is crumpled and thrown into the garbage. Hiro recalled being able to easily transcribe words onto the page with profound wording directly from his heart when he was a little younger, but now—now he sincerely wondered if he was cut out to be a writer.

Hiro stared at the next blank page of his notebook. His head clunked onto the desk only to bolt upright as the sound of the front door being opened cut through the silence of the house. He scrambled to gather his notebooks and paper crumples and shove them into the tiny safe that he kept in his closet. “She couldn’t know,” he thought as he quickly blew out the candle and pulled out his school issued laptop and science textbook. She couldn’t know.

His mother, Caroline, cracks the door open and peeks in on him doing his chemistry homework. She looks annoyed and it gives Hiro a common sense of foreboding; nothing good happened when his mother was annoyed or frustrated. Although he has the textbook propped on his desk in such a way that the large, block lettering on the spine is in her clear view, she still asks, “What are you doing, Hiro?”

The anxiety creeps up his spine as he shortly answers with, “Chemistry homework.”

His mother rolls her eyes as she shuts, nearly slams, the door closed. Hiro’s just glad that she didn’t smile and compliment him for being such a diligent student. He *is* a diligent student, but when his mother says so, it feels like that’s *all* he is.

Hiro shudders at the thought of his mother’s smile. It almost always makes Hiro feel a wave of calm sweep over him before a chill creeps up his spine. Her smile almost always felt empty and fake to him, a ruse at maternal love rather than the unconditional support it was supposed to be; however, he couldn’t help but feel a rush of love for her. As much as it hurt, she was his mother and he was *supposed* to love her—just like she was supposed to love him.

Another day at school passes by. Hiro has no friends. After one turns down so many invitations to hang out after school, they lose their standing as anything but a loner. His mother didn’t have the time or money to pick him up late after school or to drop him off early, so he was stuck with his classes and a monotonous bus ride to and from school. In between the heavy course load of math and science requested of him by his mother, Hiro’s only real joy was in his notebooks.

Fantasy worlds played out in the pages. Lines of poetry, fantastic magical feats, and happy endings gave him an escape from the silent boredom, silent fear, silence of his daily life. He reveled in the companionship that he got from

reading and writing characters because he didn't have that companionship, that love, elsewhere.

When he came home that day, the house was as silent as usual, but it felt different, eerie. Hiro did the floorboard twirl tentatively, like he might have forgotten a habit of years in a few hours, before creeping up to his room. He opened the door to the sight of his mother.

"What's in the safe, Hiro?" He stared with wide eyes at his mother standing in front of his open closet door, staring distastefully at the somewhat rusty safe. His throat constricted, and he thought he was going to pass out from the rush of anxiety and primal fear that rushed through him.

But he still opened his mouth and spoke in a calm, even tone, "I don't know. I don't have the combination. It was a safe that dad gave me."

His mother scowled and hefted the safe out of the closet, much to Hiro's mounting panic. "You have no use for it if it's from your bastard father," his mother ranted, "He died a death he deserved, and I'll be damned before I let you near any of the nasty things he left behind."

Hiro felt a burn rising in the back of his throat as he held back tears. Tears meant more anger, pain, fire. The images passed through his mind quickly: his parents laughing together as they roasted smores on a bonfire, his mom lighting a cigarette on the back porch of their home while his dad swept out the door like a silent storm, watching as the bus passed the ash and rubble of the shopping center where his father died in a blazing inferno; Hiro bit his tongue as his mother hauled the safe into her room and out of sight.

There was a moment of rustling before he heard several loud bangs. *Bang, bang, bang.* The sound continued for several moments before the silence reigned once more. Hiro went back to his desk, but he couldn't focus through the feeling of loss. His notebooks, as well as some books he'd been able to sneak into the house, all held hostage in his mother's room.

"What are these?" his mother asked, her face calm and impassive, her eyes smoldering embers waiting for the right fuel to catch fire. She held a red notebook, the cover covered with doodles of candles, lightning bolts, and little flame motifs; Hiro knew that within the pages were his pain and suffering that he hung out to dry, knowing he could leave it in his poetry—not gone, but trapped in a cage where he could visit it when he wanted instead of leaving it to fester in his heart for weeks at a time.

He struggled to maintain face, unwilling to feed the flames threatening to grow in his mother's eyes, scared of getting burnt. "I don't know. I told you it was dad's safe."

His mother scoffed, "Your father didn't have your chicken scratch. You *lied* to me," she seethed as if lying was equivalent to murder, "Now answer the question. What? Are? These?"

He couldn't hide anymore. Hiro's voice trembled as he replied, "It's my writing. Stories...poems...just...stuff I wrote for fun."

The truth was gasoline on his mother's fire, "For fun?! You *know* what I told you about your shitty writing, Hiro! It's never going to get you anywhere, so it's *useless*." She stormed out of Hiro's room in a rage.

A few more moments passed before his mother started carrying stacks of books and paper out of her room. "I'm burning them," she said fiercely, hate fueled her every step as she went for another stack, "At least they'll be a useful fire starter."

Hiro's eyes bugged as he chased his mother into their backyard and watched his favorite books and personal notebooks get handled with indifference, tossed haphazardly into the half-dead and patchy grass that loitered behind their back porch. His life was in those notebooks. His carefully practiced calm facade fell to his rising panic, "No! You can't! Please, please don't burn them!" "Maybe after this, you'll focus more on your future rather than getting caught up in empty fantasies," she gritted out, tossing the last stack into the small pile sitting in the yard. She pulled out a near empty box of matches and lit the last few, one-by-one, and threw them onto the pile.

The fire was hardly the size of a campfire, but as Hiro sat there and watched his hard work and happiness burn, the flames felt giant and imposing, threatening to consume him too. His mother turned and left after the papers blackened, but Hiro stood and watched, empty and driftless, until the flames dimmed to ashes.

The next week consisted of so much nothing that it physically hurt. It hurt so much that the glint of the knives in the kitchen enticed Hiro into a new pastime. He still sat at his desk, illuminated by the dim glow of the candle, but instead of black ink filling white pages, there was red on tan, as he methodically and carefully worked his way down his arm, letting blood from his arms to fill his soul for a little while.

Until one night when thin strips of red didn't cut it anymore. Hiro stared down at the thin cuts in his arm, but still felt the suffocatingly painful nothingness that consumed his life like a greedy fire. He drifted into the kitchen to return the now useless—like his writing—knife to the kitchen, but in the dim, dingy stovetop lighting, the empty box of matches called to him.

He stood near the counter for a moment, just staring at the box, feeling a heat and longing creeping into him, a longing for the fiery passion that burned away with his notebooks.

Reaching out, his fingers touched the box and a spark of something rekindled in him; Hiro couldn't tell if it was good or bad, but he lifted the box and slid it open to find a lonely match lying within. Hiro smiled for the first time since his happiness burned. Tonight, he would find a new way.

Dousing his clothing with the gasoline that they kept in a can in the garage required no thought, no feelings, and Hiro quickly and easily did so before slipping the soaked garments back on. He held the match like it was a precious sun in a world of endless shadow—and if he hadn't felt so empty, it might have been. Nevertheless, he held it delicately as he sprawled in the patchy, still singed backyard grass, legs bent at the knee and feet resting against each other. He was careful to hold the flame away from him as he lit the match, admiring the flame instead of fearing for his life as the orange glow reminded him of afternoons scrawling in his notebooks by the light of a candle flame.

Hiro's heart dropped before trying to force its way up his throat—fire, burning, the ashes of his notebooks scattering in the early fall wind, the images burned into his skull, permanently destroying any and all companionship he had with the world. He was empty and driftless, a waif, a haunting spirit—and the flame of the candle was a promise, a promise that Hiro would no longer drift anymore.

Hiro smiled hopefully and dropped the match.

Marisa Rodriguez

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Truman High School, Independence, MO

Educator: Lynnae Andersen

Category: Poetry

On Being Mixed Race

Six Stages of Coming to Terms with Being Mixed Race

I.

Fitting in is easy when one is alone.

It is when we are with others that we feel we must find a place to belong.

But people are not objects that can be packed away neatly in organized boxes,

Alone in a crowded room because none of the pieces are the same.

Too light, too dark, too wrong to be the right fit, always slightly off, twisting languages

Until they are indecipherable to anyone but yourself and the wall with which you speak.

II.

Not black enough, not white enough, not brown enough to speak

With the bonafide and true. Always on the outside. Always a little lonely. Alone

With yourself and your words. Two different languages,

One that you know how to speak and one you don't, but they both belong

To you; they are separated by a large, dark chasm, but they are also the exact same.

So you pack the painful one into a (hopefully) forgettable box.

III.

It sits in the back of your brain, shaking and screaming for you to open it. The box

speaks. It calls for you, and you cannot help but listen, even though you know speaking

Back will bring the minute flaws back to the forefront. You look the same

As everyone else in the room. You fit in, but you are alone;

Your language, so carefully packed, bursts out—too big to hide—and it doesn't belong.

You don't belong. You're different from everyone else—a fact proven by your language.

IV.

No hope of fitting in, you pick it up; feeling the familiar weight on your tongue, your language

feels familiar yet weird; it's wrong to speak it somehow. You glance at the broken box

ripped and scattered on the floor. You realize your language is strong! You realize it belongs;

Your language—the one you embarrassedly hid because it was painful— is *yours*. You speak

and then laugh—because you never were alone,

Were you? After that, you are never the same.

V.

You look at the people that surround you, pure-colored, knowing you will never be the same, same as them. But you've realized that you are not wrong. Instead of one language,

You have two languages, and you are not alone.

Two cultures intertwine inside of you, but one is slightly out of reach. Going back to the box

tempts you; the comfort tempts you. So you learn, you learn to speak

Freely again. You learn how to touch your culture. You learn to belong—

VI.

With yourself. You will learn to belong
With each of your cultures. Different, yet the same
Because they are both yours. You will learn to speak
With confidence. The syllables lilting out in both of your pretty languages,
the chasm between them will be forded; the painful, embarrassed box?
Long gone. You won't be the same as the pure colors around you—but you also won't be alone.

Envoi.

With no one to emulate—no one the same or different—fitting in is easy when one is alone.
Yet we feel the need to belong with others. *Feel* the need. You don't *need* a box
To hold the unsavory and incomprehensible parts of you. Just speak—in *your* language.

The American Part of Me

You are white—
yet a part of me, as I am a part of you.

That's American.
Sometimes perhaps you don't want to be a part of me.

That's rare, for me,
To not want to be a part of
A seemingly balanced
Racial equation.
Alien is how it feels.
How it feels to be wrong and right.
Brown and white mixed together
Into a tone that mimics both
But gets neither quite right.
You are white—

I, however, am not

No matter how hard I try
To be. Nor can I achieve
The proper tone and inflection
For my *lls* and *rrs*, *mi lengua bonita*
Is always slightly untrue,
Just a bit too equivocado
To be truly considered colorful.
“Of color” always seems so taboo
Yet a part of me, as I am a part of you.

I straddle the line in a world of either.
Either white or colored, but I am both;
I am human, but I'm a bit too dark to be white,
a bit too gringo to be chicano.
I'm too blended to match
with the pure colors around me. An aberration
That fits everywhere and nowhere.
At every moment, the divisive feeling underlying,
Pervading my heart with racial expectation—
Unfortunately, that's American.

American is thriving in the free nation
that sees me as white when I'm more than that.
Americano is wondering if my father
Is still in the States or gone

beyond an immovable wall, emotionless faces acting like freedom
Is prisons, and violence, and dividing hopeful families.
Of course, when they see brown faces, they think drugs
and violence is the obvious end. But those faces
Are a part of me too, not just my mostly white appearance, so
Sometimes perhaps you don't want to be a part of me.

Charlie Rubin

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Clayton High School, Clayton, MO

Educator: Benjamin Murphy

Category: Flash Fiction

Promises in the Fog of War

What he told me first was that the day was moderate, somewhat cloudy. The sun peered through the clouds in little slits, illuminating the slightly arid August morning. When Ted Lavender's mom would tell the story later, she would mention how nice and beautiful the day was, the air crisp and the aura tranquil. This was not true. Azar's 1963 Ford Galaxie pummeled down a rocky beige road. He rode in radio silence, all was quiet except for 96.3 KNDS-FM quietly blaring Joni Mitchell through the car's stagnant air. Behind him was a tiny box, making little beeping noises like clockwork. It was clockwork. The circadian rhythm of a watch, or something or other. Azar was ready to give it away.

When Azar was four, his little brother was born. He was jealous that the attention was placed on the little menace instead of him. He threw a tantrum, and when that scored him no recognition, Azar pretended to have gotten over himself and asked to hold the baby. When his mother gave him little Jeremiah, he glanced over the boy's intricate, clear skin. Then he bit him square in the shoulder. The devil in his arms screamed, and his father yanked him by the ear to the hallway of the hospital's obstetrics wing and then beat Azar with a 1958 Buckingham camouflage belt. Onlookers pretended not to stare, averted their eyes, and then quietly passed him. In a way, it was karma, the biting, I mean, for the trouble that Jeremiah would cause Azar later in life.

When you knock a girl up, get her pregnant at sixteen like Jeremiah did with Felicity, lucky enough that the courts had just legalized her to terminate the pregnancy, that's kind of your fault. When you skip school, barely passing basic algebra, like Yvette, Azar's older sister, that's also kind of your fault. But when you're square in the middle, not really having any distinguishable qualities to criticize, that isn't really your fault. And so when Azar's father berated and beat him, he targeted the small intricacies. The way he walked, the way his left eye was just slightly lazier than the right, the little lisp that burrowed out of his mouth when he said the word "slight." Thlight. Azar would blame his siblings for giving his father so much pain and grievance, but it was only until many years later, over a decade after he gave *it* to Ted's mom, that he realized that the tumultuousness was the fault of his father and not because of the faults of siblings.

After he blew up Ted Lavender's puppy, Azar felt bad. He really did. I could see it in his eyes, peered downward in the hours after. When he rationalized it to the group, us marauders withering away in the floodplains of Vietnam like the decaying foliage beneath our calloused feet, making up excuses he knew were wrong, his eyes slid downward, for a split, infinite second. Yes, I remember it all too well. What Azar never told me was that he felt guilty for the whole ordeal, and afterward, he promised himself that he'd buy Ted a new one after the whole thing was over with, out of sight and out of mind. When Ted was killed just fifteen days later, March 2nd, 1970, he knew that—for his consciousness—he had to settle for the next best thing.

Azar was special in that he was one of the only three of us to voluntarily enlist. His friend, who was a friend of a friend of a man in the army, told him of some easy, combat-free logistics jobs in the army. This was just when the draft was heating up, and after that friend, who had waited too long, was forced into the army by Uncle Sam, dying by capitalism's hands, he made the decision to enlist before it was too late. At first, it was the sunshines and rainbows promised, slow walks on the sandy beach, serenading the clams and the crabs with Joni Mitchell, but before he knew it he had to go out and hump with the other men. This made him angry, every brush with death affirming his indignation.

And so they were, Azar, the stagnant air, the somewhat cloudy day, 96.3 KNDS-FM, Joni Mitchell, the world, his hands, and the box. He pulled into the dirt lot, examining the rustic house in front of him. In three years it would get struck by technicolor lightning, burning flame to the dead ground. He moved, almost like clockwork, automatic, and knocked on the door. The woman inside was waiting. She foresaw him coming, probably because at 2:09 AM on the drive there he had called her, driving, tipsy, not on drinks, but on death, to tell her that he was on his way. He presented her with the box that thrashed in his palms. All was going well until the very end, when he spontaneously

decided that he no longer wanted to give it up. Sure, he had paid for it, but that wasn't really the reason. He felt as if he was tearing apart from him something core, something of the quintessence of his essence. A chunk of his side was getting torn out, and he was somehow willingly giving it away to the woman. It was the pebble in his shoe, the luck of his life or lack thereof, the darkness in the light, the small part of his brain that said "maybe I don't deserve it at all", his birth, his death; the box almost tumbled out of her hands, but she suddenly caught herself. In the small slip-up, the square lid had popped off, and the jet-black animal popped out its tiny head. It made eye contact with Azar. It appeared to have sucked the constitution from his eyes, taking his curse with the naïvete of youth.

He had given Ted Lavender's mother a black cat.

Trenton Sandler

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Blue Valley North High School, Overland Park, KS

Educator: Lisa Bauman

Category: Flash Fiction

Give and no Get

“Silver looks good on you,” a blurred face mentioned as I checked my appearance out in the shop window. I turned to notice but there was no one there, just passersby on the busy street. Walking into the little bookstore, I brought the old man his morning coffee with a smile. As I turned the corner my many children were already in a circle, waiting to hear my voice draw out the words and my fingers peel over the crisp pages. Their toothy grins met me as I maneuvered my way and sat, criss-cross-applesauce, in the middle. Vocal cords humming, I sang the sentences to them, finishing each tale on a high note as I did every time. Some days I even brought them treats: ice cream, pizza, and cookies. They gobble any of these down without room for a thank you between their bites and swallows, but I see the way their eyes glint. It brings me joy, seeing them happy, and I smile at them no matter what, just like my mother did.

Shivering on the cold walk back to the apartment, I passed the young homeless man on the street.

“Well, how did you like it?” I asked him.

“It was surprisingly good,” he smiled.

“Surprisingly?”

“Yea, well, I didn’t realize a sad ending could actually make for a good story”

“That’s exactly what I thought! Try this one next!” I laughed, handing him another novel to try. He beamed, and I continued on my walk home, arms a little lighter.

Beeping into the apartment, Carlito, my big, fluffy dog immediately tried to jump onto my lap, practically slipping over the bare tiles. Eviction notices sat on the otherwise empty table, and I beelined for the shower, walking straight through where the couch once was. Carlito attached himself to my heels and even tried to nuzzle into the open shower, but I pushed him back with a chuckle.

“It’s not bath time, Carlitos,” I laughed.

Now clean, I shuffled my way to the closet and stared into the few sets of clothes, trying to remember which I wore the last time I went out, and which smelled the cleanest. I settled on a navy-blue puffer, and a classier pair of joggers. I heard the honk from outside that Tasha was here to pick me up, and I quickly gave Carlito another scoop of food and scratched him goodbye.

Tonight we were getting drinks at the bar in West Bronx that we had been attending since we were kids—far too young to be hanging out in a bar—but that’s just what we did, mom didn’t care. We talked and laughed about old times. Constant chatter filled my ears as lights and music circled around me. I smiled at my friends as I ordered the cheapest drink on the menu, claiming it was my favorite although I used to prefer something different. Time flew by as the womens’ words just grazed me. I gazed down at my drink, circling with the straw. When the waiter brought our checks, I noticed them all signing the no-tip option. Heart-dropping, I filled my receipt with “Happy Holidays” drawings and snuck my last \$100 under the paper before we left.

As Tasha, insisting she hadn’t had any drinks with a hearty laugh, took me home, we sat silently. Lively music was playing, her eyes focused on the road, mine on top of the buildings. She dropped me off at the apartment and as I said goodbye and thank you, she drove off, music fading with her into the silence.

Back in the apartment, I found Carlito already asleep on the mattress that I called a bed. I set down my bag and took off my night-out clothes to slip them into the closet. I settled myself into the bathtub and turned the knob for water but none came out. I settled into the cold porcelain and picked up the jagged blade that had managed to find its way in here. *Silver looks good on you*, I thought, as I slumped even deeper into my coffin.

Zenya Sharief

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Lindbergh High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Megan Roegner

Category: Short Story

Nobody is Beautiful Without a Brain

Nobody Is Beautiful Without A Brain

When Amira was 8 years old she was told that she is not a perfect pretty princess by her entire family. They said to be fair, have bigger eyes, a straight nose, be skinnier, and become taller. They said her smile was hideous because her teeth were crooked and she was weird for having glasses. They said all of this because they wanted her to be beautiful. Amira was young--she didn't understand what a beauty standard even was. She wanted to please the eyes of her family. She looked in the evil queen's mirror as she touched her face and burned her own hands when she touched the fire of ugliness that was burning on her face. Then she thought to herself, "Maybe if I was pretty they would love me more."

She began treating herself as fast fashion. She used the whitening creams that her family spent a fortune on in the hope she would become as fair as snow white--she didn't realize that her own family was the poison apple killing off all of the trust and self-esteem she had. She wanted to be as pretty as a princess so she stopped eating, but then her family called her too skinny. She dropped her smile, so people wouldn't notice her warped teeth and got braces, yet her family said she looked prettier with crooked teeth. She tried to jump for the clouds as hard as she could to grab their whiteness, but with those whitening creams, all she got was painful acne and was called mountain face by her family. She spent hours searching for videos on how to make her nose straight with face massages, then a small bird chirped a notification in her head, and she realized her eyes shouldn't be on the screen if she wanted her eye number to reduce.

Some things she tried to change could never change. So, after all of the altering, she tried to do to herself her family stayed the same and continued to feed her these poisonous apples. The aunties said in their evil witch voices, "My child if you mixed milk, flour, onions, and turmeric, you would become so fair and beautiful. Trust me, my dear, try it. You will be so pleased and all the men will want to marry you when you are older." Amira wanted to say, "Thanks for the onion rings recipe," but instead of the words spitting out like hot oil, her mom gave her a death stare that turned off the flame that was under the hot pan. She couldn't say a word because if she did she would be a girl who talked too much, and her parents would have to make sure she didn't go out of control by keeping her in the house. If she talked as much as one of Snow White's critters, she would be considered dumb. By being born a girl she needed to have the qualities of a good wife, and she was nothing more to her family if she couldn't accomplish that.

Later, when she went to the United States, she noticed that people were getting self-tanner to have her golden skin, getting lip fillers to have her big lips, adding hair extensions to get her long hair, using botox to get the full cheeks she already had, and reshaping and coloring their eyebrows to look like Amira's eyebrows. It made her acknowledge that nobody was happy with what they had--we all want something unattainable to make us happy. Soon enough she got the right eyes and saw the beauty that she always had; she came to love her acne scars and her unibrow that some people considered to be imperfections.

After this, she didn't waste time listening to useless comments. Rather, she focused on school and Islam. She understands that those hateful comments that the family made about her looks are considered unlawful (haram) in Islam; so when they comment Amira is sure to pull out verse numbers when she speaks back since they will not want to argue with the points of God.

Despite that they get mad at her for correcting their false misconceptions, they are mad

that she knows Arabic, Hindi, and Urdu because now she can understand what they are saying about her, and they were mad at her for knowing the truth about all concepts, not only Islam.

Those comments brush past her like the wind in a forest, the chillness never stays near her thick bark for long. She is a tree that stands tall and strong, no axe can cut through her. She has the same gentle voice as Snow White when she speaks against what they have to say because she is not worried about not being able to prove her point since she knew her point is right. She knew they are yelling because they didn't know how they would prove their point, so they holler like the evil queen and waste their time. When they are not yelling they show they abhor her in other ways such as not receiving as many presents as her fairer cousins, neglecting her in conversations, never reaching out to see how she is doing, or a simple eye roll anytime she is in the room.

Even though her family despises her simply because of the way she looks, she is happy. All she does is throw away the poisonous apples in the river and focus on educating herself about everything she can so that her cousins, classmates, and friends that look like her would know that nothing about them is ugly, it's society's standards that are ugly. She does this in a hope that eventually this information will pass on and no girl will hate herself because of the way she is raised

Jiya Shetty

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Rock Bridge Senior High School, Columbia, MO

Educator: Danielle Johnson

Category: Critical Essay

Winners Are Also Quitters

Like most high school relationships, mine with extemporaneous speaking (or Extemp for short) did not work out. I should have seen it coming. When I first told a friend that I was willingly going to draw a question 30 minutes before having to give a researched, written, and memorized 7-minute speech, she asked me if I was a masochist. Still, my crush on Extemp blinded me to its red flags. So here I was, excited to deliver my first-ever Extemp practice speech, but when I tried to speak, no words would come out. No matter how hard I wracked my brain, I just couldn't recall what I had wanted to say. Even though I was able to overcome this hindrance in the future, I still came to dread Saturday morning Extemp draws. At some point, I realized that I had lost all of the passion I had felt for this speech event, but -for some reason- I still clung on to it. After all, winners never quit. This may seem like just a cheesy saying, but this adage is ingrained in our society. Researchers Carsten Wrosch and Gregory Miller explain, "The notion that persistence is essential for success is deeply embedded within American culture," (Risen). Although this advice is sometimes true, the problem arises when perseverance becomes unhealthy. And this brings me to my primary concern, hammered in us is the mentality that quitting equals failure. Unlike my haphazard Extemp speeches, we are going to address this issue in a more organized manner. First, let's sit down for some research to explore how the stigma behind quitting was formed. Next, we'll start writing our speech with real-world examples to illustrate the downsides to futile perseverance. Finally, let us overcome our fears and speak up on how we can learn to quit when need be.

The prejudice against quitting starts in the most fundamental aspects of our youth. The classroom. For me, it all began when my eyes stumbled across those posters we all know and love. You know - the ones - A cat clinging to a branch telling us to "Hang in there" or the classic "You only fail when you give up." In fact, Clay Risen of the New York Times asserts that "Posters that read 'Winners Never Quit, and Quitters Never Win' might as well be state-mandated signage in grade-school classrooms." Almost naturally, quitting has become synonymous with failure, whereas perseverance has become admired. We've all heard the legendary tale of Thomas Edison failing 10,000 times before finally inventing the life-changing light bulb. These stories feed into society's delusions that anything is possible if we just keep persisting. Kerri Sackville from the Sydney Morning Herald counters "For every JK Rowling, there are thousands of aspiring writers who will never get published," and "For every Olympic athlete, there are innumerable others who trained every day of their lives [but] never made the cut." These instances are often ignored because they contradict deep-rooted beliefs that perseverance is the key to success.

Albert Einstein once said, "Insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results," (Wilczek). We can see that this is what occurs when we don't know when to quit. This insanity can manifest into the deterioration of both mental and physical health. Dr. David Feldman, professor of counseling psychology at Santa Clara University, follows the story of a man named Guillermo. Guillermo has worked his entire life and now holds his dream job. But his 16-hour workdays have damaged his personal relationships. His wife feels lonely and abandoned, his friends never see him anymore, and his children question if they have a father at this point. As Guillermo himself fell into a deep depression, thoughts of his work consumed his every waking second. At that moment he realized that "his high-school dream was eating him alive," (Feldman). Guillermo is not alone. Forbes highlights that 52% of respondents in a survey had experienced burnout in 2021 (Kelly). Thousands, just like Guillermo, feel suffocated under their current circumstances, but still refuse to quit. If they quit, then previous efforts will go to waste, so instead, they keep digging themselves into an even deeper hole.

This plague of persistence can even harm our physical health. An issue in the journal *Psychological Science* discovered that teenage girls who are unable to withdraw from difficult goals exhibited higher levels of the inflammatory molecule C-reactive protein, which is linked to diabetes, heart disease, and early aging in adults (Miller). The inherent ambition of youth combined with society's idea of toxic tenacity is a recipe for the debilitation of our future generations.

Nevertheless, even when people quit due to concerns for their own well-being, they receive immense backlash. This stigma was practically palpable in the past Tokyo summer Olympics when Simone Biles dropped out of the individual competition for gymnastics. She admitted that she should have quit before Tokyo, especially due to mental trauma, but she couldn't give up on 18 years of hard work. So she tried as long as her mind and body allowed. When she eventually stepped away from the competition, she was drowned in a flood of public hate. Charlie Kirk, a political commentator, called Biles "selfish", "immature", "a shame to the country" and a "sociopath". Even going as far as to say, "Simone Biles just showed the rest of the nation that when things get tough, you shatter into a million pieces," (Nisen). It is comments like these that only exacerbate the problem at hand.

So, it is time for a better conclusion. All my life, quitting has been labeled as the easy way out, but in reality, it can take a lot of mental strength. In fact, when it comes to the idea of quitting, it is a reflex to answer with "I can't." Although this can be backed with a plethora of reasons, it is important to recognize that we can quit. Every single person is able to quit. Oftentimes, what is stopping us are the social and emotional consequences that are attached to quitting. Once we as a society acknowledge our choice and sense of advocacy for self, we can feel empowered to not only unchain ourselves from deadweight goals but also support others in their decision to quit. Even when societal barriers are destroyed, quitting can still cause individual turmoil. A key issue that people face when it comes to quitting is the question of "when?" Although it is difficult to find the right time to quit, there are four questions that can help rationalize your decision:

First, Have my goals changed? If you outgrow your goals, there is no shame in letting go of your old ones to make room for new aspirations. Second, Does the process uphold my values? For example, if your endeavor causes you to neglect family or to abandon the things that matter to you most, then it might be a good idea to take a step back. Third, Is the reward worth it? If the reward is not worth the effort it takes to achieve a goal, or if the costs outweigh the benefits, then it would be better to focus on something else. Finally, Have I dug myself into a hole? This can happen after investing countless dollars and/or hours into a project that is no longer viable. It might be tempting to continue spiraling even further, however psychotherapist Amy Morin argues "The only thing worse than being on a sinking ship, is staying on board until it's completely sunk," (Morin). It's better to swim away now before the situation worsens.

None of these questions can be asked until we first accept that quitting is always in the realm of possibility. The beauty of embracing quitting lies not only in the individual power to quit but also when society sees it as an option so you can live your life on your own terms. For me, breaking up with Extemporaneous speaking was extremely liberating. It's the very reason I stand before you, trying my hand in authorship. So it's time that we changed that age-old saying to winners are quitters. But rather than seeing quitting as losing, see it as a chance to venture into something new and achieve success.

Ava Sportsman

Age: 18, Grade: 12

School Name: Marceline High School, Marceline, MO

Educator: Julie Sheerman

Category: Flash Fiction

The Court Room

What does one wear to the trial of a serial killer? And with that, what do you wear when that killer is your childhood best friend? This gloomy Tuesday, those are the questions I wake up with. Zack Tuffin was caught in an alley on fifty fourth street with two knives, a gun, and “crazy eyes.” Though claiming to know nothing of the past twenty four hours, he was taken to the police station before the hospital, poor guy, at which they took his fingerprints and simple DNA samples. He was matched to forty violent crime scenes.

Next unfolded the most gruesome story the public could imagine. The most shocking. The bloodiest. Zach was a seemingly normal and family oriented man. He grew up and lived in the suburbs, had a job in accounting, has two kids and leads the church youth group. I should’ve been in shambles when I heard the news while drinking my morning coffee, but I wasn’t.

Behind the East Launcewood elementary and middle schools, there’s a creek. Though not permitted, it was a right of passage to cross the football field, venture past the treeline, and down across the body of water. You were to pluck a buckeye from the tree on the other side as proof. It was the fourth grade when Zach and I made this quest. Successfully making it to the river, we stopped and watched it flow with awe, the way the water ran over the rocks mesmerized us. Then we saw the frog. A bird or something must’ve gotten to it, it only had one leg. Without one wince or second thought, Zach brought his foot down on it with all of his strength.

“My dad says you need to put them out of their misery. He wouldn’t last anyway,” was the only explanation I was given. We waded across the river in our school gym shorts, plucked the buckeyes from the ground surrounding the trees, and rushed back to the cafeteria before PE attendance.

Tick, tick, tick, was the sound the clock made, counting down the minutes until it was my turn in the witness stand. Zack sat at the defense table, nervously tapping his fingers on the table and, old habits die hard, aggressively applying chapstick. Nineteen murders? He could never. He’s always been delicate. Never even been hunting. He’s vegan too. The quietness of the courtroom was interrupted by the sound of the bailiff announcing the judge’s entrance. As Zach rises, I can’t help but smirk. He’ll never make it in prison. The beginning of the trial is a blur. I only heard parts of the prosecution's evidence.

“Murder weapon...”

Which one? Couldn’t have ever used one weapon for all 19. He’d surely lose it, he’s not organized.

“Castoff blood...”

Zach is an intelligent man, he wouldn’t have left blood. But Zack also wouldn’t commit murders.

“Luminol...”

Can you even use that in the mountains? I swear these detectives are making stuff up.

“Boot prints...”

He wears size twelve. Another mess up on the details of this case.

“Gunshot residue...”

Now how did that get there Zack? They got you there.

“The prosecution now calls Brian Carlton to the stand,” says the lead prosecuting attorney. That’s me. Showtime, baby. The bailiff walks me down the gallery aisle.

Thinking back, Zack was always a good friend. He always shared his lunch when I forgot mine in elementary (10 steps.) He helped me with math homework in middle school. Zach’s been a close to me, should I choke up a bit? (8 steps.) He’s such a thoughtful guy, surely no one believes he actually did this (6 steps.) I wonder what Carol and the kids are going to do (4 steps.) Every piece of evidence is clearly flawed (2 steps.) How could it not be though, (1 step) when the killer is in the witness stand? (0 steps.)

Adam Spree

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Lindbergh High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Sandra Olive

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

I'm Possible

"Nothing is impossible; the word itself says 'I'm possible!'" Audrey Hepburn

I stood anxiously at my front door waiting for the mail truck to arrive, bringing with him my undoing. For most, winning a class writing contest would mean getting to pick where to eat, celebrating with friends, or at the very least, reassurance in one's abilities, but I knew that those pages were written in spite, in rebellion.

I think the first time I ever heard the word "gay" was in a little round my second grade music class sang called "Kookaburra Sits in the Old Gum Tree" by Marion Sinclair. The line was "Laugh, Kookaburra, laugh, Kookaburra, /Gay your life must be," and every time I heard "gay" after that, it reminded me of the silly nursery rhyme. Occasionally, I would go so far as to describe myself as gay, especially when I was feeling carefree and childish. I was often confused as to why such an amazing and versatile word was never used by my family, my pastor, or my classmates, but it didn't bother me. I knew what it meant, and that was all that mattered.

My blissful ignorance continued into that summer when I attended my church's Vacation Bible School, where "gay" became a frequent adjective of the fantastical talking animals that would teach my Sunday school class about the power and depth of God's love. However, it all came crashing down after answering the question of "Who or what is Jesus to you?" with "I think Jesus is like a friend; anytime I pray and thank him, he makes me feel gay like I have nothing to worry about." Immediately my Sunday school teacher's expression soured, becoming a mixture of confusion and shock. Consequently, I was pulled aside while making a popsicle-stick cross during craft time.

"Alex, you do know what the word gay means, right?" my teacher inquired.

"Well, kind of, it's like being really happy and breezy, at least I'm pretty sure," I responded cautiously for fear of being misunderstood.

That day I learned the "real" meaning of the word "gay," the meaning I was supposed to possess per biblical scripture. At the time, I did not understand why two boys liking each other was such an issue. *I mean, I had friends that were boys, so did that mean our friendship was an abomination?* I left summer camp that day unwavering in my resolve that I would continue to use "gay" despite what my teacher had told me. Home was a different story, though. My mom was in fury for the "embarrassment" I had made our family at my church. She made me swear up and down that I would never use that word in public again, to which I complied for fear of her wrath.

The only time I had ever seen her like that was in preschool after my sister painted my nails a requested ruby red just like Dorothy's slippers in *The Wizard of Oz*, which I had watched the day before. The entire day I referred to myself as "Debbie," after my mother's coworker who wore a similarly colored, elegant red dress to our house one time. My teachers quickly caught on to what I was doing and unassumingly told my mother. That night, I sat on the toilet lid in our bathroom as my mother furiously scrubbed my nails and fingers with a strange, tingly substance that left my fingers dry and chapped.

My attention was dually drawn by the approach of the mail truck and the approach of my mother's car. *Of course, the mail was running late today of all days*, which I echoed in my brain over the span of an hour. I occasionally stepped outside and looked around, feeling the cool, autumn breeze on my warm, perspiring skin. To pass the time, I even began to count the animals I saw around me. Three squirrels, twelve birds, something I can only describe as gecko-like, and, oddly enough, a single baby bunny seemingly separated from its mom and siblings. Anytime I heard the roar of a car engine, I swiftly halted my count and waited in both hope and fear. Luckily, I saw the familiar and nostalgic USPS logo before any sign of my mother. After an eternity of waiting, the vehicle finally screeched to a halt in front of my mailbox, and the worker, whom I had learned was named Charles from a small beaded keychain that hung from his overhead mirror, efficiently sorted and placed my family's mail into our mailbox. I quickly shuffled off

my porch and over to the mailbox, desperately searching for that dreaded letter.

By the time middle school rolled around, I was well aware of the feelings that I had left unplaced up until then, along with their implications. I liked men. It was what it was, and I knew there was no changing it, but that did not stop me from denying it. Whether it was my mannerisms, the way I walked, the way I dressed, my features, or something else entirely, I will never know, but it seemed like I was always getting asked, "Are you gay?" usually followed by a version of, "It's fine if you are; I just *need* to know." Unsurprisingly, my answer was always "no," prompting an "Are you sure?" in an attempt to out me. "I don't like anyone; I think everyone is ugly," I'd usually say at this point. Worse than the incessant questioning was the aggression and hostility I faced, becoming the frequent recipient of a slur or homophobic joke. Worst of all was my acceptance of and apathy toward the situation in general. I simply took it.

By this point, my mother had arrived home, and my family began eating the pizza she had brought home as leftovers from a luncheon at her work that day. The letter had arrived in a small white envelope with a small school logo in its corner. Inside was a copy of my piece for my family, along with a congratulatory free ice cream coupon as a prize. I could have thrown it away or burned it in its entirety, but a perpetual, gnawing feeling boiled up inside me that had seemingly remained dormant. In the middle of one of my mother's stories about the nerve her coworker Ashley had to report a numerical error in the company payroll to her boss instead of her, I spoke up.

"I won a writing contest in my class," I sheepishly mentioned while twiddling my thumbs and going through every OCD ritual I could think of to ensure a positive outcome. Rip out three eyebrow hairs. Scratch your right calf. Blink as hard as you can and hold it. Pop each side of your jaw five times each. There could be no mistakes; this had to be perfect.

"Oh, honey, that's great. Are we ever going to get to read this supposed piece?" My mother jokingly probed while raising one eyebrow to drive the comedy bit home. I pulled the now wrinkled and folded pieces of loose-leaf paper out of my pocket and handed them to my mother. She quickly scanned the pages, but I was waiting for one reaction in particular. Page 2, paragraph 3, sentence 5, was where I first mentioned my queerness. Deep down, I knew my mother had no issue with gay people. A combination of changes in social norms along with distancing from the church due to the pandemic coerced my mother into becoming more accepting, even supporting Democratic pushes for the "Respect for Marriage Act." Suddenly, I saw the reaction I was waiting for: a quick peer up from the paper, almost beckoning, and saying, "Prove it; I want to hear you say it."

As if opening a floodgate I launched into a lengthy discussion recounting my queer experience, beginning with the first subtle feelings of attraction or the jealousy directed at my friends with boyfriends, followed by my feelings of loneliness and pain. It seemed like I was trying to defend my sexuality rather than express it at this point, going into how unfair it is that straight people do not have to come out like queer people do. Unchecked, my meekness shifted towards anger. *Why doesn't my sister have to come out? When she joins the Gay-Straight Alliance, she's an ally and a saint, but when I do it, I'm basic and predictable, as if fulfilling an obligation. This is bullshit. I've been hiding my identity, facing hostility for nothing.* I took a deep breath and recentered myself, distracted from the purpose of this ordeal: my mother.

My first crush, my first *real* crush—not some looming entity born from jealousy or a celebrity attraction—was Jack. He was the only person in my tennis class that gave any attention to me, acting as both a teammate and an opponent depending on the circumstances. His swoopy, curly hair always shimmered in the dim gym lighting, complemented by the shimmering sweat beads falling from his face. Each tennis match was more than a battle or competition; it was a passionate argument coupled with snarky compliments, but it was entirely ours. Jack was the source of my happiness—the beginning and end of my week. I adored the way he would nudge my arm during lessons or trip up on his words while keeping score—quickly and desperately apologizing to the competitors. He wasn't perfect, but I didn't need perfect; I needed him and every quirk that came with him.

Jack was my first kiss. A small peck on the cheek was shared on the way to my car. At that moment, my face grew warm as I was blushing at this affectionate display. He followed it with a quick, "No homo, man." My face sank.

After all of this time of hoping and praying for this boy to be gay, we're merely in a bromance?

Perhaps it was an overreaction, but I unenrolled from tennis. The reasoning I gave my mother was stress, nothing more, nothing less. Jack was reduced to a mere classroom daydream of what could have been, solely serving to reaffirm the feelings I had pent up for so long.

I matched my mother's gaze. My declaration was taboo—a stain on her perfect family tree is what I read it as. It is fine whenever it is someone else's child, but her son? No way, not her one and only son, who was supposed to carry on the last name for generations to come.

We sat in silence for a couple of minutes, picking at the remnants of pizza crust that remained.

"So, Mom?" I questioned myself as my heartbeat increased with each passing second.

"That's fine," she stated abruptly, rising from her chair and returning to the living room, likely to watch another true crime documentary. I followed her and plopped down on the couch next to her sacred recliner. We watched in silence, but oddly enough, it felt like we were healing and deepening our understanding of one another. I knew my mother, and she was never the quiet or stoic type, but at this moment I decided to let it settle, hoping that all would be resolved by morning.

My mother sat in the corner of my bed when I fluttered my eyes open from the night before. Before I could say anything, she spoke.

"I understand you are going through a lot right now with school and everything, so I hope we can revisit this conversation when your thoughts are less clouded," she started while firmly yet lovingly grasping one of my hands. *Less clouded? What happened to the "mature" young man she had described to all of our relatives and family friends? I was mature enough to impress, but not to think for myself?*

"I think you're just too young to be making these life-changing decisions about yourself; now I'm not homophobic; I have a lot of gay friends who are kind of like you," she struggled to find the right words, "but it's too early to be doing all of this and making a scene at the dinner table." She finished and swiftly left before I could respond in protest. *It's not the worst reaction I could have gotten, I suppose* I left the experience with a sense of mundane apathy. *On one hand, she didn't outright reject me, but on the other, she kind of did by simply calling me confused.*

I thought about crying over the next few days, but nothing ever came. The moment I had been preparing for since a kid finally passed and now what? *Was I free? Was I out? Was I proud?* I left the experience dissatisfied. I knew that my friends would comfort me at the drop of a hat, but it meant nothing in this instance. I needed my mom, the woman who had raised me since birth. I needed her to tell me it was going to be ok and slowly brush her fingers through my hair, but I didn't have that; I only had myself.

Now, a lot of people know I am gay. It is not the superstition I once thought it was. I've given speeches about it. It appears that I have reclaimed my first-grade definition of gay, the one in which I am carefree and do not feel the constant weight of sexuality crushing me. I like to think my mother has come to terms with my sexuality, but she seems indignant. I am grateful we have returned to our nightly tradition of Netflix teen dramas, yet I sometimes wonder what things could have been like with a mom that did accept me and assured me my existence was entirely valid and sound.

I am everything I have ever wanted to be. A culmination of the hopes and dreams I could never achieve in the closet. My one wish is that my younger self knew that it was possible, that I was a possibility.

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Cooper Stone

Age: 15, Grade: 11

School Name: Lawrence Free State High School, Lawrence, KS
Educators: Josie Clark, Andrew Martin, Adam Smith

Category: Short Story

Perfect Willow

Perfect Willow

In the midst of a sea of imperfection, the infallible Weeping Willow Tree stands upright against the winds of normality. Erupted from broad roots, a long trunk sprouts thousands of flimsy branches, all of equal length that dip following the same curve. Each branch sports the exact same chain of leaves. Vermillion flowers all bloom at the same time; when they fall they don't wilt, but instead keep thriving. The catkin flowers grow larger and more lustrous than other willow tree blooms. Seven rough, brown roots rest upon vibrant, emerald moss and spongy dirt. Sometimes the roots slide underground and then protrude upward creating a false sense of deviation. The grass is greener within the Willow's reaches. When it storms, the follicles of her hair catch the rain and protect whoever is underneath her. The Willow is alive, not like a flower or bush, but like a human. She hates, she holds grudges, and she envies. Her mouth parts at eye level and curves to create plump lips. Her voice, if her visitor is lucky enough to hear, is soft without any hints of scratches. She even has a perfect set of teeth that hide just past her lips. If perfection exists, it is the Willow.

On this particular late afternoon, an imperfect adolescent boy has found his way into her grasp. His stomach sticks out from his shirt and hangs over his belt. A scar rips down the right side of his face starting at the eyebrow and ending near the earlobe. The bridge of his nose is grossly enlarged. He reeks of desperation and garbage. The boy stands timid and humiliated in front of the Willow, and his torso has a horrible hunch that leaves his shoulders below his back. He looks into the Willow's bark with his disgusting, bulging eyes and dreams about being as perfect as she is.

"Weeping Willow Tree?" The boy's voice is raspy and cracks often.

"Yes, boy?" Her voice is angelic.

"I want to be as perfect as you are. Will you help me?" He asks, and cracks on the words *are* and *help*.

"I can help you, but it will be difficult; you are almost entirely imperfect. Be prepared, the process is treacherous," she warns.

The boy ponders.

"Torture can be beautiful," he remarks.

"Torture is not beautiful, but it will sculpt you into beauty, so you must be tortured near death. At which point I will continue to torture you. Are you okay with that?" The Willow warns.

"Yes," the boy responds quickly.

"You are filthy. Take a bath."

The earth rumbles underneath the boy's feet. An image reaches his mind of giant ghostly hands reaching down from the clouds and puncturing the ground. The godly hands then pull the soil apart with slow and smooth movements. The new cavity fills with water. Steam floats up from the cool dirt and singses the boy's face.

"It's boiling hot!" The boy exclaims.

"Your filth goes beyond the mud that clutches your skin. It's inside you. I have to cleanse it with heat from underground," the Willow explains.

The boy stands at the edge of the tub looking into the water which has now calmed. He sees his own reflection. The face in the water is grotesque. He hates the face in the water. A force pushes on the back of his neck. The face in the water gets closer and closer. The boy doesn't feel that he's falling. He is so close to the face, he could kiss it. The mysterious force, which now is more of a vine wrapped tightly around his neck, exerts power through the boy and he breaks the surface tension of the water. The boy turns on his back and stares into the broken ripples of reflection. A repulsive face stares back in refractions. The shifting tides of the mirror distort his *other* face into a

twisted grin. A deep, low laugh rings from the cold walls of soil. It sounds distant in a distinctly underwater way, more like vibration. He feels the sounds with his fingertips. Fingertips which he only now realizes are burning. His eyes, open the whole time, singe with pain as boiling water finds its way deep into his sockets. Only now does he realize he's been underwater for minutes. He watches bubbles roar upwards and wonders if those are the last of his breaths. *This is it*, he thinks. Ready to go, the boy closes his eyes. Just then, the Willow pulls him out of the water and flings him to the ground. The boy imagines the ghoulish hands reaching down again with a needle and thread. The hands sew the earth back together then return to the clouds.

"You're clean, but still imperfect," the Willow scolds the boy.

"I am fat. I am disgusting. I am lopsided and I am wrong. Fix me, Willow," the boy pleads.

The boy has been engulfed in the desires created by the Willow. She has a hold of him and won't let go. The Willow is a snake and the boy is her mouse. She is squeezing the life out of him. A snake will play with its mouse until the fun is gone, and then the snake eats the mouse. In a desperate attempt for perfection, the boy will follow whatever she demands.

"You're all wrong. There's a scar on your right side. How did you receive it?" The Willow asks.

"When I was in school I didn't pick it up as fast as the other kids. My dad told me to 'fix my brain.' One night, after the bars, he decided to fix my brain himself. The glass of a broken beer bottle is sharper than a blade," the boy explains monotonously.

The Willow extends her vine with a silver platter on it. Resting neatly on a pile of dark green leaves is a blade made of sharpened ivory. The ivory blade has a vine handle that fits perfectly in the boy's palm. The edge is sharp enough to break flesh on instant impact.

"Take this ivory blade and mirror the scar on the left side of your face."

The boy holds the blade up to his left eyebrow. With his other hand he traces the scarred lines of his right side. He closes his eyes, grits his teeth and starts applying rigid pressure to his eyebrow. The feeling is oddly sensational. He feels release as the first drops of blood stain the white ivory blade crimson. Although the boy's plump hands are shaking, the blade creates a perfect line, identical to the original cut. Blood trickles down the perfect line, producing perfection of its own. The new scar is a river, and the blood droplets are streams branching away.

The boy heaves his chest. For a moment he feels light-headed, like he is about to faint, but he stops himself. He places the blade back onto the platter gently. The Willow tree smells of fresh blood. Blood that is not quite par with what the Willow usually consumes. But she is hungry, and must be fed.

"How much can you smell from that nose of yours?" The Willow asks.

"What?"

"With a nose that size I'd think that you could smell just about anything within the mile," the Willow starts. "Lay your face against my root."

The boy drops to his knees, then lays his face against the protruding root. Goosebumps rush down his body as his skin makes contact with the cool ground and his face embraces the wet root. *'Stay calm. Let me take control. Just relax.'* A smooth heaviness begins at his toes. Then his calves and thighs weigh down. The boy feels he is becoming heavier. His abdomen and arms rest heavily on the grass. Heavy, but at the same time, light and smooth. He's fog, heavy on the ground but light enough to float.

A vine descends from her canopy and coils around the boy's neck. She lifts his head and shoulders two feet from the ground. His whole body is heavy and as she raises his shoulders, his hips stick to the ground. His eyes are delicately closed and his mind is empty. The boy's head strikes against the root. A bony *snap* rings throughout the dry air encasing them. He doesn't feel the pain until a few seconds after the hit. While his body is heavy, the pain is light, like a tickle or a kiss. As the Willow lifts the boy up again, a strand of blood sticks to the tip of the boy's nose and connects to the root below him creating a web that tethers them together. The Willow smashes the boy's nose against the root two more times in quick succession.

The Willow rolls the boy over onto his back and absorbs the blood stuck to her root. Blood follows the curves of the boy's face. His nose is a deep red. The infecting crimson creates a beautiful flower shape radiating from his nose.

"Awaken boy."

The boy wakes up.

"If you were skinny, then would you be beautiful like me?" The Willow asks, although she knows the answer.

"Nothing can make me as beautiful as you are, but no being can be fat and perfect," the boy reasons.

"Then take the ivory blade, and cut off your fat."

She extends the same platter with the bloodied ivory blade idle on it.

"Start with the fat on your stomach. You must also cut off the meat that hangs from your arms," the Willow commands.

The boy takes the ivory blade and saws through the flesh hanging over his hips. As he finishes cutting the first

slabs of meat, he feels a sensory relief, and vulnerability. His body is twenty pounds lighter already, but he misses the warmth of his armor. The wind cuts through his stomach sharper than the knife that cut through his fat. The boy pinches the skin underneath his bicep and slices through the meat. He pays more attention to the sound of the flesh hitting the ground. There's an initial impact and a following *swish* of blood. The sound afterward is a distinct sucking sound, like the sound of a straw when the drink is almost finished. The boy clutches his newly skinny gut. A loud, echoing silence rings throughout the grasps of the tree only interrupted by the boy placing the ivory blade back onto the platter. Then more silence, except for the soft drops of blood. *Plink, plink.*

"Stand up straight," the Willow orders.

The boy hobbles to his feet. His arms are almost entirely painted red. He tries to stand up straight but his back still hollows forward and his shoulders fold into his chest.

"Stand up straighter," the Willow orders.

"I cannot."

"I see. Lay your face down with your hands above your head,"

The boy crouches down then almost falls onto his face. He shakily raises his arms above his head. Three vines extend from the ground underneath the boy. Two coil themselves around his ankles and hold him in place. The third wraps around his waist and restricts him from leaving the ground. Branches descend from the canopy; attached to the branches are pristine silver hooks. The hooks drop next to the boy's hands.

"String the hooks through the web of your palms in between your thumb and index finger," the Willow demands.

The boy tentatively picks up one of the hooks with his left hand and in one swift movement sews it through his right hand. He then repeats on the left side. The branches ascend, which pulls his hands off the ground and arches his back. His torso is pulled backwards, towards his feet. The boy groans, while his back cracks like a hammer pounding into thick nails. The branches continue to move with the insistence of a machine until his head is directly above his feet. The shape of his body is an almost perfect semi-circle. The boy starts to scream. His cry grows in intensity as the branches slowly put more pressure into his back. His eyes bulge as he shrieks.

"YES! Yes, yes, cry for help," the Willow inhales the boy's fear.

The Willow opens her mouth revealing her ivory teeth as she breathes in his screams. She exerts her strength through the branches. There is a soft zipper sound that crescendos into a loud *wwwrraaAAPPP!* Then his spine rips apart in a deafening *CRACK!* The screaming stops and is replaced with an incessant moan. A thoughtless moan out of a dead, slack-jawed mouth. His forehead is pressed against his feet. His body makes a perfect ring shape. Behind him the setting sun perfectly fits inside the circle he creates. The golden glow reflects from the oily maroon that paints his entire torso. His eyes have rolled almost all the way back. Blood continues to pour from his nose and spread with ease. His face looks almost as if there were a crimson flower on it. The flower has vibrant petals and a deep center. The Willow is enthralled, the boy has finally assumed an angelic form with the sun bowing down to him and giving him her rays as a crown.

The Willow releases the hooks and the vines that held him down. He lies in near perfection. He can't talk anymore, the only sound he can make is the consistent drone from the back of his throat. He sobs from the only imperfection left, his eyes.

"Come to me child," The Willow gently lifts the boy and creates a cradle close to her own face.

Their faces are a few feet apart. The cradle is warm and dimly lit by glowing flowers.

"There is only one flaw left, child." The boy's face drops and he cries more.

Two vines extend from the corners of her mouth. They shape into delicate hands and reach for his eyes. She presses her thumbs underneath his eyelids and her index and middle fingers above his eyelids. She then applies sudden force and pops his eyes out of their sockets. He continues to cry, but now the tears are a deep red. The eyes hang like ornaments on a christmas tree. She pinches the cords quickly and severs the connection. She buries the eyes in the bark above her mouth.

She reaches up into her leaves and pulls out two flowers. She replaces his eyes with the flowers. He can now see once again. He looks at the Willow, more perfect now than ever. Her unblinking eyes stare into his. The eyes are too small for her face, but she nonetheless looks perfect with them. She looks down on him with his eyes and loves the boy.

A seam splits down the middle of the Willow, perfectly in between her eyes and creating a cross with her mouth. The seam opens up and a vine shoots out from the dark. It tethers itself to the boy's stomach. It pulls him in. If he could speak, he would scream, but he cannot. He tries to raise an arm to stop himself from entering the Willow, but his muscles don't work anymore. Her eyes follow his ragdoll body as it enters her cavity. The seam closes and he is engrossed in darkness again. All he can see are the whites of the Willow's new eyes on the bark. The pupils roll backwards to look at him.

"You'll see what we will do, boy. We are beautiful. I am perfect," the Willow concludes.

The eyes roll forward again. The space is too small. The bark is rough. It scratches against his body. He feels like

the tree is becoming smaller. The walls are closing in, squeezing him like a chinese finger trap. The monotonous groan grows in volume.

Outside, in a sea of darkness and imperfection, a light of nature illuminates her perfection at night. Visitors hear her beautiful humming. Her flowers have all fallen at the same time and make the ground glow. The Weeping Willow Tree is untouchable, as long as we continue to feed her delusions.

Riley Strait

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Olathe North High School, Olathe, KS

Educator: Deirdre Zongker

Category: Poetry

My Mother's Son

I'm my mother's son & my mother is the universe

–Jack Kerouac

I.

My mother is the universe, but
I think the sea might fit her better.

But she's never been one for hubris, so
she might say she's but a humble ship,
bumbling around in the nebulous blue.

Whichever she is, if by some hazard we're both
on the same track, then we're bound to collide.

But afterward, we'll be drifting around,
picking up flotsam from the wreckage,
which is all anyone can hope for.

II.

Mom and I don't talk in the car—we don't need to.
As if by some law of science neither of us can name,
we find a way to communicate beneath the silence.

My mom's mom
(long dead)
is watching over us
from the back.

She taught my mom how to drive
like how she taught her to swim:
throwing her in all at once and
assuming that she'll find the surface.

She was 18, living in Colorado,
a stranger to the road beneath her:
she accelerated on every turn
(she thought that's what you did)
while her instructor hailed Mary.

I can see the mold of her past
growing on her today, flaring up
every time we enter a roundabout.
It's the one time I speak:

“Keep going. They have to stop for you.”

Her line is next: “I did that well, didn’t I?”

We haven’t died yet.

I don’t drive.
I’m waiting for the
ghost of my mom’s
mom to inhabit her,
for her to throw me
in blind at once.

Then she can tell me
how to go through a
roundabout.

III.

I developed into who I am after
soaking in my mother’s darkroom—
dipped in a chemical wash and
hung to dry in red.

I perceive the world through her.

But before me, my mother developed in the darkroom
of her mother—and my mother’s photo proved imperfect:

there’s the sunspot from life below the poverty line;
the graininess from her mother’s next new boyfriend;
the age fog from realizing that the birthday trip that Dad
“couldn’t make” was a ruse, blurring into life without him.

And still, when we sit on a Sunday afternoon
with dusty sun pouring in on our shaggy carpet,
and we kick our feet up on the coffee table and
notice the album with each of us developed within,
my mother is the winner of the pageant.

Micah Tate

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Marceline High School, Marceline, MO

Educator: Julie Sheerman

Category: Poetry

Youth and Flower

Youth

I don't want to age gracefully,
Like the beauties on TV.
I want to age happily,
Like all the beauties before me.
I want to age violently,
Like the wind that moves the rain.
I want to feel the age within my face,
In every beautiful strain.
I want to age rigidly,
Like a wise and worthy tree.
Feel the rings add on every year,
Like the wrinkles onto me.
I want to age like my grandma,
Unapologetic and free.
I'm her namesake for a reason,
As some of her went into me.
I want to see my own reflection,
And count the smiles in the lines.
See the anger between my brow,
And the joy beside my eyes.
Feel the creases in my cheeks,
From the smiles and the tears.
Feel the aging in my face,
From living all my years.

Flower

Everyone likes flowers.
Even the little dandelions that infest our lawns,
Even the fields of purple clovers that plague the perfect planted ground,
Every flower is a gift from nature herself.
A colorful collection of colliding petals creating cacophonies of neon noise.
But everyone likes flowers.
A flower leaves its mark on the world around it,
It stays in a photo gallery long after a picture is taken.
It stays in a hive as the bees take its nectar and move its pollen.
It stays in the ground as the roots recoil and hide from the harsh winter.
And it stays in our hearts long after it's wilted away and its once bright self has gone brown.
As the flower grows strong,
As it gains strength in its stem and blooms out into its true beautiful self,
It reaches the end, where all flowers go.
Its petals dip and descend to the ground.
Its leaves wilt and lose their strength.

The flower is no longer a flower,
It's a show of age, a proof of the passing of time.
When we look at a flower, we don't see the age.
We don't see what it will become.
We don't see that one day, it will be a wilted, broken version of itself.
We just see the flower.
This isn't our way of denying the flower's fate.
We know one day it will be nothing more than a memory.
Than a cool summer day scented like honeysuckle.
Than a spring sidewalk laced with daffodils and hyacinth.
Than a day inside, on the couch, with a vase of lilacs.
And although you are no longer a flower,
No longer a graceful creation spreading warmth and joy,
Sharing love and teaching me what it means to love and be loved,
I will not remember you by the age that made you lose your petals.
Not by the hurt that broke your leaves,
Or the time that took your stem.
I will remember you by your petals that gave color to the days.
I will remember you by the strength that never wavered no matter how tired you were from fighting.
I will remember you as the beautiful flower you once were,
And the angel you still are.

Jasmine Torralbas

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: William Chrisman High School, Independence, MO

Educator: Natianna Ohmart

Category: Poetry

Wedded Souls

There's a tale of a love prescribed by fate,
of two desperate souls compelled to wait.
A poor clever man devoted to she,
A hopeless rich girl so loyal to he.
A love that presently cannot be known,
for her blood is tied to her father's throne.
A love only murmured behind closed doors,
two mindless fools unmoved by chants of wars.
Still, her heart received him with delight,
she longed to drag their love into the night.
Still, his lips received her with strong desire,
wishing unexplored skin could spark a fire.
Now more than this, she wants to be his wife
Satisfy her dreams of sharing a life.
And more than that, he wants to be her groom,
Thus, to have his love guarded in her womb.
 And until he can uncover her veil,
 this poem remains an ongoing tale.

Lillian van Hoornbeek

Age: 14, Grade: 9

Home School, St Louis, MO

Educator: Lena van Hoornbeek

Category: Humor

No Such Thing As Irrational Fear

No Such Thing As Irrational Fear

In horror movies, there is usually a part when the main characters are afraid. Their leveled breathing becomes extreme panting, and they become paranoid of everything around them. Every sound, every movement, everything frightens them. This is the same way I felt about insects. Every sound they made disgusted me. Every movement they made repulsed me. Everything about them – every *single* thing – frightened me to an extreme extent.

“Alright class, today we will be starting our Bug Project.” The teacher smiled at her class of fifteen fat little fourth graders. Bug. Insect. Beast. Creepy-Crawly. Class Insecta, if you want to get scientific about it. In other words, *ew*. Bugs are demons from Hell.

While I cringed inwardly, the teacher explained that we would be collecting bugs, freezing them, and pinning them to a board. I wanted to cry out to God that He had forsaken His child, but I was in my squeaky plastic desk chair, and therefore could not mournfully weep the death I would soon experience.

The next day, while I was swinging my legs on the kitchen counter stool, the back door creaked open. My dad had been outside doing yard work and in his hands was the Devil himself. A Praying Mantis squirmed in the clearly-been-used work gloves my dad had on, trying to escape so it could return to Hell.

“Ew-ew-ew-ew-ewwww!” Quickly, I leapt off the stool, my mom wondering what was wrong. She calmly obtained a container meant for small children like myself to look at nature. It had a magnifying glass, air holes, and a string to put around one's neck to have grubby little hands free. The devil-spawn was forced into this prison of plastic, hallelujah. Its wiry antennas poked out the air holes, trying to find ways to escape the demise we had created for the creature.

Once I collected, frozen, and pinned the satanic creatures to styrofoam in a pizza box, I took the revolting project to school and presented it. I stood as far away as possible from the box and afterward made my mom throw it away. I shuddered at the thought of their creepy little legs squirming and tried my best to forget about the devilish creatures that haunted my mind.

Several years later, I was peacefully sitting in bed like a lazy cat when my sister ruined my life completely. She said that she was going to take a shower in our Jack-and-Jill style bathroom when she knocked on the door to my room from the shared restroom space. I thought nothing of this, as I was a mere innocent seventh grader at the time. There was nothing out of the ordinary by her knocking on my door.

“I almost stepped on it, isn't that nasty?” She chuckled. Was it a rat? A mouse? A snake? Numerous possibilities scurried through my head. She drew back the shower curtain and there it was. The most disgusting, horrendous, repulsive insect I had ever seen. The cockroach was about the palm of my hand in length and two fingers in width. Its spindly antennas danced around for information on its surroundings. Its legs were folded ever so neatly under its stomach.

“*Yichhhh*, that's disgusting!” I shrieked.

“Here, you go – cover it with this cup. I'll go get Mom. You stay here.” My sister dismissed herself from the crisis I was having. I tried to cover it with the cup, but the roach ran to the other side of the bathtub each time I gathered up enough courage to get near it. I glanced away for a mere second and when I looked back, it was gone. I looked under the shower curtain. No roach. I peeked behind the door. No roach. I shook out the carpet and towels. No roach.

My sister came back with my mom and asked where the cockroach was. Shaking with fear, I responded that I lost it. Neither my sister nor my mom could find the repulsive little creature. My mom and sister headed back to bed. Tossing and turning, tears streamed down my face, dancing with the anxiety in my head. Suffused with the paranoia of roaches, I cried myself to sleep.

The next morning, I begged my mom to check the bathroom one last time. Flyswatter handy, my mom opened the creaky door and spotted the roach on the tile near the shower head. *Thwack!* I breathed a sigh of relief as the fear left my body. The demon had been successfully exorcised from the bathroom.

Months after that, for my birthday, I received a cat who proved useful for not just serotonin-inducing meows. Moon Pie, that was her name, became an expert assassin of Class Insecta.

One day, while I was sitting at the kitchen counter doing homework, I spotted it. A large beetle had crawled in through the back door and was making itself at home on the wooden floor. My parents and sister had retreated upstairs, so I was left alone to deal with Beelzebub the Beetle. I was about to yell for my mom to wake up and save me from my doom, when Moon Pie came to my rescue like Superman would. The kitten was barely one year old when she became a miracle-worker.

Swish, swash. Moon Pie's tail was a pendulum on the floor. She crept down low, her back arched, and she started to circle the hellish fiend.

The unsuspecting creature sat perfectly still, a perfect target for Moon Pie the Murderer. Back up...back up...get ready...*POUNCE!* The beetle was no match for my cat. It tried to scurry away, but the effort was useless. Cornered by Moon Pie, the insect cowered with fear, knowing its death would soon be before it. A flick of the paw and the bug was caught on Moon Pie's claw. *Crunch...munch...* the death of the beetle. I hopped down from my safe little perch on the granite counter and swooped my cat up and pecked her on the nose, adorning her in compliments.

In horror movies, there is usually a part when the main characters are afraid. But when they deal with the possessed creature, when they stand up to the ghost, when they look the specter dead in the eyes, they become strong. They feel weak, but they come to terms with their weaknesses. They are quivering leaves. Their breath is heavy and uneven and their legs are shaking when they stand up. But they are standing nonetheless. They are afraid and they are strong.

Wilson Von Rohr

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Shannon Koropchak

Category: Short Story

Mother and Son

Mother and Son

While many contend the peculiarity of living with your mother past adulthood, I, indeed, object to this false opinion. For years I accompanied my mother, nursed her, guided her, and protected her through every moment of our despair. Our precious love has remained one of inseparability, and the bond we share forever shall shed light upon our sorrowful reality. Once was a time, I do remember when my mother and I used to enjoy life's charm, the warmth of the morning sun, the coolness of its set, the pleasantness of our soft sheets, and the speckled sweetness in our morning coffee. From my first words to my first interview, my mother was there for it all; now, I can only reflect on the moments I hold so dear.

I remember the day I noticed her malady; a day like any other, we awoke to the sounds of construction beyond the yard, yet we never listened for long, never cared, we only smiled at one another as we released ourselves from our loving grasps. Each morning consisted of the same routine: brush our teeth, make our morning coffee, and prepare breakfast. By this time my mother had become very well-equipped in the art of eggs, but she only ever laughed off my compliments and hugged me tight around my waist as I washed the plates. Once all was cleaned and placed how it should be, we made our daily journey upstairs to rinse off before work. As we slipped off our robes and crawled into the hot sprinkle, I noticed her skin lacked its usual pleasant softness. I looked into her eyes to notice their now distant gaze and cloudy composure. I pressed my palm to her forehead only to feel the sharp sweltering of her feverish state, but like many times before, I grabbed a cool rag and placed it on her head as I laid her to rest. I rubbed her back as I whistled our favorite lullabies, yet contrary to her past illnesses, she only worsened as the light of day faded.

By the time the night grew cold, she bore a yellow hue, ill to the eyes and absent of any remaining vitality. With time I had hoped her physical state would grow less grim, but it never once appeared to improve. Weeks passed, and her mild aches matured to rotten nausea, slight soreness to complete agony, and her once gentle voice, now scratchy and rough. Losing work to tend to her needs meant the meals I could muster consisted of meager leftovers from shops nearby, and though hopeful of a godly savior, nothing of the sort ever arrived. It became clear I had no choice but to put my trust in those with white coats and fancy degrees. Nevertheless, these claimed professionals, against all my pleas and cries for assistance, could only provide a single cot and insistence upon the impossibility of her recovery.

Each day I waited tirelessly by her bedside, long enough to notice our bodies had run cold and stale, our ribs shown through our brittle skin, and our lips shriveled down to thin pail lines painted between our cheeks. I ate when she ate, drank when she drank, yet I never slept, for if for one moment I took my gaze off her graceful blue eyes, I feared I would never witness their beauty again. Each morning as the sun reflected against her pale skin, she awoke with the same groan of agony, followed by a piercing cough. I would fashion our favorite lemon refreshments to soothe her throat, yet in these moments, I couldn't help but press my palms to my ears and hum intensely enough, so that her violent hacks no longer tore at my mind.

Each morning, the same whimper, the same groans, grew louder and louder, where humming no longer drowned out the cacophony. I watched as her body ceaselessly convulsed under the weight of her own gasps for air, feeling each shock of pain, an excruciating ripple of agony, within my own nerves. I found every attempt to assure myself she would weather this plague and hold me as she once did completely ineffective, and the fear of losing the only love I'd known grew to be a persistent, painful thought. It became synonymous with the feeling of watching an injured animal whimper and cry as it slowly died right before you. "What vicious, hateful soul could have brought this upon our once blissful lives" I would ask myself, though no answer ever came of it. While my wandering thoughts had failed to provide me with much clarity, they did produce the understanding that we no longer could suffer under this

unforgiving reality.

As night came, and the light within the room dimmed to only the illumination of the moon, I stood silent by her feet. I watched as the air within her chest rose and fell. I studied her twitching eyes, her shifting lips, and her indistinguishable murmurs. Step by step, I paced my way toward her side, and for the first moment since our arrival, I lowered my eyelids shut. Raising one leg, then the other, I calmly crawled into her cot, careful not to wake her, and rested my head next to hers. Gently, I ran my hand up and down the side of her figure, kissing her delicate, brittle lips before falling into a silent sleep.

Upon the first rays of light protruding through the city windows, my eyes slowly came too. Once more, I studied her breath and the glow of the orange sun on her skin. For a brief moment, it felt as though I had forgotten her incurable torment, and in that short moment, I felt a long-lost warmth return to my bones, however, this warmth quickly faded and I soon recalled her insufferable screams and knew soon, upon her arousal, she must endure that pain once more. With quick and meticulous movements, I placed myself over her resting body, careful not to take my gaze off her fastened eyes. As what felt like an eternity passed, I patiently waited for the slightest crack of her lids. Every few minutes, I pinched my shirt and brought it to my cheeks to remove the collecting salt, yet my gaze never left her eyes.

The sun had now fully shown over the horizon, and in one quick gasp, her eyes swiftly fluttered open. Without hesitation, I screamed in torture as I pressed the wool pillow against her face. Her weakened body flailed in distress, though so depleted by her plague put up an anemic struggle to my compression. Sooner than I had thought, her body grew limp, and her wails softened to silence.

My heart's rapid pound sored my ribs as my mind's surging aches fogged my vision, yet for a brief moment following her stillness, as everything cleared, I sat in silence, watching the cotton pillow slowly slide to the floor. As I examined her lifeless gaze, I did not scream nor shed another tear, for it was only now that I knew her torment had concluded. I returned to the leather chair placed across from her bed and sat still as I patiently waited for the warmth in my bones to return. I believed her now restful peace would provide me with new strength yet the longer I stared at her rolled white eyes, the greater my own throat began to smolder. I hurried to the sink placed in the room's far corner but I quickly stumbled to the ground in a violent fit of uncontrollable coughs. Crawling to my mother's bedside I begged for her return in a whimpering outburst, only to have my vision now completely obscured by my own tears. I screamed in one final cry of agony as I fell back from her bed and dug my nails into my throat, ripping my flesh to the floor. Like a wild dog, I dug out my own skin and tissue till my nails scraped the bone of my own spine. My arms soon fell limp to the sides of my torso, and I laid my head back on the tile as I rested my eyes for the final time, ready to embrace my mother's renewed warmth once more.

Louisa Wallner

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: City of Fountains School, Kansas City, MO

Educators: Idean Bindel, Brandi McFadden

Category: Poetry

Truth

Truth, Part 1

The trouble with truth is

it

shows at bad times

it

delivers no justice when siblings fight

it

brings trouble when I make a mistake.

Truth, Part 2

Sometimes

no one

wants to hear the truth

and yet

it

must be told.

The truth can devastate countries

the truth can hide and put the wrong person in jail

the truth

can be admitting that

yes

it was

my baseball.

I'm Not...

a ballerina who dances en pointe in "Swan Lake"

a talented magician who enchants a regal crowd

a well-paid actor known for knee-trembling films

a skilled artist of layered oils on canvas

an accomplished musician of Carnegie Hall

a famous sailor who sailed the seven seas six times

who you think I am.

I'm just

a simple

pedestrian,

am I not?

Silence

It began in silence

then a hair-raising fear

a demonized spy with

ghastly whispers of an impatient guy,
dark and deceptive, lurking,
an eerie, dreadful smirking,
shrill screams haunting my
gruesome
dreams.

I investigate, skull after skull
a horror, a terror,
an unwelcome veil,
nightmarish and unexplainable.

The moonlit phantom with
gory eyes, repulsive lies, a rhyme,
a riddle, a potion, a deadly premonition,
with monstrous motion makes much
noise in the night,
breaking dreams with
silence
then silence again.

I retreat and find myself
but, oh my word, I promise
on my miserable life
that in 14 moons time
at the beast's next feast he
will meet my waking
vengeance.

Louisa Wallner

Age: 13, Grade: 8

School Name: City of Fountains School, Kansas City, MO

Educators: Idean Bindel, Brandi McFadden

Category: Flash Fiction

A Mystery

I stand there, listening to the overwhelming noises of the big city. Not like the quiet country where I grew up.

It is early in the day. People are getting up, going to work—constructions setting into motion.

Something catches my ear, a voice so familiar yet distant in time.

"...Oh, yeah. Okay—two of those. Here, thank you."

I run.

Hoping.

Needing to find that person in an ocean of noises and chaos of machines and people of past and future.

The city is waking up, coming to life.

Oh, no...

My thoughts swim together, the person's voice becoming fainter and fainter, tears forming in my eyes.

"Are you alright?" someone has stopped to ask.

In the rush of the crowd, someone sees me.

But just as soon as the stranger has come, he is gone, swept off with the morning crowd.

Everything goes black.

* * *

"No..." I mumble, waking from my sleep. "Where am I?"

I sit up, breathing heavily.

What happened? I wonder. I am in a pitch black room, trying to orient myself through the darkness.

"Ahh!" I wail, a sharp pain aching now in my back.

"What's wrong?" asks a voice outside the door.

"Where am I!? Who are you!? What's going—"

"—Shhh," the voice cuts me off. "Let me explain..."

* * *

T—That voice.

I struggle to set my thoughts together in a full sentence.

That's the voice,

the one I was hunting,

trying to fish in a huge city of millions of voices.

"My back—" I gasp, mumbling something under my breath. I guess leaving the hospital early was a bad idea. Oh, well—it's not like I can go back or want to for that matter, knowing who waits for me there.

I practically jump out of bed when someone opens the door, slowly letting the bright light flood into the darkness of the room. Opening my mouth to complain, though, nothing comes out.

This person just stands there—awkwardly, fumbling, and failing for the right words.

While the figure is still there trying to start this lousy conversation, I decide to help out.

"So...do you often kidnap people of the street?"

A grim smile is slowly forming on my face.

"Is it a weekly thing? No, no, no, no, no—you're right, bad habits—they are the worst."

My jokes aren't appreciated very much. All I get in return is an angry grunt.

"I remember—" he suddenly chimes in, "being like that...annoy—"

"—Hold on," I cut in. "Let me get this straight; you remember being young? Wow—must be hard to think back to a time before time..."

I made sure to drag out those last words—over the top.

I try to choke back my laugh and feel satisfied when I finally hear a low growl coming from the direction of where the person must be standing.

The mystery figure continues.

"—ANNOYING, mean, and an awful sense of humor that only makes people more and more angry every time you open your mouth."

It's my turn to frown, and even though I can't see anything through the dark, I just know there's a wide grin on the figure's face.

"Shut your eyes."

"What? W—Why...?" My voice trails off. I try to think through every scenario where a person might say "shut your eyes."

I hear the figure fumbling in the dark to find something on the wall.

Uh-oh, think.

Click.

"Ahh!" My eyes burn and sting, watering as I slowly open them again.

The figure has turned on the light.

"I warned you," he scoffs, still laughing at my exaggeration.

The person grabs a stool and sits down next to where I lay in my bed.

I study the face of a young woman, maybe in her 30s.

I freeze.

She looks like me.

Call my crazy, but she looks exactly like me—only older.

I struggle for air. I gasp, taking a good minute to catch my breath again.

"W—Who are you?" I mumble the words, barely hearable over the shaky sound of my breathing.

But deep down, I already know the answer.

She is me—a mystery.

Juliana Wamelink

Age: 16, Grade: 10

School Name: Lawrence Free State High School, Lawrence, KS

Educator: Josie Clark

Category: Poetry

Through a Dark and Perilous Night

**Blood stains the sun of dawn's early light
The wings of Victory clipped in Liberty's flight
Freedom defiled in courageous man's fight
Barricades rise in the cold and brooding night**

**As smoke settles upon the land
The early dew doth not disturb a single sleeping man
For when morning light takes tomorrow's stand
For many a man shall be buried beneath the sand**

**A woman weeps solemnly, never to sleep
To her husband a promise he did not keep
Tears of so many roll down her cheeks
Her eyes no longer able to weep**

**A widow she was not when the sun settled down
A new king hath not gained thy crown
A husband cares for a wife of which is proud
A change will affect thou once the sun rises again above the clouds**

**The King! The King! The King must be dead
For another therefore hath been placed in his stead
A crown moving along from head to head
And soon a queen quickly to be wed**

**As many walk hesitantly towards the new beginning light
Some swiftly part in fearful flight
A new ruler crowned after Freedom's long fight
As Liberty leads her people through a dark a perilous night**

Alex Wang

Age: 14, Grade: 9

School Name: Ladue Horton Watkins High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Judith Miller

Category: Poetry

Nature's Hei Bai

heavenly beach

part i

light creeps up on the sea
illuminating the cold rippling water
with a calming yet vibrant hue of tiger red
with streaks of rose pink and waves of steel blue
as the occasional sea-scent drifts
in and out, in and out, in and out

wooly white clouds slumber high above
detached from the squawking seagulls
watching the seaside's speckled sand
watching the foamy water climb onto the shore
hypnotized by the periodic motion
to and fro, to and fro, to and fro

creamy beads of frost slide down the side
the sticky sweet substance dripping onto my fingers
smiling with a humble happiness as the flavors retreat
smiling with freedom as the patterned cone softens
embraced by the aroma
lick after lick after lick

part ii

gleaming shovels sink into the smooth sand
scooped into the waiting pails supported by his hand
intricately sculpted towers stand precariously tall
a blazing blue flag conquering the knoll

lightly fluttering nets dance in the breeze as he soars
for god bestowed upon him a pair of wings
to gift the ground as he victoriously scores
and as the wind whistling through the air sings

honey badger

outclassed, overshadowed, and eclipsed
trampled and toyed with by the apex
the odds are stacked against you

scavengers stealing the spoil you've earned

you've lost again and again and again

your pitch black fur and silky silver cape

the lights are cut off but

ripped and torn, your smooth skin worn

you're still looking at your dream

but you still stand, fearless

reviewing it

pushing yourself

every

single

day

swearing to yourself

that it's not over

until.

you.

win.

highrise beauties

majestic mountains, peaks aglow,
rising high above the earth below,
their craggy cliffs and rocky slopes,
an obstacle to be overcome
the final goal of all climber's hopes.

their beauty is unmatched, a sight to see,
a natural wonder, mother nature's magnum opus,
a symbol of endurance and strength and might,
a beacon, a boundless beholder of dreams
to poor lost souls, a guiding light.

as he stands in awe, and gazes up high,
he views the peak tear through the sky,
a landform of beauty and wonder, a gift to behold,
a treasure to forever cherish
one as exquisite as gold.

Livia Willey

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Anita Hagerman

Category: Dramatic Script

Lady

EXT. PARKING LOT BENCH- DAY

A boy, PETER, is tranquilly sitting on a bench, writing in a NOTEBOOK. A car honks and Peter jumps up out of the bench, walking and entering his fathers car.

INT. DADS CAR- DAY

The car is awkwardly silent. The natural noises of the road almost make it even quieter. You can sense the space between FATHER and son. Father maintains eye contact with the road as he starts conversation.

FATHER

How was your day?

PETER

Good.

Peter also continues to look at the road. The car is once again silent. Peter looks at his feet in boredom.

They both are desperately searching for things to say, but neither seem to be able to say anything. Father inhales, as if to speak, and Peter turns his head eagerly.

A beat.

FATHER

Make sure to clean your room tonight. Yeah?

Peter nods and slowly turns his head back to the road in disappointment. The radio begins playing "I'D HAVE YOU ANYTIME". Peter is content to hear the song.

Father sighs and reaches for the radio.

FATHER

Hate that song..

He changes the channel to a baseball game. Peter, slightly disappointed, reaches behind him and lowers his seat gradually, while it mechanically whirs.

Peter listens to the song in his head. He stares out the sunroof for the remainder of the car ride...

INT. PETER ROOM- DAY

Peter enters his room.

FATHER (O.S.)

(shouting)

Clean your room Peter!

A beat.

FATHER (CONT.)

and close the window!

Peter closes the door. He walks up to the window in front of his desk and it slams shut, knocking a BOTTLE full of sand down. The bottle falls open and sand spills all over Peter and the desk. He hears a buzzing.

Peter frantically wipes the sand off himself, accidentally swatting a BUG. The bug falls onto the desk and stops buzzing. A maroon and black bug. Peter stares at it curiously, realizing it's a ladybug.

Slow zoom on bug.

Peter carefully reaches a finger to touch it, and the ladybug latches onto his hand. He tries to bring it towards his window to free it but the ladybug won't go.

EXT. BACKYARD- DAY

Peter stands in his backyard, ladybug is clinging onto his finger. He drags his finger along the grass. Waves it in the air. Nudges it onto a tree. The ladybug continues to hold on.

He searches on his phone: DO LADY BUGS LIKE WATER? The phone says: YES.

EXT. BEACH- DAY

CUT TO: a vast area of sand, footprints. Camera moves up seeing Peter's feet shuffling through. He opens his mouth and gazes at the mesmerizing blue waves. The scene makes up muted blues, greens, grays, and beiges. Peter slowly lowers his hand containing the ladybug.

He freezes for a moment, waiting. He stares at the ladybug. The ladybug stares back at him. After giving the bug a nudge, the creature doesn't move.

Losing hope, Peter collapses into the sand and continues to watch the waves. He reaches into his backpack to get out the glass bottle, then scoops sand into it. He sets it down after filling it.

Peter's back falls into the sand as he lays face up. His eyes are tired. His brown hair is swallowed by sand.

The ladybug, still on his hand, climbs its way all the way up to the top of Peter's nose. He intriguingly notices this.

Peter dumps the sand out of his jar, picks up the ladybug and places it in.

INT. PETERS ROOM- NIGHT

Sitting at his desk, Peter places his glass jar down, opens the lid off, and looks at the bug inside. He then opens the window in front of the jar. Peter CLICKS the lights off.

INT. PETER ROOM- MORNING

The next morning, Peter emerges from his bed, rubbing his eyes and stomping towards his desk. The bug is still sitting patiently in the bottle. Peter is surprised by this, and he pours the little bug out.

He comfortably smirks knowing the bug is still alive and walking on his desk. He starts eagerly scribbling in his journal...

MOTHER (O.S.)

Peter?!!

Mother's voice comes from the stairs. Her footsteps continue to his door.

MOTHER (CONT.)(O.S.)

Pete-

Peter spins around in his chair to look at his mom.

MOTHER (CONT.)

You know, you really should try and see some people this week, go somewhere...Since its break.

Peter nods.

MOTHER (CONT.)

Hey don't forget to close that window.

Still looking at her, Peter rushes his arms to the window to close it while she's in the room. Mother turns around and gently closes his room door.

Peter continues his writing. He stops and notices the ladybug once again.

He rips a page out of the notebook and folds it into a tiny throne. The ladybug stumbles into the chair. He chuckles, noticing how strange it is, and continues to smile.

EXT. BACKYARD- DAY

At night, Peter dreams of gigantically standing in his backyard, reaching for the clouds. He optimistically jumps, jumps again, and again, getting less optimistic each time.

He frowns in disappointment, until he notices a BUZZING from the sky, and sees a large red ladybug coming towards him. Peters eyes marvel in this amazement. The bug grabs his hand and begins to fly into the air.

Peter, after some time, starts to grow his own wings. Big clear wings emerge from his back. He floats lightly into the sky.

The sky looks dark green and indigo as Peter disappears into the clouds.

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Peter awakens surprisingly, gasping and panting a bit. He jumps out of bed and runs to the desk in anticipation.

Seeing the bug's still there, he sits in the chair. Relieved.

INT. PETER ROOM- DAY

With a fat sharpie in hand, Peter scribbles the word LADY on the bugs tiny paper throne. He picks the bug up and places her on his shoulder.

EXT. BACKYARD- DUSK

Peter climbs a large tree in his backyard, launching his arms towards the fat branches while he smirks with pride.

When he reaches the top, the bug is still clinging onto his shoulder. They sit there, quiet but comfortable, watching the sunset.

Orange and purple skies.

EXT. NEIGHBORHOOD ROAD- NIGHT

Peter marches down his neighborhood road with purpose in his walk. He has his backpack on and his hands hold the bottom of the straps. The ladybug is still there. He walks through neighborhoods, sidewalks, and wooded trails.

EXT. HILLSIDE- NIGHT

At the top of a hill, Peter rests, taking in his view of the world. He is thankful for the moment, and turns to look at the ladybug.

The two can see the whole city and millions of tiny lights, flickering in millions of homes. Speckles of yellow on pure black buildings.

Peter pleasantly writes more and more in his journal. Camera focuses on journal, reads: I AM LOVED.

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Mother SHAKES Peter awake. As he looks into her eyes he gets anxious.

MOTHER (O.S.)

(sharply)

Where have you been?

Peter, in shock, doesn't respond.

MOTHER (CONT.)

What've you been doing all night?

PETER

(stuttering)

I- I'm sorry mom.

MOTHER

My god Peter, I'm glad you left your dirty room but you shouldn't be sneaking out on the last night of break. You have school!

Peter stares at Mother, embarrassed and disheartened. Mother sighs and slightly calms.

MOTHER (CONT.)

Get ready. You're gonna have to leave soon. Okay?

Peter grabs his backpack and quickly leaves his mother in the room.

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After school, Peter slowly walks into his room, pushing the door open. Inside are Mother and Father, Mother holding his journal. Peter's face is hit with surprise and betrayal.

Mother is leaning against his bed, disappointingly talking down to her son.

MOTHER

We need to talk...

Peter, frozen in place, watches his mother. The camera stays on Peter as they speak to him.

MOTHER (CONT.)(O.S.)

You have been acting absurd lately. I think, you need to see more people. REAL people.

FATHER

You gotta be a normal teenage boy Pete. I don't know what's going on with you...

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I- I- I am, Dad. I have friends. I have friends!

His father speaks carefully and smoothly.

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Besides the imaginary ones-

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(to Father)

She's real!

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And bugs don't have hearts.

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(gesturing)

Maybe if you closed your window, bugs wouldn't be crawling everywhere!

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That's not true!

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PETER (CONT.)

Get out!

The two parents stare at him, pitying his ignorance.

PETER (louder)

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The two exit the room. Peter slams the door behind them. He walks over to his desk, seeing the throne but no ladybug. He looks to the left, to the right, ladybug is nowhere. Flashes between Peter's face and the open window. His face starts to melt into agony. He grabs himself, feeling abandoned. Peter begins to cry. He covers his face in his hands, grabbing his forehead to stop thinking about it, but nothing can stop him from feeling hurt. Peter is conflicted by his guilt, as he hyperventilates and grasps the desk to stabilize himself.

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Livia Willey

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: John Burroughs School, Saint Louis, MO

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Category: Dramatic Script

The Pattersons

EXT. SUBURBAN GRASSY BACKYARD - DAY

The scene starts with RICHARD, a father, speaking to his young son, TOMMY.

RICHARD

Ok Tommy, now you know this is a bit of responsibility.

TOMMY

Yeah!

RICHARD

And you're a big boy now so you can handle this responsibility.

TOMMY

Yeah!

RICHARD

Alright. Then this!

Richard pulls a pocketknife out from behind his back.

RICHARD (CONT.)

Is for you.

He hands the knife to the child. Tommy smiles and runs away from his father. The child plays in the grass with his knife, dragging the edge across surfaces. He then begins to mindlessly carve into a tree.

INT. CLASSROOM - DAY

We see a teacher talking to a group of children sitting on the floor below him.

TEACHER

(patronizingly)

So trees also need to get big and strong, just like humans. Trees are here to provide oxygen so that we can breathe in air. And that's why, we need to be mindful of the plants around us, as they are just as important to the planet as

we are.

Tommy's eyes begin to well up.

INT. CAR - DAY

Suddenly, Tommy is crying and sniffing. His mother, BRIDGET, is consoling him.

BRIDGET

Hey...! Hey it's alright Tommy! It's ok! The tree is alright.

Tommy is still crying and sniffing.

BRIDGET (CONT.)

And you know what? You didn't do ANYTHING wrong. You didn't know. It's ok baby... don't worry! You didn't know!

Tommy slowly cheers up a bit, still sniffing. He nods his head at his mother.

INT. SUBURBAN GLASSY HOME - DAY

The scene starts with Bridget and Richard conversing about their days in the living room.

BRIDGET

He seemed really broken up about it. I felt bad.

RICHARD

Yeah? Well I'm glad he's better now.

Richard looks around.

RICHARD (CONT.)

Hey have you seen my watch anywhere? The one with the gold band?

BRIDGET

No I haven't. But please don't lose it that was your Christmas gift from my mother.

RICHARD

I'll try my best.

Bridget through the window eyes a gardener working on plants. She notices him wearing a similar watch to the one her husband lost. The husband drones on about when he had it on last and why he took it off. Bridget points through the window and theorizes the fact that the gardener stole it. Their conversation continues muffled, zooming in on the watch the gardener is wearing. It has a leather band.

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

Bridget and Richard are lying in bed underneath the sheets.

BRIDGET

Did he take it alright?

RICHARD

Relatively yes. He just seemed verysad. INT. ROOM - NIGHT

The gardener is talking to his wife and children and gestures a lot as he is speaking. They're faces drop eventually and seem very morose. The children bike to Richard and Bridget's home and egg the windows.

RICHARD (V.O)(CONT'D)

I actually felt quite bad for him. He had been loyal for quite a long time, and he seemed like a nice guy. I don't know.

BRIDGET (V.O.)

Don't. How could we trust him in our house anymore? I think we did the right thing.

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

The camera cuts back to the couple in bed again.

BRIDGET (CONT'D)

Well... goodnight.

Bridget reaches over and turns a lamp off.

INT. SUBURBAN GLASSY HOME - DAY

Bridget sits on a couch sipping a cup of tea in the morning. She looks back to the window, squinting. She then sets the cup of tea down, stands up and walks to the window. Richard walks in.

RICHARD

What's wrong?

BRIDGET

Oh- the window just looks a little dirty. Could you call the cleaner for me?

RICHARD

On it. Bridget sits down again and proceeds to drink her tea.

EXT. DRIVEWAY - DAY

Richard and Bridget stand at the edge of the front porch, looking at their child and a babysitter, POLLY. The two are dressed up.

BRIDGET

Alright, bye baby I love you!

She blows an air kiss.

RICHARD

Bye little man. See you later. Thank you Polly.

POLLY

Oh anytime.

Polly and Tommy continue to wave on the front porch as the couple gets into a car. The car exits the driveway.

INT. CAR - AFTERNOON

The couple sit in the passenger seat as a driver takes them somewhere.

BRIDGET

I hope there isn't too much drama. You know with Bill quarantining and everything.

RICHARD

Oh I'm sure it'll be fine, none of us are too worried anyway.

BRIDGET

oh hey! Did you forget your jacket?

RICHARD (frustrated)

God damnit you're right. Shit.

BRIDGET

Don't worry we'll just turn around.

RICHARD

It's not gonna be there

BRIDGET

What do you mean it's not gonna be there.

RICHARD

I mean it's not at our house.

BRIDGET

(angrily)

Then where is it?

RICHARD

The dry cleaners. I forgot to pick it up after work the other day.

BRIDGET

You're kidding! I can't believe you could just forget it! You know how important this charity event is!

RICHARD

(sourly)

I know Bridget. It's not like I was sitting around all day. You give me a million things to do!

BRIDGET

It's called providing for a family!

RICHARD

I can't with you. I can't! It's not as easy as it seems! You couldn't even TRY doing any work for me.

BRIDGET

You know what? Stop the car please. Driver could you please stop the car?

The car comes to a halt, regardless of the fact that they're in the middle of the road. The couple keeps arguing louder and louder, overlapping and interrupting each other endlessly. We zoom out and see that behind their car there is a lineup of cars, waiting for them to move. The couple keeps arguing, not realizing that they are blocking traffic. The cars honk and honk but the two cannot hear it over the sound of their voices.

EXT. STREET - EVENING

The car is parked on a street, and Bridget is standing outside talking to her husband, holding the open car door.

BRIDGET

It'll just be a minute.

She closes the door and starts walking away from the car. She is in the city, and around her are a few homeless people. The more she walks the more homeless people she sees, yet Bridget does not even make eye contact with them. She pretends to not even see them. Bridget eventually arrives at the door of the dry cleaners. The door has a sign that says MASKS REQUIRED. Bridget enters the room without a mask.

INT. DRY CLEANERS - EVENING As Bridget walks in, the dry cleaner notices her.

DRY CLEANER

Hello ma'am do you have a mask?

BRIDGET

I'm afraid I don't. Those give me a rash you know.

DRY CLEANER

Alright then just stay further away and I'll get your clothing.

Another person walks into the dry cleaners with a mask on. She looks at Bridget and takes a few steps back, fearing

being too close to her. The dry cleaner hands Bridget her clothing and Bridget exits the store.

EXT. PARKING LOT - EVENING

There are many, many cars filling up the spaces of a parking lot. Bridget and Richard exit their car and thank the driver. Richard adjusts his jacket and sighs. He smiles at Bridget. Bridget smiles back. They grab each others hands and start walking towards the entrance. Another man, JOHN, is walking in the vicinity.

JOHN

Hey Richard! How's it going!

The two men shake hands in a friendly manner.

RICHARD

Hey John.

JOHN

So glad I can do that without getting in trouble.

RICHARD

I know! the whole mask thing is getting a bit old. Just happy to be able to relax tonight.

JOHN

Me too.

The camera zooms out in the parking lot full of cars, expressing the fact that no one is going to be wearing a mask despite the size of the event.

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No I haven't. But please don't lose it that was your Christmas gift from my mother.

RICHARD

I'll try my best.

Bridget through the window eyes a gardener working on plants. She notices him wearing a similar watch to the one her husband lost. The husband drones on about when he had it on last and why he took it off. Bridget points through the window and theorizes the fact that the gardener stole it. Their conversation continues muffled, zooming in on the watch the gardener is wearing. It has a leather band.

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

Bridget and Richard are lying in bed underneath the sheets.

BRIDGET

Did he take it alright?

RICHARD

Relatively yes. He just seemed very sad.

INT. ROOM - NIGHT

The gardener is talking to his wife and children and gestures a lot as he is speaking. They're faces drop eventually and seem very morose. The children bike to Richard and Bridget's home and egg the windows.

RICHARD (V.O)(CONT'D)

I actually felt quite bad for him. He had been loyal for quite a long time, and he seemed like a nice guy. I don't know.

BRIDGET (V.O.)

Don't. How could we trust him in our house anymore? I think we did the right thing.

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

The camera cuts back to the couple in bed again.

BRIDGET (CONT'D)

Well... goodnight.

Bridget reaches over and turns a lamp off.

INT. SUBURBAN GLASSY HOME - DAY

Bridget sits on a couch sipping a cup of tea in the morning. She looks back to the window, squinting. She then sets the cup of tea down, stands up and walks to the window. Richard walks in.

RICHARD

What's wrong?

BRIDGET

Oh- the window just looks a little dirty. Could you call the cleaner for me?

RICHARD

On it.

Bridget sits down again and proceeds to drink her tea.

EXT. DRIVEWAY - DAY

Richard and Bridget stand at the edge of the front porch, looking at their child and a babysitter, POLLY. The two are dressed up.

BRIDGET
Alright, bye baby I love you!

She blows an air kiss.

RICHARD
Bye little man. See you later. Thank
you Polly.

POLLY
Oh anytime.

Polly and Tommy continue to wave on the front porch as the couple gets into a car. The car exits the driveway.

INT. CAR - AFTERNOON

The couple sit in the passenger seat as a driver takes them somewhere.

BRIDGET
I hope there isn't too much drama. You
know with Bill quarantining and
everything.

RICHARD
Oh I'm sure it'll be fine, none of us
are too worried anyway.

BRIDGET
oh hey! Did you forget you're jacket?

RICHARD
(frustrated)
God damnit you're right. Shit.

BRIDGET
Don't worry we'll just turn around.

RICHARD
It's not gonna be there

BRIDGET
What do you mean it's not gonna be
there.

RICHARD
I mean it's not at our house.

BRIDGET
(angrily)
Then where is it?

RICHARD
The dry cleaners. I forgot to pick it up after work the other day.

BRIDGET
You're kidding! I can't believe you could just forget it! You know how important this charity event is!

RICHARD
(sourly)
I know Bridget. It's not like I was sitting around all day. You give me a million things to do!

BRIDGET
It's called providing for a family!

RICHARD
I can't with you. I can't! It's not as easy as it seems! You couldn't even TRY doing any work for me.

BRIDGET
You know what? Stop the car please. Driver could you please stop the car?

The car comes to a halt, regardless of the fact that they're in the middle of the road. The couple keeps arguing louder and louder, overlapping and interrupting each other endlessly. We zoom out and see that behind their car there is a lineup of cars, waiting for them to move. The couple keeps arguing, not realizing that they are blocking traffic. The cars honk and honk but the two cannot hear it over the sound of their voices.

EXT. STREET - EVENING

The car is parked on a street, and Bridget is standing outside talking to her husband, holding the open car door.

BRIDGET
It'll just be a minute.

She closes the door and starts walking away from the car. She is in the city, and around her are a few homeless people. The more she walks the more homeless people she sees, yet Bridget does not even make eye contact with them. She pretends to not even see them. Bridget eventually arrives at the door of the dry cleaners. The door has a sign that says MASKS REQUIRED. Bridget enters the room without a mask.

INT. DRY CLEANERS - EVENING

As Bridget walks in, the dry cleaner notices her.

DRY CLEANER
Hello ma'am do you have a mask?

BRIDGET
I'm afraid I don't. Those give me a rash you know.

DRY CLEANER
Alright then just stay further away and I'll get your clothing.

Another person walks into the dry cleaners with a mask on. She looks at Bridget and takes a few steps back, fearing being too close to her. The dry cleaner hands Bridget her clothing and Bridget exits the store.

EXT. PARKING LOT - EVENING

There are many, many cars filling up the spaces of a parking lot. Bridget and Richard exit their car and thank the driver. Richard adjusts his jacket and sighs. He smiles at Bridget. Bridget smiles back. They grab each others hands and start walking towards the entrance. Another man, JOHN, is walking in the vicinity.

JOHN
Hey Richard! How's it going!

The two men shake hands in a friendly manner.

RICHARD
Hey John.

JOHN
So glad I can do that without getting in trouble.

RICHARD
I know! the whole mask thing is

getting a bit old. Just happy to be
able to relax tonight.

JOHN

Me too.

The camera zooms out in the parking lot full of cars,
expressing the fact that no one is going to be wearing a mask
despite the size of the event.

Anwen Williams

Age: 15, Grade: 10

School Name: Lawrence Free State High School, Lawrence, KS

Educator: Devin Heath

Category: Poetry

carnival games

let's play carnival games
try and try again,
waste your life away

*burst balloons with dulled darts
aim well, eyes sharp*

pop

take the insecurities away
cut and carve until skin fades
and there lie only scars

pop

red runs like a river does
rivulets down your legs
give life to the pain you dreamt of

pop

trace white lines with fingertips
face questions of what happened
smile, say the knife just slipped

*toss the ball into the cup
raise your arm, let it drop*

it's in

stop the food and start to starve
healing is energy but
healing

is hard

it's out

bones are peeking through your skin
chilled

at the slightest wind

you'd waste your life away just
to feel thin

it's in again

a hospital bed and a tray you
push away with hands that shake
you worked

to feel this pain

you don't want your heart to beat
you wait

for it to break

*ride the rides with peeling paint
that childish thrill, it fades away*

spin

forget the life of chasing dreams
you chose to scar and starve and tear
at the very seams

spin

remember when you smiled free
wished you'd one day rule the world
why survive
when you could bleed

spin

now your heart beats slow
your skin is marred with scars
look back upon this muddled mess
a life lived,
yet nothing but pain to show

let's play carnival games
try and try again
perhaps you were meant
to waste this life away.

Lucia Williams

Age: 12, Grade: 7

School Name: City of Fountains School, Kansas City, MO

Educators: Idean Bindel, Josh North

Category: Poetry

Taking Her Own Path

1.

Immortal. With fire in her veins and the winds howling her story.

She is the daughter of the phantoms who were never found,
caught in the magic that now screams for her spirit.

She is a storm with skin,

rising from the ashes of those who failed before her.

Blood stains her feet, and the moon cries her name as she strides into the jaws of Fate.

2.

Princess. Rising to be queen.

Her heart is as pure as the diamond crown she bears,

delicate beauty concealing the storm.

She leads the hunt, running with the wolves and fighting as pack and kin,

her cold howl piercing the moon that shines upon her.

She is the elegant rose, hiding the dark, teeth-like thorns,

petals stained with the blood of those who bid her wrong.

3.

Heroine. Daughter of the witches they could never burn.

She will bend Heaven to raise Hell,

her eyes carrying the lethal beauty of darkness.

The demons cower before her as she challenges the Devil's thrown.

She is the queen who will burn the world

and race to Death with open arms.

Rayna Williams

Age: 13, Grade: 9

School Name: Smithville High School, Smithville, MO

Educator: Angela Perkins

Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy

A Christmas Kidnapping

A Christmas Kidnapping

On one algid night of winter, he would enter towns. On this icy, lightless night, every year, there were those who'd vanish. They would disappear from the face of the Earth, none of them leaving even a hair at the scene. On-duty persons would scavenge on this night keeping aware of anything out of the ordinary. Those who vanished were those who saw him. They were transfixed by the glorious being of his nature. Things they had believed for their whole lives were proved wrong at the sight of his velvety, red coat. Snow might surround his figure, while he strode into neighborhoods all around the Earth. And to those who were in the misfortune of being in his presence when he arrived at their home, well... let's just say they might see, but never again be seen...

He was covered in a layer of ash. He shook the black soot off of himself and brushed through his white beard. Nick looked around, quickly locating any possible traps or dangers. There was a mastiff-sized black dog in the corner of the room, but it seemed to be sleeping and mustn't have been a good watchdog. The living room connected directly to the stairway and upstairs of the house, where Nick assumed the family's rooms were located. A tray of scrumptious-looking cookies lay on the table accompanied by a tall glass of egg nog. He glanced around a final time until turning around. He huffed under the weight of his big gray bag and pulled out 4 presents to lay under the tree. Each was labeled either "From Mom" or "From Dad." Nick then closed the bag tight again and launched it up the chimney before creeping up the stairs.

Nick turned around and jumped at the sight of a small child with a camera gazing wide-eyed up at him. The child looked like he was about to say something, and Nick acted fast. He grabbed the kid and held his hand on its mouth. He then raced downstairs, careful not to wake any of the sleeping family, and jumped up the chimney. The kid squirmed in his arms and he merely put it in the dark compartment on the bottom of his sleigh. The kid would never escape. He would scream, just as the rest did, but eventually, he would come to accept his fate.

"On Dasher, On Dixon, You all know the rest!" screamed Nick at the reindeer, lashing the reins at them. The reindeer pranced in the snow and numbly took off into the frigid wintery night.

"MOM!! DAD!!" The child wailed hopelessly, hearing the sound of jingle bells ringing and snow flurries wisping outside. He was claustrophobic in the small area in which Nick had shoved him, and he scratched at the small cupboard-like door, trying to find a way out. The camera that had once captured Santa's essence now lay shattered on the rooftop. He felt the sleigh take off and was slammed against the back of the compartment. He shivered, feeling around for any means of escape. Trying to tug up the red cover that lay on the cold metal flooring of the sleigh was no use. He returned his attention to the ventilation panels on the side of the sleigh. The wind slicked through them and the child started to shiver.

Very little light shone into the compartment, but the child could tell it was almost dawn. The cold, frozen, mood of the hidden starry night was gone, and awoke was sweeter, fresher scents. The sleigh's motion had drifted him to sleep when he had given up on trying to escape. He awoke and attempted to peer out the gaps provided in the vents, but he found no luck. He was still flying, he could tell, and he settled back into the least cold corner of his compartment, finding a semi-comfortable position that the sleigh rocked him out of on multiple occasions. He could only hope that this was all just a big mix-up and that Santa would take him back home once they landed.

The sleigh jolted and headed down to the snowy white ground of the North pole. It was morning now, and rays of bright sun bounced off the snow like a mirror. The reindeer stretched out and landed gracefully, bringing the sleigh down in a "Clupunk" behind them. The child bounded up, ready to tell Santa that he had accidentally picked him up and that he could still take him home before his parents woke up. He heard the sleigh slide through the snow, the reindeer pulling it into a barn-like building, and the sound of doors shutting. A creaking noise arose from the door of his little enclosure, which was being opened from the outside.

Wrinkly and old, yet muscular hands reached in and dragged the child out, tugging on him even harder when his nightgown caught on a screw. The child glanced around hopefully and gasped in awe. Christmas lights lit every inch of the barn, red and green bouncing off of the glossy floor like disco lights at a party. Candy canes, sizes ranging from tiny to as big as a human extended out of their roots in the frosty snow. Candys and gumdrops were scattered around the barn, all in a pattern that lit up the eye. Suddenly, the child could see no more of this wondrous area. He was picked up and carried into a wooden house. He passed what looked like a kitchen, with gingerbread and sugar cookies lying randomly on top of the counters. The sound of creaking hinges indicated that a cellar door was being opened.

The child stumbled down the stairs, and with a hard shove on his back, he fell the rest of the way. The door to his freedom slammed shut and was bolt-locked above him, along with all hope of going home. He stared around blankly, still processing what had happened. He slid down a cold stone wall and put his head on his knees, muffling out his weak sobs. Once he was tired enough, he lay down on the chilly, concrete, flooring and fell asleep. Watching him from behind a covered chair, and sneaking peeks at his new friend throughout his rest, was Arroll. Arroll, a North Pole elf, was dressed in sloppy potato sack jeans and a vest. His shirt seemed to have never been cleaned, nor updated. He watched the child, knowing what would happen to him and feeling sorry. He would soon be at ease with his new purpose though, and Arroll would get a new brother.

The child awoke, startled at the restraints around his body. His torso, limbs, and neck were wrapped awkwardly around a large beam that was seemingly in the middle of a giant library. Bookshelves towered over both sides of him with thick books scattered on the floor. The child took a second, slower glance and spotted small green creatures scuffling pages around on the floor. One looked up at him, noticing his consciousness, and thumped off nervously. A few minutes later a booming voice echoed through the library.

“RISE UP.”

A tall man entered with thundering proud steps, dressed in a black coat that sparkled as if it had been made in Emerald City. The green creatures stood, shuffling themselves so they could have their attention on the man. The child opened his mouth to speak, asking why he was here and if he could go home, but was restricted by a gag strapped around his mouth. The man strode over to the child, eyeing and sizing him up. The man then turned, yelling at a small green creature with a yellow bell around its neck.

“ELF SAUE,” snapped the man, “Get. The. Book.” The creature scrambled up the side of a leaning bookshelf, pulled an old book off the top row, and stumbled back down. It place the book in the man’s abnormally large hand and squirmed away. The man opened the book, flipping to a worn-out page somewhere in the middle of the book, then looked up at the child.

“You have broke Code 4: Seen; A3 by viewing Santa without permission on Christmas eve. Your human form will now be terminated so you may not reveal the truth about Santa.”

The child stared wide-eyed and screamed, a muffled voice escaping through the gag. The man glanced down at the book, and read in a rough monotone voice,

“I call upon the spirits of the Coldest Winter, to transform this child into what is necessary to keep us a secret unknown to the common world. Let him become my newest elf, Elf Eigean.”

Rebecca Xue

Age: 16, Grade: 11

School Name: Blue Valley West High School, Overland Park, KS

Educator: Jeffrey Baxter

Category: Poetry

For a world without the death penalty

Our prisoners have seen the bad and the ugly
Of a justice system that functions quite poorly
And the worst of it all
Is when inmates have to take the fall
For a system that doesn't comprehend
It's time for us to take a stand

Abolition of the death penalty
In the land of the brave and the free
Abolition of the death penalty
Let us all achieve the American dream

Sitting in a windowless room alone
If only we had known
The truth of this crime is at stake
But putting one on death row is simply a mistake
An inhumane and irreversible decision
For this issue, there's only one position

Abolition of the death penalty
In the land of the brave and the free
Abolition of the death penalty
Let us all achieve the American dream

The mentally disabled are protected
Under the Constitution we selected
A moral right that gives people a chance
Many Americans would take this stance
That though we must punish offenders coldly
There are alternatives that accomplish the same thing

Abolition of the death penalty
In the land of the brave and the free
Abolition of the death penalty
Let us all achieve the American dream

Life without parole incapacitates inmates

But the legal system can't decide their final fate
For the exoneration of many happens after a decade
Can't inflict death for a mistake they never made
So let's all bring our heads to the table
And make our justice system a little more stable

Abolition of the death penalty
In the land of the brave and the free
Abolition of the death penalty
Let us all achieve the American dream

Max Yang

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Ladue Horton Watkins High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Janet Duckham

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Can You Give Me a Haircut?

Before I was 12, my dad always gave me buzz cuts using the #2 guide of our Wahl Clipper. “Tradition,” he’d say.

But when I started caring about my appearance, I hated that my short, straight, jet-black hair stuck out in the sea of flowing blonde and brown hair at school. When a student shouted, “You look like a monk,” I vowed never to let my dad touch my hair again.

“I’ll get my haircut at the barber,” I declared when I came home that day.

“I thought you liked the haircut,” my dad stammered, hurt.

Blind to his disappointment, I left his haircuts behind.

Time passed, and the pandemic hit. With the barber shops closed, my dad’s chair became my only option for a haircut. “Son, your hair’s too long,” he’d constantly remind me. His words fell on deaf ears. Defiantly refusing to concede to his offers, I let my hair grow long.

Three months into lockdown, in an odd twist of roles, my dad asked me to cut his hair. I was stunned. How could I cut his hair after I wouldn’t let him cut mine? But seeing how his too-long hair bothered him, I agreed.

My dad waited patiently on the same barstool where I’d sat all those years before, facing the living room mirror. Hands trembling, I slid the #2 guide onto the clipper and gingerly held it to his head.

Cutting his hair was more difficult than I’d imagined. I cautiously maneuvered around his ears, taking care not to nick his neck. The tile floor chilled my bare feet, but I could feel his warmth. Seeing his stiff, black hair fall to the ground, I was reminded of the countless times he’d cut mine.

“Your grandfather used to give me haircuts,” he remarked. I glanced up, imagining the scene in Yeye’s family house in Shanghai. Glimpsing the reflections of my dad and me in the mirror, I saw myself as a link in a generations-long chain of fathers and sons.

When I finished, my dad felt his hair. “That’s the best haircut I’ve ever gotten.”

My heart filled with joy. At that moment, I realized that my dad’s buzz cuts meant much more than just a haircut: they symbolized a family tradition, my culture, and my dad’s unwavering love. He didn’t always express his care through words. Instead, he showed his love by bringing me cantaloupe slices while I was buried in piles of homework, driving me home from Science Olympiad workshops late at night, and massaging my aching legs after exhausting cross-country races.

Yet I’d been awfully cruel to my dad, taking his unconditional love for granted. Realizing this, I was determined to make up for my lack of understanding.

“Actually, Dad, your haircuts weren’t bad. I just didn’t like that my hair was so different from my friends’ hair.” I shared my past feelings of humiliation.

An idea suddenly came to my mind. "Could you cut my hair, but leave it a bit longer?"

The wrinkles at the corners of his eyes expressed his genuine excitement. "Certainly! You're my son."

In between laughs while watching haircut tutorials together, I felt we understood each other perfectly.

"Dad, how's this style?"

He grinned.

Max Yang

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Ladue Horton Watkins High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Janet Duckham

Category: Critical Essay

Holcomb Falling

“The mind is its own place, and in itself can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven...”

–John Milton, *Paradise Lost*

The story of the fall of man has fascinated scholars, artists, and writers for centuries. Our obsession with human nature and our relationship with choosing good versus evil has led to literary and artistic masterpieces like Titian's *Fall of Man*, William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, and John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Similarly, just a news column on the violent murders of a family in Holcomb, Kansas may have been enough to pique Capote's interest in exploring the effects of human nature and violence on man. However, instead of just covering the fall of an individual, Capote extends the metaphor of this biblical story to an entire community in his novel *In Cold Blood*. Through his use of biblical allusions, imagery, and symbolism, Capote demonstrates that inexplicable violence can fundamentally alter even the most perfect, resulting in lasting distrust.

Capote opens his novel by characterizing Holcomb as the quintessential rural American town. In Holcomb, the townsfolk have a collective sense of trust, doors are rarely locked, and a close-knit sense of community is omnipresent. This seemingly idyllic setting is reflected in Capote's incorporation of several biblical allusions to the Garden of Eden. On the day before his death, Herb Clutter surveys his expansive farm on his morning walk the day before his death. As he observes the wealth of his land, he posits that if Western Kansas received “an inch more of rain,” “this country would be paradise—Eden on earth” (12). This description of Holcomb and the surrounding areas as nearly “paradise” demonstrates how highly Herb Clutter views the area's environment. Capote's incorporation of the imagery of Eden also reflects the land's seemingly perfect nature. Soon after, Herb's gaze shifts to his peach, pear, cherry, and apple trees. Although Herb admits they are water-intensive, his “little collection of fruit bearers growing by the river was his attempt to contrive, rain or no, a patch of the paradise” (13). The grove of fruit trees, which parallels the Tree of Life and other trees found in the Garden of Eden, again demonstrates the idyllic nature of the Clutter farm. Because very few trees exist elsewhere in the prairie, the presence of this “patch of the paradise” symbolizes the prosperity of the family. Furthermore, Capote uses the trees as a symbol of Herb Clutter's self-made success, as the use of the word “contrive” in describing how Mr. Clutter's endeavor carries the connotation of a high degree of dedication. Later, Bobby Rupp tells the investigators about his last time seeing the Clutters. He recounts how Mr. Clutter “came back with two apples; he offered one to me” (51). Mr. Clutter's friendliness shines through in this interaction, as his status quo is to offer Rupp an apple, which illustrates the tight-knit connections in the town. More importantly, the apple—the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden story—represents Mr. Clutter's prosperity and success. Yet, just like in the biblical story, they could also be foreshadowing his downfall.

Soon after, however, the inexplicable violence of the Clutter murders tears apart the idyllic atmosphere, replacing it with one of distrust, and the town soon becomes comparable to Hell. Immediately after the news of the murders reaches the other townsfolk, paranoia quickly takes over, with residents frantically buying up locks and bolts in an effort to better secure their homes. Yet, even with all the preparation, Capote admits that “imagination, of course, can open any door—turn the key and let terror walk right in” (88). Through his description of imagination letting “terror walk right in,” Capote illustrates how the murders have resulted in fear easily infiltrating the minds of the townsfolk. The need to bolt up one's houses demonstrates how distrustful the residents of Holcomb have suddenly become in the wake of the murder. However, the degree of fear present is so large that many residents do not stop at just fortifying their locks. In the following scene, Capote describes how any passerby of the town could observe “windows ablaze” in “almost every window in almost every house,” with families who “sat the whole night wide awake, watchful, listening” (88). Clearly, the residents of Holcomb are terrified and want to prevent the same fate of

the Clutters from befalling their family. As a result, they are willing to forgo sleep and undergo the tortuous task of staying up “the whole night wide awake.” Capote uses the imagery of the “windows ablaze” to very explicitly draw comparisons to the fiery inferno of Hell, illustrating how Holcomb has now transformed into Hell itself. This transformation is also made apparent in the first few paragraphs of the novel, which serve as a prologue to the rest of the story. After foreshadowing the murders, Capote reflects that “those somber explosions [...] stimulated fires of mistrust in the glare of which many old neighbors viewed each other strangely, and as strangers” (5). By using the word “stimulated,” Capote directly connects the violence of the Clutter murders with the resulting distrust of the town. Additionally, the imagery of “fires of mistrust” once again parallels the burning environment of Hell, and also serves as a metaphor for how this feeling would grow and spread, inflaming this mistrust within the community.

Finally, following the murders, Capote weaves in the accounts of the townsfolk to demonstrate the lasting mistrust and residual evil that remain in the town. After his Christmas dinner, Bobby Rupp decides to run to the Clutter home. As he nears, Capote describes how Bobby was hit by “The cider–tart odor of spoiling apples” from Mr. Clutter’s “apple trees and pear trees” (206). Capote uses the “spoiling apples” to demonstrate how the evilness of the murder remains in the town, festering, just like apples, in the minds of the townsfolk. Furthermore, while the fruit trees had once symbolized the prosperity of the Clutters in a manner akin to “Eden on earth,” now, the rotting fruits just serve to remind the townsfolk of the murders. Capote uses this juxtaposition to illustrate the magnitude of the societal effect of the murders: stripping the town of paradise and replacing it with evil. Later in Hartman’s Cafe, postmistress Mrs. Myrtle Clare is overheard in a radio interview stating that even though Dick and Perry were caught, “plenty of folks are still keeping their doors locked and their guns ready” (231). Even after the criminals are caught, the residents of Holcomb are still wary. Capote uses this fact to demonstrate that the murders, which seemed so inexplicable, had fundamentally shaken the residents to the point they could not accept returning to their previous lifestyles. Furthermore, while Mrs. Clare used to be alone in her cynical conspiracies, the Clutter murders have changed that. Capote recounts how “the majority of Holcomb’s population [...] appeared to feel disappointed at being told that the murderer was not someone among themselves” (231). Capote’s use of the word “disappointed” suggests that the townsfolk had turned against each other, and had even hoped the killer was “someone among themselves.” To them, the possibility of two strangers coming into their town to murder one of the most successful families was beyond comprehension. As a result, they refuse to accept the truth. Ultimately, the murder transformed Holcomb, severing the close ties found within the community to create a new community: one filled with evil and distrust.

Yejun Yun

Age: 14, Grade: 11

School Name: Lawrence Free State High School, Lawrence, KS

Educator: Jeff Morrison

Category: Short Story

A Tall Creature

After twenty-or-so tempestuous days of trial and tribulation, I encountered a strange creature on an atoll at sea. I had anchored myself as best as possible to the blue-green coral, having stopped to marvel at the sight, when in the saltwater core of the ringed island, a break in the glassy-smooth surface caught my eye. I must admit, it took me a second to realize that I had even looked at anything out of the ordinary, so shocking was the sight. A bug protruding no less than two meters above the water, encased in an aquamarine exoskeleton and dripping liquid from cracks in its carapace, stared at me with two dangling eyes which were attached to its head by stalk-like fibers springing from its body. My jaw had hardly begun to drop when it began to move toward me, striding across the atoll with clawed, spiny, and skittering limbs; and rooted in place, I could only watch, astounded, as the larger-than-life bug swam forward.

It took all of my willpower to stay still when the thing finally reached me. It stayed in the water, avoiding touching the coral, but still it was taller than me, forcing me to stare up into the sun to face it. I was only all too aware of its claws, which looked to be as heavy as anvils and as sharp as filleting knives, and the eyes of the thing, pitch-black and as intelligent as any person I had ever met. With those thoughts in mind, and after it made no further move, hostile or otherwise, I cautiously moved my callused hands toward the air in a gesture of surrender. I knew it was silly—really, how would it know what I had meant?—but, amazingly, it seemed to accept my offer of peace, mirroring my movements with its claws and, in the process, spreading itself out to its full size. The thing looked like it could eat a blue whale, blubber and all, and still be raring to chomp at the next thing that wriggled into its path. I could only hope that it was just as curious to see me as I was to see it, and that that instinct would overcome its base hunger.

In the burning midday sun, out in the middle of the greatest uncharted expanse known to man, we made a strange pair: I, with my worn-out woolen jacket and trousers, and the bug, with its mineral-blue suit of armor. I didn't dare to change the terms of our stand-off, especially when it seemed content to float in the swirling waters, so I turned inwards, thinking of a plan that would see me off the island safely. My ship, the *Phaeacia*, my ever-so-bruised dinghy of the waves, was on the opposite side of the atoll from where I was, the bug standing between me and my method of escape. The practical items I had included a short, dull pocket knife, a brass compass, and a pack of Bryant & May matches, none of which would even scratch the carapace of the medieval knight of yore that I was to face. But I had one advantage over my crustaceous opponent: knowledge from beyond the atoll.

"Hello," I said slowly, enunciating every syllable. "I don't suppose you speak English?"

Contrary to my expectations, the bug did indeed respond. However, it did so not by opening its mouth as a human would, but by rubbing together two mandible-shaped joints near its mouth to produce a high, chattering squeal similar to that of a dolphin.

"Well, there was no harm in trying."

I could have sworn that the bug nodded at that moment, a slight tilt of its massive head and dangling eyeballs, but before I could reflect further on the matter, it began to wade toward me with slow, almost cautious movements. Its heavy bulk reminded me of my time in Calcutta, where I had seen an elephant crush a man into paste with its hind feet. The memory did not comfort me in the slightest.

With nothing but the ocean to my back, I was forced to retreat to my left, the direction slightly closer to the *Phaeacia*. For every step the bug took, I mirrored its motion in a modest manner, trying to convey that I only wished to maintain our previous distance. This game continued for another few steps until I was a quarter of the way to my ship, but with a questioning chitter, the bug seemed to realize my intention and stopped. As I hardly wanted to appear as if I was fleeing, with a good distance still left to the *Phaeacia* and the bug's speed unknown, I halted as well, planting my boots firmly on the ground. We were once again at an impasse.

This time, I was the one to initiate. Still facing the bug, I took a single labored step backwards. The bug took this

in stride and made a movement of its own toward me, keeping the distance between us constant. It then turned its head—with surprising freedom of motion considering its armor—toward the *Phaeacia*, looked at the strange shape for a few seconds, and peered back to where I stood, now unmoving. A light of understanding graced its eyes, and before I could react, it strode over to my left, roughly between me and my ship.

I grimaced. It seemed that the bug wasn't content to let me leave in peace. Against what looked to be an intelligent opponent, I would have to think of a plan to distract the bug long enough for me to dash to the ship and hoist its leaden anchor. And then I had a wild and nonsensical idea which at the time seemed perfectly reasonable, but that I later realized to be the delusions of a nervous and adrenaline-fueled man.

The largest of the objects I currently possessed, an unexpected carry-on from my previous travels, was a small bamboo *dizi*, a kind of flute, now tucked neatly between my inner cotton shirt and the back of my waistband. It had been a gift from a Chinese man whom I had befriended over the course of many months, and which had taken many more years to learn to mastery.

As I had done a thousand times before on my travels, I began to play, slowly exhaling and inhaling air until a melody echoed across the atoll. Sure enough, the bug reacted, two strangely curved appendages on its head swiveling around until they locked onto my instrument. For a moment, it was almost as if a spell had been cast: I played, the bug listened, and all the other noises of the sea faded into silence.

At the sound of my music, the bug had stiffened and seemingly forgotten my presence entirely. I began to back away, slowly but steadily, my eyes never leaving its face. When there was only a short distance left separating me and the *Phaeacia*, I began to move with more urgency, keeping the music playing as best I could. The anchor, which I had left in a semi-submerged puddle near the ship, made a loud ringing sound as it was dragged up the rough, hole-pocked coral. The bug heard the noise and began to wade toward me, but it was too late. I ran on board, kicked off the atoll, and the *Phaeacia* started toward the open sea.

Over the gunwale, I saw the bug standing on the ground where I had stood seconds ago. It had for the first time stepped fully out of the dark blue waters, and now I saw the full height of the erect bug—no, creature of the atoll. It was a tower of sapphire suddenly grown from the deep; it was a walking biology of barnacle encrustments; it was a stalking hunter of pincers and claws and maxillipeds. And only then did I truly feel that I had stumbled across a gem of the ocean, a glistening pearl reserved for only those who had strayed to this remote corner of the world. But I lacked the courage to stay any longer, for the creature looked able to capsize the tiny *Phaeacia* if it deigned, and I was far from any friendly shores.

I stood, waited, and watched, and when the shine of aquamarine carapace faded into the distance and I was once again alone in the open ocean, I turned around, never to see the creature again.

Anthony Zhao

Age: 14, Grade: 9

School Name: Ladue Horton Watkins High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Judith Miller

Category: Flash Fiction

Crimson

Crimson blossoms across the sky around the setting sun. It's getting late. The sky's getting dark. Dinner's getting cold. *Where is he?* I wonder to myself as thoughts fly through my mind.

My eyes move away from the window to the framed black-and-white photograph in my hands. In the photo, I'm beaming with happiness in my wedding gown, with my white veil cascading down my back. He smiles in his tuxedo as he gazes lovingly into my eyes. I haven't seen that smile in a while. In a long time.

He promised. He promised he would love me forever, I remember. A single tear slides down my face onto our wedding picture.

Oh no. I quickly wipe my cheek and set the golden frame back down on the counter. I walk past our room. Or, what used to be our room. Past his study where he has been sleeping for the past few months, then to the bathroom where I stare at myself in the mirror.

I have to look perfect, I think as I fix my makeup. *Another layer of lipstick won't hurt.* Crimson spreads along my lips.

The sound of a car pulling into the driveway startles me, and the lipstick tube falls out of my hand. I wipe my hands on my apron and plaster a smile on my face, hoping he is in a good mood.

"How was work today, honey?" I ask once he opens the door, but his jaw clenches, and I quickly step away. I look on silently as he drops his briefcase to the ground and sits down at the dinner table.

"I made beef stroganoff, your favorite," I murmur, hoping, praying to see his face light up.

He takes a few bites, but his mind is clearly somewhere else. I long to see a smile crack through his inscrutable countenance, but nothing shows. I swallow and look down at my feet.

He suddenly raises his hand, and I flinch. He reaches toward the jacket of his tuxedo and takes it off, throwing it to the ground. I swiftly pick it up and walk to his study. I hang it inside his closet, ignoring the unfamiliar floral scent of another woman's perfume. Right when I'm about to leave, a flash of dark metal catches my eye.

It's a gun, partially covered by papers haphazardly strewn across his desk.

Crimson fills my vision, and my breath catches in my throat. I slowly reach out to touch the gun, but my hand jerks back as though it was burned. Hands trembling, I pick up the revolver and turn it over in my hands. My mind whirls with memories as the gun pulls me into a trance.

How many times have I found myself on the wrong side of this gun, with the cold metal pressed against my temple? How many times have I begged for my life as his booming voice filled my ears?

Fervent apologies after each fight become more and more infrequent. Bruises mar my body like deep purple galaxies. He sleeps with another woman, and another, moving through various bedrooms, yet the one at our home is always

left empty.

Rapid, heavy footsteps interrupt me from my reverie. The door swings open, and his towering figure looms in the doorway.

“What’s taking you so long—” he grumbles, but his eyes narrow as he sees his weapon in my hands.

It all happens in an instant. He lunges towards me frantically for the gun. My hands move on their own, and a crack shatters the silence.

The next thing I know, I’m kneeling on the ground, sobbing over his corpse.

Blood seeps onto my white dress, staining it forever crimson.

Celina Zhou

Age: 15, Grade: 9

School Name: Ladue Horton Watkins High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educators: Judith Miller, Abigail Eisenberg

Category: Science Fiction & Fantasy

storm seraph sing

Angel, Maine was ironically hellish for a town named after a servant of God.

Perched on a rocky beach, the sleepy coastal town was painted blue and gray and tainted with the stench of fish and brine. The fishing industry had fallen through years ago, for reasons unexplained: dozens of ships sunk, fruitless catches for season after season. Now most of its residents made their living off of the small lumber industry that sprung up in its wake.

At least that was what the local shopkeeper had told her as he fiddled with a jammed cash register at the checkout counter.

“So what brings you to Angel?” he’d asked, squinting at her. “Yer young, and ya look like a flatlander.”

She’d blinked, a little bemused. “I went to Bowdoin,” she’d replied. “Got a programming gig for a company in Europe, decided to work remotely, and needed cheap housing for a year or two.”

He’d snorted. “You were right to come here. The whole place’ll be underwater soon enough. No real estate value there.”

And then the drawer he’d been yanking at screeched open abruptly, the coins within rattling against the metal. He’d groped within it, withdrawing a handful of quarters and counting them out. He held his fist out, gray eyes studying her.

“Here’s yer change,” he’d said. She took it with a raised eyebrow. “Seeya.”

“Thanks,” she had replied, torn between confusion and faint amusement. She’d still felt his gaze on her as she slipped out the door.

The shopkeeper had been perhaps the friendliest face she’d encountered in Angel. It was a small, close-knit community, and it seemed the locals didn’t take well to outsiders. So she had spent her free time outside of work holed up in her rented cottage, scrolling on her phone and working her way through the set of books inside it.

But eventually she’d gotten bored – and restless. She’d resorted to pacing the length of her bedroom, practically buzzing with energy.

Which was how she found herself standing on a stretch of rocky gray beach tucked away just to the east of the town. It felt empty in an eerie sort of way, and yet not at all silent. The roar of the waves against the shore echoed in her skull, rattling her bones.

She breathed out slowly. Cold air rushed into her lungs, biting and icy, but she found she didn’t mind the sting. Gravel crunched beneath her boots as she walked closer to the water, dark and murky and foaming. Her fingers shook slightly from where she’d jammed them into her jacket pockets, a chill seeping through the thin polyester.

The ocean was loud enough that she didn’t notice it, at first – a quiet, lovely voice weaving through the wind,

wordless but haunting. Her head snapped up when she did notice it, brows furrowing.

As far as she knew, this beach was abandoned. She'd never seen anyone there, despite its rugged beauty. But the singing continued, ringing through her bones.

She shivered, suddenly dizzy, casting her gaze over the empty beach.

"Hello?" she called, her voice cutting through the cold. There was no response.

She stumbled backward, blinking rapidly, her breath a sharp huff that shook her ribs. The song continued, but it settled: blanketing and blurring the edges of her vision. She swallowed, fear and hazy yearning warring within her.

She had to get out of here.

The drive back to Angel was silent and cold, and it felt as if she had left something behind.

She came back.

She didn't even know why – why she had succumbed to that terrible, alluring pull back to that fucking beach. But the shift onto the rugged side road had come as naturally as breathing, and then she'd found herself there again, staring at the sea, uncertain about what had come before and what would come after.

The singing was back, too, blending so naturally into the roar of the water that she only noticed it because she was listening. Her nails bit into her palms, her throat raw and dry.

"Who are you?" she called finally, her voice nearly drowned out. Again there was no response, just that haunting, enchanting voice.

She hesitated, gnawing at her lower lip even as cold winds buffeted her face.

"Please," she tried. "I'm not gonna hurt you. Or say anything to anyone back at Angel, if you don't want me to. I just – I just wanna know who you are – and what you want from me."

The voice paused, and when it began again something in its melody changed: a new phrase, a concession and a question.

She huffed, a little frustrated. "What an eloquent response," she grumbled, glaring indiscriminately at various points across the beach. Irritation flared within her when the song continued as though she hadn't spoken at all, burying whatever fear she might've had left.

"Fine," she breathed, raking a hand through her hair with a sigh. She turned on her heel, gray sand scattering with each step, and she did not look back.

Inevitably, the music dragged her back to the shore.

She hadn't minded at first, consumed by boredom and enraptured by the voice's allure. It had drowned out the white noise that made up the rest of her life – and it had been a relief in the beginning to just sit and listen and *feel*. She hadn't been able to resist the pull of the music, but she hadn't really wanted to.

It was only when she'd realized that she couldn't resist it at all that it began to gnaw at her from the inside out.

She'd tried not going one afternoon, but then she was pulling onto the gravel road when she'd only meant to run to the grocery store, all memory of her route blurred. The next day, half-asleep and near delirious with exhaustion, she

broke.

“Please stop,” she said, a shattered plea. “I can’t keep doing this. Can’t keep coming back here. I have – I have work, and things to do. Meetings. Projects. I need a break. I need to sleep.”

The singing halted then, or perhaps it quieted just enough that she could finally hear herself think.

And then she found herself approaching the water, surrendering herself to that familiar compulsion with a weary sort of resignation. She barely flinched at the icy bite of the waves, but panic rose when her head submerged, her eyes flying open against the sting of the water.

She gasped foolishly as the spell broke, her breath stolen away by the current. The darkness swelled and squeezed in upon her, salt and sea flooding her throat as her vision blurred at the edges.

She had to find the surface; she couldn't *breathe* –

The water surged upward, pushing her up, up, up, until her head broke above the waves. She drank in the wind greedily, salt and tears staining her face as she glanced around, still shaky.

Something shifted in the water around her, and she swallowed, trembling.

“Please,” she whispered, begging now, closing her eyes and bracing herself.

There was only a soft splashing and silence. Slowly, she opened her eyes.

A pair of black voids met her gaze, dark and depthless, set against a moon-white face faintly glowing in the water. Long black hair fanned out on the surface around the creature, a brush of scales against her legs.

She scrambled backward, flailing uselessly in the water as terror rose in her throat. But the creature just tilted their head, something like curiosity shining in those dark eyes.

“Who are you?” she whispered. Maybe it would’ve been more accurate to ask *what* they were, but it was *who* that had slipped from her lips.

The creature stared at her, eyes creasing. They opened their mouth, and out came her voice again, echoing and warbling, a shattered hymn.

Who are you?

She paused, rapt.

“Eve,” she said, her voice breaking unbidden. “My name is Eve.”

The creature was quiet for a beat, examining her with thoughtful eyes.

Eve

She trembled.

“You’re the singer,” she said, not quite a question.

The creature blinked, long lashes bobbing. A pale hand reached out towards her, and she did not flinch as spindly fingers brushed against her cheek, dark eyes tracing the movement.

“I can’t stay,” she murmured, as their cold fingers swept over her brow, reading the question shining in their eyes, even as they could not speak it.

Dark eyes creased at the edges, contemplative.

Come back.

She opened her mouth to respond, but pale fingers landed on her lips, and she halted.

Come back.

Firmer this time.

She sighed, cursing her own weak will.

“Okay,” she murmured. “Okay.”

It wasn't as though she'd never drowned before. She drowned every day, with every breath and every word, buried in a life unrelenting and unfinished. Maybe that was what left her unafraid.

The water lapping at her ankles was gentle, if cold, and she shivered in the silence, almost missing the music.

A shadow rippled beneath the surface, and she leaned forward as the singer emerged, a moon on the water.

“Hi,” she murmured, stepping closer. “You're not singing today.”

A slow blink, and a pale hand extended from the waves. She hesitated, crouching, and gingerly placing her hand in theirs, unflinching against the cold. Dark eyes fluttered closed, gently swaying to a phantom rhythm.

And then the singing started again.

It was raw and visceral and cut deep in ways that she had never known, echoing in her bones and the hollow spaces in her chest – and it was perhaps the most beautiful sound she'd ever heard. When it stopped, she felt emptier and fuller than she had ever been.

“How did you do that?” she breathed, after a long, trembling silence.

The siren blinked at her, dark depths haunting.

Stay.

She closed her eyes, but the music echoed still.

“I can't,” she said, unsure of who she was trying to convince.

Can't you?

She realized, faintly, that she was trembling.

Can anyone stop you?

“No,” she admitted, quiet and shaky, the word ringing in her skull.

A low, satisfied hum, bleeding through the water.

Stay.

It will be okay.

She opened her eyes again, met with the pale hand again. An invitation, a plea.

She sighed, her breath rippling across the surface. Unfamiliarly trusting, she took it without a word.

Maybe this time drowning would be kinder than breathing.

Celina Zhou

Age: 15, Grade: 9

School Name: Ladue Horton Watkins High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educators: Judith Miller, Abigail Eisenberg

Category: Poetry

mirrors

v. crimson

hey, babe,
don't you know we're all gonna die?
we live under red suns and a sky on fire
dusting the earth in ash and wasted winds.
I watch you paint gold and glass
to flood out the flame;
a lily and the storm,
unrelenting;
shattered moons scattered
on a leaden sky.
do you know how much I envy you
for that memory of the stars?

we are the heirs of the lost
and the quiet, latchkey children
crouched in crawlspace and catacomb,
light-forged in the embers.
so sing for me, won't you?
won't you sing for me?

remember how you promised we'd find ways
to be happy again
—how you promised you'd show me
a clear sky, methylene blue
stretched to the edge of sunlight?

well there's a world out there
that's still worth living in.

vi. storm runner

do you dream of stallions
wind and flame, racing across the plains
dust-storms rising in their wake and
burying their footprints behind them?
oh young one,
what do you run from, what do you chase?

remember, want is your birthright
worn leather & forget-me-nots, the scent of the sea ablaze

do not forget to hunger for breath and all its luxuries
live by that yearning;
survive.

oh! my gypsy,
did you inherit your father's grief?
did you inherit your mother's rage?

vii. god eater

names are fickle things,
and you, who calls himself god
you should know that best of all.
man of a thousand names, a thousand crowns;
strength, glory, light
cruel divinity bent to your will
oh, but what is divine to the hungry?

remember,
I can unmake you;
ink my lips against your skin
bite and bruise until you forget
the syrupy sweetness of my teeth;
snare your hands in the shallow curves of my hips,
in these preludes of womanhood that I have won;
devour the daffodils seeded in your chest
reclaiming arrogance as pride,
worn vicious and bleeding red.
(oh, but what is godhood to girlhood?)

viii. blanche

winter ain't a state of sky, it's a state of mind
it's ice on a windowsill and wind that weeps
at the faintest warmth; it's the cool sting of
ignorance and my life in your hands and the
cruelty in your eyes – insidious, wondrous,
unforgiving. what do I need to say for you
to look at me? really, truly, look at me?
don't you remember the promises you
made and that voice like poison, calling you
oathbreaker, oathbreaker, oathbreaker–
tell me you remember, even if it makes you a
liar, even as it forges truth – tell me you remember,
because I will not let you forget.

Celina Zhou

Age: 15, Grade: 9

School Name: Ladue Horton Watkins High School, Saint Louis, MO

Educator: Abigail Eisenberg

Category: Journalism

LEGACY

A lot of my friends are my older sister's friends.

That's something I've realized over the past months. Upperclassmen in the hallways, with my teachers, at clubs -- I see her presence everywhere, even when I cannot see *her*. It's always Camilla Zhao, Siri's little sister Camilla, her sister went to Stanford Camilla, never just Camilla.

That's what it's like to be the younger sibling. You're the tag-along, the add-on, the shadow.

So here's the question: when all that's gone, when your sister's off to college and you're left home alone -- how do you move on?

It might surprise people, but I'm close with my sister.

My mom likes to joke that we couldn't be more different, opposite combinations of our parents. But we always got along. Over the last two years, especially, we became closer as we could become something more like equals. We came to each other whenever we got stressed, spent hours ranting about whatever made us mad. Our reliance was never truly unhealthy, but it danced on the edge of codependency.

A month into my first year in high school, Siri left for college.

Her flight was on a Sunday afternoon. My mom and I dropped her off at the airport, along with my dad, who was going to help her set up. We watched the line crawl along for a few minutes, before I tugged my mom away, piled into the car and drove to the local Chinese school, where I taught chess classes for the afternoon.

"Where's the old teacher?" one of the kids shouted during classes. I couldn't bring myself to do anything but ignore him.

On call later, Siri told me it took her a week to break down.

I didn't admit it, but I'd only made it two days.

That was the reason entering high school was such a struggle for me. I wasn't just grappling with her legacy -- I was grappling with her loss, too.

"It's a completely different environment."

Sophomore Bob Jones perhaps just as well known for his particular personality than for his younger-siblinghood. His brother Ricky graduated as part of the class of 2026, and currently attends Harvard University.

"I definitely liked having the company in my house. It's kinda lonely now. I go out more," he said.

When I'd first asked Bob for an interview, it was 6pm on a Monday night and we'd been partnered for volunteering. He gave me a blank look and a sardonic smile.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," he'd said, "I don't have a brother."

A few days later, we were on a Zoom call.

"I think he's dead," he drawled. "I haven't seen him a while."

I rolled my eyes and pleaded with him for usable material. With reluctance and no small amount of dramatics -- he softened.

"He came back and it was kind of normal," he said, "We went bowling and played billiards and I destroyed him like usual."

But when he brought up college and the expectations that came with it, I couldn't stop myself from breaking professionalism. Ricky graduated in the same class as Siri, and both went to top schools. Bob could understand my struggle.

"I want to go into film," Bob admitted. "But I'm still expected to try hard. Really hard."

I paused, untangling the knot in my throat.

"Yeah," I said. "I know what you mean."

"Even though he's like 15 minutes away he says he never has time to come home."

Senior Jennifer Smith grinned at me through my laptop screen, pixelated and stretched in the Zoom window. Jennifer's brother, Frank, currently attends Washington University in St. Louis.

Frank, unlike Ricky, was someone I'd known, at least peripherally -- the Smiths lived in our neighborhood. Jennifer joked, when we first got on call, that if I ever had any follow up questions, I could just make the walk over to her house.

"I think a lot of who I am is based off of who my brother was, and also what he's taught me and told me over the years," she said.

"I obviously miss him a lot," she continued. "I have to set up a time to go see him now. I used to be able to just walk over to his side of the table and be like, hey. But I think I was lucky because he's not very far away. So now that I can drive I sometimes go and visit him at his apartment."

Jennifer described her thoughts on his absence as complicated, something she'd had a long time to think over and come to terms with.

"Now I'm being more independent," she said, "but also missing that key person in my life."

My mom told me once, "You have to learn to live without her. Learn to be your own person instead of being attached to her."

Siri came home for Thanksgiving break, for one week of supposed normalcy. But even with her here, even with everything fine on the surface, it was different -- undeniably, irreversibly *different*.

Maybe someday I can learn to live with that.