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2022 Teen Writing Contest

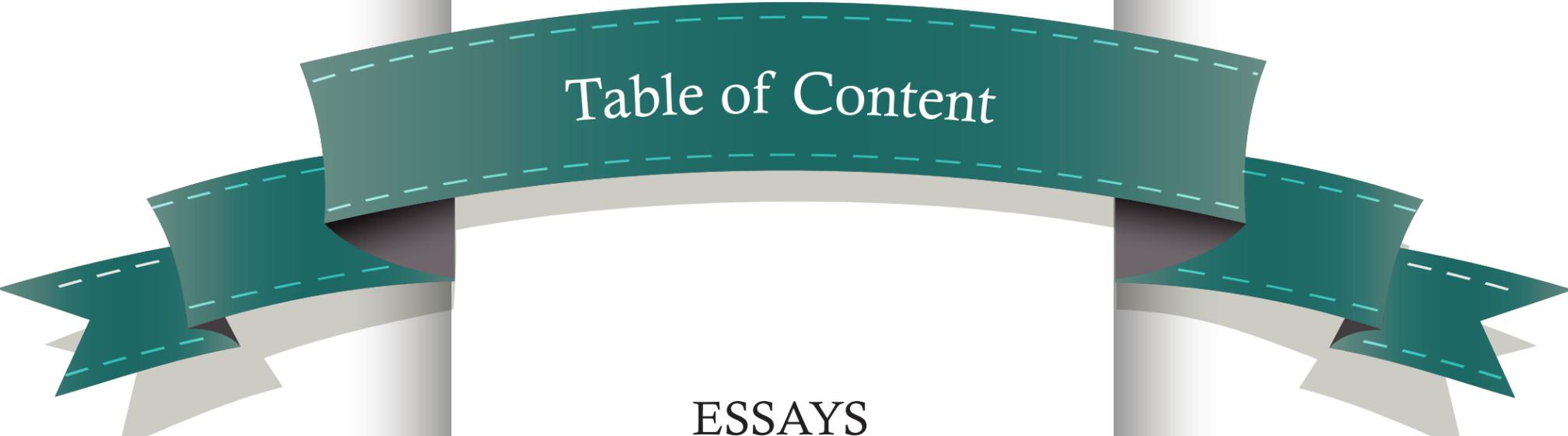


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Allison Hill
High School



Why Perfect Scores Don't Make for a Perfect System: The Debunking of Standardized Tests

In 2021 alone, I took five standardized tests. This number seems manageable over the course of the year, but it took a huge mental toll on me. I spent 15 hours and 30 minutes taking the ACT, SAT, PSAT, and two AP exams last year. This does not include time spent studying and even more time stressed about the test, scores, cancellations, college applications, and staying safe during the pandemic.

I know for a fact though, the number of standardized tests I took would have been higher if we had not been in a global pandemic. But to say the least, the thousands of other high school seniors in the US and I got lucky. Colleges and universities across the country decided to make the ACT and SAT college entrance exams optional for admission.

Going “test-optional” became the new normal for most schools (with some even going “test-blind”) and also became a loaded word, putting students who chose not to submit still at a disadvantage of sorts. Despite this though, it has pushed the ACT and SAT to the forefront of the argument of whether standardized tests are an accurate measurement of knowledge and preparedness for further education. It is, after all, just a test.

No Child Left Behind... in Rich, White Neighborhoods

The introduction of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act by former President George W. Bush in 2002 required public schools to administer standardized tests in reading and mathematics to measure proficiency and growth. The goal of this act was to give the federal government a role in holding schools accountable for

student performance. This act was created with surface-level good intentions. It was an agreement by two major political parties as well as civil rights and business groups that sought to bridge the wealth gap in education. However, a focus was put on English-language learners, special education students, and minority children living below the poverty line.

An incentive was thus created for states to administer these standardized tests. Although it was not mandatory for states to comply, they would risk losing sought-after federal Title I funding. States soon realized that lower student test scores led to staff replacements and school closures while higher student test scores, on the other hand, allowed for more consistent funding and support. Test preparation became the main focus in school, instead of actual learning, and the groups of students needing more assistance were being left behind more than before. The NCLB was later replaced by the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) that scaled back the role of the government in these tests. (Read more about the ESSA that went into effect in the 2017–18 school year here)

Numbers, Metrics, & Everything a Child is Not
Defenders of standardized testing argue that these tests do offer sufficient, useful metrics for gauging how well not only students but also teachers perform in the classroom.

Aaron Churchill, an education policy researcher, is a proponent of standardized tests and believes there are three key reasons why these tests are essential to the success of a school. These reasons include the objectivity, comparability, and accountability of the tests. (Churchill) He further breaks down these reasons by explaining that the tests are good because they are a set standard, meaning each student receives the same tests. The test questions are even adapted each year to become fairer and less biased towards particular groups. (Moulon) All the tests are graded the same as well; this makes the scores easy to compare.

These scores can hold schools accountable too for the quality of

education they are providing to the students. Churchill says, “There are good schools and rotten ones; there are high-flying students and pupils who struggle mightily. We need hard, objective information on school and student performance, and the best available evidence comes from standardized tests.” Quality of education and curriculum is the number one priority in the defenders’ eyes.

Roots in Racism

Opposers of standardized testing, on the other hand, believe that these tests only show which students excel at taking tests and are unfair to minority students.

Young Whan Choi, a California educator, furthers that racial and gender discrimination is still built into the tests when he says, “Too often, test designers rely on questions which assume background knowledge more often held by White, middle-class students.” (ProCon.org) Often students from lower-income families do poorly on the tests compared to their higher-income counterparts who can afford test prep. Another issue that opposers have with these tests is how they only test a few subject areas so students only have to master what the test covers. They believe this is a poor attempt to test mastery and, “...that if you pressure people to improve on just a few aspects of their job, some of the other important aspects of the job will stay the same, and some will deteriorate.” (Walsh)

In addition, teachers often have to spend instructional time going over test prep instead of filling in gaps that their students may have in subject areas. In 2015, a study done by the National Education Association found that about 70% of educators also believe that their state’s tests are not “developmentally appropriate” for their students and that the “narrowly prescribed curriculum” does not match up with the right grade levels, further proving their stance on the tests. (Walker)

Making Profit off of Failure

Behind the scenes, standardized testing is also unsurprisingly a

money-making business with the biggest test publishers, like McGraw-Hill, the College Board, and NCS Pearson, making billions of dollars a year on tests.

Between the SAT, PSAT, and AP exams, College Board makes hundreds of millions of dollars on these tests each year. They make their profit from charging high fees to take each examination. Every AP exam costs \$95, meaning if you are a high-achieving student, you could spend up to \$500 a year on AP exams alone. These exams are what help colleges determine if you can get first-year credit for specific courses based on your exam score. However, most schools require high AP scores to receive credit and many times, do not grant credit no matter the score.

It costs a little over \$50 to take the SAT. This is a more manageable score compared to the AP exams, however, the College Board tacks on additional fees for late registration, answer services, and score sending that drive up the price. Many students do not score what they want the first time they take the test which means, if they have the means to do so, they have to retake the test again and again. This means more test costs and additional fees. All of this spending just to attend one college and maybe get one or two classes out of the way. [TheRealCollegeBoard.org](https://www.therealcollegeboard.org) has a great article about the College Board's finances that I highly recommend reading here.

The Game of College Admissions

The SAT and ACT only measure one thing: your ability to master the test content. Pre-pandemic college admissions relied heavily on these scores to compare students and choose ones to admit.

Wealthy, and oftentimes white, students have more access to expensive test prep services (a whole million-dollar industry itself) and can take the tests, fees and all, as many times as they need.

This means that a college heavily valuing high test scores will admit wealthy, white students who paid their way to a good score.

When the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted safety and accessibility for these entrance exams, many schools chose to go test-optional

for the application cycles during the pandemic. The University of California and California State University systems even chose to go test-blind, not allowing students to submit scores at all.

Schools that went test-optional fell into two categories: test-optional with no preference and test-optional but still suggested to take. Students felt pressure to still attempt these tests despite the numerous risks and difficulties. Wealthy, privileged students were again put in a position where they were able to take the tests while other students had to hope for the best.

Weeding Out the Good & Bad Tests

After evaluating both sides of the argument, I concluded that standardized testing should not necessarily be banned, but rather largely scaled back and utilized for different purposes. There is a good type of standardized testing however that can truly analyze a student's ability to understand a subject without creating an unfair environment for scoring. In our current school system (flawed but uneasily changed), students do need to be evaluated to see where they are at. The balance of good to bad tests needs to change and good tests need to be used only when appropriately helping students.

These tests also create an unnecessary amount of stress for both students and teachers as they have to prepare extensively for the tests and are expected to perform excellently. Many students also have test anxiety, are neurodivergent, or simply struggle under timed tests, which make constant standardized tests detrimental to their mental health and academic performance.

Improving the System

Standardized tests are a hallmark of modern public education in America. Originally becoming popular to improve students' performance in school and evaluate teachers, these tests have become ways to weed out the white, wealthy students from the low-income, minority students and punish schools who perform poorly. This is a backward way to approach evaluating education

and academic performance.

Standardized tests should be used scarcely and only in a way that truly helps teachers and schools understand where their students need improvement. By using test questions that are application and real-world-based as well as not convolutedly worded, tests will be set up for students to succeed rather than fail. Instead of giving consequences to low-performing schools, more support and funding should be given to them so their students can have the resources they need to succeed. The tests do not need to be completely banned, but they should not be used in ways that negatively affect students' and teachers' futures.

In A Flash

Late into the night, after a party, I was resting on my dad's chest, while he and I were watching a movie together.

"That party was so fun, dad." I exclaimed.

"Thank you so much for driving me to the party."

"No problem" replied my dad. "Just remember that I will always do everything to make you happy, no matter what."

"And I'll always be thankful for that." I replied back.

We finished the movie, and went upstairs to sleep. It seemed like it was going to be an ordinary night, following an ordinary day. But little did I know, that it would be different that night.

I still remember it like yesterday. I woke up to my mom pleading to my dad to not go to the hospital.

"Sure you might have some chest pain, but why do you need to go to the hospital? Don't you think you're overreacting?" my mom cried.

"Because these chest pains are not normal. They might mean something more drastic." my dad replied.

When I finally came up to them, my dad was already on the phone, calling an ambulance. How brave he was, calling the ambulance for himself, because he knew that there was something wrong with his chest pains. The final time that I saw my dad in a week was in an ambulance, driving away from us.

My entire family from my dad's and mom's side came from Chicago, Richmond, Houston, New Jersey, to console and tell us to pray that my dad would get better. The staff told us that an artery in his heart was clogged up with cholesterol, and that he would need surgery. After one dreadful hour, the doctors told us

that the surgery was a success, and I was finally able to see my dad. He was asleep in his room, but even within those tubes and machines, I could still see my old loving dad, stronger than ever.

Later, just before my Thanksgiving Break ended, my dad finally got discharged from the hospital. He had to sleep in the guest bedroom, because he didn't have the strength to walk up the stairs to his bedroom. Over the weeks, he got better, stronger, and could perform his daily tasks, like eating and going to the bathroom. And on his birthday, January 3, he celebrated his recovery with his family and his staff.

This event scarred my dad, in a good way. Even as a doctor, he had a smoking addiction, and smoked whenever he could. He knew about the risks and dangers of smoking, but he couldn't stop himself. But after the event, he decided to quit smoking forever. He also now plays tennis, swim, bicycle, and runs to keep his heart active. He makes us eat more fruits, vegetables, and fish, to make sure we get enough vitamins and nutrients. And even after that, he still is a loving father to me.

So where do I come into this? Well, I was in the middle of the event the entire time. It was hard for a kid like me to know what was happening. Sometimes I would lie awake late into the night, worrying if my dad would get better, or not. I still lie awake and think that thing could have gone different, that my dad wouldn't be here today. I learned to always embrace what you have, and not to take something for granted, because one day, you might be laying down on somebody, and the next day, that somebody might be hanging between life and death, with you not able to help him, but to only watch and pray.



Johnathan Schilling
High School



Language: Limited or Limitless?

When I was a junior, I was in a program at my school called International Baccalaureate (IB). The IB has its own in-school coordinator and counselor, who basically just guide the students through the complexities of the program. This program also has 3 sub-programs; the Middle Years Program (MYP) which I took grades 6-10, and then two 2-year programs for juniors and seniors: the Diploma Program (DP - the more rigorous one and the one that I was in) and the Career-related Program (CP). In the IBDP, we had something called “The Core”, consisting of Creativity, Activity, and Service (CAS); the Extended Essay (EE); and finally a class called Theory of Knowledge (TOK). In TOK, we explored what knowledge is and how it relates to many other different topics. There is a main theme the teacher needs to touch on called “Knowledge and the Knower” and 5 optional themes to discuss (from which the teacher needs to choose 2 to teach) with the prefix of “Knowledge and” which is followed by “Technology”, “Language”, “Indigenous Societies”, “Religion”, or “Politics”. In my class, we started out with the main theme and then continued on to Knowledge and Language and then Knowledge and Technology, finishing the year with a focus on the EE. It was in Knowledge and Language that sparked the question, “What is language and how does it affect the way we think?”

So... what exactly is language? Well, according to Google, language is “the principal method of human communication, consisting of words used in a structured and conventional way and conveyed by speech, writing, or gesture.” However, in TOK we were taught to dig deeper than simply looking up and accepting a definition. So, I dug a bit by scheduling a call with the coordinator to talk about what I was learning in the unit. Through a bit of

joint exploration, we came up with a definition that I've used when talking about language ever since then. However, before I unveil the definition, the process to manufacture it is just as important as the result: first, he asked me what the purpose of language was, to which I replied, "We use language to communicate; we use it to talk, to write." He then asked me what I was doing when I talked or wrote about something. This question stumped me for a bit, so I asked him what he meant by that. He then explained that he was asking exactly what I talked or wrote about when I spoke or wrote. So that question got me thinking... we don't actually speak about a physical object when we talk about things. When I talk about this essay, I'm not doing anything to it, it is not physically coming out of my mouth (or my fingers) when I reference it in speech or writing; in fact, that's what it is—simply a reference. Hypothetically, if we could talk about an actual thing, then there would be absolutely no miscommunication ever because we would be talking about actual things rather than representations of things or references to things; however, it is impossible to talk about an actual thing, purely due to the nature of language itself. In fact, that brought to light the new and improved definition of language that I use today, which is as follows: language is the symbolic representation of objects, things, thoughts, or concepts (though it may be true that this definition contains redundant parts, such as including objects and things and concepts along with thoughts, and it might also be true that there are words missing that would improve the definition, this definition works for the purposes of this essay).

Along with this new definition of language comes many consequences. There are truths that are brought to light through the application of it, and there are special things we can now use language for with this perspective. I think that one large limitation of language through its definition that Google gives is its explicit human exclusiveness. I think that even through mainstream society, we can see how that might be problematic. An example is the case of "body language". We've literally studied this form of communication scientifically and we have also observed similar behaviors in animals. For example, when a dog turns its back to

you, it generally means it trusts you. And while it isn't body language, when one barks, it alerts you to something, whether that be an unknown (or even known) person, a pain it has, or a need unmet. This is a type of communication, and according to the definition of it we're using, language. But Google doesn't think so. Even so, this pretty clearly isn't the only example found in the animal kingdom: bees move around/dance to tell other bees where to go, and birds fly around and sometimes call out to mate—these are all examples of language in the new definition yet not in Google's. Not to mention how certain primates can actually use more abstract, human-made languages for them to communicate with us. While all of this is super fine and dandy, the new definition's implications through popular linguistic and philosophical views are even more interesting. For example, take linguistic relativity (otherwise known as the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis): if language is symbolically representative by nature, then languages would differ in the way they symbolically represent things and we could hypothetically create languages that represent things novelly. Language could be viewed as a scientific and intentionally progressive subject, rather than purely a force of human nature and culture; we could continue gaining new perspectives through language, and by doing so we could continue progressing our language and making it more advanced through a mix of scientific, philosophical, cultural, and linguistic development.

Now, there's this very common view that language's primary or, heaven forbid, only function is communication. I actually disagree with even the former notion. Of course I admit that language is used for communication; however, I think that its primary use is to think. Think about it. When we are thinking about something physical, we can do more than what we can speak. However, the object still isn't physically in our head when we imagine it or think of the word that describes it. We come up with a symbol that represents whatever object we think of, whether that symbol is a picture of the thing, whether we hear the thing's name in our internal dialogue, even if we imagine using the thing, the thing will never physically exist in our mind (and

through different philosophical analyses of this, when we see it we might not even be experiencing it as is). Also, different people literally experience life differently due to their language. According to studies conducted by Caitlin M. Fausey at Stanford in 2010, Spanish and Japanese-speaking people differ from English speakers in how they assign blame; in Spanish and Japanese, if a person broke a vase accidentally, then speakers of those languages would say the vase broke itself (while, obviously, we English speakers assign the blame to the person). This came into play in a study on memory of people speaking these three languages: when presented with faces to choose from, Spanish and Japanese-speaking people couldn't remember as well as English speakers which person broke or did something accidentally, although no clear differences were shown when remembering people who did things with intention. Another example of people's experiences differing based on language is summarized in a concept called schema theory, which is a theory about how humans gain and categorize knowledge. In essence, the brain forms a schema of something as it learns about it—it stores information about exactly what the thing is, and how it relates to other things. However, due to the nature of language being symbolic representations of things, each person will store that information differently, even if they experience a single event simultaneously their past experiences and knowledge forms their reception of new knowledge and experience. This is one of many ways all of us experience and know things differently. The coolest thing is that schema theory is a psycho-linguistical theory and therefore inherently recognizes the importance of language in its propositions!

Talking about language, its nature, how important it is to us (and therefore how important it is to learn about it), and about how much it affects the way humans think about, process, and even experience the world is extremely entertaining, but also vastly enlightening. The lens that language is the symbolic representation of objects, things, ideas, and concepts provides for much more meaningful discussion about language by removing its presupposed limitations and allowing it to even have as much

importance as, say, the physical sciences in modern society. While this definition might need more fine-tuning, even through its potentially-flawed form the great power that language holds shines brightly. It gives much more consequential insight on the world and how we view and perceive it as humans. As such, it is therefore of utmost importance that the concept and results of language continue to be examined and discussed throughout all society. Albeit there may be differences in language throughout all the people of the Earth, new perspectives and understandings of it might be able to help unite the world while it battles for its survival in many more ways than one.



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Her, She, and I

Her anger consumes,
Her fear is immense.
Her heart breaks,
Her brain assumes.

She takes too much,
She hurts so little.
She wants to give,
She wants touch.

I am without you,
I hurt your heart.
I broke your feelings,
I hope you know too.

Her soul, tears,
Her essence forgives.
Her guilt never parts,
Her love always cares.

She cries at night,
She lost her passion.
She searches for it,
She is without sight.

I live between the two,
I prevail barely without.
I mourn the memories,
I hope you lived true.

Her brain defends,
Her heart at war.
Her gut says forget,
Her devotion mends.

She will always care,
She will not forget.
She sees it clearly,
She moves on, aware.

I hope to find new love,
I won't forget your kindness.
I love you always, but,
I let you go, selfish above.

Twinge the Light Sky

Most may think,
The sky ink is flushed with,
A tint of azure and mauve,
Grasped through the Northern Lights.

Oh how so bright.

Most may think,
The sky oh so subtly shrinking,
Fading into lids of darkness,
May be soon colored with news,
Of hues colored with clouds.

Oh how proud.

Most may think,
The sky disappearing each day,
Is a sign of new decay.
Birth, death, everything in between,
Will then be recolored,
With hints of azure and mauve.

But what most misinterpret,

Is that our sky,

Oh so loved,

Is painted oh so slightly,

With tinges of,

Rust, gold, amethyst, peridot, sapphire.

The undetermined opinions of color,
Misconstrued and miss viewed by most,

Or seen by all.

Often fall from the grasp,
Of the tincture of the eyes of the world.

Thought to be,

Grass, ocean, river,

Oh so can be.
Rust, gold, amethyst, peridot, sapphire,
At the end of the day.
The eye ever so sly,
Will always,
Tinge the light sky.

Untitled

A snake coils up,
Ready to attack her prey,
But suddenly stops mid-attack,
After seeing the mouse's,
Glistening, glimmering tears.
Time seems to stop,
As snake backs up.
Mouse senses her pausing,
Squeaks with joy,
And scurries away.
Snake watches quietly,
Feeling not even the slightest,
Regret.

Untitled

Dear Dance,
We've been through a lot together,
Ever since I was 3,
You've helped me move &
Groove to the music.

I fell in love with you.

From the moment my mom,
Started the music,
To the moment the,
Last song ended,
I knew you were my love.

You helped me through,
Some rough times,
The times where my,
Anxiety got the worst,
You were there.

But it is time we,
Say goodbye. I knew that I,
Would always love you.
But you got ,
To be too much.

The minute I realized, was the minute,
The music stopped,
Even when my family was cheering,

I couldn't find it in my heart,
To keep going.

So that being said,
I will always love you,
But my path,
Is taking me,
A different direction.

I will never forget you,
Sarah A. Manzanares.

A Lovely Evening

The birds are chirping quietly for their young to fall asleep.
The pigs are huddling together in the barn
just waiting to fall asleep.
The sun is saying its farewells.
When the moon begins to rise.
The deer frolic in dens as the wolves start to thrive.
As the crickets begin to chirp.
We wish a goodnight to all, as the evening comes around.
The children jump in bed eager to see the sun again.
What a lovely evening we all say.
What a lovely evening sadly it has to end.

Unkind Words

Back in elementary school,
Not too long ago,
You scarred my heart.

With the unkind words, you said,
The bullying you did to me on the daily,
The constant torture of your heart-piercing words.

How could you say all of these things?
How could you dare to let the words slip out of your mouth?
I ask myself these questions all the time.

If only you hadn't bullied me,
I may still have the self-confidence in me,
That went missing long ago.

You made fun of my eyes,
The way I dressed,
The way I looked,
The way I talked,
The way I acted,
The way I existed.
And so much more.

The inhumane comments,
The laughing and pointing,
All of it breaking me down inside.

You made my life unlivable at school,
Imagine every day going to school,

And expecting bullying to await you.

So, these unkind words,
These unbearable actions,
Could've all been avoided.

I wish I would've gotten a warning,
Before attending school.
Saying, beware scarring for the rest of your life.
Beware of constant torture,
Beware of low self-esteem,
And beware of loads of new insecurities.

So, you could only imagine,
How badly I wish this could've been avoided.
I miss having self-confidence,
I'd do anything to get it back.
No matter how hard I beg or try,
I'll never be the same.

Now, before you think of bullying anyone,
Think about my story,
Think about how I feel,
Think about how my life was changed,
Then maybe you'll change your mind.

He is the One That They Live For

He who lies,
Just out of grasp,
From those who beg.

Whimpering,
Reaching,
Tear after tear,
Life after life.

He devastates,
Those who depend,
On faithless morals.

Those who dream,
For better lives,
To distract themselves,
From their failures.

They blindly follow,
As if he is the antidote,
That dulls their pain.

Yet this is a distraction,
They do not realize,
That it is up to them.

That they are the ones,
Who write their destiny.
That they do not live,
To please him,
Instead to please themselves.

Shattering lives,
One by one,
He watches them carefully.
Letting them suffer,
Enjoying their deaths.

All is for him.

Unwritten Thoughts

My fingers itch,
To put the pen to paper.
But as my thoughts fly,
Which one to choose?
The fantasy of a land of magic,
The love of two people,
The friendship of a lifetime?
Which, oh which do I choose?
The alien invasion,
Or the crash at sea?
Every thought,
Swimming around.
Wondering, whispering.
New ideas and words and music,
But which to choose?
It is unknown.
So I take my quill,
And place it back in its pot.
So I can just enjoy,
My thoughts,
In their purest form.

Untitled

It's at the moment of death
that you are reminded of the life you've loved.

The reality of depression is that it doesn't end with death,
it spreads to others through death.

It starts and ends with a choice you make.

Paper

Life is like paper,
Blank like a fresh canvas,
Waiting to be adorned with colors,
Of all kinds.
To create a masterpiece,
That others with certainly admire.

Life is like paper,
It comes in all different sizes and colors.
Such a vast variety,
Each with a different story.

Life is like paper,
Easily torn apart.
Cut into tiny pieces,
With no effort at all,
By the scissors of negligence,
Despair, death.

Life is like paper,
Can be rearranged,
And glued back together.
On another piece of paper,
Aspects of a different life.

Life is like paper,
Folded into perfect creases,
To make the most beautiful origami crane,
Anyone laid eyes on.
Before it's crumpled up,

And thrown away,
Never to be seen again.

Life is like paper,
Recycled to create something new,
And blank yet again.
To be adorned with bright colors of,
Hope, youth, and ignorance,
Carefree, happiness.

Those Blue Eyes

Your eyes sparkle,
Like a glistening lake,
Like a deep deep pool,
I cannot escape.

Blue like the finest,
Sapphire you could buy.
Blue like the soft,
Warm summer skies.

Icy like a glacier,
That slowly melts away.
Blue blue eyes,
Like tiny blue jays.

Your gaze penetrates souls,
Like a blade pierces skin.
Those gorgeous eyes,
Are more than I could ever imagine.

Your big doe eyes,
Make everyone swoon.
They're like late nights,
In the middle of June.

Those blue eyes,
That I see every day.
Those blue eyes,
I hope never go away.



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Storm

Lightning cracked across the sky,
Thunder roared in its wake.
The trees shivered in expectedness,
Animals diving underground for their sake,
Amongst them all stood a girl,
Not afraid alas.

She stood with the Earth,
Hair blowing wildly like the wind,
Her cheeks were flushed a rosy red,
And cold held her body still as dead.

A storm was brewing,
She headed the warning for home,
Yet something about the atmosphere,
Held her standing there alone.

Small droplets of rain,
Splattered her face,
And the wind lapped against it.

Her gown of sage green,
Corset nowhere to be seen,
Started to thrash around.
She knew she needed to leave,
So she gathered bare feet,
And headed off into town.

A mile was her house,
And four moments of wait between the light and crash,
Alerted her the storm waited four miles not impasse.

Rain started to pour,
As her steps fell into air.

The girl sunk her feet in the mud,
Feeling the substance squish as a fellow that is quare.
She ran and she ran,

Towards a home far away,
The storm was closer,
Then she could make.
Putting all of her might in her bare feet,
Her steps quicked and pulsed.
She tipped her head back,
Spinning and laughing,
For this felt like home.
Wind ripped from the sky above,
And the trees shook with their leaves thereof.
Smiling, she went on,
A dance and a game she played,
She was the player,
And nature hosted the game.
Would she arrive home,
Or would the mother take her?
Hair as wild as the horses in the pasture,
She sprinted down a dirt road.
Dress and feet, covered in mud,
Yet she did not care about what those bestowed.
The girl was soaked in nature,
From mud to rain,
All awaiting her bright smile that took pain away.
As the lightning cracked above the western sky,
And thunder roared like a beautiful monster,
She knew the storm that had been brewing,
Was finally here to overcome her.
But she smiled as she knew,
What was the building ahead?
For there was her cottage,
With her mother's worried stare holding horrid dread.
A playful smile and a mother's shake of her head,
And the girl was inside,
Beating nature instead.

Heart and Mind

Just as the fox outsmarts his hunter,
This heart has outsmarted my mind.
Like the fox, my heart was clever and sly,
Telling my mind, its beautiful lies.
But now my heart is like the owl, silent and wise observing from
the trees,
And like the owl, my heart was made.
My heart was made to fly free.

Nothing Helps

Nothing helps,
The pain that courses through my veins.
Seeping, searing acid rain.
Impossible to escape, agony to contain,
And nothing helps.
No cure for what's come over me.
Unsure of what comes next for me.
What could tomorrow possibly bring,
If nothing helps?
Like a river, block, block, blocked by a dam.
A wave that can't quite touch the sand.
A hand with no one left to hold.
A desert that's always ice and cold.
But nothing helps.
And no one understands,
What it does to me.
This pain, now my enemy.
Stuck, a part of the agony.
And nothing helps.
Like a broken toy can't fix itself,
I can't fix myself.
Is this my destiny?
Alone with this pain inside me?
Crying with no one beside me?
'Cause nothing helps.
Gnarled knots stick deep within,
Tangling, rooting under my skin.
Can't help it, can't fix it, can't even begin.
Nothing helps.
But to complain,

Would be vain and insane.
Others in worse pain,
Though I still feel the flame.
Yet who's to say,
My pain's not bad?
If others are sadder,
Why can't I be sad?
If others are madder,
Why can't I be mad?
If others hurt badder,
Why can't I hurt bad?
'Cause nothing helps.
Still, I keep quiet.
I don't make a sound.
I talk to the page,
When there's no one around.
Though nothing helps.
So is this what life is?
A constant battle?
Riding a horse,
Without a saddle?
Running a race,
Can't win a medal?
An earthquake abounding,
With no house to rattle?
And nothing helps?
They say, if I want better,
Then make it better.
But how,
When nothing helps?
The remedies, I've tried.
With the doctors, I side.
I run from the pain,
I try to hide.
And yet,
Nothing helps.
I don't like that it's like this.
I don't like the pain.
I don't like the screams that I can't contain.

I don't like the illness,
That fills me like led.
I don't like the voices,
That ring in my head.
I don't like the aching,
That never flees.
I don't like the heartache,
My bitter disease.
And nothing helps.
When I try,
They tell me "Try harder".
When they say "Don't cry,"
All I do is cry harder,
In a hole that I burrow,
As I hide it from view,
So the questions and comments,
Don't start to spew.
Their sympathy, I hate,
Despise suggestions and plans.
And the looks people give me,
Are looks I can't stand.
Because they know,
Nothing helps.
I try to keep going,
I try to stay strong.
But when they tell me wounds heal,
I feel like they're wrong.
Of course, I can't say that,
Heaven forbid,
Or the objections will ring,
Pounding through my head.
"Don't be so negative."
"Don't get so down."
"How can you get better,
With your face in a frown?"
But I can't help what I think.
I can't help what I am.
I can't help how I feel.
I can't help, nothing can.

So I keep it all bundled,
Deep down inside,
So others don't see,
All the tears I have cried.
And so they won't notice,
All the hope that has died,
Long, long ago,
When I realized,
That nothing helps.
So is this my story?
Is this what's foretold?
Are these the moments,
I'll recall when I'm old?
Are these the seconds,
That never die?
Are these the years,
I'll think back to and sigh?
Because not all tales,
Are those of laughter.
Not all stories,
End in happily ever after.
Sometimes the rain,
Just gets wetter.
Sometimes people,
Don't get better.
And sometimes,
Nothing helps.



Ella Gaughan
High School



The Beauty You Possess

Did no one tell you about the beauty you possess?
About the worth of your blue eyes and what visions of light they
project across the horizon of possibility that you create?
About how your hair curls and bounces around your shoulders in
its ever-changing waves of golden pink that sparkles like the dunes
of the desert?
About the unique way, your heart bleeds with caring love that is
given to all forms of life, even if it is never looked upon by anyone
else?
About the way, your laugh carries its rays of sunshine across the
globe to brighten the coldest parts of the Earth with the warmth of
a thousand suns?
About the way, you can shuffle your way across the kitchen in
goofy moves that could only bring uncontrollable laughter?
About the way, you carry yourself across any path but make it
look like a runway?
Did anyone tell you that the universe does not know about the
beauty you possess because it does not fit into its measurements?
To my sister, who does not know about the beauty she possesses.



A Message to You

Please, listen to me,
I know things are hard.
Every day, I see you so broken,
With all these scars.

No matter what you do,
The results are always the same.
It continues to hurt me so deeply,
To see you in such pain.

Whenever you cry,
You will always have me to hold.
You are worth more than diamonds,
You are worth more than gold.

I will say it again and again,
For as long as it will take.
The dark thoughts in your head are fake.
You are meant to be here,
You were never a mistake.

Yes, you are more than enough,
You're the loveliest person I've ever seen.
And I need you,
Just as much as you need me.

In no way you are ugly,
You are just as you were meant to be designed.
Your kindness continues to shine,
Your inner beauty,

Your outer beauty,
Both rival the divine.

Do not believe those dark thoughts,
They are merely a myth.
You give everyone around you life,
You are a magnificent gift.

I am still with you,
Even though you feel we are apart.
Every morning you wake up,
It brings so much joy in my heart.

Please, I need this to be known,
That I'm always, always here for you.
You do not need to worry anymore,
Because you are never alone.

The Lady of the Night

In the depths of night,
As the cold wind blows from the north,
And covers the silver moon with heavy clouds,
She splits the darkness open,
A ray of light more brilliant than the dawn,
Then the sun.

That thinks himself so worthwhile,
For seeping through the sweetened air of day.

But it is in the smallest moments,
When all is silent,
And the little nightingales have gone to sleep,
That she shines the brightest.
Her eyes are a heady shade of gold,
As she dances through the air.
Atop the clouds and stars and mountain peaks,
Her arms are outstretched in front of her,
Her fingers run through hair like woven silk,
And her face is split into a dazzling smile,
That steals the breath from the summer breeze.

And far below,
Chained to the frozen ground,
By curling tendrils of darkened weeds,
I watch her soar through the night sky.
Until she falls into a dive,
Like a waterfall of light,
And stops in front of me.

Her feet--silent on the bowing grass,

Her eyes--shimmering with hidden mirth,
Her hand--reaching out to mine,
And she laces our fingers one by one,
And smiles:
“Hello.”

And the world falls silent.

But then the wind finds its voice again,
And her gaze lifts to the clearing night.
As the clouds unveil the twinkling stars--
And she is gone,
A stream of diamond,
Returning to her home above.

And as I stand there,
Watching her fly away,
I cannot help but wonder,
How blessed I have been,
To witness such a dream.

Untitled

After years of letting go,
I have learned the animosity, of a closed door,
Turned over like a new leaf,
Igniting a ragged breeze.
I have learned, that time folds in incoherent breaths, and that if
you do not breath,
It will catch you by your thin hair,
Strangle your insides and call you upon deaf toned wooden
frames.
And soon, you become reliant, resilient and submissive,
To the pain of lost things, etched into your arms and stomach.
It is all just a faint breeze, never storm, never hurricane,
Locked tight.

Toxic Love

I love you but how do I say it?
Cus' you're so judgmental,
And I'm just the misfit.
You're a catch,
And I'm the hypocrite.
Now you have to put me back together,
Every sad, scary, stitch.

And I know that you're trying,
But please try harder.
Cus' I'm over here dying,
Inside your arms,
But I still kept trying,
But all you do is keep lying.
Please tell me how to stop crying...

CHORUS:

Cus' when I have no place to go,
I'll find peace inside your arms,
And let that be my home,
Cus' you've been good to me,
Oh so good,
To me.

I feel like I'm the one putting in all the work.
If it came between me and him,
Would you pick me first?
Cus' you know your love is the worst,
And I'm so broken that I'm about to burst.

CHORUS:

Cus' when I have no place to go,
I'll find peace inside your arms,
And let that be my home,
Cus' you've been good to me,
Oh so good,
To me.

I Am Back & It's Serious

(This Poem deals with the topic of self-harm. The story in this poem is fictional)

Hey, I'm back, but this time, it's serious,
I am one of the voices in your head in case you were curious.

Times are bad, I know I hear every thought you have,
Honestly, I really hate to see somebody like you so sad.

You've tried every way out trust me, I watched it,
For a moment I silenced myself because together we lost it.

But I decided to come back because I know they left,
I know you have the feeling of trusting nobody but yourself.

Yeah, you're a pure kid and your heart is big and open,
In this ocean of tears your love just sunk in.

It's hard to fight all the thoughts of constant suicide,
Think about how it would affect those around you
if you had died.

Would they be cheerful or would they grieve?
Life gets hard but ending it doesn't reach the goals you wish to
achieve.

This one got deeper than all of them expected,
I'm a voice inside this young lady's head
silently keeping her protected.

One thing to know is that she's been left a lot
so she doesn't know attachment,
She lives in fear of loving someone because of the abandonment.

Although nobody can vouch this kid has plenty to give,
Through her words she spreads love
and knowledge to the other kids.

You ask, why do for others what you can't do for yourself?
The easiest answer is she saves others from dark places,
Without a thought of protecting herself.

Fly

The two of us rise above the ground,
From grassy hills and the world around.
From a familiar place we leave,
To a new air we now breathe.

We ascend into the azure sky,
Wandering unimaginably high.
Until mountains are reduced to rocks,
And rooftops to birds of flock.

My dragon glides beneath me,
Her wings beating steadily.
She fears neither danger nor height,
A natural part of flight.

The wind biting wildly at my hands,
Gravity begging my return to land.
I wish my feet could feel soil once more,
I wish things could go back to the way they were before.

As I hold on tighter to my dragon,
A creature loyal and full of passion.
She is confident and strong up in the air,
Can I ever be as brave and without care?

What if I never made it back down,
To my home on solid ground.
What if I was never meant to be up here?
Among the clouds, in this humongous sky so clear?

But if I give in,
The fire of doubt and sorrow will surely win,
And take control of me,
The smoke so strong that I can no longer see.

Surely I cannot fall into that wildfire.
So on my dragon's back will I climb higher,
And stand proudly upon her shoulders,
Each second my courage growing bolder.

I was born to feel the thrill of fear,
The sense of danger ever near.
For what is life without adventure?
Peril and plight I gladly enter.

No longer do I cower at the height,
But I marvel at the clouds, perfectly white.
And the sun shining above them, it lays,
A compass of the day.

Still flawlessly we soar,
Until time doesn't matter anymore.
And the sun begins to fade behind the mountains,
Turning the sky into a golden fountain.

Night falls all a sudden on the world,
The sky an ocean with each star a pearl.
I gaze at the earth below, curious it lies,
And I marvel at its beauty as we fly.

There is No Wisdom in My Mouth

Wisdom! why did you have to hurt me so?
I let you hurt my head for far too long.
Explain to me, oh wisdom, must you grow?
No room, a crooked tooth cannot belong.
Hurts to leave you, but it hurt to keep you.
My heart aches! I could not eat, nor could I drink.
Just soup, and mush, I long once more to chew.
These holes; they gape, my gums left raw and pink.
The pain! The pain! Though revenge will be sweet.
I'll drill, I'll drill, I'll drill two holes in thee.
Goodbye, dumb wisdom, accept your defeat.
Wisdom! My wisdom, earrings you will be.
My wisdom, dear wisdom, by my cheek you will stay.
A demon on a leash, my turn to betray.

Untitled

Sunlight glides through the bushes,
I giggle, I chase.
My mug is full of berries squished,
Childish fingers tinted red.

Grey, silver, tan stone buildings,
A center empty and full.
My family laughs, green and velvet,
Gold has filled the shop.

The ocean is cloudy, or,
Maybe it's just my memory's fixture.
I can't go into the water alone, I'm too small,
The black sea washes the dark sand off my hands.

Green tall grass fills fields,
The sky is a sickening shade of blue.
Someone is carrying me,
I wear pink, a wonderful color.

Despair and Expectations...

I feel myself slowly begin to drown
into the depths of my own mind.
Choking on the thoughts and words,
that I feel being shoved down my own throat.
My eyes well up with tears on a daily basis,
as my brain grows empty.
As my thoughts become unintelligible,
I choke back my sobs.
I feel the walls slowly caving in on me.
Their eyes peering at me constantly.
I feel as if I'm silently being judged by the world around me,
the people who surround me.
The ones I love and hold dear.

Why...
why why why why...
Why me...

Why am I the fuck up? Why can't I be good, be ok, be happy?
Why must I constantly cause the ones I love pain or sorrow?
I know they don't like me right now.
I'm sure they love me but does that mean I am not allowed to feel,
to feel they don't like me?

Me as a person...
not a daughter or granddaughter, a sister, a sibling, not as family.
But me as a person.
I hear what they say about others, about me.
What do I do when I feel this way?
So out of control I don't know how to feel.

I know I should feel one way
but then I feel another.
Why do they remind me?
Is it to tease or judge?
Is it to remind me how disappointed they are
or to remind me of how much I really am
a failure?
How I feel like a failure.
I try to mask it but I can never get it right
but if I don't mask it I only tend to cry.
NO, I say no
I do not want pity
I do not want YOUR pity.
It's not why the tears stream down my face,
it's not why I yell in despair.
Why I hold my head tightly praying thoughts will disappear.

I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry...

I'm sorry, I know I mess up
I know my head is wrong, my mind, my thoughts are off...
Somethings not right,
I'm not right
I ponder if I'll ever be alright
if I ever was alright to begin with.
My wayward thoughts seem to move downward
upon my very being.
Why do they continue to talk badly of me,
what part of me is so wrong?

Why why why...

No matter how many times I ask.
It's relentless, they call my name over and over.
Why won't they tell me?

I can change, I can change, I can change...

I can be who they want me to be,

I can change who I believe I am,
I can change how I feel...
I can change so they don't hate me.

I can change, I can change, I can change...

But I'm in pain
it hurts

my subconscious is telling me it hurts.
That it's been hurting for longer than I can recall,
and that I've been in pain.

Why? I don't know,
they say I should know but I don't,
my mind floods with thoughts.
But all at the same time it also doesn't.
It's empty, there's thoughts but only words.
What good are words when there's no emotion behind them...

What good are words when there is no meaning...
Without meaning there is nothing but an empty promise,
empty thoughts why do I feel empty?

Empty empty empty... Am I empty?

Or are there things about me that are simply just meaningless?

It's confusing, am I meaningless?

Is my life meaningless?

As I think these things

I hear the whispers or hear the words...

Words with meanings, with distaste what did I do wrong?

Is it me ?

Is it my past or is it simply my future that I am unaware of?

I'm confused and hurt, simply lost.

I feel alone even when in company.

I feel estranged,

estranged from people from family,

from myself,

simply alone.

When I feel alone,

I don't even feel that I am alone with myself.

I don't feel as a person,
maybe simply just being a life force
with not much thoughts or feelings.
They call me names
it hurts,
the names they use...

Like stupid, am I?
Another thing I'm not sure is true.
Selfish, am I?
They say it so it must be true.
And the names I call myself...

Estranged, weird, a nobody...

It hurts but it must be true,
who am I what am I?
I ask over and over again daily.
I don't know who I am, I don't know how to change.
I want to be better,
I want to be okay,
I want them to not hate me.
But most of all I want to be happy.
to smile and mean it
to laugh and feel it.
I don't know who I am...
but if by all the things I hear or they say,
the names I'm called...
I don't think I like who I am,
or the person whom I may have become.
As I sigh, I look in the mirror.
Empty...

That's how I feel, am I pretty? That's nice I suppose...
But looks aren't everything because...
how can I be happy about being pretty?
When I feel so broken about being me...

Inspiration

I am heavily inspired,
By mostly everything.
It seems it all needs to be admired.
I often hear singing,

I hear songs of birds,
Whistles of instruments. . .
And I write them in my words.
There are many arguments.

However, between me and my inspiring's.
Whether I should credit it all.
Whether I should blame the springs,
or let myself fall.

Fall into these people,
Places, items, things. . .
If I just become the prequel,
If I am the same poet who sings.

If I am inspired,
Am I unoriginal?
Is my voice required,
Or has it only become an additional?

Voice to the concepts I adore.
The colors and tunes I love,
If I fancy them, do I grow to be a bore?
Or will I float above?

And will the world- I am so sensitive to-
Agree I'm only a poet.
A poet who,
Is inspired by it,

By it all,
By "mostly everything."

Jewel and the Miner

Every book is a jewel,
Not on its physical self,
But within.

Within its white, finished pages,
It holds memories, scent and,
Emotions.

More than texture and color of its skin,
it is unique for every genre.
Made from diamond is love,
Made from emerald is fate.
The list is long and enduring.

And it is a miner that does the art.
Miner for all these beautiful stones buried underground.

Sits on its “chair” with a shovel,
And digs each jewel and perfects it to the core.

And digs for hours,
Day and night, winter and summer, fall and spring.
Not for fame.

Nor for greenbacks.
Not only for himself.

But for his jewel collector-with tons of jewel in their room-
eager to flip each page.

Only for those with a hope that there is no end.
No end to the crystals packed inside.

Those so eager to adore that piece of beauty
brought from the store,

That the being holds it in its very hand, bag or purse,
But mainly its mind, heart and soul.

Hoping for every new second to take it out,

A que, a bus, or even at hard times,
And feel the same beauty as seen at first sight on the shelf.

Small pieces of jewel have meaning.
Hope to be analyzed by students and pupils for months,
Hoping to be read by the stupid
and gain some degree of knowledge to compare.
Hoping to be sent a message.
But none of this can happen without a miner,
Who holds a shovel and digs?
And digs just for a jewel.

The Figure

My mirror's fogged,
I can't see a thing.
Not myself,
Not my room,
Not the figure,
Looming over me.

I wipe the glass,
With my hand,
But the fog reappears,
Just as quickly as it left.
The figure moves closer.

I swipe my hand again at the mirror,
And that's when I see it,
Directly over me.
The darkness,
Waiting for the glass to fog up.

With fearful eyes,
I turn to face the creature.
The darkness,
The figure,
The thing.

I hate how it looks like me.

Untitled

Water flows through my mind;
It never stops.
I want to flow down this river,
Drifting upstream.
I want this sensation to last,
As nothing seems normal here.
It's colorful and bubbly!
All the sounds set free.
I like this weird.
I like this calm.

Waterfalls flow upwards,
Lifting me higher.
Candles burn dark,
As the lacking light welcomes me kindly.
The animals talk endlessly,
Their curiosity bringing out the best in me.

Then the dams stop the flow;
They ruin the tide.

The calm is being used.
Energy is taken, all running through this dam.
I tried to break them down, but I'm taken into the dark.
The endless labyrinth inside. I follow the flow.
I can't escape, I know I can escape.
But the calm isn't here.

I never could swim out of the labyrinth.
The more I tried, the more lost I got.

The dream of my mind I tried to keep.

Remember the rising waterfalls.
Remember the dark-burning candles.
Remember the curiously talking animals.
Remember the calm.
All that isn't here.
The calm isn't here.

The soft bends on my river replaced by sharp turns.
The sandy banks now metal with nowhere to stand.
The open purple sky replaced by a burning darkness,
not lit by the candles.

It could never be lit by the candles.
The candles aren't here,
As the calm isn't here.

The calm was never here.
It wasn't used, it's hidden.
It's lost in the dark,
Not lit by candles.
It's sinking in the water,
Never rising in the waterfalls.
It's stuck on mute,
No sound can undo it.
The dam tries to shape it.
Shape it to something it could never be,
But alas, the calm isn't here.

It's brand new.
Reformed, shaped.
New hope.
New form.
A changed calm.

So straighten the rivers.
Mimic the calm.
It is here.

So silence the animals.
Mimic the calm.
It is here.

Snuff the candles out then.
All the light will shine in.
It can't welcome me.
It's not welcoming.
I'll find myself in Zen.

It becomes a great delight.
All without being my right.
I'll make it my balm.
I'll mimic the calm.
The calm will make it alright.

I flow downstream, blocking out light.
Can't see where I'm going; it's night.
I'm touching the floor.
Can't stand any more.
The calm isn't here, it can't fight.

Untitled

Why must you leave at the dead of night,
right as my eyes are about to close?

I just want you to stay and hold me tight forever in your arms.

Oh you could talk about the moonlight and still have my full
attention to your heart, but would you ever notice me if I never
said anything?

These are all just daydreams and thoughts that I have of you.

You don't really know me, I sit in the back of the room.

But as I think of you, and delight in all your beauty,
I see you have your arms wrapped around her like I wish you had
them wrapped around me.

But I could never be the kind of girl to disturb what you have,
And I could never be the girl to have the courage to say I love you
to the person I so calmly dream of.

And though you may be with her, I will forever have your thought
and fantasy in the back of my mind like a glass of white wine.

I can dream of your touch and your dictionary lush,
and the look you'd give me if I were to kiss you so softly.

The forever thought that you could be mine might just be enough
to satisfy me, and even if it weren't it would have to do, because he
likes her and he doesn't like me, but pain and simple truth is the
essence of reality.

Preparing for College

Take Algebra 1 in middle school,
Be 1 credit ahead.

Choose the right classes,
And fit every activity into a tight schedule,
Feel the weight of the world.

Participate in extracurricular activities,
They are important.

Wake up early,
The outside is pitch black,
School ends at 2,
The bell makes a loud ring.
Complete extracurriculars at 8,
Complete homework at 10,
Outside is pitch black again.
Can only fit in 6 hours of sleep.

Has to make a decision,
What school to go to?
What major do you choose?
No room to change your mind.

School is fun yet stressful.
Attend field trips and talk to friends,
Everyone is smiling.
Complete homework and study for quizzes,
Everyone must be quiet.

Train and study for large exams,
They determine Everything.
The sound of papers shuffling around,
And pencils scratching in answers.
Scores must be high,
But tests only tell part of the story.

Tour different schools,
They are all so amazing.
The sweet smell of old books,
And endless grass fields.
What if your decision changes?

Everything must be prepared,
But nothing is set in stone until accepted.
The college being prepared for is Unknown.



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Yohana Abinate
Middle School

Untitled

"Are you okay? " I asked my friend Heather.

You see she had been going through a really hard time. Starting from racism to separation.

We have been together since we were both four. We both grew up in the adoption center waiting for parents to pick us up.

One day I realized Heather was feeling down. She did not eat and wore the most covering sweater possible. I knew something was wrong. I did not know what to do so I just let the day pass by.

At about 12:30 at night I heard, " Please, please." I went to do see what was happening so I rushed quietly to the private room. There I saw the manager of the adoption center hitting Heather. Not knowing what to do I dialed 911. I told them everything and they came just in time.

"Why did you hit this young lady?" The kind officer asked.

"She is a threat!" The manager said.

"How?" The officer asked.

"She is black!" manager answered.

The officer took him and found an awesome home for Heather. I was really sad she was leaving but hoped the best for her.

"Are you okay?" I asked Heather.

"I am fine."

She left and lived a great life!

The end!



Brooklyn Ceccarelli
Middle School

Untitled

I never meant for this to be a real big deal. I thought that if I added some lip gloss and maybe a pair of skinny jeans, I could be desirable or just be a normal teenage girl but that wasn't me. I was not someone you chose to hang out with. I was the girl you cheated off of in math and science, the one you asked for help from in history or the one who you asked for homework answers in English, so I was INVISIBLE unless you needed help.

SO, why did I help you? Why did I give you all the answers, all of the written responses? Why did I help you out when all you did was laugh at me and make fun of me? Well, it was simple. I thought that all of the answers would make you like me. I thought all of the tests and homework I let you cheat on would somehow make us fine... But it only made me hate myself for trying.

Dear diary, 5/14/19

That is what I need to tell people - That I, Saturn Ray Wright, needs to tell some of these people; I need to spill all of my hearts fire and content towards them and maybe things will change, or I will be another girl who thinks that smarts and a positive attitude will fix her decades of issues that just keep trying to fix themselves but never will; I have a friend though, just one but her name is Ahava, it means, love and it's a slap in the face every time I hear someone yell her name in the hallway because unlike me she could be popular she could be fun and thrive by going to parties or playing softball because she is an extrovert she loves outside, she loves to try new things but for me? I stay in a small dark corner of my comfort zone and I write to you every day, 7 days a week, every week for 3 years. Give or take the days that I go out to eat or binge watch something on Netflix or Hulu. So, school starts

soon and I need to go to the mall and get new clothes so I can breathe.

*See you soon,
Sat*

Deary, 5/20/19

Thought I would try something different and well I hate it. I got new clothes and new makeup and new shoes, but I still feel the same. I feel old, tired, and hated but anyway I need to keep a positive attitude, right? Well let's hope so... I need to try something new. I want to stand out but blend in but not be invisible. This is freshman year, I need to be noticed. I went to the mall last night and Ahava invited her BF and his friend so they went to the food court and I tried not to panic because this is the guy I like, he knows me but doesn't know me. I want to tell him and get to know him, How could I tell him? How could I remember to breathe with him around me, sitting across from me. Well I did be, I might just be a little dramatic maybe! I Got his number the other day but our messages have been dry. I wish there was a way I could tell him... but why would I have to do that If my friend already did. I want this to work but he wants to get to know me and if he thought I was crazy before then oh, boy I hope he is prepared for what is about to happen. But signing off.

*Awkward hug,
Sat*

Bud, 5/21/19

I am trying a new look, large hoodies and skinny jeans with black slip-on Vans. Maybe this will work because this is a comfy fit. I sound like a tween (hahaha)! I am going to get humiliated. What color lip gloss though? Should it be bright or matte? I think I will go with

matte because it's not as noticeable, right? He texted me yesterday and this morning, mostly it was about Hey and how are you, and are you excited for school. and I was dry. I gave him one to three-word responses because what do I say, 'Hey it is nice to meet you. Are you ready to get to know each other and be good friends?' No! That's not what a normal person says but what do I know about being normal. Anyway, we are finally home and I can't wait for the dryer to be done so I can get my hoodies for tomorrow, the first day of school! That's the dryer. I am taking a nap in the meantime,

*Sayonara
Sat*

Sup,

I made a poem. It's not good but I thought it fit, you know for me; I was sad again and I thought this made sense so here

*My breath is like a dagger jagged and sharp
I fear I cannot stop it from popping my heart,
As I continue this journey I might have to stop
My breath has slowed down and now I must restart*

This poem was supposed to help but now I fear it won't. I am tired and sad, with no one who knows. I can't keep up my act. I am not perfect but try to be. It is the only way to be in society. It sounds like me but if I showed anyone this poem, they would think I was crazy, and I wanted to be the next person who wrote a series, like dork diaries, and I want everyone to find my diary, but I don't I want to have someone to talk to. Well anyway, I need to get ready for school so I will talk to you tonight after the "Big day"

*See you later,
Saturn Ray*

Untitled

My name is Quentin, and my life is kind of crazy. It was the year of 1981, and it all started when I found the stone. I was 12 years old, and it was an exciting Saturday morning. This would be the day the new arcade opens in town. When I woke up, I was greeted with the smell of sizzling bacon. I changed and I dashed down the stairs to find my baby sister dumping milk on my baby brother. Those two really are a mess. Anyways, I grabbed a piece of bacon and almost tripped over a toy train on my way to the door. I didn't bother to brush my teeth. I sprinted outside, where my friend Jason was waiting for me on his bike. We had planned to go to the grand opening of the arcade a week earlier. I got my bike out and we rode to the arcade together. The street was jammed with people waiting for the grand opening. We dropped our bikes on the other side of the road and we made our way through the ocean of people and got to the door. There were employees trying to keep people back. We waited a few minutes, and the manager of the arcade came out.

“I am happy to open this arcade!” He yelled. Then, the arcade doors opened. Everyone was trying to get in. The arcade had lots of games, but I hadn't seen most of them before. There were lots of people in line to play a new game called Pac-Man, but the one I wanted to play most was called Frogger. Jason and I both had a huge bag of coins for the arcade games. We were there for an hour and almost finished all the games. Then, Jason noticed something strange. There was a door at the back. It was slightly ajar, and we could see a rainbow light inside.

“There must be more games!” Jason exclaimed. We slowly walked in. It turns out it was just a dark storage room with a flashing rainbow light. Jason went out back to the arcade, but I saw a hidden doorknob behind a few boxes. I tried to call Jason back, but it was no use over the other voices. So, I decided to turn

the doorknob. Suddenly, the sound of the arcade faded away, and I started to get dizzy. The room was dark and I couldn't see a thing. There was a quiet whirring sound and there was a flash of blinding light. Suddenly, I didn't know where I was anymore. It was completely quiet and it looked like I was in a cave. Then I looked up and saw a glowing blue light. It floated there, and it was out of reach. I started to panic, because I knew Jason would be looking for me at the arcade. I looked at the blue light again, and it started to lower. It turns out, it was actually a glowing stone. I grabbed it, and I felt a surge of electricity run through me. Then, the stone disappeared and I was left in the dark. After that, there was another flash of light and I was back in the storage room. I stood there for a moment, unsure of what had happened. I then walked out to the arcade and saw Jason.

“Where were you?” he asked me.

“I... don't really know.” I answered. I explained to him what I saw and he thought I was joking. I told him I wasn't in the mood to play games anymore and he said he wanted to play more games, so I left the arcade. I pushed through the line of people waiting to go into the arcade and got my bike. I rode back home, thinking about what had happened. When I walked through the door, my mom asked me how it went. I told her it went well, and I told her I wanted to go to sleep. I walked up to my room, and I couldn't believe my eyes. There was a giant Pac-Man sitting on my bed.

“Howdy!” The yellow dot exclaimed.

“How is this possible?!” I asked.

“Well, you summoned me here.” Pac Man told me. “I don't understand. How are you on my bed and how did I summon you?” I asked him curiously. “Well, you have the power to summon video game characters,” he told me. It all made sense. The blue stone that I touched probably gave me powers to summon video game characters. “Well, how do I summon characters and how do I get rid of you guys?” I questioned Pac-Man.

“You just think about the character you want to summon and to get rid of us you just think about that too.” I thought it was a dream, but it wasn't. I want to get rid of Pac-Man and I want

Frogger here, I thought. Then, Pac-Man disappeared and Frogger showed up on my bed.

“Where am I?” Frogger asked me.

“Well, I summoned you here.” I explained.

“Well, can you get me back to my game? Frogger isn’t fun without me!” He said.

“Yeah, sure.” I replied. Then, he disappeared. This was crazy. I couldn’t wait to show Jason.

I walked down the stairs and turned on the local news.

“This is breaking news, an invasion of space invaders from the popular arcade game has taken over the city.” The news reporter said. I couldn’t believe it. I couldn’t help but wonder if this was my fault. I then headed back to the arcade to find Jason. When I got there, the arcade was empty. I heard shooting sounds and I looked up to see the sky thick with an army of space invaders. I wanted to call the police, but I remembered I could summon video game characters. I summoned Donkey Kong, who started throwing cars at the space invaders. There were people running down the street in fear. I summoned Pac-Man, who started helping them. The town was turning into a mess. There were cars on fire, and the arcade was heavily damaged. I summoned Frogger who jumped over cars to help people. Then, there were military vehicles that arrived. I could tell they didn’t know what to do. I told them I could help summon video game characters to help. They said I could do whatever I could to help. This went on for an hour, and I was exhausted.

Soon, the space invaders were down and I was known as the “Video game summoner.” There were news reporters all around me and I was on the news. I was glad this was over. The arcade was built again and video game characters helped with the construction too.

Now it’s 2022, and I can still summon video characters. Although arcades aren’t popular anymore, I still like video games. When Covid-19 took over the world, I had to stay home, and to keep me from boredom, I kept on summoning video game characters from the 80’s. Well, that’s basically my story. Now I’m going to go to the grocery store.

WAIT - IS THAT A SPACE INVADER?!?

Home Alone

It came like thunder from a clear sky when my mom told us she needed to go back to Bulgaria, the country where she was born.

One early morning, my dad and I sat down on the couch as my mom told us that she must leave us for a month.

“What!?,” I screamed in surprise. Surely, not an easy choice to be made given the sudden heartbreaking news of her dad’s passing. I could feel her sadness and lack of excitement when making that decision. She then explained all of the reasons why she needs to go. I was shocked, confused, concerned, and worried. I lost my grandpa, my mom will be thousands of miles away for a while, and I will be left alone all day long while dad is at work. No kid would like to be in my shoes. On top of that, all this is happening during my favorite summer vacation. It’s the time when you have fun, play a lot, and see your friends or travel to new places. I didn’t want her to go but her answer was: “I really must go.” She needed to get some things arranged and deal with important matters.

Later, as she packs her bags for her trip abroad, she said, “Sunshine, I will be leaving this Tuesday. I don’t want you to worry about anything. You are not a little girl anymore; you will be fine with dad. I will call you often. Please, don’t forget what we talked about.”

“But mom, why do you have to go? I want you to stay with me. Please...,” I would go on and on for the next couple of days because I didn’t want her to leave me home alone.

The night before her departure, I lay on the bed as I told her I was worried that she could get sick or the plane might crash. She then reassured me, “Honey, you don’t have to worry, everything will be fine.”

On the day of my mom’s departure, with big tears in my eyes and sadness in my heart, I started to cry. I already started to miss

her. I tried to act like a grown-up that can handle everything, but in reality, I'm only eleven years old and I wasn't sure what I would do without my mom for that long time. After she left, I was at home by myself day after day. I was frustrated and lonely. I didn't know how to spend my time home alone, so I just sat there, grabbed my computer, and started watching YouTube. After a couple of hours, my dad came back home and I had to stop. One thing was sure, I didn't want to get in trouble for watching too long. This would go on for a whole month and I found it hard. I had to be more independent because I was home alone for most of the day. After all, when I was with mom, we would do things together, and I usually would rely on her rather than myself.

It was the day when my mom was returning. I was excited for her to be back, so it came to my mind to do something really special. I made her some gifts and even baked brownies before we left for the airport. My dad and I got somehow emotional, but also ready for the big day. As I tied my hair in a ponytail, I sat down in the front seat of the car. It was time to go to the airport and during the drive, I began thinking. "I've changed, haven't I? Being home alone taught me lots of things: being independent, responsible, reliable, and mature are some of them." I knew mom was going to be proud of me.

When we parked at the airport, mom was already waiting for us. She had a wide smile on her face as she entered the car. On the ride home, we held hands and talked about the trip, the places she went, the people she met, and the feelings she had. It felt so good to have her back! When we got home, I showed her all the gifts I made. She was touched and surprised because it was the first time I baked her some yummy brownies, and added signs "Welcome Back, Mom!" Then I yelled in excitement, "Welcome Back!"

"Wow, I didn't expect this from you!" my mom said thrillingly. She was happy to be back and hugged me so tight that I could barely breathe. I told her how responsible I was and how I did tons of chores without anyone reminding me. It was very nice having her back home, and it was also a big relief. When it was time for bed, we easily fell asleep. In the end, everything worked out the way we planned it to.

In conclusion, staying at home alone for over a month made me realize how responsible and trustworthy I could be. Most importantly, I proved to myself that I can be dependable. Being alone is not that big of a deal. I did things that I wouldn't even imagine I'll be able to do and felt proud of myself. This short time made me change a lot and will surely be remembered.



Lily Cho
Middle School



The Whistler

Chapter 1.

The young girl trudged through the dark woods, the cold wind blowing across the brazen ground. The blood moon had risen, fully covering the forest with its dim crimson light. The damp smell of moss and smoke came from deep within the core of the grove. The strange whistle was here yet again, replying back to hers. This back-and-forth conversation of a series of melodies had been going on for quite some time now, and it carried a sense of comfort along with it.

The dead and shriveled leaves under her boots crunched as she slowly treads back along the trail she came from. She had come outside to go for a walk, and she had gotten lost in the forest, only able to watch the sun set as nighttime slowly covered the skies. The whole world was now a cold, shivering, ink black canvas. The bright flickering stars dotting the night sky seemed to fly away like the wind. As they faded away, she had begun to walk deeper into the woods, trying to find the path she had followed, but with no success, she had wandered around the forest, whistling an old melody that was stuck in her head until something replied back. At first, it sounded human-like, mimicking the exact pitch of her voice so similar that it sent shivers down her back, surprising her on just how alike it sounded to her own. However, if you listened closely to it, you could hear the small differences on how the whistle that replied back was more light and silvery. It had an air-like, wafting ethereal tune to it, almost sounding inhuman. The melodious replies would whisper against the trees of the forest and echo throughout the night. Mellow and hollow, the sound was a clear shrill from beyond. It echoed into the night, too much to be recognized from where it originated.

After whistling back and forth to the imitation while trudging

through the dark night, she had found a flickering light of a flame from the distance. Walking closer upon the sight, it revealed itself as an old lamp. Soon, she found herself back in her village, wondering what time it was. The small town was completely empty except for a few scuttering creatures here and there. All the lights were shut off except for a few lamp posts that lit up the dark streets. Not a single sound except the rustling of the leaves could be heard, as everyone was sound asleep. She looked back into the distance of the forest, with questions pondering in her head. She wondered what the whistle came from, and how she had even gotten lost and strayed from her original path.

Just then, a sudden piercing cry could be heard from her house. The scream was sharp and desperate, loud enough to wake up the village. It was soon then cut off, the sound of the shriek echoing through her ears. The small town was dead silent, until the sounds of door creaks and the pattering of feet could be heard as the villagers slowly climbed out of their huts, trying to figure out what was going on so early on the break of dawn. The girl ran towards her house, full of curiosity, despite the angry hushed whispers of the people telling her not to. She quickly opened the door of her small house, to find her dear mother's dead, now cold and limp body, drained of blood and now pale white, hanging from a rope tied to one of the house's pillars. Her poor elder sister was lying on the ground, eyes wide open and overflowing with tears from the shock, jaw dropped, and quite pale. That scene of lamentation was quite horrid, really. The only sounds the girl could hear were her elder sister's muffled cries as she covered her own mouth, the sound of the drops of her heavy tears slowly falling onto the creaking wooden floorboards. The young girl stared at her own mother's hanging body, not out of shock, but out of curiosity on what had happened. The vision was unsightly. Her mother's body was pale white, her nightgown still on. It seemed mostly likely as if it was a suicide, as there was no evidence of restraint or harm done on any part of her body. Her mother was a beautiful woman, with glimmering olive skin, forest green eyes, and had rich dark midnight colored hair flowing down to her hips. But there she was, an unruly sight to see, truly. Her hair was a tangled mess, drooping over her face, skin so white that the young

girl was sure she was dead by now. Her eyes were still open, a hazy gray had covered her usual dark green, making it a putrid dark lime.

The girl was disgusted. She turned her back to her elder sister and her now dead mother and slowly trudged out of the old house. And as she stepped out of the suffocating small building, all of the villagers looked at her in curiosity and worry. Still pondering with questions and wondering what had happened inside. She kept walking, not knowing where she was going but wanting to get out of there as soon as possible. The scuttering sounds of the footsteps of people behind her walking into the house and screaming out of shock was now distant, and in the far hills beyond her, she could see the bright pale tint of orange of the sun, slowly peeking out from behind the mountains.



Kaydence Cohn
Middle School



Is Anything Real?

A blinding yellow light shone in my eyes as I sat up slowly, taking in the scene around me. Lofty trees covered in long vines hovered over and the leaves almost looked fluffy. The yellow light I'd woken up to also shone through the many leaves, casting green spots of light on the ground. My hands brushed against the floor I was sitting on. The texture shocked me, for it was much softer than I'd imagined. I couldn't quite tell what it was, but it must have been a bed of moss on the ground.

Carefully, I stood up (which took some effort). Everything around me seemed much taller than normal, even the mushrooms scattered around. They came up to my hips. Looking down, I noticed my clothes were a simple pair of comfortable brown leather pants and a white blouse. Surprisingly, neither of them were dirty at all. There were no shoes on my feet. I pondered how I'd gotten there in the first place, but I couldn't quite remember. Taking in a breath, I smelled a wonderful scent. It reminded me of a fresh out of the oven apple pie. Just like home. Without realizing it, my feet were carrying me across the way, and I was following the amazing aroma. All of a sudden, an arrow shot past me and barely nicked my ear. I grasped the left side of my head and spun around to see who'd shot at me. No one was there.

"Oi! You there!" Turning around again I spotted a boy, who seemed to be around my age, atop a beautiful pinto mare wearing very similar attire to me. Though he had a belt with a sword in it, as well as a bow and some arrows strapped to his back.

"Are you the one who just shot at me?" I asked calmly.

"Well, who else is around that has a bow and arrow?" The boy raised an eyebrow.

What a smart mouth, I thought while rolling my eyes. And how annoying. Despite this, I did my best to be kind.

He walked his horse in circles around me for a good while, but

then abruptly stopped doing so. I took note of how vivid his appearance was. The boy's hair reached his chin and was a darling golden color with magnificent waves in it. His eyes were the color of dying embers in a fire with green specks, and his features were sharp. He was tall and lean, with limbs that were rather lengthy.

"What is your name, boy?" I questioned. He looked at me strangely before answering.

"Christopher. Christopher Meyers."

Smiling politely, I reached my hand out. "Pleased to meet you, Christopher. My name is Everild, but you may call me Rye if you wish. That is what some of my friends back home call me."

"Euhh..." Christopher looked down at my hand which was covered in blood. "I would shake your hand, but it seems you need it cleaned..."

My face flushed from embarrassment as I lowered my hand. "My deepest apologies, I will find a stream to rinse off soon." I started off in the opposite direction and quickly turned around to wave goodbye. I had no intention of seeing Christopher again, though I had a peculiar feeling I would. After walking for what seemed maybe about an hour, I heard galloping hooves.

"Wait! Everild! I must speak with you!" Christopher's voice called out in a tone that sounded almost musical. Almost unreal. My feet had just met the water so I waded in up to my hips before calling back. I wasn't able to tell if it was cool or not.

"Yes, I am here!" I used my hands to scrub the dried blood off my ear, hands, neck, and arms. Behind me there was a loud thump as he dropped his weapons on the ground and hesitantly joined me in the stream.

"I wanted to apologize for earlier." Christopher sighed heavily. "While I was extremely scared, I shouldn't have just shot at you like that."

Grinning, I responded, "It's quite alright. This is nothing, I've gotten plenty worse." I paused. "Why were you scared? I was merely walking."

He fiddled with his fingers. "Exactly. You were walking in a forest that's extremely dangerous. No one ever goes here. As enticing and wonderful as it seems, it's filled with murderous things." I was starting to get genuinely concerned now.

“Remember that apple pie smell? That was a Wandering Willa. Those creatures give off a scent and adapt it to each person to lure them into its trap.”

I thought about that for a moment. Nothing there seemed real now that I was thinking about it. The wind picked up and blew my black hair into my eyes. Strange enough, the movement of my hair was slower than what would seem normal. I tilted my head down and looked at my fingers. I waved them in front of my face. The motions were blurred together.

“Christopher?” My face contorted in confusion.

“Yes, Everild?” He looked slightly confused. My eyes caught onto his face. He was too perfect. Everything. The shape of his eyes, his hair, his nose, his mouth... This didn't seem real. Even the path of where this went and was going. None of this made sense. “Are you alright?” I saw Christopher put a hand on my shoulder, but couldn't feel it.

“Are we... are you... am I dreaming?”

Christopher let out a hearty laugh that faded in and out abnormally. “That's ridiculous! Why would you think such a thing?”

“Well, it's just that - ” I wasn't able to say anything more, for I was pulled under water. Shocked, I accidentally took a breath and water filled my lungs. It stung. It stung so harshly that I for sure thought this was the end. Christopher wasn't there, just the deep blue of the stream and the occasional fish fluttering by. I wasn't able to tell what was holding me down, or what was even happening.

Gradually, my vision faded to black. All of a sudden, I awoke drenched in sweat, back in the moss bed I'd originally started from. Christopher was there by my side. He was so... different. Nothing was the same. Everything was so much more dull. The next few minutes I sat there in shock. Christopher tried asking me if I was alright and what happened.

Still terribly frightened, the most I could choke out was, “Is anything real?”

Untitled

1-17-1964

Dear Ms. Valentine,

There's a new boy in town. He's about my age. I haven't dared speak with him yet. He came down to where Trevor, Rose, and I played by the river. Trevor and Rose took a liking to him, but I was hesitant to greet him. Rose said my face looked like a tomato and laughed at me, which I thought was quite rude. Regardless, the boy was rather kind. I spent the next few days watching him laugh and play by the river with us. Honestly, he wasn't too awful to look at. I wanted to talk to him, but if I tried, it was like my tongue refused to work.

Mama says I have a crush, but that's not possible. Boys had cooties, so there was no way I was going to like one. Then again, I have never liked anyone before. Trevor was hardly crushing material, at least for me. Anyway, if I were going to choose any boy to risk catching cooties for, it would be this one for sure. I thought that I'd seen everything I needed to know about boys my age. They're usually so gross and dangerous. Seriously, Trevor tried to make Rose and I cross the river on a branch that was barely larger than my arm. The audacity!

This boy was very different, though. He was what Mama called, chivalrous, and she muttered to herself that such a trait was endangered. This boy would offer to help me across the stones in the shallow part of the river to cross to the other bed, while he stood in the water. He would compliment my hair or my new dress. I would compliment him as well if I could bring myself to do so. His eyes were this gorgeous shade of blue, and his hair framed his face perfectly. He never seemed to mind ruining this illusion of perfection, so long as it meant my dress stayed dry or my smile stayed giddily plastered across my face. I appreciated his

actions very much, and I would love to return the favor someday.

Sincerely,
Sweetheart Valentine

* * * * *

1-24-1964

Dear Ms. Valentine,

I learned his name this week. I learned his name. His elder sister came to fetch him while we were playing one day. She called him Ryder. Knowing his name only makes me love everything about him more. Ryder was so fitting, at least to me. The next day, I greeted him excitedly. He and I smiled in unison, but I'm sure it was for different reasons. I was smiling because I had simply said his name. I'm not even sure if I have the right to say the name of such a perfect boy. Mama thinks I'm being dramatic, but she hasn't met him yet. I'm sure she'd say something different once she does meet him.

Yesterday, he joined in on a game Rose, Trevor, and I often play. The game usually has Trevor playing a knight who has to rescue Rose and me, the princesses, from the raging river dragon. Rose and I are hardly ever rescued before dusk, but this time was different. Rose couldn't play today because her mother wanted her to help with chores. Since it was just the boys and me, we decided that Trevor would play an evil wizard that Ryder had to rescue me from to make it more fun. I couldn't help but smile, knowing that Trevor could've easily chosen the knight, but conveniently, Ryder would be playing my hero.

We played that game all day, and Ryder creatively made a pair of swords for Trevor and him to battle with. Eventually, and to my surprise, Ryder picked me up bridal style and started running back to town with me. Trevor bolted after us, furious, but I paid no mind to the game after that. All I could do was stare at him in adoration. We reached my porch first, and I will never forget how he said goodbye to me. He bowed down, saying, "See you in the morning, m 'lady!" I swear that I'll marry that boy, just like in the

fairy tales.

Sincerely,
Sweetheart Valentine

* * * * *

1-31-1964

Dear Ms. Valentine,

Mama sent me to school again this week. I was glad to see that Ryder, Trevor, and Rose were all in my class. We chose a few seats near each other and had fun introducing ourselves to the rest of our classmates. I was disappointed to see that we also had to share the class with Vanessa. Vanessa lived on what Mama called the "snobbish" side of town, and it seemed like she had everything. At least, she acted like it. I despised her, mostly because she always teased me because of my name. She made me feel like there was something wrong with me, and I feared that if I had to endure another second of it, I might start believing it.

Vanessa came up to us as expected, but she turned to Ryder. She took this sickeningly high-pitched tone with him. I wanted to shove Vanessa away and defend Ryder, but I acknowledged that he seemed to be weakly smiling at her. He noticed my confusion and explained to me that he and Vanessa had been friends for a long time. I wanted to strangle her. There was no way I was going to share this perfect boy with that awful witch. Vanessa snapped at him, asking why he was talking to me. I faltered, sensing her scorn. Ryder explained our friendship, and Vanessa started teasing me again. I was surprised when Ryder, Trevor, and Rose came to my defense. I was not always one to attract friends, so I did not expect a few of my new ones to jump in to support me.

Regardless, they did, and I saw Vanessa look powerless, for once. I had always been the outcast. The weird one, but today I felt like I belonged somewhere, or at least, to someone. Vanessa stormed off, and I let my red, wavy hair cover my face in embarrassment. I let my head fall, but a few moments later, my chin was softly lifted. My eyes met a pair of soft blue ones. Our group of misfits reorganized ourselves and made sure that the rest

of the day was not dampened because of Vanessa. I think I'm going to have a very nice time in school, as long as my new friends are beside me.

Sincerely,
Sweetheart Valentine

* * * * *

2-7-1964

Dear Ms. Valentine,

Once again, Vanessa has interfered with my developing relationship with Ryder. Everything was going well, and I was beginning to develop some confidence in myself. Then, Vanessa sashayed over one day and started to casually talk with Ryder. Ryder wasn't interested. She got uncomfortably close to him. I finally decided enough was enough. I charged up to the girl who had tormented me since we could walk, overalls, boots, freckles and all, and I slapped her straight across the face. With every vile word she had ever said to me, I spat every ounce of venom I could. When I was finished, I could tell she was on the brink of tears.

I straightened my back and left the classroom proudly. Without thinking, I sprinted away. Once I left the schoolhouse, I bolted for the one place I knew that no one would judge me and I could relax. I booked it for the river. It was pouring rain outside, but I never minded it. Of course, I had chosen the one day with gloomy weather to finally release all of my bottled-up emotions. I reached the familiar riverbed easily and sat myself down on the sandy bank. The natural music of the river's current and the cattails blowing in the wind filled my ears. It finally set in that I had done it. I stood up to Vanessa, and I was more than the shy pushover I've been all these years.

Ryder showed up a few minutes later. He was holding an umbrella with a glittering smile on his face. He told me that he was impressed with what I said to Vanessa and that she certainly deserved it. We sat on the riverbank for hours, making jokes and

laughing together. It wasn't until the rain cleared up and we realized it was almost dusk that we started to head home. I felt him nervously offering to hold my hand. My face turned the same color as my hair, and I fumbled to hide it. Eventually, I accepted his offer and took his hand. We walked awkwardly home but silently agreed to accept the unspoken bond that had developed between us.

Sincerely,
Sweetheart Valentine

* * * * *

2-14-1964

Dear Ms. Valentine,

Today is one of my favorite days of the year, simply because it is my namesake. Because of my name, I also became one of the most popular girls in school. Everyone's always asking if I'm related to St. Valentine or if I have some special relationship with the holiday. The truth is that neither rumor is true, but my surname was what inspired my forename. Regardless, I still enjoy the holiday simply because of the celebration. Everyone in the class hands out candies and cards to their friends and classmates, and there is always a Valentine's party to attend. I hardly ever receive cards and candies, but I always have at least a few for everyone in my class.

This year was even more fun because I had a close group of friends to share the day with. I was wearing my silk red dress that I only wear on Valentine's Day and a pair of matching red flats. My signature pink bow was placed perfectly on my freshly styled hair. I put everything into this holiday. Rose and I ran around the classroom giddily, handing out our little gifts, and then time seemed to stop when Ryder finally arrived.

I had designed a very special card for him, unlike any I had ever made. The intricate design I had cut out gorgeously framed the central message of the card. In the message, I nervously shared with him the secret I've kept for so long. I told him that I loved

him and asked if he would be my valentine. We approached each other, and I noticed he was holding a card as well. We eagerly traded without a word, and I read his card. The smile that stretched across my face was wider than the Cheshire Cat's. This whole time, he had liked me as much as I had liked him. I quickly responded to his question without another thought. We answered each other at the same time. "Yes."

I hesitantly shuffled closer to him. Leaning forward, I kissed him on the cheek. My face was once again the same color as my hair, but that didn't matter. I could see Vanessa fuming in a corner. She was holding a handful of fancy, paid-for cards in shock. I didn't care, because all that mattered right now was that Ryder and I were officially valentines.

Sincerely,
Sweetheart Valentine

* * * * *

2-28-1976

Dear Ms. Valentine,

I'm afraid this is the last time I will be writing to you. I apologize for not writing for these twelve wonderful years, but I think that now that I'm turning twenty-four in June, this is a nice point to close this book for good. I suppose it would be good to acknowledge that Ryder and I still share a very strong bond. This past Valentine's Day marked our 12th anniversary since the blooming of our relationship. In July, I officially cannot refer to myself as Ms. Valentine. I will be writing to Ms. Lowe from that point forward. I'll be taking Ryder's surname once we are lawfully wedded since he proposed at the old schoolhouse down the road. Then, our future awaits us.

With a heartfelt farewell,
Sweetheart Valentine

Untitled

She was praised.

She had beautiful dark hazel eyes.

She had luscious brown hair that flew to her knees.

She had the figure of an hourglass.

Yet she thought of only one thing.

“Am I pretty enough?”

“Does he think I'm decent?”

“What if he doesn't like me?”

“I need to try harder...”

No matter how much she was told
she was beautiful and absolutely goddess-like,
she didn't feel the same way about herself.

She felt her lowest when people liked her the most.
She felt the prettiest when no one was looking.

She walked down the halls crying some days,
and people whistled out to her.

She sat in her classes hood-up some days,
and girls rolled their eyes.

She sat at lunch without eating some days,
and people told her to eat to stay beautiful.

She walked home covering herself some days,
and people followed her until they were satisfied.

Just because other people felt that she was alluring
didn't mean she felt that way as well.

Just because the boys drooled at her sight
didn't mean she drooled at theirs, or herself.

Just because they thought some type of way,
didn't mean she thought the same.

And that's when they realized.

Message:

Everyone thinks differently. You must respect each other's thoughts, or simply keep them private. Teenagers go through the most negative body image eras in their teenage lives, which could cause permanent life issues such as low self-esteem. Just because someone is “too” pretty, doesn't mean whatsoever that they are perfect. They should be heard, and everyone deserves a voice.



Ishanvi Goyal
Middle School

Untitled

I stare out of our window one last time, remembering every moment I spent in this house. The first moments, and now the last memories.

“Heather! Come on, we have to leave, and don’t forget C.B.!” My older sister Hannah yelled from the R.V. parked outside.

“Coming” I replied. I went to get C.B. and was about to leave my house - the house- for the last time in my life when I heard a faint door creak. I went towards the creak and saw my younger sister Hayley, sobbing. When she saw me, she immediately wiped her tears.

“What’s wrong Hayley?” I asked.

“I don’t want to leave.” She replied sadly.

“It’s okay Hayley, we’ll.... we’ll...it’s okay Hayley.” I spoke, not knowing what to say to comfort her.

I scoop up Hayley and deposit her in the bottom bunk of the bed in the R.V. Then I climb into the top bunk and stare at our house. A couple of minutes later, mom, dad, and Hannah climb in and Hannah starts the engine.

“Everybody ready?” Dad inquired.

“Yes.” Everybody responded off-key.

I read a book, watched Netflix, and dribbled a basketball. After a while, I got hungry and made two bowls of rice. I handed one to Hayley and sat next to her. She and I slowly ate our rice. When we were done, I put both bowls in the dishwasher and stared out of the window in the dining section. I thought about moving and slowly fell asleep counting stars.

The next day, we arrived at a large mansion. It was beautiful, but not the same. I walked up a fancy pebble path, leading up to a neat flowery garden and front yard. I walked up the front steps to the front door. I took a deep breath and slowly peeked through the door for the first time. Honestly, I was impressed, but I tried my best to hide it. Hayley came screaming happily downstairs.

“I love this house, I love it, I love it, I love it! Mom! Dad! Can I have a big room? Can I, pretty please?”

Well, at least somebody was happy. I dropped the boxes in the living room, next to mom and dad who were sorting and unpacking the boxes.

“So, do you like it here, Heather? Mom asked.

“Sure, it’s nice. But, I still miss home.” I answered.

“Oh sweetie, it’ll be alright.” My mom reassured me. “Also, I have a surprise, once you unpack all your boxes.”

“Alright. Thank you, mom.” I smiled.

I went to the living room and unpacked my boxes. I sighed. I was finally done with my last box. Just then, mom came over, patted my back, and handed me a small box. She winked at me. I opened it, while she supervised me, with a proud grin and her hands folded. Inside the box, I revealed a key, a customized wall sticker that spelled out ‘Heather Hollister’ in gold letters, and a professional-looking mini-map. I was grateful for it. I flipped the key examined the designs, traced my name with my finger, unfolded the map and studied my new room, on the right side next to the office, and Hayley’s room. Of course, Hayley.

I thanked my mom and went upstairs to find my room. It was huge, but the view from my window was different. I also had my balcony, a walk-in closet, and a bathroom. But I wasn't sure if it was an upgrade. I opened my sleeping bag and cleaned my new room. I customized my room like my old room, but it didn’t feel the same. I looked out the window and I thought I spotted my old home. I don’t if that is my old house for sure, but I fell asleep staring at it.

A couple of weeks later, I came down for breakfast, tired and worn, but not sad. I was hugging my pillow while forcing myself downstairs, half asleep.

“Heather! Heather!” Hayley called.

“Yes, Hayley?” I questioned.

“We are, going to school next week.” Hayley sang.

“Yeah, we are. We are? OMG! School?” I said, sounding funny.

That got my attention. School? I was so busy moving I forgot about school. If I had to come up with a synonym for ‘middle school’ it would be ‘juvenile’ or ‘torture.’ As I snapped out of my daydream, I realized Hayley staring at me funny. I smiled at her

and made my way down. After I drank (orange juice,) and ate (a bagel, guacamole, yogurt, and some ripe strawberries dipped in chocolate) and put my plate and glass in the sink, I went to get ready. After my shower, I picked a cute outfit. Then I took C.B. for a short walk.

After the walk, I took C.B. to the backyard. She pounced onto our trampoline. I giggled as she slowly got off the ground and made another attempt. She was busy bouncing on the trampoline, while I watered the garden, and cleaned the pool. Suddenly, she bounced a little too high and landed on the fence separating the neighbor's backyard from ours. I sighed in relief, at least she didn't fall.

I walked over to the fence and was about to scoop up the naughty kitty off the fence when a puppy barked. In slow motion, C.B. fell off the fence. Luckily, she landed perfectly and didn't hurt herself. Instead of barking at C.B., the puppy licked her. C.B. seemed startled and meowed at the puppy. I quickly climbed over the fence and grabbed C.B. I patted the puppy, but just as I was leaving, I heard footsteps. I stopped dead in my tracks like I was caught red-handed.

"Well, well. Our new neighbor. Isn't it right Clawson?" The old man demanded.

"Woof, woof. Bark, bark, bark, woof." The dog replied.

"I'm sorry, sir. My kitty accidentally jumped over your fence, and you know how much an owner loves their pet.... heh, heh.... right?" I stammered.

"I'm allergic to cats and feline, you know, so that kitty of yours... (he pointed at C.B.) ...is a big no, no." The man commanded.

"Heh...heh...heh.... oops.... sorry...." I mumbled.

"Name's Yarditch, see your ugly kitty later." He sneered.

"Now watch it you and get your kitty outta here!"

He must have had bad eyesight, he turned and tripped on his dog. While he recovered, I made a run for my life. Unexpectedly, I ran into something as hard as a rock and fell badly.

"Are you okay? I am so sorry." said an unfamiliar voice. Startled, I opened my eyes and saw a boy. He looked around my age, or maybe a little older. He held out his hand, waiting for me to grab it. I slowly lifted my numb hand, and he pulled me up. We studied each other for a moment, while I forced a smile. The boy

had silky, dark brown hair, tanned skin, coffee-colored eyes, and was about the same height as me. He wore a necklace, a sorry grin, navy basketball shorts, a sky-blue shirt, socks that were right below his knees, and 'NIKE' shoes.

"Hi, I'm Atlas. I live right there." the boy introduced. Atlas - the boy - pointed next door, he was my other neighbor. Although, they had completely different personalities...

"Hi, I'm Heather, I live right there. I'm new here." I said.

"Oh. What school will you go to?" He asked.

"I'm starting middle school at Forest Academy, I'm eleven. How old are you?" I inquired.

"I'm eleven, and I'm going to Forest Academy as well! Go falcons...." He joked.

"Atlas has a girlfriend!" A little girl screamed. Atlas blushed. "I'm sorry, that's my little sister, Avery. She's an embarrassment, mostly."

"Oh, it's fine. I know what it's like." I replied.

"You have a little sister too?" He asked.

"Yes, she's probably worse."

"Hey Atlas, what's your girlfriends' name, I bet mom would love to know." Avery grinned.

"Avery Morrison, don't you dare." Atlas gritted.

"I highly doubt your sister is worse than my sister." Atlas said to me. "Anyway, I need to go, see you tomorrow!"

"Bye!" I replied. Atlas waved and ran after his sister shouting "Lying is bad for your health!"

A couple of days later I started school. I had already bought a cute, but casual outfit, my school supplies, and locker decor. As my parents drove me to school, my belly performed somersaults the entire time. I felt nervous but excited. I stared at my new cell phones' lock screen to check the time. A couple of minutes later, I pulled into the parking lot. I hugged my parents and hurried away before they said - or did - something embarrassing.

"Hey, Heather!" Yelled a familiar voice.

"Hi, Atlas!" I replied.

As we walked to our homerooms, we compared schedules. We had six classes, and two of them together. My classes were math,

science, ELA, history, computer science, and debate.

After school, which wasn't that bad, I picked up my sister and my parents picked us up. My sister and I fought over whose lives were worse. Then my mom asked how our day was, and we both replied okay at the same time. I looked over at the window and thought about something I hadn't thought of. Atlas reminded me of my friends. My friends made me at home. No matter the place, the feeling, the people, and the moments are what make a place home. Bad and good, sad, and happy. The moments make up memories, and memories make a home. Then I had my family, they were enough.

As we drove, I realized we weren't going home. We stopped at a drive-through. Then we went home, I unlocked the door and put my heavy backpack down. I looked up in surprise. My parents had planned a party! We ate, we swam in the pool, we played games, designed, and customized our home, and we relaxed/chilled. We thanked our parents, but they smirked at looked at each other, and I knew it wasn't over.

Our parents blindfolded us and took us to the backyard. We took our blinds off and there was a camp with a projector. We watched a movie and camped, we told stories and memories. Then my dad told us that we still owned our old house, we kept it as a summer home. I was so happy I tackled my parents. And I knew that this move was going to be a big memory.

Don't Stop Building

One call, and I'm running to the hospital. My mind is flooded with the harsh memories of these walls. I've already lost her; I can't lose him too.

'Beep, beep, beep, '

I startled, almost thrashing my head on the angry headboard. I checked the photo next to my bed, the two people I loved the most in the world were staring back. I miss them both so much. I crawl out of bed and into the shower. Turning on the water I say a silent prayer, hoping that somehow the evil disease will leave what's left of my family alone. It's been 3 years since my husband, William Winchester, died and 18 years since my daughter, Annie Wincheaster, died. The fear of death has paralyzed me ever since. Today, I'm going to ensure that I will never die. I throw on a jacket, grab the address slip, and start down the street. Around 15 minutes later, I've arrived at the medium's house. I confidently walk to her front door, but before I even lift my hand to knock, she swings the door open.

"Hello Sarah!" The young, frail woman squeals

"Umm Hi," I reply timidly, "I'm looking for-"

"Yes, yes I know," the woman interrupts, "please come in and make yourself at home." She displays a hand toward the inside of her house. I decide she's crazy, but at this point, I'll take what I can get. Her house smells like a mixture of warm vanilla and smoke. The house is beautifully decorated with many plants, tapestries, and tiny rocks. I sit myself down on the edge of her gray couch, noticing the tiny cat laying on the other side. The woman enters the room holding two cups of what smells like coffee. I haven't eaten anything this morning, so the coffee smells and tastes amazing. I haven't realized how hungry I really am until now. After a few sips I set my cup down. The woman does the same.

"So, you're obviously here for a reason. What do you need my

help with?" The medium said taking my hands.

"Well," I hesitate, "I lost my husband and daughter due to Tuberculosis and I was-"

"Ah! You want to speak to them" She interrupts again.

"No, well yes, no " I argue with myself, "The fear of death has haunted me ever since and I was," I inhale a deep breath, "I want to know," I pause struggling to strand a sentence together, "I want to know how to never die, and why my family seems to be cursed". The medium pauses, and I swear I can see the wheels turning in her head while she thinks.

"Okay." She whispers.

And with that, she's closing all the windows, locking every bulky door, and dimming the lights. A shiver of panic courses through my veins. She sits down, and looks up with an excited, dark smile.

"Lemme see your hands" she says, holding out hers. I place my shaking hands into hers. She takes a deep breath and whispers some words I couldn't understand. What felt like five hours later, and she's released my hands. She stares at me. I try to speak but the words won't come.

"They aren't happy" She stutters.

"Who? Who's not happy?" I cried out.

"All the people who were killed with the Winchester gun." The medium says, her voice barely passing a whisper.

My heart stops, time stops, the world stops. "They say if you build them a home, they will let you live forever." She continues. I look up. "But you can never stop building. No matter what, project after project you can't stop." I weigh my options.

"Tell them we have a deal."

Trapped

Zach scanned the island that he was approaching. He could smell the stench of the murky green lake near and the whistling of the wind. He wondered what adventures awaited.

“Looks like we got another one,” Luna mentioned.

“This one’s going to be fun,” replied Blade, in a mischievous tone.

Zach docked his boat and leaped onto the island. He quickly got out his sketchbook and started drawing. He kicked his shoes off and felt the warm sand between his toes and the cool breeze coming from the west. It felt like paradise, but he would later realize that it was nothing of the sort.

Zach screamed, “This is amazing! Now I know why people never come back from this island...they’re living in paradise!” Zach started towards the trees to go for a hike, but something caught the corner of his eye. He noticed a doll hanging from a branch on the tree. Zach walked slowly, closer, and closer to examine the cracks and old torn up clothes gripping to the doll’s limbs. He squinted and looked into its eyes, “Interesting.”

Luna and Blade were watching Zach closely. They were waiting until he got a little closer to proceed with their plan. Zach walked further into the tall, dark trees ahead. He noticed that there were more dolls. A lot more! The trees were covered in raggedy ancient dolls.

“Maybe I should turn back,” uttered Zach, as he was feeling a bit creeped out.

“Or maybe you shouldn’t,” announced Luna.

“Who said that?”

“A doll. You see, we aren’t just here for decoration. We’re here to make sure you don’t announce to the world what you have seen.”

“Well, what do you plan on doing with me?”

“Don’t you want to touch the doll?”

“What?”

“The doll you were inspecting. Don’t you want to touch it?”

“Um, I don’t think that would be safe,” but Zach was dying to touch the doll.

“It is safe,” voiced Blade, reassuring Zach.

“Wait, you can talk too?”

“We all can,” announced the hundreds of dolls on the tree.

“Ok, this is creepy. I’m getting out of here!” screamed Zach.

“I don’t think so!”

Zach started sprinting as fast as a cheetah out of the tangled mess of dolls, but a tree branch reached out and grabbed Zach by the ankle. Zach’s face plummeted into the sand and was dragged into the trees, face to face with the doll he was looking at.

“Go on, touch the doll!”

“If I touch the doll, will you let me go?” stuttered Zach.

“Yes, we will release your ankle from the branch.”

“Ok.” Zach reached out and touched the doll. He was blinded by a huge flash and the next thing he knew; he was staring out at the ocean and his boat.

“Wh-what happened?”

“You’re a doll. Just like us. Trapped on this island for the rest of eternity.”

“You, you tricked me! You didn’t let me go!”

“Well, your ankle is released from the branch, right?”

Untitled

It was a beautiful day outside. The sky was fiery orange as the sun set, the red autumn leaves drifting to the ground. With one foot on my skateboard, I buckled my helmet.

“Ready, Fenn?” my friend Myra called. She came rolling next to me on her neon pink skateboard, adorned with orange flames. The determined look in her eyes made me a little nervous about our mock race. Not that I could tell anyone, of course. I was the best skateboarder in town, and in two days, I was supposed to take home the giant skateboarding trophy from The Great Skate Race. The whole town depended on me to take home the trophy for the fourth time in a row! If I didn’t....

I closed my eyes and tried to squeeze the scenario out of my head. My mom, standing over me in disappointment. The kids at my school would brush past me and snort. I would become nothing more than a joke in our city, the girl who thought too ahead of herself.

Steadying myself on the board, I ignored the doubtful whispers inside of me. Myra turned to me. “Here we go!”

Rozella’s Skate Park was infamous for its wild obstacles. For experienced skateboarders, it was our main practice spot.

“Now,” said Myra. “If you make it into the finals division, you will be racing against the best roller skater, biker, and.... Scooter-er? So, you need to envision yourself as one of them. Ride like you want to win the race.”

I stared at Myra. “You know you’re great at helping me, but it’s kind of hard to envision myself riding in something I’ve never touched.”

Myra snorted in frustration, but we were both interrupted. Three kids skidded down to meet us. I recognized them as Alex, Joselynn, and Jack. Joselynn and Jack were siblings, and Alex was a kid that we met at The Great Skate Race a few years back.

Joselynn did a small circle in her skates. “I didn’t expect you to

be here!” She exclaimed.

Alex looked at me. “I haven’t seen you in almost a month!” I may have known them for the shortest time, but they were my best friend.

“Why don’t we do a little practice race? So, we can all see how I can beat Joselynn this time?” Jack said, a mischievous glint in his eyes.

I felt sweat on my forehead. I couldn’t lose this. My parents would stare and say, “Maybe you aren’t ready for the competition.” Could I win? What if I didn’t, and I missed one of the ramps? Or if I slowed down a bit and someone else got ahead? What if...

“You wish...” Joselynn snickered, but she buckled her helmet. Alex hopped on their scooter, and Jack tightened his roller skates. I jumped onto my skateboard, and Myra did the same. Alex was chosen to start the countdown. They stood at the starting line, with the rest of us. “Three...two...one...GO!” they yelled. The five of us took off.

I was off to a great start, zooming down ramps and over obstacles. I was so close to the end, and still in the lead. The final jump would take me to the end of the course, resulting in a victory for the practice round. Arching my legs, I got ready to make the jump and...

My feet left my skateboard, and I caught it again, but it didn’t hit the ground.

Everything turned to a blur as my face smacked the cement, and my skateboard slipped out of my grip, rolling over my hand. I looked up to see concerned eyes staring at me.

“Fenn?” someone whispered. “Are you ok?”

I didn’t move. I wasn’t hurt. I really didn’t want to stand up and see their disappointed expressions. I was never able to make that jump, and if I didn’t master it in two days, I would fail. I would be a disgrace to everyone I’ve ever known, and even to the people who I didn’t. I had to win this. Shakily, I stood up.

“I’m fine.” I muttered. The group dispersed. Alex lingered for a second, their eyes meeting mine, but then turned away too.

“See you tomorrow. Hope you get better!” they called.

I looked around at the park. It was slowly beginning to empty as the sky went from orange to the purple-blue night sky.

That night, I decided to talk to my parents. “Mom? Dad?”

About the race that's coming up....”

My dad interrupted me. “Fenn, we’re so proud of your hard work that went into this! We know you will be racing into first place!”

Mom nodded in agreement.

“Well.... Hypothetically, let's just say I.... didn't win?”

Mom stopped and choked on her breadstick for a second, and Dad's eyes widened.

After my mom recovered, she asked, “Why would you think that?”

I slid my breadsticks around the plate nervously. “Just a random thought, I guess.”

Dad stared me dead in the eyes. “Fenn. You don't need to worry about that. We know you'll win no matter what!”

A bead of sweat rolled down my face. “Yeah. Weird question. I don't know why I asked that.”

The next morning, a sunny Saturday, and the day before the race, I woke up early and grabbed my skateboard out of the garage. I also grabbed the special foothold-thingy I received last year from the Skate Race. That was to help us not lose our vehicles when jumping over holes. Of course, last year, it was much shorter, and I did it almost effortlessly. Fastening it onto the skateboard and sliding my foot in, I skated off to the park.

When I arrived, I warmed up by doing a few ramps and practicing smaller jumps. The park was nearly deserted; the only other person was a girl with green hair playing basketball. After about ten minutes of warm up and practice, I decided to work on the jump.

The first time, I leaped over the crack and landed perfectly, but my skateboard twisted suddenly and I fell down. The second attempt was worse than the first. I didn't even get both parts of the skateboard onto the ground! I grazed the other side and slammed into the floor. I took a big breath in and sat on a tree stump. A random nail, probably from an old sign, rolled by. I picked it up and twirled it in my thumbs. I pulled out my water bottle, and as I drank, I considered the contest. Since the four-foot jump was the hardest of them all, there was a paper where you could sign right

before the jump. This allowed you to go home with a prize since you made the finals, but not the grand prize. Every person who signed got a free pass to a luncheon. There was always an option to do that...

No, I thought, absentmindedly digging the nail into my skin. You can't go and be more of a failure than you already are. I sucked in a breath. Everywhere I went, there was that voice of doubt. But now, the little whispers felt like shouts. Gripping the nail tightly, I started to poke my arm in other places. Blood spurted in a few of them.

Suddenly, I felt my arm get yanked. Alex was standing over me with concern on their face. "What are you doing?" they asked. I stayed silent. They picked up the nail and hurled it across the park. Then, they turned back to me. They stared for a second, and then they helped me stand up. We walked home together, and it was only until they got to my doorstep that they said something.

"Fenn... I don't know what you were doing back there... Just promise me you'll never do that again."

I looked down and whispered, "I'm sorry."

"No!" they exclaimed, grabbing my shoulders. "Don't be! Fenn, this is about the jump, isn't it?"

My silence said it all.

"Well, don't get yourself down. That's one of the hardest jumps for people in the contest! Only one third of people make it. So don't get mad, you're the best skateboarder I know!"

I nodded and smiled weakly. Alex said, "Now go rock the competition tomorrow."

I nodded again and said, "I will."

Then, Alex said firmly, "But you have to promise you'll tell your parents about this. And then you'll start talking to someone." I glanced down for a second, and then muttered, "Fine."

The night seemed to go by in a blur. Alex talked to my parents, and I reviewed photos of the track to prepare myself for the race. That night, as I closed my eyes to go to sleep, I felt ready.

It was the day of the race. Twenty racers showed up at 5:30 A.M. We were given a one hour briefing on rules, sportsmanship, and the course. Then, we had three hours to practice all we wanted. As the sun rose, we laughed, practiced, and prepared our

moves. At 9:30, the viewers started streaming in. Everything was a haze as the announcer called us to the start. I was in the skateboarder's subdivision, the first race. I glanced at the four other contestants, also in the top five best skateboarders of the state. As I surveyed the crowd, I hid a smile when I saw Myra and Alex jumping up and down with an encouraging sign.

"Ready.... set.... BEGIN!" bellowed the announcer. I took off and gained an easy lead. This course wasn't so hard, and it was an easy first place. Now, it was time for the finals. I lined up at the starting line with Joselynn (to Jack's annoyance) and two other skaters.

"Thank you all for coming, and without further ado, we'll start the finals. May the best skater win!" The air horn blared, and we took off. I took an early lead, gliding between obstacles and dodging the rolling balls they sent. The race was tight as I battled it off with the bicyclist, a tall girl in pigtails. I zoomed forward, and she would surpass me. The battle was neck and neck when I suddenly gained on her and flew past her. Then, I approached the leap. I skidded to a stop. You can't do this. Give up and go home. The little whisper was unbearable. The cyclist pedaled quickly behind me, making a graceful leap. I took a deep breath, closed my eyes, and thought, I got this. Backing up, I gave myself a huge push with my leg, flew over the empty area and...

I heard a soft thump as I fell into the foam below. I missed the jump. Tears sprung in my eyes. I really am a failure. The audience seemed distant as I pulled myself out. Myra, Jack, and Alex led me to the stands as I watched, devastated. The race ended five minutes later, with the bike girl taking first place. I took fourth place, and first place in the skateboarding subdivision, but I felt disappointed. The car ride home was silent except for my parents repeating constantly, "Honey, we're so proud of you. It doesn't matter whether or not you win or lose." It was when we pulled up to the house that I was in for a surprise. Joselynn, Jack, Alex, Myra, and a few other friends of mine stood, smiling. As soon as I got out, they mobbed me.

"Fenn, you did amazing!"

"Great job, Fenn!"

"WOO! My best friend is one of the best skaters in town!"

I was surrounded by hugs, and I couldn't stop smiling. Maybe

it wasn't so bad that I didn't win.

Two months later, I'm still skateboarding. I stopped entering contests to relieve some stress, and it's now a hobby again. My parents started sending me to a therapist, and I'm a lot happier now. I'll never forget the Great Skate Race of 2032.

His Arms

I was eight years old when I had to watch my mom fall to the ground from tears. She was hysterically crying because of my dad leaving. He had to go serve his time, serve our country, serve the war. It was hard to watch but I know my dad will be just fine. He was strong, trustworthy, and healthy. He would try as hard as he could just to come back to see Me, my mother, and my little sister. It took a while but finally about a month after that mom decided to go to the gym. She was tired of being out of shape and upset all the time, especially knowing my father would fight hard just so he could come home again. She came home looking sweaty. She showered and enrolled me and my sister into school again. This was surprising since I hadn't gone to an actual school in over a month. I had been homeschooled the entire time my mom was getting better, and I finally felt normal again. Although I had to go to a new school, I still felt normal and happy. Our first day of school came around and after what felt like a week it was already the end of the school year. Mom picked us up after school with grandma in the passenger seat. She looked very happy to see us all. I put my backpack in the trunk of the car and we drove to some mansion.

“Where are we going mom?” I asked

“Just wait and see” She replied

Me and my sister curiously looked out of the window wondering where we were going, and I saw it. We turned the corner to see a big sign. The sign read “I'm home”

We gazed at the sign and just before I looked to see who was there, I felt my eyes fill with tears.

“Is dad home?” I asked

“Yes, he is sweetheart” Grandmother replied

Me and my sister held each other sobbing as he opened the door and held each of us in his arms. That was the warmest feeling I had felt in a long time.

Wash Cycle

“Michael,” yelled my mom, “Come fold your laundry!”

“Augh,” I mumbled. “Coming”

I came down the stairs and sat on the couch in the living room.

“Here” Mom said, handing me the basket. “Fold.”

I began. Socks, Shirt, Shirt, Jeans, Underwear, Socks, Socks...

I was about halfway through the pile when I found something strange. It was a pair of jeans, but it looked too small for me. I looked at the size: 4T. I’m an only child.

“Mom?”

“Yes”

“How did this get in here?”

“You must have kept it in your dresser since you got that. You really need to organize your dresser.”

I continued to fold. After a while, I found the largest pair of underwear I had ever seen.

“Mom? How did this get in here?”

“Hmm...I don’t know”

I finally finished folding. At the bottom of the pile lay a muumuu.

* * *

A few days later, I called my friend Max over to hang out. I told him about the strange experience I had the other day.

“Interesting,” he said, “Where could it have come from?”

We both thought for a long time.

“Did you babysit a toddler?”

“You know I don’t do that.”

“Did your dad’s wash get mixed with yours”

“My dad is an average size man”

“ ... ”

“Maybe my washing machine’s magic?” I joked.

Instantly, I regretted what I said. Max is very superstitious, and I knew he’d take me seriously.

“Let’s go check it out!” he said, running toward the washing machine.

“No!”

When we got there, he checked the main wash compartment.

“Look, look!”

“There’s nothing there.”

“Just come!”

I looked in the wash compartment. I saw a diamond shaped stone that was covered in strange writing. It was glowing bright yellow.

“Wow,” he said

“I think... I think I recognize that”

* * *

I told Max that when I was a toddler, I climbed onto my parent’s bathroom counter and looked in the medicine cabinet. In there, there was a whole row of strange stones. When my dad saw me, he pulled me back and said the medicine cabinet was dangerous. I had forgotten that time, until now.

Could my parents be magical?

“Cool!” he said. “The washing machine has become a portal because of the charm! What if...what if we went inside.

“No!”

It was too late. Max was in the washing machine and turned it on. He was gone.

No! No, my parents are going to kill me! What can I do, what can I do?!

It was then that I had a rash thought- I would go in after him.

* * *

When I turned on the washing machine and climbed in, I found a whole new world. I was at first blocked by a huge pile of clothes, but I climbed out.

That's where the clothes are coming from.

I turned around and saw an orange portal, from which I could faintly see the laundry room. I looked around and saw that we were surrounded by portals, stretching as far as I could see.

"Isn't this amazing!" said Max. "We should find Anna's washing machine and spook her!" Anna is our sworn enemy.

Looking back, I should have focused on getting us home, but this sounded like a good idea.

We spent the next 30 minutes looking through each of the portals. We didn't see anything that resembled Anna's laundry room, and we finally gave up.

"Let's go home," I said. Max agreed.

We walked for what felt like hours when we found a portal that looked like our laundry room. We went through. In hindsight, we should have looked at the portal itself. We had gone through a purple portal.

Forged in Fire

“Rock, paper, scissors, shoot!” chanted best friends Kris and Katie. Katie emerged triumphant as her choice of rock won. Katie won the next round, her fingers laid out straight, imitating paper. She had won the best out of three challenges. Just as Katie readied her iPhone to prank the spam caller, Kris noticed a bright red flame on Katie’s pile of drawings.

“Fire, fire!” Kris yelled in surprise. Never had she thought that their sleepover would include this! Katie dropped her phone in shock. Before the girl’s eyes, the fire spread to all around the room. There was fire everywhere. The temperature in the room suddenly raised.

“We gotta get out of here!” Katie exclaimed in fright. “Wait, my life savings!”

“Is it worth our lives?” Kris said unsure. Katie nodded and the girls looked at the bed, whose frame was too hot to touch. They rushed to save the money, and in the process burned their hands to a severe level. Kris dived for the shoebox, which, thankfully, had not caught flames yet.

After retrieving the box, the two went to their parents' room, to get them out. Then they evacuated out the window. After getting to the grass in the front yard, Katie and Kris passed out, because they had taken too much smoke.

A day later Kris woke up in the hospital, dizzy and dazed. She saw Katie trying to hold a cup of water with her elbows. Her hands were wrapped in a cast, and she looked weak. Her eyes were red and dry, as if she had been crying for hours. She had.

“Kris!” Katie exclaimed in joy, spilling water all over herself. “Oh, man Kris, I’ve worried so much about you. Nurse! Kris is awake.” Katie wore a newfound smile on her face. Kris had never seen her so excited in her whole life. This made Kris smile too. The nurse came over and said hi to Kris. She was dressed in a white buttoned shirt and had blue pants.

“Hi, my name is Brielle, I’m your nurse. So, I just told Katie this, but due to severe burns, your hands are too weak to hold a pencil. After a month your skin will be almost fully healed. Until then we will keep you here to monitor your hands’ regrowth.” The nurse said. Her voice was excited, but calm.

Kris nodded a thanks to the nurse and looked back at Katie. She was still excited. Kris looked down at her hands. One month, she thought, is a long time.

A few hours later, Kris wanted to tell Katie something. This was important. Katie just lost so much. Her life had flashed before her eyes, and Kris wanted to make her smile as she had when Kris woke up.

“Katie? I wanted to tell you that since you don’t exactly have a home now, I can give you one.” Kris said with an empathetic smile.

Katie looked away from the TV and at Kris. She started happy crying. “Really?” She sniffed.

“Yeah. You are my best friend. There is not anything I wouldn’t do for you.” Kris replied.

“Thank you.” Katie said. “I have just worried so much about that. I thought that I would be on the streets.” Katie wept even harder. The friends hugged the air to hug each other from a distance.

1 month later

Kris and Katie could finally come home. Kris’ mom and dad picked them up from the hospital. Nothing could separate the hug Kris gave her mom, dad, and brother Conner, when she saw them for the first time in a month. Back to school!” Announced Kris excitedly, on the way home.

The next Morgan, a friend of the girls', greeted them excitedly. The entire school followed. The teacher called them out in class as Fire survivors. All the Christian kids said that they prayed for them. A couple kids said they saw the house fire on the news. But it wasn’t till after school things actually got interesting.

Kris and Katie were walking out of school, as some kids ran out screaming a girl walked out, with a remote in her hands. She

pushed the button on the remote and a loud thud was heard, coming from the gym. Kris and Katie rushed in, to find a 100-pound bomb. Kris ran to try to move it, to find the skin she had grown on her hands, had given her super strength, only in her hands. There were sharp edges on the bomb that would have cut the average person's hands. But there was no pain for Kris. Had she lifted the bomb and launched it through the roof with ease. Her hands were indestructible. Katie's were too. They fought the villain who called herself Diversion and her bombs until they were able to knock her out with a punch. The girls refused to kill Diversion. It would be the wrong thing to do.

But a day later a second battle took place in the cafeteria. During this battle, Kris managed to get Diversion's mask off. Kris gasped in surprise as she realized the unconscious supervillain was her friend Morgan all along. Looking at Morgan, Kris noticed a chip implanted near her ear. She carefully removed the chip, and Morgan suddenly regained consciousness. Kris put the ever so confused Morgan who refused to believe she was a supervillain. As she did so Kris noticed Katie lied on the floor.

Kris ran over, to find she had just lost her best friend. She started sobbing uncontrollably. After Morgan realized what had happened, she started to cry too. She extended her hands out, and green rays shot out from her hands and shot Diversion's mask.

"Did I do that?" Morgan asked.

"No, Diversion I did." Katie answered somberly.

Tears running down her face, she still she saluted her friend and hero, and then looked at her hands. She picked the chip up and was determined to save the world from whoever had done this. In the memory of her best friend Katie.

TO BE CONTINUED

Untitled

When she first wakes in a messy home, she is disgusted. With a turn of her head, she noticed a man potion making in front of her- a forbidden art in the town of Chainbell. She would know this, of course. She would know this, as she is an entity that belongs to those who despised magic. She would know this, as she had seen generations die before her eyes from a simple trick. She would know this, as she is a phoenix, reborn from the ashes again and again.

Her feathers burned brightly as she quietly tried to manipulate her flames against the cage. The bird exhaled slightly. The figure at least knew to coat the cage in magic, unlike a handful of her past owners. The phoenix tried once again to unlock the cage, before understanding the pointlessness of it all. The man knew his way around mythical beasts, it seemed.

The mystical creature quickly regained her composure before staring at the potion maker. Suddenly, the man in question turned and laid his eyes on the phoenix.

"Oh! By the stars, you're awake! It's been, what...30 minutes since you landed on my porch? Oh, do you remember what happened? I mean, this worked out perfectly for me as I was going to sneak into the royal palace, but -." The phoenix quickly stopped his rambling.

"You are the most impudent, fowl, and idiotic man I have seen." She took pride in the sudden change of his facial expression. "Speak. Why am I here?"

The man began once more, completely forgetting about the phoenix's insults. "Well, I need you for a plan. I'm glad the legends were right - you can talk. Ah - the reason you are here is that you were...setting fire to my cottage."

"Because of that, I shot a hidden spell at you. You dropped down on my porch, so I put the fire out and took you in. Just in case, I put you in that cage in case you were hostile." The man

paused and looked away sheepishly. "You are...pretty hostile."

The phoenix narrowed her eyes in indignance, trying to hide her incredibly surprised emotion. This man was the epitome of foolishness. Yet, he knew magic that could subdue a phoenix (while keeping the magic invisible). Upon closer inspection, he was wearing a black top hat and wore a thin navy blue peacoat. Black shorts and long white military boots completed the look. She stared at the man once more before realizing why he looked familiar - those were the colors of the Chainsbell royals.

She swiftly began to inch closer to the front of the cage. "What is your purpose with me?" She was delighted to find the man begin to spill his plan to her.

"Well - long story short, I am planning to take down the hierarchy between the royals and commoners by eradicating the royal class." The bird suddenly grew incredibly wary of the boy - he only looked around twenty in human years.

"The royals...none of them are good."

His words did nothing to decrease the distrust of this man. "The worst part is that I cannot fight," continued the captor. "So, I'm looking for a hero. Someone who can bring down the royals. You will help them." The phoenix's captor grimaced slightly before pulling a fluting knife from his coat pocket. The bird's eyes widened as she realized it was imbued with magic.

"If you ever find a way to make it out of the cage, these will make you fall asleep effectively." The phoenix quickly jumped at the man, hissing and scratching to no avail. The room quickly heated up, and the candle's flame burned higher. Just as fast, all flames went out and the phoenix felt her magic weakening. Before she could see anything, the man had slightly pricked her with the tip of his knife. Slowly, the bird faded in and out of consciousness as her flames slowly died down. The last thing the creature heard was a faded "I'm so sorry..." come from the man.

When the phoenix awoke again, she had smelled spices and seasonings. She looked down, and of course- she was still in her cage. The man, who noticed her awake from her slumber, smiled slightly. He was wearing a white sweater with black shorts and had a red striped apron covering his outfit. A low rumbling noise came from the phoenix's throat, but the man paid no attention to it.

"Hey again. I made you some food - by the way, my name is Elizer. You can call me Eli." The phoenix surveyed the trays of food as the man teleported the food into her cage. When she glanced at the food she was given, she quietly shoved it away from her as best as she could in the cage. It looked incredibly unappetizing, and she was glad her body did not need to eat.

Elizer stared at the bird before sighing. "Yeah, I assume you do not want to talk." He quickly took a glance out of his kitchen window, before returning his gaze to the fiery animal. "It's...late out. I'm sorry about the whole sleep thing." Eli quickly shook his head and began to mutter to himself as he walked away from his kitchen. The phoenix stared at him before blurting something out in the dead of the night; "Are you going to call me "bird" the whole time?"

Eli stared at the phoenix, and the phoenix stared back. Another smile crossed Eli's facial features. "No, Isabella." Eli laughed at the phoenix's expression. "Alright- goodnight, Isa," muttered Eli before he disappeared into a room. "He fell for it - getting attached is only worse for him," mused Isabella. With that, she let herself sleep.

When Isabella came to her senses the next morning, she was greeted by Eli bouncing up and down with stars in his eyes. The phoenix narrowed her eyes before demanding Eli to speak. Eli quickly grabbed a duster and started violently dusting his cabinets. "The hero I have chosen is coming over now!" As if he was realizing something, Eli suddenly grabbed a fluting knife from one of his pant pockets. "I don't want you making a fuss." With a sigh, Isa let the magic weaken her flame as she began to fall asleep.

When she woke once more, she was immediately outraged. It was dark out, and the man was scribbling away at paperwork on his kitchen counters. Her voice, filled with venom, spoke once more. "Why do you even try to fight?" The man looked at Isa in surprise

"You are powerless against the royals. Every hero has died in the end. There is no point in trying. I will never succumb to you and your atrocious ideals of the end of the royals. Your house will burn, and it will be at my hands. I am a bird from the royals, and your mercy only serves as a weakness towards your pathetic heart."

Eli stared at her before returning to his paperwork.

"Isa, I know my home will burn. I know I will die, somewhere, along the road that I am traveling." Eli moved to a new page and began to continue writing.

"However, my dream will never die. I have planned this for years, in secret. No one knows where we will join or plan."

"If I die, the hero will take on my ambitions. It will continue throughout the crowd. My dream will be reborn, again and again." Suddenly, Eli grabbed the papers he filled out and made his way to his room. "Goodnight, Isa. Sweet dreams."

Isa met the hero a week later, and she was silent as she watched the man and the hero fuss about. The hero's eyes were closed, and he was leaning against the house's walls. After dumping eons of potions and a brewing stand into his bag, Eli shrunk the bag before throwing it at the silent boy. "Leave. Go to the planned spot. I'll meet you there." The hero started to object but nodded and exited the house when he saw Eli granting him a tiny smile.

His voice was to the point when Eli spoke- yet, there was a hint of fondness. "The plan is being enacted today, Isa." Isa felt no emotions for this man- her anger was but a mere match compared to the endless bounds of irritation she had felt previously. Her voice was cold as she squawked- "You doubt my strength. I will not stop until I see you fall to the ground." They stared for a few solid seconds- before Eli threw his head back in rambunctious laughter.

Eli smiled at her as his eyes crinkled with his grin. Isa stood strong in her cage, ready to expect a psychopathic move. What she does not expect, however, is the man opening the cage door and releasing the magical boundary. Suddenly, Isa felt power running through her flames as if someone had poured gasoline over her. "You utter, blithering fool."

"Do you see what you have done?" Isa set the coffee table next to her cage on fire. "You have set me free, in your foolish, atrocious kindness." Isa spread her wings and flew to the table where Eli was situated.

"Where is the dream you have now?" Isa raised a sharp, talon-like claw to Eli (who closed his eyes).

"Isa," he started, "You... are blind at the worst moments."

Isa began to speak but was interrupted by Eli's palm. White, pupil-less eyes started into steely gray ones.

"I was a royal." Isa stopped as she processed his words. Eli continued, closing his eyes.

"Back then, I was not who I was today." Eli's coat was fully on fire, but he showed no sign of pain.

"However, I met a girl in the garden behind the castle's miniature concert hall. You know which one." Isa began to slowly step back and spread her fiery wings. "She always came bruised and dirty. She kept wishing- no, dreaming- for her mother to get better."

"I only beat her more. Yet, she kept coming back. So, I asked her, as I mistreated her - why do you dream?" Eli smiled - a smile that suddenly looked much older than Isa remembered - and looked at Isa.

"And do you know what she said, little bird?" Eli was fully on fire, at this point. "She told me - 'a dream will never die, and I will carry on my dream until it is impossible for me to do so.'"

Eli looked up at the roof. "You must be wondering why I'm not dead by now- or how my cottage is still standing. This is my last spell- when I remove it, the only thing left of me will be ash, along with my cottage. This is as far as I make it in my plan. Let me tell you my message for the rebels, and where to meet up. Promise me you will make it there to tell them." Isa had stared at him for a fleeting moment before letting Eli whisper the messages for her to send off.

Time had passed since then- and if the royals noticed Isabella's stare turning more protective over the town, they said nothing. If the royals saw Isabella setting fewer fires, the royals were too absorbed in their glory to fully notice. If the royals realized Isabella had gained the trust of the rebelling commoners, the royals did an amazing job at hiding it. When the royals saw the phoenix helping the rebels during the war, they made sure to point it out. When Isa saw Eli's dream come true, finally, the phoenix made it known with her call.

Stowaways in Saturn

“Woah,” Bianca told her best friend Emelia, “Your mom works here?” They had just entered the Nasa headquarters in Houston and were staring up at the polished white room filled with hundreds of workers. They were there to tell Emelia’s mom goodbye as she was going to be on the first all-female crew to Saturn.

“Look! There she is!” Emelia called out while simultaneously dragging Bianca toward the rocket. “We can go in and say bye to Mom now.”

Bianca frantically said, “Are you sure that’s a good idea Emelia? What if they launch? We could get trapped up in space, what -”

“Calm down, we’ll be in and out before anyone sees us and before we launch,” Emelia cut her off.

As they walked onboard the rocket ship though, they didn’t hear Mr. Stevenson, the head engineer, announce, “Three minutes to launch!” And then, they were in.

After a few minutes of climbing up ladder after ladder the entire rocket began to shake. “Hurry!” Bianca shouted at Emelia already climbing down the ladder so fast she was practically falling.

Emelia continued heading up. “Come on, we need to get to a seat, the rocket is launching!” She didn’t even look down to check if Bianca was following her up the ladder, she just quickened her pace. She rushed to the nearest seat and saw Bianca coming up. Bianca scrambled into a seat just before the rocket lurched and they were up. They were on their way to Saturn.

After only hours of flight they made it to Saturn, thanks to lightspeed travel. As the astronauts were coming down the stairs, led by Dr. Elena they stopped in their tracks.

“Bianca? Emelia? What are you doing?”

“Oh, uh, hey Mom,” Emelia said nervously, “We came on

board to say goodbye, but the rocket launched.” She braced herself for a punishment.

“Emelia! How could you be so irresponsible! And you just had to draw Bianca into your little schemes!” Dr. Elena’s voice was cracking with absolute rage as her companions stood behind her still in shock.

One of the astronauts was tall with dark blonde hair and the other was short with light brown hair. They began to whisper to Dr. Elena quietly enough that the girls couldn’t hear them.

“Jenn, Tiffany, just go on out and finish the mission I’ll take care of the girls,” Dr. Elena said in a tone that discouraged any disagreement.

Only a few moments after they geared up and left the rocket there was an abrupt shriek from outside, and then silence.

“W-what was that?” Bianca whispered shakily.

“Stay here and don’t even think about disobeying me,” she said with clear panic in her eyes.

A few moments later there was another scream, but it sounded like this time it was Dr. Elena. The girls glanced at each other with faces white as ghosts.

“Was that -”

“I think so”

And then they ran outside never to be seen again.

It's Always Been Him...

The bell dismissed us to our third period, my favorite class. Not only because it's biology class but he's in that class. I never was the romantic person who did what they now call "simping." I hated anything related to love because I just simply didn't believe love could ever be magical. Sometimes I still doubt it but now, it all of a sudden changed. I've never really been interested in having a boyfriend or just dating in general, I'd rather sit in my room reading all day and listening to music because it's what interests me most. Anyways I'm sure you are confused about what I'm even yapping about, trust me I get confused too with my life. My name is Adilynne Dayson, I'm a sophomore at Moonrise Way High, partially known for how skinny and slim my body is. Currently 15 years old. Then there's my crush, Sawyer Deans. Tall boy, prepossessed personality, alluring hazel eyes. He wasn't the handsomest guy, yet I found mostly everything about him admirable. The smartest boy alive? No, but was he the boy who made me laugh? Yes, indeed he was.

He wasn't like other boys, he was idiosyncratic but in a good way, if you know what I mean. Instead of using me for things that I'd rather remain secret for now, he...defended me. I'll never forget the day I first laid my optics on that boy. It was freshman year I'd say maybe mid-March? I just came back from being virtual and I sat right in front of him.

What I felt is practically unfeasible to describe with human words or actions. The closest thing I'll get to describing that feeling was that I felt as if my intestines tangled with each other, my heart throbbing faster each second as I continued to lay my eyes on him. "This is treacherous, I can't fall in love with a boy I just met, or maybe it's an early feeling of hatred? Yeah that's probably the case because I've never fallen in love so I wouldn't know." So many things passed through my mind in 5 seconds. I pushed my glasses up and walked towards the classroom with the

fake confidence I always did since kindergarten, which says a lot about me doesn't it? Our eyes connected and I felt a sudden relief of pressure on my heart.

“Wow that boy sure is breath-taking.” I thought to myself, “Why did I feel a lock in our eyes?” I sat down after I got introduced to the class and we started talking. After a few days we became extremely close, and we would always exchange terrible puns. The “your mom” jokes never got old with him. One day, I overheard these two boys talking about me. What they said about me made me feel tense. I stayed silent for the rest of the day to not provoke any further conversations.

He noticed I was acting unusual so when I excused myself from the classroom, he took the opportunity to follow me. After a bit he caught up with me breathless and asked what happened with a worrisome voice gasping with the rasps of his throat from breathing heavily. I burst into panic, “I didn't want him to know I'm sensitive to comments or go through stuff like this.” I tried to leave but being around him alone made me feel safe, oh god I fell in love. I stayed there in shock of what happened then luckily, he was able to get me to tell him. He apologized because that was his stupid friends and he said he would spend lunch with me the next day since the day was about to terminate. So, he did. He started to understand me in a way other boys never did. It felt really special to know I was escaping my negative sorrows of loneliness and that someone could be so similar to me in all different aspects of life manners. Or so...I thought maybe I was finally out of my troubles?

We had a little party celebrating us entering the second year of high school. We both posed for the photo and back into the yearbook it went. We kept the friendship intact, but we saw each other less because we both had the same classes yet different periods. There was this boy in our last year class whose name is Arnie Stubbston. He was the most annoying boy I've ever met, no offense to him but I didn't really like him romantically or even as a friend. Shortly after I found out Arnie was obsessed with me, brutally obsessed. He was like this short bratty kid who tried to impress me by being rude and obnoxious which leads me to no surprise because today's boys are idiots. Real jerky idiots.

We had a dance coming up and Arnie asked me out to the

dance with a teddy bear he thought I wouldn't recognize. That teddy bear was the teddy bear my friend gave his ex-girlfriend back when they were dating. I spotted a group of boys hiding behind the lockers. Everyone was staring at me which made me more nervous to answer. "I'm sorry but it's a no, Arnie." Arnie ran away perilously which led to a bunch of texts of his guilt tripping full mode. Nobody understood my point of view. Nobody cared about my point of view all of a sudden. I was left as the rude chick who rejected "the sweetest boy you could ever meet." Heck no those were phony lies. If only everyone knew how he tried to manipulate me. I was feeling terrible after that so I decided maybe I could tell my mom to see if she could influence my advice from her wisest mind.

Well... let's say I ended up with a:

"You wanna go to homecoming with me Sawyer?"

"Uhm yeah sure"

"Wait for?"

"Yeah, sure that'd be cool :]"

Perhaps it didn't exactly turn out as efficient as expected but I'm glad I went out of my comfort zone to ask him after what had happened that day. I met this one girl who was on Sawyer's soccer team. Her name is Delilah, she was the girl everyone dreamed of being. Glistening blue eyes, silky dirty blonde hair that passed below her waist flowing in the air perfectly as she walked. For some unknown reason. I felt intimidated by her presence. Though she was the nicest girl I've met. Three times better than what I was. Time passed by quickly and shortly I came to realize Sawyer had no interest in her. I was surprised because if I am sincere with you, her perfection was captivating. Was.

The bell rang alerting us to transition to third period. At this point I'm not even illusioned with hope no longer. I can't imagine a guy like him noticing the girl who used to write in the corners or used to dance till her whole body was bruised with pain. Out of nowhere, he greets me with a warm smile and tells me the jokes we told each other when we first met. He was repeating all the things I fell in love with.

Out of all the people he could've asked for help, he asked me. Sure, it isn't a big deal but I must say they are way smarter girls than me out there. Everyone looked at both of us smiling so

brightly I even imaged the sun on their smile from how truthful that smile was. He spent the entire class period with me, then passing period, then after school before we got picked up for our sports, The next day again in the morning. I realized, those weren't smiles thinking me and Sawyer were cute together. Those were "I think I'm crushing on Adilynne" smiles...from six boys!

Arnie tried to interrupt my socializing with Sawyer out of pure jealousy but deep down even after I admitted on Valentine's Day that I liked that Deans boy, we both knew we liked each other for the real us, not the ones who we appear to seem. And our story together, oh it just commenced. The future has more things in store for us whether or not we don't end up together, I'm glad I met him even if we continued to be friends in the future. I don't mind those six other boys because we both know who I'll choose in the end. Sawyer Deans.

Untitled

I woke up to the sweet smell of French toast. I put on my oversized graphic tee and blue jeans. As I approached the stairs, the delicious aroma of bacon flooded my nose. Once I settled at the table, I got a helping of French toast, smoked bacon, and fresh pineapple. The food was already cold because I woke up later than my family. When we piled into the car, the rush of fear and adrenaline poured over me. My brother pestered me the whole way there because he already knew who I was horrified by the Winchester Mansion. My mom pleaded for him to stop due to the fact that she knew he was scaring me. Now that I was thoroughly frightened, we arrived at the mansion.

My family seemed so cheerful about the whole situation. This is not a cheerful or happy moment. We are at a mansion that was abandoned by a crazy lady. But I didn't have a choice. As we approached the decrepit steps, I examined the architecture of this mansion. It was so strange. There were so many walls, windows, and roofs that made no sense. I couldn't wrap my head around this nonsense. I was horrified once we walked up the creaking steps. My brother joyously pranced around without a care in the world. He was enjoying this. How. Whatever. As we slowly and carefully turned the doorknob, my heart started to race. I shut the door as quickly as possible without anyone entering. It was too scary. I just couldn't. My brother was upset with me that I was being too scared. So, he took action. He swung the door open and viciously shoved me into the house.

I banged on the nasty door, nothing. I tried to push it open, nothing. I needed to find another exit. I needed to escape. But that place was a maze. I didn't understand where I was going or how I got there. I tried to go back, but I got even more lost. There was nowhere I could go. I began to panic. There was nothing I could do. There were doors that looked like the first one that just led me

into more rooms. There was nothing I could do. There were windows I could open to escape. But they just led to more rooms. There was nothing I could do. I went upstairs just to be met with another flight. There was nothing I could do. I would start to starve and die of thirst. There was nothing I could do.

The panic began to boil and boil until I exploded. I screamed. There was nobody to hear it. I screamed but there was no point. Nobody could help me. Even if there was somebody, they couldn't find me. I was stranded forever. The rooms kept going. It felt like I was stranded in the middle of space. I kept going but there was nowhere to go. I was trembling with anxiety. There was nowhere for me to go. What if I died there? Nobody would know. I opened so many windows. But there was still no way out. I had walked through so many doors, but I still couldn't find the exit. I needed to try to escape. It felt pointless but I kept going. I found a flight of stairs that I decided to climb. There were so many. They just kept going. I just kept going. Until they stopped. But I didn't.



Cason Noll
Middle School

Washed Up

August 7th, 1902

U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT)

10:22 P.M.

“Welcome, Mr. Roosevelt. We are very pleased to see you.,” announced Thomas Wikilson, the vice president of the Transport Corporation. “Greetings to you.,” stated Theodore Roosevelt, the official president of the United States. “To you as well, we have invited you to propose a presentation.” said Thomas, as he rose out of his tall, velvet dynasty chair. Right as he arranged a pile of carefully preserved papers on the large table, he stated, “These were found off the shore on the east side of Arabia.” As Roosevelt slightly leans over to examine the artifact, he is shocked in bewilderment. “It’s...It’s...A flying machine!” Roosevelt exclaimed. “This needs to get to the paper, stat!” stated Roosevelt. Thomas then sighed, with a stump of credibility. “Sir, I do indeed see your intentions, but this matter is more to be kept secret.” Roosevelt then stated, “Well, I believe we have made a compromise.” “We have?” stated Thomas. “Yes, we have indeed. I believe we privately sell this artifact to a museum and allow them to take it from there.” said Roosevelt. “...Like the National Archives Museum?” said Thomas. “Bah! This piece is Arabian! No one shall go around believing that! I say we go to the museum of Natural History.” stated Roosevelt. Thomas then said “I agree with you indeed, Mr. Roosevelt. Let us meet next week to discuss our schedule for this transferal.” Roosevelt agreed with a faint nod, and formally walked out of the building. His services picked him up in his car, and Theodore Roosevelt made his way back to the White House.

As the week passed by, Roosevelt had begun preparing for his

secondary arrival at the Department. On his way there, he had been notified by reporters questioning his destination. When Roosevelt arrived at the Department, Thomas Wikilson had greeted him once again and gestured towards his car, with Roosevelt's security following swiftly behind him. As they made their way to the local train station, they came across numerous people staring at the president in awe, finding it rather shocking to see such a vehicle on the president's behalf. As the car ride arose into its timespan, Thomas Wikilson decided to strike up a conversation.

"Are you quite fond of the environment around these parts?" he stated.

Roosevelt then exclaimed, "Why yes, I am! As a child, I have found the beauty of nature and brightness quite fascinating, and I often take breaks on walks simply to enjoy the foliage."

"I do indeed agree, sir." Thomas stated.

Roosevelt and Thomas then arrived at the train station, with such a splendid manner, as trains were rare and joyous in this matter of time.

"Shall we head to Seattle now, sir?" stated Wikilson.

"Indeed, we shall. These blueprints are of shocking manner and need to be seen by an official." stated Roosevelt.

Nonetheless, the two stepped in through the enclosed doors to reveal a widespread indoor station, with citizens rustling about, looking rather lost in a peculiar manner. Roosevelt and Thomas then stepped over to the small, empty booth, reserved for emergency transport, and Roosevelt stated, "We will need two three-punched tickets to Seattle, sir."

The Ticketmaster then exclaimed, "How convenient, Mr. President, we happen to have a carry-on transport headed for Seattle, and I can get you on it right away!"

Roosevelt then formally stated, "Very well then. We shall take these reservations and head to the boarding dock...as of now precisely."

The Ticketmaster stated, "Right away, sir, and safe travels!" as he handed both Roosevelt and Thomas their pre-punched tickets and directed them with a small nudge of his head towards their boarding dock. Roosevelt and Thomas casually made their way about the station, with many so often citizens staring at the

president in awe, with Roosevelt strictly refraining from their whereabouts and fanatical dialogue. Roosevelt and Thomas had finally arrived at their designated boarding dock, and within a few minutes, their train had arrived and the mechanical, iron-casted door was opened by the conductor, as Roosevelt and Thomas pleasantly walked into the cargo-filled train car, and thanked the conductor as he closed the door once again with his wrench, and walked back to the front control room. Roosevelt and Thomas took a seat next to the small wooden coffee table, and both casually smoked their pipes, as it was standard to do so at the time. As the intricacies of nature were beautifully linked to the men's eyes through the window, Thomas came to a stopping point.

“Is this proposition fitting for what we are giving it towards? Wouldn't you think maybe this could be slightly ordeal by our department? I mean, what could the museum possibly have to offer towards this developmental lead?” Thomas stated.

“Well, we could in fact propose this towards your department or others, but I believe the museum has the right to examine this artifact, as we cannot commit to our assumptions of its blueprint as of now. Possibly later, when we develop this closer.” Roosevelt stated.

Within an abundance of longing hours, the train finally came to its stop. 81st Street. Notorious for its responsibility for taking visitors to the Museum of Natural History, in which Roosevelt and Thomas were about to vacate. “You have arrived at your destination, Mr. President.,” the conductor presented. Roosevelt and Thomas had then parted their ways out of the train and up the steep, stair-ladder leading to the city. Upon reaching the top, the men were met with cars running to and from, with the luxurious and rather shocking three story high complex building, being apparent to the Museum of Natural History. The two men crossed the alleyways, and entered the glossy, clear doors. A magnificent brown wooden globe stood atop of the office desk, and Roosevelt and Thomas were met by a serious composed lady with a double craft eyeglass chain, and a simple, violet fedora.

“Where to, gentlemen?” said the lady, with a slight frown of foreign disappointment emerging throughout her face.

“Shipping Department please. We have an artifact proposal in which we believe you will take high interest of in evaluation.,”

said Roosevelt.

“Second Floor, Right Door, 3rd Row Down the Hallway.”

“Highest compliments, Miss.,” said Thomas.

“Next in Line!” groaned the lady, still looking gloomy and wandering in misery. As the two stampeded quaintly up the aisle they were met by dozens of wooden oak doors, each with unique tags on it. E11, E12, E13...

“Here we are.” said Roosevelt. Thomas walked over in a helpful gesture and clasped his palm on the cold, metal door handle, and slowly pressed down and opened the door. They were met by a man lying in his crisp black leather chair, on a wooden desk writing what seemed to be a record file for a client. The man wore a silk, brownish-maroon brim top, with a brown felt suit.

“Can I help you, sir?” the man stated with a confused look in his eyes.

“Certainly, we have a brief proposal to share with you. We believe you will take it as an impeccable top priority and look forward to your evaluation on it.,” Roosevelt said.

“What piece is this, exactly? I don’t have much time for evaluation today, it’s 3:44 P.M. and my shift ends at 4:00, so make it quick.”

Thomas then opened his luggage suitcase, and carefully unwrapped the artifact which was then covered in crystalline bubble wrap and carefully poised on a paper-holder. Thomas then meticulously lifted up the paper and set it within the front-middle of the man’s office desk.

“Interesting...do you have any specifications on its references?” the man asked.

“Precisely, sir. It was found off the Arabian Coast, around 350 miles from Kuwait.” said Thomas.

“Hmm...this looks indeed like a lead to something, but I’ll have to examine this piece more to find out.”

“We believe it could be some human flight machine in development.,” said Thomas.

“Well, I’ll do you a favor, and I’ll get it photographed and sent to the museum’s evaluation center, not far from here.” said the man.

“Compliments indeed, sir, we must be getting on our way, and we look forward to your works with it.” said Roosevelt.

“My pleasure,” said the man.

And just as the two men were walking out of the office, Thomas glanced back for a moment. On the man’s felt suit, a nametag read:

*Orville Wright
Wright Brother’s Partial
National Museum of Natural History
Section Lot E13*

And sooner or later, the world would know, that Orville Wright, the man himself, all due to the coast of Arabia, was soon to be nominated as the future inventor of planes.

Untitled

As Sam persuaded the boy in the wheelchair to hurry up, Jayden continued to gaze at the white fence. The white fence wasn't for show, no, not at all. It only kept things out and in. "We're going to be late! Come on!" The young girl wailed as she began to push Jayden to school.

"Hey! Stop that!" Jayden partially turned around to push her off his handles, "I can go by myself! Just leave me alone!"

Sam didn't like that answer, yet ended up leaving the boy alone as he said. However, Jayden never went by himself. In fact, he never went at all. He continued to look at the fence where he was originally. The birds were singing their song as the sun was shining its shine. For once, it didn't seem that he lived in a horrible city. He was just enjoying the calm time around him.

Jayden's daydreaming was interrupted by a bird sitting on the ledge of the fence. He had seen it before. The bird always flew up and over the fence, looking for food. What if Jayden had the ability to do that? Why can't Jayden have the ability to go up and over the fence like that? Oh, how life would be so much better if Jayden had the ability to use his legs. Some things just aren't fair, and never will be fair, he assumed.

Up and over the fence the bird went. The boy smiled at the thought of him flying in the air with the bird. Oh, how much fun it would be to be able to spread his wings and fly as well. The boy may not be able to fly, but he does indeed have the spirit of a bird. He just has to unlock being able to fly free, once and for all.



Olivia Runco
Middle School

Untitled

PROLOGUE

It was a sunny day. There wasn't a cloud to be seen. Sarah used to spend all her days resting on the small cottage roof, watching the sunset as it slowly sank until the dark fell. Then she would look up and watch the stars, wishing the same thing every night.
I want my dreams back.

Part 1. The Start

Sarah's mom had been locked in her room for 3 days now, still under the trauma from her family moving to the other side of the world, and Sarah was sad too, but not as sad as her mom. She never loved to stay at home very much, there was a gloomy, eerie feeling to the cottage, it didn't feel like home. Instead, she usually biked to the nearby old-timey thrift shop, the only other place that felt like home to her.

"Well, well, well. Look who we have here!" an old voice growled. A smile spread all the way up to his ears.

"Just here to look around," Sarah said.

"Well," the man's smile grew bigger. "I actually have what you were looking for..." he reached back and pulled out a sealed box. Sarah's eyes widened as he cut open the box to reveal a...

"A dreamcatcher?"

"But not any dreamcatcher. This one is different from the other ones I've seen... Look at the design carved into the sides," the man rotated the dreamcatcher to show Sarah the side of it. The edge of the strange thing was nothing like Sarah had ever seen, like runes.

But the weird thing was, she could read what it said.

THE FUTURE LIES IN THE HANDS OF YOUR DREAMS.

“Sarah?” she snapped back to reality.

“What happened? Did you see something?”

“Nothing of good interest,” she lied. Maybe he shouldn’t know what it said.

“How much is it?”

“7 Dollars,” he replied, “But I’ll give you a discount because you come here so often,” he winked.

“Sooooo...”

“It’s on the house, sugar.”

“So, it’s free?”

“Yep. now take it and go home! Tell me if it works tomorrow.”

“Thank you, Mr. Darrow!” Sarah gently put the dreamcatcher into the box and taped it back up.

“As always, Ms. Sarah. See you tomorrow,” Mr. Darrow said. His smile stretched across his face as Sarah turned to leave. “Good luck.”

Part 2. The Dream

As the stars slowly faded into the sky, for the first time in years, Sarah wished for something new. This has to work.

...

As sleep pulled her under, Sarah had her first dream in years, but it wasn’t the best dream she could have imagined. The dream felt cold, and warm, and dark and blinding. When the dream finally came into view, Sarah felt the cold of... Snow? Dream Sarah stepped by the window. The sky was gray, packed to the brim with clouds. Dream Sarah rushed down the stairs of her house, when a knock came from the front door of the house. She went to the door and pulled it open, revealing her best friend, Arianna.

“Hi...” Dream Arianna was shivering. “C-can I come in?” Dream Sarah opened the door more to let her in.

“Sarah, we c-can’t go to school today, it’s... T-too c-cold...” Arianna said, her teeth chattering.

“We have to go to school, today’s an important day.” Dream Sarah replied.

“The bus isn’t coming to pick us up.”

“Okay, so?”

“You’re gonna have t-to walk.”

“Sounds fine to me.” And Dream Sarah snagged her backpack and her hat off the hooks. She then walked out the door, leaving Dream Arianna behind.

As Dream Sarah walked to school, she felt the cold wind blow right at her, the cold made her start to shiver. She decided against going to school, and bolted home, the cold air stung her lungs as she ran.

Once she made it to her house, the dream got fuzzy, and all the words were muffled.

The dream then faded to black, leaving Sarah in the dark.

Part 3. The Future

BEEP- BEEP- BEEP- BEEP-

Sarah's eyes slammed open. She grabbed her phone off the bedside table and checked the time and weather. It was 6:45. The weather was forecasted to be snowy.

Probably just a coincidence.

Sarah slid out of bed and changed into some warm clothes before heading downstairs. She dropped a piece of toast into the toaster and packed her backpack. When the toaster dinged, she tossed her backpack on the back of a chair and rushed over to butter it.

As Sarah was finishing up her breakfast, someone knocked on their front door.

“I'LL GET IT!” Sarah shouted. But the person she least expected was on the doorstep-

“Arianna?”

Another coincidence?

“Hi...” Arianna was shivering. “C-can I come in?”

Sarah opened the door more to let her in.

“Sarah, we c-can’t go to school today, it’s... T-too c-cold...” Arianna said, her teeth chattering.

“We have to go to school, today's picture day!” Sarah replied, shutting the door.

“The bus isn’t coming to pick us up.”

“Okay, so?”

“You’re gonna have t-to walk.”

“Sounds fine to me.” And Sarah snagged her backpack off of the chair it was hanging on and slipped out the door.

“You’re gonna regret that decision!” Arianna shouted through the cold winter air.

And she did. As she trekked through the snow, she only got colder and colder, she couldn’t feel her fingers. It was at that point where she could barely move, but Sarah forced against the cold and ran as fast as her frozen legs would let her. When she got home, her eyes filled with tears.

No.

That dreamcatcher... the future - OMG.

My dream catcher can tell the future.

My dreams can tell the future.

I can tell the future.

My dreams are back.



Quinn Satterwhite
Middle School

Marcus and the 5 Items

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Prologue:

If you have not read this story yet, you should know that this is a story about a 13-year-old boy named Marcus. He is an adventurous, brave, and kind kid who goes on an adventure in this story (Marcus and the 5 Items". This is a sequel to "Family Message" which also stars Marcus and his family. This is the second book in the series "The Adventures of Marcus." Finally, Marcus' father is the star of Timothy Pepper from the best-selling "Fruits vs. Vegetables" series. OK, that is all. Enjoy!

Chapter 1: The Treasure Map

Once upon a time, there was a 13-year-old boy named Marcus. Marcus was a normal boy; he did normal things. But then he found something that would change his life... One day, Marcus was playing in his favorite tree. Then, he found a treasure map. Marcus, being a curious boy, picked up the treasure map and looked at it. "Wow!" said Marcus. The map showed five different items-an apple, a train, an elephant, a scroll, and a banjo. He had to collect them and bring them to the king.

"If this is for the king, then it must be important." Marcus thought. Marcus was about to close the map, when he realized there was a message on the back. It said, "Greetings Marcus, I am the king. Will you please bring me these things? An apple, a scroll, a banjo, an elephant, and a train. Bring me them and a great reward you shall gain."

Chapter 2: The First Item

Marcus debated on whether he should go or not. If he did, he could get a reward. But if he didn't, he wouldn't get to see the king. Marcus had always wanted to see the king. He decided to go. So, he started his adventure! The first item Marcus decided to search for was the golden apple. Marcus walked until he came to the tree. But how would he get the apple? He jumped, but he couldn't reach it. "This may take a while." Marcus thought to himself. Conveniently, he found a ladder that looked as if it could reach the apple. He brought the ladder and leaned it against the tree. He climbed up the ladder. He reached for the apple and grabbed it. Marcus felt a surge of energy run through him. He brought the apple down and put it in his bag. He looked at his map.

Chapter 3: The Train

Next up was the train that would take him to the land of the castle. Marcus sighed. "It would be a whole lot easier if I brought better equipment." He came to the train.

"Hello. Welcome to the Express." Marcus handed the conductor five dollars. "Have a great ride."

But how would he bring the train to the king? Suddenly, Marcus had an idea.

"Do you have any train models?" he asked the conductor.

"Yep. Would you like small, medium, or large?" the conductor replied.

"Small please," said Marcus politely.

"Small it is. \$4 please." Marcus handed the conductor four dollars. The conductor gave him the train. Marcus took it and put it in his bag. He found a place to sit. The train ride was relaxing. It

gave him time to rest his legs. When Marcus got off the train, he was amazed. There was lush greenery and nice, tall trees. It was most unlike where Marcus lived, an apartment in a big, bustling city. He took another look at the map. There was an elephant on top of the mountains. Marcus climbed for a couple of days.

Chapter 4: The Elephant on the Mountain

The climb was tough, especially since he only had a couple of granola bars, a water bottle, a flimsy rope, and a pickax he had borrowed from his dad's shed. Finally, he was at the top of the mountain. There, as big as could be, was the elephant. Marcus hopped on the big creature. As soon as he got on, the elephant jumped off the mountain!

"No, no, no!" Marcus yelled. Oof.

Marcus woke up. How long had he been sleeping? Had it been minutes, hours or even days? Marcus was laying on the elephant's back, which was now seeming to be walking in a burning desert. Marcus took a gulp of water. He glanced at the map again. The scroll was next. As soon as Marcus tore his eyes away from the map, he saw it, right in front of him. Marcus grabbed it and immediately dropped it.

Chapter 5: The Message of the Scroll

Marcus picked up the scroll. Just like the treasure map when he found it, there was a message on the scroll. Marcus read, "I am the King of far, far away. Bring me these items before someone else may. Marcus, you are the one with the skills we need. But time is running out so you must move at top speed." Marcus wondered. He was confused. Did he have to get the five items and what did it mean "Time's running out"? How much time did he have? Marcus cleared his head. Either way, he had to get the last item fast. That last item was the magical banjo in the sky. How would he get to the sky? Just then, the elephant made another sudden jump and just like that, they were standing on a big, fluffy cloud.

"Thanks." said Marcus, rubbing the elephant's back. Then, Marcus found it.

“There, the banjo!” he exclaimed. He ran to pick it up. When he touched it, he felt as if he could do anything. It made Marcus feel calm. He let go of the banjo and put it in his bag with the apple, train model and scroll. Now he had to bring the items, including the elephant, to the castle. But where was the castle?

Chapter 6: Marcus' Reward

Marcus looked at his map to see if the castle was on it. He found it on the map and headed towards it. Marcus gazed at it. It was majestic. It was golden and had tall towers. He knocked. A guard opened it.

“Who are you?” the guard asked.

“M..Marcus,” said Marcus nervously.

“Please, come in. The King will be pleased to see you.” the guard replied. He went in the door. He found the King, who looked exactly how Marcus thought he would look, with a giant jewel-covered throne and a sparkly crown.

“Your majesty. I have brought the five items you have requested.” Marcus said, bowing.

“Very well. Show me.” said the King.

Marcus took out the items. The golden apple, the train model, the ancient scroll, the magical banjo, and finally, the huge elephant. The King examined the items (and elephant). Then, after a while the King said, “I think you have earned this.” He handed Marcus a bag that had not just 1 or 2 pieces of gold, but about one hundred pieces of gold. Marcus was surprised. This was more money than he had ever had in his whole life! Marcus gave one final bow. “Thank you, sir.” he said, before rushing out the door.

Epilogue:

When Marcus got home, he was happy. His mother ran out the door.

“Where were you? Your father and I have been worried sick!” she said. “And what are you holding?”

Marcus showed her the money. “As for where I've been, well I guess you could say that it was an adventure.”



Untitled

“Hey Oatmeal, how are you?” Raisin asks, very enthusiastically, “Isn’t this great, we’re going to meet so many folks when we get eaten!”

Oatmeal sighs as he tries once more to push Raisin away, “No, I’m going to be stuck with you the entire time. I could have been my own cookie. I have enough nutrients, five whole grams of protein. You just made the portion size bigger.”

“Why are you so mean to me? I just wanted to be your friend. You’re rude, so bye,” Raisin replies. She pushes on Oatmeal, but she’s stuck. “I can’t get off.”

“Oh great, we’re going to be entering the mouth very soon and I’ll be stuck with you the entire time. My once-in-a-lifetime journey is going to be spent with you,” he says, spitefully.

“Speaking of which, it looks like we’re about to start, I hope you get mushed up first.”

“Same to you.”

As soon as they enter the mouth, they are bombarded with hellos from every tooth. The teeth are very happy things because they’re friends with each other and get to hang out all day.

“Hiya folks, welcome to the mouth, I’ll be here with you just to guide you through, and I’ll see you again in the stomach. I’m Enzyme, it’s a pleasure to meet you!” a scrambled-looking creature says as the saliva begins its work.

Oatmeal and Raisin scoff, they’re very excited to be there, just not with the other, “Yeah, hi, my name is Oatmeal, it would be a great thing for you guys to do if you could break Raisin up first, she’s super annoying.”

All the teeth start talking at once to each other and one speaks over them all saying, “You’re stuck with each other though, I think you’d be friends like I am with all the other teeth.”

“Ew!” Raisin cries, “I never want to try to be friends with this flakey jerk again! He’s so rude!”

The two continue to fight as the mouth moves up-and-down,

the tongue moving the cookie pair around, the saliva being released from the salivary glands to break them up. Enzyme looks at both of them as they glare at each other, “You’re both broken up already, while you were busy bickering, the teeth and saliva were doing all that. You guys can move on to Esophagus.”

“Oh,” Oatmeal and Raisin say in unison, then glare at each other because of it.

“Welcome good sir and good madam to the esophagus, I am Esophagus, I’m going to be moving you to Stomach,” a classy-sounding gentleman says as the two enter.

“Hi, Mr. Esophagus, I’m Raisin, this is my associate, Oatmeal.”

“No need to call me Mister, Raisin, we’re going to get very comfortable!” He hugs them both very tightly and begins moving down.

“Esophagus, don’t you think this is a bit tight?” Oatmeal says, “I don’t like being so close to anyone, especially someone I’ve never met before.”

“You’ll get to know me soon enough, you’re going to be here a while, at least an hour.”

“An hour?” Raisin gasps, “An hour, oh boy...”

“Of course, it won’t all be spent with me. Speaking of me, let me tell you my life story, feel free to put your two cents in any time, but also, don’t interrupt me. It’s incredibly rude. Ok, here I go!”

Raisin and Oatmeal groan, then look at each other. They begin to whisper about their journey so far. “Enzyme was so sweet, but I think we made her mad,” Raisin says.

“Yeah, I think so too, but she probably meets loads of foods who don’t like each other, right?” Oatmeal whispers back.

“If we get along, maybe we can win her favor back when we hit the stomach.”

A booming voice cuts in on them, “Did the middle of my story interrupt the beginning of yours?”

Raisin and Oatmeal look at each other, trying to decide what to say, “Uh, we’re working out our differences? Yeeeeeah, we’re working out our differences,” quick-minded Oatmeal says.

“Differences? Weren’t you part of the same cookie?” Esophagus asks.

Raisin nods, “Yeah, we were, but Oatmeal didn’t want me there.”

Oatmeal laughs awkwardly, “You didn’t have to say that,” he whispers, nudging Raisin. He thinks it’s weird to tell a stranger, a very strange one at that, their problems.

“Why didn’t you want her?” Esophagus asks.

“Well, I could have been my own cookie, I’m rich with nutrients.”

Raisin cuts in, “So am I, I have loads of fiber and potassium. I was a grape you know.” She looks sad, trying not to let the thought of Oatmeal thinking she’s useless to get to her.

Oatmeal notices her dismal look, “Raisin.” She looks up at him. “Every other oatmeal cookie I know doesn’t have raisins. The things that eats us don’t usually like them. That means you’re special.”

“Really?” Raisin says, cheering up, “That’s so cool!”

Esophagus gasps, “Aw, yay, you’re friends again! Back to me now.”

The pair groan, then just sit back and try not to fall asleep listening to Esophagus’s boring life story.

“And that! That is why you should never make a bet with Heart,” Esophagus’s story concludes, “You’ve arrived at the stomach, bye!”

Raisin and Oatmeal sigh in relief. Then see Enzyme coming through. “Hi, Enzyme, we’re friends now!”

“Oh, that’s great to hear, Raisin, now let’s get you folks halfway digested. Meet Stomach!”

“Hi, Stomach!”

“Hello, little foods, ready for your whirl?” Stomach says softly.

Oatmeal and Raisin nod, super excited. People named Bile come out from what they will learn is the gallbladder, which stores them from the liver.

“Ok folks,” Enzyme pipes, “We’re going to be moved around a lot, the Bile people are going to be breaking you up, so just be prepared.”

Oatmeal and Raisin nod, then hold onto each other so they don’t get lost. Stomach’s muscles begin to push around the pair, the Bile people coming from this way and that to break down the

pair. The rocking ride shocks the two because Stomach is so chill. Once the process is over and Stomach has used a lot of energy to break them down into chyme, Enzyme comes back over to the pair.

“Hope you enjoyed the ride; I’m going to be going with y’all through until Small Intestine is done and get ready because she’s quick. Say bye to Stomach and the Biles!” She says as they move down toward the pyloric sphincter. The gateway separating Stomach from Small Intestine.

“Bye Stomach and the Bile people!” Then the group is pushed through the sphincter.

“Hi hi hiya folks, how are you doing today? Oh me, I’m doing just dandy, let’s get you off now!” a very energetic sounding voice says as the pair immediately start through the path, “I’m Small Intestine and I’m going to be breaking y’all down until you’re nutrition less! Enzyme here is going to help me.”

“Nice to meet you, Small Intestine,” Oatmeal says, “I’m Oatmeal and this is my friend, Raisin.”

At that, Raisin beams at him, “Yup! My bestest friend!” she replies.

“Good to hear, good to hear. Now, did you know that your friend, Enzyme, comes from my good friend, Pancreas? Well-nowyou do, I remember one time I wastalkingwithPancreasandshe-saidthatEnzymeisthenicestthinginthiswholesystem! Ain’tthatgreat?I think it’s great. Enzymeisagoodfriendofmine,we-hangouteveryday. If you aren’t friends with her, you’re missing out!”

“Oh yes, we’re good friends,” Raisin says, only understanding the last part.

“Well, it only makes sense! I never met anyone so precious in my entire life, sometimesIgetsoworriedaboutthermovingalloverthe-placeandIthinkshemightgetlostbutsheneverdoesbecauseshe’s-nogoodatherjob!” Small Intestine talks super fast, and gossips a lot, Raisin and Oatmeal just nod and laugh because they have no idea what she just said!

“I know, she’s hard to understand,” Enzyme says, “She said that she worries about me, sometimes, because I travel a lot, but she knows I’m fine because I know my job. Thanks, Small Intestine.”

“Aw, y’all are such good friends,” Raisin says, “Does she

always talk this fast though?”

“She always does, moves fast too, because she’s about twenty-one feet long, she’s gotta go fast to get y’all through to Large Intestine. She’s very good at her job too.”

“Seems like she gossips though, I’m listening to her right now talk about how the Lung twins aren’t getting along right now,” Oatmeal says.

“If you think she gossips, you’re lucky not to meet the blood highway or the nervous system web. You’d be overwhelmed.”

“And then Diaphragm stepped in and said HEY stop fighting you’re giving me the hiccups!” Small Intestine laughs, “It was the funniest thing I EVER saw!”

“That sounds like it’s been twisted,” Oatmeal says, “She’s not even near the lungs, how does she know?”

“What happened?” Raisin says, “I didn’t understand.”

“She said that because the Lung twins were fighting, Diaphragm had to step in because he got the hiccups,” Enzyme says, “And it is pretty twisted, Small Intestine got it from the blood highway and they got it from someone in the nervous system who kind of overheard it when passing by.”

“Wow, when did this happen?” Raisin asks.

“Just after dinner,” Enzyme says, “About 30 minutes ago. She’s been talking about it for twenty now.”

“Boy oh boy,” Oatmeal replies, “word travels fast around here.”

“Yeah, and then we drank a whole bunch of water just to get rid of them, we were working hard!” Small Intestine continued.

“That’s right, speaking of fast, your trip here has ended. Get ready to meet Large Intestine. Just to warn you, she’s a little, how do I put this? Thirsty. Bye-bye now!”

“Bye Enzyme, bye Small Intestine!” Raisin says.

Oatmeal thinks out loud, “Thirsty, what does that mean?” Then the pair pushes through the ileocecal valve.

“Ooh, what do we have here, I’m guessing something that was sugar, huh? What’re your names?” A jazzy voice says as the pair are moving through what must be Large Intestine.

“I’m Raisin, this is my friend, Oatmeal. You must be Large Intestine,” Raisin says.

“Yes darlin,’ I am Large Intestine. No wonder you both got

put in here, you look so sweet!” she replies melodically.

“Oh. That’s what Enzyme meant,” Oatmeal says,
“This is going to be a weird ride.”

“Be nice,” Raisin says, “Maybe she’s just really friendly.” Large Intestine continues to flirt with the pair as she removes the water from what remains of them. “I am about six feet long, and I go slow honeys. Then I’ll pass you off to Rectum, that old sour puss.”

“So, she’s a little more than friendly, but that’s okay, we won’t be here too long,” Raisin says, “I’m already a dried up grape, so there’s not much water in me, and you’re just oats, we’ll be out soon,” Raisin says optimistically.

And they were out, very soon. It was an uncomfortable ride, but they made it through.

Hi guys, I’m Rectum, I’m just going to hold you until Anus allows you through,” A very tired-sounding lady says, “Congratulations, you’re feces now. Everything of nutritional value has been removed from you, and that’s what I’m left with,” Then with a bored sarcastic tone she says, “Yaay.”

“I miss Enzyme,” Raisin says, “She was friendly.” Oatmeal nods, “we’re near the end though.” Then, at the exit, the pair sees a strong, scary guy.

“Hi, I’m Anus, you can’t pass yet, we’re not in a safe zone,” he says.

“Oh wow,” Raisin says, “You look like a bouncer.”

Oatmeal nudges her, “Stop talking he looks like he could beat us into a pulp.”

To be fair, he was right. Anus sometimes gets so angry, he beats up a food so much it’s liquid. Anus has a quick temper. Today it seemed, though, he was in a good mood.

“We’re nearing safety, I’ll let you out very soon,” he said.

“I’m very ticklish, so don’t move,” Rectum said, “Otherwise, I might accidentally move Anus out of the way, and you’re not where you’re supposed to be.”

The pair laughs, then turn toward each other, “It’s been nice knowing you, Oatmeal,” Raisin says.

“Likewise.”

“Out you go,” Anus says, pushing them out. They fall for a while, the wind hitting them, then they hit the water.

What is My Passion?

"Congrats on the publication of your book Xie, was it the great moment you were expecting?" asked my friend.

"Of course it was, I mean, it was like the biggest moment of my life!" I truly felt that, I think, I really did. I followed my passion after all, like I was told. "So, how much have you raked in yet from the book?" "I don't know yet, I've yet to hear from the publishers!" I smiled as cheerfully as possible, hoping to feel happy at the moment that I was supposed to.

"Well either way Xie, let's celebrate, cheers!" cried out my friend as I lifted my glass with her to create a loud, happy bang.

"Good morning Ms. Lin, or should I say, Sakura Xie, your alias name? Either way, I would like to inquire about the profit margins you were asking for and such. Are you sure you wanted just the 50% we negotiated? Or do you want more?" I couldn't believe what I was hearing at the time. My book must be doing so good, I could get extra profits and they would still be able to sustain themselves?

"Yes yes of course, 60% would be fine!"

"Suit yourself then, we'll send you the royalty paycheck today, so please wait for it."

I ended the call as fast as I could as I started into my bed to lay in wait for my check. Finally, compensation for my work, my dreams, my passion. They were all coming together, with the huge success of my first novel, my debut romance novel! Or, so I thought, of course. On my iPhone, I began to look up my book, hoping to see the sales or how much it was being talked about as an instant success! Was I wrong? Of course. Some poor reviews, and barely anything on it. There were so many advertisements for the book, so many things going for it, and yet, it still failed? I couldn't fathom it, so I ran. I ran out of my home, running to the place I felt at home, where I wrote my book, the park. There, I had

friends; my trees, who directed my decisions and told me what my next path should be.

"Sincere as ever it seems, are you trying to comfort me?" I asked the trees all around me.

"It's the same as always, Xie, we'll listen to your problems, so speak to us, and we'll tell."

As I was about to speak, my phone buzzed, and I fell to the ground startled. "Oh, it's my paycheck. It's \$242, and that's after a month or so, isn't it?" At that moment, I couldn't tell if I should cry or move forward. The money was nothing, so it didn't matter.

"Did I fail with my novel? How did I not reach my goals? I put in the effort, right? I came here everyday trees asking for your help, you saw me, right?! The leaves and petals of you all fell on me, in rain or Sun. Should I have done more? This is my passion after all! Has my passion failed me? Am I doomed to fail!" The trees looked down on me, with their soulless expressions like I was a failure.

"Your passion... follow whatever you believe, do whatever you wish. Try again with a new novel, don't sway. That's the only way with your passion." The trees talked to me like always, telling me the truth, or their idea of it.

"Don't sway, you're right. I'll write my sequel, and I'll write new novels. I'll live on nothing, and I'll reach the heavens with my next novel!"

And, like I said, I kept writing. During the rest of that year, and the next year following it, I visited the park every day, conversing with the trees, watching passing patrons, and doing a part-time job to stay alive. I never questioned the trees and their thoughts, I never questioned whether the publishers would take another of my books. All I knew was that my passion, writing, mustn't sway, as the trees told me. That's when the day came. Two years after my first book was published, I returned to the publishing house that first accepted me, with a sequel and a new story along with it. I deemed these stories as perfect, unchangeable love stories that would surely enter a new sphere of popularity. "So, who might you be, a new writer?" asked the lady at the front desk, smiling at me. I never realized that over these two years, I hadn't seen any of my friends, and began to wonder, were they doing well without me? Was it okay that they didn't see my smiles?

“Of course,” I told myself, my passion, as the trees should be, and will be, the only thing I focus on.

“Oh no ma’am, I wrote a book for your publishing house a while ago, maybe two years! The name was Sakura Xie?”

“Sakura Xie? Oh, you. We canceled you, and your book is out of print. All your books were donated and given away, not being sold at all. We won’t be taking any of your next novels, it says here.”

“Canceled me? I was canceled? No, that’s not right. My book, my career, it was just starting. Give me a second chance!” I yelled, trying to reassure myself.

“We could if you were sooner, but any work from you we will not take under our contracts.”

Could you see how shattered you’ve made me, trees? My masterpiece work failed, and my sequel was unpublished, my masterpiece!

“Another chance, you know me! I am a masterpiece writer, you know! I have so much potential, I can write anything! Just give me what you want, and I’ll write! Just give me a chance! I know you can, so please?”

“That isn’t my job Ms. Sakura Xie, just to tell you what the higher-ups have decided. Any more futile talking and I’ll have to call the police to leave the premises. Now, please leave Ms. Xie,” said the woman behind the counter with the most straight face of no fear or guilt.

“You know what, who needed you, you haphazard publishing company! I certainly didn’t! I’ll find someone else to publish my masterpiece!” I ran away in tears, back to the park where the trees could help me. I sat on the bench I always sat on, and pulled out a pencil, and held it to the trees.

“Where do I go next?”

“Where to go next, young child? Well, visit other companies, follow your passion, your true passion.”

“I knew that already, no need to tell me again,” I told myself. I didn’t need to hear that again from the trees. From there on, I went out, just like I did with my first novel. It was a chore to me, going out every day, visiting every company all over again, feeling that constant heartache every time I failed. I couldn’t take it after

some point, so I just became numb to the pain. Each day, my eyes remained teary, as I yearned to live, to follow what I called my passion. I quit my job, and just decided to live in the park, the place I felt most at home. I had my notebooks and MacBook and could write all I wanted in the place where I was most happy.

The trees comforted me in my efforts of writing, though they never told me anything new. The same old follow your passion, and I was with writing, wasn't I? I kept telling myself that, but where had it gotten me? So, after many months, I decided to ask a new question besides, "What should I do with my life." I asked, "What is my passion?" hoping for something new.

"Your passion, young girl? Well, it's certainly not the chore you are doing now anymore, is it? It may have been before, but what do you want to do now?"

"What do I want to do now? Well, I want to write!"

"No, ask your heart, not your brain."

"Well then, I suppose I want to live to have fun. I want to be with you, trees, and protect this land, I mean, it's gotten me through all these times!" I smiled for the first time in a while, as I covered my mouth in confusion. "Your passion, have you found it yet? Go leave, my child. This park will stay but finding your passion won't. If you want to protect this land, think farther, to the world."

"The world stage, yes! I want to travel the world, see the world, see its beauty. I want to live to the fullest, I don't need writing! I'll do what I want, not what my brain tells me to do because I already took time to do it! I'll work, and I'll reach my true goals. I don't need any of this dilly-dallying in writing, in the financial prospects. I spent all this time writing, hoping to make it rich, and become successful, but it's pointless! Aren't I right, trees?"

"Your passion is whatever you deem it to be, we can't tell you if you're right or wrong. Before you leave though, we hope you can live your life to the fullest without us." I began to cry as I ran from my bench and gripped the tree I always saw in front of me, the largest tree in the park. As I did, leaves that shined a beautiful pink began to fall from the trees, like Sakura blooms. It wasn't

natural, but I didn't care. The trees were crying with me. Without a home, I began to pack all the stuff I had left and began to leave the park, leaving a note on the bench for anyone who would follow in my footsteps, hoping they don't end up the same way I did for all those years.

“Follow your passion; ask your heart.”

The Fun House Horror

The time read 12:00 a.m. July 9th, 2019, on Ashlyn's phone. She kept looking down at it like she had received a text and even when she hadn't, she kept obsessing over it trying to find an excuse to get out of doing something reckless with her friends.

"Come on Ash, it'll be fun," Mikayla said.

"Um my idea of fun is nowhere near yours," Ashlyn stated, "And besides isn't this like, illegal?"

"Only if we get caught," Noah said confidently as if there wasn't a chance they would. As they stood at the locked gate of Oaks Wood Amusement Park, which had been shut down 29 years prior due to the death of a little girl, Ryan started to climb over the gate with Noah following behind. They gestured for the three girls to follow and all of them did, but Ashlyn hesitated.

"We are going to get arrested and it's going to be your guys' fault," Ashlyn said angrily while pointing at Noah and Ryan. Tatum and Mikayla couldn't help but giggle at Ashlyn's anger. The group of friends started to explore and were having fun, even Ashlyn.

"Sooo what's going on with you and Noah?" Tatum questioned Ashlyn, "It's complicated." Ashlyn replied, smiling, knowing it really wasn't. "Anyway, where should we go?"

"How about we go to that fun house over there? That should be fun," Mikayla said with a sly smirk on her face.

"Okay bet." Ashlyn replied while quickly catching up to the boys.

"Hey, we are going to go to that fun house over there, wanna come?"

"Yeah sure" Noah answered for the two of them.

"Alright, let's go," Ashlyn replied, smiling.

As they approached the door to the house, something felt off or wrong. All of them felt the same but no one wanted to say anything to ruin the fun. They stepped inside and were greeted by

a slight gust of wind and a cloud of dust. There was also a stench. It smelt like something had died in there.

“Ew, what is that smell,” Tatum complained,

“It's been twenty-nine years, it's probably a dead rat or something, calm down.” Ryan replied.

The house was big, it was like a mansion. Creepy paintings hung from the walls, some were crooked, and some looked as if they were alive. Old chandeliers hung from the low ceilings. When Mikayla tried to turn on the light switch, the lights flickered and then turned off again. They were in complete darkness.

“We shouldn't split up so let's stick together.” Noah said taking control of the situation,

“Or we could just leave,” Tatum suggested, when she tried opening the door again it was locked, “what the heck?” She pulled and pulled on the door, but it wouldn't open. “Great, we're stuck in this creepy house.”

“I mean there's gotta be a different exit at the end,” Mikayla suggested.

“Yeah, let's just try to get to the end.” Ashlyn agreed.

The group of friends were having the time of their lives being alone in this fun house. They were taking selfies, talking, laughing, just having fun. Then suddenly the room turned cold, bitter.

“Do you guys feel that?” Mikayla asked,

“Yeah, Yeah I do” Ryan replied confused.

There was a gust of wind that blew through the room sending the friends stumbling backwards.

“WHAT WAS THAT!” Tatum yelled, terrified.

“I- I don't know,” Noah stuttered.

“That's it, I'm out of here.” Ashlyn remarked, and with that Ashlyn left the room shutting the door behind her and entered the main hall of the house where the exit was. But, when she tried to open the door it was locked and wouldn't open. “Ugh.” A hand rested on Ashlyn's shoulder putting her at ease, she had assumed it was Noah or one of her friends, but she turned around to face the person and no one was there.

“Guys,”

“GUYS!” Ashlyn yelled trying to contact her friends.

“We should go after her,” said Noah,

“I agree, she shouldn't be walking around alone,

especially not here.” Mikayla said in agreement.

Noah walked toward the door Ashlyn had exited but it wouldn't open this time. “

Ash!” Noah shouted trying to contact his friend.

“It won't open.”

“Maybe there's another door we could try,” Ryan said, going to try the other doors, out of the four other doors in the room only one of them opened and led to a different hallway that was covered in scary decor. Tatum followed closely behind Ryan while walking through the doorway. Noah and Mikayla slowly following behind. When Ryan and Tatum were on the other side of the door it slammed shut making a loud noise and not allowing the other two friends to enter, leaving the group separated.

“RYAN... TATUM!” Noah and Mikayla screamed in unison.

“GUYS WHY WON'T THE DOOR OPEN,” Tatum shouted with fear in her voice.

While Tatum tried to get the door open Ryan walked a little ways further down the hallway. As he walked past one of the doors it opened, by itself.

“Uhhh Tatum, come here,”

“What now Ryan?” She stopped and looked at the door, “was that open before?”

“No, it wasn't.” As the two stood in front of the door debating if they should go inside, they started to hear quiet sobs on the other side. It sounded like a little girl.

Meanwhile, Ashlyn walked over to a corner in the room and slowly slid down the wall in defeat. A few tears escaped her eyes as she thought she would be there forever. She had tried to open any of the doors that were there but none of them would open. She was about to completely give up but then she heard the squeaking of door hinges. Ashlyn looked up at the source of the noise to see a door across the room slowly swinging open. It revealed a very dark hallway that gave off no light. Ashlyn pulled her phone out of her pocket and turned on the flashlight feature. As she peered down the hall there were just more doors. The frightened teenage girl walked cautiously through the now open doorway. The hall was dark, ominous, and frightening. Scary decorations hung on the walls all the way to the other end of the hall, broken clown dolls and cracked lights hung from the ceiling

and were only illuminated by the light from Ashlyn's phone. "I hate this place," she said under her breath, mad that she let her friends convince her into coming into the house.

In the meantime, when Ryan and Tatum heard the sobs, they stopped in their tracks. "Hello," Ryan called into the dark room, waiting for an answer but he only heard more quiet sobs. He opened the door more so they could see the entire room inside. He took his phone and turned on his flashlight, and Tatum copied him. He shone the light through the door and peered inside, he saw nothing but emptiness. They walked in but still heard soft cries. Then, the cries suddenly stopped and were followed by footsteps which were not Tatum's or Ryan's. Through the piercing silence of their environment Tatum and Ryan both heard a soft, "This way."

Meanwhile, Noah was trying to open one of the other doors that they were surrounded by.

"Ugh, why won't these open," Noah said through gritted teeth. As he kept trying to break open the door he heard faint footsteps on the other side.

"Do you hear that?" Noah asked Mikayla.

"No," Mikayla replied confused. Noah pressed his ear against the door and heard very clearly footsteps.

"Hello!" Noah shouted, "hello!!!" he repeated.

"Noah is that you?" a familiar voice said on the other side.

"A-Ash is that you!" He exclaimed, as Noah said that Mikayla ran over to the door.

"Noah, I'm here!" Ashlyn replied, running to the door he was on the other side of.

"Hey Ash!" Mikayla said happy to hear her friend was okay.

"Mikayla! I can't open the door, can you guys?" Ashlyn shouted, "no we can't."

It went silent as they were trying to think when Ash felt a cold breeze on her back, she slowly turned around when she was met by loud footsteps almost running in her direction, but she couldn't see anything that was in front of her.

When the footsteps landed in front of her, she felt a pair of cold hands wrap around her head, she felt as if her brain might explode. When she screamed from the pain it caught Noah and Mikayla's attention.

“ASH!!” They both screamed, rattling the door handle. Noah tried with all his strength to get the door open, but it wouldn’t budge, it was almost as if someone was holding it shut. Eventually he gave up his current methods and started kicking at the door. Because the door was very old, made of wood, and rotting it was not as impossible to break open. He broke off some of the door panels and climbed through the door. What he saw on the other side was Ashlyn, she was sitting in the corner with her head in her hands covering her face, she was quietly crying and breathing heavily.

“A-Ash,” Noah said softly as he knelt beside her. She slowly lifted her head and when she saw his face, she hugged him and cried into his shoulder.

“How about we get out of here,” he said softly, “please,” Ashlyn said. They found Mikayla again and started searching for an exit.

Ryan and Tatum were questioning whether or not they heard what they thought they heard. Both of them turned towards each other and looked horrified. Then the footsteps continued down the hall but stopped in front of a door a little further down the hall.

“Do we follow it?” Tatum asked, still horrified.

“S-Sure,” Ryan responded, completely unsure. They cautiously approached the door, it opened and revealed the main room with the front door.

“Yes,” Ryan exclaimed with excitement, “a way out.” He tried the front door, but it wouldn’t open. As he looked around for a way to open it there was banging on a door on the opposite side of the room. Tatum hid behind Ryan in fear when all of a sudden that door broke open to reveal three people.

“Noah, Ash, Mikayla!” Tatum exclaimed, happier than she had been in the past hour.

“Guys!” Ash said, all of the friends ran to each other and embraced in a group hug.

After they were done hugging one another they started trying to find something to break the front door open.

“Guys, I think I found something,” Mikayla said as she pulled a dusty sheet off of a toolbox.

“Perfect,” Noah said, opening the box and digging through it until he found a crowbar and a hammer.

“Ryan, help me break open the door.” Noah ordered. Ryan grabbed a hammer and started to break holes in the door. They kept hitting at the door until there was a hole large enough for a human to fit through. One by one they each climbed through it and ran to the entrance of the amusement park that they had come from. Once they had grouped back together, they got as far away from the park as they could.

Each of them went home that night and tried to forget about it. Ryan couldn't keep it to himself, and he talked to his parents about everything. When he was done his father looked shocked and explained that 39 years prior his twin sister had passed away in that same fun house, they couldn't find her body until 10 years later when the park was shut down because of it. When his father was done talking, Ryan knew that the ghost who had helped him and Tatum that night was his aunt...

What They Don't Know

I'm in my seat by the time the warning bell rings. Ashley is sitting in her seat on my right, talking through me to talk to Riley. They laugh about something, but it quickly dies as we start to announce the pledge.

I stay quiet, moving my mouth as if I'm actually making any sound. I don't want people to hear my voice in case it turns out all deep and croaky.

Mr. Thomas walks in and we go over the bell work that was placed on the screen. I draw on the paper during the school announcements, bored from the same reminders as yesterday. I draw quickly, satisfied with the girl on my page.

The class goes by quickly with us labeling and coloring a political map of Europe. I work in silence until the bell rings and I stand to pack up my papers.

"That's a good drawing, Kris," Mr. Thomas exclaims, pointing to my bell work.

I smile, "Thank you."

Leaving the classroom, I maneuver the hallway and flock of students until I reach the lockers outside of Ms. Toucan's classroom. There waits Caitlyn with her navy pullover hoodie and tote bag. She smiles when she sees me.

"Hello!" I greet as we leave the hallway and head toward the art room on the other side of the school. The wind pushes against us and my hair goes flying with it.

"Hello. I'm thinking of filming HorrorLand today," Caitlyn announces as we walk past the rush of students heading to their second period classes.

"Ooh, yeah. I'm sure it will turn out great. I'm probably going to film mine tomorrow. Still working on the blue snake though."

She nods, "Yeah."

The classroom is full of students when we arrive. The two boys who sit next to us are absent. Thank God, I sigh. Having to not sit

next to them when they only talk about inappropriate actions for just one day less is a blessing.

Giving Caitlyn a smile, I head into the backroom, her footsteps following after mine and pick up my two model magic snakes and one model magic rat.

The class goes by quickly, with Caitlyn using a foldable locker shelf to rest her phone upon as she films her stop motion cartoon using her 3D monsters which includes vampires, Frankenstein, werewolves, and a swamp... thing. In the frames it shows the creatures dancing. She's going to put music in the background once she's done.

As I'm painting the blue snake, which is currently half white half blue, Calvin stands up from his chair and starts talking and laughing so loud with his friends to the point where the music Mrs. Jen put on is hard to hear.

Mrs. Jen turns on her microphone which is around her neck. It makes a small jingle in the speakers before her pleasant voice commands, "Calvin, sit down. It's hard for the other students to work when you all are being noisy."

It's not, but he complied anyway. Mrs. Jen is too nice. The bell rings again as I'm putting my snakes away. Walking out of the backroom, Caitlyn is already there with her bag and my binder in arm.

"Thank you," I chirp, taking my binder and walking with her halfway to science before she heads off in the direction of the band room, her clarinet bumping against her knees.

Third period science is the worst. I only say a couple of sentences to Avery, who I sit next to.

I say "Hello." I mumble,

"The answer is C."

And then I finished off with a short, "Bye."

At lunch Belle and I go up together to get the gross school food from the cafeteria workers. Waiting in line feels like forever. At one point it seems as if a group of boys are staring at me, but when I look it's only Jack. He smiles as hoots, "Cardigan girl!" from the row next to mine.

His friends are too busy messing around to notice. I grin back and give him a playful glare.

"It's a shawl," I clarify at the same time he mimics those same words. I slant my eyes and respond with, "Scooter boy." He rolls

his eyes and then faces the girl working that station to order. At the beginning of the year Jack won the talent show with a video recording of him doing scooter tricks. He even has sponsors.

I pull my grey shawl closer to my body, fitting it against my teal T-shirt dress. I stare down at my Doc Martens until it's my time to order.

Fifth period is the highlight of my day. Caitlyn walks into the class right after me, setting her bag in the extra chair at our table. It's two to a table, so we get to sit with just each other.

Moments later Carter and Holden walk in afterward and take their seats at the table next to us. If one were to look at the seating chart, it would read: Caitlyn, Kris, Carter, and then Holden. I sneak a glimpse at Carter before taking out my blue notebook. Caitlyn and I leave the class five minutes after we arrive.

Interview time.

~ ~ ~

“Have you ever seen or talked to someone who's depressed?” I ask, Caitlyn recording the conversation from a little ways behind me.

For my editorial article I'm doing the effects school has on teenagers that lead to depression. I'm currently interviewing a girl a year younger than me with dark brown eyeliner with rosy cheeks and a pinkish lip gloss on her lips. Her name is Emma.

“Yes.”

Looking bored, she shifts on her feet, her hands clasped behind her back like she's in the military or something.

“How so?”

She shrugs and I wait a few seconds until she answers.

When I went into Mrs. Richmond's classroom and asked her if any students would like to be interviewed for the school newspaper, I had hoped that she wouldn't pick on someone boring. So far, the interview is going just like Val's, the girl I had just previously interviewed who had the most unamusing answers to my questions.

“By the way they talked or looked,” another shrug, “They showed me some cuts on their arms.”

My eyes widened in shock. I nod, “Okay, thank you Emma. You can go back to class now.”

She leaves and I turn around to Caitlyn, shock still plastered to my face. She has the same expression as she clicks the stop button on her phone.

“Wow,” I breathe.

“Right?”

I nod as we exit the hallway and head back towards the classroom.

“I definitely wasn’t expecting that. Like, oh my God. Well at least my article's gonna be more interesting now.”

We head into the classroom and take our seats in the back just in time for the bell to ring.

~ ~ ~

“Kristen? Kristen Palmer? Are you here?”

I blink up at Mr. Young. His hair is a dark brown with streaks of silver here and there. His weary eyes stare at me through his gold rimmed glasses. We had him as a substitute on Thursday and Friday last week. I’m sure he knows who I am, but still he asks. Everyone’s eyes are glued to me, staring unblinkingly.

“Here,” I mumble, just for everyone to look away. Just stop staring at me, I plead.

He moves on to Naomi and then Marcos, the two people who sit behind me. Once he marks everyone who’s absent into the computer, he starts the lesson. Putting up the algebra notes and sitting down into Ms. Goods swivel chair. He scrolls on his phone for the rest of the class.

I look around at the people sitting next to me. Naomi and Marcos are talking about Evan, the redhead who sits across from Naomi, who just so happens to be absent today

“It sucks that he’s absent. Do you think he’ll be back tomorrow?” Naomi asks, pushing her messy purple hair out of her face. It sticks out in different ways as if she just got out of bed and is short like a boy.

“I heard that his crazy girlfriend beat him up. She found out that he was cheating and went nuts. He was defending himself when he split her lip is all. Was suspended after the school found out,” Marcos smirks.

Naomi widens her eyes and whispers, “Wow.”

I watch them as they talk about the algebra homework Mr. Young passed out at the start of class. The way they talk is so normal, like they’ve been friends for years even though they only met at the start of the year. Sometimes Marcos says something inappropriate and I smile. Maybe they’ll say something to me?

The bell rings and I set my green composition workbook and yellow homework page in my binder. The three basketball players in front of me rushed out before I could stand up, so I’m one of the last people out.

I wait by the lockers outside until I see Caitlyn, and together we walk to get our backpacks from our lockers. When we’re leaving the hallway, we say goodbye and part ways. I’ll see her tomorrow, I think, and even though I don’t want to, another thought creeps into my head. Because tomorrow will be the same.

~ ~ ~

Once I’m in the car, Mom smiles at me and asks, “Did anything exciting happen today?”

I smile back and reply. “Nope.”



Kathleen Wittenberger
Middle School

Lungs

Day 1

I watch as the icy blue liquid splats to the ground, in no hurry. the cold air is visibly huffing from the pale lips of those walking around. the wooden bench freezes my body as I shift my position. the breeze sends chills throughout my bones. there is a faint scraping noise coming from the metal razors touching the frozen pond. my lungs feel frozen with each breath, but it enlightens me. pasty white flakes quickly fill the ground. one lands on my face, finding a home. my fingers burn as they emerge from the safety of their gloves, the cold air rushing to embrace them. I catch a whiff of gingerbread and it delights my nose. I spot a sparkling star topping a newly chopped tree. the fuzz of my socks protecting my feet reminds me of their warmth.

Day 2

I watch as the icy blue liquid splats to the ground. the cold air is visibly huffing from the pale lips of those around me. the wooden bench freezes my body as I shift my position. the breeze sends chills throughout my bones. there is a faint scraping noise coming from the frozen pond. my lungs feel frozen with each breath, but it enlightens me. pasty white flakes fill the ground. one lands on my face, finding a home. my fingers burn as they emerge from the gloves, the cold air rushing to embrace them. I catch a whiff of gingerbread and it delights my nose. I spot a sparkling star topping a tree. the fuzz of my socks reminds me of their warmth.

Day 3

I watch as the icy blue liquid splats to the ground. the cold air is visibly huffing from the pale lips of those around me. the wooden bench freezes my body. the breeze sends chills throughout my bones. there is a faint scraping noise coming from the frozen

pond. my lungs feel frozen with each breath, but it enlightens me. pasty white flakes fill the ground. one lands on my face. my fingers burn as they emerge from the gloves, the cold air rushing to embrace them. I catch a whiff of gingerbread and it delights me. I spot a sparkling star topping a tree. the fuzz of my socks reminds me of their warmth.

Day 4

I watch as the icy blue liquid splats to the ground. the cold air is visibly huffing from the pale lips of those around me. the wooden bench freezes my body. the breeze gives me chills. there is a faint scraping noise coming from the frozen pond. my lungs feel frozen with each breath. pasty white flakes fill the ground. one lands on my face. my fingers burn as they emerge from the gloves, the cold air rushing to embrace them. I catch a whiff of gingerbread and it delights me. I spot a sparkling star topping a tree. the fuzz of my socks.

Day 5

I watch the liquid splat. the cold air is visible. the wooden bench freezes me. the breeze gives chills. there is a faint scraping noise. my lungs feel frozen. pasty white flakes fall. one lands. my fingers burn as they are taken out of the gloves. I catch a whiff of gingerbread. I spot a sparkling star. the fuzz of my socks.

Day 6

I watch the liquid. the cold air. the wooden bench. the breeze. the faint scraping. my lungs. white flakes. one lands. my fingers burn. I smell the bread. the star. my socks.

Day 7

the liquid. the air. the bench. the breeze. the scraping. my lungs. flakes. one lands. my fingers. I smell. the star. my socks.

Day 8

liquid. air. bench. breeze. scraping. lungs. flakes. one. fingers. smell. star. socks.

Day 9

liquid. air. bench. breeze. scrape. lungs. flake. finger.
star.

Day 10

liquid. breeze. scrape. lungs. flake.

Day 11

breeze. lungs.

Day 12

lungs.

Day 13

lung.

Day 14

l-.

Day 15

until it's gone. that last breath was your last. that word stays
unspoken. because you're gone. forever.

My lungs breathe for you. This breath won't be my last. I will
say that word. Because you're gone. Forever. So, my lungs are
your lungs. Forever.

Day 1

L-.

Day 2

Lung.

Day 3

Lungs.

Day 4

Liquid. The Breeze. The Scraping. Lungs. Flake.

Day 5

The liquid. Air. Bench. The breeze. The scraping.
My lungs. The flakes. One. Fingers. Smell. Star. Socks.

Day 6

I watch the icy blue liquid. The crisp air is visible.
The wooden bench. The breeze. There is a faint s
craping noise. My lungs feel frozen. Pasty white flakes fill the
ground. None find my face. My fingers burn as they emerge from
the gloves. The gingerbread fragrance makes me nauseous. I spot a
star. Socks.

Day 7

The icy blue liquid is slowly starting to freeze over. The cold
air is not as enjoyable to see emerging from others' mouths. The
wooden bench hasn't been touched yet. The chilly breeze makes
me shiver. The faint scraping noise is fading. My lungs are frozen.
Pasty white flakes fill the ground higher each day. None have
found my face yet. My fingers burn as they emerge from the
gloves. The gingerbread fragrance makes me nauseous. The
sparkling star doesn't sparkle as bright. The fuzz of the socks.

Day 8

The icy blue liquid is fully frozen. The cold air isn't enjoyable
to see emerging from others' mouths. The wooden bench sits un-
touched still. The chilly breeze makes me shiver. The faint
scraping noise is no more and the pond stays untouched. My lungs
still feel frozen, but they hurt with each breath. Pasty white flakes
have filled the ground until it's almost unwalkable. As many as
there are, none have found my face. My fingers still burn outside
of the gloves, and I hate the feeling. The gingerbread fragrance
makes me nauseous. The sparkling star has lost its sparkle. The
fuzz of my socks only reminds me of you.

Day 9

The liquid is fully frozen. The cold air isn't enjoyable. The
wooden bench sits untouched still. The chilly breeze makes me
shiver. The faint scraping noise is no more and the pond is
untouched. My frozen lungs hurt with each breath. The ground is
unwalkable. None have found my face. My fingers still burn

outside of the gloves, and I hate the feeling. I feel nauseous. The star lost its sparkle. The fuzz of the socks reminds me of you.

Day 10

Fully frozen. Not enjoyable. The wooden bench sits untouched still. Makes me shiver. The pond stays untouched. My frozen lungs hurt with each breath. The ground is unwalkable. None. I hate the feeling. I feel nauseous. Lost its sparkle. Reminds me of you.

Day 11

Frozen. Unenjoyable. Untouched. Shiver. Untouched. Lungs. Unwalkable. None. Hate. Nauseous. Lost. You.

Day 12

Lungs.

Day 13

Lung.

Day 14

L-.

Day 15

I said forever. 'My lungs are your lungs. Forever.' I lied. My lungs will no longer breathe for you. That breath was your last. This will be mine. I won't finish that word. Because we'll both be gone. Forever. So, our lungs can breathe together again. Forever.



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The Cat Chronicles

Shizuka had heard talk of having a little sister. She didn't know if it was true but she did know she didn't want it to be.

She already had her companion, Shalom, and his sister, Shanti. They didn't need a new addition. She heard it was going to be a kitten too!

Shizuka remembered when she first came to her home two years earlier...

She was the only cat in the house. That time was magical. Until one day when Shalom and Shanti were brought home. She was angry.

A few days later, Shizuka started warming up to them. She felt jealous. They were brother and sister so they stuck together. Although, after a few weeks, Shizuka and Shalom began cuddling. He was warm and she liked him. They fell in love.

She wasn't happy with the way Shalom would bully Shanti. She wasn't one to talk though. Shizuka had to admit, she did have a part in bullying Shanti, and even Shalom, too. She would tell them to stop eating so she could take their food. The owners caught on recently and she was not happy being in trouble.

Now, Shizuka and Shalom cuddled by the fireplace, adoring the warmth.

"Shizu Wizu! You're such a cutie!" Shizuka heard one of her owners exclaim. She already knew that she was pretty. She was the Queen of this castle, wasn't she?

"Why, thank you, my royal Subject!" Shizuka meowed. Her owner scrunched her nose. "Oh, I love you, too, baby girl!"

"That is not what I said, Subject!" Shizuka demanded. Her meow must not have been simple enough for the girl.

"Hi, Shalomy Bologna! You two are so cute when you cuddle!"

He meowed. "Thank you, Subject," he said kindly. He turned to Shizuka, "You really should humble yourself more. If the news

we heard is true, we will be getting a new cat.” He licked his chops randomly. “A kitten actually,” he corrected himself. “We are going to be adopting a kitten meaning we will be parents.” He was overjoyed by the news.

“What makes you think the new kitten is going to be our child?” Shizuka insisted.

“Darling, I know you dislike change, but,” he tried to continue but Shizuka cut him off.

“No! Change has absolutely nothing to do with this. Who knows if this new kitten is a spy sent from the kingdom next door, hmm? Or maybe she was sent from a far away land. Like... like... oh! Like where I originated from,” Shizuka hissed. She was taken care of in a larger kingdom when she was a kitten. She preferred her new kingdom better though.

“Well, darling, I don’t think she is going to be a spy.”

“Well, even if she isn't a spy, she could still be disrespectful and wild.”

“She is a kitten, Shizuka,” Shalom insisted.

She huffed, “I was so stressed when you guys came here. I hated your arrival, you know.” She laid her head down on her paws.

“But you got to know Shanti and I. And now look at us. We are married. You went from hating me to loving me. You can repeat our experience with the new addition as well.”

Shizuka paused for a moment. “I’ll think about it. I promise. Now, I’m going to take a nap.” She closed her eyes and drifted halfway into sleep.

Shizuka could hear her owners talking about a new kitty. THE new kitty.

“I can’t wait for Amani!” One said.

Amani? Shizuka pondered.

“I know! I love the name! Amani. Peace.” said the other.

Shizuka knew her name meant ‘peace’ in Japanese. ‘Shalom’ meant the same, only in Hebrew. And ‘Shanti’ in Bengali. Shizuka had heard her owners talking about the language the new kitty’s name belonged to.

Amani. Peace in Swahili. The name did sound royal. Shizuka liked that.

Maybe this new edition to her family wouldn't be as bad as

she'd thought...

Little Amani sat in the arms of one of her new owners. She really liked this owner, she was very calm and gave her compliments, saying she was cute or sweet. Precious was her favorite name. Amani had just learned her new name. She liked it. It sounded... royal.

The owner who was currently holding Amani handed her off to another and picked up another cat. A bigger cat.

"Hello! I'm Amani! I'm new here!" Amani exclaimed. The big cat scoffed. "Who are you? You're an intruder!" she hissed.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I just wanted to introduce myself," Amani defended.

"Well, that's unnecessary," the cat jumped from the owner's arms.

"Ouch! Shizu!" She scolded.

Ooh! Somebody's in trouble! Amani thought. Two other cats came up to Amani and hissed. Amani didn't care. She didn't need them. She had lots of love from her kind owners.

Throughout the day her owners scolded the other cats. She'd learned their names. Shizuka, or Shizu, Shalom, and Shanti.

After a few days of the cats still hating Amani, she was close to giving up on earning their trust. When they hissed, she hissed back. When they swatted at her, she swatted back. She held her ground. She did know her place in the pride though.

One day she woke up and was carried down the stairs by one of her owners. She got a new toy which she was ecstatic about. Suddenly, all of the owners sat around the room with boxes of all different shapes and sizes. They all started throwing paper into a bag. Amani dove into the bag! She did parkour throughout the entire room, hopping from lap, to box, to the tree, and back to start again. Amani heard the owners talking about something called Christmas. Whatever that was, Amani liked it. She really really liked it.

She had fun on Christmas, despite being yelled at for trying to eat the tree, and being scolded by the other cats for no reason.

Shalom had been acting strange all day. "What's wrong, sir?" Amani asked politely.

"None of your business!" He demanded.

“Shalom, dear, are you sure you're alright?”

Shizuka called from the top of the stairs, a place Amani was not yet able to reach on her own.

“No, I feel horrible!” he whined, calling back to his wife. “I've had a stomachache for a few hours now.”

“Did you eat something?” Shizuka asked.

“No, I couldn't have!” Shalom insisted.

A couple days after Christmas, Shalom was very sick so the owners took him to the hospital. Even though Amani knew Shalom didn't like her, she still felt bad and wanted Shalom to feel better...

Shalom felt sick to his stomach, literally. The pain he felt was unbearable. He'd been in this healing dungeon for what felt like years. He had so many scents flooding his senses. It was torture!

Shalom missed his wife, Shizuka and his sister, Shanti. He also missed all of his peasants, especially the one that fed him breakfast and dinner, and the one that always welcomed him onto her lap. The only reason Shalom was happy about not being home was that he didn't have to look at Amani. She was the most annoying little thing he'd ever met. Sometimes, she didn't even act like a cat. She was a ferret, always crawling in small spaces in an agile manner. She was a monkey, climbing on everybody, the humans and the cats. She was also a bird, sitting on the humans' shoulders like a maniac. Who did she think she was? Cats always make it a priority to stay off of the shoulders and in the arms of the humans.

Suddenly, another pain struck Shalom in his stomach. OUCH!! It hurt so bad. “Help, somebody please help! Humans! Peasants! Please!” Nobody heard his cries. They were too busy working on other cats. He relaxed his head on his paws and slowly fell asleep.

Shalom was awoken by one of the healing peasants. “Thank you for finally coming! You took way too long! I have been in the worst pain imaginable!” Shalom cried.

“Aww! Mr. Shalom, you have the cutest meow,” said the healing peasant. She walked him over to the counter.

“No, no, no. No, please! I don't want to be stabbed! It hurts too much!” he pleaded.

The human ignored him, “I'm sorry, bud.”

“No you’re not!”

She poked him with a needle, “There you go.”

“Ugh, that was so rude.”

He heard the doctor and the nurse talking about his Mommy. She was coming! He was gonna get to go home!

Mommy came after he was put into his kennel. He was so happy. He felt very sick still, but at least it wasn’t as bad. He was confused when he wasn’t at home. Instead, he got a bunch of other scents that he didn’t get before. Why was he here?

“Yes, his name is Shalom.”

Why is Mommy not taking me home? Shalom was so confused.

“I’m sorry, Shalomy. I love you. You’re gonna get better. You have to.” Mommy sounded sad. She left him and Shalom was worried. He thought he was going home.

The next day he had gotten his belly shaved. He got a nice big shot and started feeling woozy. Soon everything went black. When Shalom woke up, he felt much better. He still felt sick but he didn’t have a tummy ache anymore.

“Yes, Shalom had a very successful surgery,” the doctor said proudly.

What?! Surgery? Shalom had surgery? That must have been why he was in so much pain! He needed surgery!

Five days later, he went home and he was so happy to see his house. He wasn’t even inside yet, but he was so excited. He couldn’t wait to see Shizuka.

He was let out of his kennel. “Thank you,” he said. Shalom saw Shizuka, his beautiful, beautiful Shizuka. “Shizuka, I’ve missed you!”

Shizuka’s face was blank but soon turned angry. “Who are you?!” she hissed...

“It’s me, Shizuka! It is Shalom! Your husband!” the cat explained rapidly.

“You are not my husband!” Shizuka cried.

Shanti was in shock. First her brother left, and now there was somebody pretending to be him? It was impossible. Unbelievable. She couldn’t wrap her furry head around it.

“Why are you here? Where is my brother?”

“I am your brother! Shanti, it’s me,” he looked at Amani then swatted her and hissed.

They had become close with Amani. Amani was one tough cookie. She took the swat like a champ but they still didn’t like that this imposter was bullying the sweet baby.

“Don’t touch my baby!” Shizuka hissed.

All of the humans gasped in shock. “Shizu, why are you swatting at Shalom?”

“His name is not Shalom!!” Shizuka hissed at him once more.

“What is the matter, peasants? We are protecting Amani, and you. There’s no reason for you to side with this imposter!” Shanti couldn’t grapple it. Was her brother still sick? Did somebody catnap him? Could he be... no, he couldn’t be... Shanti looked at the imposter.

“Tell me, what is your real name?”

“Shalom! My name is Shalom!” He looked very frustrated.

“I’m tired. I will explain everything, I promise. I just need to rest.”

Shizuka was practically crying at that point. Shanti didn’t know how to help. She wasn’t crying but she was overly surprised. “Shizuka, what is something only Shalom would know? We could trick the imposter.”

“That is a good idea, Shanti. What if the imposter studied? Then he’ll know the answer.”

“Oh, you’re right. Well, what if it is something Shalom swore not to tell anybody?”

“I don’t know. Shalom would probably tell his deepest secrets if his life was on the line. He’s always been a bit of a wimp.” That was true. There was no way of denying it. It was still worth a try though.

“Just think. I want my brother back. We need to know.”

“Okay, I’ll think.”



Nathaniel Ayele
High School

The Justiniad

Author's Note

This is my first shot at a Timeline of my own! The main POD here is a victory for Byzantine forces at the Battle of Sebastopolis, and the capture of Muhammad ibn Marwan. I wanted to write this timeline as essentially a "What if Justinian II had a decent reign". I should also mention that this is NOT about Justinian I, the one familiar in our popular memory, but instead Justinian II, the last Heraclian Emperor to rule Eastern Rome. Hope y'all enjoy.

A Heraclian Timeline

Prologue

Justinian II stood outside of his tent, looking at the shoreline. The sun was setting, and the battle won, the fields of Sebastopolis stained red with the blood of Romans and Arabs alike. The sound of the waves relaxed him, the smell of the sea breeze letting his body and mind forget the terrible screams and carnage of the battle. It was brutal, but at least it was a victory, something which had been rare in this time. He thought for a second, pondering the recent string of victories he and his father had achieved in the face of their overwhelming foes. He didn't have long to think though, as he was approached from behind by his General.

"Basileus, I have news of the prisoners." Leontios spoke, distinguished by his aged and rough voice.

"Speak General, what information have you gained?"

* In reference to Muhammad ibn Marwan and the Caliph Abd-al Malik. The Greek transliterations of their names are used in text, as is the Greek title given to the Caliph, that of "Chief"

Justinian replied, slightly disinterested. He had little care of what those heathen prisoners had to say under the screws.

“We have captured their leader sir, Mouameth, the brother of their chief Abimelech*.”

Justinian turned to face his General, the peace that had formerly filled his mind now cleared out, replaced by the reality of the situation around him.

“You are entirely sure it is their leader, and not a man you may have confused for him?” asked Justinian.

“Yes sir, he was found with 5 other men around him, all guarding him, as they would their liege.” Leontios said, “And one of our officers claims to recognize him from previous campaigns.”

Justinian gave a wiry smile, gleeful at the capture of the chief Saracen commander, and brother to their monarch.

“Well General, take me to him. I wish to see the captain of the host we have vanquished.”

Chapter I - Justinian II

March, 692, Sebastopolis¹

The small dilapidated tent was surrounded by Excubitors, 6 in total it seemed, all surrounding the building like the hawk watches over her chicks. As he entered the tent, he found Mouameth², sitting in a chair in front of a table, watched over by another pair of Excubitors, as well as a man dressed in the simple garb of a foot soldier. Justinian took a seat in front of Mouameth, and looked at him.

He lacked the garb that typically distinguished the leaders of the Arabs, likely having abandoned them in his failed flight. Instead, he was dressed in the simple linothorax, with a plain white cloak and a white headdress. Still, despite the clothing, he retained the look of a noble. His beard was trimmed and groomed, and he had a calm energy to him, not panicked as a captured foot soldier would. Nevertheless, Justinian turned his head to the Roman soldier standing next to them.

“Would I be correct to assume you are the translator for me?”

Justinian said, glancing at the soldier.

“Y-yes Basileus,” the soldier said, “I am fluent in their tongue.”

Justinian nodded at the soldier and began to speak.

“Ask him how it feels, to see your God abandon your cause before your eyes.”

The soldier spoke to Mouameth, and Mouameth replied, continuing to seem calm and unphased.

“He says that his God has not abandoned him, but that he has only given them a trial to overcome.” translated the soldier.

Mouameth spoke again, this time unprompted, forcing the soldier to translate once more.

“He asks how much of a tribute you will demand his brother to hand over for his return and that of his soldiers.”

Justinian scoffed. “He attempts to demand terms while he is our prisoner?” he asked, “Such boldness for a captive of war.”

As he heard the translated words, Mouameth spoke back in his guttural language.

"He says that we have grown proud of our few victories, and that we should not forget the true strength of their armies." the soldier said once again, glancing at the floor.

Justinian glared at him, thinking about how he was so stoic in the face of his captors. "Your brother's armies are preoccupied, no?" he said, his voice slightly strained. "They are campaigning in Erithbos and Persis³, far from us, and will be unable to react in time."

The soldier performed his job and Mouameth replied, still unfeeling and relaxed.

"He claims that they still have reserve throughout Armenia, and despite our best attempts they still outnumber us."

Justinian felt his teeth grind for a second, but stopped and attempted to calm himself. “They are fresh, no? And their commanders remain to be proven.”

Mouameth smirked upon hearing the translation, and replied.

“He says that although they are inexperienced, they could conquer us in a heartbeat.” The soldier paused for a second, visibly uneasy.

“That their raw recruits could march over Rome as they had

before. That their God will grant them their victory.”

Justinian seethed, and realized his jaw was clenched in frustration. He rose from the table and walked out of the tent, without word nor warning. As he opened the flap he heard a small snicker, followed by the sound of a slap, come from the inside. Upon exiting he saw Leontios standing outside, facing him directly.

“Basileus, what-” Leontios attempted so speak, before being cut off.

“Were you in my position, what would you do?” Justinian asked, his teeth gnashing.

“Pardon?” Leontios replied, his eyebrows raised.

“Were you in my position, what would you do with this heathen? What choice would you make?” Justinian asked again, his pale face reddened in irritation.

Leontios paused for a few seconds, then replied with an answer. “I would ransom him and his men to his brother, and extract from them another treaty of tribute.”

“But that is what he wants,” Justinian said, his voice beginning to elevate. “He wishes for it, because he knows they will return with an army and continue to ransack without mercy. And every day we give to Abimelech to negotiate, is more time for him and his generals to leave Erithbos and march upon us.” His breath was heavy and he felt a beating alongside his temple.

“What other option is there, my liege?” Leontios responded. “This is the nature of politics, of war.”

“We could kill him. Have his body paraded through Constantinople as a sign of our victory.”

Leontios’s face turned pale at the mention. “That would be an extremely unwise choice sire.”

“Why? Would they not do the same if they had captured you? Did they not treat generals like Thomas or Cyril in the same manner?⁴ Should they afford no mercy to us then we should afford no mercy to them!” he yelled; fists clenched.

Leontios looked shocked, and the guards around the tent shared a similar face of surprise. “My lord, should you kill him, you have no idea the wrath that might be visited upon us by the Arabs, what terrors they might bring to bear upon our people.” Leontios said, his voice soft and eyes wide.

“God is with us! Our God, he delivered us at Constantinople,

at Lycia, against the Sklaveni, and now here on the fields of Cilica! Their true soldiers are off on the ends of the earth, and the only ones that remain are scattered or fresh off the press! This is our chance, to do this, to avenge the disgrace of my ancestors, of our lands, of our people.” His eyes had widened now, his blonde bangs forming a stark contrast to his apple red skin.

Leontios clasped his hands together, and bowed himself in front of his Emperor. “I beg you please! Rethink this, before your rashness leads to unnecessary carnage and suffering, please! If not for me, for the people, for your soldiers, for the legacy your father fought to build!”

Justinian paused, his face twisted into both confusion and contempt, but still continued his rage.

“My father’s legacy? This is the legacy of my father, to kill the heathen where they stand! To put an end to their invasions and pillaging of our Christian nation. I do this to protect my people from raiders, to ensure my soldiers will not have to return and fight hundreds of wars, this is to save Rome!”

“Please, Basileus, please.” The general tugged on Justinian’s chlamys⁵, but the Emperor quickly yanked it away from him. “Show some dignity, you are a General of Rome, not a beggar on the streets. Now rise, for the decision has already been made.”

Leontios rose from his bowing position, and walked away towards his quarters, head hanging and arms falling at his side. It was a sad sight, to see the man who had just won the battle slink away into the camp as if he were defeated.

Justinian re-entered the tent and looked the soldier dead in the eye. The man was visibly shaken, likely having heard the conversation outside the tent. “Tell this barbarian that he will not be ransomed, but that he will be taken to Constantinople. There he will be dragged through the streets like the animal he is, and killed in the great hippodrome, dying to the cheerful glee of the Christian world.” His voice was calmer now, more levelled.

The soldier spoke and Mouameth’s face turned pale. His eyes seemed as if they would fall out of their sockets. Justinian felt his anger be overtaken by a sense of joy, seeing this stone wall crumble in the face of his promise. Mouameth sat in shock for a minute, before rising from his chair and lunging at Justinian. He managed to tackle the Emperor to the ground, but was quickly

pulled off by the guards within the room, and beaten by them until his face turned the same shade of purple as Justinian's robes. The Emperor raised himself from the ground and smoothed out his clothing, his face stoic but his mind filled with satisfaction.

[1] The actual date for the battle of Sebastopolis is unknown, only the year, so I decided to have it happen in March just to be extra mean to the Umayyads.

[2] I originally misspelled the Greek transliteration of Muhammad, this is the proper form.

[3] Greek names for Hejaz and Fars, where they are respectively, besieging Ibn Zubayr's army in Mecca, and being defeated by the Kharijites.

[4] In reference to Thomas, commander of the Roman garrison at Damascus, and Cyril of Alexandria, commander of the last Roman Army in Egypt.

[5] A traditional Greek robe, often worn by Emperors between the 6th and 12th centuries.

Untitled

On my way home from work my gas light came on. I knew from that moment I wouldn't be able to make it home without tracking down the nearest gas station. Shortly after, I saw an exit sign stating there was an exit in the next mile or so. I figured there would be a place to get gas there. I pulled off the highway and after a little bit, I saw a gas station.

“Perfect,” I thought to myself. As I drove up to the gas station I realized that there was only a gas station in the area and nothing else could be seen for miles. It was a little odd as it had only gas pumps without a convenience store attached. I didn't think too much of it at first, and something did not feel right to me about the place, but I needed gas.

As I pulled closer to the station I noticed someone was standing there. There was no car in sight. He didn't seem to have any real reason for being there. He was just standing there unmoving all alone. So, I pulled my car to the side because he was in the middle of the station and there was no way around him.

I got out of my car and started to walk towards him. He didn't seem to even notice me arriving and his back was turned to me so I couldn't see his face. I started to call out to him,

“Hey,” I said, and got no response.

“Excuse me.” Still no response.

“Sir, are you okay?” Nothing. Nothing at all.

I noticed as I walked closer to him, he wasn't moving at all and didn't even seem to be breathing. He seemed to start to fade away. Like he was fading out of existence. I started to get concerned so I moved faster towards him, calling out for any type of response. But still no reaction from him. The closer I got to him, there seemed to be less of him.

As I got to him all that was left was his head. The head turned to me and I saw his face. He had a malicious look on his face. He

smiled, winked, and said in a barely audible voice
“Have fun.”

When I got to the exact spot where he was standing and there was nothing left of him. No trace at all. There also didn't even seem to be any activity, no signs of life in the area at all. I turned around looking for any sign of him and saw nothing. I also noticed that my car was gone. When I turned back around to where he was originally, what looked like a business card appeared in front of me, and fell to the ground. I picked it up and read it. On the business card was written “All that stand here after me will take my place and become the new paused one.”

After I read it, I simply laughed it off and thought of it as a practical joke. I thought this was all a huge setup and that someone was just doing this to people who passed by. But as I tried to walk away I realized that I couldn't move at all, not a single muscle. I couldn't even blink. As far as I could tell I wasn't even breathing. For all intents and purposes, I was no longer alive.

That happened, what I am assuming was years ago. I have been standing here waiting for someone's gas light to come on at the right moment, so that the exit will appear for them, and they will come. So that I can be released from this purgatory in which I now stand.



Brooklyn Chan
High School

Shelia Holmes and the Case of the Classroom Chaos

“What in the world?!?” screeched Mrs. Daisy as she was greeted with an unpleasant sight. “I left you guys for one second, then I’m welcomed to this catastrophe!”

‘A catastrophe was one word, it looked like a herd of animals stampeded here along with a tornado.’ As I, Wendy Watson, thought to myself, I took a quick look at my situation. The classroom was in chaos, chairs and tables were upturned, broken glasses of beakers lay dangerously on the floor, and everyone was stained with an unusual smelly and colorful soap that was created by one of the poor student’s experiments. Mrs. Daisy sent the least untidy students to retrieve Gary, our school’s janitor, to clean up the mess. He kept going off muttering about ‘I don’t get paid enough...’ and ‘Four years of medical studying for this...’ as he mopped up the mess.

“If no one comes out and confesses in five minutes, then it’s detention for all of you!” Screeched Mrs. Daisy as she massaged her head in agony.

No one in the entire London Junior High liked detention. However, you thought regular detention was bad, then you certainly don’t want to be caught dead in one of Mrs. Daisy’s detention classes. You might as well sign your death will because from what I hear her detentions are torture making students sent there begging for mercy and escaping was futile. Well, those were just rumors, but I wouldn’t take a chance.

Then, Mrs. Daisy shrieked when something chirped from the makeshift cage next to her, “Also, can someone tell me who in their right mind let a squirrel in here?!?”

Yes, the bringer of this chaos was a squirrel. A small, twitchy, fuzzy squirrel and it looked very confused. I would be too if I was stolen from my home and put in a classroom full of screaming

students. It looked adorable in my opinion. The cage was made out of strings and pencils courtesy of Shelia Holmes, my best, childhood friend. I have no idea how she made the cage, nor how in the world she managed to catch the furry menace.

I looked around to see if the guilty party would admit their crimes, after a deafening silence that felt like years nobody came forth. Mrs. Daisy was about to scream ‘detention’ when a lonely hand raised itself from the sea of students, and that hand belonged to Jack and Lily. Me and Shelia’s worst foes and major tyrants of the entire school, they acted as if they were rulers of the entire school because their parents were nobles or rich. I sent them the nastiest glare I could muster as they sauntered up towards our teacher, smirks written on their faces as if they were receiving a reward.

“Oh, Mrs. Daisy! I know exactly who done this, the person is clever and is disguised as one of your students,” cried Lily out dramatically while Jack grunted unthinkingly agreeing with Lily, “The person is incredibly cruel for interrupting an amazing class like this!”

I rolled my eyes, even the dullest student could make out the lies and sarcasm laced into those words; however, it went unnoticed by our teacher.

“Really, Lily? Please tell me so I can inflict a good scolding on them.”

“Of course, Mrs. Daisy,” Lily spun until she faced me and pointed an accusing finger at me, “It was her, she’s the one that released the creature among our peaceful classroom!”

Everyone surprisingly gasped, including me. I couldn’t believe she would accuse me like that!

“She was the only one that was near the student’s experiment in order to sabotage it and the window was open to let the squirrel inside,” Lily explained, “She must be the one who done it!”

“I did no such thing!” I argued, however, my plea fell on deaf ears as everybody glared reproachfully at me while Lily and Jack sniggered at my misfortune.

“She’s the one that needs to be punished!” cackled Lily delightfully. I squirmed nervously while the students formed around me like wolves about to pounce on prey.

“I disagree, I don’t believe Wendy was the cause of this,” said

a familiar voice calmly, stopping the students. I let out a breath I didn't know I was holding, I peeked over the forests of students to see the face of my savior, Shelia Holmes.

“Oh, really Detective Shell-bell,” drawled Lily, “What could you possibly think that Wendy didn't do it. All the evidence pointed to her!”

I clenched my teeth at Lily's mockery of my dear friend Shelia. However, my anger died because I was curious about how Shelia thought I was innocent.

“Gladly, Lily. There were many clues that pointed to why Wendy wasn't the culprit. One, if Wendy really did sabotage the experiment she wouldn't have panicked or been surprised like the rest of us. Wendy would have to be an amazing actor or had no idea what was going on to have that reaction,” Shelia clarified with the same cool expression, “Two, Wendy couldn't have grabbed the squirrel because she would need to go outside and her hands or boots would be muddy catching it. However, neither her hands nor boots are muddy and she's been inside the entire afternoon so she couldn't have brought the squirrel inside. Three, if Wendy sabotaged the experiment, then what's her main objective and what does she receive from it? Other than getting messy and humiliating the student, there's not really any benefit Wendy can gain from this dubious act. This all helped me sum up that Wendy couldn't have done this instead someone else has.”

“Well, if it wasn't me, Shelia, then who really done it?” I asked inquisitively.

“Simple, it was Jack and Lily.” Stated Shelia. We all gasped in shock, Lily started furiously stuttering and Jack began dumbly mumbling in protest.

“Lies, how would we have done it!” scream Lily marching up towards Shelia and began poking challengingly, “You have no proof!”

“Contrary to what you believe, I have many clues that lead to this belief,” said Shelia serenely pushing Lily's finger aside, “I'll start with Jack. During the beginning of class, I haven't seen nor heard of Jack until about twenty minutes later with a smug look on his face. He left because I quote ‘I forgotten my pencil,’ however, all the materials needed were right in front of him and the place that held our backpacks was a mere two feet away, so

what could Jack possibly be doing that held him back for twenty minutes? It was because he was outside chasing a poor squirrel and stuffing it into his bag. Jack's muddy boots and soil-filled

fingernails led me to this. In addition, Jack's bag has many small scratches that weren't there before. This must have been caused by some small creature."

It all slowly started to make sense, Jack was late to our class and was holding his backpack with him, but he was looking a bit more cocky than usual and had specks of dirt among him. I never noticed until now, but something was still bothering me.

"Shelia, if Jack did do all that, then why did he do it and how?" I asked still confused.

"Elementary my dear Wendy, by using the art of deduction. Jack isn't the brightest student here. He can barely solve a simple equation, let alone create such an ingenious plan, so how could he have made this plan? Simply, because this was a two-person job." Shelia said, shrugging. We gasped again, "Jack was obviously the brawns of the plan, so who in the entire class has the brains for this? The answer to that is Lily."

After hearing her name, Lily must've seen only red because she transformed into a bull and wrathfully charged headfirst towards Shelia. Snorting and screaming all the way in her fury while Shelia barely flinched or showed any expression as Lily stomped her way up to her.

"Lies, lies, lies! How dare you accuse me of such a thing!" screamed Lily as Jack held her back from pouncing on Shelia, "I would never commit such a thing, you don't have anything that could prove this nonsense!"

"Oh, really Lily? I think the only one telling lies here is you, and just like before I do have the proof to your crimes," said Shelia, sending a chill to everyone in this room, "First, your motive. You always jump to the chance to humiliate or make trouble to Wendy. Also, you're the second cleverest student here, so making a clever plan to frame another student is child's play to you. As a result, you obviously sabotaged the experiment for our science class and blamed it on Wendy. You knew that framing Wendy would be sweet victory and mortification on Wendy's behalf, but how? Simple, you knew that you couldn't do this alone so you got Jack with you because he would do any foolish task

without question and is always willing to cause destruction. Thus, creating the perfect partnership. You made a plan, once you made sure that Wendy was near the sabotaged experiment you opened the window to make it look like she let the squirrel inside, then, you sent Jack out to fetch the squirrel. You used the squirrel and the mess to frame Wendy using specifically placed clues that successfully pointed to her. You could've gotten away with it if Jack washed his hands and boots before coming in the classroom. However, it would all been proven useless on your behalf because I would've deduced it was you and Jack either way."

Lily sniveled, tears of rage and defeat painting her face as she clawed at Shelia in vain while Jack had the look of a toddler in timeout after his chaos was ended so soon. Mrs. Daisy led Lily and Jack away before Lily's tantrum gotten worst. After Lily and Jack left for the classroom, the thunder of student applause for the victory of Shelia and my proven innocence. Many were apologizing for jumping to conclusions and others were complimenting Shelia for her amazing deductive reasoning.

"I'm terribly sorry for jumping to conclusions like that Ms. Watson. I was just so furious about the situation and I had little patience left, unfortunately, lead me to accuse you," Mrs. Daisy said apologetically after leading Lily and Jack away, "I should've known better and asked for more evidence or asked your side of the story. I'm incredibly sorry."

"It was nothing Mrs. Daisy, I would've done the same thing in your shoes. What happened to Lily and Jack?"

Lily and Jack?"

"I sent them to the principal's office. Those two won't be causing any trouble for you anytime soon. I'm still guilty about the situation, is there anything I can do to make it up to you?"

I was about to decline Mrs. Daisy's kind offer; however, Shelia beat me to it.

"Actually, there's one thing you could do for us..." Shelia said, a mischievous glint twinkling in her eye.

Everything went well, we all helped Gary clean up the mess and helped Mrs. Daisy fix the classroom as well. She still felt sorry and kept asking for me to rest instead while the others cleaned up. Jack and Lily admitted to their crimes so their parents wouldn't scold

them, however they didn't receive any lesser punishment. They were stuck with classroom clean-up and cleaning the cafeteria for an entire week. Word of Shelia's case spread like the plague among our school. Shelia and I were swarmed with students and admirers for the rest of the day. I must say that this case was closed and another accomplishment was added for the Great Detective Shelia Holmes and Wendy Watson. Now, all we needed to do is explain to our fathers about our new pet squirrel.



Katelyn Chan
High School



Destiny's Truth

“Blessed with inhuman strength and life, it is a Solarite’s mission to rid the world of evil.”

Rose’s master lectured on, lightly pacing around her as he recited from his book. His master robe was dotted with faded stars and mud stains from years of teaching. His lightly crinkled hat sat on top of his balding head, waving in the gentle breeze that always seemed to blow at just the right time.

“On the opposite side of the universe, live the Lunari, who are given the power of unmeltable frost and ice. They loathe the Solarites’ goal to let the star systems prosper and believe that only the strongest should survive. Thus, they are bent on destroying the stars to rid the galaxy of the weaker systems and the lesser creatures that inhabit the planets.”

Perched on a flat rock, Rose listened attentively, scribbling out her notes. Her wavy fire blue hair was tied back in a neat braid, and her apprentice uniform was spotless. It was her duty, after all, to fulfill her people’s purpose: to perfect the universe and purify the worlds. And the only way she knew would guarantee success at this mission was to train to become a Guardian.

“When the day comes for you to be a Guardian, you will be given a star to reside on, and it will be your sole duty to protect the star and keep it burning for millions of years.”

Rose felt the sudden change in the sun’s atmosphere. Something wasn’t right. She scanned her surroundings. The sun’s fiery orange glow reached as far as she could see. Ashes danced like snowflakes in the air. Her fire-proof hut remained in the same spot. While everything looked the same, it all just seemed... different. It all felt...colder...

Rose gasped in realization and glared at the starry sky. A silver

meteor was shooting towards her.

That's no meteor. She thought grimly.

Rose materialized her white flame sword. The entity crashed down on the sun's surface, leaving a gaping crater in front of her. In the center crouched a woman cloaked in onyx Moon Emerald armor.

A Lunari. Rose tightened her grip on her sword. The foreigner rose, gazing around at the hole she created. Her bluish-grey hair was tied in a spiky bun. A fractured star, the symbol of the Lunari, rested between her furrowed brows. "Such a weak star," She traced a hand on the crater's sides; the surface sizzled at her touch. "It should be thankful to be snuffed out."

"You are not welcome here," Rose announced. The Lunari glanced up at her.

"So, you must be the Solarite of this little flashlight." Her glowing stormy eyes surveyed her. "I almost feel sorry for you." Rose pointed her sword at the foreigner, hoping to make her flinch. "Leave."

She smirked and let out a cackle. "Is that supposed to scare me?"

The Lunari reached behind her and pulled out her sword, copying Rose's gesture.

"I, Celeste of the Lunari, have defeated countless Solarites and have destroyed even more stars. Yours is but an insignificant little candle compared to the others!"

Celeste charged with her raised sword, a sonic boom exploding behind her. Rose blocked the attack and slashed back at her opponent. Unfazed, Celeste attacked relentlessly, swinging her sword and shooting ice from her hand. Rose fought, countering each blow and melting Celeste's magic with balls of fire.

"Tired yet?" Celeste taunted.

"I am Rose of the Solarites, Guardian of this star." She declared, blocking another attack. "I will not let your kind's evil spread any longer!"

This ends now. Rose thought.

She jumped, flipping behind her opponent and bringing down her blade.

But her opponent was quicker. Celeste side-stepped and thrust her hand faster than Rose could react. Ice shot from her

fingertips, sending Rose flying. The ice shards grew like vines, wrapping around as she plummeted to the sun's surface. She landed with a bang, the ice threading with the sun's surface, snuffing out the fire and pinning her down.

"Typical Solarites," Celeste shook her head, "always trying to control the galaxies with your goodness. It sickens us."

Rose struggled against the ice. She couldn't summon any fire to melt it, and her sword was out of her reach. Celeste grinned maliciously as she watched Rose attempt to escape. She stalked around her, dragging her sword and extinguishing the flames underneath.

"Give up, Solarite," Celeste's dark sword glistened in the sun's flames. "You know your destiny."

Destiny. The word echoed in Rose's mind. Suddenly, she was pulled into a distant memory.

"Again." Her mentor repeated, tapping his crystal staff on the stone trail.

Rose remembered this. She'd been training for about a year and was excelling in her studies. She'd passed every test, finished every task, and mastered every spell he taught her. It was today when he'd given her something completely different.

Her past self panted, a bead of sweat trickling down her head. "But, master, it's impossible."

He was asking her to carry boulders on her back while conjuring multiple balls of flame. All while balancing on one leg on hot coal.

"Destiny will always give you the impossible," her mentor scolded. "When you are a Guardian, the Lunari won't stop until they have destroyed your star and the rest of the stars in the universe. No matter what you do, the impossible will always be there; the Lunari will always be there. Nothing can rid the universe of that."

"Why do it, then?" She'd said, hefting another boulder onto her back. Her knees buckled under the weight. "If we can never win, why don't we just leave the suns and do something else?"

Something we can do.”

He shook his head. “It’s not about winning.”

The memory blacked out, leaving Rose with her thoughts. Her master’s words echoed in her mind.

It’s not about winning...

At the time, Rose had brushed this aside as nonsense. She was training to be a Guardian; she needed to win. Guardians were meant to defeat the Lunari and protect the galaxy.

No. She thought, shaking away the thought. That’s not what he said.

“When the day comes for you to be a Guardian,” He’d told her. “You will be given a star to reside on, and it will be your sole duty to protect the star and keep it burning for millions of years.”

Rose gasped. She knew what she had to do.

All of a sudden, Rose was pulled back to reality.

Power surged through her veins, and suddenly she was filled with strength. Her eyes glowed a fiery orange, and an aura of flame radiated around her.

Celeste screamed in agony. She jumped back and shielded her face. The fire melted away the armor covering her hands, revealing her claw-like hands.

She scowled, freezing her hand to extinguish the remaining flames. “How did you—”

“I know my fate, Celeste,” Rose stood, her blue hair rippling behind her.

“I know one day I might lose to you, and I will have failed my purpose as a Solarite.”

She planted her feet and resumed her fighting position.

“But, there is one thing you forgot...I am a Guardian. And it is my duty to protect the stars.”

She charged, fueled by her rediscovered purpose. She fought and dodged, sending more flames to her enemy.

“Until I fall, I will not stop fighting to keep the light alive.”

Rose raised a hand, and fire erupted from her palm. Her enemy blocked with her sword. The smoke settled, revealing Celeste and a melting sword in her hand.

Rose grinned. “Tired yet?”

Celeste growled, tossing her useless weapon aside.

“I’ll be back.” She snarled, baring her jagged teeth. Jumping into a somersault, she turned herself into a silver orb of light and shot back into space, disappearing amongst the stars.

“I know you will.” Rose watched as her enemy retreated.

“And I’ll be ready.”



The Train Compartment

Note: Please do read this story with your utmost inner British accent. It's not necessary but oh! is it fun.

—1939 London —

The two young faces that sat across from one other in this cramped compartment were reading. One “Alice in wonderland” and the other “David Copperfield”. Not to say that these books were chosen by chance, since these two young souls' names were in fact...Alice and David. These names also being picked on purpose by fortunately both having a pair of loving “bookworm” parents. Though this compartment was filled with ten children (including Alice and David) five on each bench. Alice and David were the only ones to be reading! The others either, crying, crying or (the most popular scenario) looking out the window. It seemed that their parents had perhaps too much to pack for books.

(DAVID) Do you like the countryside?

.PAUSE.

(DAVID) I for one have not been.

David (though he had been talking as if it were directed to someone) looked around to see who would talk to him. He had (for many hours) been deciding whether talking was the way to go. It was not that the other children did not like a chat, but with an unknown future, how could they. These non-reader Progenies being in ripped clothes and dirt on their finger, which clearly had been trying to be cleared off. Had taken no notice of David. Alice looked up from her book in the silence. She saw this young lad, as he sat there sheepishly in the quiet. Alice said, after a couple of seconds and very slowly:

(ALICE) Yes... it's very amiable.

Alice was not a shy creature, she loved a good tete-a-tete. Though as of late, had found no need to express her feelings with words. Actually, come to think of it... found no want in talking at all. As most girls, Alice was without fail, nicely dressed. Her hair was consistently tied up with a little black bow. Her coats were in any event, made from the best fabrics. The round cheeks that were usually filled with a natural blush, had seemed to fade. She believed her opinion was not needed at any conversation. Which makes me for one wonder why she took on one here? Perhaps it was her inner material feeling which often got the whole on her. Having two younger brothers in which she loved dearly.

The quietness after this remark was very comical that David was inclined to laugh.

David, ah! How do I start? Alas for David the poor elephantine chap, he was a good humored boy for he had little to unset him. Nevertheless, with the occasional outburst relating to (in his own words) his "parent's strict ways". Also, the occasional realization that he was sadly in the end ... still ten, and far from the standard and age that held a gentleman. He had large ears but bore it well with his beaming little smile and soft brown eyes.

David was conscious of his blubber, but oh! How could he resist the temptation of a tart on the table! For some afternoons it seemed to him that food was his savoir, and that everything could be fixed by the smell of his mother's pie. Let us just say that David was at the peak of his innocence.

(DAVID) My mother says my aunt is a lovely woman... My mother says she has a little cottage with a garden and is one of the greatest cooks!

.PAUSE.

(DAVID) Not that I need any more food.

He thought that pointing out the object, he believed was the reason no one would talk to him, would in fact make others talk to him. Please don't laugh at him! Young Boy argumentation is dense...but believe me, it made the most absolute sense to David.

(ALICE) I love a good tart.

(DAVID) My mother makes the finest tarts! Covered with chocolate sprinkles and cream on top, she places it with milk and water in our little living room and – – He stopped himself here, he had a boyish realization of loss.

(DAVID) I will envy those afternoons.

.PAUSE.

Alice had seen David's mood dropped and in a joking matter said:

(ALICE) I will miss the tarts.

.PAUSE.

His smile slowly came back, it took a while to see her matter. (There was a sense of obviousness, that was too clear to say that they'd miss their parents in the most melancholy way)

(DAVID) But in order to make new ones there must be a spring into the unknown. Don't you think?

(ALICE) Indeed. That is very true.

She looked down at her novel (The natural sound of the train filling in the gaps of this conversation). The beautiful red leather hard cover, with golden text reading "Alice in wonderland" and a golden flower under it. Her father's face came to her mind...then his voice... his wild crazy laugh.

(ALICE) Would you like to look at the illustration in my novel?

(DAVID) Oh! Yes.

She had passed him the novel, which he took quite hurriedly. David gently flipped through the pictures, looking at them very fondly. The other (perhaps) miserable children were looking over David's shoulder. Admiring them from afar. There were eight other children, their assets were very low. Still these youth could enjoy a story as any person with the first-rate textile could...but This question pops in my head.... who can delight in a book the most?

(ALICE) My father drew them...he is an illustrator.

(DAVID) Golly! He's very talented.

(ALICE) Yes.... he is the cleverest man I know. My brothers are artists as well. Even with their young age.

David smiled, he loved to hear well of people. The end of novel came, David said as he closed the book:

(DAVID) And your mother?

David handed her back the novel. David knew, there was maybe a reason she had not mentioned a talent she had. He decided not to mention it.

(ALICE) Yes?

(DAVID) Does she have some talent?

.PAUSE.

(ALICE) No....no.

Alice looked down at the book again.

(ALICE) She's just some woman.

.PAUSE.

(DAVID) This is my novel.

He had grabbed the novel that sat next to him on the widow shield. Handed it to her. She slinged past the pages to the pictures.

(DAVID) The pictures are not as pretty, but I'm fond of them.

(ALICE) I can see. They are very expressive.

Halfway through she said;

(ALICE) This is my father's favorite novel.

(DAVID) Really!

(ALICE) Aye, he used to read it to my brothers and I....

Looking at the cover she remembered all the jokes her father said. She opened it to the first chapter.

(DAVID) What was your favorite part?

(ALICE) The one where he meets Dora. I love how Dickens explains falling in silly love. Oh! And I love all the phases and terms he uses.

.PAUSE.

(DAVID) Why don't you Read it out loud?

(ALICE) .. out loud?

(DAVID) Sure, why not?

.PAUSE.

This was not a convincing argument, but how she yearned to read it. She went back to the first chapter and began;

(ALICE) Chapter 1 "I am born".

She began. Alice had the sort of voice that was meant for reading. A captivating voice, rich with a rage of passion. She steadily gained followers as her spirit rose, reading through the humor and wits of man, who had such a tragic life. If you want to know how this felt to them all, it was a jazz performance. The children, for a spell, were sitting in a dimed room. Wine or a drink of their choice in front of them. Sitting in tables of two, with a little lamp in the middle. Some of them perhaps smoking, while Alice on the stage pouring out words. The trumpet going high and low, the piano hitting the perfect notes at the perfect time. The bass player plucking the strings gently. Drums hitting on the down note. She spoke to them all with the words of Dickens.

(ALICE) "Above the ashes and the dust that once was he, without whom I had never been"

As she ended this chapter, silence hit. The children all looked at one other, back into this cramped compartment. She closed the novel, looking at its cover. A small green book, on the side did it read "David Copperfield" in black. Alice perhaps absolutely knew at this moment that her heart belonged to stories, that she could truly only fall in love with jolly tales, because what other beauty is there then stories? .It seemed to them all...That life was worth living just with the knowledge that humans can write and draw such things.



Amanda Hernandez
High School



Well Water

They say a monster lives in the well at the edge of town, long since abandoned in hopes that whatever resided within would wither away and die.

Daisy wasn't sure what to think of the rumors. Though the well was far from the town square, she could see it in the distance, piquing her curiosity as to what lay inside. The bricks of the well were dirtied and chipped, covered with residue and overgrown weeds. The thick wooden cover and heavy rocks shielded the opening of the well, trapping the monster inside. The town was so afraid of the beast that all houses around the well had been abandoned, their rotting wooden doors creaking in the cold, sharp wind.

Her parents never spoke of the monster or the well itself, only that she must never go near it, but six-year-old Daisy couldn't help but wonder what was the cause of so much fear.

"Come along Daisy," her mother held a basket filled high with food. "We must hurry home now. We don't want to be out after dark."

Daisy followed her mother, gripping tightly onto her silken dress, eyes never leaving the well which now began to turn into a simple outline in the far-off distance.

The townspeople feared the night, nearly as much as they feared the monster, for that was when the monster howled and cried its horrid screams. Daisy barely heard them, as her family lived on the other side of town, but the rumors made her shiver all the same.

Following her mother, Daisy skipped along the cobbled stone path, a smile as bright as the sun as she imagined the delicious dinner waiting for her. She walked home happily, but as they did so there was a soft ringing in the air, like the twinkling of chimes.

"Daisy."

Daisy stopped and turned at the sound of her name, looking

for whoever had called her, but the streets were empty.

Daisy swung her legs back and forth as she happily ate the meal her mother had prepared. The fire burned brightly at her back, sending waves of heat to warm her from the cold night. Her mother and father sat in front of her, chatting about town gossip while her grandmother poured herself another glass of wine.

Daisy hummed happily, her stomach full and her thoughts slowly wandering back to the well. It seemed to be the only thing she was interested in these days.

“Papa,” she asked, “what does the well monster look like?” Her mother dropped her fork in surprise and shot a look towards her father. “Ah, well.” Her father paused, thinking of what to say.

“Daisy, you know we don’t speak of that beast. Wouldn’t you rather speak of happier things like the raspberry pie waiting in the kitchen?” He shot her a wink, trying to distract her.

“You can’t keep it from her forever dear,” said Daisy’s grandmother. “You see Daisy, no one really knows what the beast looks like.”

“Why not?” Daisy asked curiously.

“Because it is said to have no shape or form. It’s not a man nor a woman, but as fluid and free as water itself.”

“Mama,” said Daisy’s mother in warning, but the old woman brushed her off with a wave of her hand.

“You see, that well wasn’t always cursed, a beautiful creature used to live within it. It was said that this creature could heal anyone who would touch the well’s water.”

“Really? What happened?”

Her grandmother clasped her hands together, leaning forward with a dark expression. “Well, a terrible monster appeared and destroyed the good creature. This monster had the opposite power, rather than heal, it would hurt anyone who touched it. When the town found out, they trapped the creature in the well.”

Daisy shrunk back in fear. Her grandmother opened her mouth to continue, but Daisy’s father interrupted. “Okay, I think that’s enough stories for one night.” He picked up Daisy affectionally. “Time for bed.”

That night Daisy found it difficult to fall asleep. Dark shadows seemed to leak from every corner of her room. She ducked under the covers, shut her eyes, and willed herself to sleep.

She didn't sleep long; soon after, she woke, but this time it wasn't from the choking shadows and monsters her mind created.

"Daisy."

She lifted her head from her warm pillow towards the door, thinking it was her mother, but the door remained closed. There was not a flicker of light coming from the hall.

"Daisy."

Daisy sat up. "Hello?" she called. The voice whispered her name again, brushing past her ears like the soft night breeze. Again and again, it called her. She suddenly felt a warm fuzzy feeling of calmness wash over her. She stepped onto the cold floor and gently tiptoed out of her room. The voice seemed to be coming from outside the house.

Down the stairs she climbed, careful not to wake her snoring grandmother who sat sleeping on her favorite rocking chair. Daisy stepped out into the cold night. The voice kept calling her, like a sweet song, urging her to follow it. Down the grassy hill and into the emptied town she walked. The town was silent, with not a single person roaming the streets. The wind howled in warning.

Daisy moved through the town, closer and closer to the abandoned well. She wasn't sure why she was there, but the soft voice drew her closer, until there were no other thoughts in her mind.

It wasn't long before she found herself standing in front of the well. The calmness vanished from her body and the trance broke, leaving her standing in the shivering cold, panic clawing up her throat. She stumbled back, wondering why she had come here in the first place.

"Daisy."

She stared at the well, twisting her hands together fearfully.

"Hello?"

There was a long silence before the voice replied. "Hello."

She swallowed thickly. "Are you the monster that lives in the well?"

"Yes."

She knew better than to be here, but curiosity had gotten a hold on her, and it wasn't letting go. "Are you stuck down there?"

"Yes. Sad."

"You're sad?"

"Yes."

"It must be lonely down there," she whispered.

"Everyone is afraid of you because they think that you'll hurt them."

"Won't," said the voice, "angry before. Not anymore."

"Why were you angry?" Daisy placed her hands on the old stones.

"Abandoned."

"Abandoned?" When the voice didn't answer Daisy sat back on her heels, thinking of what it could mean. Then she remembered her grandmother had also told her of how this well was difficult for many sick people to get to, so the townspeople began bottling some of the water to take home, so that they wouldn't need to visit the well so often.

"People stopped using this well because you destroyed the good creature, and they became afraid." She paused, then whispered. "Did you really destroy it?"

It was silent for a moment. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to."

"Why did you call me?"

"Please help me."

"But, why me?"

"Your interest in me. I feel it." The creature's voice seemed to get stronger the more they talked. "Your compassion. I feel it too."

"How can I help?" She couldn't imagine how lonely it must be, stuck in an old, dirty well.

"Free me. Please."

"Oh. I don't think I'm supposed to." Daisy chewed her lip, thinking of how worried her mother would be, but she always told her to help those in need. "Okay." She got to her feet. Daisy tried to move the heavy rocks that sat on the wooden cover with all her might, but they were far too heavy for a child to move alone. She huffed and pushed but the boulders wouldn't budge. Suddenly, there was a warm feeling in her chest which grew stronger and stronger, moving throughout every inch of her body and flowing out her fingertips. A sudden strength washed over her and the

rocks tumbled off. Daisy gasped in surprise and cautiously moved off the wooden lid.

The well was so dark she couldn't see the bottom, only the residue which coated the sides. "Hello? Are you still there?" Something that looked like dark oozing molasses slithered up the walls towards her. Suddenly a shapeless object shot up from the darkness, leaping out of the well.

Daisy shrieked in surprise. The creature slunk back, stunned by the noise. The darkness formed into the shape of a body, with no eyes or any details of the sort. Daisy shut her eyes, waiting for it to eat her, but after a moment of stillness she opened her eyes. The creature sat there, unmoving, as if watching her.

Daisy scrambled up. Once she was sure it wasn't going to do anything, she spoke. "H-hi."

"Hello."

Its voice was cold and empty. It seemed so sad, slumped over like a lost puppy. It looked around then turned back to her.

Daisy swallowed. "What happens how?"

The creature shrugged. "Don't know. Still sad."

"Oh. I'm sorry." It gave another depressed shrug. "Why did you destroy the good creature?"

"Didn't mean too. It felt abandoned and angry. I tried to help, but we merged together and I became angry as well. Now we're both sad."

"Is it still alive somewhere within you?"

It shook its head, but Daisy wasn't so sure. There was a dim light, glowing from the center of its chest and she pointed to it.

"What's that?"

The creature seemed to look down and back at her, tilting its head, almost in question. It couldn't see the light.

Daisy shuffled forward but the creature jerked back as she raised her hand. "Don't. It will hurt you."

Daisy paused and swallowed back her fear. "But I really want to help you." She pressed her hand deep into the creature's body. Her hand burned in pain and she cried out in surprise, tears welling up in her eyes. She forced herself to push forward and grab the soft light.

Her hand was red and raw as she held back her tears and held out the light. "This. What is this?" She dropped the light into the

creature's hands.

It stared down at it, turning it over and over again. "Me," it whispered.

The mass trembled and held the light tightly. It glowed brighter until it exploded. Daisy covered her eyes and when she opened them, she was no longer staring at a sad, dark creature but one which was now a glowing, clear being with a light bright and shining from its center.

"It's you." Daisy said. The good creature had never really been destroyed by an evil creature. It was just another side of the creature. The monster that came to life and engulfed the creature's light was fed by its own anger. Despite the fact that the creature had no face, Daisy could feel its joy.

The creature reached for her wounded hand and touched it. Its body, which she realized was made of pure water, was comforting and the wound disappeared before her eyes. "Wow!" She exclaimed, eyes wide with awe.

The creature stood and dove back into the well filling it to the brim with sparkling water, cleansing the side until it shone beautifully. Daisy placed her hand in the water and wiggled her fingers playfully, laughing as the water swirled around them. She played with the good creature until dawn came, until her parents appeared, anxiously looking for her. They hugged her tight and watched in awe as the light creature came back to life. Their friendship continued to grow as the days passed and the townspeople celebrated the return of the good creature by decorating the well in its honor.

Daisies sprouted around the well, but the creature's favorite daisy was the one with wiggling fingers and toes, and a smile as bright as the sun.



Parth Paresh Joshi
High School



Untitled

The morning was cold; crisp, exactly how she had liked it. Attempting, and then failing to ignore this, he got up. In the kitchen, he forced himself to eat. Taste had been one of the first feelings to go after it started. Disgust had not. Every bite he took felt like sludge.

Briefly, he contemplated suicide; at the very least, he might still be able to do it before he lost his sadness. He stopped when he remembered how she had saved him.

All in all, his normal morning routine.

As a retiree, he only could reminisce. However, every memory he thought of would only dilute the feelings he had felt in that moment; better to sit quietly and do the bare minimum to live. Occasionally, thoughts of his past came to the front of his mind, but he had become an expert at fending them off. At least, all but the ones that were still the most potent.

The accident was a memory he would never - could never forget, even if he eventually couldn't feel it. The horror as the car crashed into them, the screaming that was and wasn't his own but was definitely Elle's, a strong push from her side that moved him away, the sickening crunch of her ribs being crushed by steel, and the sudden black as he felt a sharp pain on his head.

He woke up from his dozing, and immediately felt anger; he had no control over his dreams, and yet they were using up the emotions of his last memories with her. He left to go eat his second meal of the day, and did his best not to return to slumber.

A year went by, and the things he could feel decreased. After taste, the next sense to go was touch, and then smell. He lost the ability to see blue, even if he could still see red. He tried to ration out what feelings he had left so that he wouldn't lose it all; he sat with his eyes closed now instead of open, his ears covered with sound muffling headphones.

As he woke from the accident, he could only think of what

had happened to her. He couldn't move, could barely think, but yet he had to know. Deep down, he had known, had had to have known, exactly what happened; he did see it after all. However, he desperately hoped for a different outcome. The more he thought about it though, the more his desperation calmed, and his level of fear decreased rapidly. He panicked immediately. Elle had meant everything to him; was he really heartless enough to have this little concern with what happened to her?

As he panicked though, an odd feeling had arisen in him; after a few seconds, his level of panic had gone down just as his desperation had. Every emotion that he was feeling at the time was decreasing in intensity at a mind-boggling pace. Even before he woke up with the doctors, who gave their diagnosis, he knew, and had to live with it.

Three years after the accident, he had lost almost everything. The rationing proved too difficult, as it was hard for him to keep control of his brain. Almost all of his feelings of his time with Elle had disappeared; almost all of his feelings overall had disappeared. All that was left for him was cold, empty, loneliness. And yet he attempted to stay alive. Eating exactly as many times as he needed to per day, keeping himself in a state of half-death. No one could stop him; after all, his last feeling was of despair and resolution. His feeling when he saw the smile on Elle's face as she let him live at the cost of herself.

A Writer's Truth

I am a writer, as simple as they come. Anyone could be a writer; just give them a paper and pencil and you have yourself a writer. Each one writes differently, some prefer scary horror stories, others rely more on facts. Some build unrealistic worlds but the readers can find the realness in it as much as they want while others choose an everyday setting story. The magic behind writing does not lie in which words they choose but the meaning each word holds. As much as everyone writes differently, everyone reads differently as well. That is the beauty of it. These combinations of letters on thin slices of paper are art. No color nor frame needed. Every passerby views a story as differently as a painting on a wall. Each sentence will drown your imagination with new feelings and emotions. As a reader, the amount of times I have wished to reread a page for the first time once more would be infinite. I adore each writing style as if it was hung in a famous museum being sold for millions of dollars. Writing has saved me in one way or another. Reading the words has changed my perspective or taught me of other views. The words help me dream of unrealistic characters whose lives scream happiness in my ears each day. In truth, writing provides me with an outlet. Even if my heart races and my hands shake at the thought of presenting, I wish to share my stories with others. For who will read my thoughts if I do not write them in the first place? My emotions and feelings line each word like a hidden message. Perhaps I'd like people to decipher these messages and figure out my mind. Or perhaps I like to see what others make of my stories. My "fantasy" worlds all start somewhere in my mind. So here I am, writing and writing until I have no more stories to share. I share my life on these pages as if I am screaming off a bridge into an endless river. A writer's truth is that these words are much more than letter combinations on a thin slice of paper. A writer's truth is that they could never really mean what they write, but that is up to you, the reader, to decide for yourself.

Limbs

The young teen grinned as she checked her phone to reveal a text from the guy she'd been talking to for a week. He'd graduated a few years ago, but she didn't mind being with a guy who was a few years older than her. She was just excited that he'd finally invited her over.

"Matt," she sighed, hugging her arms to her chest. She could feel it in her bones that she would never forget that night.

She walked confidently up the stairs of the porch and knocked on the door, barely controlling her excitement. Matt opened the door, a charming smile on his face. He ran his fingers through the mop of brown hair balanced on his head and winked at her.

"Jessica!" he laughed, his tone welcoming and cheerful. "I'm so happy you're finally here! I've got an eventful evening planned. Come on in, kick off your shoes, those heels must be killing you!" Then he shut the door with a snap and Jessica felt the crack of a bat against her skull before her world went dark.

She woke to the sound of running water, and her limbs tied to a chair with the quiet sounds of shuffling in the background. In her mouth was a thick cloth, soaked with a metallic-tasting liquid. As her eyes adjusted to the dim lighting, she saw splats of deep red on the walls around her. What looked like fake limbs dangled from the ceiling, dripping what Jessica could only hope was fake blood. Suddenly a light flickered on above, illuminating Matt standing eerily in the corner, cleaning a meat mallet and watching her with wide eyes.

"Well, you've been the fastest to wake up out of all of them," he mused. At her confused look, he laughed and gestured to the hanging limbs. "What, you think I bought all of these? That would be such a waste of money! No, I cut all of these of myself. Soon I'll add yours to my collection as well," he grinned innocently and crouched down in front of her. He reached over

and ran a bloody hand down her face. “You’ll be in a better place soon,” he stated clearly before reaching over and picking up one of the stilettos Jessica had taken off earlier that night. He weighed it in his hand thoughtfully while Jessica whimpered and struggled beside him. She watched in fear, completely unable to do anything, as he raised the shoe to her face and struck the pointy heel into her eye repeatedly.

Jessica felt her eye burst like a grape, and felt the warm sticky liquid that was her blood drain down her face. Matt’s eyes lit up as he wiped some of the blood from her face with a single finger, examined it for a moment, before popping the finger into his mouth and grinning sickly. He then picked her up, chair and all, and carried her over to the sink. Blood splattered from her other eye all over the stainless steel, and the stiletto thudded onto the floor. He used the meat mallet to hit her shoulder repeatedly, breaking the joint and stopping all movement in that arm. Then he was untying her arm and it was being lowered slowly into the sink. Her wrist slipped past something slimy, and then just dangled there.

Jessica heard the click of a switch seconds before a roaring noise and searing pain shot through her body. Matt had stuck her arm in the garbage disposal. His throaty chuckle was barely audible over the bone-shredding noises emanating from the disposal. Jessica tried to cry out of pain, but the cloth in her mouth just released more of the sickening liquid into her mouth.

“Hey now, you better take it easy with the cloth. That’s all I have left from the last girl, so it’s all you’ll be getting,” he muttered gruffly in her ear as he shut off the disposal. “Now what do you say we get rid of that other arm too?”

Jessica cried, violent quakes shaking her body as she tried to cry. Matt slowly sliced through her other arm, right through her forearm down to the bone, the knife gliding through her skin and muscle as though it was butter. After Matt cut through all of her skin, he took the meat mallet and beat the bone repeatedly until it shattered. Jessica felt him kneel down in front of her and felt his hands travel past her knees up to her face. He removed the bloodied cloth and kissed her roughly before striking her in the head once again, this time fatally.

Matt stood and wiped his hands on his damp jeans, looking satisfied. He then picked up his phone and dialed another number, slowly dragging Jessica's body towards his attic. "Hey Marlie," his voice began sweetly as he disappeared up the stairwell.



Mahika Madhu
High School

Pandora's Box: A Retelling

Born from the magical flame of Hephaestus, Pandora came into the world. She was a cute little thing with her big eyes and round cheeks. The gods had gathered around to bless her mortal soul with gifts of beauty and wit. At last, it was time for Zeus to bless her with gifts of his own. A heavy ornate box that contained all of the evils of the world and the gift of curiosity. Little did he know the dangers this gift would possess.

* * * * *

“Epimetheus!” I called. The wind lifted the stray hairs on my neck. Soon, I heard rumbling in the distance. My husband came into view at the far end of the clearing. I went back inside to get the food ready. Here in Thessaly, it was well past night, and was time to eat. The smell of cheese and salted fish wafted around me, making my mouth water. The moonlight filtered in through the open window and cast a soft glow on the rounded table. He should be here by now. I rushed out into the cold night air once more and called out, “Epimetheus!” Rounding the corner of the house, I was picked up by a tall shadowy figure. I screamed and dropped the cloth I had wrapped around me. “Epimetheus!” I shrieked. He laughed a bellowing laugh as he set me down. “I told you to stop doing that!” I scolded. “But how can I when it gives me a burst of pleasure every time?” he questioned innocently. “Just go in. Supper is ready,” I grumbled sourly. He chuckled once more before going inside the stone house. I picked up the cloth from the soft grass and breathed in the night air. I chuckled to myself and walked into the house.

* * * * *

“Dinner was splendid as always, Pandora.”

“Thank you,” I smiled. We sat in silence for a bit while I cleaned the platters and put them away.

“I must take my leave in the morning,” he said.

That sent a shock through me. I whirled around. “But you have just gotten here! You mustn’t leave so soon!”

Epimetheus rose from his seat and touched my cheek. “But I must. Zeus has asked me to cover the West.”

Zeus. “Well surely the King of the Gods understands that you need a break! I can’t imagine creating mankind is a simple task!” Epithemeus sighed and I realized that he had no other choice. To disobey the orders of Zeus is suicide.

Though it hurt me to do so, I had to let him go. “Ok,” I said. He nodded sadly and went to his sleeping chambers. Taking in a deep breath, I walked through the halls that would soon be empty once more.

My eyes caught on a door embellished in black. I was instructed not to go in there. Inside was a heavy ornate box with green gems placed on the sides. It had been locked in that room for as long as I could remember, and I could not help but wonder what it might hold in its possession.

* * * * *

The next morning, I wished Epimetheus a good journey and went inside to grab a warm cloth to cover myself with. I went outside and gazed at the scenery. The trees were toned with orange and red. The frigid air stung my exposed skin as I searched the bushes for berries.

Thessaly came alive when the sun was at its peak. Deer poked through the trees and birds started chirping. Crickets played their song and satyrs started playing pipes. It is much too cold for life to bloom here. There aren’t many flowers, and trees are as bare as bones most of the time, but there is a certain time when everything comes alive. It’s an unremarkable magic.

It was time for supper so I cooked the last of the fish I had left. On the table, I had the most startling thought. The box. Normally, my husband would be here to stop me, but he is not here. One

insignificant peek shall not harm anyone. No, Pandora. You must not think this way.

I sighed and left the fish unfinished, promising to come back to complete the meal later. I was in the mood for a light rest. I walked through the halls and came across that door again, black and menacing and regal. I felt like a slave for I could not control my helplessness in the face of this door. And that box. My hunger rose and before I could think not to, I tugged on the doors. Huge and heavy, they did not move. At that moment I came back to my senses. In fear, I ran to my chamber and slept, my mind still lingering.

* * * * *

In my dreams appeared an old man with a greying beard. On the crown of his head sat a laurel of golden leaves. He had no eyes, just black holes where they should be. He was sitting on a throne of marble, and in his hand, a radiant bolt of light. Zeus. “Pandora,” he whispered. All was quiet and his mouth did not move. “What did I tell you about the box? You mustn’t open the box, Pandora.”

In this eerie silence, I felt beads of sweat drip down my forehead. Yes. I mustn’t open the box. I mustn’t. Still, my mind wouldn’t be left at peace. Just one peek. After just one peek, I will be satisfied. Yes, I will forget about that box after just one peek.

My mind had been made. I rose from my bed and scurried to the door. I grabbed Epimetheus’s axe and with a great blow, I managed to thrust the blade into the crack in the door. Soon, I could hear the hinges creaking and the door swung open. When it did, a gust of wind lifted my hair and pushed it behind my head. My skirt danced around me as I stepped into the room. It was a big and empty room, with nothing but a single table, and on it was the inky black box that had been eating up my soul. The room was cast aglow with early-morning light. It had only made the shadows seem darker. The box was decorated on the side with the deepest of green gems. Its intricate and regal pattern drew me closer. This is dangerous, Pandora, my mind conflicted. But it was like a fly compared to the lion of curiosity I had bubbling in the deep depths of my very being. I caressed the lid of the box, feeling its

smooth pattern, the embellishments, and the absolute power it radiated. It was electrifying. Wishing to cherish the moment, I cracked open the lid slowly, feeling the utmost care and thought used to protect the contents of this box. There was nothing inside. Nothing but air and disappointment. The lion I had been fighting for so long finally calmed inside of me, but a new one rose of anger.

“There is nothing in this accursed box! I have been losing precious hours of rest over this, and for naught! There is no reason to lock it in a room, and decorate it as such! This must have been a trick! A trick to make a mockery of me!” I threw the box to the other end of the room, and only moments later, it started hissing. Like a snake. Black fog poured out and covered the room. The windows shut, encasing the room in an insufferable darkness. I ran to the direction of the door but it was shut, and much too hard for me to open in my moment of terror. With what little light I had, I could see the fog creeping toward my ankles and wrapping around me. I think I started crying. I remember tears clinging to my cheeks and dripping down my chin. All of a sudden, the box stopped hissing and all at once, released wind like a storm capable of Boreas himself. My lungs started filling up with my tears and sorrow. I could not breathe. I am suffocating. Whispers filled my head - or maybe they were real. I couldn't tell anymore. “We are finally free! After years of imprisonment, all evil has been set free! Havoc shall be wreaked, and no one shall be able to stop us!” The wind roared louder and I felt like I would perish right then and there.

In a moment of miracle, my tears eased. I could breathe again. The fog started retreating and the winds calmed. I grabbed my throat to steady my breathing. The windows opened and all was normal once more. The evils of the world. I had just set them free. I recoiled back in horror of what I had just done. I ran to the door and pushed it with all my strength. I slipped my fingers into the crack and pulled as hard as I could manage. The door widened just a little and I used that to swing it open with as much force as I could gather. I ran out. If I had stayed in that place any longer I would have gone insane. I ran into the kitchen and caught my breath, my heart ready to break out of my chest.

My eyes caught on the fish I had left unfinished last night. What was originally a bright beautiful cod was now black as ashes.

Putting a hand over my mouth, I rushed outside, scared to see what horrors had awaited the forest. I stepped out the door and as soon as my feet touched the grass, I could tell that death infected this place, and that it was a stain that could not be removed. The grass turned black and the trees were burnt at the bottom. The air held the faint smell of smoke. The birds stopped singing their song and no crickets chirped. I saw a blue feather laying in the distance, next to a blue bird. It was not blue any longer. What a gruesome sight. It was horrible. I covered my mouth again in fear of vomiting. And I cried. My tears shed with the full force of the ocean. I looked up at the sky. "Zeus!" I cried. "I have made a mistake! I have let forth the evils of the world and now my friends have suffered! Help me!" I screamed, my throat raw. My tears dripped down my cheeks as I shook in sorrow and anger.

I don't know for how long I sat there, miserable in a pile of tears. But sometime later, I felt the ground quiver. Epimetheus. How shameful I should feel for letting him see me in this state. Soon, I could feel him standing in front of me. I didn't need the power of sight to be able to tell the horrors he was experiencing right now. I felt his strong arms wrap around me and take me into the house. He knew not to ask me any questions. He set me on a chair and slipped my hair behind my ear. After a short period of silence, he began asking the questions. "Pandora," he asked gently. "Did you open the box?" I looked up and stared into his sad eyes. That was all the answer he needed.

"I set forth the spirits of evil," I whispered.

"I know," he replied.

We sat in silence for a bit longer as he coaxed me out of the chair. "I have a solution," he said. My eyes lit up.

He took me to the room. He had to help me get in, for I could not stand to be near it. Once we were inside, he led me to the box. That wretched box. I watched in silence as he brought it to me. "I don't want it," I replied.

"You should take a look inside," he said, his eyes glistening. Warily, I opened the lid, and what I found cast the entire room aglow. It banished the shadows and brought forth light. Light. Oh, how wonderful it was to see light again. Epimetheus looked at me.

“Pandora, wherever there is darkness, there will also be light. And as long as we have this light, we can still fight. This is a precious treasure and we can never lose it.”

Pondering over his words, I stared at the tiny essence that just lit the vast room aglow.

“Hope,” I said.

“Hope,” he repeated.

The Cost of a Crown

“You came into our home with malicious intent.” Cyfrin begins with a tone that shows she is used to being heard and respected, “We opened, for the first time, the sanctity of these grounds to an outsider, and you have repaid us with betrayal. Through our trust and your masterful deceit, you were made aware of our secrets and you sold that knowledge.” She pauses, allowing her words a moment to sink in.

“Still, we must acknowledge, to your credit, that you did make an attempt to right your wrongs. Therefore, we have decided to grant you clemency.”

She pulls a vial of amber-colored liquid from within her cloak. “You will drink this” she extends the vial towards him, “and it will erase your memory of us. We will deliver you to a temple of the Higher Goddess and from there you will never interact with any of us again.”

The man does not move to take the bottle, “If I may...” he waits for Cyfrin’s nod before continuing, “I’d rather you kill me.” Seven pairs of gold eyes snap to him and he feels their weight as he continues;

“I have nothing. My home, my family, my pride- all of this I have lost. The grief that drove me to act against you has taken seed within my heart. Naively, I believed that revenge would help me heal, yet it has done nothing but ensure that this seed of sorrow buries so deeply into me that I can never be free of it.” He looks up meeting Cyfrin’s gaze.

“Even after my memories are gone, I will have this pain. There will be a gaping hole within my heart and I will have no recollection of how it got there. I will retain the grief but I will not have any comfort that may have come with my memories. I know I have no right to ask, and yet what you propose would destroy me

so thoroughly that I can only beg you to do the kinder thing and end it yourself.”

Dimly he is aware of tears streaming down his face, but he cannot tear his gaze from Cyfrin’s. Desperately searching those golden eyes for any hint of emotion. If everyone else in the room despises him, it’s fine. If they choose cruelty, he can accept it. But Cyfrin...

At least, let Cyfrin not hate him.

“I know you.” He lowers his voice to a soft whisper, “You are not cruel. You don’t enjoy it when animals you hunt for dinner suffer.” He drops to his knees “Please, I beg of you,” his voice breaks “grant me that same mercy. If I am to lose myself— if you must destroy me, then please, do it yourself.”

For the briefest moment something softens in Cyfrin’s gaze. She bends so they are at equal eye-level, “Tal.”

Tal’s heart aches at his name, pushing painfully against his lungs. How long had it been since Cyfrin had called him so? She reaches out a hand, tenderly running her thumb under his eye. “When you came to us, we thought you a hero. You made everything seem so pure, you made us all believe that we could share the same free life as you humans.”

Tal remembers- he had been so young back then, so full of naïve hope that for once he could fix something in the world.

Cyfrin looks up, meeting the somber gazes of her six sisters; they were her Council, her strength, her family... and she knew, when this was done, they would be all that was left of her love.

“Do you know the difference between a hero and a monarch?” She asks without turning her gaze back to Tal.

“What?”

“A hero gets to love freely. A monarch can never have such joy.”

When she turns her gaze back to him her gold eyes shimmer with unshed tears. “Allow me this one, final selfishness. Allow me this before I must pay the cost of my crown.”

Tal had always admired how proud the Elf Queen was. How despite all the scars she bore, despite the fact that she and her people lived in constant fear, Cyfrin always stood tall. Never before had she wavered nor weakened, but this was the closest to begging he had ever heard.

Once more, Cyfrin procures the amber potion, she uncorks it, raising it to his lips.

“Please.”

And Tal finds himself unable to turn away. He doesn't know what will happen now, and he feels that despair settle as the elixir trickles down his throat.

* * * * *

Six years later, Camelot Castle

King Arthur stands on a palace balcony looking out at the courtyard. On his right, stands his trusted aide Merlin. On his left, the surprisingly wise bard Taliesin.

Below them is a makeshift stage, nothing more than wooden planks stacked earlier that morning. Kneeling with her face towards him is an elf, her brown hair cut short and her sharp ears in clear view. Next to her a large man covered from head to toe in black wields a menacing axe.

This is the first, and hopefully the last, execution of Arthur's reign.

He says only a single line:

“This elf, Cyfrin von Adhail, is adjudged guilty of conspiring with her fellow elves, who murdered my father.”

It is all he needs to get the crowd roaring with rage and sorrow for the late king.

He raises his right hand; below, the executioner raises his axe. In perfect synchrony with Arthur's hand the axe comes down, cleanly separating the elf's head from her body.

Arthur's face bears no expression as he passes his gaze over the bloody stage to the now cheering crowd and finally to his two most dear advisors.

“Do you pity her?”

Taliesin looks up surprised, “Sire?”

“She was protecting her people.” Arthur continues, “Perhaps you think it was unfair for her to die for such a thing?”

Taliesin shakes his head, “Had it been you in her place wouldn't you have done the same?”

The corner of Arthurs lip turns up slightly, “Indeed. And she

too would've made the same decision had she been in my shoes.”

Taliesan knows that he is right and yet he can't shake the strange sadness he feels for the former elf queen's fate.

The king reaches out placing a gloved hand on Taliesan's shoulder.

“Truly I envy you Tal. That you can still show such sorrow for a stranger; that you have never known the cost of a crown.”

A Good Day for Rain

It was a painfully cold and rainy day in Tokyo, Japan, and Heather Kalman was feeling melancholy. Not that a rainy day is particularly uncommon, nor the cold that comes along with it. The raindrops were no more than fat water droplets, simply doing their duty in watering the greens of the earth. And really, it's only natural for the wind, and thus cold, to accompany such a glorious day. The earth was washing itself fresh- cleaning out the polluted air and streets that covered the whole of the planet.

And yet, in the midst of all the swirling life and moisture was a girl, clutching her fingers to her bare arms to ward off the bitter chill. This girl was no rookie to the cold. She had been born in that great forty-ninth state of the U.S., where the temperatures were regularly below zero, and the land was frequently covered in powdery white snow. Even in the summers it was best to hoist around a heavy fur lined jacket wherever you went, as the weather had a nasty habit of deciding on one temperature, and then changing its mind quite abruptly and doing whatever it pleased.

And so, having lived in bitter Alaska for five years, Heather was quite accustomed to the cold. She liked to consider herself a great adventurer; someone worthy of the exquisite land she called home. She knew it was suicide to go out during the winter without a coat, and she certainly knew better than to go out in the summer without an extra layer, stowed away in a cumbersome backpack. And, perhaps most importantly, she knew that Mother Nature always had the upper hand.

And so, being a girl who bore the title of someone who is always prepared for the weather with pride, it came as quite a shock to her three siblings when she announced vehemently that she was freezing.

“You?” Her younger sibling Addie was incredulous at this, but also a little pleased to see her older sister so vulnerable. And

though she herself was also shivering from head to toe, she knew this was her chance to put up a pretense of being the tough one, “It’s just a bit of rain.”

Heather was quite annoyed upon hearing this. After all, she was supposedly strong, and undefeatable in any weather condition. Not Addie. Quickly, she summoned up a simple excuse to protect her well-worn reputation, “Well, it’s easy for you to say!” She snapped, “You have a rain jacket.”

“Mom said it would rain,” Commented her older brother Tyler, who never passed up on a chance to deface his sister, “So really, it’s your own fault if you’re cold. Why didn’t you bring a rain jacket?”

“Because,” Heather hissed, getting more and more sullen as the conversation progressed, “We’re on vacation! I thought that it would be all warm suns and happy faces. I didn’t consider that the elements would try to kill me three-thousand four hundred, and seventy-three miles away from home!”

“Well, we’re not in California or Florida,” Addie reminded her kindly, starting to feel a little pity for poor Heather. “We’re in Tokyo. And, I’m sorry to inform you, but Tokyo’s climate follows the same rules as the rest of the planet. Meaning when it’s rainy and windy, it’s also cold.”

Heather held back from pointing out that Addie herself was rubbing her arms and dancing on the balls of her feet, trying to stay warm. She reluctantly admitted that Addie was right. Perhaps it had been naive of her to assume that anywhere in the world that wasn’t home would automatically be warm. Of course, that didn’t make her feel any better about it. She wasn’t sure how anyone could possibly feel happy in a time like this. It was simply impossible!

Heather, though certainly not alone in her grumblings, was not entirely correct. You see, it was not impossible to be happy at such a time; her younger brother Charlie was proof of that.

He had heard the conversation going on between his older siblings, and grown rather weary of all the gloom. Charlie hated gloom, as it was the opposite of fun. And naturally, being the cheerful person he was, he decided to escape the gloom and search for something a bit more upbeat.

The word ‘upbeat’ seemed to click a lock in his mind, and open up his ears to something he hadn’t heard before. Music, pounding through the streets, its loud foreign lyrics declaring that it, like him too, was an anti-gloom.

Charlie decided that he liked the music. It was catchy, and made him feel tingly inside. So he stepped out into the rain, for once enjoying the way it matted down his hair and clouded his vision. And then, letting his body sink into the rhythm of the music, Charlie danced.

Heather, who had been steadily complaining while Charlie was finding his peace, now noticed with horror what her little brother was doing. And it really was something to be horrified at! He would certainly catch a cold-or worse, he would make a fool out of his family.

She quickly decided to put a stop to his joy. After all, if she was feeling bad, it simply wasn’t fair that he got to be glad. “Charlie!” She yelled, anger and woe coursing through her, “Stop it Charlie, you’ll catch a cold. And you’re making such a fool out of us!”

Charlie heard her, but decided that he didn’t want to deal with the attitude that emanated from her. So, he simply stuck out his tongue and kept dancing. Heather bristled at this, as her misery was rapidly replaced with boiling hot anger.

How dare he? How dare he! He defied her laws of what the people surrounding her were supposed to feel. He achieved what she had deemed impossible! She wondered, briefly, if that meant she was wrong, and that she could have fun... But then she shook her head, her resolve firm. She would not let this disease infect her! No-o, she was stronger than that. She was determined to be miserable!

Charlie opened his eyes for a moment, and noticed that Heather was still set on having a crummy time. He sighed, feeling pity for his clueless big sister. Honestly, people said that when you grow older, you grow wiser. But it made no sense to him. The older you got, it seemed, the more you frowned! Charlie had decided a long time ago that he wouldn’t grow up, so that he would be forever free of the devastating wisdom that came with the passing years.

The pity in his heart swelled when she scowled at a passing woman who had remembered an umbrella. Really, it simply wasn't fair that Heather was so sad, when he was having such a lovely time. And Charlie was nothing if not fair.

“Come on Heather!” He exclaimed, “Come and dance with me!”

A ball of inspiration erupted with his words and seemed to penetrate Heather's downcast heart. She froze, and blinked once. Those simple words had such an impact on her, made her feel so weak...so foolish.

She realized then, that it really wasn't impossible for her to feel glad. After all, Charlie could clearly do it. And she knew from experience that he did not have superhuman powers to defy the impossible, and be happy at all times. She had seen him miserable and whiny plenty of times. So why was he so buoyant now? Heather was stunned. Was it possible...that she had been wrong? That it wasn't a terrible day, destined from the start to become just another horrible memory? That...perhaps the day was a gift in its own special way?

She started to feel a strange sensation, that tickled the back of her throat. Her brain didn't like the feeling, and tried to push it out, but her heart refused to let go of it. Remembering all the good times of the past, it pumped joy and giddiness through her body, filling her to the very core of her being.

Heather laughed. Then, she started to giggle. The giggle grew into full body laughter, and she refused to let her disgruntled brain have a hold in this situation. No, it was her heart's turn.

Her heart rejoiced at this remarkable turn of events. It longed to run out into the rain with little Charlie, and show him how real dancing was done. Unable to resist a second longer, it yelled as loud as it could in its little voice, “Go on, go dance with him!” And then, much to the delight of that large heart inside her, she took a tentative step out from the shelter. The rain immediately drenched her already damp hair, and soaked through her cotton shirt. This time though, Heather ignored the smart side of herself that told her all the reasons this was a bad idea. She ignored everything that involved thinking, really. All she wanted to do was go out there with Charlie and dance!

And so, no longer burdened by her own silly rules, Heather put her hands up in the air...and danced.

A Good Day for Rain
Charlotte Swenson

La Soñadora

The owl watched as the little girl danced on one of those things that they put where people park their cars. And the girl was jumping all over it while her grandmother merely smiled. “¡Baila, salta, sueña!” The girl ended her little feat with a bow. Her smile was as bright as her emerald eyes and golden hair. The owl knew that the girl liked to dance, leap, and most of all, dream. He had been watching her from the moment the girl first tasted the beauty of gymnastics. . . .

Spain was a beautiful país, or country. And especially beautiful when it came to dance, the owl thought. And if Spaniards were amazing at dance, it was no surprise that they were good at gymnastics as well. So, when the girl asked her grandmother to get enrolled in gymnastics, the grandmother couldn't say no. The grandmother was the little girl's biggest supporter.

The owl flew above the two women, young and old, as they walked to el gimnasio, the girl leaping all the way, and the grandmother simply watching and walking. It was not a moment too soon when the owl perched up on a 250-pound weight, watching all the little girls, including his favorite, move in grace just like the teacher. The owl then flew to the grandmother, who was also watching, for a better view.

The owl saw, alas, the poor girl couldn't catch a hula hoop or leap like a swan. Instead, she leaped like a fat koala, her chubby self-landing on the mat. The other girls laughed at her because she was chubby, and she looked pathetic. She felt enraged, and so did the owl.

The owl felt like attacking all of those girls. He sharpened his talons and flapped his wings, but it was already too late. Class had ended. And the girl was crying. But the grandmother merely called to her (the owl could not understand what the grandmother said but it sounded like ‘Ven aquí, Liana; come here, Liana’ so he

assumed the girl's name was Liana), took her hand and said, “A palabras tontas, oídos sordos; to foolish words, deaf ears.”

And Liana smiled through her lucid tears.

As the years passed, everyone grew older. The owl grew older and wiser. The grandmother grew older and wiser. And the little girl grew older and wiser, all the while holding on to her dream.

The owl, in his nest in the tree that was right next to the little girl's window, watched as she practiced her stretches on her bed. She leaped. She spun. She did headstands. She did backflips. The owl was so proud of Liana, who was becoming more agile than ever.

A veces, sometimes, Liana made a little blunder. She'd get upset and sit alone under a tree. A veces, it took her grandmother horas y horas to find her, and when she did, she would tell Liana, “Recuerda, Liana, nunca, nunca te rindas. Never, never give up.” Of course Liana would listen. The owl knew she was such a determined person and obedient girl. ¡Por supuesto que podría!

When Liana was twelve, she entered her first local gymnast competition and lost. But the grandmother and the owl believed in her. And Liana believed in herself. And it paid off. She won her next contest. As Liana kept entering more tournaments, she gained fame, pride, and a lot of roses. Every rose thrown to Liana meant a new plant for the grandmother's garden. Once there were so many roses that the grandmother, with the help of Liana, had to dig out yet another flower bed.

One day, the two women and the owl made their way to the train station. Liana had to take the train for the national tournament.

The grandmother gave Liana a present. It was a sweater. A good-luck sweater along with a matching gymnast suit. Liana cried and hugged the grandmother. The owl felt like crying, too. As Liana boarded the train, the grandmother told the owl to go watch her granddaughter please. “Por favor, mira a mi nieta, pájaro valiente.” The owl squawked in response, swooped to the top of the train and held on to a rod with his strong talons.

The next day, the stadium was all set, and the contestants lined up and walked in. The owl beamed as he saw his little girl who

wasn't so little anymore. Other people he did not know. But he knew one other girl, who had hair the color of the carrot, freckles, and steely blue cat eyes. It was Raquel Melina. The owl angrily sharpened his talons. Every day when Liana returned home, she would often complain of Raquel the ginger headed bully. Now the owl hoped more than ever for Liana to win, or Raquel to lose. No, make that Liana to win AND Raquel to lose.

The owl watched as the competition moved on and on and on, until the final part that the owl feared most came: the pommel horse. Poor Liana, thought the owl, for the pommel horse is mainly used in men's gymnastics, but this time they had probably made an exception. The pommel horse was basically some box with two handlebars on it, and it was shaped like a horse. Liana was exemplary in everything, even the pommel horse, but she feared it a lot because her mother was killed in a horse accident and that made her wobble on it. When she feared something, so did the owl.

It was Liana's turn to execute tricks on the pommel horse. And she started off with single leg work in the form of scissors. But the owl knew that she knew that double leg work was more important. She started to rotate her legs counterclockwise and then clockwise and. . . well, the owl couldn't keep up. She placed one hand on the horse and lifted her whole body up, dancing on the box. The owl realized that she was moving to the tune of her favorite childhood song, La Cucaracha, the Cockroach.

Liana was almost done, and it was time for the owl to watch her triple backflip over to the mat.

Baila. She spun around, this time snapping her fingers with her free hand. Salta. She lifted herself up and started to flip. And flip.

And flip.

Sueña. She fell. . .

. . . on the wooden floor.

The owl was shocked! Where was the mat? Who did these people think they were?

Liana got up. Her nose was squished and her face was red. Staff rushed to her help. The owl then saw that Raquel, with her foot, pushed the mat back to where it was supposed to be and lifted her leg on the horse. . . What? NO!

It was Raquel!

Raquel was the reason Liana's nose was broken.

The owl knew what he had to do. He swooped down to Raquel, who was teasing some other girls. Those girls' hurt faces reminded the owl of the times Liana would cry when Raquel was bullying her, or whenever she would fall and scrape her knee badly. Filled with a courage he never knew he had before, he let out a loud shriek and swooped away. Everyone turned to Raquel's direction.

A crabby (in mood and in color, the owl thought. His face was rosa, or pink!), dashedly hobbled over to Raquel and told her, "No way, Jose, are you even gonna think about staying here for long 'cause no one gave ya the permission to pick on your fellow contestants and you are a really rotten apple and . . . say . . . who put the mat back here?"

Ha! The owl knew that Raquel was done for good. The crabby judge escorted Raquel out of the gym, all the while muttering some not-so-nice things under his breath. Raquel gave the owl and Liana each a hissy cat sneer with her icy blue eyes. After tallying up all the votes the judges decided that Liana was the winner. She received her first trophy as well! After a reception and a yeehaw and a yippee from the crowd, everyone went outside for a "fiesta pequeña", or small party.

Liana was near a tree. The owl swooped down to Liana's shoulder, the first time he ever directly met her. But, as Liana explained, there would always be a guardian who would do the best for her, her grandmother said. The owl swelled with pride. He was a true guardian!

"Ay!" She said, "You showed everyone the truth! ¡Qué increíble eres! Gracias, señor búho."

The owl was exuberant, but he wished he could speak Human to his amiga soñadora.

Aureliana Reína, Olympic gymnast, was greeted by a crowd of cheering fans. She showed off yet another gold medal in gymnastics.

She came down the steps and was overwhelmed by the pummeling questions of journalists, but she answered each question with grace.

Just before she was about to leave, a reporter asked,

“To whom do you owe your success to?”

“Uno, mi abuela, my grandmother. Dos, mi maestra, my teacher. Tres, un búho muy leal, a very loyal owl.”

As the owl and grandmother watched their little girl from the skies, they smiled, realizing that today was her day and tomorrow would be, too.

He's Not My Brother

My twin brother and I were supposed to go on a trip with our father's family during the summer break of our sophomore year in high school. They were nice people, but we barely visited them. When my father did make plans, he usually only invited my brother, so I was stoked at the fact that I would be going as well this time. Our uncle offered to drop us off from our mother's house, and during the car ride, he told us an old story that he heard about. Apparently, the lake house we would be visiting used to be a cemetery that got flooded during a bad summer monsoon storm.

My brother and I looked at each other and grinned. We were both fans of the paranormal, so this was more exciting than frightening to us. Once we got there, we thanked our uncle and headed towards the lake house. It looked pretty fancy, but through the walls, we could hear the muffled sounds of the rest of our family inside. I knocked on the door and our aunt opened it. She welcomed us inside, then took us to our room as we settled our things.

Most of our family was in the kitchen preparing the barbecue that was for dinner that night. Our dad told us that we were welcome to use the canoe for now since our uncle only used it to go night fishing. He'd taught us how to paddle it properly when we were younger, so no one found it suspicious once we left on it. The only warning that our dad gave us was that we shouldn't get into the water, but no explanation as to why we couldn't swim in it. My brother and I looked at each other again, wondering if our uncle's story about the underwater cemetery was in fact true. We proceeded to go pretty far out up the lake. I could hear the loud sounds of the oars grazing through the cool lake water. The sun shone brightly, making the water in the lake glisten like a diamond. It felt good to feel the light summer breeze in my face

until my brother suddenly anchored the boat. I looked over at him to see what he was doing, and it seemed like he was getting ready to jump in. Neither of us had on life jackets, so I rushed over to see what was going on; by the time I was right behind him, he fell in.

Looking over the railing, I watched him sink into the depths of the lake. I stood there, waiting for him to come back up and scare me—but he never did. I started to panic as worry and anxiety started to pervade my mind.

I waited there for about half an hour, paddling around the lake, aimlessly searching for my brother. After looking for a long time, I gave up and I paddled back to the lake house for help. I must've been late for dinner, because my dad stood outside with his arms crossed. In my mind, I began thinking about how I was going to explain what happened to my brother. But before I opened my mouth, he began to speak.

“You guys didn't listen to the one rule that I gave you!” Sweat dripped from my forehead as he continued.

“Why would you let your brother swim in the water?” He asked me, and I bit my lip before I could say anything stupid. How did he know what happened? We were too far out for anyone to see us. Before my dad could continue, a familiar face stepped out onto the porch.

“Hah! I can't believe I beat you swimming back! You suck at paddling the boat,” my twin brother laughed. I eyed him closely. How was he here? Later at dinner as I observed him, he told the same jokes he usually told me when we were home, and got along with everyone very well. I tried to catch him slipping up, but nothing happened; everything seemed normal. He even knew all our family members inside jokes. He sounded like my brother, talked like him, and even had his atrocious posture. But that thing was definitely not my brother.

How do I know this, you ask? I am the one who pushed him into the lake. I watched him get pulled down and heard screams of him drowning as he begged me to grab his hand and pull him out of the water. The thing in the lake house is not my brother, because my brother is dead.



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