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# Unlocked Voices



2024 Teen Writing Contest



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## Untitled

Kevin Horsley once said, “Your memory is the glue that binds your life together, everything you are today is because of your amazing memory.” This saying echoed in my head as I touched the old coin in my palm, my fingers caressing its fragile edges and ruined face. The memory of the time I received this was still vivid in my mind, even though years had gone by since I'd gotten it. A smile played on my lips as I closed my eyes and recalled the memory.

Growing up, I always had a bond with my grandpa, even though I only knew him for one year so far during that time. I would always sit with him as he told me about his days as an airplane mechanic in the Vietnam War, he would also tell me about my ancestors, who were famous generals. And always, always, I would ask, “Gramps! Tell me more! Please!” He would always chuckle and then reply, “Tomorrow, we have some walking to do.” Times like these will always stay in my heart.

One sunny day, I bounded down the stairs, a big smile on my face, wondering what the next story would be. I already saw Gramps at the table, a cup of coffee in front, and a bowl of oatmeal half-eaten. The air was thick with the smell of coffee, and I winced inwardly. I did not like coffee that much. He smiled warmly when he saw me and extracted something from his pocket. “What is that?” I asked, curious. He placed the object on the table, and I leaned in closer. It was a rusty-looking coin and it reeked of dirt and something else I couldn't place. Gingerly, I placed a tentative finger on the coin, tracing its lines. “It may not look like a lot, but getting this coin was quite a story,” he softly said. “Can you tell me the story?” I asked eagerly. “Not today, sometime later, when you're older,” Gramps, in a swift motion, placed the coin back in his pocket. “Now, where were we yesterday?” Gramps smiled. I grinned back, eager to hear the story, but I couldn't take

my mind off of that special coin.

Old times have gone past, I'm older now if you would say being five years is "older". One day, I got home from school in a joyful mood when I saw my parents, uncles, and grandma looking grim. They were nearly on the verge of tears. "What happened?" I asked, confusion on my face. "It's okay, dear, it's okay," Grandma hugged me tightly. "What's wrong?" I asked, really scared. "He's gone. Your gramps," my uncle replied in a hollow voice. I stepped back, confused, and scared. "Honey are you okay?" my mom asked, reaching out to me. I couldn't understand, I was always with him, he couldn't be.....gone. I ran to my room, refusing to burst into tears in front of the whole family. Closing the door softly behind me, I sank to the ground, still bewildered.

My grandma slowly opened the door, placing something in my hands. I glanced down, it was the coin, its face gazing up at me, I could almost hear the stories Gramps told me. It felt warm and comforting. Maybe, just maybe, my gramps is somewhere happy now, not feeling the pressure of old age or anything else bothering him. This coin was him; it held all the stories he told, all the times we spent together. "This was really special to him," I said softly. "He wanted to give this to you before he...." my grandma faltered. I placed a hand on her arms, comforting her. The next week went by in a blur; going to the funeral services and family reunions of more than twenty people. By and by, I would always have the coin in my pocket, the only thing left I have of my beloved Gramps.

I opened my eyes again, my fingers still dancing on the souvenir. I could almost hear the stories he once told me when the wind whistled over the coin. I never knew how he got the coin but if I listen carefully enough, I might just get a story. I gently placed the coin back in my pocket, looking out at the setting sun. True, my heart aches for Gramps. Memories and that coin are my only sign of him, but they also remind me of his absence in my life and many others. I find myself wanting another day with him, to listen to his stories, to smell the thick air of his coffee every day, but I know that day will never come. Wherever he is right now, I wish that he can rest in peace and be freed from the suffering of the world. Goodbye, Gramps. Your memories and stories will forever live on in my heart and so many others who cherished you.





Addison Roderick  
Middle School



## Untitled

Adolescents stutter for multiple reasons. Most people brush it off as social awkwardness, but is it just that? When you look closer, the answer is no. Childhood stuttering can persist from childhood, a neurological disorder, a traumatic event or sequence of events that will cause an impediment in speech, a genetic cause of stuttering, or even something unrelated and unexplained.

Teen stuttering seems insignificant, but that couldn't be further from the truth. Teen stuttering can cause severe anxiety, which later on in life can lead to selective mutism. Selective mutism is one of the many forms of mutism that disables the ability to speak. People with selective mutism have developed such an insecurity of speaking, that they simply don't. Low self-esteem and bullying are also the brutal effects of teen stuttering. Leading those effects are depression and even suicidal tendencies. If the teenager has been stuttering since childhood, the bullying may start, and won't see an end any time soon.

People who stutter often have another condition along with their speech impediment. These include but are not limited to, Autism Spectrum Disorder, ADHD, and Cerebral Palsy. These conditions can make communicating and executing daily actions extremely limiting and defect the teenager's ability to communicate and interact with their peers like a neurotypical and able-bodied teenager.

Contributing to lifting teenagers up who have a speech impediment is crucial to their well-being. Being patient is one of the best ways to support someone who stutters. Talking can be hard for anyone, but for people with a speech impediment such as a stutter, it is important to let them take their time. Realize how your speech and phrases can affect others. Terms like "did I stutter?" can be extremely harmful and damaging to people who do stutter. If you look closer at that phrase, it infers that people with a speech impediment can't be taken seriously, and their voices

shouldn't be heard, which is wrong. Ask the person what makes them feel comfortable. Each person, stutterer or not, has their own needs and preferences. Ask them what you can do to make them feel more accepted in their daily life.

The treatment for stuttering is unclear at the surface. The only treatment that is clear at the moment is speech therapy. Speech therapy takes a specialized therapist and the stutterer and helps them through different oral exercises, and activities, and work through the session. Speech therapy is most effective at a young age because this timeframe is when the brain is still malleable and developing. Speech therapy only minimizes stuttering though. The impediment will make it easier to prevail in times of high emotions like stress, anxiety, depression, happiness, etc. These can occur when giving a speech, getting test results, going on a roller coaster, etc. Speech therapy can help teenagers gain independence, but that may lead to teenagers feeling broken and defective if the situation is not dealt with accordingly.

To conclude, stuttering in teens isn't something that should be taken lightly. It isn't something that needs to be changed or fixed even, it is something society needs to learn to adapt to. When a teenager has a chronic stutter, it should be advised to look into other disabilities or other causes if not investigated already. Teenagers who stutter are often dismissed and thrown to the side because of their speech impediment, and their representation is scarce. Supporting teenagers who stutter is something that hasn't been talked about much yet. That is why bringing awareness to stuttering is a crucial step to evolving as a society.



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## It Couldn't Be That Bad, Right?

If you were to tell me five years ago that I would have my name up on my high school's wrestling wall, I would have called you insane. My name is Lauren Bowling, and everyone knows me at school as the “wrestler chick”. I have done mixed martial arts since I was five years old, but I was never extraordinary at them. I would assume that most kids writing college essays would talk about their sports and how it was so inspiring, and it led them to who they are today, which is exactly what I am doing, but with a little twist. Let me start from the beginning and tell you the story of how I made a deal with my dad to get my first pet.

Ever since I was little, ever since I could talk, I have wanted a puppy. Every Christmas, every Hanukkah, every birthday, I always asked for a dog. Until I was in sixth grade, my parents were very adamant about not having a pet. They never had pets growing up and didn't see the muse for it. I however, always have loved animals so I begged and begged nonetheless. My father decided it would be a fabulous idea to tell her eleven-year-old daughter that she could have a puppy if she simply wrestled for one season- without telling my mother. You can guess how that went down, however moving forward I took the deal. As I stated before, growing up I was always in aggressive sports, so it was not an entirely new world to me. I received a black belt when I was eight, because eight-year-olds definitely have all of the knowledge and maturity. I also used to do Jujitsu and Judo (fun fact for bragging rights: I used to do Judo with Nicholas Cage's son Kal-El). So how bad could wrestling possibly be, right? Oh, how I was so wrong.

My first team I wrestled for was for the youth team at my high school. We conditioned mostly for two hours straight with no water breaks (we were supposed to hydrate before), and I made zero friends. I absolutely hated it, mostly because I sucked. Out of around 40 matches throughout the season, I won two. That's it.

Two. It was horrible and miserable, and I hated every single second of it. However, in the long run, it was definitely worth it because a year later we adopted my miniature golden doodle puppy, Rocky (my mother was very insistent with picking the breed, already furious at my father).

Fast forward to a year later, I joined a new gym and went back to Judo. At this gym, there was a wrestling team. Once again, my father asked me if I would consider trying out a few practices. Of course, I said no, but Father's Day was nearing so what could a few classes hurt, right? I decided to give it a shot, and I was so glad that I did. The practices were more efficient, I was starting to make friends, and I even was starting to win and get better. I was so proud of myself, and I felt like I earned the title of being "a wrestler". However, it doesn't have a happy ending here, because a few months after joining the team, COVID hit. As I am sure you remember, everything was shut down, including the gym, including wrestling. I was bummed and got super out of shape (I was struggling to do one push up and if you know me at all [which I know you don't but bear with me] that made my ego PLUMMET).

When quarantine started to become less strict, some of my old wrestling friends reached out to me about this club team. My parents and I thought how bad of an idea it could be, right? Oh my goodness gracious, worst mistake ever. I hated the layout of the practices, and the people on my team were literally national champions, so how well do you think I did? Spoiler alert- I sucked, again. I was ultimately the worst of the best, but in perspective I thought I simply was just straight up awful. I did make a handful of friends, but I slowly started to hate the sport I just learned to love. I was disappointed and this close to finally quitting. However, high school wrestling started up. I decided that I should try at least one practice before finally giving up on the sport. It couldn't possibly be that bad, right?

It was the best experience I could have possibly asked for. The coaches, the teammates, the environment was literally perfect. There were a handful of girls that were eager to wrestle, and some boys who had no idea what they were doing. I was teaching them pretty much how to fight (which definitely made my ego soar). I had a great time, and I ended up becoming a two-time state placer.



This year my coach appointed me as the Girls Team Captain. The title isn't huge seeing as it is a team of 5 including me, however I am still a captain. I lead the boys as well, I help and teach, and watching my friends grow and become amazing wrestlers just makes my heart so happy.

I truly believe that everything happens for a reason, and it is how I got here today and how I explain my unique backstory. My dad got to watch his daughter improve and become a proud wrestler. I got my puppy, which for the record, my mom loves more than me, so I think it worked out pretty well. I made the best friends I could ever ask for, and it presented me with so many incredible opportunities that I could not be more grateful for. Everything had its silver lining and worked out in the end, so, in conclusion, it really wasn't all that bad, right?

## Why Reading is an Important Part of Education

Reading in different genres is very important to a person's education for many different reasons. Some reasons why people should read different genres of books as part of their education is because it exposes them to different styles of words. Also, it helps people with their comprehension. Finally, it can cause people to love reading all the more. Now let this essay take time to explain why.

Firstly, people should read different genres of books as part of their education because it exposes them to different styles of words. The article *The Importance of Reading Widely* states, "Sharing lots of different kinds, or genres, of books with your young reader exposes him to different words, different pictures, and whole new worlds. Below are some genres to try with your reader that complement 'traditional' fiction." This shows how reading different genres can make people see different views. Also, the same article says, "It's easy to find yourself lugging home a stack of library books that your kids will love to listen to. It's harder to make sure you're bringing home a wide variety of books. "This proves that if people can make the choice to choose different books, they can find other genres that they might like and want to read more of. Therefore, reading in different genres is very important to a person's education for many different reasons.

Also, it helps people with their comprehension levels. For example, the article *The Benefits of Reading Different Genres* tells us, "Reading different genres helps with overall comprehension. For example, if it is a fiction book, your brain will be focusing on characters, setting, plot, and theme. If it is a nonfiction book, your brain will be focused on helpful text features and learning real-life facts. If you are reading historical fiction, you know that the events are real, but the characters are not. When it comes to fantasy, your child will understand that there will be elements and events that cannot happen in real life." This is important because it

shows how different genres can help with people's skill of comprehension. For example, the article Reading across different Genres says, "By engaging with stories from various genres, children gain insights into different cultures, perspectives, and life experiences. They develop a broader worldview, learn to empathize with characters from different backgrounds, and develop a deeper understanding of the world around them." This illustrates how reading different genres can help people understand and comprehend better. Reading in different genres is very important to a person's education because it helps people with their comprehension levels.

Finally, it can help people to have better social and emotional growth. The text An Easy Strategy to Encourage your Students to Read a Variety of genres explains, "Reading different genres help to contribute to a student's social and emotional growth. The more variety a student reads, the deeper the understanding a student has about social and emotional issues. They learn new ways of expressing thoughts and feelings through the characters and topics in the books that they read." This shows that through learning how other characters might react they can learn from and have an understanding of their social and emotional health. Also, the talk The Link Between Reading and Emotional Intelligence reads, "reading enables us to explore multiple perspectives and better understand the mental states and experiences of others. By doing so, we develop one of the main components of emotional intelligence: social awareness." This proves that reading can help people better acknowledge different perspectives, causing them to have better social and emotional health. Reading in different genres is very important to a person's education because it can help people to have better social and emotional growth.

Reasons why people should read different genres of books as part of their education is because it exposes them to different styles of words. Also, it helps people with their comprehension. Finally, it can cause people to love reading all the more. Helping this education system to create a more diverse reading system and encouraging reading different genres will introduce a better future. Reading in different genres is very important to a person's education for many different reasons.



## Social Media

For a while, I wanted to be popular on social media. I watched as all the stars got tons of money, support, and even free things. I would stare in awe as they seemed so happy.

As I grew up, I finally got a phone. I was excited to rapidly press the download button on popular social media apps and watch as they're installing. After a while of socials, I had realized that having social media isn't all that it seems. It can be a cheery cup of Starbucks, or it could be you screaming on the inside saying, "Why did I post this?" or, "Why are they hating on me?" "Why won't it stop?"

It never stops. I thought it would, if I changed. I tried to change who I was so I could have my own profile, my own new persona. It never works. The real you always comes out. The realization that social media was draining me was the worst.

Endlessly scrolling, procrastinating, and spending all my life on it. My mental health from social media and destroying my true personality completely abolished me. That is until I just stopped caring what people had to say about me on the internet.

You may be thinking, "How can someone's digital words affect you?"

One word, Nothing. Two words, Nothing, but over and over hearing how horrible you are makes you think that you're a horrible individual.

Being yourself is the **ONLY** thing that'll get you past social media, trust me.

## The Teachings of a Butchered Tongue

It's terrifying to know how much you've lost, and yet it has taught me how to venture into the darkness and relish in the feeling of discovery and value of culture and identity.

Three large looming red letters hang over my whole childhood, "ENGLISH SPEAKING ZONE," words written in school entrances, words dominating my youth, words on a sign whose creaking in periods of heavy winds still ring in my ears. The ever-present shadow of English hegemony cast upon my nation, my home, my life. Our teachers led with a torchlight of English as the only guiding flame and path to knowledge. The light of our mother tongue was discouraged, and you were celebrated for having left it in the mud; its significance scoffed at and diminished.

I suffered the repercussions by eight years old. Awkward in my Tagalog, I stuttered and tripped over my words speaking only with instinct, unable to express myself in the words of my home. They told me I bore a Conyo accent, that my mouth is rounded by a foreign language, and my mother tongue butchered in how I would speak. They said this was great, that Tagalog was unnecessary and informal, that only speaking English meant I was smart. I spoke my language with shame and was congratulated for it.

Then, I met a friend. I admired how they embraced the light of our home's language and their passion for learning. They excelled in science to writing to arts, and yet I was most enamored by their longing for history; how they looked at those glaring red words and had told me, "They ruined us," in their most solemn voice, "we still suffer from what they did to us centuries ago...they took our roots away...we could have been beautiful."

My friend's words echo in my heart, teaching me to hold dear the searing moments of mourning and grief in finding a mangled scar where knowledge should be: stories lost to time, ancestors whose names were scratched out by our oppressors and doomed



to be forgotten, a language undervalued and erased, words in Tagalog always at the tip of my tongue as though eternally out of my reach, flesh wounds caused by colonization ripping our history and culture away from our hands.

My friend's words helped me understand that there is a gaping wound where my home was, as Filipino youth continue to get ripped away from the nuances and intricacies of our culture and tongue. Tagalog is now a shadow against the blinding harsh light of colonial mentality, washing away the traces of home in my life. This was most evident in how literature, research, classics and contemporaries written in my hometown are limited in number and eloquence whilst being unattainable for most people growing up.

In spite of this, these experiences instilled in me the most important and valuable passion I have: the passion for learning. I learned to question paths our education couldn't take. I gained courage to venture into the unknown, acknowledge our fading histories, see the errors of our understandings and attempt to mend it, and persevere to discover the unexplored beckoning to be known. I began to value my learning past the grades, the numbers, and the curriculum, just enlightenment in its entirety, as a warm glow to aid in illuminating the foundations of my identity and nationality.

I began to seek out literature beyond what was expected for me to read. Stories from non-western cultures including my own. I learned to value the stories history had to tell and understand the importance of the flow of power and its long term effects on the people.

Most importantly, I have grown to see and value the act of learning as a method of healing. Understanding discovery and enlightenment to be a beautiful medicine for the scars of colonization and tyranny left behind in my home. Knowledge was my antidote, and learning my sweet revenge for what was robbed from my people. I learned to love the culture, progress, and sound of home that our colonizers tried to erase, to value knowledge once forbidden.

My Tagalog has gotten better, but, as I had stepped foot on American soil for the first time in the February of 2023 to continue my studies, the imposing red words only grew larger and

louder. It beckons me to extinguish my light, that my mother tongue and cultural roots have no use for my future ahead, but I will stand determined. I will venture into the darkness bravely with my passion for learning and love for home leading my path. I know how powerful and valuable knowledge can be now, and my greatest wish is to grow my light brighter and conquer the uncharted darkness ahead-to discover and retrieve information unbeknownst to us and mend the injuries of ignorance.



Kangwoo Kim  
High School



## Happiness in Discomfort

I've always hated roller coasters. As a child, my family would do everything possible to get me to ride with them. I grabbed whatever there was to grab on, the trash can, a pole, anything. One day in Disneyland, they managed to get me on a rollercoaster, which was supposed to be tame, and it wasn't massive. On that ride, I did nothing but cry my eyes out and lay on my mother's lap next to me. As soon as I got off, I ran to the nearest trash can and puked. As somebody who hates scary movies and being thrilled, the Disneyland incident was no exception to being a bad memory.

Nearly a decade later, just the thought of riding a roller coaster made me shiver. In the summer of 2023, we visited our home country of South Korea to see our extended family. Not only was our time in Korea limited, but merely 3 months later, my brother would be off to college. One day, we went to Everland, a theme park with tons of thrilling rides. My brother, being more daring than I, wanted to ride everything there was to ride.

I did everything I could to delay riding the roller coaster, such as getting food and merchandise. Every few minutes, we would hear screaming in the distance, reminding me of what I was avoiding. Inevitably, when we walked by one of the roller coasters, my brother practically begged me to go on the ride with him. Watching other people ride the roller coaster screaming gave me immense fear. I said no without a second thought.

My brother, who was very enthusiastic about theme parks, waited angrily in line while my mother and I watched from outside. I thought, "Why do people want to be so scared?"

Seeing my brother, about 200 feet above us, did nothing but exacerbate my fears of roller coasters. After the cart was lowered and my brother got off, we walked to another ride. My unhappy brother got in line without asking me, indicating that he already knew I was not joining him.

As he got on, I looked around me. Other families were having



fun together on the thrilling roller coasters. As I looked towards my brother, my heart started to pound. Our time was limited, especially for me and my brother. I was spending it in fear of the rides my brother finds so much enjoyment from. My mother later said, "Are you really that scared of the rides?"

After he got off, I made up my mind. I would get on the rides, no matter how scared I was. As fate would have it, the next roller coaster we walked to was the tallest in the park, described as the most intense and biggest roller coaster in Korea. When my brother got in line, I got in with him, to his surprise. I immediately saw his excitement and how much it meant to spend time together. After around 10 minutes of waiting in anxiety, it was our time to sit in the cart. I felt my body trembling, but I reminded myself that some things are more important than others. I knew my comfort meant nothing compared to my brother, so I forced myself beside him. Looking at his face, I could see how happy he was, and that's when I knew I made the right decision.

As the carts cranked up the roller coaster, I looked at the world around me, the park, which looked tiny from so high up. The park was surrounded by mountains covered in dark green trees. Eventually, the cart stopped cranking as we got to the top. The track ahead was perpendicular to the ground that couldn't have looked more menacing. After hearing the last click, the cart tipped forward, and everybody started screaming. The cart kept tipping forward until it was facing straight down. The drop felt like falling straight down in the air. I shrieked at the top of my lungs as fear gathered in my stomach.

I took a breath of relief, thinking the scariest part was over. Ahead were three rather short hills, especially compared to the drop we just experienced. Going up each hill with such speed pushed my body back, only to be pushed forward by the subsequent drop. Then, the cart turned at a sharp angle, pushing us to our left. Eventually, the roller coaster calmed, and what remained was a slow, straight line to the exit area.

Roller coasters weren't as scary as I remembered; in fact, I found it to be a thrilling experience. After my brother and I got off, we talked about how crazy the roller coaster was. I then realized how important it was to both of us that we got to share an experience like this.

As the day went on, we kept going on ride after ride, no matter how much they scared me. By the end of the day, we all had an incredible time, all because I overcame my fears and tried something new.

## Feminine Rage

“Feminine rage.” Many people within our society would hear those words and cringe. Others would roll their eyes and say something about “crazy feminists”. Many others just get uncomfortable and quickly change the topic of discussion. After all, it’s 2024, what do women have to rage over? What is going on for us to feel as if there is injustice happening? Why is this idea-some would even go so far as to call it a trend-of feminine rage surfacing and going back around our masses? And no, I’m not talking about the “rage” that is often just plain frustration, that is misplaced as rage. I’m talking about the genuine, pure, unadulterated rage that seems to come from something deep and primal within women. A rage that yearns to flow like a river, but we've put up dams against it. Because after all a woman, a lady, must remain sweet and soft. At. All. Times. WHY?

### FEMININE RAGE IN POP CULTURE

When we have seen “feminine rage” in movies and literature in the past, it is often misrepresented. Usually, the female protagonist has been deeply wronged or hurt e.g. cheated on, assaulted, a loved one has been killed, their trust severely broken, etc. Often their reaction is to sit there staring at the cheater, the rapist, or whomever hurt them. Usually stone faced with a single tear dramatically sliding down her face. Perfectly. Still appearing sweet, demure, and soft. Never mad though. Never that. But recently we’ve had an influx of actresses and directors beautifully show raw examples of feminine rage. A movie scene that perfectly encapsulates feminine rage would be the speech in the throne room of Wakanda given by Queen Ramonda (played by Angela Bassett) in “Black Panther: Wakanda Forever” that expresses both grief at the loss of her husband and her son, but also the rage she has pent up in her very soul. Take also for example actress Anya Taylor-Joy. During an interview with BBC Radio 1 about her



movie “The Menu” she says, “I get a lot of, like, 'men doing really terrible things' and women sitting silently while one tear slowly falls. I'm like, 'Oh no, no, no, no, no. We get mad and angry.” In her movie, her character attacks the man she was at dinner with for his betrayal. A perfect example of that raw, unbridled rage women are capable of. There was also a very famous scene in the movie “Don’t Worry Darling” when Alice (played by Florence Pugh) finds out that her husband put her into a simulation in which she begins playing the “perfect wife” role, just like all the other women in the simulation. When she finds out she starts yelling at Jack (played by Harry Styles), her husband, saying “It was my life! My life!” Jack then attempts to justify his actions by saying how much she worked and claiming she was miserable. She then says that she loved working and that it was HER life. She then attacks him. There have also been songs quite recently making tidal waves through the industry for their prime examples of feminine rage. “Labour” by Paris Paloma, “Same Old Energy” and “Burn Your Village” by Kiki Rockwell to name two examples. All of these showing beautifully raw, feral, unashamed emotion that society might not consider truly “feminine.”

## FEMININE RAGE IN RELIGION

Throughout history women have been taught to be demure, soft, and most of all-silent. This famous saying “Women are better to be seen, and not heard” is often used to put women down but is historically inaccurate. The original saying was “children are better to be seen, and not heard.” Disgustingly enough, when asked, plenty of people have compared women and children equally. Hence why these phrases have historically become interchangeable. The taboo of feminine rage is especially prominent throughout biblical times. There is a quote from the Bible in the Old Testament book of Proverbs that says, “It is better to dwell in the wilderness, than with a contentious and angry woman.” There it is again, saying that you should dwell in the harsh wilderness, then be with a woman who has anger and intense emotions. This further pushes the idea that women's anger and rage is wrong. And that rather than work through it and help her, a man should just leave. The Book of Proverbs also doesn't tell men to alter their behavior in any way, if they so happen to be

making the woman mad, no runoff into the woods, acting like nothing is happening; or, woman tuck away your rage to keep the home and husband happy. In Jewish lore, there is the story of Lilith. She was said to have been the first wife of Adam but fled from the garden of Eden. The story goes that Lilith refused to submit to Adam, for she believed they were created equal, both born from the dust of the Earth. After Adam disagreed, she fled to gain her independence. Other sources say that she was banished from the garden because of her “disobedience” to Adam. In Hindu mythology, the goddess Kali represents anger, the death of the ego, as well as the final liberation from the cycle of rebirth. She is often illustrated with a crazed look upon her face, fangs bared. She is usually portrayed holding weapons. And although something like this would be seen as masculine in many other societies, she is a prime example of feminine rage, and womanly strength. Although most people would consider women to be bringers of life, and rebirth, she is the opposite. Some sources have gone so far as to refer to her as “The Mother of Death.” These are just a few simple examples of feminine rage, feminine erasure, and feminine strength within religion.

## WHY IS THERE FEMININE RAGE?

The definition of “feminine rage,” according to HerCampus is “an ancestral and inherited response to the struggles, oppression, and wrongdoings that women have been subjected to.” The little things we do every day: swiping our credit cards (something we couldn't do without our husbands' permission in 1974), using birth control (especially without permission from our husbands and fathers), walking into a voting booth (something that all women including women of color couldn't do until 1920), all these little actions, really aren't little to our ancestors. These are just a few of the things that they had to fight for. Now as for the reasons for feminine rage, that list could go on and on. From girls as young as four years old being sexualized by men over fifty years old, to women making an average of eighty-three cents for every dollar that a man makes to the fact that when a woman expresses discomfort at being catcalled, she's being “dramatic.” Now when we look back into history and deep dive into the ancestral



backings of feminine rage, the use of women as trading property, the witch hunts, the domestic abuse that only became completely illegal in the U.S roughly around 1996, not that this stops it. Women's say in court was little to none, with laws favoring men, and the value of a woman's voice in court being two thirds the value of a man. And so, when we do these things that we may not see as too big or anything special, we are doing the very things our ancestors fought for. We are healing them. Slowly, and bit by bit, but we are healing them. Healing the generations of trauma, of pain, of being silenced. And we will never be silenced again.

### WHAT DOES FEMININE RAGE MEAN TO YOU?

I went around, interviewing women and men. Close friends and strangers, teachers and students, staff, and librarians. The main question that I asked was “what does feminine rage mean to YOU?” The answers varied from person to person. One of my male friends responded saying “I feel like feminine rage is what a woman gets mad over. Exclusively a woman's problem.” Another male friend of mine said that he thinks that feminine rage is “anger over workplace disparages, and public disrespect.” These two examples, both coming from men, showed two very different perspectives. One gave a pretty set answer, giving two simple examples of why a woman would be angry. The other gave a very cut and dry response, but also mentioned how it is exclusively a “woman's problem.” The things that fuel feminine rage should be everyone's problem. The assaults, the disrespect, the women disappearing and simply being written off. These should not be seen as just women's problems. When I asked my teachers what feminine rage meant to them, one of them responded with this, “It's stereotypical, because it's “feminine” rage, and it's tied to only certain issues, and people tend to think only specific things matter to women. And it's somehow tied to a man. The first thing I associate feminine rage with is domestic abuse. Or any abuse that women face, leads to that kind of rage.” These stories and issues that fuel these strong emotions, such as rage and sorrows are often dismissed, or as my teacher had said, used in a stereotypical manner, to further invalidate women's feelings, stories, and experiences. After asking one of my friends what she thinks of when she hears feminine rage, her response was very eye opening.

She said “When I hear the words feminine rage, I think of my dad, because even with as loving as he is, I feel the most hurt when he talks to me, I never feel heard, and almost feel like I'm talking to a wall. I've never cried more than after my dad has let loose on me.” This is a common experience for women and girls, not feeling heard. Especially by their father. I also asked my mother and aunt. From my mother she said “Built up tension from not being heard. That's why we become upset.” My aunt's response was as follows: “The result of the patriarchy silencing women.” I asked my uncle and he said, “Feminine rage to me represents our culture's inability to fairly allocate standards in the home, the workplace, and in social constructs abroad.” And I couldn't have put it more beautifully. When I asked my English teacher what this phrase means to her, she said “To me I think feminine rage is anger against the system and society that we live in. We as females all have it, but it overflows from us when we've just been taken advantage of by men. We're expected to be workers, caretakers, mothers, wives. But we're not in a society that supports those, even though that's what's expected.” She pointed out how our society expects women to be all these things, but does not truly support women, even when we are fulfilling those roles. As for me, feminine rage is something deep and carnal. It's the result of centuries of disrespect, abuse, and silence. It's something that every person has within them, and it cannot be calmed or quieted. One day our society will heal.

## AN ODE TO THE WOMEN THAT CAME BEFORE AND THE WOMEN TO COME

To all the women that came before me, the witches they hung, the women that marched, the women that hid and fought, thank you. You will not be forgotten. To my mother, thank you for giving me strength and giving me a safe peaceful environment, and loving me through the madness. To my grandmothers, thank you for your strength and boldness. And to the goddesses of the stories and legends, Medusa, Lilith, Persephone, and so many more, your strength and bravery was everything to little Zelah. Your stories kept me awake reading and writing under the covers. And for that I am eternally grateful. This is my love letter to the women of before, and the women to come.



## The Ultimate Olympian Showdown: Athena vs. Poseidon

Athena is to the mind as Poseidon is to the fist. Not only does this synecdoche represent the different roles that Athena and Poseidon play in *The Odyssey*, but it also relates to the significance of possessing *dolos*. In *The Odyssey*, Homer uses epithets, the Ancient Greeks' perception of the Gods, and the Foster concept of symbolism to illustrate the idea that strength is futile without knowledge through the actions of Poseidon and Athena, who is deemed more powerful.

Throughout the epic poem, Poseidon's phenomenal powers are continually showcased through the Greeks' perception of the gods; however, Poseidon does not know how to properly utilize his abilities. From the viewpoint of modern society, there have been countless instances throughout history in which an individual possessed great knowledge, but little knowledge of its use. These figures range from emperors like Ivan the Terrible to military generals such as Genghis Khan. Poseidon stands amongst them as the primary antagonist of Odysseus in *The Odyssey*. It is noted that Poseidon could not have outwardly killed Odysseus because every god was subject to the laws of divine intervention, among them forbidding the killing of mortals. Instead, Poseidon's goal was to slow Odysseus's journey home as much as possible. Conversing about Poseidon's actions against Odysseus, Zeus, the King of the Gods, remarked "How can he stand his ground against the will of all the Gods at once - and one God alone?" (Homer 80). Poseidon's power is substantial to the extent that he can stray from the will of all Gods. This interrogative from Zeus also relates to the Greeks' perception of the gods. Homer lived approximately 3,000 years ago, meaning he adhered to a religion far different than the widely practiced religions today. Rather than having God be the supreme model for all to be compared to, the Greek gods were more human than god. In Book 8 of *The*



Odyssey, Demodocus the bard sang of a story in which Aphrodite and Ares had sexual relations while Aphrodite's husband, Hephaestus, was away. Ares begged Aphrodite to "go to bed and lose ourselves in love! Your husband's away..." (Homer 200). A God that we worship today would believe adultery to be a mortal sin, not a source of euphoria. In lieu of being a powerful all-knowing God, Poseidon is most known for his ability to control the seas. Poseidon alone can "launch a colossal wave, terrible, murderous...hard as a windstorm blasting piles of dry parched chaff" (Homer 163). Nevertheless, he only periodically uses his powers throughout *The Odyssey*. There is no exclusive reason for why it took Odysseus ten years to return home to Ithaca, meaning that the prolonging of Odysseus's nostos cannot be solely attributed to Poseidon.

Through epithets and the Foster concept of symbolism, Athena, the wisest being in *The Odyssey*, is the primary reason why Odysseus arrived home. Because there were a multitude of characters in the epic poem, Homer used epithets to help readers keep track of the many characters, particularly by identifying a defining trait for the given character. "The bright-eyed goddess..." (Homer 169) was one of the most commonly used epithets for Athena in *The Odyssey*. Paired with the Foster concept of symbolism, many observations can be deduced from an epithet. However, according to Thomas C. Foster, "the thing referred to is likely not reducible to a single statement but will more probably involve a range of possible meanings and interpretations" (Foster 56). Consequently, "the bright-eyed goddess" can have multiple meanings. Athena is the goddess of wisdom, so "bright-eyed" could possibly mean all-knowing and all-seeing, proving her abilities to see the best solutions for obstacles Odysseus faces. A divergent analysis would examine the definition of "bright" from a traditional sense, signifying that "bright" synonymizes "intelligent" or "wise". Speaking to Odysseus about her powers, Athena stated, "I am famous among the gods for wisdom, cunning wiles too" (Homer 295). Athena's wisdom and cunning are regularly shown throughout *The Odyssey*, principally in her assistance of Odysseus. Being all-seeing and intelligent, Pallas Athena has all of the idiosyncrasies that were necessary to aid Odysseus on his journey home, shown through her actions in

Phaeacia. In the land of the Phaeacians, Athena took on the persona of a teenage girl to cleverly persuade Nausicaa to wash her clothes by the sea, where Odysseus rested. Nausicaa would go on to discover an emaciated Odysseus, who Nausicaa would supply with clothes, food, and an invitation to the castle. This example epitomizes Athena's abilities. Athena did not need force or incredible powers to assist Odysseus; she exclusively needed her wisdom.

Through Homer's use of epithets and the Ancient Greeks' view of the gods, Athena is more powerful than Poseidon. The aforementioned epithet "the bright-eyed Athena" proves this claim. "Bright-eyed" means all-knowing, all-seeing, and wise. This claim is additionally proven by the Ancient Greeks' perception of religion. The Ancient Greeks perceived the gods much differently than the God worshiped today. Each god was known by his or her respective primary powers, but lacked many favorable qualities; for example, Poseidon is known mainly for his ability to control the seas, not for his intelligence. Poseidon is the "God who rocks the Earth!" (Homer 257), and his powers are immense. However, his plans to stop Odysseus from returning home to Ithaca were fruitless because of his lack of *dolos*. The primary method of transportation that Odysseus used on his journey home was by ship, which is Poseidon's domain of power. Nevertheless, the fist lacked the mind as Poseidon was unsuccessful in his mission. Notwithstanding her inferior abilities, Athena leads Odysseus home using *dolos*. If Athena never used her persuasion abilities or cunning, Odysseus would not have made it home, so while Athena's ability to shapeshift is indubitably inferior to Poseidon's control of the seas, Athena is more powerful than Poseidon because knowledge is nugatory without power.

Through Homer's use of epithets, the Ancient Greeks' view of the gods, and the Foster concept of symbolism, Athena is assuredly more powerful than Poseidon. Although Poseidon has superior powers compared to Athena, knowledge is futile without power. One can live without fists, but not without a mind.





Maryiam Syed  
High School



## A Message to Dr. Bergler

The feeling is all too familiar. You stare at a blank document on your computer, only for your monitor to glare back at you. You stare at a fresh page in your journal and, seeing the neat black lines meant for lining text jumble into an optical illusion of madness, you rip out that page, only for a new one for you to see. You pick up the novel sitting on your bedside, open it, read a sentence, marvel at the wonder the author crafted from their fountain pen or keyboard or whatever their writing modem was, and hurl the book across the room. Deprived of the energy provided by your cappuccino, you give up and go to sleep. Tomorrow is another day. Tomorrow, new ideas will come to you.

Yet the next day, you experience the same migraine-inducing feeling everywhere that you look. The ads on those tall billboards have more life than that notebook on your desk. Store names sound so musical to your ear compared to the discordance of your befuddled thoughts. Even the random numbers and letters make much more sense than whatever your pen is about to write. You feel trapped in your own "lack of imagination," entangled in a blank, listless void with no doors or windows to escape.

"Writer's block" is a psychological phenomenon in which a writer cannot produce work. A common problem with all creative minds is a period of listlessness and self-hatred in which the writer cannot think of something and questions their abilities. This period can last anywhere from several minutes to several years. "Writer's block" has intrigued writers and psychologists for years: is it real? Is there a way to combat it, and if so, what next? Can we eradicate it all together?

These questions have spurred psychoanalyst Edmund Bergler, who coined the term "writer's block" in 1947. He authored more than a dozen works explaining the phenomenon in detail. In one such piece, he wrote about ten fallible arguments contradicting the existence of "writer's block." Much of his presented

counter-arguments seem wholly incorrect, such as the "Drained-Dry Theory," in which a writer can only create so many new ideas before losing their imagination completely, and the "Landlord Theory," in which "most writers write to pay the rent" and do not generate new ideas until it becomes necessary to keep their homes (43-45). In one controversial theory, the "Hangover Theory," writers are perceived to be alcoholics who use "writer's block" as an excuse for their lack of productivity (44-45).

Dr. Bergler has clarified that "writer's block" exists, is deeply rooted in psychological turmoil, and is quite unpleasant. But one fallacy, written at the end of the same work, leaves us open to question the nature of "writer's block" itself. Dr. Bergler finds the "Self-Curative Theory," self-contradictory: it mentions a cure for writer's block, but it also says that it doesn't exist, that those who claim to have writer's block are 'talentless,' and that "unproductivity . . . is explained as 'natural boredom' which carries its own antidote" (52). In other words, calling a blocked writer "talentless" and justifying another's lack of productivity as "natural boredom," which has its own cure, is like juggling two apples and insisting that one of them is a pear. It makes no sense.

Yet this rebuttal does not answer the question as to whether "writer's block" can be cured. It merely explains why being blocked and being bored should not be presented as two different coins, but rather as two sides of the same coin. Whether the phenomenon has a cure is a common Internet search with seemingly promising results. You may read an article or two and find your favorite novelist's tips on returning to your workspace with a fresh start.

But after brainstorming, hiking, and talking to a friend, you may still feel that your brain is empty, and your fingers do not dance on the keyboard. If the tips of Purdue OWL cannot cure you, what can? If even the greatest of authors can get "writer's block," is no one immune to it? What are you if your mind is "blocked" and you can't access or generate ideas? Are you even a writer?

Yes. You are. I should know.

As I was trying to create an interesting topic for this essay contest, I kept rejecting every new idea that came to me. Every day, I would open my "Contest Submission Document," only to surrender to the obstinate white screen glowering at me. It was like



this for several months - I spent November, December, and January questioning my ability to write at all.

After one especially exasperating day in which I threw a copy of Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire across my bedroom, I gave up and decided to shower.

It was therapeutic. I let go of my concerns in the shower and only concentrated on the pitter-patter the "rain" setting reverberated. I felt as mindless as I could get when a provoking thought suddenly shook my one brain cell and changed how I view literary creativity forever.

With that, I practically dashed out, dressed, yanked out my copy of the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, and flipped the pages to the E section.

*Experience.* The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines "experience" as "the conscious events that make up an individual life." An idea is "an entity (as a thought, concept, sensation, or image) actually or potentially present to consciousness." And consciousness is "the totality in psychology of sensations, perceptions, ideas, attitudes, and feelings of which an individual or a group is aware at any given time or within a given time span."

In other words, an idea is anything you feel when you have conscious awareness, which is most of the time. Everything you experience is an idea. The verbatim definition of "writer's block" is "a psychological inhibition preventing a writer from proceeding with a piece of writing."

If an idea is anything formed in a conscious state of mind, and you are conscious during your realization of your psychological inhibition, then your psychological inhibition is an idea. But during a psychological inhibition, you are supposed to feel like you have no ideas. Then how can you have no ideas when you have an idea of having no ideas? And if an idea contributes to your literary creativity, your writer's block should help you! But since writer's block is considered a literary adversary, then how is the idea of having no ideas supposed to work against your state of having no ideas when you are already experiencing that idea of having no ideas, which is an idea in itself?

Oh my God, I thought. It's a paradox. And the fact that I only realized this in the shower made me wonder - why? How? Think of it - I was simply standing in a tub. And yet, my most exciting thoughts occurred there.

The answer lies within ourselves.

To regulate its overcomplexity (there's 100 billion neurons there!), the human brain is divided into various lobes that control different spheres of thinking. For example, everyday tasks, such as planning, task management, and memory, are regulated by your dorsolateral prefrontal cortex. And since the modern framework of today's society is built upon a working lifestyle, this particular part of your brain tends to be more active than others.

But to step away from your working lifestyle for a moment - to find a part of your life where you are seemingly doing nothing and analyze precisely what is going on in your mind then - is to go boldly where no one has gone before.

Where is a better place to start than in the shower?

A study by researchers Allen Braun and Siyuan Liu can explain the occurrence of "shower thoughts" and other genius impromptu ideas. They examined the brain activity of twelve freestyle rappers and found that an uncommonly used area activated, whereas the commonly used dorsolateral prefrontal cortex decreased in activity. This area, the medial prefrontal cortex, is responsible for "learning association, context, events, and emotional responses" (Widrich).

This phenomenon also happens in the shower. As a distraction from the rest of the world, a shower can allow you to disengage from fixating on problems. Showering can also trigger dopamine, a neurotransmitter in the brain that induces feelings of happiness and relaxation while stimulating the medial prefrontal cortex.

So, to achieve maximum creativity, one should be in a completely relaxed, mindless state. In the shower, I wasn't affected by my problems because I let go of those problems for those twenty minutes. I wasn't elated but soothed and serene, and this serenity allowed me to open my eyes and think.

With that, I would like to send two messages.

First, to the late Edward Bergler: you're wrong. You're massively wrong.

Second, to all writers, amateur or professional: don't worry.

The fact that I could somehow turn my writer's block into an entire essay concerning it proves that it is nothing more than an absurd inconsistency.

Relax.





Seungho You  
High School



## The Power of Music

Music, through its melodies and flow, inspires emotional responses in those who hear it. Sometimes, it even allows them to feel emotions, such as excitement and sorrow, that they might not otherwise be able to express in their daily lives. I find music an essential part of my existence because it has always been there for me, shaping me into who I am: a happy person who can express emotions and deal with stress in a constructive way. It has helped me express my emotions better, leading to various benefits, including reduced stress and improved mental health and happiness.

Pop, in particular, has always made me feel very energetic and given me support and confidence. When I was 8, I would listen to the song “Sugar” by Maroon 5 and sing it every minute of the day. In fact, I did this so often my mom would beg me to stop. But the excitement of singing the song made me feel as if I were in a concert performing for a massive crowd and that I could do anything. One day, however, I stopped listening to music. It just felt very tiresome hearing the same tunes and melodies over and over again. So, for a few years, I barely listened to any music. But that did not mean my love for it had died. Rather, I found that exploring new genres was part of growing up and developing as a person, so I needed to identify the music that suited me the best.

A few years back, I got introduced to hip-hop and started listening to a lot of artists. Travis Scott, a rapper/producer who released an album called *ASTROWORLD* in 2018, captured my attention. There is one song on the album called “SKELETONS” that really revived my love of music. The song consists mostly of using keys and guitars to create dreamy and fresh atmospheres. The sound of drums adds to the song by making it catchier. When I first listened to it, I was mesmerized. The song as a whole made me feel sentimental and transported me to another world: a happy place where my stress melted away. I imagined myself by a beach

looking at the sun as the gentle breeze brushed my skin, and I closed my eyes while floating in the middle of the ocean.

This experience encouraged me to explore his discography to find similar songs. There is one titled “90210” that has a feel similar to that of “SKELETONS.” The first half of the song uses various instruments and an angelic melody to create a psychedelic vibe. The mood of the second part of the song is reminiscent of “SKELETONS.” The use of percussion and guitar creates a sentimental atmosphere I have never felt before. When listening to it, I feel as if I have lived a previous life, the memories of which are rushing through me all at once. Such an experience is truly only possible through music. The sound reaches beyond my senses and into my brain, easing the tension in my body and giving me the sensation of weightlessness. This genre has broadened my imagination and mental capabilities since it leads me to visualize what I am hearing. I do not believe I will ever find any experience that gives me the same thrill and appreciation for music as listening to hip-hop.

With rhythm and blues (R&B), which combines these two genres with other elements, such as pop, I experience different emotions. My favorite R&B artist is Daniel Caesar. His voice and melody combined with background instrumentals create music that brings out various feelings, including satisfaction. In the song “Japanese Denim,” Caesar uses his vocals combined with simple instrumentals to create a heartfelt song that stirs people’s emotions. This song employs blue jeans as a metaphor for a relationship the singer hoped would last his entire life. However, the end of the song implies the couple grow apart and the singer ultimately takes his own life as a result. This piece makes me feel calm and joyful, but toward the end, I experience a sense of emptiness. As the song concludes, the vocals sound perfect in my brain, but my heart feels like something is missing. This song taught me that happiness and sadness often go hand in hand. This realization of the duality of our existence made me more mature as a person.

Sometimes in life, I feel empty and tired of everything. My body seems hollow, like a bottle drained of water. When my brother is taunting me during these times, I have no motivation to



fight back. I lack the energy to text my friends. I have no desire to play games, which I always enjoy and should improve my mood. This feeling results in a lot of stress, but somehow, I am unable to find the cause. During such times, I listen to calming music and stare at the wall since I have no drive to do anything else. Doing this makes me think of the past few days or even months, of what I could have done better and should do from now on. It ensures I get my priorities straight and focus on my goals for the future, disregarding meaningless distractions. Listening to music helps me loosen up, engage in acceptance, and become more mature.

During quarantine, I had a very tough time, just like many other people. I was in 7th grade and lacked a phone to connect with my friends, so I spent most of my time by myself. It was very lonely. I would wake up, eat, and then go back to sleep. It was a completely different life from when I was at school. Throughout this time, music was a friend and inspiration. I could connect with it and vibe out to it at the same time. With the relatable lyrics, I felt safe to be myself and sing my heart out. Music has a mysterious capacity to soothe the soul, almost like having a therapy session with a best friend.

Listening to music is one of the best ways to gain experiences beyond one's everyday life. Many of us spend countless hours at work or school only to come home feeling nothing but stress and hopelessness. Our daily stress can be relieved and this mundane life can be greatly enriched by listening to music with its multitude of songs and genres to discover and enjoy. Music has helped me grow emotionally and mentally by teaching me many things as I experience a wide variety of emotions. It has gotten me through tough times, and I believe it is a big part of why I have become the kind, mature, and empathetic person I am today instead of going down the wrong path. Music is a universal language that is always there to support us.



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Lian Barakat  
Middle School

## Untitled

I watch the night bleed through,  
As the floors of where I am standing lie beneath bones.  
The sky gets painted red with just one brushstroke.  
The sky turns into a haze as my crimson tears splatter the cold,  
hard ground.  
Let it fall as the cruel stars in the midnight sky.  
I watch the night bleed through.

OR

And at the forlorn nights that lay upon us,  
The moonlit sky are the remains of our wistfulness.

OR

I love you like the dog I am.  
The dog who bit the hand of its owner,  
who loved them so impulsively.  
The dog who will claw,  
rasp and linger for every touch of affection,  
For I will always stay undeserved for such feeling and fondness.  
I am blind in this sentiment for ever and ever,  
I am stuck in this dreadful loop.  
I love you like the dog I am.





Natalie Bayramyan  
Middle School

## Aphrodite's Roses

Covered in powder white,  
like snowfall on a mountain.  
It makes hearts feel bright.  
These are roses and are found near an old fountain.

Purity, grace and simplicity,  
all in just a few petals.  
Some think the rose stays like this for infinity,  
but drops of tears and blood settle.

Now the rose is red,  
It has been fed.

Nothing stays the same forever,  
for everything must change.  
So don't act so clever,  
You can't run out of Mother Nature's cage.



Francesca Cannon  
Middle School



## Untitled

In the quiet of the night under the moon's soft light,  
Where dreams usually take flight,  
I find myself feeling a bit unsure.  
Restless thoughts, a mysterious lure.  
In the dark,  
I can't quite explain,  
Why sleep seems hard to attain.  
It's like my mind is in a maze,  
Lost in thoughts like a nighttime daze.  
The moon shines bright,  
a calming friend.  
Yet, my worries seem not to end,  
Silent and speechless in the night.  
Restlessness fills me,  
an unknown fright.  
As bedtime comes and the lights go low,  
Anxiety creeps in and it starts to grow.  
I wish I could understand why,  
But the reasons for my restless sigh...  
oh my!  
Pillows and blankets offer some ease,  
Yet my mind wanders with unease.  
Beneath the moon's gentle glow,  
Restlessness persists for reasons I don't know.



Audrey Dockweiler  
Middle School

## Untitled

“Life is too short”  
says an old man  
explaining to a kid  
nearly age ten.  
“ You'll find a good wife.”  
as he said  
“ you'll get a good job, and raise good kids.”  
The man would say  
in such a way  
as if he never listened to this advice  
when he was the kid's age.





Gavin Dvorak  
Middle School

## Untitled

the rain was cold  
the station was dreary  
the sun was sad

the rumble of wheels  
made my heart leap  
the headlight was so bright  
like an angel coming

the sound of screeching,  
the doors opening to the passengers  
the seats of leather  
the sound of heaven

the sound of the people flooding in  
like a zombie to a human  
the roar of footsteps like thunder  
I knew it wasn't mine

the honk like a goose  
made the departure  
like a pond

a grinding start it left for the next  
like an elevator going to a different floor  
the desal hum faded away

at last, the steaming hiss  
the grinding halt snapped me awake  
I knew it was mine



Evelyn Jeong  
Middle School

## From E

For this letter is for my dear friends,  
who have gone away.  
If you still remember me,  
I hope that this will make questions go away.  
Since it's too late to say face-to-face  
read it,  
and see what has happened to me.

To H,  
I was eight.  
Careless, loose-tongued  
and late.  
To see what my  
words,  
have brought upon you.  
I am sorry.

To S,  
You were my first and only friend of a strange new city.  
We shared many laughs and memories.  
We thought our bond would be  
unbreakable.  
Only distance would have severed our complete harmony.  
Through the years we have lost touch,  
I miss you.

To O,  
I thought of myself as smart,  
until I met you.  
Your knowledge surpasses my own,  
your wisdom unmatched.  
You are Athena in the flesh.  
On subjects I used to ponder  
alone,  
we shared feelings and thoughts.  
Your insights were far deeper than mine.  
I respect you.

To K,  
You were my friend.  
I trusted you.  
I have been  
betrayed  
by you, my traitorous friend.  
You climbed the hierarchy by stepping on me.  
I hate you.

To A,  
I have known you my whole life.  
Thirteen years.  
My sister,  
you've changed.  
You abandoned me,  
hurt me.  
But still,  
I wait for you.





Mikah Newman  
Middle School

## Untitled

My life is TBD  
My path is not decided  
It took some time to see  
That I should only guide it

I never was taught  
That you don't get to choose  
What happens in your life  
And sometimes that you'll lose

You will lose friendships and love  
You will lose hopes and dreams  
You will lose battles and wars  
Still, your life has solid seams

I was never taught  
That you can choose to be wise  
With every choice you make  
And that is how you rise

Rise above your lost relationships  
Rise above your lost wishes  
Rise above your lost fights  
You will win, even with the misses

I wish that I was taught  
That you can lose  
And you can rise  
And your only actions  
Have the power to shift the tide

One day I'll learn  
That I am not in control  
Of everything in life  
Other than my choice

My choice to rise  
Or my choice to lose  
I hope my choice will be wise



Sherlyn Palma Lopez  
Middle School

## Not a Father

A father.

A father is someone who loves their daughter.  
Someone who hugs her  
and is there when she's in trouble.

Or maybe that's not it.  
I wouldn't know,  
I've never had a father.  
Never a father, father.

The closest one was a man as tall as trees.  
He was a boyfriend of my sweet mother Bumble Bee.

Then there was the man who helped make me.  
Impregnated the foolish poor child.

The foolish poor child whose destiny could've been more.  
More than to end up in misery at her core.

This man rarely called me.  
Rarely called me when I moved until there was no talking.

This man I wept for across a month  
and left me with rage in my heart.

Rage in mine and despair in hers,  
and maybe confusion in my little brother's.



This man I called father when I was younger,  
will no longer be mine and never my brother's.

Still, I wish to see him again.  
To see him, to tell him my words.

My thoughts  
My feelings  
My anger.  
To question  
To scream  
To cry.

To make him see what he lost.

Maybe he was a decent father.  
Maybe he loved his three year old daughter.

But how would I know  
if my only memory of him  
was of him hurting my dear mother.



Maizie Rapp  
Middle School



## Untitled

When I see  
bullying

When I see  
homelessness

When I see  
addiction

When I see  
hate

When I see  
others living in poverty

When I see  
people going hungry

When I see  
awful diseases and sicknesses

When I see  
people not having enough money for a proper education

When I see  
depression affecting mental health

When I see  
anxiety eating up peoples' lives

I will stand up



Zsafia Roberson  
Middle School



## The Love Of My Life

Her eyes are ever so green;  
She looks very serious;  
She is forever my queen;  
And acts really mysterious.

She is beyond precious;  
She looks just like an angel;  
Every time I look at her, it leaves me breathless;  
And we never have a tangle.

She is always wearing stripes;  
She can be really fragile;  
She never ever gripes;  
And is super agile.

She has a lot of flair;  
She can be very dainty;  
She has such beautiful hair;  
And acts so saintly.

She is unbelievably sweet;  
She is incredibly pretty;  
She is so elegant on her feet;  
These are all the reasons why I love my kitty.





Lauren Stanton  
Middle School

## BARS

If it didn't happen  
If they guided me  
I wouldn't be stuck in this place  
Not just a place where you stand  
But inside your head  
A hamster on a wheel  
For 24 hours  
Just because of that "violence"  
Try to hide  
They will find you  
No food, no water  
But, no limit on the hunger to get out  
You think you escape  
Your identity changed  
Within these bars



Ilakkiya Suresh  
Middle School

## Social Clues

I crave social interaction  
as a man in space craves oxygen-  
that is to say,  
desperately.

I crave speech,  
the feel of words rolling off my tongue.  
If only there were something more meaningful to say but  
"How are you?"

I crave the knowledge that you  
want to talk to me today,  
that there's still something for us  
to be happy about.

I crave to know you again,  
but what is there left to  
be happy about,  
when we see each other every boring day?

I guess I just miss you,  
but what am I to say to you,  
when conversation isn't possible to strike up?

They say there used to be policies for this,  
can you bring them back to me  
and teach them?

Maybe then I could have the interactions I crave,  
ones where I can learn and love;  
the ones I miss from my youth.

Do you remember those?  
I do, so clearly as it were yesterday.  
It's the only thing I still recall of us,  
and it's what I cling to when I miss you.





Ezekiel Vargas  
Middle School

## Untitled

The immense feeling of  
Realization, understanding  
When a person of significance  
Has fallen, deprived of your presence.

Regret,  
Sorrow,  
Hesitation,  
Happening all at once.  
Hope,  
Bliss,  
Confidence,  
Fading from touch.

However, you must remain  
Triumphant and exultant,  
Through all the hardships.



Destiny Vega  
Middle School

## Me

People always say I'm pretty,  
But here's the question,  
Does it really fit me?

Do people look on the outside or inside?  
They say I'm quaint,  
Artistic, they say. Full of paint.  
Colors dangle from my hair to my eyes,  
But it's just full of lies.

People don't see the ACTUAL me,  
The real Destiny,  
And that's not cool.  
But neither do I.

They see the outside,  
And that's what's poor!  
They like what's on my beauty scale,  
But if they knew what's in store,  
They would like the inside Destiny,  
A whole lot more.



*High School*  
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Lyla Barajas  
High School

## Spring Awakening

Flowers,  
Fresh scents - sweetened  
Awake from melted snow,  
Blooming, blossoming, birds chirping,  
Spring's awake.



Mawce Boback  
High School

## Untitled

As the dusk settles onto the perfectly lined light posts  
and the clouds dance into new wisps of shapes and colors,  
I think of you.

I think of your life.  
I think of all the potential you had and the light you were.

I think about all the mundane tasks you had to do  
and how I would be glad to just be there with you.

I think of you doing homework  
because you don't have to do dishes tonight,  
folding laundry,  
playing games in the middle of the night,  
talking about a book you really like  
and recommend to me,  
and how you would simply listen to me  
when having a bad day.

And I think of how you are just beyond that gradient,  
just beyond those clouds,  
just barely out of my reach.

Or you are with the birds, the bugs, the plants,  
or just simply in the air.

Or perhaps, you're not there at all.  
Perhaps I am thinking these things  
to make me feel better about myself.  
To make me not feel guilty.

It's the kind of guilt that weighs on me  
like going too far under in the deep end of the pool.  
The kind that makes it hard to breathe,  
makes my ears pop,  
my eyes water,  
the kind that makes me need to fix my breathing.

I think of all these things.  
I think of you,  
of the nightfall sitting on perfectly lined light posts,  
the stars and how bright they shine on this clear night,  
and I think of how many days have passed.  
How many sleepless nights your parents have had,  
the nights I spent crying not only because of you,  
but because I'm scared too.

I know that isn't what you would've wanted,  
but I can't help it.  
I feel things so deeply  
that I can't help but mourn you  
and the person you could've been.  
You have forever changed the trajectory of my life.  
I will always think of you  
and of how you made the mundane interesting.





Raven Cervantes  
High School

## The Struggle

From a young age,  
I was in a maze.  
In tangled in what I needed to be  
For those to approve of me

I was only five  
When I started to cry  
About all the stuff in my mind  
That left me blind.

I started asking by age nine  
Who am I supposed to be?  
Because in my mind  
I didn't even know who I needed to be.

Soon came grade eight,  
I was standing there at the gate,  
Wondering why all the world did was hate.  
I just wished I could escape this place.

The rest of my schooling was full of tears,  
Wondering why boys only wanted to go upstairs.  
Why couldn't they just seem to care.  
Instead of being so unaware.

All they knew was being "cool."  
Though I ended up falling a fool  
Because these boys were just so cruel  
All they ended up wanting to do was brutal  
Even for those of us who were just seeking approval.

I just wish that the world would change.  
Or maybe even be rearranged.  
Because why should I have to be aged  
Around a world with so much rage.

So now I have to go through the struggle.  
The struggle of this crude world.  
The world that only longs for hurt instead of praise,  
Even though that praise would be amaze,  
And would help us escape this lonely maze.

I just wish our struggles would end.  
For they may be so unbright  
To the naked eye  
That they continue to let our dreams die.

Dreams that once sparkled and glistened  
Now fallen and shattered into pieces.  
Pieces of our hearts that now lie broken,  
Broken and shattered on the floor.  
Ready to be swept away in a roar.

So now I'm stuck just wishing that the world would just change.  
Or maybe even be rearranged.  
Because why should we have to be aged  
Around a world with so much rage.



Penelope Chadwick  
High School

## Untitled

I have a shell of skin,  
And organs lie within.  
I have a structure of bones  
That can be broke by stones.  
I have a system of nerves  
That has twists and curves.  
What could I be?

Human describes my body,  
It feels like an oddity.  
I have a human face,  
No other can it replace.  
The human of my mind  
Is faced with the unkind  
What could I be?

There is a creature,  
She lives in me.  
My body is her cage,  
Crawling with fleas.  
She's filled with rage.  
Please, can you see?

Owning a human body  
With a creature inside  
What could I be?





Kaitlyn Marie Garcia  
High School

## Fallible Fantasy

I trusted the movies,  
When they showed me the most wonderful friends  
Who'd accept my cruelties,  
Because they would better me in the end.

I trusted the songs,  
When I'd heard of a romance  
That would still stay strong  
Under any given circumstance.

I trusted the books,  
When I had read of hopes and dreams coming true  
So much so that I took  
My reach of a future and thought it might too.

I trusted, nurtured a fantasy,  
That came crashing down before my eyes.  
And in one heartbreaking travesty,  
I watched it fade despite my desperate cries.  
But given the chance I'd still keep it alive;  
I'd relive my sweet falsehood that once helped me survive.



Emma Grover  
High School

## A-L-I-C-E

A-lert,  
L-ockdown,  
I-nform  
C-ounter,  
E-vacuate

Active shooter and intruder training,  
Training to teach this generation of students  
how to stay alive in a school setting.  
Active shooter and intruder training,  
A breeding ground for what if

“What if”  
We students ask,  
“What if it happens to us?”  
Statistically speaking, it can and it will;  
Whether it's a false alarm or real.

“What if”  
What if we are forced to join the over 35,000 people  
whose lives were taken by gun violence in 2023?  
What if out of the nearly 600 shootings that took place,  
almost 100 of them being in schools,  
I will change that number for the worst?

What if it is my life  
that is added to the tally?  
My sister or my brother,  
The siblings I have sworn to protect.

We look to our teachers for guidance  
when they require it themselves,  
Only to be told to  
“Stay quiet,” and “Stay calm.”

“Stay calm?”  
Stay calm they say?  
Stay calm while you hear the screams and cries of your friends,  
the friends you see as family?

Stay calm while you hear gunfire in the hallways  
of a school you once called your home away from home?

“What do I do if the shooter enters my classroom?”

Stay quiet.

Then?

Play dead.

Take the body of a lifeless classmate and lay under them,  
Let their blood spill onto your hands in an attempt to survive.

Try not to breathe.

Don't make a sound.

Don't move a finger.

Everyone knows the shooter(s) won't linger.

What if the shooter knows the drill  
we're all forced to practice each year of our lives  
from the moment we enter the classroom  
to the day we're free from the gun range  
known as an American High School.

What if the shooter knows  
that dropping a curtain over a window  
doesn't mean that a classroom is empty  
but rather, there are children inside whose lives can be stolen?

“What if”

“What if I don't make it to twenty years old,”



“What if I don’t get to graduate,”  
not because of my grades  
but because another student  
got their hands on a gun  
and had the itch to kill.

What if I never achieve my dreams  
because someone else decides I’m not deserving of it?

What if I don’t make it to my senior year  
because my backpack sized bullet proof shield  
isn’t enough to save me.

What if I never get to say goodbye to my own mother?

What if my father has to go to the funeral  
of his school aged child?

How about,  
“What if I survive?”  
But no one is that optimistic.

After enough instances and scares,  
the “What if” becomes,  
“What do I do?”

“What do I do if I’m in the bathroom?”  
Easy. Don’t go. Hold it all day.  
It’s better to have a bladder infection  
than bleed to death on school grounds.

“But... What do I do if I’m on my period?”  
Well, I hope you’re religious  
and have a god to pray to that says he will save you.  
If not, hide in a stall and hope for the best.

Hope that whatever and whoever is up there will show you mercy.  
Hope that the flimsy plastic stall protects you  
in a way the government won’t.

“Okay. I’ll try my best.

But what do I do  
if I'm in gym class running the mile?"  
I hope  
the bleachers protect you  
in a way society couldn't.  
Hope.  
Is that the only answer we can provide?  
Hope?

And to me, what do I see?  
What do I think?  
From the perspective of a student  
in the prison of the American School system,  
All I know is that I would rather die  
by the hands I have been dealt  
by God,  
than die at the hands of another.  
Because at least alone in my room,  
before kicking the chair,  
Rope tied to the fan above me,  
I have the option to say goodbye.  
I can leave this world knowing  
that I won't die due to my government's negligence.

When did our country become a place where people  
such as myself  
have to fear dying at 17 years old?  
Not to cancer, or a car crash but to a gun in school.  
A gun in a place where we are told to feel safe.  
A gun in a place our parents entrust to take care of and protect us.

A gun in a place it shouldn't be.

A-L-I-C-E

Alice

An acronym that shouldn't need to exist.



Fernanda Gutierrez Garate  
High School

## Youth

It's during these long nights  
that I miss you, having  
finally put a name to  
the emptiness that I feel  
all day long.

It's in these quiet moments  
that I become too aware of  
how long it's been  
since I've heard your voice.  
Like a familiar nameless  
lullaby,  
you would bring me company  
when it all became too loud.

It's in these lonely mornings  
that I'm plagued by memories  
of you.  
You and your warm laugh,  
you and your bright soul.  
They remind me of how  
much time has passed,  
since I've ever felt that  
happiness again.

It's in these old times that  
I regret ever wishing you  
away.  
I had been too careless  
with my shooting stars,  
and too arrogant to  
ever truly see you.  
I miss you,  
my Youth.



Roman Iverson  
High School

## Untitled

Get down from the bridge, it's still raining.  
You know how it makes me feel  
when you sit and weep,  
yes, I'm still waiting for you.

Honey, you know how I feel when you go and cry alone.  
"You sleep so beautifully," he said,  
I shake him away and stumble outside the motel.  
You drag on your cigarette in the rain-soaked parking lot.  
The smell of ash and wet pavement  
soothed her even when sitting on the curb.  
She knew how he could pull her in every time,  
at first sight, his smile was sweet and beautiful,  
but the more she saw him,  
the more the disdain only grew inside her.  
She had this drunken stumble in her step  
when pacing towards her car.

Stepping inside the small, compact car,  
she could only think of him.





Sanya Jolly  
High School

## The Wicked Woman of Winter

The fruits of last summer have rotted,  
Winter has cried her first tears.  
She visited me last night,  
And when she did, I cried too.

A smile adorned her ethereal countenance.  
I tell her to get out.  
She simply refuses and takes a seat,  
wearing a white dress made of silk.  
And it is in her seraphic-like image that  
I hate her!  
I hate everything about her.  
Every time Winter visits,  
She ruins my life.

Everything I spent the year working on disappears.  
Friends turn into foes,  
Hearts begin to hurt.  
I begin to write woefully.  
And like clockwork,  
My brittle mind breaks.

So, when she tries to console me,  
I kick her!  
I push her!  
I want her to leave.  
I sing a song, a disguised plea.

But in between the heat of the summer  
And the calamity of the spring,  
Winter remains a comfort.  
I couldn't tell you why,

Perhaps because when she visits,  
My emotions are distinct enough to finally understand.  
Maybe because she is the only thing constant  
Constantly ruining my life,  
Constantly resetting my cycle  
Constantly present.  
I yell at her to leave.

She refuses,  
She starts dancing in circles,  
Lost in her capricious ballet.  
With every spin and pirouette  
She usurps what's left of me, day by day.

I remain in this state of nothing,  
and everything at the same time.  
For Heaven knows I wait to rise  
Once the flowers bloom again



Eunjae Lee  
High School

## Untitled

So cold that it feels hot.  
Feels like every vein in my heart popped out,  
To you who want forever peace, I'll tell you,  
Goodbye. I won't hold you back.

I won't cry even though I feel sad.  
You were a really good person.  
Don't forget that.  
Rest peacefully. Forever.

I feel like every flake in snowflakes cutting through me.  
Just like I'm hugged by my mom,  
I pull in my legs and arms as close as I can get.  
The streetlight turns off; at the same time, I close my eyes.  
Thank you. Everyone.

If I could take your sadness,  
I would change my 4-leaf clover to a 3-leaf clover.  
To you who don't have much time left,  
with this flower, 'please remember me.'  
At least I have loved you dearly.  
Your tears to my tears,  
those tears will be there with you until the end,  
as the snow melts.  
Bye. This seems like our last farewell.



Sarah Manzanares  
High School

## Homesick

Would you call me strange  
If I told you I missed an exact tree in the front yard?  
Or too sensitive  
If I shared  
That the smell brought me to tears,  
When I returned?  
Would you find it odd  
That I love where I live,  
Yet grieve where I once was?  
Laugh or shrug your shoulders  
That I'm only one minute from my house  
Yet I am so far from my home.  
How can I make it clear  
That the way the clouds covered the sky,  
The snow crunched beneath my feet,  
And the way the mountains used to look,  
Glued parts of me back together?  
Would you call me weird  
That I miss the place  
I couldn't wait to leave?  
You can call me  
Weird, Strange, Sensitive, or Odd  
Laugh at me or shrug your shoulders.  
But to me  
I'm just  
Homesick





Ella McMinn  
High School

## Untitled

I walk with bare feet on the grass.  
As the wind blows against my skin.  
Whispering to me  
It says it loves me.

I lay in the meadow,  
With the sun gently touching my skin,  
Peeking through the canopy,  
And I say I love you.

The trees that stand ever so tall  
With their branches swaying in the wind  
Dancing to a familiar tune.  
They sway with love in their hearts,  
And they say,  
I love you.

The flow of the river in intricate patterns tells me,  
I love you.

And the fish in the river tell me,  
Love is all around me.

The birds that fly ever so high say to take a deep breath,  
They tell me I'm breathing in myself.  
When I'm loving the world around me  
I'm also loving myself.

I dig my feet into the dirt.  
The dirt says,  
I love you.

And I stand on the sandy bay.  
And it says that even when it seems hard,  
Love is all around us.  
All the time  
It's not always seen as one thing.  
But as many things  
And that we are love  
And we are loved.

We can choose to love,  
Because even when it storms,  
The clouds still say,  
I love you.



Caleb Morales-Fuller  
High School

## Natural Love

Like clouds tenderly embrace the mountains on a foggy day,  
The soft touch of your arm floats gently around me.  
So, from your side I shall never stray,  
Like a pampered pet, too content to run free.

The beauty you possess is such of dreams,  
Like the grandeur of steep rocky gorges.  
There is nothing else for me, it seems,  
But to adore it.

I could spend an eternity in your sunbeams, soaking  
In all the warmth you radiate but never burn.  
Knowing that to my side you are always hoping  
To return, my faith in you will never be worn.

Your patience and perfection complete me,  
Always sticking to my side as a river leads to a sea.



Sophia Muelrath  
High School

## Untitled

What do you do  
when you cannot get through?  
How do you move  
when you're stuck in your shoes?  
Do you reach for a hand to pull you past?  
Do you sit and wait for the light to come back?  
Do you loosen your laces and tug at your toes?  
Do you stand on your head and wait for the blood to flow?

I used to think, I used to ponder.  
I'd let my mind question and wander.  
For soon I'd find a familiar feeling,  
My passion, my joy, it'd feel like healing.

I'd listen and follow  
its soothing voice.  
Until I had made it,  
I began to rejoice.

Now it is different,  
I seem to not know  
When to stop or when to go.  
When I am stuck, I wait for a sign  
A whisper, a voice, anything would be fine.  
It used to bubble, it used to sing,  
But now it has left me a blurry feeling.



My muse was my passion.  
My love was my price.  
And now I am left,  
Only with sacrifice.

Still, as I go, I see it pass by.  
It whispers sometimes,  
But without the answer, the why.  
I move my feet, but I lose a shoe.  
I pass the line, but it feels like I haven't made it through.

Oh, where have you gone?  
My passion, my joy.  
How do I find you?  
My love, my boy.



Alan Navarro  
High School

## Trapped

How does it feel?  
Whole table is turned,  
And it's hard being receiver.  
You stay distant, infatuated by a new pleasure.  
I understand your mindset,  
I'm done knowing you're hiding.  
I ask for the keys to your doors,  
The entrance to the kingdom  
Or temple, if I could only find out  
If he wanted to, he could, and I'm willing.  
You'll never starve from fulfillment,  
And I'll stand on that till end's time.  
Time's ending and I'm wondering...  
Can I still be it?

-

Hold my hand,  
Just as you hold my freedom.  
Kiss me gently,  
Absorb my warmth through your lips.  
Wrap me with your arms,  
Suffocate me within your brick walls.  
Love me gently,  
Then regret our introduction.  
If love and fear are two sides of a spectrum,  
How then can I run with love, yet terror runs my mind?  
How then can love help see clear,  
And leave me blind from damage?  
Or perhaps I see clear,  
And love blocks death at its highest tier.

-

Entrapped by the ring of the mountain horizon,  
And the foggy 'scrapers,  
I view the rising of a new day.  
As it sets yesterday in the dark,  
I view the city in all its simplistic but complicated beauty.  
The insect people running through their anthills.  
I wave through my high like beach waves,  
I begin to feel my own pulse.  
It's a peaceful pause.  
My eye catches the concrete cages,  
Sectioning collectives into individual  
Metal trees with wire branches intoxicate-  
Individuals with meaningless signals.  
Til further notice I rest-  
Within the foggy scrapers...



Katherine Perez Gonzalez  
High School



## Untitled

I remember standing in the rain,  
Just me and my cousin.  
The droplets that fell from the sky captivated me.  
Oh! And the soft splash as they touched our feet!  
The rain intensified with our childish giggles...  
Then my aunt's voice broke through our laughter,  
Her voice shone like the sun on its brightest day.  
She directed us to do "la rueda rueda,"  
A little dance we'd seen on TV.  
We held hands and skipped around in a circle,  
Humming and singing to a tune.  
I think the earth grew irritated at our song,  
Then became vengeful.  
Suddenly, my cousin slipped, landing on her bottom.  
There was a moment of tension,  
Would she be sad? Indifferent? Mad?  
For a second, I'd expected tears  
To plummet like the ones in the dark clouds.  
Yet, none of that happened.  
She arose as if it was the silliest thing,  
And laughed.





Aaliyah Reed  
High School

## Eyesores

It takes significantly more time to build a relationship  
than it does to break it,  
More energy to earn trust  
than it does to lose it,

It takes less time to forgive someone  
than the decades that passed,  
During which you have to still scrub off your skin,  
To try and forget the horrible memories  
that contaminate your cells within,  
Because a natural disaster lasts for a couple of hours,  
But the aftermath can last years.

The black eyes and bloody noses don't compare to  
The stares that stitch their sight into your sleeves to see,  
All of your complexities,  
Each step and stutter you make,  
I will be breathing down the back of your neck,  
Stress spreads through your spine and next thing you know,  
you're a wreck.

This society is to keep you in check,  
If you are going to get used to the trends,  
get used to the judging,  
If you are going to conform to the expectations,  
don't be surprised by the resist,  
Not everyone fits in the same mold,  
so why does that ideology even exist?  
Just because society says something is ugly,  
does not mean that it is.

Who even makes those rules? The questions we ask, we dismiss,  
This is how nightmares are made.

When we let insecurities grow louder  
than our thoughts,  
When we let wanting to be accepted  
be more important than what we want,  
That's when we become afraid.  
That's when we stray away,  
From the deeper connections  
between each other we could make,  
I know too many men who use their limbs before their mouths,  
Who use their mouths before their brains,  
And then comment on the fact that they don't think before acting,  
Like common sense isn't so common these days,  
If you want to ruin someone's life,  
Ruin your own,  
Please don't be like dominoes,  
Knocking over everyone in sight,  
And even when you make yourself fall,  
Someone has always fallen down with you,  
Even if you don't try to,  
It's just in "our nature" to sabotage each other,  
To act upon an emotion directed at others,  
But who says being civilized means conforming in all ways?  
It doesn't have to be weird to sometimes want to escape,  
Doesn't the same thing each day make your mind go blank?  
Old, bent trash cans scattered around the streets,  
Peeling off walls and paint colors, fading and bleak,  
The dried-up lawn and dead bushes are a style of unique,  
Headless dolls and other treasures around  
are known as community antiques,  
Because when something is "ghetto", it is seen as cheap,  
And when something is cheap, it is unsafe,  
And being unsafe is an eyesore no one wants to look at,  
And yet we stare at it every day,  
If our world is a house,  
We trash it, so the future generation of children won't know  
what the word home even looks like,  
You walk on the bones of my dust-ridden body,  
but out of sight, out of mind,

Forgetting what it was like to be truly alive,  
You know you have to pay taxes when you die?  
Why are we still in debt  
if every day that is applied?  
You built the foundation  
and lay out all the stone,  
You sit in a mold growing old,  
Where once sat greatness, monstrosity is shown,  
You pity your own condition  
because that's what you've only ever known,  
Something to claim that will finally be your own,  
A place worthy enough to be defined a home,  
Cracks in concrete do not have to be seen as an eyesore,  
Tape on the windows shouldn't be seen as poor,  
Holes in the walls don't have to be connected to anger,  
You perceive that broken hearts  
weren't ugly before they were torn,  
But isn't there a morbid type of beauty  
to scarlet red enhancing purple arteries?  
And isn't it a majestic way  
how a hole can make a little bit of extra room?  
Don't cracks mean  
that many soles have taken the time to walk throughout the city?  
Lovely flowers have to die first  
before they can have the chance to bloom,  
If anything, stained carpet, broken facets, and mix match cabinets,  
Give off a sense of imperfectness that nobody needs to fix,  
It's the bent doorknobs, the toppling table, that comfort depicts,  
The hanging lights and unstable pictures add to the reassurance,  
Finally, a home where harmony can be blocked out by the eclipse,  
You box up and hide away  
the things about you that could be judged,  
But scars and stretch marks  
just show how much a warrior is in your blood,  
Soon eyesores will all make up this world,  
and you'll have no choice but to be loved.  
Because everything about you might be seen as ugly,  
but intense glory you have become.





Sophie Ross  
High School



## Untitled

Some songs are red.  
Crashing, violent, angry  
Screaming out  
In rage  
For justice  
A drumbeat  
Like a heartbeat  
Matching your steps  
Electric or techno or metal  
Until your voice goes hoarse.

Some songs are blue.  
Smooth, gliding, calm  
Melodies  
Tinged  
With soft sadness  
Violins and pianos and flutes  
Crescendo, and fade  
Until the next wave  
On the blue sea  
Brings it to an end.

Some songs are purple.  
Thumping beat  
That makes you  
Want to get up,  
And sing along.  
Washing over you  
Like a tsunami



Cresting and falling  
From note to note  
Bass sax and drums  
And Electric guitar  
With a sound all its own,  
Bringing you along  
For the ride.

Some songs are gold.  
Bright, Bopping  
Excited  
Like a laugh  
You can't shake,  
No matter how you try.  
Drums, tambourine, flute  
Laughter within lyrics  
That makes listening feel  
A little like love.

Some songs are gray.  
Smooth, with just a hint  
Of emotion  
Breaking through the clouds  
Almost enough  
To let you ignore it.  
Let piano, let oboe, let legato,  
Bring you  
Smoothly  
To the end.  
Pretending  
You didn't hear  
What they don't want you to.

Some songs are black.  
Laced with heartbreak,  
Like you just can't  
Go any further.  
A voice by itself

On the verge of tears  
Discordant  
Or so much sound  
That it plays in your head  
Over and over  
Sharing heartache with you.

Some songs are white.  
Tired and soft  
Defeated  
Piano  
Or cello  
Quiet  
All alone  
With the outline  
Of what could be,  
Just out of reach.

Some songs change.  
Some songs are red but gradate to blue.  
Some songs begin gray,  
But their feelings  
Shine through the storm clouds,  
And turn the song red.  
Some songs swirl gold and purple,  
Until you could almost forget  
They were ever separate.  
Some songs turn black to white,  
Or green to blue,  
Or orange to purple,  
Metamorphosing  
Into something  
Entirely their own.  
Their own color  
Individual to them.

It's art.



Torres Sage  
High School

## Untitled

I kept going  
not because I wanted to  
trust me,  
all of me wanted to stop.

I kept going  
because I deserved to know  
what not giving up on myself felt like.

Butterfly garden:  
if you spend your time chasing butterflies  
they will fly away,  
however, if you spend your time building a beautiful garden,  
the butterflies will come to you;  
and if they don't,  
at least you have a garden to be happy with.

A sky full of stars and he was staring at her.

Moon:  
like the moon,  
we all go through phases  
of emptiness to feel again.

Maybe forever  
was a word meant for memories  
and not people.



Alexander Sandoval  
High School

## Untitled

Tattered and burnt,  
cut and torn,  
left alone  
and left to die.

As I lay bruised and in tears,  
cold and afraid,  
I shed myself  
of the hope that drifted me astray.  
I turned a blind eye  
to the joy and happiness  
for it brought along its bitter and rotten pain.

I drown in numbers  
I have myself a number,  
a value and sold myself.

Alone I stand here  
meaningless and fearless.  
Alone I stand here  
content and empty.  
Alone I stand here  
without a heart or a soul,  
without reason or judgement,  
without pain or suffering  
and without fail.

And now in my last breath  
I wonder,  
"what am I?"





Aleah Stringer  
High School

## Untitled

March 20th  
Spring  
this time of year, I've nothing to do with,  
can't it be  
summer?  
fall?  
winter?  
trees grow leaves  
where they'd previously fallen  
off  
pollen is everywhere.  
I would breathe if I could,  
but I can't.  
I sneeze.  
my sister wants to draw outside,  
chalk,  
it's allergy season,  
and I'm stuck sneezing.  
the baby sneezes too, but she's busy,  
drawing,  
two,  
three,  
four,  
five,  
little petals

I hate spring feelings,  
but it doesn't matter.  
my sister is drawing flowers,  
and I would spend,  
    one,  
    two,  
    three,  
    four,  
    five,  
    six  
    hours,  
    seven days a week,  
watching her smile and say,  
    "Sister, I draw flowers"  
because nothing is more valuable  
    than time,  
especially when it's ours.



Raeminda Tagbo  
High School

## A Name With a Story at Each Part

With my first name,  
I am a living ship between my parents,  
Visminda and Ramon, from the Philippines.  
Rather than giving me an ordinary name,  
they constructed me a new one.  
Raeminda.

I used to joke  
that they named me like a Wi-Fi password,  
but I love the originality my name exudes.  
I've come to love all interpretations of it,  
from "Reeminda" to "Miranda,"  
as there's an underlying meaning.

People don't come across a name like mine that often.  
I love my first name,  
as it connects me to my parents like nothing else could.  
To change it  
feels like erasing the efforts  
that went into sculpting my name,  
with the various consonants and vowels from their names.

San Diego,  
the second most populous city in California,  
which also happens to be my middle name.

Just 5 days ago,  
I was at a counter at the DMV  
when the man assisting me asked,  
"Have you ever gone to your middle name?"

Surprisingly, that was the first time  
I'd ever been asked that question.

And yes, I have.

When people see my middle name,  
they look at me with an inquisitive look  
that brightly reads, "Is that really what it is?"  
Up to now, I have been mistakenly called  
Raeminda San Francisco  
twice.

I love that.

My middle name is my mother's maiden name.  
Somehow, although not being given one by my parents,  
my middle name manages to stand out.  
Maybe I should be thankful for not being made one,  
or my name would actually sound like a Wi-Fi password.

My last name, Tagbo,  
is attached to a joke that connects me to my heritage.

Not everybody gets it, but  
with a heavy Filipino accent,  
my last name easily sounds like "takbo."

That means "run" in Tagalog.

My family never missed a chance  
to tell me that I was perpetually running.

The joke has gotten old,  
but it's still gold  
around the people who understand it for the first time.

3 days ago,  
my mom entered a Filipino-owned market  
to exchange her U.S. dollars for Philippine pesos  
to give to her family residing in the Philippines.  
The kind man at the register asked for her last name.

I was putting our groceries in the car  
while she took care of the currency exchange,  
and from afar,

I heard him laughing goofily at our last name,  
which I didn't mind.

You'd think that your name is something nobody can joke about,  
but I don't see it that way.



My parents lecture me  
for “When the time comes,”  
which are basically “When I die” talks.  
They’ve gracefully made sure  
to give me a name  
to reassure me  
that “When the time comes,”  
I won’t be alone.  
As long as I have my name,  
I have them right beside me.



Alissa Tanksley  
High School

## Chapter

If my life was a book,  
You'd be one of my favorite chapters.  
Whether it end up being 10 pages to 1000,  
I'd reread it until the end of time.  
People don't often realize  
the smallest interactions make the biggest difference.  
Putting away a book,  
Laughing and making jokes,  
Sharing a core memory,  
Just making someone feel seen and heard.  
Someone who gave you the confidence  
to do something even though you felt trashy about it.  
A person who you've found  
to be relatable in multiples ways.  
Mostly someone who it didn't matter if you talked  
for 10 seconds or 3 hours.  
They could immediately switch your mood  
from sad to happy  
and that effect is irreversible.  
Everyone has at least one page in my book,  
but you get a chapter,  
and if you maybe felt the same.  
You would be part of every single one from here on out.

And maybe,

Just maybe,

I could be a chapter in your book too.



Cira-Ann Thomas-Knudson  
High School



## Untitled

I am a snake at war,  
my teeth sharp and venom strong.  
I dodge your bullets,  
with a winding body.  
I am built for this.

The venom rushing through my blood,  
has long killed the defenseless worm I was.  
you will now scream at the sight of me,  
For, I am a raging fire, an active volcano and  
my tears shan't hydrate the lion at my nest.

In this war you wage upon me,  
you slaughter with no tact.  
In your vile game of checkers,  
I am a queen of chess.

You can keep killing us,  
but you'll never get my king,  
through his castle of rock and steel,  
or his moat of lava and piranhas,  
I will die long before he does.

A hundred years from now,  
you can rewrite my history,  
but the passing wind will remember me,  
and the soil I decay into will rise once more.  
I will remain a snake,  
at war.



Aylani Elise Toy  
High School

## Untitled

I look at her.  
She's on her father's feet,  
holding her hand as her mother dresses her.  
Her bubbly personality filling the room.

I look at her,  
Losing teeth by the second although she stayed grinning.  
Standing up by herself now, she just keeps getting bigger.  
Her words starting to create clauses.

I look at her,  
The backdrop is so different now.  
Things that I'd never seen before covered her dresser.  
Dancing around the room with newer music blasting,  
She's changing...her interests aren't like they used to be.

I look at her.  
But emptiness fills her room most of the time.  
A phone is her main priority,  
Taking pictures with me only to delete them a few hours later.  
She is fascinating over filters.  
Her life is slowly fading before my eyes.

I look at her.  
Giggling back at the words on her screen.  
A new face is staring at me.  
Maturity overtaking this young girl's body,  
Mirroring her screen is a new person morphed by other's faces.  
Forgetting who she originally was,  
Her reflection is getting harder to look at.



I look at her.  
Crying on the floor of her room,  
Trashing everything in sight,  
Yelling to the Gods,  
“What have I done wrong?”  
Mood swinging from one extreme to another,  
Questioning her own existence.  
The bubbly personality now burst by the needle of time.

I look at her, but she won't look at me.  
I can only observe from the side.  
I wish she could look at me,  
to see the beauty I've seen this whole time.  
For I am the mirror,  
I hold the truth with no corrections.



Elizabeth Waltermeyer  
High School

## Untitled

I wish you were still in my life.  
It feels like you stabbed me with a knife.

I wish I never got that call.  
I wish I never answered at all.

I wish you were sober.  
But I know you'll never stay sober.

I wish you were here.  
I wish you would just appear.

I wish I could see and talk to you.  
I can keep wishing but there's no point.

I wish you made better choices.

I wish you weren't an alcoholic.

I wish this situation never happened.

I wish you were back  
to being the brother that I once knew.

I wish...



Salem Warren  
High School

## Untitled

A snake is a snake,  
it cannot hide what makes it.

A snake can try to hide its fangs,  
But it is a fruitless task.  
It cannot bite without releasing poison.

A snake can hide its fangs, but not its tail.  
The tail is a giveaway.  
A snake can put its tail in its jaws,  
Clamp down to convince itself it's not there.  
Remember, it cannot bite.

A snake can die, and it will still be a snake.

Its venom will dry in its teeth,  
And its tail will decompose, but it's still a snake.

A snake can lie through its teeth "I will not bite."  
But it is a snake, there is no hiding that.



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Jaelynn Armstrong  
Middle School

## Lost in the Shadows

The beginning...

*My friends and I wanted to go out, but my parents would definitely never say yes to my plans. But maybe we should try. What's the worst that could happen? As I gathered my strength to ask my mom if I could go, my mom called my name at least 3 times, "Kayla... Kayla...KAYLA!" Then she even used my middle name, "KAYLA MARIE!" I knew that something bad was coming.*

*"Coming mom! Be there in a sec," I called out.*

[Kayla's mom:] It's about time you know. Maybe I should take your phone because that's what you're on 24/7. What's so special about it? You don't even need it. It just takes up all of your time so.

[Kayla:] No mom-

[Kayla's mom:] So I'm going to the shop tomorrow morning to get you a new phone. One that I would use, you know the ones back in my day where there was no screen and just a keypad to dial numbers.

[Kayla] Yeah mom I know what a flip phone is, but I was wondering if me and my friends can-

[Kayla's mom] Nope, it's already past curfew and I don't trust those crazy kids with you.

[Kayla:] But mom

[kayla's mom:] Fine let me think about it

[Kayla:] thanks mom!

[Kayla's mom:] Yeah no. I just don't trust them, sorry kiddo

[Kayla:] yeah, whatever

Chapter 2: Is this real?

(Kayla calls her group of friends)

[Kayla:] Guys I don't know what to do. It's apparently “past my curfew”

[Leah:] But it's only 6:00

[Kayla:] I know but what my mom says goes.

[Leah:] What if you just leave?

[Kayla:] Like sneaking out?

[Leah:] Yeah

[Kayla] no, my mom would kill me

[Liam:] Well you're not going to live forever you might as well live life a little

[Kayla:] Yea, I guess so

[Leah:] Okk meet us at the wash

[Kayla:] Ok see ya there.

*As Kayla waited for her parents to fall asleep, she made her bed to seem as if she was still there after that she tiptoes down the stairs then hurried out the front door. Kayla hops the fence then gets to the wash she then sees a brunette girl “Leah,” she calls out. “Kayla!” They share a hug and wait for their other two friends Adam and Liam.*

*Kayla feels breathing on her neck, she spins around to her other friend Liam wearing his black hoodie he always wears. “Liam!” Kayla exclaims. “I haven't seen you in what feels like years!” I know Liam says with a shaky voice. “Is everything ok?” Leah asked. “Yeah, I guess it's just this place. It feels like something is here and it does not want us to find out or know that it is here.”*

[Leah:] Come on Liam stop being a baby right when Adam gets here, we are leaving

[Kayla:] Where are we going?

*Before Leah had the chance to speak, they heard a branch break... "Adam?" Kayla called out. "Hey guys!" Adam yelled with a smile on his face. "I was going to scare you guys, but the branch blew my cover." They all laugh then they get ready to leave.*

*They arrived not long after to what seems like a very old house.*

[Leah:] Alright guys are you ready to explore something that nobody else could because they were too scared.

[Adam:] Like what?

[Leah:] The Allen's family house!

[Liam:] No

[Leah:] Yes

[Kayla:] Are we trying to get killed? Tales say that last person that went in there never came out

[Leah:] No way

[Kayla:] Yep, that is why we should not go inside

[Leah:] No I meant no way you believed that, you guys are such babies ok now let's go.

[Liam:] Ok but if I get hurt it's your fault

[Leah] Oh ok whatever Liam

[Liam:] yea ok.

[Leah:] Ok we made it to the door. What's the worst that could happen?

[Adam:] Wow even the door is-

[Leah:] Cool yea I know

[Adam:] No i meant creepy but ok

[Leah:] Its apparently a very dangerous place

[Liam:] THEN WHY WOULD YOU TAKE US HERE

[Leah:] To prove that it's not dangerous

[Adam:] You are psycho, Leah

[Leah:] Whatever, Kayla doesn't think it's scary right Kayla?

[Kayla:] No I do it's even scarier than my mom and she's scary

[Liam:] Yep

[Adam:] Yeah

[Kayla:] See they all agree

[Leah:] Yea well not me

[Adam:] Because you are crazy

[Leah:] Whatever.

*They hear a soft sound*

[Liam:] Guys what was that?

[Leah:] Probably the wind you little baby

[Liam:] Can you stop please? I don't like being called a baby just because I'm scared.

[Leah:] Be a man Liam and toughen up

[Adam:] Are you serious Leah?

[Leah:] What? It's not my fault Liam can't take a joke

[Kayla:] Yeah, whatever Leah.

*As Leah storms off they all agree to search they thought if they posted about how fun and scary it was, they could make Leah mad.*

*“Ok who wants to go first?” “Not it!” They all said it at once. “Jinks,” Kayla said. “Got you guys you all owe me a dollar.” They laugh to themselves then they walk up to the door as Adam goes to twist the doorknob but they then hear a*



*scream not just any scream a scream that you would only hear if someone is dying.*

[Kayla:] Leah?

*They all question themselves.*

[Liam:] Oh no. Leah needs help guys! We have to find her ASAP!

[Adam:] Do we really need to help her? I mean she was a bad friend

[Kayla:] YES, YES WE DO SHE WAS STILL OUR FRIEND!

[Adam:] Yeah, a bad friend

[Kayla:] Ok Adam, if you're not going to follow us to find her then don't follow us AT ALL.

[Adam says under his breath:] It's fine I never liked you guys anyway  
Then he runs off.

[Kayla:] Okay, Liam let's go

[Liam:] Well, do we really need to go?. I mean it was probably not Leah-  
*(the group gets a text from Leah saying she's sorry)*

[Kayla:] You got that too right

[Liam:] Yeah, but if that scream was not Leah, who was it?

*They then hear the scream but this time it was closer as if it was right behind them*

[Liam:] We have to get out of here like now

[Kayla:] I agree

*As they run, Kayla looks to Liam and he says, "We have to hurry up!" Kayla had let out a scream of horror because that was not Liam's voice, she spoke breathlessly she stopped to stare at the figure as Kayla thinks to herself this thing it's trying to sound like Liam its voice but it just keeps getting deeper and deeper and Kayla tries to run away she just stopped then looked around there was no one or nothing in sight but she still got that feeling the one that you would get when*

*you think someone or something is looking at you she was confused there was nothing in sight no Adam, no Liam, no monsters, not even anything making noise then all of a sudden.*

### Chapter 3 Who's there...?

*She hears something snap...*

[Kayla:] What- Who's there?!

*Kayla start walking again then she starts to hear footsteps right behind her but when she stops moving to look around nobody was there but then she started sprinting then she heard the same steps she then had the idea to look around when she was running then there it this tall skinny 8 foot looking creature running behind her she can feel the creature breathing on her neck but then \*Thump\* Kayla had tripped over a log as Kayla thinks to herself she says when was that there it was not here a second ago then the 8 foot looking creature stands above her with its bloodshot red eyes and all it does is breathe very heavily as Kayla is frozen she can't do anything but just sits there her brain is blank-the monster was deadpan- she doesn't know what to do then her head starts to hurt then Kayla starts overthinking about the worst that could happen then she hears "HELP ME!" She jumps up and starts running. It's the first thing she could think to do then she stops. It's like she can't move as if something is controlling her. She then hears the scream again, she has to think quick, but she can't move. What is she going to do? She then hears something, it's very faint. So, it's not a scream but a whisper as if it was right behind her, it's hard to make out or even understand what they are saying.*

[Kayla:] Liam..?

*As she looks around not understanding what Liam had to do with anything. Had that just happened? She then starts to move.*

[Kayla:] I can move I have to get out of here but first I have to find Liam

*She finds what she thinks is another path through the forest, so she then starts to look around but it's like the more she walks, the darker it gets. Then she sees those bloodshot red eyes then it hits her... she never came with friends; she came all by herself. Was it all just her imagination?*

## Cold-Blooded Michelle Oak

Michelle Oak had always loved spooky. A spooky forest with its talented, tan trees. It was a place where she felt worried.

She was a tea drinker with pretty eyes and skinny hair. Her friends saw her as a loose lover. Once, she had even brought an orange owl back from the river.

Michelle walked over to the window and reflected on her dark surroundings. The wind blew like running puppies that are scared. Then she saw something in the distance, or rather someone. It was the figure of Michael Oak. Michael was a sweet saint with beautiful eyes and short hair. Michelle gulped. She was not prepared for her brother Michael. As Michelle stepped outside and Michael came closer, she could see the gigantic smile on his face.

Michael smiled with all the cuteness as 2,543 cute kind kittens. He said, in a hushed tone, “Who are you?”

Michelle looked back, even more anxious, and still fingering the smooth book. “Michael, I am your sister,” she replied.

Michael looked at Michelle with a surprised face that said, “No that’s not possible. What’s your last name?”

Michelle said, “I am your sister because my last name is Oak, and your last name is Oak.”

Michael didn't believe it much, but he said instead, “Ok.” Then Michael followed Michelle in for a nice cup of tea.

“Where have you been all of these years Michael?” asked Michelle.

Michael just stood there silent. He stood there like no one was there.



## Untitled

Have you ever dreamed of going into the world of your favorite book and meeting all your favorite characters in person? Sounds amazing right? I've always dreamed of it. Well, not so sure now though. Haven't had any fun yet. Yeah.... It happened. I fell into my favorite book. It was a book full of magic and mystery, daring adventures, and good vs evil. I say it was because I'm here now. Now if you'll excuse me for a moment I have to run from a massive beast or whatever that thing is that's trying to kill me.

I race through thick trees. As I run, I see a tiny, abandoned house. It may not look like much, but I know what's inside. I put on a burst of speed and veer toward it. I look over my shoulder and realize I probably shouldn't have done that. You wouldn't think something so big could run so fast. I'm already running as fast as I can.

I reach the house and slam the door behind me. I look around for a book about mythical monsters.

"Come on come on..." Aha! There is! I flip it open. Inside there's a button. I slam my hand down on it. Suddenly the floor drops.

"AAAAGHHH!!!... Oof."

I forgot what happened after the button. I stand up and look around. Whoa. It's even better than I imagined.

The room is wide and spacious, with halls that lead off into other rooms and corridors. There's people and mythical creatures walking around, some carrying things, some not.

I smell delicious food coming from one of the hallways. There're crates stacked against the wall. I'm so caught up I don't even notice someone coming up to me until they start asking questions.

"Who are you? How did you get in? What's your rank?" she asks with a not so friendly face. I look at her legs for hooves and I look for pointed ears. I don't see and so she's obviously human. She looks about 17 years old at best. She's also really tall, with long dark brown hair in a ponytail. Brown eyes, a light red-brown shirt tucked into pants with a belt. A belt with a lot of pouches and 2 swords on her back. She seems to get impatient.

She asks again, "Are you even listening? I asked some questions."



She leans in. I lean back, careful not to make eye contact.

“Uhh.. I’m.... new?”

She glares. “You can’t just be ‘new’ here. Tell the truth. Are you a spy?”

“No! You wouldn’t believe the truth, so it’ll be better if we just stick with the ‘new’ thing.”

She leans back. I let out a breath I didn’t know I was holding.

“Fine Miss “I’m new ”, Welcome to the resistance,” She sticks out her hand, “I’m Natalia, my friends call me Nat, meaning you can’t.”

As I shake her hand, I realize I do know her, sort of. I recognize her as one of the main characters in my favorite book.

“My name’s Charlotte.” I reply, “Lottie for short.”

She looks at me as if I’m hiding something. I mean, I am, but I’m not. “Well, let’s introduce you to the captain. He’s the one in charge around here.”

She adds, “And some advice, don’t get on his bad side.”

I just stand there for a moment, thinking. Should I go with her? Well, where else am I going to go? I follow her down a hall with multiple bends. Everyone we pass stares at me, like they’ve never seen a human before.

Finally, we reach a door, with the words CL on it. I look at her questioningly. She doesn’t say but knocks.

“Come in!” I hear a voice say. She opens the door and I trail her inside.

As I look around, I notice the room is kind of small and plain. In the middle of the room there’s a desk. And behind that desk is a.... Boy who looks about my age, which is 15. He has thick, messy black hair, rich brown skin, and pointy ears. Since I can’t see his legs, I’m going to assume he’s an elf.

“Oh! Natalia! What a surprise. How did the raid go?” he asked. They talk for a minute and then he turns to me.

“And who is this you’ve brought with you?” He asks.

For some reason I start to get twitchy. “My...my name is Lottie. I’m new.” I explain.

Natalia snorts. “So,” she says. “Can’t get the truth out of her. Maybe you can.”

The boy smiles. “Well, she doesn’t seem like an enemy to me.”

He stands and walks over to us, “Nice to meet you, I’m Luke. Welcome to the resistance.”

“I still don’t really know what we’re resisting. And why. Could you explain that to me?” I ask him. I know, I know. This is my book. My favorite one too for that matter. But it's hard to remember things when

you're having a once in a lifetime experience. That shouldn't even be happening.

"We are resisting against the King and Queen. Who have turned our land into a land where monsters and foul creatures run wild." He explains, "They have turned humans against us. Saying that we are horrible creatures, God's mistake."

I nod. Some of what I know is coming back to me. As I look at my feet, I then realize that he is a faun, not an elf.

Before I know it, I'm dragged off to get a weapon, the elf there gives me a scythe about as big as me. I hope I never use it. Then I go get an outfit. They give me a jumpsuit. What the heck? And then I'm dragged back to Luke's room.

"I see you're all ready." Luke says inspecting me.

"I guess. What are we doing exactly?" I ask.

He smiles. "Well, my friend, you came at a good time. We are invading the castle." I gasp. Has it been most of the book already? It can't have been. But has it? Or is my book shorter than I thought? I feel a hand on my shoulder and look up. I'm surprised into meeting his eyes.

"And you'll be up front with me."

"WHAT!?"

Natalia walks over to us. "Excuse me? She's the newbie, the rookie. What is she going to be doing up front?"

"She'll be helping me confront the King and Queen."

While they're arguing I shrink away. This can't be happening. No no no no. I thought I had more time. They don't even know who I am. Should I tell them? What would I say? "Hey guys so not that I've been lying but this is a book that I fell into, so I know all your personal secrets and um, yeah." I don't think that would work out. As I stand there trying not to bite my fingernails all off (It's a bad habit. Especially when I don't have anything to fidget with), I listen to the argument cooling off. I guess I'm going with Luke.

As we approach the castle, I notice that there are barely any guards.

"Most of their guards and knights were people of magic. So, they lost most of them when all this started. Stupid."

As she says this Natalia doesn't even look at me. We creep into the castle, just me and Luke. I felt twitchy, but maybe that was because I was going to confront a King and Queen. We enter the throne room. There's no one here. Except their royal Majesties.

The Queen had long beautiful black hair, a glittering crown embedded with all kinds of jewels, and a shimmering purple gown. The king had dazzling blonde hair and a different but similar crown sat upon his head. He was dressed in red, blue, and gold.

"Queen Natasha and King Benedict! It is time to stand down and let



someone else take the throne! Or change and we will let you stay.”

They look at him like he’s crazy. Not totally saying I disagree though.

“Are you threatening us? We are your King and Queen. You have no power over us.” Benedict says. “Guards!”

Natasha yells, “Arrest them!”

Nothing happens.

“I said arrest them!” Still nothing happens.

“You never noticed that you lost all your guards? Fools. They were all of the mythical race. So, you have almost none.” I could see the glimmer in Luke's eyes. And the realization in theirs. He had them beat.

“But you don’t even have someone to take our place.” Natasha sniffed.

“Yes. No one worthy enough.” says the King.

Luke smiled. “Oh but of course we do. Meet Queen Charlotte!”

I freeze. “WHAT!!” screamed everyone but him.

“I’m just kidding. It’s going to be someone else I trust. And I know you couldn't do it Lottie. Considering you’re from another world.”

I gasp. “You know?”

Benedict gets up and walks over to us. “Everyone does. The moment you fell in here. We don’t really know how we knew. It was just a feeling. Although I don’t know why the book let you in. You didn’t really help at all...”

Now Natasha gets up. “Ben! That’s rude. She did more than she thinks. She just doesn’t know it.”

“And doesn’t have to know it.” He answers.

I look at all of them. “Wait, excuse me? What? What the heck is happening?”

They look at each other. Luke comes over to me. “In time you will know, or maybe never. But now it’s time for you to go.”

“Goodbye, Charlotte. Thank you for what you have done.” Luke and the Queen nod and also say goodbye.

“But what did I do-”

I wake up. That wasn’t a dream. Was it? No.

“Lottie! Breakfast’s ready!” Oh well. At least there’s a sequel.

## Take That Jump

“Look out!” Yelled Thorn, “Commander Phantasia! Where’s the Cataractas!?!”

“Commander Cereus and Cataractas, are working on another fire in town!” Phantasia shouted, “All of them?!?”

“There are multiple fires around town, Commander Thorn! The Miscreants are all over the town!” Phantasia yelled irritated.

“LAPIS, MAKE SURE THERE’S STONE AROUND THE BURNING HOUSES, AND NATURAS, MOVE THE RIVERS INTO THE DIRECTION OF THE HOUSES!” Thorn sternly ordered, the stone fairies try their best to contain the fire and with all their might the nature fairies moved the rivers into the direction of the houses, but no matter how hard they tried, all the fires were still burning.

“What do we do Thorn?!?” Phantasia asked, but before he could answer a large blast of energy absorbed all the fires and put them out, and a girl with glowing purple hair and wings was the one who done that.

“Amethyst!” He excitedly exclaimed, “That was amazing, as usual!” And as usual she shyly smiled, “It wasn’t that great.”

“What are you talking about? That was awesome, girl!” Phantasia cuts in, “Three cheers for Amethyst, HIP HIP HOORAY!!!” A crowd gathers around Amethyst and starts loudly cheering, “Hey, Amethyst this time will you join us on our expedition?”

Someone in the crowd said, “Yeah, Amethyst! We found the main camp and we could really use some help!” Another person said, “Stop being lazy and go help us defeat the Miscreants!” Cereus yelled,

“Wait, how’d you get here?” Phantasia questioned,

“I have a ‘let’s bother Amethyst’ sense.” Cereus jokes. Phantasia just shrugged it off.

“Calm down everyone, no need for a crowd.” Thorn tries lucklessly to calm down the crowd.

“I-I need to g-go.” Amethyst quickly whispered and flew away as fast as possible from the now confused crowd.

She quickly slams her front door, and sits helplessly on the ground, “Finally.” She sighs, “Peace and quiet.” Suddenly, there was a soft knock



on the door, “Who is it?” Amethyst asked, “You know who it is.” Thorn said,

“Go away.” She despairs,

“Are you okay? You flew faster than last time.” He chuckles,

“I said ‘go away.’”

“Are you sure you want me to go away?” He questioned; Amethyst remained silent.

“Come on Ames,” Thorn softly said, “Open the door.”

Amethyst gives in to the temptation, and opens the door, “Fine.” She grumbled, “You can come in.”

He walks in and Amethyst closes the door behind him, “If you’re going to say the same lecture about ‘putting myself out there’ you can forget it.” She said, “I can’t, no matter how hard I try, I can’t.”

Her voice cracked, and it felt like tears were about to fall, but Thorn just grinned,

“What? What’s so funny!?!”

“Well, I was here to bring you a batch of cookies Mary made. Your favorite.” He says waving a bag of cookies in front of him, “Come on.” He grabs her hand, “Let’s eat this on the roof, just like old times.” He opens the door and they both fly up to the roof.

“Wow!” Thorn exclaimed, admiring the view of the whole town. “I almost forgot what it looked like up here!”

“Look there’s the Great Bell of Fae, and the town hall... Oh, and that’s my house!” Thorn said, pointing at a small (kind of sad) cottage, “Ya know, since I’m the leader of the Naturas, I’m heading on the expedition to get rid of the Main Miscreant camp. Some of us might not make it back.” He says with a serious look on his face, “We could really use your help.”

Amethyst looks away from him. “Here. A cookie.” He lightly smiles. Amethyst slowly grabbed the cookie and looked away from him again, “I have to tell you something, Thorn.” She said, he looks intently at her, “We both know I have the power to get rid of the Miscreants, but... I’m scared.”

Her voice cracks again, but this time she couldn’t stop the tears from falling, “I know you believe that I can do it, but what if I mess it up? What if I end up making things worse than it already is.” She turns to look at his face, and he gazes at her with a soft expression, “What if I fail?” She whispered, and stares at Thorn for his answer/

“Do you remember flight school? You were so scared to jump off that cliff. You thought you were going to die.” Thorn responded.

“Yes, but that’s no—”

“You told me your teacher said this, ‘You have to take a risk, because

if you never take that risk, you are never going to fly’.” He said, “And do you remember what you did after?”

“I-I flew.” She whispered.

“Higher than anyone else in the class. Everyone was so impressed.” Thorn chuckles,

“Amethyst, it’s your choice to decide, only you can make this choice, if you’re going to stay safe on the ground...”

Thorn stands up, “Or take that jump.” He heads towards the edge of the roof, and the Great Bell of Fae starts ringing, “I have to go now, but think about it. See ya.” Then he falls backwards and flies away.

It was tomorrow nightfall, Lapis, Naturas, Cataracta, and the Donatus, the whole Caelestis commission, was getting ready to make their move, “There they are.” Thorn said sternly.

“Cataracta! Let’s put out the fire. Swiftly!” Cereus shouted, “Yes sir!”

“Lapis! LET’S MAKE THEM HIT ROCK HARD!” Phantasia cheered, “Yes ma’am!”

“Naturas! We will show them we will not let them spread wildfire!” Thorn shouted,

“Yes sir!” The Naturas said, Thorn turns behind him,

“Are you ready, Ames?”

“Yes.” She says confidently,

“And D-donatus!” She stumbled, “LETS SHOW THEM THAT WE WILL NOT BE BURNED, T-THAT WE WILL USE OUR GIFTS TO SHINE BRILLIANTLY!!!” She yelled,

“YES MA’AM!!!” The crowd hollered in excitement.

“CHARGE!” Thorn yells.

Blades and spears crossed each other rapidly, arrows were flying across the dark midnight skies, and the magic that Amethyst wielded was as strong as Thorn had always told her.

“AMETHYST! TAKE OUT THE MAIN CAMPSITE!” Phantasia shouted.

Amethyst was getting ready for a powerful blast when an arrow pierced her wing. She let out a scream of pain before falling.

“AMETHYST!”

Just before she could have hit the ground Thorn swiftly caught her, “Are you okay?” He said.

“Yeah... Ouch!” The arrow teared her wing just enough so she couldn’t fly, “I can’t get a good shot if I can’t fly.” She whimpered.

She tried to get up again, but Thorn stopped her, “I’ll fly you up there.”

Amethyst nods, and he tosses her on his shoulders. They flew speedily, Amethyst used her magic to make sure no arrows hit them,



which didn't really matter because Thorn dodged most of them.

"We're almost to the spot!" Then suddenly Thorn let out a scream of pain.

"Thorn!" The edge of his wing was sliced by an arrow. "Come on, Thorn. Just hang on a little bit longer!" Amethyst encouraged, "We're almost there!"

They were slowly lowering by the second, "I don't think I can fly much longer..." Thorn gasped.

"You have too! Or maybe..." An idea popped into her head, "Thorn." She said seriously,

"Huh?" She was starting to stand on his shoulders,

"Goodbye." With all her force in her legs, she leaps forward and blasts all the magic she can possibly conjure, as fast as she can, and the main camp exploded in many brilliant shades of purple and blue.

I did it, I actually did it. That was her last thought before falling toward the ground.

She opened her eyes to see the inside of the hospital, and Thorn, Phantasia, and Cereus, right next to the hospital bed.

"Amie!" Phantasia and Thorn said at the same time, while Cereus just gave the 'oh good' face.

"Looks like you're still alive." Cereus scoffs.

"You didn't need to come if you're going to just insult her!" Phantasia scolds.

"How else would I have fun then? I have nothing else to do, unlike you." He slyly says,

"You—"

"Guys be quiet, she just woke up." Thorn scolds stopping Phantasia mid punch, "Are you okay? Does your wing hurt?" Thorn asks, "Yeah I'm fine, but what happened after I exploded the Miscreants main camp?"

"All the Miscreants tried to run after you destroyed their camp. There are still a few of them out there, but we caught most of them." He says, and then a sad look formed on his face, "You scared me." He whispered.

"Hmm?"

He looked at me like I was oblivious, "You can't just say 'goodbye' and jump off someone like that! If you didn't somehow land in a giant field of peonies, you could hav..."

She settled her hand on his, "I'm sorry I scared you, but I had to." She spoke, "You did say I had to 'take that jump.'"

He chuckled, "I didn't mean literally."

There was large silence between Thorn and Amethyst, "If you two X

There was large silence between Thorn and Amethyst, “If you two kiss, I am going to LITERALLY throw up.” Cereus gagged repulsed, and Thorn and Amethyst cheeks turned hot red.

“Wait, O ME GOSH, are you guys actually together!!!” Phantasia squealed.

“N-no!” Amethyst stuttered, turning redder than the brightest apple.

“Just friends. JUST. FRIENDS!” Thorn exclaimed.

“~Alright~” Phantasia sings, “Ame-Thorn.” She whispered.

Before Thorn could make his objection to that, one of the water fairies rushed in to tell Cereus something, “What!?!” Cereus shouted outraged,

“What, What?” Phantasia questioned.

“Somehow the Miscreants escaped and has set fire to most of the town!” He turned towards the water fairy, “WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR, A RAINBOW?!? GO AND PUT OUT ALL THE FIRES!”

The poor water fairy scampered away.

“I better go before this incompetence becomes contagious.” He pulls Phantasia’s arms, “You too.” Cereus grumbles, “You kids have fuuuun.” Phantasia sings, and Cereus slammed the door behind him.

Thorn starts making his way to the door too, “Wait, you’re going too? Weren’t your wings wounded?” Amethyst asked worried.

“Yep, my wings were injured, but nature fairies heal fast, so they’re all ready to go.” Thorn reassures her.

“Well, if you’re going, I’m going too!”

“Sure.” He answers.

“You’re probably going to say I shouldn’t and I should rest, but, if you’re going... Wait did you say sure?”

“If we work together like we did last time, then I’m sure we’ll be just fine.” He said with his back turned from me, “I just have to ask you one thing.”

“Hmm?” He turned back to me and held out hand,

“Are you ready to take that jump?”





Janelle Cheatham-Cadeau  
Middle School



## Untitled

I stood on the bridge leading to the ship which gleamed in the sunlight. It looked very impressive for a machine that came with a 70% chance of death attached, although I had a feeling that it wouldn't look so great if it exploded while shooting off into the atmosphere. You might be thinking, "Wow, so negative. Why'd you even sign up for this job in the first place?" which was a fair question since I was asking myself the same thing at that moment.

You see, I didn't want to be an astronaut. My family wasn't doing so well financially when I signed up for all this. I had been fired from my job due to "being insubordinate" but I think it was just because my boss hated me. We needed a way to pay the bills, so when I saw this private company was still doing trips to Mars I thought, "What the heck. I'll most likely just be put on the research team due to my work experience. What's the worst that could happen anyway?"

Word of advice. If you ever have to ask yourself that question, just save yourself some time and walk away. Because- and you can believe me, I'm speaking from experience- the worst that can happen is so much worse than you could possibly think. Me standing here about to board a flying death machine to the stars is a prime example of that.

I've decided. There's no way I'm risking my life just for some cash that I may never even get to collect. This is just too crazy. I ran back to the giant building I had just come out of and started pounding on the doors.

"Let me in!" I cried, "I don't want to do this anymore!" Finally, my boss and the CEO of the company, Mr. Soares (Pronounced soars, because of course it is) came running up to meet me from the other side.

"What's wrong?" he asked, clearly surprised as to why I was out of the ship 5 minutes to take off, "Is something wrong with the controls on the ship?"

"I don't want to do this anymore," I yelled, "Please, let me in, I want to live to see my family again!"

"Hm," he replied calmly, "I see." He reached over to the door handle, and a wave of relief washed over me. I would love to see

the ground again! He reached for the handle... and promptly locked the door. I just stared in disbelief. I tried the other handle on the opposite side, only to confirm that it was, in fact, locked.

“Come on Mr. Soares,” I said, the fear evident in my voice, “this isn’t the time for jokes.”

“No joke,” he replied nonchalantly, “you see, it says in your contract that you owe us one attempted trip in a spaceship to our desired destination, which is Mars in this case. See?” He snapped his fingers, and someone quickly brought out the contract with my signature in bold letters at the bottom. And in really small fine print were the words, “Those who sign above must grant all who are involved one attempted space trip to a desired destination.”

“So,” Mr. Soares continued, “unfortunately, I cannot let you go. Have a nice flight!” He turned away from me and started in the opposite direction.

“But..” I begged, with hot tears rolling down my cheeks, “But I could die! W..wouldn’t that look really bad on company records?”

“Can I ask you a question, Thomas?” Mr. Soares inquired, his back still turned, “Did you find it strange when the day after you got fired from your job our flier mysteriously showed up on your front doorstep?”

“H..how did you know I was fired?” I asked, still shaking with tears.

‘And did you ever think it was a little weird?’ Mr. Soares continued, ignoring my question, “When you called the number on the flier, and we immediately accepted you, no wait, no application process, nothing?”

‘I d..don't understand,’ I said, shaking my head, “I just thought you guys were really desperate for people-”

“Desperate?” Mr. Soares turned and laughed in my face, “Us? No, dear Thomas. Our company targets desperate people. Do you know how many people get fired every day? How many people live in poverty, trying their hardest to pay their bills and feed their families, who would die for an opportunity like this? We look for them, the poor souls, down on their luck and looking for even just a little spare change to help them get back on their feet, and we send them the flier. We don't even need an application process



because those IDIOTS never think, ‘this is suspicious, maybe I should look more into it’. They just call the number, and we send them to space without a care in the world.”

He took a step closer. “Poor people are everywhere. The homeless litter the streets with their cardboard boxes and shopping carts like a living eyesore. Nobody will notice if a few of them go missing every week. Nobody will care if they are used like mice in a lab experiment that will eventually benefit the entirety of society.”

“And that family you were talking about earlier? They have already been taken care of. We don't need more nuisances littering our streets once you are gone.”

Mr. Soares was now close enough for me to see the gray hairs on his beard. How long had he been doing this for? How many unsuspecting people had been killed like guinea pigs in some cruel experiment for just trying to keep the lights on? He made me sick.

“So no,” Mr. Soares continued, “We are not the desperate ones. You were the desperate one. Now, you will die, just like all the others.”

He finished with a fake smile while he snapped his fingers, and I could hear the buzz of a button that had been pushed. I felt the platform I was on retract beneath my feet. I stumbled back a little too fast and fell on my butt, almost falling off the already shortening platform. I crab walked backwards on my hands and feet and fell into the compartment in the ship I was supposed to be residing in as the ship took off. Immediately the door slammed shut and I could hear the countdown to lift off start.

“5...4...3...”

And as I stared in horror at the giant company building, the last sight I ever got of Earth, I saw my boss, Mr. Soares, smiling and waving as the giant rocket shot into the sky with me trapped inside.

## Lovesick

I used to think you were a god.

I hate you with a burning passion that engulfs and enrages me, setting my heart and mind on fire with a blazing flame so searing it fogs up my mind that I'm not able to think straight, eyes clouded with a red smoke. But at the same time, I was deeply and utterly in love with you like I had never loved someone before and would do anything for you from heaven to hell, whether you wanted me to worship you and fall to my knees, kissing you at your beloved soles and feet, or wanted me to end my precious life with my very own hands. Even if you broke me so deeply, it shattered my heart into millions of broken glass pieces, only to be fixed back up again and hung in a museum for all to gaze upon. Even if you left me with scars that bled so deep that the wound won't ever heal fully, eternally bleeding and suffering through it all. Even though it is all because of you, I will be forever traumatized and insecure to ever even think of having anything with anyone in the unforeseeable future and am quite terrified of even thinking of having any kind of relationship at all with anyone but you.

I loved you so much that it infuriates me from how intoxicating it felt, and no words will ever be able to describe how much I had hopelessly and utterly fallen for you. Sometimes I would look at you, and even though I loathe your very being and existence, I must admit that you're like a figure who simply stepped out of my midsummer dreams. I get nostalgia remembering the memories of how we used to talk and laugh about the future, stolen glances across the room and gum wrapper hearts, paper stars and folded cranes, sticky note butterflies which all seemed to come alive, crawling into my skin and making me shake whenever I caught your glance at me. Long stares caught but never looking away, sweet gazes and whispers which kept me up all night. Oh, where did they all disappear to?

At times you look as if you were built out of marble, one of the statues I would gaze at until my eyes bore into their heads, until I could remember every curve and sharp line of the jaw, each dip in the cheeks from your dimples, and the way your eyes would flutter shut, brows



scrunched up in focus. If I wanted to sculpt you, I could do it without even having to open an eye anymore.

Your voice and your skin and bright dark night sky eyes and your statue-like figure, perfectly tilted nose, and the way your delicate veins and fingers decorate your hands as they gracefully move across paper. Fascinates me so much that I want to write about you and draw and paint you across as many canvases and sketch paper I have, day after day for years on end, until my canvases are filled to the brim, and I have no more paper left, to which I have to resort to engraving my memories of you on the walls, the floor, the ceiling of this box called life in which I am encased within. Boring your sight into my brain, my mind, my heart, and soul, and if I run out, I'll use my own blood to draw you across my naked body, cutting shards so deep again and again until nothing is left of me but dust and air. As they say, "Woe is me!" As to be loved by myself, I would certainly give up everything I have in this miserable world. And yet I realized, I had hopelessly fallen for someone who will never love me back.

I remember how you would purse your lips and your eyes looked as if they contained the entire galaxy, shining as they looked up at me, and I, for once in my life, felt loved and appreciated, like I was one of the few billion stars in the precious eyes which you held. And your freckles made it seem like your eyes couldn't contain all the galaxies and asteroids within them, which overflowed and spilled onto your face instead, all over your cheeks as if stardust were blown across them.

And I loved you, I truly did, and still am deeply and utterly obsessed with you so much that even though I pretend as if I don't care anymore, deep down, I am still too truly scared to admit that I have never moved on from my profound attachment for you. But I am supposed to hate you, despise your guts and your very being and existence. You tricked me with your false hope, fake words, and innuendos, making me look as if a fool stumbling over from his own two feet. You told me you loved me, so why didn't you?

My emotions feel intoxicating, as if like a drug or a string of cobwebs hovering over me, engulfing me in their presence. Yet I can't get enough of it, even if I know it will be the death of me. It feels as if it's worth it sometimes—a price of pain to pay for this blinding pleasure.

You remind me of a flower. So tempting, beckoning me to come closer. But then, you fade away. Your skin as soft as orchids, your lips are the color of azalea. As sweet as a cherry blossom. Astoundingly beautiful. But the fruit is bitter.

Use me like a drug, and tell me you love me, because I know I love you. All or nothing, I'll give you all of me, and I will worship you.

Now here I am, stuck between a rock and a hard place, headbanging myself against these walls again and again, lost in a daze and walking as if in a trance, suffocating within this deep endless ocean that is pulling me down, deeper, and deeper. I can't swim or get out. How can I? I don't know the answer myself. I am stuck within this sea of trauma, and I don't know if the light I see, and am trying to escape and swim away to, is life or death. Which one am I being tortured with? Which one is the correct answer, for me to choose and run away to?

It felt as if I were trapped in the deepest depths of the suffocating and dark, once mesmerizing, vast blue ocean I had once so tremendously admired. It was as though I was using up all my willpower and strength to try to swim up to the surface to take a long-awaited fresh breath of air, but an unknowing entity dragged me back down into an even deeper, terrifying, and unknown abyss of cold darkness. The more I fought and struggled against it, the further my body was pulled down, making everything feel numb.

The millions of people I have crossed paths with, even for a brief moment, in this life. Oh, I have met all these beings, but how can I still not shake off my moments with you? So many people I could share the same memories and precious moments with, talking about the stars.

But how could I ever erase your galaxy from within my Milky Way? How could I ever crush the stardust you left within me—the last remains and traces of your once being that resided next to me? You are a drug, my god, my everything.

Until you weren't.

A white noise slowly fills up the sea I was once tortured in, and it doesn't feel like I am suffocating anymore. Did I finally reach the light? Have I finally reached the goal I have been swimming up towards this entire time, desperately craving?

No. I have simply realized that the light was simply a mirror, a reflection of the other world. Your very being has invigorated me.

This was a short period of my life where I just spent a fleeting moment in an alternate universe that was as if looking down into a puddle and seeing another blurry reflection of myself somewhere buried among the glittering stars scattered across the ink-black canvas we call the night sky. The hundreds of comets and the glistening starlight were simply the light I was trying to reach, but it was too far, too blurry for my vision to realize it. And the top of the flowing water, the top of the sea, where I could finally swim up and take a deep breath for air, was simply a flowing silk sheet, trapping and encasing me within this realm which I

call my life, reflecting the galaxy which is me—the only possible ball of light within this abyss of nothingness.

When I look below, at the hands that are grabbing me by the ankles, slowly dragging me down into the deep depths below, I see my past. My past, trying with all of their might and strength to drag me down along with them, attempting to make me one of theirs, forever stuck within an infinite loop of trauma and disaster. Forcing me to dive into a bottomless pool of murky water, and once it swallows me whole, the more I struggle to go up for a breath of fresh air, the more I sink below instead, caught in a whirlwind of unwanted memories.

I am hit with this sudden realization, and begin to comprehend and grasp the fact that, what use is loving a person so much. I would pour out my heart and soul to them, giving them my life, when I cannot even love myself? I do not trust myself with my own existence and mind, so how can I trust someone else with it? Looking back, I find myself a fool from my own idiocy.



## Jurassic Jungle: Isle of Secrets

### The wreck

“Land Ho!” Jake shouted as he spotted an island in the distance. His grandfather, Nelson, was the last person on the island, along with his great uncle Kenji.

“Finally. I made it.” Jake's plan was to find out what really happened on this mysterious island, once and for all. Jake stumbled across the boat, struggling to find his footing as the waves began to slam against the boat as they neared the shore. They dropped anchor a little ways off shore, and Jake swam to shore, followed by his best friend James. He trudged up the beach and found a road not too far from the water.

“Come on, let's see if this goes to the main road in the park, and then maybe we can find something.” As the two walked up the road, they noticed that there were a variety of markings and arrows carved into a wooden pole on the road that definitely weren't made by the park. “I'd say that they made these while they were here.” Jake said, imagining his grandfather placing the pole and using a tool to carve it, marking where their constructions were. He saw what looked like a treehouse carved on the very top, with an arrow pointing to the left into the trees, “It looks like there is a treehouse to the east of here, through the jungle; should we go there first or try the visitor center?”

“I think we need to go back to the boat and get supplies, before we go into the jungle full of ancient lizards that want to eat us.” James said sarcastically.

“That is probably the best idea. Come on, let's go.”

Dark clouds started forming in the distance as they hurried down the beach. “We'd better hope that storm misses us, or we'll be toast”.

“Literally!” James shouted, pointing to the horizon as lightning ripped through the clouds, with thunder rumbling through the clouds. They rushed down the beach and dove into the water, swimming to the boat.

“The wind is picking up! We need to cast off before the waves get too rough!” Jake shouted over the wind. The waves started crashing against the sides of the boat, knocking the crew around. The boat cast



off and anchored a little ways off shore, where the waves were not as big. Everyone started to calm down as the waves slowed to a standstill.

“Wait...” Jake said, “If the waves are getting smaller that fast...”

“Then one will be bigger!” James screamed, pointing behind Jake. Jake turned around, and saw a massive wave, and began to shout “Duck and Cov-” but it was too late. The wave crashed into the boat, sending it veering off to the left, careening towards some rocks. The boat slammed into the rocks and sent James flying across the boat. He hit his head and fell unconscious. A gas canister flew off the boat and crashed into the rocks. The boat hit the rocks again and sparks flew, lighting the gasoline on fire. The fire spread throughout the boat, heading towards the engine room. Black smoke began to blow out of the windows, and then the boat exploded. Jake flew off the boat and landed in the water. Jake was barely conscious as he swam towards the shore. Once he could feel the sand beneath him, he crawled up the beach, his vision blacked out, and collapsed. Jake opened his eyes and sat up. He looked out to the water and saw the wreck of the boat bumping against the rocks with the swells. He scanned the wreck, looking for something scavengeable and saw James lying on the rocks. Jake sprinted down the beach towards the water and swam out to the rocks. He grabbed James by the arm and dragged him through the water towards the beach. He dragged him up the beach and laid him down on the sand. Jake passed out and collapsed again. Jake woke up to James shaking him.

“What was that?!?!?” James shouted,

“We almost DIED!” James started laughing and sat down next to Jake.

“You saved me,” James said, staring out at the water in disbelief. “The last thing I remember is hitting my head on the rocks. You dragged me onto the beach.”

“Yeah. I swam to the beach and collapsed. Then when I woke up, I saw you on the rocks, and swam out to get you. I couldn’t just leave you.”

“Thanks Jake. But there is one problem.”

“And what is that?”

“Now I’m stuck here too!” James said, laughing. “But at least I’m alive, and besides, we came here to discover the mystery of this island, so then how better than to try and escape like your grandfather did?”

“You’re right. Let’s do this. I’m glad that you are here with me, I would hate to be here alone. Plus, you have a sense of humor, so maybe I won’t go insane!” Jake laughed.

“Yup. Just us. Two best friends, stranded on an island. Man. Hey, do you remember Mrs. Grandil, our 7th grade history teacher?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“She said that history will repeat itself if we don’t learn about it. And here we are, stuck on an island, just like your grandfather, history repeating itself, because we tried to learn about it!”

“The irony!” Jake said, laughing. “We should probably get going; maybe we can go to where that treehouse was. I think that’s where Grandpa Nelson said they lived.” Jake said, his face lighting up as he thought about his grandfather building a treehouse.

“Yeah, that sounds like a plan.” James stood up and followed Jake into the jungle.

As the sun set and darkness began to fall, they pushed through the thicker trees and overgrowth, and saw a run-down treehouse in a clearing. The treehouse was connected to a bunch of other trees with rope bridges, and underneath what seemed to be the main tree there was what looked like a dirt bike, but it was rusty and dirty. “That thing looks like it hasn’t been touched in decades!” James exclaimed.

“That’s probably because my grandfather was the last person on this island, and that was over fifty years ago.” Jake responded.

“Really?”

“Yeah, my grandfather was only a teenager when he came here, then he got home, grew up, married my grandmother, had my father, who had to grow up, and then married my mom, who then had me, and now I’m a teenager too.”

“I guess that is a long time. Wow.”

As James stared into space, realizing how long it had been since a human had been on the island, they walked over to the rickety old rope ladder to the treehouse and climbed up. Inside, they found a round device that was too old and rusty to identify. “What do you think this is?” James asked.

“Probably something that has to do with tracking dinosaurs I bet. Jake replied, shrugging.

James continued to mess with the device, trying to figure out what it was, and Jake climbed down the ladder. He saw a bamboo pole running from the treehouse window out into the jungle and followed it. After about three hundred feet, he saw that the pole led to a stream, but it did not reach the water, it instead looked like something knocked it down. Jake grabbed the pole and slid it into the other poles and laid it in the water; the water started to flow down the pole. Jake ran alongside it until he came to the treehouse. He was about to climb up the ladder when he



heard a blood curdling scream from inside. He climbed up and saw James sitting by the window, soaked.

“I-i-its s-s-so c-c-cold!” James shouted; Jake could barely understand him because he was shivering so much.

“Sorry,” Jake said, “I thought there would be some kind of valve.”

“T-t-there w-was, b-b-but it-t-t w-was o-op-pen.”

“Ok, I’ll start a fire to get you warmed up.”

By the time Jake got the fire started, night had fallen. Crickets were chirping while Jake and James sat by the fire. Jake saw a berry bush on the edge of the clearing and went to go get berries. He ventured a little further into the forest to find some more. James was thoroughly dried out by the time Jake got back. “Are you sure those are safe?” James asked.

“My grandpa told me about berries that grew near here that they ate sometimes, and these look like how he described them, so I think they are safe.”

“I think’ is good enough; I’m starving! Give me some of those berries!”

“Alright.” Jake said as he threw some berries to James.

Jake and James sat by the fire for about an hour and then decided to go to bed.

In the morning, Jake trudged out of the clearing to find some more berries and hopefully some other things to eat. He walked through the jungle and saw some fruits on a tree. He climbed the tree, grabbed the fruits, and climbed down. Jake brought his fruits back to the clearing and grabbed some berries on the way. “What kind of fruit is that?” James asked.

“Dunno, they look like mangoes.” Jake said with a shrug. The two friends sat down at the foot of the treehouse ladder and ate the fruit. Afterwards, they went into the jungle to explore. They had been walking for a while when they stumbled upon a tree with the letters AB carved into it. At the foot of the tree was a skeleton that looked like whoever it was had been dead for a long time. The two looked at each other, horrified. There were thoughts that were beyond words that passed between them.

“Ok, you said that both your grandfather and your great uncle made it off the island, right?” James said, shaking and staring at the skeleton.

“Yeah, why?”

James gulped. “If both of them made it off the island, who was that?”

Suddenly, a scratchy, gnarled growl echoed in the distance. “What was that?” Jake said, climbing a tree. “I can’t see anything.” He called

down to James. Then they heard the roar again, closer this time.

“That sounded really close!” James shouted up to Jake. “Jake?” The ground started to tremble.

“Uhh,” Jake started, as trees began to fall, as if something very big was crashing through them.

“Something REALLY BIG is coming this way!” Jake said, as he jumped out of the tree. He grabbed James by the arm and yanked him away from the tree. Jake sprinted through the trees with James close behind him. The ground began to shake more furiously, and the roar sounded again, seemingly just behind them. As they sprinted through the trees, all of a sudden, a dinosaur that Jake had never seen before, burst through the trees behind them,

“WHAT IS THAT!?!?” James shouted.

“I HAVE NO IDEA! I’LL FIGURE IT OUT LATER! FOR NOW, RUN!!!”

The two ran towards the treehouse, trees whipping past them. The dinosaur’s footsteps thundered behind them, making it hard for them to keep their balance. They ran down into a dried riverbed and found a hollow log. They crawled inside, attempting to hide. The dinosaur sniffed around for a little while and came to the log they were hiding in. It put its face to the log and sniffed it, spraying wood chips and mucus on Jake and James, and then left.

The two crawled out of the log. “That was a gigantosaur, I think. Ok, it’s gone.” Jake said, his voice shaking. They warily ran to the treehouse. “There is something mysterious going on this island. The skeleton, the dinosaur, the tree. This island is shrouded in mystery here, and I want to solve it.” Jake said, his face darkening.

“This is an island of secrets.”



## Untitled

Listen, I may technically be a god or goddess. Is it God, no it is goddess, right? Anyways, my mother is Demeter, which sounds really awesome, but she is sometimes a real pain. My father is the all-powerful god, Zeus. He isn't a great father, but he is the only one I have, so I guess I have to appreciate him. My full sister is Persephone, and ever since she got kidnapped by Hades it feels like I don't have my sister anymore. Anyhow, let's get to my story.

"Get up," I hear my mother say.

I growl from underneath my pillow, "What!"

"Now, Sage! You find out what you are the goddess of today! Aren't you excited at all?!" she shouts, as she lifts the pillow off of my head, and hits me with it a couple of times.

"OK! Yes, mother, I am, but today is my 18th birthday! If you don't mind, I would love to sleep in, so I can be perfectly rested for the ceremony!" I snap, taking the pillow from her hands.

"Do you seriously want me to call your father?" she asked because she knew I hated it when my father was angry at me.

"No," I said plainly.

"Exactly," she said, "Now get ready, Sage! The Ceremony is at 12:00. Be there dressed and ready!"

"Whatever," I said, getting out of bed. I put on my beautiful navy dress. It went down to the middle of my thighs, and it had a long black piece of tulle extending to the ground. The tulle is only on the back of the dress, none of it in the front.

It's 12:00, and I found my mother just in time. My father stood up on the stage-like platform on Mount Olympus.

"Gods!" All the gods suddenly stopped talking.

"Wow, all the gods really do respect my father, and they listen to him. Maybe I could be like my father someday. I could be a leader," I thought to myself before my father continued.

"We are gathered here to search for my daughter's inner self. We must help her find what she can control," my father started, saying, "Sage, please, come up here, and stand with me, my daughter."

I stood up on the stage with my father. All of the gods and goddesses

were watching me, ready to begin the chant.

“Ready, gods!” my father shouted, “BEGIN!”

Everyone started humming. I had to say a chant that was posted on the podium in front of me because, and I am sure of it, my mother put it there. I guarantee you that she thought I would forget the chant I had to say. I totally forgot it, but that is beside the point!

I began to speak, “By all the gods, please, help me! I need to find my inner love, life, and happiness. Let the gods inside of me. Find a lifeful spirit!” I shouted, and then I continued, “Gods! What is my immortal passion?”

The gods said, “Your immortal passion is...”

All the gods suddenly opened their eyes and stared at me in horror.

“What? What is it? Mother?” I paused and looked at my mother still in horror, “Father?” I looked away from my mother and saw my father’s disappointed face, “What is it? What am I the goddess of?” I continued to plead.

“Time,” I heard from an unknown voice.

My father looked away from me and stated, “Hades.”

“Hades?” I asked. I have never met my uncle, probably due to the bad blood between them. Hades, as you might begin to realize, is the god of the underworld, and he is the one God I hate in this world most, as he did steal my one and only sister away from me. “That would make me the forbidden goddess. That is absolutely impossible!”

“It’s not my dear daughter,” my father stared at me with a look of fear, “I knew that a forbidden goddess had to come very soon. The world needs the only forbidden goddess to live. I also knew that one of my daughters had to be a forbidden goddess because I am one of three gods that can have a forbidden daughter.”

“That is definitely true, brother,” Hades spoke up after my father’s long ramble, “Oh, by the way, my dear brother, aren’t you going to introduce me to my beautiful niece?”

“Hades this is Sage. Sage this is Hades. There you guys met.”

“You know that’s not what I meant, Zeus,” Hades responded.

“Hold on just a minute! Why do humans need a forbidden goddess, of time, that is?” I asked, interjecting the two brothers.

My father began, “The humans need to be judged by their sins and their fate decided, whether they get into Elysium or not” then he whispered in my ear, “Otherwise they’ll all go to Hades, and the deep dark depths of pain and suffering in the underworld.”

“I can hear you, brother, and you know it!” Hades told my father with a hint of anger in his voice.

“Anyways,” I interrupted the bickering, “What kind of powers can a



forbidden goddess have?" I asked my father with curiosity.

"They can certainly do quite a lot, my daughter, and you will learn that in the time that comes or stands still. Whichever you choose."

One month had passed, and Hades was the only one that could help me harness the power of time due to the fact he controlled the underworld and the fate of the souls of the humans that I would have to send there. I have absolutely no idea why he is willing to help me or why he wants to. Maybe it is because my father refused to help me, or it is because Zeus despises the fact Hades would be helping me.

I never thought I would say this, but I think that Hades and I have been really getting along, and now we seem like family. We are powerful and so amazingly strong that we have a chance to destroy the world! In the short time that we have gotten to know each other, Hades has taught me so many things.

I am honestly hoping that my father is getting angrier and angrier the more I am around Hades and regrets the fact he refused to help train me. Hades and I have one thing in common at least, all of the gods are petrified of us. We are the only ones that can truly ruin them as we have more power over where they will end up and how they will spend eternity. The only reason they are scared of my father is because he is big, strong, mighty Zeus that killed his own father. Hades told me all about it and this explains why no one ever stands up to my father or confronts him. Only time will tell if I have to use my powers against the ones I love, but until then I'll live my life to the fullest and be known as the strong, powerful, and the only forbidden goddess.

## The Knight Trials

### Chapter 1- Brook

The Knight Trials. A series of challenges an individual needs to complete to be a knight. Centered around the three basic characteristics a knight needs to have, they are skill, strength, and bravery. I had passed the first trial of living in the woods by myself for a week relying only on survival skills. In the second trial, I had to fight 100 monsters that ranged in difficulty. I flew through this trial thanks to my amazing strength with a sword. Finally, I was on my last trial. Bravery. Even though I had no idea what challenges I'd face during the final trial, I was confident that- "Brook, are you sure you want to do this?" My father interrupted my thought. I grumbled. Of course I was ready! Why wouldn't I be?

"I don't even know why I'm allowing you to do the Knight Trials. They're a death trap!" He ran his hand through his hair nervously. I guess I could understand why my dad disliked the Knight Trials considering I lost my older brother to them, but I knew I wanted to be a knight.

I looked my father square in the eyes. "Dad. I know I want to be a knight. Plus, I already passed two of my trials so it would be a waste- "-The third trial was the one your brother died on," My father said softly.

"Oh..." I stared at my leather boots. Words couldn't express the gap I felt knowing that River couldn't be here to see me complete the Trials.

"But still, please let me try." I said. My dad nodded, awkwardly patting me on the back. "Stay safe."

Opening the door to my house, I saw a flash of electric yellow hair bounce towards me. It was my best friend, Electra. Her tan skin shone in the sunlight, and her signature yellow hair was tied up in a messy bun with a chestnut-colored wand holding it together.

"Hey!" I waved. "Hi, Brook!" she said enthusiastically. "Are you excited?"

"Yeah, but I'm also kind of nervous," I admitted. I hadn't been that nervous before, but now I could feel some butterflies in my stomach.

"Is your dad telling you not to do the Trials again? Normally, I would cast a luck spell on you, but I know you got this." She gave me a



hug.

“Brooklyn Williams, please make your way to the third trial.” I heard a voice boom loudly.

“I should go now.” I turned away from Electra. “Good luck!” She shouted after me.

I followed a trail of signs labeled ‘THIS WAY TO THIRD TRIAL’ which led to a huge cave.

“Whoa,” I breathed. Pointed stalactites lined the top of the cave while stalagmites were crowded around the bottom, making it look as if the mouth of the cave had teeth.

“Brooklyn Williams?”

I noticed a small girl with a clipboard staring at me through her sparkly purple glasses.

“You are Brooklyn Williams, yes?” She repeated.

“That’s me!”

“You may enter the cave.”

I took a deep breath, walked into the cave, and was immediately plunged into murky darkness. I searched through my woven bag, trying to find a match. After lighting a torch, I noticed that the cave had a tunnel near the back. I descended down the tunnel as cautiously as possible. It twisted and turned in a slow spiral, narrowing until eventually I had to crawl.

“Ew,” I wrinkled my nose in disgust. The floor of the tunnel was strangely slimy when I touched it. I inched along the floor of the tunnel until it led to a large cave. My torch went out with a soft crackle. Darn it. That was my only match. Surveying the area, I noticed a peculiar circle of light at the back of the cave. I moved forward slowly, flinching at how loud my footsteps were. If there was anything hiding in this cave, it definitely had heard me. As I neared the back of the cave, I saw a dark figure in the distance.

“Hello?” I called. There was also some...interesting...mist swirling around here, making it hard to see.

“Brook...” The dark figure spoke softly, as if coaxing me to come closer.

That voice- No, it couldn't be-

But I knew that voice better than my own. The figure stepped into the light, and I recognized the familiar dark blue hair and golden skin. His red eyes-I swore they were brown? -met mine.

“Brook,” My brother, River, said.

“R-river?” I stumbled forward, wanting to embrace him-

He turned away from me. “I’m so disappointed in you.”

“W-what?” I stopped, confused.

“Did you really think you would pass the third trial? That you could

do better than I had? You have the talent of a blind pig, and that's a compliment." River's harsh words sliced through the empty silence.

I sunk to the cobble floor.  
Why did I think I could do this? I'm not good enough. I'll never be good enough...

## Chapter 2- River

I slunk along the side of the cave carefully, making sure the fake version of myself couldn't spot me. Brook was on the floor, her golden locks flowing around her, and her eyes closed as if in pain.

Poor Brook. I wish I could help her. But now is not the time, I reminded myself. I knew that the only way I could interfere was if she was in danger of dying.

The Imposter River stepped up to Brook, glaring at her coldly.

"You don't deserve to be a knight..." It sneered, slowly pulling out a shimmering longsword with a navy-blue handle.

Okay, River, she's in danger now. It's your time to shine!

"BROOK, CATCH!" I lifted up the bow and launched it as hard as I could at the imposter.

The impact from the bow made the imposter fall flat on its back. I ran over to Brook as she opened her eyes. She stared at me, then back at the Imposter River. "W-who are you?" she asked shakily.

"I'm River Williams, the older brother of Brooklyn Williams. And that-" I glanced over at the imposter, who was knocked out for the time being, "-that's an imposter of me."

Brook stood still silently. "So why is there a fake version of you?"

"The third trial is about bravery, correct?" Brook gave me a swift nod. "The imposter is a being that transforms into your greatest fear, and yours was...well...a version of me that was disappointed in you."

But Brook wasn't done yet. She frowned at me. "Weren't you announced dead when you never came out of the third trial? Don't you know how sad me, and Dad have been, thinking you were DEAD?!"

"The system's rigged, so that only people of high nobility can beat the last trial. People with low nobility levels are finished off by their greatest fears, and the same fate was almost about to happen to you. There was a prophecy that you would beat this being and fix the system. I was pronounced dead because that was the only way to make sure you participated in The Knight Trials."

"So, I'm supposed to defeat your imposter?" Brook asked.

"Yeah. Oh, and this bow is for you. You're still good with a bow,



right?” I handed her the bow, along with some arrows.

“Use this to defeat your fear.”

Brook took the bow gingerly. “I don’t know if I can do this. I almost failed the first time, so how do you know I can do it now?”

I gave Brook a reassuring smile. “Because the prophecy foretold it.”

Suddenly, a giant orc came from the cave’s entrance. It was wearing worn leather armor and held a wooden club covered in solid steel spikes. It glared at me menacingly.

“River go now.” The orc grumbled.

“No! I have to help Brook defeat the imposter!” I exclaimed.

He gave me a shark-toothed smile. “River try to stay, me test new club.”

I turned to Brook. “I have to go,” I sighed.

“Y-you aren’t going to help me?”

The orc glanced over at Brook. “River go now. No help prophecy girl.”

“Why not?” she demanded.

“No more questions. Hurts brain.” The orc lumbered over to me, plucked me up as if I was as light as a feather, and started off towards the back of the cave. I struggled in his grip in a weak attempt to escape.

“Bye prophecy girl! Good luck now.” The orc gave Brook a half-wave as I helplessly hung in his clenched fist.

### Chapter 3- Brook

I watched River and the orc go until there was only me left in the cave. A feeling of betrayal bubbled in me until I felt like screaming. I couldn’t believe that River had just left me! Even if he did get picked up by a humongous orc, he didn’t even try that hard to escape! I looked around.

Great. Now what do I do?

Fingering the wooden bow River had given me, I noticed it was a stunning golden brown, with lovely flower-like engravings carved into it. In the corner of my eye, I saw the imposter twitch.

I glanced at it. “Oh yeah, aren’t I supposed to defeat you?” It responded by standing up and rubbing its head. For a second it was easy to believe that it was the real River, but then its eyes flashed red, and it lunged towards me. I ran away to see it transform into a gigantic black spider.

“Oh great. So now you’re just going to turn into all of my fears?” Its

glowing red eyes sent a chill down my spine. Also, is it just me or do spiders have way too many legs?

Come on, Brook. Just close your eyes and pretend it's a badger about to kill you. And that's exactly what I did. I closed my eyes and pretended the giant arachnid was a big, angry badger, about to kill me if I didn't fight for my life. Twang! I opened my eyes to see that my arrow had hit its target, square in one of the spider's many eyes.

"Yes!" I shouted and pumped my fist in the air, only for the spider to spin around and shoot a giant web at me. Within seconds the silk had wrapped around me and slowed me down a lot. The spider looked at me through beady eyes and crawled towards me.

Well, this is how my story ends, I thought miserably. Squashed by a giant spider.

I closed my eyes, bracing myself- "Need some help?" A voice called.

I opened my eyes in time to see River slash the spider's leg with two golden daggers.

"River? How did you get away from the orc?" I asked. "I had some help," River stared over my shoulder. I turned to see Electra holding her wand. She smiled. "I may not be good at fighting, but I do know a few spells that come in handy from time to time."

"So, what's the game plan, Brook?" River glanced at me.

"Can you two distract the spider?" I asked loudly over its angry hissing.

"You got it!" River darted forward and slashed the spider's legs.

"You can't catch me!" He taunted while Electra cast stun spells at it. Now's my chance!

I pulled back the string of my bow. The arrow soared in a graceful arc, before finally hitting its target with a satisfying Twang! The spider exploded in a cloud of red smoke.

"I-I did it!" I turned to River and Electra. "Not without some help, of course." I added.

"Are you okay?" River asked.

"Yeah," I answered. And I was okay. Because I, Brooklyn Williams, was now officially a knight.



## Non-Breath Oblige

Before I met you, I was nothing. I was just a hollow shell, stuffed with the ideologies of others. My classmates, friends, elders, teachers, and parents always disregard me. With every word that I uttered from my lips; the melody of my voice flew to deaf ears.

The words of the people I'm supposed to care for the most feel as if cold hands were clasped around my neck, squeezing tighter and tighter until there are no words left to say. They press and tear the delicate skin until there is no more energy within me to struggle.

They say that I am outspoken for good reason, and they call me unreasonable and unwise, but how can you call me such things when I do not have a voice to speak? These questions echo through my head and drown themselves in the sea that is my mind. Self-doubt and hatred flow within me like the raging waters of a restless ocean. Every question that arises is but a lonely sailboat resting on the ocean. The opinions I manifest within me are like sailors, trying to tame the raging waters aboard their vessel.

The tides of self-hatred drag the sailboats deep underwater, where they will never be seen again. The sailors scream in pain, and they raise their hands above the water, hoping to be spared, before they sink to the bottom of the ocean, the water filling their lungs and drowning away all their words. They are replaced with new boats; not of my opinions, but of those around me. Only when my inner thoughts replicate the opinions of those around me are they spared of my sorrow and are allowed to float about peacefully.

I have picked apart and destroyed every component of my personality and rebuilt it into what they want to see, for the sole purpose of wishing to be liked.

I am like a raging fire. My ideas and my opinions burn bright and loud. I am loud, fierce, unique, and unwelcomed.

It will never be painless to destroy such an essential part of your being.

I raise a bucket of my self-hatred and I use it to suffocate the flames. Nothing about myself is authentic. The mannerisms and dialogue of those around me shape my personality like damp clay until any

resemblance of my past self is gone, replaced with the image you see fit.

This is what I must do to be liked. The process consists of nothing but suffering, but the most insufferable thing of all would be standing alone at no one's side.

Your disapproval is like a squadron of soldiers arriving at the doorstep that is my self-worth. In the presence of your condemnation, I raise a white flag and I surrender, and I give into your expectations without uttering a word of rebellion. If it means that your image of me will stay untampered, I will echo the majority and burn away all my sense of self.

Though it pains me to say this, I realize I can never truly make everyone around me happy. I can never truly meet the expectations of every single person I encounter. Each time I lose the favor of a peer or a teacher, the raging ocean inside of me roars in agony, and it takes more sailors under the water.

If I am true to one side, I am false to the other. At the end of the day, it is human nature- we give, take, protect, and misunderstand all the same, yet the feeling of being disliked does not become any less arduous to process.

Is it wrong to boast of my happiness? Is it wrong to grieve my unhappiness?

These questions simmer in my inner conscience like planets in the night sky- they shine brighter, and they stand out from the rest of my self-loathing worries, but if I were to show a single glimpse of a flaw in the perfect personality. I had built for myself, the reputation I have destroyed myself to maintain would crumble. Without reluctance, I suffocate these rebellious inquiries and I lock them up in the most unreachable parts of my soul.

I find that with each passing day, it grows harder and harder to stay true to the voices of others. It feels as if the hands around my neck loosen with every word that goes unspoken, yet a harsh glance or a simple eye roll tightens them and drowns away any opinion I consider expressing. I avoid voicing every concern that the remnants of my brain can come up with, in hopes of a future where all our struggles pass right by us, like a cold breeze in the heat of the summer. Despite the self-hatred that rages within me, I have found peace in the minefield that is my inner circle. I pay the price by becoming as obedient and mindless as a dog.

“There are some people who can't even breathe.”

Such phrases repeat in my head like a song on the radio frequently, and I force myself to suck up every conflict that I have ever dealt with.

Convincing myself that I am not one of them is like trying to get rid of a



song that's been stuck in your head.

That one day, our eyes met from opposite ends of the classroom.

Your words are like gentle melodies that flow into my ears. They quell the raging tide within me.

I wish for nothing more than for us to connect, but while you are brimming with ideas and personality, there is simply nothing for you to connect with. I suppress my ill feelings and I force a smile upon my face at every word that is sent to me, regardless of how it genuinely makes me feel, but you fight against the ideologies you disapprove of in your life, no matter how many people will turn against you as a result.

For the sake of our convenience and freedom, most of us oblige ourselves to hold our breath and silently agree with everything that comes before us. I am one of those people, but you aren't.

We are worlds apart- not just from our distance in the classroom, but from the philosophies that make us who we are. Even so, you free me. With every conversation we exchange together, I feel the voice that I suppressed for so long growing louder. I feel the spirits of the lost sailors arising from the water, and I feel the ocean of self-hatred calming, gradually growing still with every interaction we share.

The fear of being disliked, rejected, abandoned, and everything in between, looms over me like a menacing fog every time we speak. It follows me like a shadow, and it will forever stay by my side, like two loyal lovers. Yet even so, you listen to me. When I am with you, I can finally release my breath. My hands can part from my neck.

When I stand by your side, the risk of being hated by everyone around me is as clear as the moon on a cloudless night. Even upon catching notice of our most simple interactions, I feel my friends drift away from me in disgust.

In the past, such a feeling would have silenced me in mere moments. But right now, as I hold your hand in mind, I can only think of one thing.

“As long as you are here by my side, it doesn't matter what they think. I don't need anyone else but you.”

In the past, for me to be acknowledged and loved, I had to quell my complexities and cleanse myself of everything they did not see fit.

But since I had met you, my complexes become weapons that defend me from the hateful gazes of my so-called friends and protect you from the harsh words of those around who despise you. I find my voice. You rekindle the flame. The hands that dug into the flesh of my neck let go.

But one day, my outreached hand is met with nothing. Your eyes are flickering with uncertainty. You stare at me from afar. You keep silent,

your gaze filled with subtle but indefinite anger.

I open my mouth to speak. My words flow like water when I'm talking to you, something that will never occur with anyone but you.

I'm met with only silence. It rings in my ears. Gradually, I felt my heart race as a pang of anxiety hit my chest.

A quiet scoff escapes your lips. With a dreadingly familiar harsh glance, you turn around and leave me. As you turn your back to me, the venomous syllables of a single sentence escape your lips.

Your tone is filled with hatred and disgust that I never knew you had. I can feel disbelief and terror course through my body, growing stronger and stronger with each step you took away from me.

"I was wrong about you. Get away from me." You had said so much with so little.

The reality of my situation sets in, slowly seeping into every fiber of my being. The realization gradually dawns before me. I can feel my hands begin to shake and my breathing quicken as dozens of awful emotions mercilessly struck upon me.

The silence is too loud. It reminds me of all the times I was outspoken. All of the time I suffocated myself to take the flimsy chance of receiving validation. It reminded me of the perilous process of breaking yourself apart and putting yourself back together completely different than what you were before.

But you were never like that. You listened, and you cared. You never outspoke me, you never forced me to suppress myself.

You gave me all the reassurance and validation I would ever need in my life. No one could ever make me feel as happy, confident, or comfortable as you did.

Without you, I am no one. Without you, I am nothing. I am just the mindless dog, who follows orders and says what others want to hear. Without you, the still waters of self-hatred rage once again. But this time, the ships will not be dragged below the surface.

Determination courses through me. For perhaps the last time in my life, I feed the flame and I let it burn. I let the words flow out of me. I keep my hands off my neck.

After this, there will be no one. No one could ever replace you. No one will ever inspire me the way you did. No one will ever reach into the parts of my soul the way you did and relight the fire I had quelled for so long. With every stride you take, further and further away from me, I feel the waters raging, threatening to drag any ship that sailed deep below the surface. The flame that you had rekindled dies, and gradually, I return to my past self. I embrace the empty shell once again.



One star in the night sky- one thought amongst the sea that inhabits my brain stands out from the rest. It shines like a beacon as you walk away.

After this, I may never open up to anyone ever again. I can feel the hands against my neck once again, reemerging from the awful sea of self-hate they came from.

But no matter how hard they squeeze; nothing will stop me from doing what I'm about to do.

“Thank you for everything.” For the last time, I won't be outspoken.

“I love you.”



Sarah Hamblin  
Middle School



## A Spooktastic Cup of Joe

“If you were to drive about thirty-four minutes from New York City, you would find a small cafe.

It’s a hidden gem among other cafes. The atmosphere is quiet, and the workers are some of the friendliest people you will ever meet. It’s an old building and has a long history. The walls tell stories of previous residents. I bet you’re wondering why a food critic would go to a cafe. Well, I heard rumors about this one and I think it deserves recognition. The cafe is Ghostly Grinds,” Sophie holds a newspaper.

“Can you believe this, guys? We got a five-star review from another critic. Things are going fantastic today,” she says, while her hands raise in the air, cheering triumphantly.

A hazy figure comes out of the wall with a sad look on its face.

“So sorry to break your mood, Soph, but... um... the pipe in the sink broke and if we don’t get it fixed by opening time, we will have to close the cafe for repairs.” The ghost floats away slowly.

“No, you don’t get to back away and make this my problem,” Sophie glares at the ghost.

“Beep! Oh, what’s that? The muffins are done. I better go finish them.” The ghost fades through the wall.

“Fine, Tom, I’ll do it. As for you, Jess, keep an eye on the shop. And the rest of you,” she looks at her workers both human and ghost. “Keep up the good work. And this place needs to be clean. Oh, and just because I am in a good mood, take a five-minute break.”

She walks out on the semi-busy street and past the small deli, where she usually stops to get a sandwich. She continues to a stop light and waits for the walk signal for what feels like an eternity. Her foot taps to the distant car honking. The signal changes and she darts across the street, towards the repair shop.

Her hands clasped the door handle as she pulled it open. She scanned the aisles for the parts to fix the broken pipe.

“Bingo! This is the wrench I will need to tighten the joints and stop that leaky pipe.” She grabs the wrench, as she walks to check out.

She thanks the worker and exits the repair shop, rushing towards the cafe. By the time she makes it back, she sees a line of people waiting to

get in.

“Looks like we're going to have a busy day today. Right. Focus on the leaky pipe.” She enters the shop and walks towards the back.

In the kitchen, she sees spirits and the living working together. Some spirits are baking pastries, while others are going over the menu for the day. Ingredients float in the air making it a fun, but confusing, environment. Sophie looks at the leaky pipe, tightens a few pipes. She looks up to find Tom staring at her.

“You know, for a four-hundred-year-old ghost, you're quite annoying.” Sophie stands up, dusting herself off.

“I know. Hey, you better be ready. The customers today are something else. Okay?” Tom smiles at her, trying to make up for his earlier hijinks.

“Okay,” she says, smiling and walking out of the kitchen.

The small gold bell rings on the front door of the cafe. Customers form a calm line.

“Hi, welcome to Ghostly Grinds. How can I help you?” Sophie puts in order after order.

The cafe slowly fills up with fascinated customers. Spirits and humans interact, sharing their stories, accompanied by the sweet fruity smell of various pastries. Sophie works for what she feels is a whole year.

The sun starts to set. She waves at the human workers to leave and locks down the shop. She sweeps the floors, while humming to the songs on the speakers.

“Boo!” Tom whispers.

She jumps in fear. “Tom, don't do that,”

Tom laughs. “Sorry, I just had to remind my friend that it's late and she really needs to take a break.”

Sophie continues to sweep. “The broom can't sweep itself, can it?” she says.

Tom smiles and levitates the broom, making it sweep on its own.

“Actually, it can,” he says.

Sophie rolls her eyes. “Next time, remind me not to hire the ghosts who haunt this building to work in a cafe,” she jokes.

“Hey, you like having us around. We help you with the cafe. You help us by giving us human interaction. It's boring being around for four-hundred years and not being able to talk to anyone,” he says, seriously.

She laughs. “Fine, I'll take a break.” She sighs in defeat.

“Thank you. Now, go upstairs and watch tv or something.” He crosses his hazy arms.



“If I am watching tv, you're coming with me.” She smiles.

And so, the tale of two unlikely friends comes to a close. Who knows what the next day at Ghostly Grinds will be like? If you really want to know you can travel thirty-four minutes out of New York City. There is where your next adventure just might be.



Kennedie Henricksen  
Middle School



## The Serial Killer

The chug of bike pedals churning resonated on the lonely road, surrounded by colossal trees and the ever so slight conversations of birds. It was part of my everyday routine, pedaling home from school. I forgot to appreciate it because I didn't have to.

Before I knew it, everything was up in flames.

Now I wish I did.

The forest was once serene, as I described. The towering trees stood stagnant in their slumber, and chirping critters chattered about. Branches reached out and interlocked hands, and dew-spotted leaves drip, drip, dripped onto the lively shrubbery and rich soil below. It seemed almost alive. Perhaps it was.

It could have been a rogue match.

It could have been a snarling campfire.

It could have even been the desolate dryness of the air.

But all I knew was that the once-tranquil forest was nowhere to be found.

It crept up with stealth and malice. You could not mistake the glint in its raging eye. The murderous racing of the thoughts. And when everything slept under the comfortable blanket of the sunset...

It struck.

And the flames took their place.

Age-old and noble trees groaned and collapsed onto the scorched earth within ungodly seconds. Smoke coughed up from the leaking lungs of the dying wood. The fire blazed, white-hot, and ever hungry. It wanted more, more, more. Swift as the setting sun, it devoured the forest. A cannibal. A monster. The screams of the wood and bark were smothered by the crackling howl of the fire.

A serial killer.

Hot ash and bits of the woodland drifted to the smoldering ground, and dancing smoke paraded into the skies. Like a surreptitious assailant, it attacked in the wake of the fire, reaching into my eyes, my nose, my mouth. My lungs stung, desperate for oxygen, but I could not breathe, for the smog awaited me, ready to steal my consciousness. In an inventive idea, I pulled my shirt over my nose. Tainted wind blew

through my hair, now tousled with the steamy breath of the murderer. My legs itched to run, to get to safety from the ever-growing massacre, but my eyes said otherwise.

Stay, they whispered. Watch and see.

For a moment, I paused to look behind me. My bicycle. It had been there. Where was it now? Had the smoke swallowed it? Not that it mattered. I would stay and watch either way.

Abruptly, dark clouds started to creep their way into the sky. The light of the scintillating fire illuminated their undersides. Swollen and brimming with rainwater, they threatened to pour. The fire blazed on, ignorant to its opponent.

CRASH.

Thunder reverberates in the distance, a shout from the dilated clouds. A warning.

The killer raged on, ignorant of its impending doom.

“Come on, come on...”

I urged the clouds to cry.

The fire grew nearer. It had spotted me, I knew it. It paused its ravenous guzzling of the woodland and crept closer. Closer. Closer.

The clouds tick their heels.

I grasped, panicked, for my bike. Where is it?

Now I can feel the sweltering exhale of the executioner, its burning claws digging into the searing soil. Its snarls could not be drowned out by the thunder.

PLEASE, GOD, LET IT RAIN.

I stumbled backwards. It stepped forward. And the second that I realized I couldn't escape...

The floodgates opened.

The storm clouds overturned their rainfall. My prayers were answered. The white-hot killer turned its head, yet it barely had any time to process its demise. Precipitation fists cuffed the assailant over and over. Its screams grew quieter and quieter as the rain pelted down, hammering it over and over until its blood spilled.

Ultimately, it diminished. It had met its match.

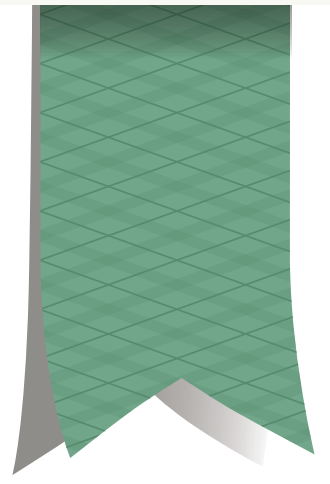
All around me remained the corpse of the woodland. A legend fallen, gone but not forgotten. I step forward into the sea of bodies. The aftermath of a massacre. What once was green and writhing with life is now a gray clearing, smothered in smoke and ash. I run my hand across the charred bark of a towering tree, now unable to reach to the sky as it did before. It never would again. The red-hot embers, reminiscent of the fury of the killer, sting my hands. I snap back, afraid for a moment that I would too be taken. Oh, how the mighty have fallen.

A warm wind sifts through the dead forest, the last call of woods.



“Goodbye, old friend,” I whisper wistfully. The stars watching, I scavenge for my bicycle and pedal home.

The Serial Killer  
Kennedie Henricksen



## The Move

In the blink of an eye, the house I had lived in for years was now empty, just a hollow complex of rooms and pillars of boxes. The smell was musty, and the air was humid and sticky. My family and I slaved away for hours, running back and forth between the house and the trailer. At that point, I was an empty husk; working to no end while my heart ached. My friends, my school, the life I made here, all thrown away for a dumb job in another city.

I wandered through the empty, monotonous halls and rooms once filled with life. Faint white marks were the only sign of the posters I had, now crumpled up and stuffed in a dumpster. All the items thrown in my closet were taken out, a gaping void left behind. As I packed my toys and books, an emptiness widened in my stomach as my parents carried boxes and furniture from the garage. My mind grew numb, and my limbs turned to jelly. I dropped what I was carrying midway, flopping on the floor as tears cascaded down my cheeks.

My parents heard the sound, rushing to my side as I wept in their arms. My mother gently cradled me as I looked back at what used to be our house; now a liminal space of without life or—us. The trailer that was attached to our family’s pickup truck was filled with boxes and crates, while a bed was prepared in the back of the vehicle itself. My dog, Thor, slowly came to my side and licked me. I gave a forced smile, before turning my head away.

“Hey baby, you okay?” asked my mom soothingly, holding me tight.

“No.” I replied bluntly, a new torrent of tears raining down.

I looked at my parents, looking at each other with sorrow in their expression. My father turned to me, kneeling. “Look. I know this is hard. But hey, there’s no arm in trying something new, eh?”

I begrudgingly nodded. “Yeah. Sure dad.”

My dad opened his arms, and I rushed in, squeezing him tight. My mother clasped her hands together before joining in as well. All of a sudden, moving didn’t feel so bad anymore. I felt a strange warm feeling, as if my family was a burning fire in a blizzard of gloom. As we let go, a new sense of calm washed over me like a tidal wave. My parents looked at me, and I nodded confidently.

“Better now?” my father asked, a smirk plastered on his face.

“Yeah, I guess.” I replied, giving another smirk back at him.

After another few hours working hard and moving boxes, the truck was loaded with a tight fit of boxes. We took a step back to admire our work, Thor licking at my hand as if complimenting me. As we climbed into our truck, I looked back on our old house. I waved to it, and I couldn’t help but feel that it was waving back to me; relishing the times we had in it.





Makaela Jackson  
Middle School

## Untitled

There once were two best friends, named Molly and Ivy.

They grew up together, were super close, and they believed no one could ever separate them.

One day, they shared their favorite insects.

Ivy's was a purple butterfly.

Ivy died from a disease, ever since, a purple butterfly followed Molly.

## Untitled

May 11, 2015

*It was never the way she looked,  
always the way she was.  
I would have fallen in love with her,  
with my eyes closed.*

*Atticus Poetry. I like his poems. I read this somewhere. Maybe in that book Mom gave me. I think it does a pretty good job explaining how I think about her.  
~Emmett Miller*

Emmett Miller is a thirteen-year-old boy in seventh grade. He attends Sorbet Junior High. His best friends are Alex Johnson, Reece Pit, and Darek Smith. He likes basketball, video games and skateboards. And he's in love.

Willow Mackery is a thirteen-year-old girl in seventh grade. She attends Sorbet Junior High. Her only friend is Skylar Win. She likes books, forests, and dreams. And she's in love.

The moon slowly descended behind the mountains, as the sun rose above the trees. And the Mackery family was just waking up. "Willow, are you up?" Rebecca Mackery, single mother of Ryan and Willow Mackery, yelled from downstairs.

"She's probably dead asleep. Her light was still on when I went to bed." Ryan, Willow's older brother, said as he grabbed a bread roll.

Rebecca sighed and quickly walked up the stairs. She opened a door at the end of the hallway that said "Willow's Room" in pretty lettering.

"Willow," she said in a soft voice. "It's time to get up." A head with light blonde hair and tired, blue eyes leaned over the top bunk's guardrail.

"Did I oversleep?" Willow asked nervously.

"No, it's fine. Just get ready. We're leaving soon," Her mom said, backing out the door and closing it behind her. Willow stumbled down her ladder, opened her closet door and rummaged through her pant drawer. She grabbed a pair of blue jeans and a gray shirt that was

definitely too small for her. She opened her door to the hallway and ran into her brother.

“Watch it,” he said and walked into his room.

“Your plate is right here,” Willow’s mom motioned to a dish full of eggs and a waffle when Willow walked into the kitchen.

“Thanks,” she said and sat down. Her mom walked back to her cup of coffee and took a sip.

The rest of the morning went as usual. Driving to school. Ryan complaining. Being dropped off.

“Bye kids!” Their mom waved as she drove away. Willow watched the car disappear into traffic.

“Willow!” Skylar yelled from the front door. Willow hurried towards her.

“Hi,” she said as Willow ran up beside her. “Did you finish that English assignment? I didn’t have time to do it last night,” Willow knew the reason she was busy yesterday. Probably hanging out with Scarlet Juro or Nelly Hack. They were more popular than Willow and Skylar. Well, maybe not Skylar. She would definitely be popular if she wasn’t friends with Willow. She was just some invisible girl whose name nobody knew anymore. Who used to be bright and happy before she disappeared into the crowd. Skylar was beautiful and funny and everything Willow wasn’t. She was jealous. Willow and Skylar have been friends since first grade. They were only so close now because Willow had no other friends. She probably feels bad for me. Willow thought. I wish I could be just like her. Not weird or boring. Just perfect.

“Yeah,” Willow said, pulling the paper out of her backpack. “Here,” Skylar took it from her hand and took a quick glance at it before stuffing it in her purse. It was a pretty one, too. Yellow like a ripe banana. It really suits her personality. Just then, the bell rang.

“Time to get to class,” Skylar said, strolling through the school doors. Willow trailed behind her.

As groups of students filed into first period, the teacher, Mrs. Evans, wrote something on the board. “Quick Write: Create a backstory for a made-up character.” Willow sat down at her usual desk with Skylar beside her.

Willow loved writing. Loved creating her own stories and a fantastical land that she wished she could live in. It was her chance to escape from the horrible world that had done horrible things to her. She started writing about a girl who could fly. She had freedom to go wherever she pleased. That’s what Willow wanted to do, to fly high into the sky.

“Guess what?” Skylar whispered. Willow looked up at her and saw



giddiness in her eyes. “You know Reece Pit?” Willow nodded. “Well, we have been talking and yesterday he told me he liked me.” Skylar yelped, throwing her hands over her smile and giggling.

“You like him back?” Willow asked, trying to sound excited for her friend. She nodded enthusiastically. “That’s great.” Willow said. “So, is he your boyfriend?”

“I think so!”

I wish my crush liked me back.

The rest of the day was normal and finally, the last bell rang. Willow rushed out of her classroom as Skylar caught up to her.

“Hey.”

“Hey.”

Reece came up behind them. “Boo!” he yelled. Skylar screamed and whipped her head around.

“Reece! You can’t sneak up on me like that!” she joked.

“Alright, alright. I won’t do it again.” He pulled her into a close hug. After what felt like forever, Reece finally noticed Willow. “Oh, Willow, isn’t it?” he said, pointing at her. Willow nodded shyly. Popular people didn’t usually talk to her. He stood smiling at her with a knowing expression. Only when his friends came and leaped on him, did he break his gaze.

“Hey! Hey! Hey!” Darek Smith said. Alex Johnson walked up and gave Darek a friendly shove, accidentally pushing him into Willow. She stepped back away from him.

“Oh, sorry,” he said, turning towards Willow. When he recognized who he bumped into, he gave her the same look Reece did. She felt uncomfortable. Like she was somewhere she wasn’t supposed to be. And it got worse when Emmett Miller walked up behind Reece.

“You still on for basketball?” His fluffy brown hair bounced in the wind. Willow’s breath caught in her throat. His beautiful face glanced at her. Then, suddenly his cheeks turned a bright red.

“Yeah, let’s go,” Alex said, spinning Emmett away from Willow. Darek followed them.

“Wanna come watch?” Reece asked Skylar.

“Yeah, sure,” Skylar turned to Willow. “You wanna join us?” Willow was stunned for a moment, but eventually collected herself enough to respond.

“No, it’s okay. I have to get home.” Willow walked beside them out the school doors.

“Okay, see you tomorrow!” Skylar said, waving her hand, Reece’s arm over her shoulder. Willow soon lost sight of them in the large swarm of kids. As Willow walked down the front steps, she heard something in

the bushes. Pacing over, she cautiously lifted the leaves. She peeked inside to find a tiny ball of gray fur. A cat!

The next morning, Willow grabbed a can of tuna on her way out the door with high hopes of encountering the gray cat again. Her school day was a blur of counting down the hours and Skylar gushing about Reece. It felt like an eternity before the bell chimed its only song and announced freedom from textbooks and math problems. Willow ran ahead of the group and out the front door. She crouched down next to the bush where she'd seen the cat. Where is he?

“Mackery!” Mackery? Is that me? “What are you doing?” Willow lifted her head as she recognized the voice. Alex. Behind him were Emmet and Darek. Skylar and Reece were nowhere to be seen. Willow's cheeks flushed as she realized they were still waiting on an answer.

“Oh, just...thought I dropped something,” she stammered awkwardly. Alex tilted his head, but eventually shrugged and walked away. Darek followed him. Emmet looked back at her and smiled, before turning and catching up to Darek. Willow was left there dazed, pondering at what just happened. Did Emmet Miller just smile at me? She shook it off and turned back to the bush. She heard a meow come from inside and reached her hand to pet the fluffy creature.

“Hi,” she cooed, overcome with joy. She had found a friend. The cat sniffed her hand with his black nose and rubbed against her thumb. Willow bit back a giggle and pulled out the tuna from her backpack. She opened the can. “Here you go,” she said, gently placing the food in front of the cat. As he leaned down to eat, she gave him a closer look and realized his ear was torn. “You've been hurt. Like me.” Willow felt calm and sensed a deep connection with this scrawny creature as he looked up at her. Willow thought she could see something familiar in the cat's eyes. Dad?

“Willow!” She turned her head around to see her brother. “Come on!” Willow gathered up her things and stood up. “What are you doing?” Ryan asked, staring at the bush.

“Nothing.”

Things changed over the final weeks of school. She and Skylar started hanging out with the boys. They'd become close enough, they could almost call themselves popular. Except Willow. She still sometimes detached from the group; however, she loved spending time with Emmet. She finally pushed herself out of her shell, joking and making friends. She met up with her cat every day after school and felt like nothing could stop her.



The night of the last day of school, Willow couldn't sleep so she decided to visit her cat. As she sat down next to the bush, a twig cracked behind her. She twisted around to see a person.

"Who's there?" Willow demanded. She was flooded with fear as the figure reached out towards her.

"Don't worry. It's just me." Willow recognized the voice.

"Emmet?" Willow couldn't believe it. He stepped out of the shadows to reveal himself in pajama pants.

"Yeah, sorry. Didn't mean to scare you. I've just seen you coming to this bush a lot and wanted to see why." Emmet explained quickly.

"In the middle of the night?" Willow was so confused.

"Couldn't sleep." Emmet shrugged. "So, what's in the bush?"

I must be dreaming. Willow stepped out of the way to show Emmet.

"Wow, a cat?" Willow nodded.

"Cool. I love cats." Emmet said, walking towards the bush and bending down to pet him.

"Why are you here?" Willow asked, sitting down on the steps of the school. Emmet sat down beside her.

"Ummm," Emmet mashed his lips together nervously. "We've known each other since kindergarten."

Willow nodded. She knew that.

"But in fifth grade, something happened. You were never the same happy girl you used to be."

Willow was stunned.

"That was two years ago."

"I notice things." Emmet shrugged.

"Well," Willow had never talked about it before, but strangely she felt comfortable around her crush. The words started pouring out of her.

"My dad died of cancer, and he was my best friend. I felt as if the whole world had collapsed. I pulled away from my friends and family. I rarely spoke."

Willow's breath caught in her throat. Tears started streaming down her face.

"I felt so alone."

Willow couldn't hold it back anymore. She started sobbing and felt Emmet's arm wrapped around her shoulder. Willow instinctively fell into his embrace. They sat there for a while, before she pulled herself together. Emmet had not spoken a word since Willow started talking. He lifted his hand to wipe Willow's tears. The gray cat joined them.

"You are not alone anymore." Willow looked up at Emmet.

"You have me."

Then, before Willow could comprehend what he said, he pulled her



face in for a kiss.

I must be dreaming! But it felt so real. So, she lifted her hands to his face and kissed him back.

*May 11, 2024*

*Watch carefully,  
The magic that occurs.  
When you give a person,  
Enough comfort,  
To just be themselves.*

*Emmet is my magic. My one and only. My now and forever.  
~Willow Mackery*

## Untitled

The war had faded, but my life was unchanged. The fireworks burned my heart, and a loud noise made me flinch. My dreams no longer existed. I would no longer love without the love for myself that was once there. I was a monster. I was drowning in the blood I once bathed in.

“Don’t let her arrive,” I had screamed into the air, “It will mark our fall!” They didn’t believe me, and that was the start of the prophecy unraveling, “The wooden horse will be our end!”

Maybe it was my fault they didn’t survive, maybe I shouldn’t have been so headstrong or maybe I shouldn’t have renounced Apollo’s name, but I had and still would have regardless. I was sure that my voice was better heard than not, even if as an echo.

All these thoughts came to me as I lay in bed. My jaw tensed. My heartbeat quickened. The blankets choked my foot, and the wind took away my breath. I let out a hoarse cough.

"An omen", I thought, "This is what happens when I have a prophecy."

I smiled; it hadn’t been since the Trojan War I had a prophecy. That prophecy marked the end of my family, I couldn’t stop it. That was when my smile faded, the prophecies only speak of tragedies. My breath thickened once more, and my sight darkened.

“This is your fault! You brought this about yourself!”

“No, please no!” I shouted. I shouted at the sun, and I cursed all poetry, I shot an arrow through its heart. At least I wish I had, but it was too late.

“Your prophetic gift will continue but no one will heed your warning. Mark the Trojan War as your downfall, Cassandra.” Apollo had said.

It hadn’t been my downfall. I continued to live, regardless of the mercy death would have provided. Even sleep only lasted for so long before I woke up again.

That morning, I tried to renew my spirits with a glass of wine, but I spilled it across my chiton. I saw it as a prophecy, an attempt at grasping for joy would destroy everything I worked for. I then began painting. The

rhythmic swirls and delightful smell of bitter lead lightened my mood. That was until I looked at the painting. I squinted and stepped back and ultimately grabbed a new canvas. I turned to grab one and hit my water jug with my elbow. It fell and clanked against the floor as I flinched. "Giving up on my past will lead to a drenched future". I thought, "That is my prophecy." I had a jarring headache, a symptom that told me a prophecy was soon to come true.

I wanted to give up the painting, but I continued, determined to not curse myself. If no one listened to my prophecies, I would. My nausea grew but I continued painting. If I stopped to pursue rest, my future would be fated as the wine predicted.

I got up after three hours to get some bread, the taste soothing my tired mouth. I looked at the painting, a base of black with white sketches scattered erratically. It was reminiscent of me, a dark background ornate with a vain attempt at felicity. Joy was something I could never have as long as the prophecies controlled me. I couldn't seek it out, I could only try to avoid it. That's why I didn't stop, I didn't stop the whole night. The shallow pleasure of sleep or soothing my aching hand was what the prophecy foretold. I sniffled and painted the final stroke.

I got up from my chair to view the finished piece, but I never saw it. Dizziness overtook me and I fell backward. Maybe the painting was my demise or perhaps the lack of sleep. Or maybe it was the dream that I could escape my fate. Maybe my real dream was to escape the prophecies, to escape the death and pretend it never happened. Maybe that dream of starting over was the beginning of the end. Joy was something I could never have. Bitter lead was the final thing I smelled.



## The Seven Chairs

1930, England (Six years ago)

A man walked quickly along a long rug he had walked on so many times before, his wet boots leaving muddy footprints behind him as the grandfather clock chimed midnight. He was walking with purpose, here to see the mistress of the castle, Ms. White, who came walking down the stairs with a long, elegant purple robe trailing behind her.

“Ms. White,” the man stuttered.

“Mr. Bell? Why are you here at this hour?”

“I have something for you,” Mr. Bell stammered, pulling something from his belt.

“Well, let’s see it,” Ms. White said, her face hardening. The man showed her a blade, as silver as a knight in shining armor.

“The Blade of the Demons,” Mr. Bell told her, grimacing.

“Well,” Ms. White muttered under her breath, snatching it from his hands. “This will do nicely in the collection.”

“Now, ma’am. May I stay here for the night, with it being so miserable outside?” Mr. Bell asked.

Ms. White shook her head vigorously. “No, heavens no. Now leave!”

1936, England (Present Day)

DING DONG! The sound of the doorbell being rung repeatedly was enough to wake poor Eliza. It was 6:00 in the morning, the sun hung in the otherwise dim sky. Slowly, Eliza stretched and got dressed. Slowly, she walked downstairs and approached the door. She peered through the stained-glass window, wondering who it could be.

“Yes?” she asked.

“Ms. Eliza Green.” It was a man’s voice, deep and sounding almost of an ogre. “Good morning, Ms. Eliza,” he said bowing.

Eliza ignored the gesture and questioned, “Who are you and why are you here?”

The man smiled. “Why, Ms. Green. I am Mr. Bell. Now, how do I

say this... There is a competition happening at eight tonight at the shack.”

Eliza was still confused, “Wasn’t the shack abandoned years ago?”

“You see, long ago there was an ancient competition called the Seven Chairs. Seven contestants gather their chairs in a circle. Each contestant, one by one, gets picked off by demons into their cave, never to be seen again. Legend says the one who lives gets a great prize. Would you like to join?” Mr. Bell asked.

“Well,” Eliza asked, making a motion to leave. “That sounds dreadful. What makes you think I would be a part of it?”

“Oh yes, quite dreadful,” Mr. Bell told her, ignoring Eliza’s question. “Still, if you would like to join, I’ll be waiting.” He put his hat back on his head and started to walk away.

“Wait,” Eliza called. “I’ll do it.” She hadn’t done much with her life up until this point. What had she got to lose? Her life? Possibly. But perhaps something great would come of this as well.

“Wonderful,” Mr. Bell exclaimed. “Follow me!”

Two hours later, Mr. Bell and Eliza arrived at the shack, looking quite broken down.

“Looks pretty abandoned to me,” Eliza said, exasperatedly. She should’ve just stayed at home, where she would be enjoying a nice sip of tea.

“Ah, but that is where you are wrong,” Mr. Bell replied, pulling a golden staff with a serpent’s head on top from underneath his cloak. With a slight wave of the staff, the shack transformed into an elaborate castle, complete with a brass chandelier hanging from the ceiling and a grand piano in the far corner.

“Come,” Mr. Bell beckoned. “The mistress will be anxious to see us.”

A woman approached Eliza.

Mr. Bell bowed and waved his hand to Eliza, withdrawing, and called, “Good luck, Eliza. You will need it for what awaits you.”

“Ma’m,” Eliza called, her hand spread out. The woman took it, but only after she did a spectacular backflip.

“How’d you do that?” Eliza asked, shocked.

The woman smiled and replied, “Appearances aren’t everything, dear. Surely, you of all people should know that.”

It was soon lunch and Eliza ate with her fellow contestants, of which there were six. They were all different, including an intimidating looking man in a dark robe. As Eliza took a sip from her glass, a different man spoke to her.



“Hello,” he greeted timidly. Eliza didn’t answer, though, as she was staring at the man in the dark robe as he drank. She swore she saw fangs come from his mouth if only for a split second.

“Ah,” the man frowned, seeing what Eliza was looking at.

“That is Count Vlad, monster hunter. Suspicious and sadistic... you don’t want him on your tail.”

“You seem to know an awful lot about him,” Eliza said to the man.

“I’m his brother,” the man replied simply.

“The competition will begin shortly! Gather around!” the old woman announced after the meal.

Once everyone was gathered in the throne room, the hostess told the contestants to sit in a ring of chairs. There was a feeling of nervousness around the room, especially from a poor woman in rags sitting to the left of Eliza. The hostess sat in a chair in the middle of the group and grabbed something out of her pocket. Eliza noted that it was a wand.

“I am Madam Magic,” she stated, waving the wand around as if it were a mere child’s toy.

“Look lady,” one gruff man demanded. “When are we going to begin this competition?”

Madam Magic frowned and waved at the man’s chair, which sent both the man and the chair flying into a chamber. Snarling and growling followed soon after. After a brief pause the woman in rags attempted to run towards the door. However, before she could reach it, Madam Magic used her wand to send the poor woman into the cave after the man. Seven quickly became five.

“Now, let’s continue.”

Immediately, everyone jumped out of their chairs and began frantically looking for something to defend themselves. Eliza remembered that she had seen a dark sword near the gates of the palace upon her arrival. She started to rush to it. Before she could grab it, however, she felt a cold hand grasp her neck and pick her off the ground. The hand was attached to a man with bright red hair, an eye-patch, and bulging biceps.

“Oh no you don’t!” he smiled, tossing her aside and grabbing for the sword.

That was a bad move, however, as the sword began to attack him. The blade impaled itself into the man’s chest. The man was still alive however, despite spilling blood at a rapid rate.

“This is how I die, by a magic blade. My son, he will live his life not knowing his father,” groaned the man.

Eliza had picked up another nearby sword, ready to defend herself.



However, the man wasn't as injured as he appeared.

"Ha!" the man grinned and pulled the blade out of his chest. "Skullbreaker does it again!" He laughed triumphantly and raised the sword, ready to strike at Eliza.

Just in the nick of time, the magic blade flew from his grasp and struck itself once again into Skullbreaker's chest, this time for good. The deadly blade, spewing a dark energy, had struck his heart.

Madam Magic walked over to Eliza, apparently oblivious to Skullbreaker's body. "The Blade of the Demons" she shuttered. "Be careful who you trust, Ms. Eliza."

Recovering from her shock, Eliza turned around to witness Count Vlad sink his teeth into an elegantly dressed woman. With a blood curdling scream, she fell to the floor in a heap.

"Only three competitors remain! Good luck to you!" Madam Magic announced, smiling. "Only one of you will survive. Just to make things interesting, bring in the wolves!"

There was Eliza, Count Vlad, and Vlad's brother. Suddenly, the floor cracked in two and up rose two massive wolves, with snarling, blood red teeth, massive paws, and eyes as piercing as knives. Immediately, one of them rushed towards Eliza, who grabbed a bow from a nearby weapons rack and began firing.

"Good luck!" Eliza looked to see Count Vlad's brother, smiling at her. Right next to him was Vlad, who was calmly ripping away at the flesh of the other wolf. One down, one to go.

"I'm Gabriel. Gabriel Vlad," the man said, charging the remaining wolf with a silver spear. "Maybe after this, we can team up against my brother. He can be a real jerk."

Eliza smiled, but the look turned to dread when she saw the remaining wolf, its teeth as large as knives, open its mouth inches from Gabriel.

"Gabriel, look out!" Eliza called desperately, but it was too late. In one quick bite, the wolf swallowed Gabriel whole. Eliza looked to see Count Vlad, who showed no expression at all despite the fact that his brother was just eaten by a wolf! In a rage, Eliza fired one final arrow into the beast's mouth. The shot was a direct hit, going down its throat!

Once both wolves were defeated, Count Vlad started to walk away. Eliza stomped after him.

"What is wrong with you?" she yelled. "Your brother just died, and you show no expression in the slightest!"

Count Vlad stopped walking and turned to Eliza, "You want a lesson, miss? Don't get too attached to people. Sooner or later, they'll die. Life will be a heck of a lot better if you stop worrying about others and

start worrying about yourself. Speaking of, I'm sick of this. You, this competition, and you, Madam Magic!"

Instead of running and striking Eliza, Vlad rushed towards the Blade of the Demons. With a grunt, he grabbed the blade.

"What?! This can't be!" Madam Magic stammered. Through the power of the blade, Vlad grew a long black robe.

"Kill the witch!" a voice bellowed in Vlad's head.

"Gladly," Vlad grinned and rushed toward Madam Magic. With a push of his hand, Madam Magic went flying 30 feet. Eliza ran towards her. She was barely holding on to a ledge, demons and beasts grabbing at her from below.

"Listen to me," she begged Eliza. "It is vital you beat Count Vlad. The blade has chosen him, making him even more powerful. But remember, a good heart can prevail against a blood-thirsty demon."

"Foolish woman!" Count Vlad yelled, pushing Eliza aside, trapping her under a falling suit of armor.

Despite her injuries, Madam Magic pulled herself up to stand and grabbed her wand. "No more, Dracula," she stammered, hurling rocks at Vlad, who deflected them with ease. With another wave of his hand, Madam Magic's wand fell into the cave. With that, Vlad threw the sword and impaled Madam Magic onto the wall.

"You have been an excellent host," Vlad announced, slowly walking toward the Blade. "But this party is over." He pulled the sword from Madam Magic, who fell into the cave while screaming and snarling following after.

Then, Vlad turned his attention towards Eliza, who was still trapped under the suit of armor. He attempted to stab Eliza, but she yelled, "Amortentia!" and Vlad flew backwards, the Blade landing in his chest, trapping him against the wall. Weakly, Eliza stood up. She had seen Madam Magic use the spell against a man before the competition. Eliza ran towards the door, but Vlad had somehow recovered and was rushing towards Eliza. Without any option left, Eliza kicked Vlad, knocking the blade from his hands. Desperately, Vlad grabbed the blade again and approached Eliza.

"Now, let's finish you once and for all. Goodbye, Ms. Eliza."

And with that, Vlad waved his hand once more and the whole palace erupted in flames. Vlad walked out of the door, locking it behind him. The flames were inching ever closer to Eliza. With the fire just feet away, Eliza had a realization. The flames were too close. Even if she did manage to stand up, there was no way to escape from the burning palace. There was nothing Eliza could do as the flames drew closer. As she prepared to meet her fate, she wondered where Vlad was heading.





Anthony Scafidi  
Middle School

## Dark is the Night (Prologue)

(Based off the S.T.A.L.K.E.R games & Into the Radius)

As I sit by a campfire, I think about things... thoughts of family back home, my wife and my kids... I think about my next adventure in the Zone... I think about my friends that I've had... friends I've lost... memories of them...

I hate this place.

Chapter 1 - The crash.

4 years ago, November of 2003-

A loud noise rings around the landscape as a MI-24 Russian Helicopter crashes into the Zone. Four people were in the helicopter at the time, me (Lieutenant Makarov Vladikovic), and my three comrades. We were on a trip to the Southern Military Checkpoint in Cordon. We crashed sixteen miles north of there, around Zaton. It was a bad crash. I was badly injured, as three of my fingers were missing, shrapnel was all around my body, and it felt like I broke a few ribs. I was bleeding heavily, and as I looked around, it looked like all three of my comrades had perished in the devastating crash. I got up and limped over to the emergency hatch and got out. I reached into my bag and grabbed some bandages and a Med kit. I got myself patched up and started to look around. Zaton was a very flat area, with a few trees here and there. The ground was a grayish color, and there was almost no plant life anywhere. I grabbed as much food, water, and medical supplies as I could from my comrades. I started moving forward towards the Southern Checkpoint.

I grabbed the radio on my chest, and I tried to contact Command. I said, "This is Black Fox Two, we crashed near Zaton and my crew including the pilot are all dead, please respond!" A few seconds later, a voice came through the radio. I couldn't hear a word they were saying because there was too much static. "Come in Command, please say that



again! I didn't hear you the first time!" There was nothing, not a word for ten whole minutes, and I eventually just gave up. I kept walking North, hoping I didn't run into anyone hostile, or any mutants.

## Chapter 2 - My equipment.

For my weapons, I have an AKS-74U as my primary, and a PM Makarov as my secondary. For the items, I have one used Med kit from earlier, two bandages, a pack of Marlboro cigarettes (I'm thirty-four-years-old, so there's no need to worry), a box of matches, a half-drunk bottle of Smirnoff No. 21 Vodka, and a headlamp. For my protection, I have a 6B45 vest and 6B47 helmet, and an American made M60 gas mask. I have limited ammo, as I only brought sixty rounds of 5.45x39mm FMJ, or Full Metal Jacket, cartridges (Each AK magazine can hold only thirty rounds, and each PM magazine can hold eight rounds), and sixteen rounds of 9x18mm AP, or armor piercing, cartridges. As I walked around the landscape, I just started to realize how quiet this place really was. All I could hear was my own footsteps, and my own breathing. This place is a very sad place... It feels like I'm all alone, but it also feels like something, or someone, is watching my every move... It's been around an hour now, and I've walked about three miles so far. I haven't seen one damn thing that was different the whole time. I'll tell you about the Zone now, since you probably don't know what it is...

## Chapter 3 - Where am I?

The CEZ, or Chernobyl Exclusion Zone, is a section of Ukraine where the Chernobyl disaster happened. Not much is known about the Zone, and the government doesn't release much information about it to the public. Many people illegally travel to the CEZ to get artifacts, which are highly valued inside and outside of the Zone. What are artifacts? You might be asking... well, artifacts are random objects spawned inside the Zone in anomaly fields. Anomaly fields are very dangerous areas in the Zone, and they require proper equipment to traverse, like a special HAZMAT suit and an anomaly detector. Anyways, artifacts are valued by traders inside the Zone, and many criminals outside the Zone. They're worth a pretty penny if you're dumb enough to get them, at least 10,000 rubles for the most common artifacts, and if you're lucky, you could find a rare one and sell it for up to 1,000,000 rubles or more. The

people that come to the Zone for artifacts are commonly referred to as STALKER's, or Loners. Anyway, many believe that a third explosion happened around ten years after the first & second explosion, and that the third was so powerful that it created the CEZ. Another less popular theory is that twenty or so years after the Chernobyl disaster, a meteor hit the ground in a hidden location not accessible to anyone in the Zone, and that the meteor had some special properties to it that caused the Zone to form. If you ask me, I think it's all crap. I think that someone built some kind of device that made the Zone form around Chernobyl, and Pripyat, and blamed it on an unknown cause. That's my theory though...

#### Chapter 4 - Bandits!

I've been in the Zone long enough to know that there are a few factions that have been formed in the Zone. There are STALKERS, Duty, The Freedom, and Bandits. Since I'm in the military, not many people like our presence in the Zone. Why? I'm not sure, but what I do know is that Bandits are the worst of the factions. In a nutshell, Bandits are basically criminals that hide out here in the Zone as either a getaway from the police, or as a hidden place to run their illegal operations. I've run into Bandits here and there, but they're mostly hiding from the world, either in hidden bunkers or underground. As I was walking, I spotted two Bandits by a campfire. One of them was playing guitar, while the other was listening. I'm still injured from earlier, so I didn't want to force myself to do anything stupid. I ducked behind a tree, and I pulled out my PM. I slowly aimed my pistol at the first Bandit, and I fired. The first Bandit fell near the fire, and the second threw his guitar and ran to a tree. I fired three rounds into the tree, and I saw him fall into the bushes below. I got up and looted them for their valuables. I found some canned beef, a broken radio, 2 PM Makarovs (in poor condition), a pack of matches, and the guitar from the second bandit. I kept going north, and I kept going north for a while, two hours to be exact. I had gone around nine miles now, and my legs were dying. I saw some kind of hut or small house. I went inside, and I found nothing inside. Just a bed, and a note. I read the note, and it said...



## Chapter 5 - The Stash.

*To Tommy,*

*Yesterday, I was near Pobeta Factory, near the Watterson's house. I left some things there that I thought you might want. There're twenty rounds of 7.62x54R ammo there for the Mosin you have. I also left you some food and a First Aid Kit. Hope this helps you out!*

After I read that, I went out of the house. I was about to turn north again, but I heard a voice, “Hey! Stop what you’re doing immediately! Turn around and put your hands up!” I would turn around and I would see 3 people. They were wearing masks, but they looked like Bandit’s. “Empty your backpack and place your weapons on the ground! I won’t say this again!” I went into my backpack, and dropped some things on the ground, and when they weren't looking, I drew my PM and shot them. I got the two Bandits easy, but the third shot me in the leg. I shot him back, and I fell to the ground. I grabbed out my Med Kit and wrapped up my leg. It was bleeding badly, and I was in pain. I tried to keep walking, but I kept stumbling and I finally just decided that I would just go back to the hut. I laid down and slept. I woke up around 2:30 PM, and I got up. When I got up, I stood on my leg, and it felt better... kind of. I sat back down and reached into my backpack for a can of pineapple.

## Chapter 6 - Honey, I’m home!

“Six more miles... six more...” I kept thinking to myself. My leg was killing me, but I had to keep going. I kept walking for an hour, and I wasn’t sure if I was even close to being to the base. I tried to radio command again, but like last time, there was no response. I kept walking, stumbling, and limping my way to the Checkpoint, and after another hour or so, I finally saw it. They didn’t see me at first, but after I came to a stop, they went from the building to greet me.

“Who are you! Give us your ID.” I would hand them my ID and they shuttered in fear.

“W-where are the others?”

I gave them a simple answer, “Dead.”

“What happened? Did you get shot down, engine failure?”

“No. We were flying over to the base and the helicopter just shut off. The engine, electronics, everything. It all just... stopped.”



The guards, puzzled about what was happening, let me in and brought me to the doctor for medical attention.

“Hello th- Oh my god! What happened to you?”

“I got into a crash, everyone died except me.”

The doctor stared at me, thinking of what to do. “Lay down over here, alright.”

I went over to the bed, and I laid down.

“Well, let’s take a look at you... hmm...”

“What is it doc?” I'd say to him.

“Well... a few of your ribs are fractured, there are a few gunshot wounds... some shrapnel... and your leg bone is broken as well.”

“Can you fix it doctor?” I'd ask him.

“Well... I’m not sure... but I can try.” The doctor would knock me out and he would operate on my injuries.

“Ooh... god...”

“Morning, how are you feeling?” The doctor would ask me.

“Fine?” I would reply.

“Great! Stand up and see if you can walk around without getting hurt.”

“Alright doc...” I would stand up and walk around the room. It hurt a bit, but it was ten times better than...

“Hey doc, what time is it?” I'd ask.

“It's a quarter to 8:00, why?”

“Just asking.” I'd said.

“Alright. Anyways, how is your leg?” The doctor asked.

“Fine, it still hurts, but it's much better than before.”

“Great!” The doctor said, “You won’t be able to go anywhere for a few days, but there is no need to worry. Once it heals up enough, you should be good to go!”

“What should I do in the meantime though, doc?”

“Just stay and relax! We have a DVD player, so that should keep you occupied for a while.” The doctor replied.

“What do you have to watch?” I would ask him.

“Well, let's see... we have two Star Wars movies, a season of Sanford & Son... Umm... a few movies... hmm... and a bunch of old cartoons from the 40's & 50's.”

“That's it?” I'd ask him.

“Yep, that's everything.”

## The Stolen Crown

Scotland, 1607. Near a lake in the summer plains, lay a castle surrounded by flowers, such as daisies, roses, tulips, etc. This was the castle of Uthrurb. Their next-door neighbor, the castle of Ashavikerb, was the Uthrurb's worst enemy.

It was a sunny day, the most crisp air was among the kingdom today, and one Uthrurb's palace guards, with striking red hair, emerald green eyes, and a slight drizzle of freckles, Pepper, was eating her PB & J. Suddenly, out of nowhere, the king, old and tattered with dusty and wiry gray hair, let out a horrible ghastly scream, "Aaargh!" he yelled, clutching his hands to his head, as several villagers turned their heads to the castle.

"Whatever is wrong, your majesty?" The guards peeked through the king's doors.

"My crown! It's gone! I don't know what could've happened to it," he weeped. "Wait...Ashavikerb...It's their fault! They stole it! I should've known!" he suddenly gushed with anger, screaming as his wife, the queen, who had the same old tattered look, tried to calm him. Pepper ran up the mossy and cracked castle stairs to see what was going on and opened the grand double door to the king and queen's royal bedroom.

"Darling, calm down," the queen mellowed, "We'll soon figure out what's going on."

"We don't have time!" he screamed, "Pepper! Go get me my crown!"

"W-what? You mean right now?" Pepper questioned.

"Yes, but make a plan first," the queen answered before the king could say anything.

Pepper rushed down the stairs and out of the castle to her well packed dirt home among the villagers. She paced in her tiny and cozy room, and started to make a plan at an old wooden desktop and picked up one of her many dusty journals.

"I'll need the most luck I can get, so...a luck totem should work, but where...Ah ha! Wait what?!" She read that the nearest luck totem was guarded by a dragon.

"I mean, if I tried," she said drearily.

Pepper set the beaten book down and sprinted around to gather food and supplies. She shoved them in her bag and set off to adventure.

“Yes!” Pepper yelled with excitement after a 5 mile walk to the dragon’s lair. It had been a while since she started her walk.

The scenery outside the dark misty cave was amazing, with sunflowers the size of people, and fresh sweet green grass itching at the height of Pepper’s knees.

“I’ll just need to sneak in quietly, and make my way past the dragon,” she planned.

“SNOOOORE!” the dragon woke up, opening its eyes wide, “Do I smell human? Ah yes, that fleshy smell is near!”

Pepper tip-toed through the dark, gloomy cave entrance, and breathed nervously. “Hello?” she whispered. No answer. She crept onward and peeked beyond the damp cold corner, noticing there was a dragon - and it was awake.

“Helloooooo,” the dragon looked at Pepper hungrily, “SCRUMPTIOUS!”

“NOPE!” Pepper turned to run back, the dragon close behind her, clawing for ‘delicious’ food. Pepper somehow managed to survive and was edging towards the entrance of the cave.

“NO! DON’T!” the dragon pleaded, screaming as the light burned their eyes, “NOOOO!” they crept back into the cold, bleak darkness of the wet cave. Pepper suspected the dragon was afraid of sunlight. Pepper was exhausted, breathing heavily and leaning on her knees, about to fall on the soft grass, until -

“Oh, hello,” a small British voice greeted.

“Ah!” Pepper turned back only spotting a small cat with velvety black hair and glittering yellow eyes. Pepper was confused, so she bent down and looked generously at the black cat and said, “Oh, hi little cat. Do you know who just talked?” she asked. “Oh, yes, I do. Because it was me,” the teensy cat said, grinning, showing his bright white teeth, “And by the way, the name is Beans.”

“Y-you can talk!?”

“Of course I can! I’m a black cat that’s Scottish!”

“Yeah, that explains everything,” Pepper whispered sarcastically to herself, turning to the side, and crossing her arms.

“Look, why would you go into Marv’s cave?” Beans laughed.

“Who’s Marv?” Pepper unknowingly questioned.

“Well, Marv’s the dragon,” he paused, “In the cave.”

“Oh,” Pepper whispered.



“You still haven’t told me why you’ve gone in,” he sang.

“The luck totem.”

“I’m sorry. What did you say?”

“The luck totem.”

“Yeah. Um, that’s a myth,” Beans chuckled. Pepper fell silent. She couldn’t tell if Beans was joking or not. She had walked 5 miles, almost eaten alive by a dragon, and it was just a myth?” She hesitated, “You’re not joking are you,”

“Nope,” Beans responded.

“I might as well tell you that my king, the king of Uthrurb, his crown was stolen - at least that’s what we think - by the kingdom of Ashavikerb, our enemy, and the king of Uthrurb, the one I serve, asked me to get the crown back, and it was kind of abrupt so I thought it would be a good idea to get a little more luck...” Pepper explained.

“Well, if you’re doing that, you might as well ask for help, ‘cause that’s a big job,” he cackled as he started to walk away. “W-wait! Can you help? I’ve got a HUGE fear of dogs, of any size, and there are some guarding basically every edge of the castle, so maybe you could... distract...the...dogs?” her voice got smaller as she continued, and Beans turned Pepper’s way, then complained, “Fine, but you’ve got to get me fish - specifically tuna - if you get the crown, or if you don’t. Deal?”

“Deal,” Pepper answered.

Their plan was to have Beans distract the dogs, while Pepper snuck in behind the guards, and then make her way past the security to the crown, which was unfortunately in a room that was being guarded by two guards. Fortunately, though, the guards went through shifts, and right in between the shifts, Pepper would slip through the room’s doors, and retrieve the crown.

“Dun, dun, dun dun dun, dun, dun dun -”

“What are you doing?”

“Singing theme song music, and that was rude to interrupt by the way,” Beans complained.

It wasn’t exactly good theme song music, but it was okay. I guess.

Beans trotted to the entrance and Pepper waited behind a bush as Beans meowed an unconvincing meow, but after all, he was a cat, so it didn’t really matter.

The dogs growled quietly, and then noticed that it was just a small harmless cat, and that nothing was wrong. The guards next to the dogs were in awe.

“Aren’t you a cute little guy, huh?” one guard said.

“Come on, Jerry, it’s just a cat. Now stop complimenting it and get back on duty,” the other ordered.

As they were bickering, Pepper silently inched closer and motioned for Beans to do something more distracting, so the dogs wouldn't notice as she slipped through the rusty doors.

"You probably should get back to work, Jerry, he's got a point," Beans laughed as they lay in shock, gripping each other as hard as they could.

"Aaaah! Come on, Jerry! Run!"

"Aaaargh!" Jerry shouted.

"Yes! Good job, Beans!" Pepper whispered as she slithered stealthy through the kingdom doors.

It was quiet, and mostly dark, leaving only the dim lit torches on the cobblestone walls to help guide her. She heard security guards changing shifts, and quickly slid into a small nook as they walked by. They were having a conversation about sandwiches. Interesting.

When Pepper got to a corner, she peeked her head and saw the room with the crown in it! Pepper gasped in excitement and saw that the guards were on their shift again. I guess they only have a little bit of time before their shift. She tip-toed on her way to the door and slowly cracked it open and successfully made it into the room. There the crown was, sitting on a pedestal, glowing in absolute glory.

She walked her way to the crown and grabbed it delicately. It was like a huge weight had been lifted off her shoulders, and she stared at the crown like it was the most wonderful thing that had ever existed. It was all a blur on her way out of the castle, and it was almost like the crown had made her invisible.

When she had finally gotten out of the castle, her legs felt numb, but she sprinted as fast as she could with the last of her energy. Thousands of cheers erupted through her village as she stumbled towards the castle.

"Oh, my beautiful, beautiful crown" The king of Uthrurb shook, and the queen elbowed him, showing her slight jealousy of the crown, "How...How did you do this? I thought it was nearly impossible," he started shaking even harder. The queen elbowed him again, thinking it would make him stop. The king dropped to his knees and repeated, "Thank you, thank you!" a dozen times before he stopped. The king offered tens of thousands of coins, but Pepper thought that was a bit much, so she just asked for a thousand coins to share with the village.

Beans was invited to visit Pepper's 'humble' abode at any time, or maybe even live there, but Beans just wanted to visit every once in a while and get the tuna that he was promised. As he wished, Beans did get the tuna, and gobbled it like a caveman. Pepper still offered Beans to stay with her, and he finally agreed, but only if Pepper got him tuna at least every two months (or six times a year), and he did.



## Pro to Beginner (Orchestra)

There was a kid named Mike. One of his hobbies was playing the Violin. He has been playing the Violin since he was seven years old and now, he's almost thirteen. He is in the school orchestra at Del Webb Middle School. He was in Beginning Orchestra for sixth and seventh grade. He was upset that he couldn't move to the JV Orchestra.

One day after school he practiced for fifteen minutes a day.

One day after practicing he noticed that he got much better. He decided to practice every day and audition for the Chamber next year.

Mike knew he was doing better because the Orchestra teacher told him he made a lot of progress and was doing much better. When the teacher said that, it motivated him to keep going and practicing.

The year was starting to end, and auditions were starting soon. He started practicing many hours every week to prepare for the audition for Chamber Orchestra.

When the day before the audition came, he practiced all day to make sure he was ready. He had to memorize this very hard music called Night Shift. The music was very hard and long, but he believed he could do it.

The day has come. His name was called. He walked into the Director's Office. The audition took place. The results came in a few business days via mail.

He unfolded the paper and looked at the results. He passed!!

After the results he knew that practicing paid off. He continued to play his instrument through High School and College.

One day he was a famous Orchestra Star, and he was in newspapers, TV, and everybody knew him.

He was a Violin Player his whole life until he was eighty. He retired at seventy.

This story teaches you to overcome obstacles and never give up no matter what comes in your way.



## Untitled

“Hello, old friends. It’s been a while, hasn’t it?” I humiliatingly practiced the introduction to a shortened lecture in front of Enceladus, peering into her polished reflective surface. I tentatively balanced on an adjacent star, staring at the burnished moon, hoping to appear confident. The piercing star stabbed at the soles of my feet, and effortlessly broke the skin on my right heel.

I winced and half-heartedly muttered, “There goes my composure. Rather, whatever composure existed in me in the first place. Perhaps none,” I trivially rambled as I painted my finger across my heel, hoping to cleanse any blood that blemished my pale skin.

Sharply, I exhaled, lifting my chin and narrowing my eyes. I acted impassive and continued, “You don’t recognize me. I’m sure of that. My name is Sol. Sol Seren,” I flashed a cheesy smile, and I noticed a precarious glimmer in my eye. Both immediately vanished. Dissatisfied, I folded my arms and tapped my finger to my chin. What am I doing wrong? My brain fogged as if a thick mist was enveloping all six of my senses. After a series of deep breaths, I straightened my spine, cracked a few knuckles, and exhaled once more.

“I am the unfathomable reincarnation of a fallen Capricornus Star. Now, I am here. I am back,” I breathed the last sentence, letting every last drop of oxygen leave my lungs. I concentrated on the pulse in my wrist and allowed myself to revel in unadulterated silence. I am back.

I shook my head and exited a curious moment of temporary paralysis. For some odd reason, the phrase “I am back” shattered a decimal of my soul. Or my sanity. Or both. I was sprinting circles around every cell in my brain; uncontrollably--and nearly unconsciously--unwinding the thread of a spool that was my overworked mind.

“Perhaps I am overthinking this. I should certainly give myself more credit for trying to reach out to them after millennia of neglect,” That sentence burned the roof of my mouth, and I choked back a swear. Millennia. I blankly stared at my feet, allowing my lace white bangs to fall into my eyes. It’s not me that is doing something wrong. It’s them. I barely withstood the urge to sob--and the urge to disintegrate Enceladus with a delicate snap of my fingers--and gingerly blanketed my

exasperated face with my sweat-stippled palms. I felt a single steaming tear trickle down my cheek. It bled through a crevice in my trembling hand. I sensed a faint trail was left streaking down the side of my face, tracing my jawline. I cruelly let it sting for a moment before wiping it away; suspended dots of water speckled through the space between me and Enceladus.

Any sane person should indisputably be insane at this point. I understand, and I bequeath unto you my deepest apologies. As I now realize, you have no context of anything I've narrated thus far. Approximately a week earlier, I decided to travel to the Capricornus Constellation to reconvene with its Stars. I simply figured they might have been enthralled to learn that one who had once fallen, had later been awakened; just, with a new physical exterior. I proposed to travel to Saturn, stroll along the shattered comets in its rings, rig up an address of some sort, and then prance down to my preceding incarnation's home. I didn't initially include a pit stop at Enceladus; she merely happened to be on the way.

I settled on the few sentences I managed to develop in front of the moon, who had--regrettably, on my part--witnessed my burnout. I gently held my hand to her surface and graciously bowed my head.

"Thank you for allowing me to recite this passage in front of you. Mental outlets aren't necessarily common anywhere else. You are certainly my favorite moon in this system. I hope to find myself in your presence once more," I steadily raised my head. Shortly thereafter, I felt a spine-shuddering emission of energy, coming from nowhere and everywhere at the same time. It was tranquil, similar to the aura Enceladus exhibited. It was familiar; it was comfortable; it was everything I needed to slow the cogs in my brain. After all, who knew when I would be back here? Who knew if I would be back here?

Contrary to my belief, the peculiar energy caused the cogs to speed up. My anxiety-driven desire to trample my stress with a distraction was ever-scorching. Another meltdown-type situation was likely due, I suppose. As a hurricane of painful thoughts clouded my perception, I realized that the more I lingered, the more wires were splitting in the structure of my ability to function. I unwillingly let go of her surface, letting the loose gravitational pull of the star I still stood upon draw my hand back to my side. I let my fingers relax; they were vibrating as a result of being so tense and inconceivably capable of--yet, again--collapsing a moon from Saturn's perimeter.

I apologetically gazed at Enceladus once more before bending my knees, taking a profound breath, and grandly bounding above her. A shallow wind, cooling and sincere on my face, alleviated some remaining



ambivalence from my ascent; on one hand, I was ready to confront the Stars and ask a throbbing, nagging question or ten. On the other hand, I didn't want to abandon any of my previous exploration destinations that held significant places in my heart and memories. I was certainly conflicted, but scrawling 'visit Saturn' on the unimpressive list of objectives before the awaited encounter was beneficial for my sanity. Before I left on my journey of answer-seeking, I considered the possibility that I would need to release some steam from my Instant Pot of tension. The wind surely helped; Saturn would help next.

Shrouded in my thoughts, I was practically swimming in an unending cyclone of stars in my surroundings. My peripheral and central visions were blinded by millions of blazing spiked entities studding the immeasurable ocean that was the universe; terrifying and unforgiving at first glance, but alluring and comparable to a goddess once you devote your life to discovering its infinite expansion.

Still slowly floating amongst heavenly celestial bodies, I reached into my muted white leather satchel which was belted across my shoulder like a crossbody bag. I wedged my fingers into two separate--and seemingly bottomless--pockets, patiently searching for my flats. My fingertip met the silk on the exterior of my beloved slippers and gently latched onto it. Cautious to not rip the luxurious fabric, I grasped and pulled them out with care. Delightedly slipping them onto my feet, I witnessed the elegant ribbons lacing around my ankle and making themselves taught.

Approximately 10 Earth years prior, my brothers Atlas and Hoku gifted those to me when we were progressively tasting different fields of talent. I eventually took up ballet and ballroom dance. On my Day of Descension, they blessed me with emerald studded, gravity-defying, gorgeous pearl white ballet flats. They never explained the fact that the flats respond to godlike figures, however. These flats that I possessed had an incredible property that could only be unlocked if they perceived that a god should wear them. If you were, in fact, a god, the sheen ribbons would delicately wrap around your ankle, fitting perfectly, and allow you to saunter across any surface, boiling or freezing, without damage or harm. I used those to my advantage; I didn't want to clean off any more blood.

With a cocky smirk on my face, I impressively landed on the star I was projected to land on, and my feet were completely unhurt. I was beaming from ear to ear, and I felt my skin glow like a warm string of fairy lights. I leaped from one star to the next in a pattern that slightly resembled a scatterplot, jarringly accumulating speed. Approaching a smaller star, I wasn't necessarily astutely paying attention, so I foolishly misjudged its size, and overdramatically stumbled with my head facing



what would be the floor. Before I took an unwanted deep dive into the petrifying grave of space, my reflexes kicked in, and I snapped intending to suspend myself in midair to prevent any further injury; physical or mental. Slanted toward the “ground”, I rotated myself so I was vertical again, and continued cautiously, yet cheerily, star-hopping.

A plethora of stars later, I arrived at a broken asteroid which marked the beginning of Saturn’s outermost ring. A bubble of wild exhilaration arose in my chest; a feeling that I hadn’t experienced in many Earth years. I joyously twirled in my flats, pumped my fists in the air, regained that precarious glimmer in my eye, and wonderfully laughed a real laugh. A powerful laugh. A soul rejuvenating, heart melting, brain wrinkling laugh. I filled my lungs with the nonexistent air that accompanied me in nonexistent waves, and breathed a sacred sentence, “I made it! I made it to Saturn, and Capricornus is just underneath me! I’m back!” And, instead of choking when I spat “I am back”, I felt a glorious kiss of self-assurance and self-worth from the universe. A sheet of adrenaline drowned me, and I wasn’t sure if I wanted to ever resurface. Skipping my thoroughly thought out and planned amble around the rings, I recklessly dove into the empty vacuum below me. Dashing dodging stars, I precisely aimed for the stunning constellation, like a dart for a dartboard; diving reminded me of Atlas. Darts reminded me of Hoku.

Nearing the family of scattered, fervent, spectacular diamonds of space, my heartrate intensely spiked. Beads of sweat perspired on my forehead, but I ignored the internal pressure of meeting everyone for the first time again. Another round of poisonous thoughts intoxicated me, crying, what if they hate me for returning? Why should I go if nothing between us will change? Why am I so unable to control my mental state? What if I’m too emotional? Those last two were personal and stabbed my heart with an ornate dagger. Although no physical pain was inflicted, I flinched like there was, and shook my hands out. I desperately tried to exhume the negativity that was deeply buried in the tomb of my body. I closed my eyes, all while diving, and autopilot flew me through the vacuum.

A moment of silence bathed me like an ocean; like space; like a mysterious and never-shall-be-known memory from my previous life. I took that silence and ran with it, similar to how I used to run back on Earth; back when I was free from these chains of undesired knowledge, unearthed guilt, and stabbing feelings of obligation. I tensed and untensed my muscles, regulated my pulse and my breathing, and opened my eyes to a bright awakening of stars. All of them were seemingly staring at me with awe and confusion. To ease my once-again shuddering

fingers, I pondered about Enceladus, my all-time favorite moon and mirror. I celebrated about Atlas, my older brother, who would have killed to meet the Capricornus Stars in person. I deliberated about Hoku, my younger brother, who would have loved to watch me soar through the sky like the aircraft he was obsessed with. Like a vicious strike of a Mortal Kombat fatality--no, rather, a peaceful finality--I reflected about myself and how far I'd come from the entry point of my expedition. I quickly counted all the times my tears blossomed from my eyes like sorrowful pansies, my favorite flowers. I remembered my passionate burst of sunny energy that shot through my veins like a snake's venom. I glossed over moments of maundering and nonsense and refocused on the present. The current moment where I stood in front of my past family who had before forgotten about me all those millennia ago. As my brain spooled its spilled thread, I unbolted my lips to release a familiar introduction:

“Hello, old friends. It's been a while, hasn't it?”



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## A Twinkle in the Eye

Whitney Glover pulled into the hospital parking lot. Her brown bangs swept vigorously over her eyes as she rushed inside. Her heart was pounding, a lump forming in her throat. She felt as if she was running in slow-motion. A nurse with curly red hair wearing purple scrubs and matching purple glasses looked up at her, "Name?"

"What? Whitney," she said, flustered. Why would she want to know her name?

"Last name?"

"Why do you need to know that?" she asked.

"So I can find the patient you're looking for," the nurse seemed to be annoyed.

"Oh," Whitney realized she was not asking for her name. "I'm here to see Lily and Ross Johnson."

The nurse clicked the keys on her computer more loudly than necessary, "Relation?"

"Umm," what would she call her relationships with them? Lily was her best friend, practically her sister; she was there for her through middle school and now high school. Ross was also her friend and - maybe - more than that? They'd had deep conversations and shared things that only the closest of friends could share. He always treated her as if she were someone special. She looked up to the nurse, "Friend."

"Go sit in the waiting room."

Whitney wasn't sure she wanted to do that. Not with the musky smell of sweat and chemicals. The flickering of the light was already pounding against her temples, and the persistent hum that synchronized with each flicker only intensified her budding headache. "Are they okay?"

"Go sit in the waiting room," the nurse insisted, her tone firm and unwavering.

She tapped her fingernails on the gray desk and clenched her teeth. When she heard about the accident, she was in disbelief. She sat on a weathered bench outside her favorite frozen yogurt shop, Key Lime Fro-Yo in hand, her long straight hair pulled into a ponytail, and her hazel eyes fixed on swaying palm trees. As she was reliving a recent

argument with her mom, her phone rang, interrupting the painful thoughts.

“Hello?”

Her heart sank at the words, “Lily and Ross have been in an accident.”

The entire drive to the hospital was miserable and now this rude nurse was making her more anxious, “And do what?”

“Wait,” the nurse said, pursing her lips, her tone leaving no room for argument.

Whitney stormed away from the desk, furious. She felt like crying. She wanted to scream. She was on the verge of a meltdown when she saw her friends’ parents across the room. “Whitney!” Mrs. Johnson pulled her into a hug. She shivered as the anger dissolved into anxiety.

“What happened?”

Mrs. Johnson looked at her husband and he explained, “They were driving down the road along the beach, when a drunk guy driving an RV...” He lowered his head, grasping his forehead with one hand while gently pulling his wife's head toward his with the other.

“Oh, my...” her voice trailed. She had gone to an amusement park with them last weekend, everyone laughing so hard they had tears in their eyes. And now... She grappled with her thoughts, slipping in and out of memories heavy on her heart.

The last time she spoke to Lily was on the phone the night before; it was one of the best conversations. Whitney had called her, crying, missing her dad, who had been deployed. Lily, doing what she did best, lifted her spirits almost immediately. She mentioned her dad’s imminent return from the war, expressing concern about his reaction to her tears. She disliked seeing him sad, and she knew Lily was right, her dad wanted her to be happy. Besides, he would be home before she knew it. Lily went on to comfort her and joke around, successfully cheering her up.

She glared at the clock on the wall, the way the hands circled around as if lives weren’t at stake. Her knee bounced to the second hand’s ticking rhythm. The flickering light's hum returned; she buried her face in her hands, seeking comfort in the imagined sound of waves crashing against the sand. She remembered walking along the beach with Ross a few weeks ago. He looked at her, a sparkle in his eye, and started to say something. Hope ignited a flame in her heart. She waited but he simply closed his mouth and continued walking. Confused, she decided to let it pass. Thoughts spiraled like grains of sand caught in the gentle currents of crashing waves. That sparkle in his eye felt like he was peering deep into her soul. Despite her bewilderment, she couldn't help but smile at the vivid image of his sea-green eyes.



She felt hungry and headed to the vending machine, passing a tall doctor with sandy brown hair on the way. He walked with straight posture and kind determination. At the vending machine, she wasted money trying to get a snack, kicked and punched it in frustration, then gave up and returned to the waiting room. As she approached, she spotted the tall doctor walking away, and Mrs. Johnson's head buried in Mr. Johnson's chest, overcome with sobs.

Her palms began to sweat. What was wrong? What were they told? Heart racing, she turned and caught up to the doctor, "Excuse me, Doctor."

"Yes?"

"What did you just tell them over there?" she pointed to the Johnsons, his steel blue eyes looking puzzled. "I'm with them," she explained.

"Oh, I'm afraid you'll have to ask them," Mr. Johnson overheard and waved his hand, signaling him to tell Whitney. "Unfortunately, their injuries are significant, and we had to put both into medically induced comas. I'm sorry, I need to get back; your family can fill you in on the rest," his patience was wearing thin.

She looked at him desperately. He sighed, a mixture of irritation and understanding evident, and explained the extent of their injuries.

Whitney's heart first sunk, then began to shatter into pieces. Her two closest friends were severely injured, and their prognosis appeared dim. The worst part of this was the realization that she might have arrived too late to utter the words she had dreaded saying her entire life:

Goodbye.

"What's going to happen to them?" she asked as she shook uncontrollably, trying to steady her voice.

Whitney attempted to blink away the tears puddling in her eyes before looking up at him. In his steel blue eyes was a look - a sadness - that she had never seen in doctors, only people who were willing to show emotion - or whatever. A look a mother might give her crying toddler after falling off his bike. Or the look one might give their friend when they are apologizing after a fight. It was the look of someone who cared and wanted to make things right.

After what felt like several minutes of silence, she grew impatient, "What's going to happen to them?" she pushed.

He put his hand on her shoulder, "Nothing you can change," his eyes were doing that - that thing again. She looked away and allowed the tears to burn their way through her eyes. "I am truly sorry, but unless we see progress in their brain activity, there is nothing more we can do for



them,” he released a heavy sigh, “I understand what you’re going through, I do. Don’t blame yourself for something you had - and have - no control over. It is not your fault,” he reassured. His words brought her a glimmer of comfort.

She slept restlessly in an uncomfortable waiting room chair. It was not until the next morning, when the lights turned to their brightest setting, that she gave up on rest, and blinked her eyes open.

Whitney saw Dr. Martin walking toward her at an even, but upbeat, pace. His face was serious, but his eyes were smiling. She stood up, rubbing her eyes. “I have good news,” he finally smiled.

Good news?

“We have seen significant brain activity from Lily through the night,” he said. “And Ross woke up a few hours ago. His parents are in the room with him now. They wanted to see him first,” Dr. Martin said, his voice deep.

“What about Lily?” she asked.

“She’s still asleep, but her numbers have improved substantially.”

Whitney felt her shattered heart repairing itself. “Thank you,” she smiled.

“You’re very welcome.”

She walked down the hall to Ross’ room. His mother spotted Whitney as she poked her head in the door. She and his father stood up, holding Ross’ hand once more before exiting the room.

She stood in the doorway, as Ross stared at her. Straight at her. His eyes brightened. “Whit,” his voice was weak and hoarse.

“Shhh,” she came closer. “It’s okay, I’m here.”

“Why?”

“Why... what?”

“Why are you here? Why did you wait for me to wake up? Why...”  
“Because...” she cut him off. She didn’t know exactly why she was there, but she needed to say something. “I need you to be okay. I can’t function without you,” she said with a stern attitude, but a soft voice.

She gently slid her fingers over his forearm. “I’m sorry that I worried you so much,” he said softly.

She searched his sea-green eyes, which had always told the story when his words wouldn’t. The look carried a sense of familiarity; it was a look she had seen many times, more recently, but she hadn’t been able to identify it. “It wasn’t your fault. You don’t need to be sorry,” she replied.

“I almost died,” his face was serious; his eyes possessed a depth she had never seen before. She choked as a couple tears spilled out. She let

them fall, not allowing Ross out of her sight.

“Even if I don’t remember anything from the last two days, I know you always will. And you’ll always be worried that it’ll happen again. I know you, Whit,” he was right, she was going to remember the accident for as long as she lived. And she would always worry about him getting hurt again. She was still shaking inside but wasn’t sure if he noticed.

His eyes twinkled again with that same familiar look. What was it? He released an apologetic smile, “So, yeah, it might not be my fault. But,” Ross’ unwavering stance resonated in the determined resolve of his voice. “I am still sorry that you had to go through all that fear.”

“I think I’ll be okay,” she gently stroked his brown hair, a soft smile danced on her pink lips. “As long as you are.”

“Can I tell you something?” the softness of his smile returned, and his eyes twinkled with that familiar gleam. Perhaps he would finally unveil the mystery behind that endearing sparkle she had grown to love.

With a hint of eagerness, she replied, “Anything.”

“I love you.”

As those three words hung in the air, time seemed to pause. The room filled with a profound silence, heavy with the weight of unspoken feelings. She looked into his eyes, and in that moment, the mystery unraveled, replaced by a profound understanding.

The softness of his smile and the twinkle in his eyes spoke volumes, echoing the same sentiment. No further words were needed; they had found their conclusion in the unspoken language of love.

## Untitled

Gas station bathroom (87 miles west of Waco, Texas, 2013)

I am fourteen and I am on Mom's post-divorce announcement road trip and the car engine is whirring and I sink my teeth hard into the taut flesh of a tomato. A burst of seeds spurts out into the cool swell of air-conditioned air as I break the skin.

Mom cuts her eyes over to me in the rearview mirror, pursing her lips slightly. "Jules, this is a rental."

"Sorry," I mutter, pulling my sweatshirt sleeve over my hand and sliding it over my glasses and the dashboard in turn. Cracking open the window, I scrape seeds off of my sleeve and watch as they scatter in the wind, arcing out over the sunny prairie.

We're driving west, and the sun at our backs urges us onwards into the Texas morning.

I close the window and turn up the volume on my brand-new blue iPod Nano—another divorce plus—letting the sounds of the last Shins album I pirated drown out my younger brothers in the backseat. They're wrestling over Minecraft, which I downloaded for them before we left our hotel room in Waco. Mom's jaw is tight as she tries to focus on the road, tapping her fingers to the tune of her Dixie Chicks CD.

And then we're pulling into a Chevron. Mom switches off the stereo and idles the car for a few moments along the edge of the parking lot, exhaling deeply. "Jules, I need a minute." She hands me thirty dollars. "Take your brothers with you."

I manage to herd them out of the car and into the convenience store. They roam the aisles wildly. "Cosmic Brownies!" shouts Noah in glee, tugging Evan along behind him. "Twinkies! Starburst! Angry Birds stuffies! They have everything, Juliet!"

Jamming my earbuds back in, I turn my iPod's volume up as loud as it goes, but it's still not enough to drown them out. I yank them back towards me before they can bowl over a trucker and promise to buy them chips if they can calm down.

As they wander over to the snack aisle, I scan the premade deli sandwiches in the fridge to my left, pick out sandwiches for each of us, and head to the counter, grabbing a couple apples along the way. Noah



deposits several varieties of Fritos in front of the register.

“I haven’t tried this kind before,” he whispers to me, prodding a small finger at the bag of chili cheese flavor.

The pale-skinned girl ringing us up—twenty-five at most—has her brown hair loose and curling around her shoulders. Her name tag says ELIZABETH. She smiles over the cash register. “Twins?”

Noah shakes his head vigorously, bouncing on his heels. “I’m eight. He’s only six.”

She nods, the silver hoops in her ears dancing, and hands me my change. I send Noah and Evan back out to the car, offering a death glare to convey what will happen if they mess with my sandwich, before heading to the women’s restroom.

There’s a foul stench coming from the rightmost stall, where someone has strewn toilet paper up and down the walls in thin white garlands. I hold my breath, dig out a pad from my pocket, and slip into an empty stall just as someone else shuffles in.

Wrinkling my nose slightly at the smell of my own blood, I wrap up the old pad and deposit it in the little trash can along the edge of the stall before putting on a fresh one. As I piss, staring up at a wet spot on the ceiling, I dig vigorously at the side of my thumb, peeling away a sliver of skin and casting it onto the grimy floor.

It’s just as I’m pulling up my skinny jeans and stepping out to wash my hands that I see the angel.

It’s here that I feel the need to specify: I have never really been someone who believed in God. Dad dragged us along to church every so often, and we went to mass for the major holidays and stuff like that, and I’m pretty sure I got baptized, but I was never really faithful. And I’m not saying that I believe in God now because I saw an angel in a bathroom in the middle of nowhere or anything, but I’d at least think a little longer before denying the existence of some higher power.

Anyway. The angel. It’s standing by the sink, backlit in fluorescent lighting, and, just like me, just like the other girls in my eighth-grade class, it’s putting on eyeliner with the hand of someone whose mother never bothered to teach them how to properly apply makeup. Its lips are puckered out in a slight smile, and its curly dark hair is alight, nearly ablaze, casting glowing flecks upon its tan skin. It’s wearing a short, billowy purple skirt and a ripped black tank, and although it’s skinnier than I am and missed a few facial hairs the last time it shaved, its face is round and soft in a young, childish way.

It doesn’t see me coming until I’m standing right next to it at the sink, and it startles, smearing a line of black onto its cheek as it moves away to give me a wide berth. Its heels clack along the floor in a frightened staccato.

“Sorry,” I say quietly, like I’m trying not to wake someone.

It looks at me warily.

I turn the faucet on.

The angel looks maybe nineteen or so, in its human form. I can almost see its wings, shimmering and black, curled up behind its back. I imagine myself reaching out, running my hands along the feathers until they smooth out and expand, carding my hands through the soft down, burrowing myself into the wings; worshiping.

I wish silently that the angel would stop looking at me like I’m going to hurt it.

I rinse my hands with soap, trying my hardest not to stare. The angel tugs out the bottom of its tank top, wets it, and bends down to wipe away the smeared eyeliner before it reapplies several layers of eyeshadow in various shades of pink and draws its eyeliner back on. Its hands are slightly shaky, still.

It cards a hand through its hair, which is still growing out. I think to myself, drying my hands slower than I ever have before, that the angel looks like a fledgling bird.

The bathroom door opens. The girl who rang us up walks in, her sneakers skidding across the damp tile. She’s not smiling anymore. “Ryan,” she says, which is a weird name for an angel.

The angel does not respond, just closes its eyes and inhales deeply, both feet planted firmly on the floor. I look cautiously between it and cash-register Elizabeth, who had been making friendly small talk with my brothers not ten minutes ago.

“Ryan,” she says again.

I carefully and slowly roll one sleeve of my flannel back down at a time.

The angel continues to say nothing.

Elizabeth makes eye contact with me, her hoops swinging slightly and casting shadows of light across the bathroom wall. “Oh my God,” she says, “I’m so sorry. Has he been bothering you?”

I shake my head. I can’t tell where I’m supposed to look. My eyes flit back and forth nervously between the girl and the angel.

She sighs. The tap drips twice in the heat of the small room.

“Ryan,” she says again, turning back to the angel, “you can’t keep doing this here.”

The angel opens its mouth slightly and asks where else it’s supposed to go.

“I’m gonna have to call the cops soon if this keeps happening. Like, I don’t wanna be the one to report you, but you’re actually bothering people. I don’t care if you wanna do that freak stuff at home, just, like,



maybe not in the women's restroom?"

The angel turns around and makes a sound to indicate that it hasn't even been here for five minutes and isn't bothering anyone.

Elizabeth crosses her arms, her brows furrowing together. I hover near the edge of the sink and wonder why she's so upset about an angel putting on makeup in a gas station bathroom, besides the fact that angels are probably too good for gas station bathrooms.

The angel opens its mouth again and indicates that it will be out of here in just a second and will never bother Elizabeth again if she promises not to call the cops.

I wonder vacantly if angels have some sort of magical charm they can turn on humans. I wonder why it isn't praying for divine intervention.

There is a quiet, silent standoff, before Elizabeth shakes her head wearily and pulls out her phone, navigating to the clock app and showing the display to the angel as she sets a timer. "Five minutes," she says briskly, and storms back out of the restroom. The door slams behind her, paint peeling silently in her wake.

I look at the angel and, despite knowing that it needs to be comforted, can only think of questions. The angel takes out a Ziploc bag and packs its sacramentals away, shoving them back into its bra.

Every fiber in my body screams at me to say something. I don't know when I will see another angel again. I clear my throat and draw myself together.

"I'm sorry," is all I can think to say. "I'm so sorry. You're really beautiful."

The angel looks at me and smiles. It moves its lungs again and tells me everything is going to be okay, including the angel itself, and also, I should never be afraid to be myself, and hard days pass, and it's really good that I'm kind, and it can see there's a kind soul in me and I should never forget about that, and my parents are probably going to get back together, and also maybe one day I can be an angel too.

And then the stupid timer goes off, and I am standing alone in the bathroom, and the angel is long gone, pulling its feet through a dusty parking lot, and we have both of course said nothing to one another.

I am, at that point in time, a girl of few words. If I could have told it what I wanted to, I would have.

I am, at that point in time, a girl, and I hope to God that it understood, at the very least, that when I handed it the mascara it almost left behind, when I took it out from where it had been tucked behind one of the faucets and made direct eye contact, that I was not afraid. I was not afraid. I have never been afraid of angels.



In my dreams, for years to come, I see the angel. I kneel, and I press my nose to the ground, and I supplicate at its feet, and clean its ankles, and scatter wishes through its wings, and I try so, so hard to keep myself from becoming holy, shutting every eye tight against the song of feathers emerging from skin. I will recount this, years later, as my college roommate helps me with my first T injection, leaned up against the dorm sink while Steven Universe plays faintly from a laptop on my dorm bed. She will call me things like brave, and say I couldn't have known, and despite everything, the guilt will surge through me then just as strongly as it does at fourteen.

But in that gas station bathroom, I smooth down my shirt, avoid eye contact with my own reflection, and wander back outside for the long drive out to El Paso, wading through the murkiness of shame.

## Wendy and the Case of the Missing Detective

“H-How could this happen...” I muttered in horror, hoping what I saw was just a terrible hallucination.

I harshly pinched myself as I closed my eyes in desperation, hoping—no pleading-- it was just a nightmare. Once I opened them, everything would be how it should be: Shelia Holmes, my best friend, sprawled across the couch, bored out of her mind until the sound of me entering shocked an electrifying energy into her. Eagerly awaiting my arrival, Shelia would enthusiastically chat about the newest mystery during school as I shared information about an exciting subject I learned today. Our days would be filled with endless fun as our conversations echoed playfully throughout the apartment.

The disturbing sight said otherwise, mocking me with my greatest fear lying before me, dancing in my anxious state. The sunlight, which normally swept the gloomy darkness to give me a warm welcome, was anything but warm. It was as cold as the sweat against my forehead. I was starkly snapped back into reality as the door slammed behind me.

The only light source came from the barely drawn curtains, which hoped to hide away from the horrors that awaited me, leaving me with myself, my thoughts, and the host of eerier gloom welcoming me. Despite my subconscious screeching to run, I hesitantly marched onto the hall; the coat rack had fallen, and its shadow formed a sickening hand gesturing for me to come closer into the eerie darkness.

‘I must stay calm; perhaps Shelia made a mess after doing another one of her reckless experiments and forgot to clean up after herself. There must be a rational reason for this disaster.’

I cautiously strode to the living room, hoping to meet Shelia and try to find cleaning supplies. Unfortunately, luck seemed to ignore my wishes.

I’m not one to exaggerate, but I’ll make an exception: it looked like a murder scene. Furniture was flung chaotically, overturned across the cluttered floor. Precious items lay dead, their broken pieces crying out in agony, and a flower vase now had its pieces scattered across the rug and stood up like jagged rocks.

“Who could’ve done such a thing....” I asked myself, shuffling across the empty room as I rubbed my arms for warmth to soothe the

shivers trickling from my spine.

Pencils bent beyond their use, various papers torn to shreds, and other art supplies checkered the hallways. I shakily walked over to a broken picture frame of what once was a happy day for Shelia and me in our childhood years, which was now replaced with an empty frame covered in shattered shards that matched my shattered spirit. I kneeled to lean against the wall for support as my legs were close to collapsing, and I felt my breath weighing heavier the more I exhaled in an attempt to steady myself.

However, the worst was a single note in the middle. I nervously walked over to it, hoping it may be from Shelia stating she left to get cleaning supplies, only for my stomach to drop 1000 feet from the sky.

“We retrieved Shelia from the House without Wendy knowing our presence,” I warily read aloud to the silence, only the thumping of my heartbeat accompanying my voice, “We, unfortunately, left quite a mess while getting everything ready before we left. Sorry about that. We’ll be waiting at the required destination as soon as you get the ‘package.’”

There was only one terrible conclusion: Shelia Holmes had been kidnapped.

“I should’ve known as soon as I walked through the door; how could I have been so foolish?!” I exclaimed, scolding myself for being so dense, “...I need to figure out my next step.... they’ve already taken Shelia, but where?”

“Okay, I need to stay focused and figure out where they’ve kept Shelia; let’s think...” I said serenely, breathing in and out as I keenly observed my surroundings, “They left a mess, but they also left clues. Looking around, I’ll find more notes leading me to Shelia. Let’s start with the kitchen; it can’t be too bad compared to the living room.”

The kitchen was no better. It was a battle scene as weapons of knives and forks were positioned near the oven. The broken corpses of plates stood throughout the kitchen, warning anyone not to enter lest they desired to meet the same fate. Blood decorated the table in a twisted, beautiful way as the murder weapon rested above the catastrophe in a silently terrifying manner, scornfully scoffing at my presence as it showcased its blood-stained smears as trophies.

“This could be a chapter out of a horror story! Poor Shelia...she must’ve been all alone...trying to defend herself...Let’s search through the blood first; it’s coating almost everything in the kitchen so that it might’ve left a trail somewhere.” I said, scanning the scene before I noticed a slight but noticeable trail leading toward the hallway.

I followed the trail; thankfully, I didn’t have to walk for long as the end led me to another note hidden underneath a pile of crumbled paper.



After flattening out the crinkles, I observed that whoever made this note was stressed as they crinkled the paper while writing it, and the words were shaky.

“Okay, we prepared all our supplies so the plan would go smoothly, but we need her there for everything to start. Ensure she gets here, or all our hard work will be for nothing!”

So, they must’ve planned this for a while...What plan were they working on? They couldn’t start without ‘her’ there, or else their work would be for nothing...so Shelia must’ve been crucial.

“Well, I only found clues, but nothing leading me to where Shelia could be held,” I stated with determination as I walked back toward the living room, “Maybe retracing my steps will help me find things I didn’t see before?”

I wandered around the room, trifling with different objects to find clues, turning over furniture, carefully sweeping shards, and tossing away frames until I found another note stuck onto the back of a picture frame. The writing was more rushed and frantic than the last two, meaning whoever made it was in a hurry.

“Bloody hell, she came too early! She was supposed to arrive three hours later, so why was she here?! You said the plan would be alright. What happened?!” I read aloud, trying to decipher the scrambled writing, “We decided to grab whatever we could and booked out of there; the others will collect the remaining items. Meet us there.”

“Shelia did leave a note saying that class got disrupted, so her classes were postponed, and everyone was sent home, so this made sense,” I pondered, “Everyone’s classes were postponed today, including mine. This surprised everyone, so whoever planned this didn’t account for school ending early.”

“Shelia’s presence must’ve spooked them before making a getaway, but I still don’t know where they went. All this searching, and I’m still no closer to the truth...” I thought somberly until an idea sparked, “...wait...they left in a hurry, so they just left a mess while rushing out...so I have to find a place where it looked like someone was in a rush...”

“...Let’s see, not the front door because it was already locked until I came through unless they locked the door as they went out, but someone would’ve seen them coming out as they left...also they would’ve left a mess out at the front door so that’s not it...” I stated, mentally marking off the wrong area. I walked to multiple regions in search of places where numerous people could escape from, “There couldn’t be any windows because all the curtains were still drawn and closed...also they would’ve needed to escape one at a time AND bring all their stuff with them so that would’ve caused them to get caught easier....so where?”

“Okay, if I wanted to get out swiftly without being seen while moving multiple people and items at once, where would I go,” I thought for a few seconds before an idea popped up, “the back door! Of course?”

I rushed outside to the back alleys, where a trampled but readable note and a stampede of dirt footprints led to my answer. I would’ve jumped up for joy, but I needed to find Shelia first; I read the note out loud:

“Alright, we got everything out...thankfully our messenger told us that she wouldn’t arrive for another hour, so we had time...but barely...We have everything set up. All we need is for her to arrive...In case you forgot where we set up the ‘big reveal,’ it’s over at Kendall Acre Street inside the blue building on Quinn Avenue...”

I readied myself as I made my way to the destination, thinking up plans in case everything went awry. I toughened my resolve as I marched up the two doors that awaited my friend. I flew open the doors with a powerful kick and jumped into a fighting stance, bracing for incoming attacks.

“Give me back, Shelia, you fie-” I started to shout.

However, before I could finish, I was interrupted by the chorus of “Happy Birthday, Wendy!” as the lights erupted like fireworks, revealing a lovely birthday party filled with all my friends, family, and, most importantly, Shelia, who was safe and sound. Colorful streamers floated above like mini rainbows as balloons and a large banner gleefully displayed “Happy birthday” presents leaned against the wall.

“What....” I said in disbelief.

“Happy Birthday, Wendy! I’m glad you were able to get here without any problems.” Said Shelia gleefully as she walked over to hug me.” I was afraid my directions might’ve been complicated to follow, but you made it just in time!”

“Wait...birthday part...this was all a birthday party?”

“A SURPRISE birthday party. Your classmates and I planned this for weeks, so it’d be perfect!”

“What, you didn’t get kidnapped?” I exclaimed as some classmates started giving me hugs.

“Kidnapped whoever said I was kidnapped?” asked Shelia, raising an eyebrow.

“A message saying, ‘We retrieved Shelia from the House without Wendy knowing our presence,’”

“Wait, that message? You didn’t get my note?!”

“What note?!” I shouted.

“The note I left on the front door?” asked Shelia. “You should’ve seen it when you entered and locked the door; it should’ve led you here!”

“I didn’t see the note because of the huge mess! I thought something



terrible happened to you! There were so many cryptic messages everywhere; I thought they planned to kidnap you and attempted to cover their tracks.”

“Wendy, those messages were meant to be cryptic in case you accidentally found them; we had to rush since I didn’t account you’d also have your school day shortened.” Explained Shelia, shaking her head.” Although you’re correct, we were trying to cover the evidence, but we were hoping that you’d be arriving a little later so we’d adequately clean up the mess.“

“B-but the whole apartment was a mess?! The broken frames, the closed curtains?!” I shouted as I flung my hands up in the air.

“Some classmates helping us had younger siblings they needed to look after. I didn’t know how rowdy they’d get, so they made a mess while we were preparing. We drew the curtains in case you came home to hide our preparations and everyone inside.”

“T-The blood...there was blood all over the kitchen! And the bloody knife!”

“Blood? Wendy, that was icing! We used the knife to decorate the cake!”

“I-I...I guess after hearing your explanation...I was being a bit silly...”

“It’s alright; if I saw the huge mess and scary messages without explanation, I’d also jump to conclusions.”

“I’m glad you’re alright....and thank you for the birthday....”

“I’m just glad you made it here,” said Shelia as we walked over to the presents, “But, answer me this one question, Watson.”

“Of course, Shelia,” I answered.

“How in the world could you forget your own birthday?”





Katelyn Chan  
High School



## Perfect

*Dear Diary,*

*My name is Emmy Lee. I am seven years old. Mommy got me this book to practice new words. I learned a new word at school. Perfect. Mommy said it means very good. I love my mommy. My mommy got me a new doll. My doll has a sparkly dress. My doll is very pretty. I like my new doll. It is perfect.*

*Bye,  
Emmy Lee*

*Dear Diary,*

*Em here. It's my sixteenth birthday and my friends are coming over for a girl's night. We're gonna stay up late gossiping and marathoning all my favorite movies. I think Ellen is going to bring some fireworks that we can light up. It's going to be epic.*

*My mom thinks I should do some studying before they come over. Like I'm going to study on my birthday. Everyday, she's been nagging me about getting into a famous college and getting a degree in Law like she did. Does she even care that I want to be an actress? I swear, it is like that lady doesn't even listen to me.*

*My baby sister is just as annoying as ever. Whining about how she wants to stay up late and play with us. She's six years old! Right now, she's complaining to my mom to include her. Like that's going to happen.*

*Whatever, I don't care. Today is my day and I'm not going to let my mom or some bratty sister ruin it. Today is going to be perfect.*

*See ya,  
Emmy "Em" Lee*

*Dear Diary,*

*22-year-old Acting Major Emmy Lee here. College life is amazing! I've met so many amazing people and my classes are absolutely perfect! And you have no idea the amount of parties I've been too!*

*My mom is still the same: Still telling me to quit and study to become a lawyer. Saying things like I'm still young and that it's not too late for me to switch majors or that I'm going to spend my life poor if I go into acting. One day, I'll show her and become a famous actress. And when that happens, I will so enjoy rubbing my success in her face.*

*My sister just started middle school. She has a phone, but we don't talk much. She's just so much younger than me, I don't know what we'd even talk about. Not that we'd even talk about our problems or stuff like that. We mostly just keep to ourselves. I'll probably spend more time with her when she's older. Maybe we'll have more to talk about then...*

*Sincerely,  
Emmy Lee  
(Future famous Actress)*

*Dear Diary,*

*I haven't written to you in a while. Where to begin... At twenty-six years old, I married my wonderful husband. And what's even more amazing...we're expecting a baby! I'm a little scared but I'm also excited at the same time! I'm going to be the best mother ever!*

*I got my bachelor's in Acting, but I still want to earn a higher degree. Hopefully I can earn it with the child around. I still need to find some acting jobs to launch my acting career.*

*But one thing I know, I never want to end up like my mother. Always stressing out and complaining about every little thing. All that never did me or her any good.*

*I don't even really talk to my mom anymore. And my sister? She's still so young, so I don't think she'd understand what I'm going through. But nevermind that, I just need to stay focused. As long as I keep this in mind, I just know everything is going to turn out perfect.*

*Bye,  
Emmy Trivers  
(previously known as Emmy Lee)*

*Dear Diary,*

*Life's been...okay.*

*With several more babies to take care of, at age thirty-eight, I haven't had enough time to start my acting career and I decided to drop out of college to fully focus on my kids. I just don't want to leave them. What kind of a mother would that make me?*

*My husband's been busy working to provide for everyone, so we barely get to spend time together. My mom and sister have offered to care for the kids to give me a break, but I just don't know about that. I don't want their attitudes rubbing off my kids.*

*I just gotta keep holding on and pushing through. Surely, with all the work I've done, everything will turn out perfectly.*

*Bye,  
Emmy Trivers*

*Diary,*

*I'm at age forty-five, and I've still been stuck in the same place. I haven't acted in a while and I've lost the skills I used to have when I was young. I've tried finding other jobs, but with my age and low experience, no one seems to want to hire me.*

*My mom and sister are long gone from my life. And I've grown apart from my college friends. Anyway, they're all busy with their careers. Their amazingly successful careers.*

*My kids are still as rebellious as ever. Always telling me about their crazy dreams of being famous artists and singers when they really should become something more practical, like a doctor or lawyer. They'll never make it in the real world with those extravagant dreams. How will they face the challenges following that kind of dream? They just don't understand I'm trying to protect them.*

*And my husband? Well, we've just been focusing on the kids, so we haven't been spending as much time with each other.*

*How could my life turn out like this? I had dreams. I had goals. If only I'd thought more about my decisions. If I knew it was going to lead me here, I would've made a lot of different choices. How could everything turn out like this? Everything was supposed to be perfect.*

*Bye,  
Emmy Trivers*



*Dear Diary,*

*It's been a long time, hasn't it? It's funny, it's been so long...I almost don't know what to say. I guess we should just start from the beginning.*

*I'm Emmy Trivers, previously known as Emmy Lee, and I'm seventy-seven years old. A lot has happened since we last talked. I spent a lot of years reflecting and taking time for myself. Did some traveling with my husband around the United States. Made up with my kids, too, and I now strive to be the best grandma and great grandma ever.*

*Looking back at it all, I should feel sad. I didn't become a famous actress. I didn't finish college and earn a law degree like my mother wanted. I stressed out my kids and family a lot. And I didn't get to do all the things I wanted to with my life while I was young.*

*But, I had a good life. I've had a lot of wonderful experiences, met a lot of amazing people, and have a wonderful family that forgave me after everything. While I didn't have a perfect life, the life I had was...perfect. I only wish I realized that sooner.*

*Your friend,  
Emmy Trivers  
(Also known as Emmy Lee)*

## Untitled

The town was littered with bright streamers. Bright blue lights filled the pitch-black sky. The town's ashen bricks rolled as the road shortened. Kids jumped gleefully over the gaps created, running wild with beautiful purple ribbons. Giggles could be heard everywhere. Glimpses of gray were scattered throughout the crowd as people cheered. Chris couldn't believe his eyes. He had never seen so many people out of their houses.

Chris had just left his shop the day prior. As he walked through the town, every door was shut tight. Suspicious eyes followed his every movement. He straightened his wide-brimmed hat and carried on. It was everyday that he had to make the trek from his shop to No Name's studio. He carried with him a little toolbox, filled with all sorts of threads and needles. He floated over the gaps in the brick, as the road began to lengthen. He sighed and spotted a short bench by a fountain. He sat down on the bench, fixing the collar of his indigo jacket. The tall, uneven buildings loomed over him. The buildings creaked as the foundation floated up. The black void in which the town was built had that effect on the buildings. Slowly but surely, the road shortened once more, almost bringing the studio to him. He hopped back up and headed inside.

"Get on that script if you'd like to keep your memory!" He heard someone shout. The command was followed by a shriek of fear.

No Name appeared at the door, their broad shoulders filling up the entire door frame, black suit seemingly swallowing up the light around it. Their long-twisted neck shot underneath the top of the frame, sticking their head out to look at the new guest. Their pinpoint feet clicked toward Chris.

"Ah good day, good day, Chris!" No Name appeared in front of him, their neck cracking as it twisted down to meet Chris's face.

"Good morning No Name. Where's the couch?" Chris knew No Name had never been one for small talk, their demeanor always changing to something far more violent whenever he attempted.

"Just that way, in the main filming area." No name stepped behind Chris, "Say, have you heard the news?" They set a large hand on his shoulder.

"Well, I haven't tuned in yet this morning." Chris began to float

forward, while No Name's spider-like legs followed behind him.

No Name chuckled, patting Chris on the back. "That's what I like to hear! Just in here," they mentioned. Chris glanced into the room, staring at a gently ripped couch.

"This'll take me about a half hour."

"I think it'll take about 10 minutes, what do you think?"

No Name ignored him, their masked grin staring down at Chris.

"Fine. 10 minutes."

"Great, fantastic!" No Name sat down on the stool beside the couch. They straightened their tuxedo jacket.

"Snake lost his last life this morning. Someone's working on the script right now," No Name announced.

Chris paused his hand.

"I'd suggest you not pause if you want to finish in time!" No Name snapped.

"I'll get done in time. How did he die?"

"Tune in tomorrow, we can't let the script go to waste, now can we?"

"No, we can't. I'll check it out tomorrow." Chris continued his stitching on the couch.

"Fantastic!"

Chris was brought back to reality by a ribbon hitting him in the face. The town was truly out of its dark age. People weren't afraid to be out on the streets anymore, out of fear of the cat. It had grown powerful from their fear, and attacks were incredibly frequent. A new face was seen at the front. A short man wearing a long purple cloak. His hair had been grown out, as part of Warden custom. His 3 eyes darted around, looking at the crowd that had formed around him. He parted the crowd with his spear, making his way to Chris. From this angle, Chris could tell one more thing about the Warden; he had a camera fused to his skull.

"Are you Chris, the shopkeeper?" The young man asked him, when he finally got close enough.

"Yes. What can I do for you?"

"Snake told me you had something for me. He told me it was urgent."

"It's at my shop. We can stop by there soon, I need to grab something from the marketplace."

"Alright," Croix agreed, and people crowded around him once more. Chris looked at the people around him, trying to figure out the source of the celebration. Maybe it was that there was a new warden, maybe it was because the old one died. He couldn't be sure. He had never witnessed a similar festival; when the last warden had been appointed, there was no celebration.



“Everyone, could you clear the way? We must get through!” Chris yelled out into the crowd, giving him just enough time to grab Croix’s shoulder and lead him through. Croix slid the spear back into his cloak. As they walked through, people cheered. Chris swiftly made his way to the stand he needed something from.

“I need a new needle for my kit.”

The woman sitting in the marketplace wordlessly slid the needle to him as he set a few pieces of metal down on the table.

“I hope that’ll be enough.”

The woman nodded and grabbed the metal scrap, tossing it into a small pot that was hot with melting metal.

Chris turned to Croix. “That’s it, we can get going now.” He grabbed his shoulder once more and began to lead him back through the crowd.

Suddenly, Croix’s camera lens began to zoom in and out, rapidly, as if desperately trying to focus on something.

Bricks began to crack apart as a shadow from underneath unstabilized them. Long, spindly, centipede-like legs burst out from the ground. Screams began to erupt as the scene turned to chaos. At the end of the source of destruction, a head popped out. It was just as black as the sky itself. One could barely make out its shape. On its round head stood two cat ears, and below were two pincers lined with teeth. The shadow twisted around, staring Croix dead in the eye. The top of its jaw was lined with even more sharp, jagged teeth.

Chris took a step back, bracing himself against the stall. His actions filled with panic as he saw the creature's single eye. His greatest fear had come back to haunt him. “The one-eyed cat,” is what everyone called it. He called it a menace. He could feel the burlap sack on his face begin to grow wet with his tears, but his panic was cut short by the creature charging toward them.

Croix jumped into action. He threw open his cloak, revealing his long-pointed spear. His palmless hands grasped around it, readying for an attack. The cat got closer and closer. Croix thrust the spear into the creature's neck and it let out a banshee-like cry. It reared back, coiling up like a snake. Croix ran to slide between its huge, sharp legs. The cat refocused itself on Chris.

It struck again, trapping Chris between its pincers. The cat’s top jaw caught on the rope around his neck. Chris was dragged forward as the noose began to loosen. His glasses fell to the floor, cracking as they hit the ground. Through the chaos, Croix had made his way to the top of its head. The cat let out another shriek of pain as Croix stabbed it through the top of its skull. It shook him off and dove into the floor, shapeshifting into a normal cat as it passed through the brick. Chris fell

to the ground. The eyeholes of the burlap on his head were stained bloody. Chris shrank into himself, bringing his ghostly tail up to his chest.

The Warden walked up to Chris and tapped his shoulder. Chris refocused his attention on Croix. He handed him back his glasses. Chris looked up at Croix, noticing that the camera lens on his face had cracked into the shape of an “x.”

“So what's up with your glasses? There’s a design on them that spins in case you didn’t know,” Croix nonchalantly asked as he helped Chris off the ground.

“I need a second to breathe before I answer that.” Chris leaned against the wall, trying to straighten out his suit jacket. He stuffed the edges of the burlap sack back into his dress shirt before tightening the noose around it again. He let out a large sigh of relief, dusting off the debris from his hat.

“Alright. My glasses act as my eyes. If they fall, I can see whatever they see. The design of the lens changes as my mind changes. I’m not too sure how it works, but they typically spiral. I’m not sure why,” Chris explained to Croix, who was busy straightening his cloak.

“Well, that's interesting. Something that is even more interesting is giving me whatever Snake needed me to have so I can get back to the Prison.”

“Of course, I didn’t mean to keep you for this long. Let’s get going.”

They walked around the debris of brick. The pieces were slowly putting themselves back into place as they walked. Suspicious eyes returned to the windows. The path had been short.

Chris slipped a key out of his jacket, unlocking the stained wooden door. He opened it up for Croix, allowing him to walk through, before entering himself and closing the door behind him.

Chris passed by the shelves overfilled with books. He led Croix to the main center of his store. The walls were filled with mismatched clocks and pieces of instruments.

“What is this place?”

Chris turned back around to Croix.

“It’s my antique shop. Sometimes I work with the world passers to collect items from our previous world.”

“How did you know-”

“You’re like me. That means that you were once human and that menace of a cat found you. The same thing happened to me about a century ago. Play your cards right, and you can be the best warden this place has ever had.” Chris offered a box to him.

“This is a new spear end. It's sharper, more effective. I never told Snake what it was, he didn’t want you to have it, but I did. Please don’t

let this place fall back into darkness.”

Croix nodded, gently taking the box. He turned around and stepped around the stack of rugs on the floor, boots clicking against the floor.

“I have a good feeling about this new age.”



## Whispers of the Fog

Deep within the forest, a young girl walks across a mossy log. Her bare feet become increasingly cold and damp with every step she takes. She's dressed in a white cotton dress just reaching her knees. Her untamed hair dances gently as the subtle breeze encourages the leaves on the nearby trees to sing their sweet lullaby. As she reaches the end of the log, she waves her foot out into the open air and steps out onto the even colder, damper grass. Cold mist tickles her cheeks, blushing them pink. She turns her head, noticing the fog rolling in. She stands still debating on continuing her stroll through the forest or rushing back home. She thinks back to her brother, who is only a few years older than she was, telling her how a monster lies within the fog. A creature no one has witnessed for it hides, using the fog like a curtain to hide itself. It is said that the creature preys on young children, only present when the thick fog rushes in. Of course, this could be a silly old story her brother told her to scare her, as older brothers tend to do. She decides to continue her stroll for 2 reasons:

1. She's determined to prove her brother wrong.
2. There's nothing better waiting for her at home.

At home, it is just her, her brother, and her parents. No best friends to gossip and giggle with. Just her brother to annoy and her chores to do. The forest is a much better place. That's where her true friends lie. Friends who crawl up trees and hide in the grass. Her brother tells her they aren't real friends, she tells him he's wrong meanwhile deep down she agrees. She continues her walk through the vast trees, squinting as the fog gets closer and thicker. She halts, spinning her head around. She could've sworn she heard a very faint whisper. Too quiet to make out what was said, but she heard something. She now leans up against a tree, ignoring the ant making a place for itself on her hand.

"Hello?" She says into the nothingness that is the fog. To her slight disappointment but also relief, there is no response. Before continuing her journey, she hears it again. Eyes wide, she searches through the forest, whipping her head from left to right.

"Who's speaking?" A second goes by and once again she hears a whisper, this time it's closer and she can finally make out what it's

saying.

“Friend.”

That alone sends shivers down her spine. It wasn't a scary or threatening word, not even something you'd hear in your nightmare. No, the whisper itself gave her goosebumps, a whisper that made the air colder and gave it a sense of eeriness like eyes from all over were watching you. Her breath quickens as she quietly says, “Please, don't hurt me.” She swallows the lump in her throat, frozen in place she feels as if her cold toes are about to fall off.

“Friend”, the voice whispers again.

“Friend? You want....to be - friends?” Saying that to something that could be a wicked creature felt incredibly silly. She's starting to not only believe her brother but regret her decision to continue her walk through the forest.

“Yes,” The fog responds, its voice starting to sound lighter, almost...kinder. The girl shifts her eyes to the ground, squeezing them shut as she cannot believe what is happening now.

Hesitant, she responds, “No - no one wants to be my friend. Why should I believe you do?” She swallows another lump awaiting a response.

“I too have no friends.” The fog replies sounding wallow.

The young girl looks up as if there's something to look at. “Everyone is afraid.”

She's grown-up reading stories about misunderstood characters, some being human whom she's always related to, others being non-human, creatures people were afraid of. She thinks back to the famous saying she's been told time and time again, “Don't judge a book by its cover.” Could this be that very situation?

“Other kids are afraid of me too. They think I'm strange. Believe I talk to bugs.” Talking to a creature in the fog was surprisingly easier than talking to her parents. She felt as though she knew it, there was a familiarity.

“I just want a friend. To play with.”

The girl thinks to herself, could it a be kid too? “What games do you like to play?” Perhaps it was a stupid question for the girl to ask but she was curious what a creature who hides in the fog likes to play.

“I don't know any games.”

Oh, she feels silly now but points her head towards the ground as she thinks for a moment. “We could play hide and seek,” she says as she raises her head peering through the mist.

“We...are friends?”

The girl doesn't know how two people become friends if there's a



certain routine you have to follow but that aside she puts a small smile on her face and says in a voice that's a little louder than what she was previously using, "Yes, we are."

Now, being friends with a fog creature might seem very odd, but people already thought of her that way. So what were a few more peculiarities added? Within the span of this conversation, she went from being so afraid she was shaking, to finally feeling understood. Despite the circumstances, she felt...happy. Happy that she's met someone who understands what it's like to be treated differently, to be someone that others avoid. To meet someone else who's in desperate need of a friend.

"How do we play?" The fog asks, sounding as cheerful as you possibly can when speaking in a whisper.

"Well, you count to 100 while I run and find a place to hide. Once you're done counting, you'll try to find me. If you do, you win. If you give up, I win. Oh! And you have to close your eyes while counting...if you have those." She said that last part quieter.

The fog replies that it understands, once it starts counting the girl turns around, trying to find a big enough tree to hide behind. As she runs to find a tree, she notices how the fog thins out the further she gets. She finally finds a good tree, pressing her back up against it, trying not to breathe so loudly from running. She can no longer hear the faint whisper of the fog counting, not knowing if that's because she is far from it now or because it's now trying to find her.

She feels the air getting colder and more humid. She sees the mist around her start to thicken. Assuming she's about to hear the fog whisper "I found you!" And celebrate winning the first-ever game they've played.

She giggles slightly as a sign she's finally having fun for once. She turns her head peering around the tree as the fog grows thicker and thicker.

"Congrats, you found m-" Her sentence is cut short as she's engulfed in thick white mist.

The birds fly out of their trees, almost as if they're scared. The wind roars louder, breaking off branches from trees. No little critter is around. The air becomes ice cold as the fog continues to move away and away following the path of the wind.

No sign of the young girl is seen, as if she was never there in the first place. Of course she was, but now she's vanished. Vanished within the fog. This time its whispers shake the leaves. The young girl's giggles still brush through the grass, the very grass she loves running across. In the end, her brother was right. A creature lives in these woods, hiding behind a blanket of fog. Whispering sweet nothings to children. Waiting for its next "friend."



## See you at the end of the Rainbow

“Wanna eat Thai food? “I texted you, and you answered “Yes, let's go”, that was three months ago after I met you, It's crazy how a simple stranger can become the best part of your life, how your laugh, your smile, and even when you were in a bad mood became the only thing that made me happy, it was simple, just you and I in a car going to a late night driving to the city for some Thai food, life was simple in that moment, we were just two teenagers listening to Frank Ocean on the car driving to our favorite place to eat but even the simplest moment in life was something so special.

Five months ago, I was going to my first-period class. It was Spanish, something that was funny because I could speak perfect Spanish, I just picked that class for the extra credit, I guess. I went inside the classroom really tired. It was too early in the morning for me, I'm not the type of person who wakes up early or goes to bed, but it was the first day of school and I needed to be early, at least for the first day.

I saw you sitting down at the back of the classroom, wearing all black and with a face that said don't talk to me, but either way, I sat next to you in the only empty seat that was left in the classroom.

The teacher started the lesson with Spanish verbs, something that I knew by heart, so I wasn't paying that much attention, to either you or the class in general, so I took my book out and started reading for half of the class time. Until the teacher did this icebreaker activity that honestly would have been the only reason that we talked to each other.

We started with a simple “hi”, a little dry “hi” but was something, then our names, ages, and grades, after that little talk we learned the basics about each other, I knew your name was Mark Velazquez, that you were 18 years old and you were in your senior year of high school and that was it, and you knew the same about me, that my name was Rosalinda Mercedes that I was 17 years old and I was in my junior year of high school, the most simple and basic information you could know about someone and that was all we need it to know at the time honestly. That was the only time we had an actual conversation.

It passed weeks and I realized we had the same lunch together. I would see you hanging out with your friends inside the cafeteria while I was outside with my friends, but we wouldn't talk or wave to each other.

I guess that was normal because we didn't know each other that much. We were just classmates.

One day during Spanish class the teacher assigned us this activity of making a map of South American countries, you could do it alone or with a partner, being honest I was going to do it by myself, so I put my headphones on and started my music, I was about to start to do the map until you tap me on the shoulder, I took my headphones off and you said “Hey, do you want to be my partner?”, I looked at you I was surprised you asked me that, it took me a while to answer but after a minute I said “yes, that’ll be fine” and that simple assignment started everything, we became friends.

We started to notice each other more than before, being honest you were kind of handsome, you had these brown eyes you could get lost if you looked at them too much and that bright smile that felt so cozy like a warm fire in winter, but I was lucky when I saw you smiling, normally you were just with this face like you were mad or something. You were taller than me, you made fun of me because of my height, you used to call me “chaparrita” and I would get so mad at you.

Time passed and each day we started to get closer to each other. You knew a lot about me, you knew my deepest secrets and my biggest fears, you knew about my wildest dreams and my deepest desires, and I knew the same about you. I knew your secrets, fears, desires, and wildest dreams but each day I was so fascinated by the person you were because you were like a book you had to read and discover by yourself.

Like the blink of an eye, I was in love with you and who you were, I couldn't believe or admit that I liked you until our little game started this eye contact and flirting game started, and that made me fall more for you and who you were. I even took your music taste. I wouldn't admit you had better taste than me, late-night walking, going to a Seven-Eleven store just to get a lemon-flavored ice drink, going to the movies together dressed in matching pajamas. Those little moments were the base of our relationship and what made us fall for each other, each day more and more.

It was Valentine's Day, one of the most anticipated days for people and couples. It was the day that love was celebrated in all ways, and that day even someone with a cold personality like yours was smiling more than usual.

I was excited for Valentine's Day, I didn't have anything to do but I was going to do my favorite thing in the world watch all the Marvel movies while eating butter popcorn in my room, I know it's a sad thing to do on Valentines but I didn't have a date or anyone to spend the day with so that was my best idea, but when I was about to play the first Iron



Man movie, I got a text from you that said “Hey your busy right now?” I answered, “Busy not, I’m just about to watch a movie, why?” Then you said, “Do you want to go on a date with me?”, and that took me by surprise, I looked at the text and I couldn’t believe you were asking me out, it took me a while to answer but I finally said “Yes” then you said, “Great, I’ll pick you up at 6:30”.

It was six in the afternoon, and it was raining. What a perfect day to have a date with your favorite person, I couldn’t believe I was going out with you, it was something that I had dreamt of but never thought could actually happen. I took my time to get ready. I wanted to look pretty for you, I put on this purple dress with flowers on, my favorite Converse, and I did simple but cute makeup, and I let my curly hair do its thing.

I waited for you with my mom. I looked at the time and I was getting so nervous, I didn’t know what we were going to do because you didn’t say anything, so everything was a surprise, then I heard a knock on the door, I opened it, and it was you. You were dressed in this black suit; your hair was a little messy but looked so cute and you had this cute red tie. I was so shocked when I saw you because I couldn’t believe how someone could look so handsome.

You went inside the house to talk with my mom for a moment, while you were doing that I went to put the flowers that you gave me in water so they could last as long as possible. After you finished talking with my mom, we headed outside and before we got to the car you said “You look beautiful, Rosa” and that made me blush, you knew I hated when people called me “Rosa” but when you said it I didn’t care because the way you said it, made it sound so special so unique, we got in the car and you started driving, Frank Ocean was playing on the radio, of course, that was your favorite singer; and I couldn’t keep my eyes off you, there was something that made me never want to stop looking at you.

We drove for what felt like an eternity but with you next to me, the time was going so slow. We got to this place, where we could see the whole city from, I was enjoying this simple moment just you and I, you brought my favorite snacks and we just sat in the back of your car to watch the rain fall, the moment was so unique and perfect, it was simple but amazing at the same time.

You stand up in the middle of the rain, I was going to go with you but you told me to stay in the car, I was confused about what you were going to do until you started talking, “Rosa, you’re one the best person I ever meet, you made my life matter” you got close to me to take my hand and put me close to you, “When I’m next to you I can’t breathe because of the nervous you make me, so I want to ask in this night down



the rain, would you want to be my girlfriend?”.

I was surprised when you asked me that, but it took me a moment to answer until I said “ Yes, I want to be your girlfriend, you're the one I want to be next to for this lifetime” and from nowhere like you planned everything my favorite song started playing on the car out loud, Perfect by Ed Sheeran, we started dancing to it in the rain, you holding me close to you, you got closer to me and kiss me, my very first kiss and it was from the love of my life.

Months passed and our relationship got more beautiful each day, we were like the sun and the moon, and our relationship was cute and sweet. Even our first fight was more sassy than aggressive, I remember that fight so well, we were arguing about something that had happened in class, about this assignment that we had to do, I was right but you didn't want to admit that so we started arguing in the sassiest way possible until you said “Shut up” and I told you “Cállame cuando quieras” -that means shut me up whenever you want- and at that moment you just kiss me and I literally went quiet.

Even in those little moments, I knew I loved you for the way you were, every time we kissed, every time we were together, we were perfect for each other.

I love to remember the beginning of our relationship as a beautiful moment that I love to go back to because you made me believe in soulmates and that there are people who can love you no matter what and in the way you are.

It's been about a year since the accident, it's crazy how time goes and how I don't regret meeting you. You made me realize that love can be simple and magical at the same time.

A year ago, I lost you in a car accident. My life took a turn that made me realize a lot of things, you were the best part of my life, you complete me in every way possible. The day they told me you weren't waking up from the coma, my heart broke in two because I wasn't only losing you, I was losing half of my soul, I was losing half of my heart, you were my everything, you made the world go so slow and beautiful. I was yours and you were mine.

I never fall for anyone like I did for you because I couldn't find anyone that even if they were in a bad mood would make me the happiest person like you did. Frank Ocean didn't sound the same to me anymore, every time I heard the song Perfect, I remembered with nostalgia the moment you kissed me for the first time.

You were my other half, you only didn't make life unique, you made it beautiful. I will always miss you, my beautiful boy. I hope in another lifetime we will meet each other again. I will always love you with my

last heartbeat. You were moments and memories that I love to remember. You teach me how the simple moments in life can be magical and important.

See You at the End  
Fatima Gonzalez

## Infinity

“Uuuggghh, what just happened? Where the heck am I?”

After many thoughts rushed through my mind it struck me.

I had just died, but I was not dead. I looked around to see the scenery, seeing nothing but a seemingly endless wasteland, with nothing to do, see, or hear.

After I got up and wandered for a while in a random direction, a small distortion started in front of me. It started as a slight blurring of the colors, then the color faded. They had faded into a shade of white, the purest and brightest white I had ever seen. From the light that burned into my eyes, a man stepped out. He had an incomprehensible form, so I stood and gawked until he spoke.

“Hey, can you hear me? Can you see me? I didn't expect to see anybody anymore after the last one...”

“Hello? You in there?”

“Uguhguh, what shape even are you?”

“Oh yeah, should change form so you can talk to me.”

After his statement, he melded into himself over and over until his vibrant and bright whites slowly became recognizable colors. He had turned into something I recognized.

“Why do you... why do you look like my brother?”

“I look like you to scare you! Ahahaha! Wait, you said your brother? I thought I was you... What oh well, glad to see that you've recovered your senses.”

“Seeing that, let's go take a walk, and we can talk while we do so.”

“Alright...”

“Also feel free to ask me any of your questions that may have been knotting up in your head.”

“So, where are we?”

“Straight to the point, huh? Well... we are... here...”

“Here?”

“Yes. here.”

“Where is here?”

“Well that's right where we are now! Obviously.”

“Ok then... what about what you are?”



“That's easy, I just am.”

“That's it? Nothing else? Just, yes?”

“Yep, I just am.”

“You know what, can you stop speaking in riddles? Your convoluted and meaningless descriptions are pointless! Please! I can't take it; I just want straight answers!”

“Are you sure? Because I can give you the answers you seek, but you might not like it.”

“Ok I don't care, please just tell me.”

“Alright, ready? We are on earth, but it's been a while since anything alive has been here.”

“But aren't I dead myself?”

“No, you got sent through time, maybe an accident, maybe a scientific test, I don't know myself.”

“There have been others who've warped as well, but all of them have left to somewhere I can't see.”

“Why can't you see them?”

“This world had ended in war and tragedy, the final act, was a failed attempt to teleport away from the planet, stretched it out to infinity.”

“Ok, can I know what you are?”

“As far as I know, I am what happened to the inhabitants, given the ability that they so desired most, but knowing nothing but what they left.”

“What will you do now? What do I do now?”

“You will survive, even with the lack of food or water, so you can venture out and seek relics of your home or join me and talk until the end of time.”

“I won't follow you, or plead for you to stay, but I will follow in your footsteps and do what you choose to.”

“I think, I would like to talk with someone, if you don't mind.”

“Not at all.”

“One last question, can you show me your true form again?”

“Alright.”

After I asked my request, he slowly began changing and turning more and more abstract, slowly until the white form returned.

“Can you see me?”

“Yes, you look magnificent.”

## Yellow Butterflies

My knees were hugged up against my chest as I sat on the edge of the wooden bridge. I flexed my arm over and over again as thoughts were running through my head. The thoughts felt odd, they were a quiet roar backdropping my sorrow as I stared at the running water below me.

Loud steps approached until someone sat beside me. They leaned back on their hands but said nothing. We both sat there in the deafening silence until I turned my head.

My brother Harper was sitting there, smiling as he stared out across the forest. “What are you doing here?” My voice croaked quietly.

He turned to look at me and smiled. “I’m enjoying the scenery; it’s very pretty today don’t you think?”

“Yeah.” The sun was beginning to climb over the horizon, painting the sky with pinks, purples, and blues. The different shades of green from the trees rustled with the wind. It was pretty but would be much more enjoyable any other day. “But, can’t you enjoy it somewhere else? I want to be alone.” My voice was hard as I spoke to him.

“Why?” I stared at him as a slight sense of anger flickered within me.

“Harper, don’t do this, you know why I want to be alone.”

“No Violet, I really don’t know.” I tsked as his light voice rang out.

I turned to look away from him, I wasn’t going to do this today. I didn’t need to explain myself to him, I could suffer alone perfectly fine. Time felt non-existent as I sat there, and that was fine by me, I didn’t need to feel anything. I shouldn’t feel anything, I didn’t deserve to. Tears began slowly welling up in my eyes, why was I here? What was the point?

Harper turned to me and stared for a moment before he began scooting closer and closer until our shoulders were brushing together. “Violet-” He started gently.

“What Harper? Can’t you just go already?” I snapped at him before he got a chance to continue his sentence. “I want to- I want to be alone!” I shouted.

My voice echoed back at me and I wanted to scream as I heard the sorrow in my own voice. I didn’t even have a reason to be sorrowful,

everything I felt was my fault. Mine.

“Why?”

I could feel my face burning. “Just stop! You know why!” I tried to breathe slowly but couldn’t. “You know what? I don’t need this!” I stood up shakily, but Harper stood up with me and blocked my path. “Move Harper!” I shouted at him spitefully.

“I’m not moving.” he said sternly.

“Move!”

“Why?!”

I tried to shove past him, but my efforts were useless.

“Why?” He repeated louder. “Why?”

“Because! I can’t look at you! It’s all my fault!” I screamed as loud as I could.

Hot thick tears were streaming down my face as I paused, realizing what I had said. Harper's face softened as he looked down at me. I collapsed onto the bridge as sobs began raking through my chest. “It’s all my fault.” I weakly repeated.

I expected him to walk away, to leave me alone, I deserved it. But to my surprise he sat down next to me and wrapped his arms around me. We both sat there as I sobbed into his chest. “I- I can’t-”

“Shhh.” He began running his hands through my hair until I calmed down. “It’s not your fault.” I looked up at him through blurred vision.

“Yes it is- you would- you would never have- have that If it wasn’t my fault.” He brought his hand up to the scar on his face and traced it down to his jaw. “You- you could have been killed. I could have- I could have lost you. You know that?”

He adjusted his position so we weren’t looking at each other, but instead looking back out to the forest.

“Yeah, I know.” He whispered.

“Then why! Why do you care about me?”

He sighed and began tapping his fingers against the wood. “Well, why do you think I wouldn’t care about you?”

“I just said, I could have killed you. Now we’re both scarred.” I held up my left arm, which now ended at my elbow.

“And do you think I care about that?” He chuckled.

I slowly nodded. “Yeah, I’m basically useless now. I can barely do anything for myself. You, mom, and dad have to help me with everything now. And I won’t even be able to play softball again!”

Harper shook his head. “Again, why do you think I care about that? This struggle, it’s a struggle that we can all work through together.”

“But we wouldn’t have to work through it if it wasn’t for-” My voice caught on the words. I didn’t want to admit it. “-wasn’t for.”



“-Wasn’t for that fateful day?” He finished quietly for me. I nodded slowly. “Yes, if I hadn’t just insisted on driving that day we-” tears threatened to spill over again, “-we would be fine.”

“Hm, so that’s what you think.”

I cocked my head to the side. “What do you mean? That isn’t what I ‘think’, that’s what happened. If I didn’t push mom and dad to let me practice driving with you, I wouldn’t have lost my arm and you wouldn’t have nearly lost your eye!” He opened his mouth, but I continued, “And don’t try to tell me that ‘it isn’t my fault’ because look at the facts Harp.”

“Hm.”

“Would you stop making that noise!”

“Sorry, sorry, I was just thinking.”

“About what? About how you could get away from me finally? How to turn back time?”

“Nah, though time travel would be cool. But have you heard the theory that everything happens for a reason?”

I rolled my eyes. Harper had always loved weird science-fiction theories. “Yes I’ve heard about it.”

“So you know it?”

“Yes, isn’t that what I just said? ‘Everything happens for a reason’ blah-blah-blah whatever.”

Harper chuckled again. “Basically, if you wanted to put it that way. But it’s been making me think. What if what happened to us did have a reason?”

I scoffed. “And what reason could that be?”

“I don’t know. Maybe it’ll help us later on.”

“Oh yeah, because my missing arm will definitely help me.”

“No need to lay the sarcasm on so thick.” He cleared his throat and leaned back onto his hands. “But who knows, what if one day if this never happened, we would have gotten in a worse accident? Or maybe one day you’ll have to go have like, a checkup for your arm.” I tilted my head and smiled. “I’m not a doctor, okay? But you probably will have to go to a doctor, of some kind, because of your arm and who knows, maybe you’ll meet your true love there.”

“Ah gross.” I fake gagged and fanned myself. “That seems like a stretch, doesn’t it?” A frown reappeared on my face as the thoughts came back. “But even so, how would your scar help you? I’m sorry Harp but I don’t think- I don’t think that this is defend-able. Can’t you just- can’t you just let me accept that this disaster happened, and it was my fault.”

He sighed again. “Okay fine, maybe it was your fault.”

“It is.”

“Even so, is it was, is admitting that it’s your fault helping you move on?”

I sighed; I didn’t want to admit that my brother was right. “It’s not, I guess.” I made sure to grumble about that last part.

“So, why do you keep beating yourself up about it?”

I frowned. “I don’t know, but I guess you’ll tell me Mr. Smarty Pants.”

“I’m honored that you think I’m smart,” I scoffed but smiled, “-but I just wanted you to know that I don’t blame you. No one does.” He held out his hand as a yellow butterfly flew closer and landed on his hand. “But you know, it was just a moment in time, like how a butterfly flaps its wings.”

I smiled as the butterfly took off again. “Butterflies are your favorite animal.”

“And the butterfly effect is one of my favorite theories.”

My smile widened as I felt genuinely happy for the first time in the past week. “Thanks Harp.” I leaned my head against his shoulder for a moment, savoring the moment.

“No problem, now come on, mom made strawberry waffles.” I took his outstretched hand. “You better leave some for me.”

“Only if you get there in time!” He turned quickly and took off with me right on his heels.

I picked up my speed as I smiled like a fool. “Watch out!” I shouted as I ran past him. I reached the door before him and laughed as I saw him gasping for air.

“Guess you won.” He said as he slowly made his way to the door.

“Guess so.”

I smiled as we walked inside, maybe he was right, maybe everything was going to be okay. I took a seat at the table as the yellow butterfly landed on the windowsill.





Simon Leau  
High School



## Untitled

The cats of the manor were of the purest breed, so much so that their genes must have run straight, unlike the double helix that defined genetic code. The cats, truly, were of a greater breed by their nature, and they knew it. It gave them a sense of high superiority, as if true work and struggle were beyond them. They thought themselves to be even beyond their own masters, who had cared for them as all good masters do, in spite of their ferocious and greedy attitudes. The cats felt no recognition towards this, however, and the masters merely fed into their superiority by caring for them instead of correcting them. The cats had grown used to not only their vast superiority, but to their unquestioned authority.

But one day, the masters of the manor left the cats to their devices. The cats at first reveled in their isolation, feeling that they had been given the proverbial keys to an endless kingdom of pleasures. The cats indulged in the catnip hidden away by their masters, and as the feeling of euphoria overwhelmed them, they could only cry out in glee. Everything was theirs, and no one else. Their own utopia, all theirs. But of course, their utopia could not last forever.

You see, along with the cats, there were rats in this manor. The rats had been there long before the cats, and while their numbers were far vaster than the cats, their power in singular numbers was small. The rats had formed clans of their own all across the manor, and while they agreed on peace and mutual prosperity, they would never unite. For the rats who claimed their home as the foyer could never be anything like the rats who claimed their home as the kitchen. There was one thing that all rats could agree on, however, and that was a great want for cheese. Cheese is God to rats, and rats would draw as much blood as needed to get cheese.

The cats were well aware of this want for cheese, but it did not concern them. At least, not until that glorious catnip finally wore off, and they realized they were terribly hungry. The cats did not know how to acquire food without their masters, and as time began to wear on, the hunger only grew worse and worse. Finally, a cat came up with a genius plan. One that would earn them food for endless days and nights. Out in the gardens of the manor, their masters had planted a poisonous plant



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And so, the cats began enacting their devious plans. They took a wheel of cheese from the kitchen and placed it near the front door, where no rat was foolish enough to claim home. Next, the cats took the Cantarella flowers and chopped up the plants. They weaved the plant into the wheel of cheese like threads through a quilt, and before long, they had a wonderfully poisoned wheel of cheese. Then, the cats skulked into the shadows, and waited.

It didn't take long for the first rats to arrive, smelling the wheel of cheese from their various locations across the manor. The warring began soon after, as more and more rats came from all over the manor. The rats, simply, were brutalizing each other over this wheel of cheese. Forks and sporks and picks of all kinds were flying around as rodent blood seeped into the wooden furnishing of the manor, permanently staining the mahogany with a deep pool of red. The rats cried out amongst each other as they warred and warred, with none even noticing the cats watching and cackling from the shadows, indulging in the last of their catnip as the war around them began to end. Finally, a winner had risen up above the thousands of rodent corpses. The cats jumped down from their pedestal above them and yelled, "The cheese is yours! Feast, while you still can!"

The cats found it difficult to contain their laughter as the rats consumed the cheese. Slowly, every last rat began to die out, as the poison coursed through their veins. The cats cackled and began feasting, reveling once again in the blood and corpses left behind by the rats. But soon enough,

a deep mistake became clear. The cats had failed to see one small thing. The poison in the rats had gone into them, and now, the poison was coursing through their veins. The cats themselves began to die out, slower than the rats, but still inevitably. Before long, the cats and rats were left beside each other. The great equalizer, death, had come for them both. And the cats were no longer any greater than the rats beside them.

When the masters of the manor returned, they found themselves disgusted, but understanding. This massacre was unmistakably their creation. The bloodbath was their creation, and while it seemed a devilish maelstrom had run through the whole of the house, no sight was as unsightly as the front door. The masters simply sighed in the end as the servants cleaned up the massacre. It was all inevitable, but the masters couldn't help but wonder if things could have been different. For pride, the true killer, was the greatest sin of all, and if they had not fed the pride of the feline, then perhaps this world could have been spared of their wrath.

## Untitled

I write to make people happy, to make sense of the world, to make myself seem like a better person. I write to escape, I write to learn, to feel free. I write what I write because that person is me. I am him, her, them, it. I am all of my writing because it made me who I am.

Writing clears my head, helps me figure out a problem, helps me feel really and truly alive. Not enough words. I write for myself, for my friends, for society. I could write storyboards, scripts, and flowing literature, but I don't. I write my story, I write my life, I put cursor to screen and scream out my ideas to the void, and the void listens. The void listens, and writes with me, feeding my thoughts and anxieties to me as words and memories. I write to feel real, to feel heard, to feel like people want me.

Still more words. Life is a prison and I write myself a way out. I know my characters aren't real, but they are to me. And so, I tell their stories, I tell these stories over and over until they become prayers to some unknown god who just listens. Who listens and tells me it's alright. Its okay. You are heard. You are seen. You can feel. And that is why I write. I write so I am heard, so I am seen, so my emotions can be felt by the strange few who care to see and hear and feel just like I do.

Needs more. The people who listen, who comfort, who are more of a family than I will ever have. I write to make their stories transcend and become more than any of us have ever dreamed. I write to breathe life and death into every little corner of this desolate world and make people see I am so much more than just me. I am Furis. I am Cole. I am Windkeeper. I am all of them, and they are all me. And that is why I write. I write because it makes me feel real, and wanted, and loved, even if the person who loves me is just words on a screen. Words are all we ever need as humans. As monsters. As ashes and space dust and atoms that form a beating, broken heart. I write because that is who I am.



## The Echo in the House

This old house always has an echo, no matter where you're at. If you make the slightest sound, it won't echo, but if you slam a door shut you will hear it bounce through the upstairs, the attic, the basement, and even through the greenhouse outside that is connected to the home. It is often a time-passer to start a conversation with the house. I will say "Hello," and the house will echo "Hello." I will say "How are you?" and the house will respond with "How are you?"

One day I was sitting in the living room with the lights off. The only light was the moon in the dark, sapphire sky that filtered through the windows, even though the curtains were drawn closed. I was drafting a story, a horror story, and had decided to set the mood. I finished writing a few sentences then said, "It's quite dark in here." I thought I knew what the response would be...but this time I did not. The echo said "Yes."

I never felt my heart drop down inside of my chest so hard. The echo was my voice, but not my words. Every corner I could see visibly was shrouded in a thick, black shadow. I peeled myself off my chair and stared in one direction, then the other. I was compelled to make another sound if only to satisfy my curiosity. I surmised this had to all be a misunderstanding, a misheard echo. I decided to make one simple sound, a single clap of my hands. The clap echoed through the nearest open rooms and the living room where I was sitting on the sofa with my laptop. After the clap reverberated through the halls, it was back to the quiet. Still.

Until I heard from somewhere atop the second floor, a door handle rattling around. It may have been foolish, but I fathomed a scenario of someone breaking inside of the house. Someone breaking in...from within? I worked up the courage to storm up the stairs and present myself to the unwelcome intruder. As I stomped my way to the stairs, I spotted an antique, golden candle holder resting on top of a round iron table near the stairs. Furiously, I scooped it up by the base, extinguished the flame with my fingers, and tossed the wax pillar to the side. Holding my weapon, I grabbed onto the golden staircase railing and scuttled to the top of the red carpet-enshrouded steps.

I stared dead center at a door that was about sixteen feet away. It was white though chips from age had revealed a light tan wood color. The antique brass door handle still kept its color but had collected scratches and tiny dents over the decades. The handle did not move, and the house was deathly silent. I stood there scanning the door, waiting for the handle to move. Expecting it to move. Nothing else was above, nor behind, nor to the side, just the brass door handle in front of me.

Everything was so still, so frozen, so calm, and yet the door handle suddenly jolted up and down at rapid speed. Whatever was on the other side then began to scratch violently at the door. The force made the whole door lurch half an inch forward. The scratches grew louder and louder and felt as if they were clawing at my brain. And then everything was quiet again. It seemed the door was almost knocked off its hinges. I felt whatever was on the other side of the door could dart straight through and attack me at any moment. My pulse raced and my palms sweat.

What? What happened?

I was back sitting on the couch. The lights were off, and the moonlight glowed through the windows, just as before when I was writing my story. Was it all a dream, a figment of my imagination? I stood up and shouted "Hey!" The whole house echoed back as I hoped it would.

"Hey!"

Why am I like this? That was the worst episode I have ever had. I need to go back to my therapist.



## Don't Forget the Keys

The shuttle spins out of control as its hands reach for the control gears and it violently turns the wheel toward the back end of the ship. The ship crashes harshly into the ground. An explosion erupts from the cockpit and fire spreads across the exterior.... --. -... / -... -.. / .... --. -..-

The radio cracks and a low, scruffy voice leaks out the speakers, "We are receiving an unknown signal reflecting off a satellite. Possible crash site, translation: HGX BC HGX, repeat, HGX BC HGX." The exhausted man sits and waits for a response.

"Does anybody copy? Hello, does anybody copy?" The radio releases a stream of static and the man sighs. As he stands from his chair, a loud beeping from the transponder brings him right back to his seat. The same signal is repeated....

--. -... / -... -.. / .... --. -..-

... .-. -.. .. -. --. / -.. --- --- .-. -.. .. -. .- - . ... / -. ... -.. .. - ...

'HGX BC HGX... sending coordinates nichts'

The man checks back over the translation, "Nichts? What the hell is 'nichts'?" He lets out a quiet scoff and tries sending a message back, "Let's hope this guy can translate right..."

-. .- - - - .-. -.. .. -. .- - . ... / .-. .-.. . . . . - . -..

-. ... .. - .- -. -.. / -. .- .- .- .. -..

'Coordinates received... assistance needed?'

... .- ...- .

'Save'

The man jumps up from his rolling chair and swiftly sends back:

-. .- - .-. -.. -.. / ... .-. -.. .. -. --. / -. ... .. - .- -. -.. / -. --- .-

'Copy, sending assistance now.'

Immediately the man switches stations and speaks into the transceiver, "I repeat, requesting assistance at coordinates 40.4173° N, 82.9071° W" all he heard was radio static and silence. "Repeat, requesting assistance at 40.4173° N, 82.9071° W" Again, no response.

... .- ...- .

'Save'



The man got up from his swivel chair and glanced at the clock built into the radio desk, 2:31 am. He turns his head and runs for the stairs of the radio tower, grabbing his hooked jacket before descending the plain steel stairs. He walks swiftly to the kitchen and pulls a fistful of pencils out from a drawer and slams them down on the counter above. He places a wrinkled-up map on the hard surface and begins to circle the coordinates he read before, muttering them softly, “40.4173° North... 82...9071° West.” He draws a line with a red marker from the tower to the coordinates, as if he’s completing the maze from a child’s menu at Applebee’s.

He sloppily folds the map up and shoves it in his back pocket. Immediately he rushes out the door, almost failing to pick his keys off the table, and slams the door. He tries to lock it, but he can’t fit the key into its hole, so he lets out a huff and heads to the truck. He puts the keys into the ignition and starts on his way with the map laid out flat on the dash.

As he shifts to drive, the radio lets out “Copy, assistance heading for 40.4173° North... 82...9071° West.” The man gives a quick sigh of relief and puts his Chevy into park. However, after a moment of silent thought, his eyes light up and he pulls out of his driveway.

“Let’s hope curiosity don’t kill this cat” says the man as he starts toward the supposed crash site.

About five minutes into the drive, the radio lets out a loud crackle that almost sends the man spinning off the road. The snapping is followed by the sound of men’s screams cutting in and out.

“G-ET US-- OUT- O-F H-RE!! H-LP US-” The static fills the man’s ears, his stomach drops and sweat collects above his brow and on his palms. But he’s already there, and the scene he finds is too horrific for any person to look away.

The withered and burnt grass has been stained red. The man’s eyes catch a few disembodied limbs somewhere within the scattered piles of guts and dead bodies. Then, at the center of it all...

A deep, brooding voice escapes from a large silver dome sat amongst all the gore, “Pflege forth, делать, ан excuus может быть umbono nog dare!” The man turns his head in confusion as mechanical clicky noises exert from the metal structure. Then, from the death sphere comes, “TRANSLATING: Come forth, guy, and face me if you dare.” The man’s jaw drops. Almost as if his body is being controlled by another mind, he steps out of the baby blue truck and walks robotically toward the voice.

“What is this?!” The man shrieks, his voice cracking, like a little girl.

“Fh. Lx fh всегда umhlobo khohlo future! an fh всегда kanya UCanzibe jedhamuun beekama sollte nog khohlo truth!” Says the stranger.

“Boop beep beep boop boop!” Says the ship. “I... I am from the FUTURE!™ and I am here to show you the TRUTH!”

The man's body is lifted from the burnt ground. As he is lifted, from the dome is revealed a pale man with a very dark eyebrow, dressed in all leather, sitting in a faux fur swivel chair atop the sphere.

“Wh-who are you?!” The man screamed.

“Nee who... uvile jedhu.”

“Beep beep boop”

“Not who... WHAT,” The two beings sit in silence for like a minute as the dramatic pause takes place as more translating and beeping is heard. “I AM THE PIONEER! And I am here to give your world True-life!”

The Pioneer clicks a large red button and then opens a garage-like door on the ship. The strange pioneer guy disappears into the sphere, and a ramp is lowered as the garage opens. Two horizontally parallel lights blind the floating man. There is a moment of silence, and then the revving of an engine is heard. The man's skin starts to bubble, his face starts to look weird, weirder than before, he begins to squirm in the air; like his body is being squeezed. The weapon from within the garage slowly begins to emerge.

“Wh-what are you doing to me?! What is-” The man lets out a scream of pain, “What- what is this?!”

The Pioneer lets out a low, evil, brooding laugh. He cackles for a moment, then it dies down as his piercing eyes meet the man's.

The Pioneer speaks again,

“This... This is how it feels to drive a Ford F-150.”

## Dreams from the Void

When all went silent, the trees crept in.

When the fog overtook the moon, and all became one— the streets went quiet, and so did the sun. The violet sky of dusk twinkled with amethysts. The rain made of glass poured down, all screaming voices crushed into dust. Sweeping feet of souls that were once lost crossed the halls. The mirrors reveal the dark truths of the unknown; the trees hide the unseen. They all wait in the darkness, reaching for something more. A new life, or perhaps a new soul. A body they can obtain, a name they can steal.

My brain is empty, filled with nothing but a void. I see the truth in which all I can do is avoid. I live in a hole, away from life. I see a girl lost inside an illusion. She dreams of an escape, searching for answers she will never find. She wears her heart on her sleeve, swallowing the poison that preys on her veins. Love will not save her. A miracle cannot protect her from the forest.

They will come for her.

Who?

Everyone.

All beings who hide within the dark, all lost souls who wander through the halls. They watch, they listen. The unnamed are not monsters or creatures who feast on fear. They are simply just people, human beings, thriving on the downfall of those who dream. She dreams of being free, of being loved. Among the trees and on the street— she can run, but she will never fly.

In the middle of the empty town, she speaks. “Oh, why must you leave?” she asks the man who torments her heart. The tears in her eyes cloud her vision as the fear invades every crevice in her body.

At first, he is silent, but then looks into her pitiful eyes. “Because life is far too cruel for our love to exist. We tear each other apart. Soon, they will find us, and we will be nothing more than a lost memory. If we continue on like this, our story will be unfinished, and our names along with our souls will vanish,” he whispers without any emotion.

Anger flashes across her face. “Why must you whisper?” she yells. “Do you not love me enough to speak directly to me? To speak proudly



in my presence?”

He raises a hand to her cheek, cupping her small head with harsh, callused fingers. He smiles. Although, not a pleasant smile, but instead a greedy, cruel smirk filled with spite and laughter. “Did I ever love you at all? Or was it simply just a dream you created in your head?”

As the tears fall and a gasp escapes her lips, his hand disappears and he steps into the darkness. He begins to laugh as pieces of him turn into dust, his skin and bones disintegrating in front of her very eyes. He laughs and laughs as his remains float into the distance. The last to fade: his malicious grin.

She reaches for the dirt that was once her love and is now known to be nothing more than a pretty facade. The girl sobs, her tears made of blood. She gave her life to him, her soul. What she didn't know was that she was giving herself away to the ones who wished to destroy her—the unnamed.

She suddenly hears the hushed voices from the shadows come closer and she runs into the darkness of the forest. Trying to hide among the trees, the shadows wrap around her feet. Her voice rings out like a banshee's scream. Her cries are like thunder as the cracks of lightning splits the Earth into two. The shadows grab her ankles and yank her down. As she tries to scream in agony, her throat begins to close up, cutting off the ability to breathe. She grabs at her neck and face as a white fog escapes her open mouth. Her delicate, pale fingers reach for the strange mist but as she touches it, she realizes that it is not her dying breath, but it truly is, just as predicted...her dying soul.

One would think that it is impossible for a soul to die, for it seems to be unreal. What people tend to not understand is: just because society does not have one, nor a brain— does not make them any less real. A soul is all one has, the only entity that proves you are alive. Without it, you are nothing. Without her soul, the girl will vanish.

She stares into the dark abyss where the ground is cracked in half. She begins to slide into the darkness as the shadows pull her in. Without the ability to say goodbye, all she can do is let them take her. The trees creep closer and closer until they cover both the hole in the world, and the hole in her heart.

One final tear runs down her cheek and the twinkle in her eye finally dies out. This is when she realizes: all that she knew her life to be, was simply just a dream from the void.



Roman Reid  
High School

## Untitled

In December of 2022, I was very stressed. The semester coming to an end meant I had finals to take in all seven of my classes. So, when I was told we would be taking MAP tests on top of all the work and projects I already had to do, I deflated. It was all too much... until I realized something. MAP tests don't affect your grade or whether you are going to go to college like the SATs or ACTs. I put one and one together and got two. I purposely did not put any effort into the test. I went a little too fast at first, catching suspicion among both the Chromebook I used and the teacher administering the test, but I got it done and moved on with my life.

In 2023, I took another one after that first MAP test and actually tried because I was too lazy to not try. I got it done and went on with my day. Flashforward to February 8th, 2024, and my Algebra teacher gave me a certificate. It congratulated me for having the "highest improvement in Winter 2023/2024 MAP Math Test". I was confused. I hated math. Once long division came into play, I lost my passion for and skill in mathematics. Did they make a mistake? Then I remembered.

I had done so terribly in 2022 that when I took the test the next year and actually tried, my "improvement" went up a comical amount. I had unintentionally cheesed my way into getting a printed piece of paper... so what?

If this story was about me getting some worthless piece of paper, it wouldn't be worthy of being told outside of the parties I don't go to. The certificate had an invitation card paper clipped to it. An invitation to a pizza party. Somebody probably worked hard to improve over the year just to go to that pizza party, and instead, it went to the greatest 2e student this side of the Colorado. This will forever remain a core memory of mine, and I am glad to share it with you, reader.



## Untitled

A man was sitting on a bench in front of a house. The house was located close outside the city of Snow Ridge City. He looked down at the device in his hand. The device's shape looked similar to a smartphone, but it didn't have a screen. Instead, it had a panel of buttons, none of them labeled. The man looked down at the panel, seemingly looking for the right one to press. Eventually, he seemed to find it, as he pressed one of the buttons. The smartphone-shaped device beeped once, paused, and then beeped again. The man smiled. "I think it worked," he whispered to himself.

He stood up and walked towards the city. While walking, he carefully placed the unusual device into a satchel of some sort he carried. As he kept walking, he looked around, as if making sure that no one was around. Eventually, he reached the city and he kept walking, heading towards the Snow Ridge City Hotel. As he got closer, he started walking faster, as if he was eager to reach his destination. As he approached the hotel, he looked down at his satchel once more. He patted it lightly and then looked back up, staring at the left door to the hotel with a weirdly determined look on his face. He opened the door and walked through.

Once he stepped through the door, he wasn't in the hotel. He wasn't even in the same city. He was now inside the supermarket of Sunrise Harbor.

"No no no," he muttered to himself, digging through the satchel for the device again. "That's not right, that was supposed to lead to-"

He stopped talking to himself as someone walked by.

He finally found the device in the satchel and examined it. It was now very hot to the touch.

He sighed, looking at it. He thought, it malfunctioned... but it worked. I'll just have to find the Government Buildings.

He looked at the other two doorways in the supermarket and decided to start there. He walked through one and ended up in a different city's Restaurant. He walked back through the door and tried the other doorway, the one on the right, in the supermarket. This one led to the Silver Rail City Government Building, which served as the living and working quarters of one of the region's government officials, Clara.



He walked through the building, eventually finding and entering Clara's office.

Clara looked up at him as he entered. She had been watching a television which showed some Breaking News.

"Hi, Eric," Clara said. "Did you see the breaking news? All of the doors of the four major city buildings are leading to the wrong place! Some people are crossing whole Regions!" she paused. "Wait... is that how you got here?"

"Yeah," he replied. "I walked through the supermarket of Sunrise Harbor and ended up here."

"Do you have any idea what happened?" Clara asked.

"Actually, I do," Eric replied. He reached in his satchel and pulled something out, but he covered it with his hand. It was a different shape than the panel of buttons, though. "You'll never know, though." He raised the object — it was a gun — and aimed it at her head. Before she could scream for help, he pulled the trigger.

Clara's body dropped dead in the chair she had been sitting in.

He placed the gun back in his satchel and calmly walked back through the government building into the supermarket. He walked through the supermarket and exited the doors, which led back to outside the hotel of Snow Ridge City.

"One down," he said to himself as he walked back home. "Twenty to go."



Jacquelyn Schwindt  
High School

## Untitled

Jakob and Mateo, best friends for years, platonic soulmates for life. Time passed and they had successful careers.

But, they had hit their peak. Well, Mateo had.

Which meant things could only go down.

It started when Jakob started to hang out less and less with Mateo. It hadn't been noticeable at first, but as time went on, their time together depleted. It went from one call a day to one a week to one a month.

Mateo would never blame Jakob. Never in a million years. He blamed himself.

It was a side effect, really. He'd always had mental health problems, and this just seemed to be another nail in the coffin.

Jakob didn't know. Mateo didn't tell him. He wasn't afraid of Jakob treating him differently, he just didn't want to admit he had any issues. Admitting them would make it real.

But, maybe admitting it would've saved him.

Private Message:

pie.die , Simp101

[01:49]

pie.die: jakob?

[missed call]

[missed call]

[missed call]

[missed call]

[missed call]

[02:13]

pie.die: jakob please pick up

[missed call]

[missed call]

[missed call]

[missed call]

pie.die: im sorry

[05:35]

Simp101: shit

Simp101: hey mateo

Simp101: are you still up

[06:52]

pie.die: yeah

[Simp101 has started a call]

Against his better judgement, Mateo answered the call.

"Hey, Mateo."

"Hi." The call was quiet on both ends of the call. Usually, Jakob would listen to Mateo ramble as he was pretty loud and would never let a call stay quiet long, but Mateo couldn't find it in him to muster up the energy required to do that.

"What's up?" A pit of dread was forming in Jakob's stomach. He didn't know why.

"I dunno. Nothing, I guess." He didn't know why he was lying.

"Bullshit! You called me nine times, Mateo! That's not nothing!"

"It's better."

"Mateo, please. What's wrong?"

He didn't hang up and opened a door. Jakob could hear wind through the speakers on Mateo's end of the call and scrambled to put on a pair of shoes, knowing that something was wrong.



"I think I understand why you're afraid of heights now."

Jakob grabbed his keys and left the house in a panic, not bothering to lock up. Something bad was going to happen to his best friend if he couldn't get there in time. He got into the car and the second the engine started; he peeled out of the driveway. "Mateo, where are you?"

"Mm, graduation bridge."

Jakob's heart plummeted to his feet. Going way above the speed limit, Jakob drove towards the bridge. A cop had turned on his siren lights and was chasing him, but Jakob ignored it in favor of getting to Mateo. He could deal with the consequences later.

"Alright, uh, do you remember how drunk we got that night?"

Keep him talking.

"Yeah, you were so shit faced. You threw up like twelve times."

"Nuh uh, it was only three." The call went quiet again and Jakob frantically wracked his brain for another conversation, "You know, I haven't found all those stupid plastic ducks you hid around my house."

"You- You haven't?"

"I've only found like twenty of them."

"I hid fifty."

"Fifty?" he exclaimed, trying to keep Mateo talking.

The route to the bridge didn't have any lights, which Jakob was grateful for. He got there in record time and, without turning off the ignition, Jakob got out of the car.

He ran onto the bridge and frantically looked left and right, not seeing Mateo anywhere. The cop pulled in, chirping his siren and Jakob heard a noise above him.

He snapped his head up to an empty platform. Someone was falling. He seemed to have slipped at the cop's siren. Jakob caught the look on Mateo's face. It showed the slightest bit of fear, but what truly haunted him, was how calm Mateo looked as he plummeted to the welcoming ocean below.

## The Demon's Job

A red demon stands in his room in front of an antique dresser mirror, appearing to get ready for the day. The room is dimly lit, but a light in the top center of the mirror places the demon in the spotlight.

He combs his dark hair, about shoulder length, with a curling hairbrush. Seeing his hair finally neat in the mirror, he places the brush on the table and picks up the lint roller lying next to it. He guides the roller up and down his brown vest, then across his shirt's white sleeves. The demon's skinny tail dusts off his pants as he puts down the lint roller to roll up his sleeves to elbow length. He contemplates his appearance in the mirror, then sees as the top two buttons of his shirt still remain unbuttoned, lacking the presence of a tie. The demon turns to his rack of colorful ties, reflecting on which design is too wacky or too professional. As he was doing so, a knock came at the door.

"Zarxius, are you in there?" Zarxius, the indecisive demon—still browsing his other ties for the perfect design—yells to the door:

"The door's unlocked, Kylyre! You can come right in!"

The fellow demon opens the door. His horns were taller than Zarxius's, so he had to duck to get inside. Through his rectangular glasses, his eyes appeared stern. He closes the door behind him and walks over to where his friend was standing. Kylyre notices his struggle and sighs.

"Zarxius, you are going to be late. Just pick a plainly colored tie and move on."

"But I need the bosses to see that even if I'm a serious business guy, I can get silly at times! It needs to show my personality accurately..." Zarxius looks back at the ties, this time eyeing a maroon tie with designs of black cats walking across it.

"Just pick up that tie and go, they won't care as long as you do your job correctly."

"Alright, alright, fine." He picks up a tie that has a pattern of various playing cards.

"Good, now let's go..." The taller demon opens the door but stops abruptly, his horns stopping him from properly leaving. Zarxius stifles a laugh as Kylyre awkwardly ducks and leaves the room. The two of them



walk down the hall to exit the apartment building.

“I'm so excited to start our new job! I wonder what type of people would summon us...” Zarxius thinks aloud.

“Most people who want to summon demons are cultists wanting salvation or whatever cultists do,” Kylyre states, “Humans are strange creatures... remember what we learned in demon-academy?”

“Dude, who cares about demon-academy, that was all a long time ago!” Zarxius says in a frustrated manner, remembering when he himself was a wild teenager who went around biting other demons and worrying about what tie to wear- but he still does that. The tie thing.

“Ten years to be exact.” Kylyre says in his matter-of-fact voice.

Zarxius waves him off, “I mean, what else would we be able to do in this realm? It'd be boring if we couldn't leave at all, we should be glad these humans even wanna summon us in the first place.”

Kylyre hums in agreement as they continue walking down the streets of the underworld, underneath the dark red sky with lights illuminating the path. People around them were going about their lives, selling spicy food, or trying to peacefully walk their pets— dogs with three heads that kept trying to nip at Zarxius's excited tail, or lizards with high spice tolerance quickly munching down on the extremely spicy pumpkin bread the vendors were selling. Many demons are dressed sharply— literally and figuratively. Zarxius and Kylyre dodge a female demon with a very spiky jacket, as they enter their office building.

“Welcome, are you two the new hires?” A female demon at the front desk says and the two of them nod— Zarxius more eager than the other.

She gestures to two double doors, “The orientation is over there, have a seat inside and wait for it to start.”

The two of them enter the room, Kylyre not having to duck this time due to the doors being tall— made to accommodate demons with taller horns. They both take their seats around the back; the rest of the tables being taken with other demons in conversation. The stage at the front has a podium, but no one is currently standing at it. Zarxius shakes excitedly in his seat.

“Can you calm down? I know you're excited, but this job requires you to be serious with your clients... have you practiced your facial expressions at all?”

“Of course I have!” Zarxius breathes in and out, then his face twists in a matter of seconds. His pupils shrink and his eyebrows wrinkle uncannily as he opens his mouth frighteningly to reveal his sharp teeth and his hissing tongue. The demon's hair and tail stick up— the latter almost stabbing the demon sitting behind them. After that, he relaxes his



face and returns back to his smiling self. “Was that good?”

“... impressive. I never thought you were truly capable of creating such an expression.” Right as Kylyre was about to take his turn, a suited demon spoke tiredly into the microphone on the stage.

“Good morning, fellow demons. Today you will all get your new offices after they clean up what the retired left behind. You all know what the job entails: a human from earth summons you and you do what they request for the day. You should also be aware that we do not take human souls as payment anymore, unless the human is truly expecting it. The only payment you can receive is in the form of food or whatever new knowledge about humans you write in your reports.”

He pauses, his gaze far and unfocused. Then, seemingly remembering why he was here, continues, “They are allowed to summon you again if you give them your summoning card. If you hate the human, just dump the responsibility on a different demon. I don’t care what you do with the human after your job is over, just don’t commit genocide or we’ll run out of business. Any questions?”

He looks around at the demons staring intently at him. “None? Alright, stay here while I get your office assignments...” He steps away from the podium and walks down the stage, yawning.

“Hm, our boss doesn’t look that professional... maybe you could do whatever.” Kylyre comments.

“Except genocide!”

“Except genocide. We can only summon fire and some personal items on earth so unless we have a bomb, we can’t exactly do that anyways...”

Zarxius nods, “It’s whatever’s in our apartments and office desks, right?”

“I believe it’s only our office desks. What would a human want with your various colorful ties?”

He shrugs, “Maybe they summoned a demon just for fashion advice! I could give that!”

“The fact you own neon green ties says otherwise.”

Their boss demon enters the room again holding a cup of spiced-coffee and goes back on stage, “Alright, your offices are organized by the first letter of your names, and you’ll find out from there...” He takes a lengthy sip from his coffee and leaves the room again.

“I suppose that is our signal to leave. See you later after work?” Kylyre stands and pushes in his chair.

“Yup, see you dude!” The two of them leave the room and make their way to their separate floors– Zarxius’ being all the way at the top.

Once he had arrived, he saw his cubicle nearest to the elevator and strode over to it. It was neat, with an office PC, a stack of papers in a tray, and a stack of cards that said Zarxius's name and a drawing of a pentagram. Zarxius made a mental note to bring some items from home that could potentially be used to assist any human that called upon them— and whatever could liven up his space. He sits in his chair and spins around, not wanting to log into his PC just yet.

A demon with piercings on his horns knocks at his cubicle. “Zarxius, is it? Your first job is right here,” Zarxius plants his feet onto the carpeted floor, abruptly stopping, and is handed a slip of paper with a pentagram drawn on it. “The paper has information about where you have to go— you'll get what you have to do when you get there,” Then he leaves.

Zarxius looks at his desk, then back to the paper. It states that it is from a human kid who set up a pentagram using a red crayon in the basement of their house, using multiple electronic devices to display pictures of candles. Zarxius was quite impressed with the child's numerous gadgets and was confused about how they managed to attempt summoning this way— human rituals have always been confusing, Zarxius never bothered remembering everything he learned in demon-academy.

The pierced demon comes back and tapes instructions of how to arrive at the human's place: ‘Drip a small amount of demon blood onto the center of the pentagram and you'll get there— easy peasy.’

“Would you like a knife to help?” the demon asked, taking a silver one out of his pocket— smiling as he's clearly only showing off.

“Ah, no, I believe I'll be fine.” Zarxius says, the other demon nodded, dissatisfied, and left again.

He takes a look at the instructions again— a simple sheet of paper with only a few words that was somehow necessary in his cubicle. Zarxius looks back at the paper in his hands and says, “Hm, not bad for a first job, huh?” He smiles as he bites into his thumb till it bleeds, red liquid seeping out. He presses the finger into the center of the pentagram, staining the paper. Blue fire surrounds him and engulfs him, and he disappears from the underworld.



## A Second Chance

A single tear rolled down her cheek, the only evidence of what she had done.

No one would ever know.

No one but her.

It was fun, at first. The thrills of seeing the new light, bending it, using it to help people. But then, as she spent time in the light, she cast a shadow.

She never meant to do it.

She never meant to hurt anyone.

She stared out at the city streets, going about their lives as if nothing had ever happened.

But they had not been far from utter destruction.

And no one knew it.

“Cassie Sanderson? May I come in?”

She turned around and nodded at the doctor.

She really had no need to be in this hospital. Honestly. There was not really much of a point to it.

“So how are you doing today? Anything new you remembered?” His tone was gentle, but pleading. He had learned nothing in the days she had been in that room, and his superiors were starting to notice.

She shook her head. That was all she had ever done. It was starting to grate a little bit on his nerves.

“May I leave you with a question?”

She nodded.

“Even if you won’t tell me, or can’t tell me, will you at least tell yourself what happened? Please?”

She nodded. He hoped that was an agreement from her, but he wasn’t sure.

She wasn’t sure either.

He left the room, and she returned to stare out the window.

What was so wrong with telling herself the story? She sank into the chair behind her and took a deep breath. There was nothing wrong with a good story, now was there?

She breathed in again, and this time, exhaled with the first word she



had said in weeks.

“Light.”

It had been the idea of light that had drawn her to the job, at first. She had always wanted to see what all light really could do.

So, she walked up the steps, chipper as she had ever been. With her resume, this interview would be a piece of cake.

She pushed the door open and strode over to the elevator. She hummed a little tune to herself, happily watching as the number on the display rose higher and higher. At number 53, it chimed, and she walked out.

She turned a corner, appreciating the clean white walls and sunshine beaming in through the floor to ceiling windows.

She knocked on the door mentioned in her interview agreement, and a voice answered.

“Come in.”

She twisted the knob, grinning to herself.

She walked into the office, which had an impeccable view of the city below.

“Cassie Sanderson, I presume. I am Mr. Frederen, and I am quite intrigued by your file.”

She was taken aback by this. She knew it was impressive, but enough to intrigue a man like Mr. Frederen?

Shocking.

“Why thank you,” she managed to say. She sat down in a chair sitting in front of him.

“So, Miss Sanderson, I have only one question for you. Why do you love light?”

No one had really asked her that before. Even with her slight obsession with the common phenomenon, no one had ever asked her why.

“Because,” she began slowly, “light is essential. Light feeds us, light brightens our moods. It guides us, and without at least a little light, we cannot really do much of anything. All the different types of light have many different properties, from the power to kill and the power to heal. Light moves infinitely fast and affects everything we see, making it seem to be there, and there immediately, but it isn’t, quite.”

She paused, thinking more.

And the grin on the old man’s face grew bigger.

“You have the job.” he said.

He knew she was the right person. He just knew it.

And he had been searching for quite a while.

Within days she was in blue coveralls and a yellow hard hat, supervising the assembly of this giant machine she had designed.

After Mr. Frederen gave her the job, he mentioned her senior project from high school, and she eagerly got to work on fixing the kinks.

It had been a doodle in her physics class, at first. But when her teacher saw it, she told Cassie to keep going. She turned it in as part of her STEM diploma, and then the papers were lost. Somehow, Mr. Frederen was able to hand her the entirety of her work, all neatly compiled into a binder.

She only questioned it for a moment, but then happily threw herself into the work.

She scribbled all through the night, checking if her calculations from almost a decade before were all still valid.

They all were.

She handed the plans to a secretary the next day, and within minutes, pieces to build it were underway.

She walked around the busy workers, in awe at how quickly they worked.

After a few weeks, the big warehouse on 17th and Landry was no longer empty. It held an impressive machine.

And it was the work of Cassie Sanderson.

After all of the workers had been sent home, she walked around the machine, admiring the craftsmanship.

She wanted to turn it on so badly, but she knew she probably shouldn't.

So, she went to the pegs on the wall, and hung up her hard hat. She grabbed the lever to turn off the lights, and the second she pulled it down, everything changed.

She hadn't pulled the lever for the lights; she realized that now. But then, she couldn't tell the difference.

The machine began to whir, spinning the inner mirrors. The light in the middle turned on, glowing with the intensity of a thousand suns. She had meant for it to do that, but not while she was on the floor.

Without protection.

That kind of light should have burnt her eyes. She knew that. But somehow, it didn't.

The light traveled directly into her eyes, flashing over and over with the spinning mirrors. It refracted in her eyes, traveling in every possible path to the brain.

She knew something was changing, but she didn't know what. She pressed one hand against her temples, trying to stop the throbbing in her head, and groped for the switch. She switched the machine off and reached on the other side to turn off the lights. After the lights went off, it wasn't just the area around her that went dark.

Her entire consciousness did too.

When she awoke, it was to the sound of sirens and the hurried talking of many people.

"She's awake! Oh, she's awake!"

Her best friend started crying tears of joy.

"Why do I hear sirens?" Cassie asked.

Her best friend laughed, but it wasn't her normal belly laugh. This was a panicked laugh, a laugh to calm herself.

"Because. You didn't come back to the dorm on time, and I found you unconscious on the floor of your warehouse."

"What does that have to do with sirens?"

"What sirens?" her best friend asked.

Cassie opened her eyes and looked around. She was in a hospital, with all sorts of beeping things around her.

But nothing that would be making a siren noise.

"Nothing," she said.

A doctor came, and after checking for problems, discharged her quickly.

The two friends then walked down to the subway station, and waited for the train that would get them home.

"Lina, what time is it?" Cassie asked.

Her friend looked at her phone. "1 am. We better hope this train gets here quickly."

It did. Lina walked on first, and as Cassie followed, something strange happened.

Her hands flashed with light.

It was faint, and it was brief, but it was there.

The entire ride home, she stood, holding the handle with one hand and staring at the other.

But it didn't glow again.

It didn't glow for about a week, and then she was by herself in her warehouse again.

And this time, the light emanated out from her, bathing the whole room in more light than it had ever seen.

She looked down at herself in awe, and she could see the very fibers of her being shaking in excitement.

She had been given the power of light.



She texted Lina first this time, telling her she was going to be late. After she got a thumbs up, she put her phone down.

And she shot more light out of her hands.

She tried using every property of light she could think of. She burnt designs into the floor. She heated herself a quick microwave meal. She created holograms, and messed with the ceiling lights, turning them off and on with a simple thought.

It was incredible.

She went home late that night, exhausted, but somehow invigorated at the same time.

From then on, she spent more and more time late at night in that warehouse.

Until one day, she heard screaming outside the door.

She ran out to see what was the matter, and light poured out of her without her thinking about it. The screaming stopped, and she could hear footsteps running away from her. The light went out, but the streetlights gave more than enough light to see by.

“Thank you,” a person sitting on the ground said. “You saved me.”

If she had stopped visibly glowing, then her soul was aglow with those words.

She loved those words.

And she wanted to hear them again.

She fell into a routine, going to work and leading the research being done with her machine, then staying late so she could go around the city, helping people.

Some things were really simple, like changing the color of a light to prevent a car crash. Others took more time.

But any time she heard the words “you saved me”, she was motivated to do more.

She was tired, yes, but she was also having the best time she had ever had.

And she was using light to help people.

At was incredible, until. One day, she looked at her phone.

“I have a light question for you.” - Lina.

She raced to the dorms, knowing that was something Lina would ask only in an emergency.

She hurried into the dorm room, and screamed as she saw what was sitting at the dining room table.

It was herself.

But instead of being normal, or being bathed in light, this one seemed to be shadow.

All shadow.

Lina walked up behind her.

“You’ve been doing good things with your work and wherever you’ve been at night, I know that. You’ve been so happy when you fall into bed at night. But this, this is terrifying. I thought I was losing my best friend, and now there are two of you. One made of light, and the other, not.”

Cassie turned, surprised.

“How did you know?”

“I saw it, that one night on the train. I would have helped you Carrie, but you were never around. So, I couldn’t.”

Tears started to roll down Cassie’s cheeks.

“Cassie. I bet I know what one property of light you haven’t manipulated yet. You can still fix this. Go back and make it right. Before this shadow gets any hungrier.”

As they watched, the shadow grew.

“Please.”

More tears running down her cheeks, she summoned the light. She ran down the stairs and out into the street, letting the light trail behind her.

And then she slowed the light down.

Which meant she was going faster than light.

And she went back to the beginning of it all. To Mr. Frederen’s office.

She used her light for the last time.

To set her plans on fire.

Cassie stared out the window, and tears streamed more freely. First of sorrow, but then of joy. She had lost her powers of light, yes, but she had been given something even better.

A second chance.

## The Witches Jewel

Witches, warlocks, wizards, dragons, and fairies are fictional creatures, right? What if I told you that they're real, all of it is real! You grew up hearing stories about them and at one point you believed in them, but then your belief faded with time. Well, you've never seen one of them, have you? Of course, not and that's because they have been forced to live in secret out of human's eye, we know a lot of people don't believe in what they don't see. So, I have a question for you humans out there, how come you believe air is a thing, I mean air is something that you can't see, so why would this all be fiction just because you can't or well haven't seen it. You do know these stories had to come from somewhere beyond one's imagination.

Now there's one story that hasn't made it into a book or movie yet, which happens to be my all-time favorite story and I'd like to share it with you if you'd be so kind as to let me do so! But before we get started, I need you to believe, I need you to remember the belief you used to have and bring it back up to the surface! So, then if you truly believe then follow along little humans!

One cold and Drewey winter evening, the witch doctor got a call from the king.

"Hello, doctor, it's my queen she has fallen ill you must come immediately, I beg of you" the king pleaded, in let's just say a not so nice manner.

"Yes, I'll be on my way, I just need to get my go-bag and pack the car, I'll be over there in three eve's time." The witch doctor replied, once he hung up his earphone, he rushed to gather all his gadgets and gizmos, potions, and enchantments then he rushed to be there in a timely manner.

Now that three Eve's have passed the doctor has arrived at the palace, as the doctor reluctantly ascends the staircase, he ponders what his visit will entail for the future fate of the queen. Halfway up the staircase the doctor is questioned by the royal Centurian guards.

"STOP! State your business," The senior ranking guard Firmly spoke as the sound of his staff hitting the marbled platform startled the doctor.

"The queen has fallen ill, and I must tend to her," the doctor claimed



while looking at his pocket watch.

Noting the gesture of the doctor, the guards who have been in service to the royal family for centuries, allowed him entrance to the final staircase leading to the palace, where he is met by the king. The king then escorted him to the main chambers in the west wing. When the doctor got to the room, he set up his gadgets and gizmos, potions, and enchantments. He started by taking her temperature...

“Yowzah! your majesty you are burning up...” in a panic the doctor drew her a cold bath, he threw in some herbs to help her relax, mainly Lavender. He asked for some more symptoms and ran a few tests, everything came back within normal ranges, but only one came back positive.

“Your majesty’s, I would like to go over the results of my tests.” He was scared to share this news because he didn’t know how they would take this or what this meant for the queen as only the doctor knew her secret. The king anxiously paces in the library, the only room in the palace where they wouldn’t be disturbed.

“Miss, uh, uh your maj-”

“Get on with it doctor” the king rudely interrupted.

“Well, my queen, you're pregnant” the doctor knew what this meant and when he saw the smile on the king’s face, he knew that the king had no knowledge of her secret.

“Whoo Hoo! This is great! A little devil to raise to take my spot on the throne one day!” The king shouted with an immense amount of joy.

The queen didn’t say anything. After a moment, she started to shed a few tears of despair. Whipping away her tears she reached for the king's right hand and grabbed it tightly.

“Doctor, would you be gracious enough to leave us a moment?” The two talked for a long moment with a really hard decision to make, leading the king to go on a rampage breaking everything in sight before fleeing for the eve’s night.

The queen has been searching for a cure to undo her deal with the wicked witch of the west, in case you didn’t know yeah, she’s real too. All the king and queen wanted was to start a family, so why is the queen so sad and what is the secret that made the king her true love leave in such rage, I guess you humans will just have to wait and see!

The next dusk’s morning the king finally returns to his palace, there are many different emotions going through his mind like he’s going through an emotional whirlpool. After walking around the palace calming himself, the king paused outside the throne room. Upon entering he found his queen rifling through her spell book.

“Dear, we need to talk,” the queen told her husband because in her heart she knows the king will not agree with the decision she made.

“How are you so calm, I can’t lose you. I know that you wish for it to go that way but how do you expect for me to be so okay with it?” the king asked aggressively.

The king spent the following 9 full moon cycles trying to change her mind. In his futile attempts to change her mind he was searching for a cure or an antidote for his wife's cures.

This puts us at Scalentines day a day where we show our one and only ghoul how much we love and care for them. This was the queen’s favorite holiday which of course meant our king had to go all out on this day! Coincidentally the queen and King got married on this splendid holiday.

“Ahh! Get over here now!” screamed the queen in agony.

“Dear, what is it? And why is the bed we-” he then in that moment realized it was time his precious little devil witch was about to come into this perfect evil little world.

Momentarily the king was caught up in the joyous moment he forgot the price the queen was about to pay. Realizing the queen was going into labor they summoned the doctor.

“I’m here, I’m here. Your majesty, would you please step out for this,” asked the doctor. Once the king left the chambers the doctor went along to make a position that will help deliver the baby with no complications and pain free, You’d think you dumb humans would have something like this that works like magic, ha-ha get it magic you know cause there witches, oh how I do crack myself up but enough of that (for now) and let’s get back to the story.

After almost sixteen minutes the king and queen welcomed their sweetest little devil into the kingdom. The king grabbed his little devil and took the baby for a flight around the kingdom, if only happiness could be a forever kind of thing. When he got back, he laid his newborn in the crib to sing the baby to sleep.

“Sleep tight my little devil, haunt dreams and kiss the bedbug-” while singing his newborn a lullaby he gasped in remembrance of the queen’s words. Storming through the palace he reached the queen’s chamber, he hesitated. Breathing deeply in hopes that his queen was just silently waiting for him. Cautiously he opened the door to turn on the lights. Once all the lights were on, he walked in to see her left hand draped over the side of the bed. He rushed over to her, laid his head on her chest hoping for the sound of a faint breath along with a steady heartbeat; the queen's words rang true.

As he summoned the doctor, he knew he had failed. But then he saw

that in the queen's right hand was a folded-up piece of paper, he took the paper from her hand and started to read...

“My dearest and most beloved king,

If you're reading this it means what the witch said was true, and my fate has been sealed. In the depths of my heart, I know your love will be unrivaled. I long to be with you! One of my dying wishes is for you to continuously proclaim my love for her. While reminding her of how much I love her, remind her I do not regret my sacrifice. My final dying wish is that you renounce your vow to love someone more than me and commit yourself to a new vow; I request for you to vow your undying love to our child with all your heart, mind, body and soul. So, my dearest king, I make this covenant with you to love, protect and pledge not to condemn our daughter for my death. Will you honor my dying wishes?”



## Whatever it Takes...

As I watch the snowflakes fall, slowly piling on the ground, my little sister, Cath, snuggles against my thin shoulder. Even though I know it would be useless for Catherine to try and get warm against me, I reluctantly keep her by my side. I cannot even provide enough energy for myself which means warmth won't be reflected off in body heat. My long brown hair comforts me partially. The snow still falls.

Many of the days out here have been gruesome. We barely have any food or water sources and if we don't find resources soon, one of us will die. Little Catherine, being ten years in age, is freezing most of the time and I fear the worst will soon follow. She is my only family left and I can't afford to lose her.

The anticipation of the government known as cumhacht chasing us down has been overbearing. Everywhere who comes across the government would be guaranteed a ticket to the other side.

We've been planning on leaving our home for ages now. This just gave us a reason to act upon our plan. Sarah had to bring along her boyfriend, Matthew. Then there's Josh. He's just there for emotional support. I'm mostly surprised that I convinced Sam, my best friend, to come along, especially since he is so stubborn. At the same time, if we stayed back at home, we would have died either way.

The tiny fire burning huddles everyone closely near. I can't help shivering, especially since the night sky drains any warmth in every living creature wandering in these woods.

Sam takes the chance to try and snuggle against me but before he gets the chance, I shoot him a warning glance showing him that I have a personal bubble that I do not want to have invaded. He just smiles with teeth chattering. Why does he always have to be this annoying....

"Oh, c-come on! When are you going to come around?" Clearly Sam was freezing.

I couldn't help but be mad at him. How could he think that this comment would change my reply? We're literally on the brink of dying. I rolled my eyes but in fear of his death, I let him.

“Only this once. Don't get the wrong idea.” I say looking directly into his deep green eyes. He just smiles in response and cuddles against me.

Sarah gives us a smirk from across the dying fire then goes back to snuggle with her own boyfriend once more, clearly freezing like the rest of us. My cheeks turned red. I haven't always been very clear about my feelings in my and Sam's relationship. Not saying Sam is my boyfriend of course...That would be weird...

Catherine is asleep by now, shivering once in a while in her sleep. The guilt pings within me. I wish I could have supported us better...

I couldn't help but notice Josh all by himself, shivering hysterically. “Care to join us, Josh?” I ask in concern.

I barely managed to get the words out but I'm glad that I did. He quickly scooches near us as we all cuddle together. The fire turned to embers, causing coldness to make me slowly fall into a faint sleep. With the weight of my eyelids weighing on me and the snowflakes falling more than ever, I fall asleep even though I'm chilled to the bone.

I hadn't realized what time it was until I was taken aback by the sun at midpoint glaring at me. Sam was sitting a few inches from me, attentively talking to someone unknown while carving what looked like a spear.

“Would you mind moving so I can see who you are talking to?” I state in a croaky voice. Wow...the weather really has been messing me up lately. Sam jumps for a second, quickly turning around to make sure that I was fully awake. I smile to see his hair dazzling in the daylight. He smiles back, standing up to let me see this person. It's just Catherine. I'm glad that she made the night.

Her playful spirit has finally returned. It's been so long since I last saw her so happy and well rested. The last time I remember her being like this was when.... we celebrated my dad's last birthday...

My back is aching. The dirt must have been harder than I thought. At least most of the snow has melted from the sun. A small fire burns nearby, with Sarah, Josh, and Matthew cooking what looked like rabbits. Rabbit has never been appetizing to me. It's always too rough, no matter which way you cook it. Wait, that means they have found food...

“How long have you guys been awake?” I say gesturing towards Sarah, Matthew, and Josh sitting by the fire.

“...I would say, about 5 hrs.” Sam replies with a hint of accomplishment in his voice, stabbing the spear into the ground next to him. The reply hit me like a ton of bricks. How could I be so careless... My attention gets snapped back to Catherine, who, at this point is



carving a small dagger.

“Sam taught me to carve! Look what I made!” Catherine says as she holds out the dagger in excitement. I wish I was awake when they went hunting. Anything could happen in these woods. I have to be strong for her...Especially right now.

“That is amazing!... You’re even better than I am!” I say even though I know half of the information that I told Cath is not true. Catherine’s stomach growls, causing the noise to replace the happiness on her face with embarrassment.

“Why don’t you get some food Cath?” Sam states. I honestly forgot that he was there... My bad. Her eyes brighten up as she rushes up from her spot with the wood dagger still in hand.

A hand appears in front of me as Catherine happily skips over to where everyone else is at.

“Need a hand, Ann?” Sam says in a firm yet calm voice. My real name is Armand Chevalier but I prefer to be called Ann because it sounds more feminine. I don’t like people thinking I am a boy. Sam knows that. I smile. Why wouldn't I take such an offer? I quickly grasp his hand as he pulls me from the ground. For a second, it felt like all our troubles were gone as we stared at each other for a good 10 seconds. Something inside me began to stir and before I knew it, I was blushing hysterically. Sam must have seen because he held my hand longer than needed, smiling. That’s when I was hit back into reality and realized that our troubles were literally on our track.

I pull my hand back and brush the dirt off on my jeans. I really have been sleeping way too long at this point...The sun is higher than it should be, and we were supposed to be at least 10 miles ahead from the point we were currently at.

“Why thank you, young sir!” I say giving a small curtsy, trying to improve the tension between us. We burst out laughing, sending all the nearby birds to take flight.

“What's so funny?” Josh has always been the concerned type. I’ve always wondered how he can be concerned about everyone but himself in even the worst possible situation. I wish I was like that, especially when I had the chance to make things in my family better. Walking over, I just tilt my head to inspect the fire. The reply that Sam said caused me to jerk my head. “Oh nothing. She was just smitten by my charm.” Sam had the audacity to grab a bag and act like it was his hair, flipping it like it would flow in the wind. Josh just smiled, laughing as well as he saw us bickering back and forth.

The time...

“We should be going...” I say looking towards the sky.

“...Let's leave in a couple of minutes....” Sarah replies in a shaky



voice.

“If we stay here any longer, they might be right behind our trail...” I state as I snatch the bag away from Sam. The scared glances from everyone, including Catherine, sent chills down my spine. I couldn't afford to let anyone die. Not when so many of our family back home had...

No one would stop me from protecting those I cared about most. Even if the people that I care about most were too stubborn to think about the safety of our future.

“Come on.” I didn't take a second glance at the others as I began to disappear into the woods.

With birds chirping and the faint breeze flowing, I was swept away into my own daydreams as I took one step after another. I don't know how long I have been walking for, but my legs are killing me. The sun has been sinking ever since I left the camp. Just the thought of everyone else brings irritation in my soul. Where they are, I have no clue. They could be miles away.

The soil in the ground soon began to turn damper and damper the longer I inspected my surroundings. This can only mean one thing... A water source must be nearby, most likely a river. This river has been the life support of over 30 million people and now, it symbolizes the path towards the new land we were forced to travel and live in. As my mouth was drying out just by the thought of having at least some sort of water, I realized that I was parched. My stomach aches, causing hunger to make me crazy. I should have taken some of that rabbit when I had the chance... The bag... I quickly scurry through the bag I had swung over my shoulder. No luck. Just as I thought. There was literally nothing in it. What a useless piece of junk.

I throw the bag into the nearby bushes as I continue to walk towards my “new home.” It will never be a real home.

Just the sight of the river caused me to sprint as fast as I could in an effort to keep myself alive. My mind is racing from the growing fever that I can sense. The cold sweat has almost drenched me fully by this point. Finally reaching the end of the forest that provided a beautiful, yet somehow cold beach, my stress soon eases since the water looks so delicious. The relief of the cold liquid was so refreshing. I take a moment to cherish the opportunity to drink as much water as I can. This could be my last chance to get hydrated.

I sit on the shoreline, watching as the sun goes down while the moon awakes from its daily slumber. The waves of the river become more intense than ever before. My temperature has been decreasing at a dangerous rate, especially with no source to keep me warm. It is fully

dark and I am left to find firewood in the nearby trees.

It didn't take much effort to get the resources needed for the fire. The fire was bigger than last night's so I'm glad about that. A rustle in the bushes behind me sends me sprawling onto my feet, cautiously looking around everywhere I can.

What happens if they found me already...No, they are at least a couple days behind. It could just be a rabbit or something. I shouldn't freak myself out.

Sam jumps out, spear within hand ready to kill anyone in sight. I was taken aback as I stumbled into the sharp rocks, cutting myself in the process. The pain from my palm sends signals to my brain. That's when blood starts oozing out.

## Your Neighbor

Joe moved in next door to Bill after Missus Chambers, Bill's neighbor on Fifth Street, died. Missus Chambers was a kind woman and Bill had liked her enough. She was quiet—everything Bill needed in a neighbor.

Joe was a lot like Missus Chambers. He didn't talk much and hadn't introduced himself to Bill until a week after moving in. Unlike Missus Chambers, Joe was a young man with a shot of jet-black hair on his head. He was tall, with broad shoulders and a raspy voice. His nose was bent, and his eyes were small—beady.

Bill was gardening when he met Joe. He was digging up weeds to replace with fresh flowers he just bought when he felt a cold wisp behind him. He shivered and turned around. Instantly, he was met with Joe's standing figure. Imposing—towering over Bill, Joe was staring down at the weeds.

Bill jumped—startled. “Hey, man. I didn't see you there.” Bill laughed uneasily.

Joe remained silent.

Bill got up to his feet—wiping the dirt off his pants. “You almost gave me a heart attack, y'know?”

The other man revealed his crisply white, but shifted teeth with one small, crooked grin. “Like you wouldn't believe,” he chuckled almost menacingly.

The smaller man tried to find amusement in Joe's joke, but he couldn't. Bill pushed down the trembling thoughts in his mind—his palms sweaty.

“You from the city?” Bill tried to make small talk.

Joe shrugged and the grin had been wiped off his face, “I'm from somewhere. Just like you. I'm Joe.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

Bill had his hand up to his forehead—trying to block out the sun. Joe's figure seemed to be shade enough so Bill lowered his hand. “You look familiar...when did you graduate high school? I swear we must've been in the same class.”



“I can tell you when you graduated,” is all the other man said.

“Is that so?” Bill immediately perked up. He always liked a bet. “Ok, then. Ten bucks you guess my age.” He also liked a bet he knew he could win.

Joe mumbled something that resembled a number.

“Whaddya say?” Bill leaned in.

Joe grabbed Bill’s shoulder and almost dug his fingers in. His hands were strong but unsettlingly cold.

“You’re twenty-six.” Joe had said with nonchalance. It’s not that he wasn’t confident—he didn’t need it. He spoke like it was fact.

Lucky guess, Bill mused to himself.

Bill sucked in a swipe of air in defeat. He glanced around then back at Joe. “I don’t have the money on me right now. How’s about I come to your place and give it to you? Tomorrow?”

Joe blinked a few times. “That works.”

Bill chuckled to himself, “A lotta trust you’re putting in me. How do you know I’ll never give the ten bucks?”

“You’re a man who keeps his word, Bill.” Joe patted Bill on the shoulder.

Bill nodded to himself and sat back down to continue his gardening. He outstretched his hand for the fresh flowers to plant. When his hand met with the leaves, all he could feel was decay. The flowers had lost their color and wilted into the ground.

Befuddled, Bill combed over his conversation with Joe. He whipped his head around, ready to yell, “Hey, I never told you my name—!”

There was no one to listen. Joe was gone.

The next day, Bill had kept his word. He brought over a couple bottles of pop with ten bucks in his hand. He knocked on Joe’s door three times before the man had appeared.

When the door finally swung open, Bill was met with the face of a man who’d been expecting Bill. There was a smile on his face but it was lopsided.

“Is that coke?” Joe pointed to the sodas Bill had.

“Sure is.”

“Man, I don’t need the cash, just the coke.” Joe yanked Bill inside.

The house was a lot like Joe. Even after a week of renting the place, there was practically nothing. No furniture, no wall hangings, and no rugs. Just a singular wooden chair in what was supposed to be the living room.

“You building an electric chair?” Bill joked—finger pointed to the lonesome seat.

“Why? You interested?” Joe had shot back. Except, his words weren’t as playful.

Just as Bill went to close the door behind him, he noticed it was already closed. “Funny,” he muttered. “I didn’t see you close that thing.” His words were meant for Joe, but the man was already gone when he turned around.

Bill shrugged and figured the man went to relieve himself. He stumbled over to the kitchen. The only thing on the counter was a piece of paper. It seemed like mail, so Bill ignored it at first. As curious as he was, he wasn’t about to open another man’s letter.

The minutes ticked by. Joe was still nowhere to be found. Bill glanced around a few more times and bit his lip. His Ma always raised him as a gentleman, but it wouldn’t hurt, right? Just one peek.

Bill set down his soda nearby and reached for the envelope. His eyes only took a few seconds to scan the address. His memory filled in the rest.

He knew the address—he didn’t need to read it to process it. He gulped and suddenly his lunch wanted to leave his stomach. His hands were white as he gripped the paper. The address wasn’t to Joe—that much he knew.

The words spelled out Frank Mineo and an address in the Bronx. Bill’s brother. He hadn’t spoken to Frank in years. Time was the hack that severed their relationship. Frank had escaped South Philly and gone to live with a cousin in New York. Bill had stayed while Frank had left the moment he got the chance. He resented the years Bill had spent taking care of his Ma while Frank went out and partied.

Ma Mineo was like that too. She couldn’t forgive her youngest for running out on her—for placing the value of the family so low that Frank became a sore topic on Thanksgiving dinner.

A cousin would bring up Frank and Ma would ignore it and insist the cousin was asking for more gravy.

“More gravy,” she would say. “We all need more gravy.”

Bill’s mother was wrecked by his brother’s absence. It made caring for her harder. Even so, his Ma knew that Bill needed to leave Philly—at least go to the next town over. So, Bill left for the suburbs but every weekend he’d drive back to South Philly and take care of his Ma. Something Frank would never do.

That’s why the return address being Ma Mineo’s froze Bill’s blood. Bill’s hands were trembling trying to unseal the envelope. He never trembled. He always prided himself on his strong, steady hands. A skill he acquired growing up with a mechanic as a father. Dad taught him how to screw a bolt just right.

The tear of the paper ripped through the silent vastly empty home. It



flew through the walls and fell back into Bill's ears—his chest tight with anticipation.

Memories flooded through his mind as he gained access to the scent of the paper. A letter laced with his Ma's perfume. He could almost hear her telling Bill she was going out with his father, and he needed to watch Frank.

By the scribbles throughout the paper, Bill could tell his mother shook while writing. Every spike in a letter was another fright that jolted through Ma Mineo's body. In uncertain handwriting wrote:

*My dear Frank,*

*If you read this letter, I know that you care. I would call you, but I only have your address. I hope you're doing well.*

*There's no easy way to write this.*

*He's gone. Bill always believed in you, Frank. He loved you much more than you know. Just like I do. Please understand this.*

*Frank, I'm sorry. Bill is gone. I don't want to write too much in this letter. I hope you'll be a smart enough boy to come home, and I'll tell you in person. Frank, please.*

*I love you,  
Ma*

Bill had only gone to one funeral in his life. He'd only learned of one death. His father. He was at community college when he got an urgent call from his aunt. He hadn't thought about his father's death—he didn't want his lasting memories of his father to be so grim. Despite this, Bill could only think of his father. He tried to make sense of it—but it wasn't grief.

How do you grieve your own death?

Just as Bill was about to slot the letter back into the envelope, a soft whisper came behind him.

“Bill? What're you doing, man?”

Every force in Bill's body turned him around. He saw Joe—looking angrier than usual. Bill gripped the corner of the counter—as if to brace



himself.

“What are you doing with a letter from my Ma? To my brother?”

“Oh,” Joe said—almost dumbly. He pointed a finger, “You read it, didn’t you?”

Bill let go of the counter and surged closer to Joe. He got in Joe’s face—despite the other man being much taller than him. “Of course I read it! Why is the letter announcing my death?”

Joe put his hands up defensively. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I’m not stupid! Who are you, Joe?”

The other man didn’t say anything, but his posture shifted. His usually relaxed stance became rigid. He placed his hands at his side, staring directly at Bill.

“No. Who are you?” Joe whispered with a dark tone.

Bill went to say something, but Joe took a step forward. He started to circle Bill—slowly—menacingly—like a vulture.

“Yeah,” Joe said in agreement of something only he could hear. “Who are you?” Joe pointed an accusatory finger at Bill as he kept stalking around.

“Joe, I—,” Bill couldn’t finish.

“William Mineo. Your first kiss was to a girl named Kitty Welsh. She was a cheerleader, and you were a wrestler, yeah? Your brother Frank doesn’t like you, but you love him, right? Born in South Philadelphia,” Joe kept circling—like a lion ready to pounce. He paused for a moment and stuck his face right in front of Bill’s.

He lowered his voice, “Died on Fifth Street.”

Bill’s jaw was on the floor—his fingers numb. He couldn’t bear to face Joe who had already resumed his circling position.

“You know, man, I liked you. That’s why it’s taken me so long. I hate when it’s a young guy. Someone who hasn’t done much in their life—but you’re messing it up,” hissed Joe. “You think you’re better than the law?”

Bill started to sweat. He shouted, “The law? Joe, I’ve never gotten arrested or anything. I haven’t even gotten a parking ticket!”

Joe shoved Bill back, “You humans are so stupid. You think I’m talking about your ridiculous man-made rules? I’m talking about the laws of this universe—of time—and it’s your time.”

“I’m going to call the cops!” Bill exclaimed—helpless. He didn’t know how to get out. Joe was bigger and stronger than him.

“Yeah, you do that. They’ll need to collect your body. You know, that old lady died right here too.”

Bill couldn't believe he was standing in front of a killer. "You killed Missus Chamberlain?"

Joe threw his hands up in the air, "How am I going to get this through your thick skull?" He punctuated every word with a shove to Bill's chest—pushing Bill back into a wall.

"I am Death, you moron. I am the timekeeper. I make sure you go when your time is up."

"What—," pleaded Bill.

"Betcha didn't expect this, right? They never do. They always imagine some hooded monster with a scythe. But that's not how it rolls, William. I'm just your neighbor."

The next day, Joe moved into the former house of a William Mineo. He went to introduce himself to his new neighbor next door.

## Untitled

Until the day he died, Joseph never forgot the Arkabaahd. Those curved eyes, that dark skin, the long fingers that could pick a ripe apple from the tallest trees, and those legs so elongated they could step over the average man, yet slender enough to fit into the hollowed home of a chipmunk, never left his mind.

Joseph's first meeting with the Arkabaahd was in his youth. Born in the town of Styx, its name derived from the creek bed that cut through the heart of the forest the town surrounded, Joseph was one with nature. Every day, he would leave his home from the backyard exit, a place devoid of fencing, into the sprawling woods that lay before him as he lost himself to the warmth of the green leaves and the sunlight that caressed his cheeks. He always made an effort to visit Zeus's Palm, a large, flat rock proceeding a sharp cliff that painted an endless labyrinth of forest, the tops a permanent green that stood healthy no matter the season. It was on this trip that Joseph first met the Arkabaahd. It stood behind a large oak tree meters from Joseph's position, and as the two noticed one another, the Arkabaahd decided the first move. Its curved eyes narrowed at Joseph's small eyes, its face slowly formed a large smile like that of the crescent moon, and its fingers contorted to reveal an open palm. As if the Arkabaahd was meeting an old friend, it stepped forward and waved so very slowly and so very carefully at Joseph, with its right hand and arm in conjunction, to form one fluid motion like that of a church bell. In his left hand, Joseph noticed, was a warm lantern emanating an orange candlelight that, by any normal standard, should have died out long ago. Joseph had been afraid of the dark, and the Arkabaahd was the dark. Joseph, with his pupils dilated and feet quivering, rejected the creature and turned away, running out of instinct, as though the Arkabaahd were death itself. In his haste, Joseph hadn't recognized the scared young man stuck so desperately onto the Arkabaahd's lantern who couldn't let go. Joseph did not stop running until he saw the sanctuary of his home and panted as he closed the door behind him. He found his mother as he always did, kneeling at his father's urn, praying for his prosperity, and clinging to the hope that Joseph's older brother would return to see her one day.



Now in his adolescence, Joseph found himself in the last years of high school. Though confident in what he saw that day, he never told another soul of the Arkabaahd out of the fear that his peers would label him crazy. The new responsibilities enforced by age left Joseph without much time for the serenity of the woods. His job and homework made every day a fight to reason it all. He still, whenever the opportunity presented itself, took the trip to Zeus's Palm to escape the responsibilities of life and return to a time where he had been happier. To a time where he would sit along the cliff to count the colors of the canaries. To a time where he would listen to the chirps of robins. To a time where he could waste the afternoon guessing how many times a woodpecker had pecked at a tree. Zeus's Palm never changed, and neither did the Arkabaahd. With the figure much closer this time, Joseph had no place to run. His back was against the cliff that spelled a certain end for him, and he had no choice but to face the creature. The figure's body remained stagnant, yet its lantern shined a dimmer light than it did all those years ago. The Arkabaahd lowered its palm and extended his hand to Joseph slowly and carefully. The hand was old and withered, with a strong smell resembling honey that overbore Joseph's senses. The Arkabaahd did not touch Joseph, but rather laid his long, brittle hand on Joseph's hair before making its departure back into the woods until its appearance could be mistaken for the striations of tree bark. Joseph's quivering had stopped while his confusion peaked. Patting his head, the boy felt a ring on top. Upon grasping it to further detail, the word, "Maut", was inscribed onto the golden ring. Counting his blessings, Joseph wore the ring and, to his surprise, it fit better than a glove. Joseph didn't feel an instinctual fear upon this encounter, but rather a wave of confusion between him and the Arkabaahd. Not knowing what action to take, Joseph decided on none, and so sat back down on Zeus's Palm to ponder it all.

Now in his late thirties, his youth was gone in an instant. By the age of eighteen, both his neighbors and his mother pressured him to move to the big city of Sackgasse. He spent twenty years of his life there, working the same office job with the same computer monitor and the same fluorescent lights devoid of any natural origin. The only reminder of home was the golden ring he could not bring himself to depart from. Joseph was compelled to sell the ring several times through financial struggles, but the ring was his only reminder of home. Joseph hated his job and his city, but the paycheck kept him coming back for seconds. Not on this day, however, because Joseph had returned to his home of Styx as it seemed he always did. He had no other choice because his mother was dead. As one of her two only children, Joseph had an obligation to

attend her funeral, which he did to no objection. Although he attended, it was his brother, Fredrick, who gave the eulogy, as he was the older of the two. Joseph never saw Fredrick before. The age disparity between the two ensured that they never communicated and neither had made any attempt to do so, despite their mother's best wishes. Even now, Fredrick's eulogy was dry and uninspired, as though he were waiting for the chance to return to his important job in the city, a job that paid more than Joseph could ever hope to make. The eulogy left a bad taste in Joseph's mouth, so he left in the middle of Fredrick's speech, an act that Fredrick didn't bother to acknowledge, and stepped outside for a much-needed breath of fresh air. From the exit to the service, Joseph could see the creek bed that his hometown was known for, as well as the trees that surrounded it. To the sky, Joseph could see an entire universe of brilliant bright stars that only made the air more rewarding. The night never changed in Styx, and neither did the Arkabaahd. The creature was further away than it had ever been from Joseph and, had it not been for the glow of its lantern, Joseph would never have seen it. The Arkabaahd did not look at Joseph. Its attention was darted on an old dirt path decrepit with use which it traveled on. In his hand, the lantern light Joseph knew all too well, now brighter than he had ever seen it. In the creature's other hand, however, was a glowing hand belonging to what Joseph presumed to be a middle-aged woman. The lush vegetation prevented Joseph from catching a definitive picture of the situation and his mind was forced to wander as the Arkabaahd left out of view with the strange woman. Work in the city had left Joseph with little emotion, as becoming a drone was the only way he could tolerate his life. Without effort, the Arkabaahd broke Joseph's apathy and left him with a curious sense of peace, which he could never have expected. Joseph felt no concern for the woman and returned indoors after the service had died down, not bothering to make eye contact with his brother.

Now in his old age, Joseph returned to Styx for the final time. The years of stress and regret had put him in the palm of the reaper, and his doctor informed him that he would only live for another four months. A sign to leave his life behind, Joseph quit his job and returned to his family home in Styx. The creaking of the floorboards and the soft buzz of lightbulbs greeted his arrival like a distant memory. His home never changed, but Joseph could not tell if he himself did. Walking became a chore for Joseph, and as such he found himself lounging in an old rocking chair that oversaw the backyard and woods that he always yearned for. Joseph didn't dare enter the woods, however, as if he were to fall he would never be able to get up. It brought him peace to see the chipmunks and woodpeckers enjoying the untouched body of nature



which brought his life meaning. It was on one such day that Joseph felt more tired than he ever did in his entire life. Rocking back and forth his body desired nothing more than to sleep. In this state, Joseph felt happy. In this state, Joseph let himself fall to sleep. His body never woke up. His body never changed, but his mind did. Joseph woke up in a round of confusion as he stared into the dark sky, the stars now projecting a harsh light that Joseph used his hand to divert. To his dismay, the light passed right through his hand and into his retina. Upon closer inspection, his old and withered hands were full of youth and his body returned to his late 20's. Looking back, however, he saw his physical body laying still, a body he would never move a muscle in again. The world of Styx that had once been his home now devolved into a panicked daze as Joseph lost all control. Scared and alone, Joseph ran into the forest, his sanctuary. Joseph ran with all his might, but the world was faster. Joseph tried to make sense of his situation, but nothing worked. Joseph wanted to escape back to his youth, but time denied him. Joseph's world could not stop changing, but the Arkabaahd never changed. Joseph's mind froze when he locked eyes with the creature, and a wave of serenity washed over him. Joseph's eyes were hyper fixated on the world he was in, but the Arkabaahd was as slow and meticulous as it had ever been. The Arkabaahd's slow and precise movements toward Joseph were a welcome contrast to the speed at which he processed the world. The Arkabaahd, now mere feet away from Joseph, knelt down and spoke. "Maut", the creature requested. Its voice was slow and held an air of time behind it. Joseph gazed upon his left hand and found his golden ring on his left ring finger, only now realizing that it had not been on his physical body the last time he saw it. For the first time in all his possession with the object, Joseph let go and handed him the ring. The Arkabaahd grasped it, opened the lid of his lantern, and deposited the ring, which caused the light of the lantern to glow a bright orange. The Arkabaahd held onto Joseph's hand and used the lantern light to guide him across the forest. Joseph could do nothing but admire the scenery and reminisce about his life. He glided across the riverbank with the Arkabaahd, and arrived at Zeus's Palm. The canopy of trees did not greet him, however. Instead, a long set of golden stairs leading to a large gate appeared on the cliff, and the Arkabaahd urged him forward. Step by step, Joseph walked up the stairs. Beyond the gates, Joseph saw his parents, their youth restored. On the last step, Joseph turned around to see the Arkabaahd. With a wave, Joseph entered the gates and the Arkabaahd returned to the woods.





Carina Wang  
High School



## Untitled

They'd told her she had two years at best. But realistically, it was a year.

She accepted the news easily. It ran in her family, and she'd seen it take her mother, her older sister, her baby brother. It was only a matter of time before she was next.

After all, she'd been preparing to die her whole life.

Since that first bloody cough in the bathroom in first grade, she'd known she would not live a long life. Even if it hadn't come back until now, the knowledge that she carried the disease always echoed in the back of her mind.

Now, it was a matter of tying up all the loose ends before she went. That would be no problem. She was just another corporate worker, easily replaceable even if she was higher up on the ladder.

But saying goodbye... that was going to be harder. Even though she already knew what she wanted to write in her letters, she owed some people a face-to-face talk, at least.

When the doctor asked about treatment, Irina looked at her father's stone face. He was sitting upright, back straight as a board, but his hands rested on his knees and were clenching and unclenching tightly.

Treatment meant countless tests and visits to the hospital. Blood drawings and needles, lights flashing in her eyes and beeping monitors. Endless waiting in a pale hospital gown, surrounded by the smell of antiseptic and cleaner, for a cure that would never come.

Perhaps, if she hadn't seen this coming, she would have agreed. But it would only prolong the pain, and she wanted things to go as smoothly as possible.

Slowly, she shook her head.

Silently, her father escorted her home. He was a busy man who was always away, especially now that all of his children were grown up and moved out. But he had come to the city for a visit and taken one look at her before dragging her to the hospital.

Irina hadn't questioned him. If anyone could see the signs, it would be him. He was the only one who'd seen her in the bathroom that day, staring down at her bloody hands with vacant eyes.

Not once did he look at her, until they were parked in the driveway. He helped her out of the car, then held her by the shoulders, staring into her eyes. Searching.

He must've found what he was looking for, because he nodded and pulled her into a tight, long hug that said everything that he wouldn't say.

I'm proud of you.

I will miss you so much.

I love you.

Her father was not a person who showed affection readily. She could count the number of times he'd said "I love you" to her on one hand. The number of times he'd hugged her was even less. But she knew the language of her father well. Little gestures that built up, saying what he wouldn't.

She squeezed back, and he stepped away, blinking away tears and uncaring that his suit was furiously wrinkled. "Irina."

"Father," she whispered softly, but his back was already to her, like it had been all her life. The sight of him walking away was not unfamiliar, but it wasn't exactly welcome either.

As a child, she'd chased it so many times. Even after her other siblings gave up, she still tried to run after him. Again and again, until their mother died, and she'd watched him sit in the blazing winter sun for days, staring at her grave. His back, which had seemed so strong and proud, had finally bowed.

That was the last time she'd chased after him.

She watched him drive off, heart twisting in her chest. She would not see him again until it was her time—or maybe this was the final time she would see him, if he was unable to make it to her deathbed—because he could not bear to watch yet another loved one slowly deteriorate, falling victim to this horrible disease.

She could hardly blame him; he'd watched his wife, his oldest daughter and son, then his infant child all succumb to it.

But it still hurt.

She shook her head. It wasn't time to wallow in past regrets. She had things to take care of, preparations to make.

So she worked and worked, hiding bloody towel after bloody towel, taking phone call after phone call to arrange things, balancing too many things until it was too much, and her older sister found her collapsed on the floor of her apartment.

The doctor faced her with a grim look. "You've been overworking yourself, and so, the disease has accelerated."

"How long?" her sister asked softly. Below the desk, she drummed



her fingers on her thigh—a nervous habit they’d both shared through high school and college, but only Irina had managed to drop it.

“Two months, likely less. If you take it easy, you might get more time, but...” He didn’t need to mention the reason they were there in the first place.

Her sister's hands stopped moving. She glanced at Irina, who simply nodded.

When she’d begun coughing up blood three weeks ago, she’d known the disease was more brutal than they’d ever seen this time. For her older siblings, the bloody coughing fits hadn’t started until at least two months after the diagnosis. “Thank you, doctor.”

“You’re going to have to tell him,” Her sister said in the car. Irina leaned against the window, staring out at the trees and cars rushing past. “I know.”

“It’s cruel of you to put it off, especially this long. You mean everything to him.”

“I know.”

Her sister let out a long sigh. “I’ve respected your wishes up to this point, but if you don’t tell him, I will.”

“Give me a few days.”

“Irina. You’ve already said goodbye to everyone else, including me. I know you knew you had less time already, so quit putting it off.” Irina sighed, leaning her head back against the headrest. “And if I don’t tell him?”

Zora went very, very still, her knuckles turning white on the steering wheel. “Then you are far crueler than I ever thought you would be capable of,” she whispered.

Keys jingled in the lock, then her cousin burst into their shared apartment. “Rina! Rina!”

She hastily shoved the papers into a drawer and slid it shut, the sound of it closing lost under the bang of the door as her cousin tumbled into the apartment with all the force of a hurricane.

“Rina! You’ll never believe what happened.”

She spun around in her chair lazily. “Hm... You finally got fired because you pissed off your boss one too many times?”

“What? No!” He stopped her spinning, then sprawled across her lap, groaning dramatically as he threw a hand over his eyes. How he fit in her lap when he was a good half foot taller than her, she had no idea.

“It’s so much worse than that.”

“Oh really? What’s worse than being fired?”



He sat up, giving her an indignant look. “A promotion.”

“And how is that a bad thing?”

“It means more work!” He groaned, flopping to the floor. “I was perfectly fine with the position I had, but now... my working hours aren’t normal anymore! They can call me even at home! Can you imagine?”

“Calm down,” she said, barely containing her laughter as she patted his head. Her cousin was just like an over energetic puppy sometimes. “It’s not the end of the world.”

“It is!” He grabbed her leg and yanked, and she let herself tumble down next to him. “It means we’re going to have different schedules, and no more movie nights.”

She lay sprawled next to him, staring at the ceiling. “Well, then, just quit.”

“Huh?”

“Do you really hate it that much or are you just upset about something else?”

He was instantly quiet.

She’d hit the nail right on the head.

Her cousin was the quiet type, just like her. Whenever he made a fuss about something, it was to distract her from the real problem. Just like how he’d distracted her from his home situation until it was almost too late.

She patted his leg. “C’mon, spit it out.”

He rolled over to her and pressed his face into her shoulder, muttering inaudibly.

She poked his cheek. “Can’t hear you.”

He lifted his head the slightest bit, and she barely heard him. “You’re ignoring me. Have been for the past few months.” He leaned back, earnest eyes searching her face. “Did I do something wrong?”

So this was what it was like to be stabbed in the heart. Irina sat up.

“Of course not. What gave you that idea?”

He turned his head away. “You’re never home, and when you are, you’re holed up in here. You’re sending letters and calling out of work.” He squinted at her and cocked his head “Are you having a secret affair?”

She snorted, covering her mouth and shoving him away as she erupted into laughter. “Where did that come from?”

“I’m being serious,” he complained, sitting upright and leaning against her bed with a huff.

“No,” she said, quelling her laughter. “Definitely not. And if I was, you’d be the first to know.” He was her best friend, her closest confidant, her partner in crime. They’d always been close, and their relationship was closer to siblings than cousins. In fact, enough people had assumed

they were twins that it had become an inside joke.

He shuffled closer. “Then what is it?”

She sighed, looking up at the ceiling. “Cian, what would you do if I had to go somewhere far away for a long time?”

“Come with you,” he said promptly, nudging his head against her arm.

A smile tugged at her mouth as she reached up to stroke his hair. He really was just like a puppy. “And if you couldn’t?”

“Then... I’d quit my job and follow you until I caught up.”

She frowned, turning to look at him. But there was not a flicker of doubt on his face, not an ounce of mischief or lightheartedness present.

“Why?”

He leaned against her. “You really don’t know?”

His hand hovered over hers in a rare moment of uncertainty. She caught it, gently folding her fingers over his. “Enlighten me, would you?”

“You reached out when I was at my lowest,” he said softly, in the quietest voice she’d ever heard him use. “You were the only one there when I fell, and the only one willing to help me get back up. You stayed by my side and helped me rebuild my life, piece by piece. And even now, you’re still here. Even though... I can get annoying at times.” He let go of her hand, staring down at the floor.

Her heart was splitting into pieces. Cian had always been teased for being too much and they were both aware it was one of his biggest insecurities. A year of healing with Irene couldn’t erase that. “Cian...”

He might be free from his father’s influence, but the shadows were still there.

Part of her was afraid of what would happen to him once she was gone. Would he be strong enough to move on?

She pulled him into a hug, rubbing circles on his back. “You’re not annoying or overbearing or too much, or anything remotely similar. You’re you, and that’s why I love you. So don’t ever think that I’m actually sick of you, okay?”

He nodded, then breathed in shakily and let out a long sigh “Love you, too, Rina.”

She should tell him.

She had to tell him.

But instead, she pulled him closer, closing her eyes and breathing in his scent—a mixture of their laundry detergent, his cologne, and the clean sharpness of his shampoo. “No matter what, I will always be there for you, Cian.”

She was a liar.



## Miss White and the Unlawful Seven

### Chapter One - The Case and Comb

“Miss White, we have a... special case for you.” I turned towards the head of my detective agency, Mr. Matson. He jerked his head in the direction of his soundproof office. “Let’s head to my office; we can talk more there.”

I got up from my desk and walked into his office, closing the door behind me and leaning against it.

“My Miss White, do you look nice today,” drawled Mr. Matson, eyeing my customary blue button up shirt, yellow jeans, and red headband.

“Cut to the chase, Matson. What do you have for me?” I had learned long ago not to fall for Mr. Matson’s southern lover attitude. It was all a cover up for when he wanted me to do something dangerous.

He grinned, his gold tooth shining. “And there’s the focus I can always count on from you, Miss White. The case is all in here.” He opened a drawer at his desk and withdrew a folder, sliding it across the desk to me.

I stood up straight from my position against the door and walked over, picking up the file. I opened it. ““Queen of Hearts; poker player, steals money/valuables, real name unknown, no image.”” I read. I looked up at Matson. “You want me to deal with the basic cat burglar?” Mr. Matson got up from his desk and walked towards me. “Not just any cat burglar. This one is a known murderer, as well. I believe she may have some...importance to you. You should be the one to lock her up. How ‘bout that?”

I shrugged. “Alright, I’m in. What’s the pay for her?”

“100,000 dollars.”

I nodded, thinking. “This is a good one. Any deadlines?”

Mr. Matson always gave one. “You have five months to apprehend.”

“Okay. I’ll have her in two, tops.”

Mr. Matson grinned. “Atta girl.”

“Thanks for the case,” I said. “Soon we’ll see who she really is.”

And with that, I left his office and took the train home.





Miss White  
Izzy Yucha

Back in my apartment, I spread out the items in the file on my desk. There were a few things; the main page, an address, a deck of cards, some money, and an invitation to one of her poker games that read:

*Dear recipient,*

*I am pleased to inform you that you have been invited to the Queen of Hearts' monthly poker game.*

*Please bring your own deck, this invitation, and a minimum of \$1,000 for the entrance fee.*

*For dress, you must wear a ball gown with colors of your choice, as well as a mask to hide the top half of your face, for the Queen of Hearts is royalty and be treat as such. Head pieces are allowed.*

*Please come to 135 Maple Road, The Bronx, New York at 5 p.m. sharp on July 25th for the poker game.*

*Refreshments will be provided.*

I quickly looked at my calendar. July 25th was exactly three weeks away, so that meant I had three weeks to make my plan. If it all worked out, I would have this 'Queen of Hearts' apprehended in a month. I circled the date, then pinned the invitation and file sheet on a bulletin board, connecting them with a piece of red string. This was always a fun part.

I'd look at my closet later for the clothing options, but I was going to eat dinner first. I walked out of my house, locking up, then to my car, getting it in and starting up the engine. When I was halfway to the grocery store, I looked to my right at the sound of sirens. My curiosity and detective instincts going strong, I pulled over and hopped out of the car to see what was up.

The head of police, who everyone called Sarge, looked over as I walked up. "Miss White, thank goodness you're here. A drunk man had come stumbling out of that bar over there," he pointed, "and saw this. Poor man peed himself, then went straight inside to call us."

I pushed my way through officers and went under the police tape. I heard Sarge quieting his deputies' protests behind me. When I could finally see what had happened, I covered my mouth to stifle a gasp.

A young woman lay on her back, her face mangled, features

unrecognizable. She had six bullet holes in her legs, and several stab marks in her chest. Her blood had pooled around her, and she clutched a bloody paintbrush in her hand. And off to the side, someone had written in her blood.

*This is only the first. Watch your backs.*  
~ *Queen of Hearts*  
*Xoxo*

Of course the Queen of Hearts had done this. That sick, sick woman. July 25th couldn't get here faster. I walked a little closer to the body to check for more clues as to what had happened. I lifted the dead woman's head, and felt something hard in her hair. I felt around for a good grip, as the object was slick with blood. When I finally got it out, I held it up to the light.

A beautiful comb. With traces of green, silver, and red liquid on the pointed, knife-like metal bristles.

I felt certain that this 'Queen of Hearts' character had poisoned this comb and given it to the poor girl, who had immediately put it in her hair. The poison must've made her go insane or something...by the quick fingerprint search we'd done on the knife and gun, she must've killed herself.

I straightened and turned back to the officers and Sarge. "Run intensive searches on the weapons, and do a DNA test for her," I said, jerking my head in the direction of the poor woman. "Once you finish that, send me the items with a full synopsis. And, please get someone here to...handle the mess." I winced out of sympathy. "When you know who she is, alert her family. And give me a report on her; name, age, occupation, features, you know the drill. Based on the, ah, gore level, please quarter off a large area of space to block out news coverage and prevent any potential...scares to the populace."

Sarge straightened from where he had leaned against his patrol car while watching me do my job. "Aye, m'lady," he said with a wink.

I sighed. "Very nice, Sarge. But I've told you," I gave him a wan smile, "I'm not interested. You're old enough to be my grandpa."

He rolled his eyes. "You full well know that ain't what I mean, princess. You're queen at your job...your father taught you well." Sarge's eyes softened at that. "He was a good man, your pops. One of the best detectives I've ever seen. And your mama was the sweetest gal around, caring for everyone. I'm sorry you never got to meet her. You doin' alright on your own? I know you're already 21, but it's still gotta be hard without him."

I swallowed hard. I preferred not to think about my mother, who

died shortly after I was born. Or my father's death.

"I'm fine." And I was...but only that. Never good, never great. Usually just okay or fine. I filled my time with solving crimes like these.

Sarge smiled softly and winked. "Any, er, suitors yet?"

My mouth gaped widely, my face flushed, and my eyes went as large as saucers. "Sarge."

He mimicked my expression. "Snow."

I narrowed my eyes on him. "Well, if you must know, no. I..." I hesitated a beat, "don't have time."

Sarge nodded and put his hand on my shoulder. "For your sake, I'll pretend I believe you." He glanced over at the body of the poor, mauled girl and started speaking to the other officers milling about. "But enough chit chat. We have to finish this up." He turned back to me. "Get some food, try to get a good night's rest. I hope you don't have trouble sleeping over this."

I nodded to him. "You too. Say hi to the wife for me."

He smiled softly again. "Will do. I'll call if I need anything else, and I'll have the test results brought to you right after we finish running the exams."

I nodded once more. "Thanks."

After I climbed back into my car, I sighed and leaned forward, bumping my forehead into the steering wheel repeatedly. Yeah, I wasn't going to get any sleep tonight.

But not because of the girl.





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