

2023

THE VANGUARD

Literary Magazine

Crafted by the Rowan College South Jersey Community



Fiction
Memoir
Film
Photography
Digital Art
Poetry
and more..

By the students, faculty, and staff of RCSJ

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ROWAN COLLEGE
SOUTH JERSEY

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Letters from the Editors

For the past several years, I have served as the Faculty Editor for *The Vanguard*. Along with a volunteer Student Editor each year, we crafted a publication that we hoped would represent the talents of the college community here at RCSJ. This year, for the first time ever, I had the pleasure to create the magazine with eleven of the most talented students I have ever had the pleasure to teach. The students in the first cohort of the 3+1 Degree in Applied Professional Communications edited, designed, and wrote content for the magazine as part of our Publication, Layout and Design course. Not only was I impressed by their skills as writers, designers, and editors, but I also truly feel that they have been able to bring an authentic students' touch to the magazine that best encapsulates who we are here at RCSJ. I am proud of their efforts and excited to watch as they progress into their fourth year at Rowan University and their careers.

Thank you to everyone who contributed this year, and congratulations to our writers and artists who were published.

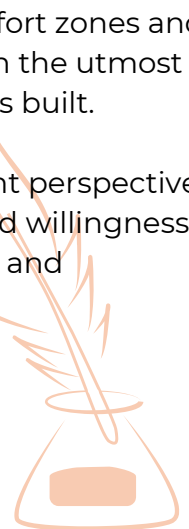
Best,
Dr. Andrea Vinci
Assistant Professor, Director - 3+1 Applied Professional Communications
Faculty Editor, *The Vanguard*

Maya Angelou once said, "You can't use up creativity. The more you use, the more you have." That inspiration should never be diminished, because artistic ability is meant to be delved into and shared. We had the pleasure of assembling *The Vanguard* in order to curate a unique collection of various artforms that were developed by accomplished artists and writers of the RCSJ community. While observing art can be an escape for the viewer, it is equally an escape for the creator. It heals, gestures room for growth, and instills a change in critical thinking. The limits of what art is capable of are infinite, just like a person's imagination. Through each piece we were lucky enough to edit, we uncovered what this meant.

We would like to thank Dr. Andrea Vinci for the opportunity to go outside of our comfort zones and work on a real publication that harnesses all of the skills she has taught us. It was with the utmost privilege to be able to review work and enter the inspired worlds that our contributors built.

Thank you to everyone for all of the submissions we received and the different student perspectives we got to explore. The submissions each year demonstrate the expressive abilities and willingness of each student, faculty, and staff member. Their efforts embody tenacity, dedication, and acknowledgement of diverse perspectives across the campus community.

Best wishes,
The APC 3+1 Publication, Layout and Design Class, Student Editors



I remember the first time I heard about the NUMB. I remember not quite understanding the extent of its potential, and how naïve I was to its hold on my future. I remember thinking it would be a good thing.

It was at my father's funeral. My mother and I lost him just shy of my fourteenth birthday. Attendees approached us with condolences, but it did nothing to soften the blow of our new reality, no matter how kind-hearted or good-intentioned they were. My mother wept relentlessly, the same she'd been doing since the days prior.

People offered things like, "I'm sorry for your loss," but those words carried such empty meaning. Though support was evident as each pair of pitiful eyes looked upon our now broken household, comfort was simply unavailing.

There was another phrase I hated more, though: "You'll get through this."

I was standing next to my mother as one of my father's friends spoke those words to her. I remember seeing the man a few times before, whenever my father's workplace hosted their annual company picnics. He seemed just as self-righteous as he did then. I couldn't help but stare at him as he spoke to my mother, wondering how he could be so ignorant of her feelings as she gasped for air between her sobs. She wasn't thinking as callously, though, and accepted his hollow gesture in hopes of scavenging out any bit of comfort she could find, not caring if it were inadequate or tied to any ulterior motives.

My mother wasn't a helpless woman, so I felt a sense of shame pulling me away from her desperation and down at my feet. Staring at the floor and drowning out the procession, I wondered how long we'd have to adhere to our new roles. Was that just who we were now?

"I'm sorry for your loss."

The words brought me back for a moment, and looking up, I realized they weren't for my mother, my grandparents, or even my aunts or uncles. They were for me.

In front of me stood a slender woman, probably no more than a few years older than my mother. I didn't recognize her, so I assumed she was friends with someone from my extended family. I frowned, realizing I would have to give a meaningless, "Thank you," to this presumed stranger, but as I opened my mouth to do so, she instead handed me a business card.

"Give this to your mother when you get a chance," she said to me, placing the card directly in my palm, then closing my fingers over it, "Let her know she doesn't have to endure this."

The inflection in her voice was sincere, and it completely shook me out of my cynicism. I was about to ask her why she couldn't just speak to my mother herself, but she moved out of line and back into the crowd of people who were taking their seats before I got the opportunity to.

Glancing around for a moment, I wondered if anyone had seen what transpired between me and the strange woman. One look at my mother and I was sure she hadn't, as she was now busy weeping into the arms of her colleagues.

"You okay, honey?" came the voice of my aunt. Maybe she had noticed the woman approach me and took note of the mixture of concern and confusion on my face.

"Yeah, I just-" I started, but there was something about that strange woman's tone that made me feel as though I was about to spill a secret.

"I was just worried for my mom, is all." I finished.

My Aunt frowned, then wrapped her arm around me. "She'll be okay, baby," she replied, "She has you, so she'll keep on fighting." Watching my mother in this condition, I wasn't so sure.

"Yeah," I mumbled.

We headed home in the evening, following the reception. I had been careful not to show anyone the card I was given, or even

speaking about the strange woman who gave it to me. Instead, I waited until I was alone in the car with my mother to finally examine what felt like contraband to me.

The card was gray with black lettering, with the letters N-U-M-B boldly printed at the top. "Xeri Corp's new Neural Uptake Mood Blocker eliminates the symptoms of depression completely. Call our service hotline today so you can be you again!"

I traced the phone number printed alongside the message with my finger and wondered if this was some sort of strategic scam to steal the money from my father's life insurance policy, not that it was much to begin with, but enough so that my mother and I wouldn't be homeless. Looking over at my mother to assess her condition, I wondered if I should mention the card and the woman to her now. The tears falling from her eyes as she silently drove were enough to deter me from speaking just yet.

As we got close to our neighborhood, my mother began crying more heavily. I was nervous for her, but she made the right judgment to pull over for a moment.

"Mom-" I began to say, but was cut off by the rapid unbuckling of her seatbelt and quick maneuvering of the driver-side door. In an instant, she got out of the car and began to puke all over the side of the road, sobbing, as what mostly came out was water.

That was the first moment I cried all day, watching her from the passenger side of her SUV as her body weakly combated against her. She wasn't at all herself anymore, and now I was faced with losing not just one parent, but her as well.

Clenching onto the business card tightly, I got out of the car and approached her.

"Mom?" It came out as unsteady as my feet on the pavement.

She wiped her mouth and looked back at me, but in my attempt to give her some relief, she just broke down even more.

"I have something for you." I managed to say, "I think it can help us."

She sat on the curb, probably too weak to withstand how her body was treating her.

She didn't say anything; I'm not sure she could, so I continued.

"A woman gave it to me. It's a phone number for some kind of mood blocker. It says it makes people feel like themselves again." She wiped her eyes with her other sleeve, then extended her hand to take the card. I nodded and handed her the card, shuffling my feet as she read it over.

"Who gave this to you?" she said between sniffles.

I looked at her at first with worry, but then knew there was no reason to fear being honest with my mother. "Some woman at the funeral. She told me to give it to you and tell you that you don't have to endure this."

She lifted her head at me. "This?"

"Yeah," I replied, looking back at the car, then to the puddle of puke on the side of the road, "This."

She looked back too, then frowned as tears filled her eyes again. Maybe she thought she really couldn't endure it, and perhaps my offer was enough to convince her.

"I'll look into it this week." She said, "For now, let's get home."

Agreeing with her decision, I walked over to help her off the curb, where we then staggered back to the car, driving in that same dismal silence.

About a week after the funeral, my mother and I were forced to return to normalcy. She went back to work, while I returned to school. Most of my friends had heard what had happened, but I didn't invite them to the funeral because it would have been unbearable. Disingenuous behavior from adults was barely tolerable, but to have my peers share and experience one of the most tragic days of my life was just too much.

The only one I invited was Chelsea, who I considered my closest friend. She didn't attend, though, because her father thought she was too young.

He said since I've never seen a real dead person, I might find it unsettling, and it could become a trigger for me," she explained to me, "I'm sorry! Was that insensitive?"

I shook my head, glad that she was still

herself around me, despite her oblivious nature. I was at her house for the day, since my mother had an appointment she had to go to and didn't want me to spend the day alone.

"I would have gone if it were up to me," she stated, "But either way, you know I support you no matter what, right?"

I offered her a chuckle, but eagerly wished to change the topic. "How about you tell me what I missed?"

She hesitated, probably wanting to make sure it really was okay to act like everything was fine. Reassuring her with a smile, I made it evident that whatever she had to tell me was better than me thinking about the past two weeks.

"Well," she started, "Evan got back together with Shania, but Alex and I are pretty sure that they're going to break up again by next week, because Shania is still trying to get attention from other guys."

"Oh?" I said, then felt my gut sink as I realized my interest was feigned.

"Yeah," she continued, not initially realizing, "She even got dress-coded last week by Ms. Braun."

I laughed, but that twisted feeling wouldn't let up. She was about to continue, but must have noticed something was wrong, because her interest in school drama suddenly vanished.

"If you want, I can tell you about the weird thing that happened to me last week," she suggested, hoping the change in the topic would provide a distraction that wasn't so superficial.

"What weird thing?"

"Well you know my next-door neighbor, Mr. Coleman, right?"

I nodded, thinking of the old man with crooked teeth who used to let us take handfuls of candy on Halloween when we were little.

"Well, when I was walking home from school, I walked past his house, like usual, and saw him standing outside."

I chuckled, "And that was weird?"

"No, I'm serious, listen," she continued, "He was standing outside and I said 'hello' to him, only he just kept staring straight ahead."

I rolled my eyes and laughed again. "Chels, he probably didn't hear you."

"No!" she insisted, "He definitely did! And even if he didn't the first time, I walked up closer to his fence to see if he was okay, and he just stared directly past me."

"So what did you do?" I asked, amused.

"I just went home and told my dad about it!"

Not really believing her, I gave her a plausible suggestion. "Maybe he just has dementia or something."

"He doesn't," she continued adamantly, "But my dad told me his daughter died of an overdose a few months ago."

"And now he's just acting strange?"

"Yes! I'm telling you! My mom even told my dad he was acting weird when she went out to get the mail. My dad said it all started shortly after his daughter's funeral."

I prepared myself to formulate another rebuttal of doubt, but paused to reflect on my own situation. My mother and I were both certainly dealing with grief in two different ways. Perhaps Mr. Coleman's strangeness was his way of coping.

"Maybe he's just grieving," I suggested.

I could tell she wanted to argue more, that whatever behavior she witnessed was something beyond grief. She must have chosen to drop it due to the sensitivity of the subject, suddenly more in tune with how I was feeling than she was before.

"Whatever the case," I continued, "I hope he feels better."

Later that night, Chelsea's dad dropped me off back home. I guess he wanted to save my mom the trouble, probably assuming he was doing her a kindness. I thanked him and went inside, prepared to tell my mom about my day.

I crept inside, entering a dark living room, where the TV was playing the nightly news to an empty audience. The light was on in the kitchen, so I put my bag down by the door and went through the living room to where my mom was.

She was cooking something on the stove, and I smiled, happy to see some aspect of her return, even if it was something as small as cooking dinner. She must have heard me enter the kitchen, because she began to place the bowl in her hand down on the counter, then turned around to see me. I expected her to have that same melancholy look on her face

she'd had all the days prior, Even more unnerving, her expression wasn't really anything at all.

"Hi, mom," I said to her, but I wasn't met with any reply. She just continued looking at me.

"Mom?" I chuckled nervously, thinking she was joking with me so I'd feel better. Maybe Chelsea made up that whole story about Mr. Coleman, and now my mom was playing into it. Perhaps they'd conspired together just to pull some elaborate ruse.

But the blank void in my mother's eyes wasn't something a person could fabricate. They were empty. Truly and utterly empty. "Mom, where did you go today?" I asked her, but again, no response.

On the counter, next to the ashtray, I saw her keys and the business card for the NUMB alongside it.

We stayed silent as she just stared at me, and my body froze in fear. From the living room, the TV came to my aid, piecing everything together for me.

"Breaking news tonight: authorities from all across the Bay Area have raided dozens of labs owned by pharmaceutical company Xeri Corp, finding thousands of illicit drugs used to illegally operate on the general public."

"Mom?" I repeated with urgency, "Where did you go today?!?"

"Though the motive behind the illegal operation is still unknown, founder Vania Lopez, along with dozens of her employees, were arrested late this evening and charged with domestic terrorism, conspiracy, and possession of illegal substances."

The panic within me spiraled, and with it, I was able to override my fear and dart into the living room, where I saw that same slender woman from the funeral, now being arrested on my TV screen.

"Sources say that the drugs administered by Xeri Corp, which were not approved by the FDA, were used as a brain numbing agent, causing irreversible damage to the brain's limbic system. Many victims have come forward, and authorities urge anyone else that may have-

The words from the TV cut out as the screen went black, and I stared at the shadow of my mother's silhouette creeping toward me. Her eyes stared straight ahead as she held out the TV remote.

"You went?" I asked her, but it came out faint, like I didn't want it to be true. That would mean that I did this to her, that it was me who gutted her feelings and made her an empty shell.

Her eyes slowly inched up and locked onto mine. She didn't need to speak for me to know that it was true. I could feel the tears well up in my eyes as fear threatened to keep me frozen in front of her again, but whether it was guilt that motivated me, or the desperation to save my mother from whatever I had done, I stepped backward to get my phone from my bag. Maybe I could call an ambulance and they could help her from whatever she had gotten herself into.

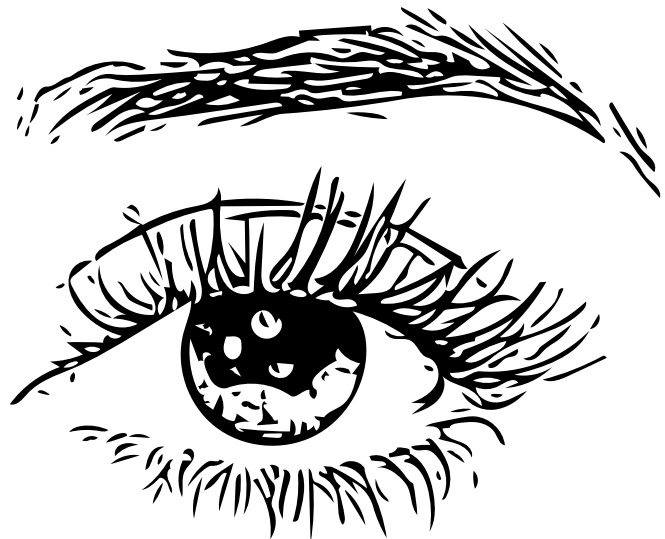
My mother's voice interrupted my spiraling thoughts: "You look just like him."

Scared, I looked back at her for confirmation that she'd really just spoken to me.

"Who?" I stammered.

Her eyes didn't break their stare.

"Your father."



"ON AN EVENING WHEN THEY ALL REJOICED"

By: TJ Edmund

In the warm evening air of the summer solstice, a little boy slept soundly while
clutching his favorite stuffed bear closely to his chest
That June, the highest court in all the land ruled to grant same-sex couples the right to
wed
The People's House was illuminated like a rainbow to signify the landmark case
Red, violet, yellow, blue, orange
Spirits were high on an evening when they all rejoiced

When trailblazers and icons alike stepped forward to make strides towards progress
During protests, riots, and bitter outrage, the flags were swaying in the gentle breeze
Red, violet, yellow, blue, orange
Windsor, Milk, Johnson, Baker, Rivera
Spirits were high on an evening when they all rejoiced

When marriage equality was codified under the law
When queer literature was banned
When drag queens were canceled
And nail polish on men was flamboyant
Some rejoiced while many others denounced these actions

In the warm evening air of the summer solstice, that little boy would be scared today
When he noticed a boy he liked, he would hide from the truth
When he quivered and shook, he would feel shame
When the world around him crumbled, he would feel alone

When that boy called on his allies, no one arrived
When he was trolled on social media, nobody comforted him
When no one supported him, he spoke up
In the warm evening air of the summer solstice, the boy felt empowered
One spirit was high on an evening when he and only he rejoiced

SURF PHOTOGRAPHY

By: Travis Kelleher



Desolation breeds the heart of warming desire, for those who do are left with the parish of dullness, and do not breed with life. Becoming one with the world around you feels as though it is an innate human trait; a connection to the world around us. Most possess but an adequate skill set, typically enough for them to survive, not thrive. For others, their abilities transcend far beyond the typical capability of usual developmental ingenuity.

The words of her father never rang faithful to her; Odessa was her own. The lavish desires of fortune and opportunity never stood out to her the same way they did for others. She felt as though the world wasn't just a place created for possession or altruism. No, the world was not just a desolate goldmine, it was a literal goldmine.

"Why must you insist upon bringing me on your voyages?" Odessa asked.

Her dad, pious as always, replied "Because your brother isn't well enough. Besides, since the loss of your mother, I need another travel companion I can rely on."

Odessa soured in the face. The loss of her mother was one that still hadn't fully settled. A decade had passed since she came down with a fierce bout of tuberculosis, one she never recovered from.

"You know I hate it when we speak about her, father. If you insist upon bringing me, I ask that we at least do it in—"

A short pause occurred before her father could no longer hold it in, "Well, I did pack your favorite food."

Not much could turn the blank expression off of Odessa's face; for a young, daunted teenager, she had a stoned expression that certainly offset many around her. But with the memory of her mother's passing still engraved in her mind all these years later, nothing quite like her childhood meals could elicit a reaction out of Odessa's face.

"I do hope it's made from Zucchini," she stated. "Only the best," her father said.

The family had only recently run into severe hardships. Life was always difficult, but the past year grew increasingly dire. With the rise of industrialization across the country, Odessa's father's longtime job as a mail courier had, like so many others, become outsourced to cheaper labor. This fact had been especially hard for the family to adjust to. Many children Odessa's age and younger had begun taking up careers instead of completing preliminary schooling. It was a hard choice many had to make, but one that her father would never allow. A scholar in his early days, Odessa's father knew the value of schooling.

"Father, I understand your wishes, but the local factory had some positions that opened up due to the labor strikes, and I was thinking I could—"

"Not a chance in hell, Odessa. Drop it," Her father snidely emphasized. "Children your age should be taught the value of education. I may not be able to afford to send you to school, but I cannot allow you to become a slave to industrialization. The answer is no, and forever will be no."

Odessa understood, although she did not agree. With the advent of the railroad, the country had become more advanced than ever. Yet, her father, stubborn as ever, disagreed with the advantageous approach the country had taken to the newfound ways in which it was expanding. Besides, gold had just recently been found in California, and nobody knew this quite like Odessa's father.

"We will not have to worry much longer about money. This journey will take us to the rich coast. Our days of issues are numbered. I promise you."

Odessa wanted to believe her father, indeed she did. But she had seen the ugly underbelly

of the world. Debt was an entrapment even the most prideful could not escape, and Odessa could never have been oblivious enough to not understand what this goal meant to her father. Debt does not pay itself off.

"Honey, it's getting late, why don't you lay down in the carriage? We'll stop somewhere quiet soon and set up camp. Oh, and don't forget to eat your Buillon," He told her.

Odessa agreed.

She carried herself to the back of the drawn carriage.

Exhausted, yet nearing the day's end, she laid her head to rest.

Dreams are fulfilled only when the desire fuels the burning passion; for dreams do not become such through complacency and ignorance. Dreams come to fruition when the man who seeks to conquer the world frees himself from the shackles of internal tyranny. Goals are but a window into the fabric of our existence if we are given the chance to fulfill them.

Odessa awoke.

The serenity of the brisk Yukon air became eerie, and the calm night had seemingly, within an instant, turned amiss. The sounds of the wildlife had drawn away. The ever-present notion of safety had become a myth. Something was wrong.

Odessa opened the carriage door.

Her face knocked against a cold doubled shaft.

"Yu come wit' me nahw," exclaimed the man.

Frightened, she obliged.

"Yu do exsachtlee' as I say, yu hurr me?" his English barely legible. "I don' have a reason to 'arm yu, don' mean I don' wil."

Odessa was forced to the front of the carriage near the horses. She saw her father, hands above his head, kneeling on the ground. Odessa's face slowly began to tremble ever more with a rush of fear. In desperation, she ran to him.

As she did, a tall, hulking figure kicked her over right before she could reach him.

"You bastard! Don't touch her!" her father

screamed. The hulking man whipped his mouth violently.

"For fuck's sake, Bill... You don't ever have a goddamn idea what you doin,' do you?" the hulking figure remarked.

"Shoo,' I mean. She jus' a lil girl, boss. I din' think she was gon' jus-"

The hulking man screamed, "You don' ever think, now do you! Now shut your goddamn mouth, as I said once!"

Bill hushed.

"Jonah. Jonah! It's been forever, partner. Last time I saw you!" the hulking man remarked. Odessa's face grew grim. The hulking man's cadence, the inflection in the man's voice. This wasn't just somebody that knew her father, it was a voice she recognized too.

"Jonah, buddy. Look at you! This... is... a delight! My word, when was the last time I ran into you? Five, maybe six months ago? Boy, it's been a real long time, Jonah!"

Odessa tried to put a finger on it, but her fear didn't allow her to look up. She couldn't place the face with the voice. It was as if the hulking man's voice was undeniable, yet seemingly unrecognizable.

"I'm truly sorry I had to do all this, Jonah! You see, the guys can get a bit, oh damn, what's the word you bigwigs like to call it... overzealous? Aw shit, I don't even know if thas' the right word. Either way, sorry for the clear, clear misunderstanding."

The way he talked to her father, the way he spoke to her father. It was as if the hulking man was so sincere, yet harbored a deep resentment for her father. She was so close to figuring it out, but couldn't bring herself to look.

"Micah, I jus-"

The hulking man, now turning violent instantly, laid a powerful blow to Odessa's father.

"Oh, now you wanna acknowledge my fucking existence, Jonah?!"

Odessa figured it out. Although, in a way, she wished she didn't. Now, she couldn't look for an entirely different reason.

"When I told you you had a month left to pay or something was gonna happen... what did

you do, Jonah? Huh? Run off and stow away like one of them field hands? Is that your career now? Am I on the same level as the fucking dirt workers?" the hulking man remarked.

"Micah listen, I did not mean fo-"

The hulking man delivered another vicious blow.

"Shut your damn mouth. Now. You don't get to speak. Hell, you shouldn't even be allowed to breathe around me. I trusted you, Jonah. I allowed you under me, and I get this? This is what you repay me with? A waste of my resources tryn' find you? A carriage full of shit and a mouth full of empty promises?" Odessa's father whimpered at the thought, before finally saying, "I'm- I'm sorry."

"Sorry?" The hulking man exclaimed, "Oh, oh you're sorry? Well, how-dee-fuckin-day.

Jonah's sorry! The man is sorry! Well, gosh, I guess I'll just be going on my way, then!"

The hulking man delivers yet another vicious strike.

"You don't get to be fuckin' sorry, you unreliable fuck! And this, this is what happens when you fuck around with me and don't pay your debts."

Odessa was mortified. The man raised the cold steel barrel up to her father's face. She couldn't bear to look before. Not at the hulking man's eyes, and certainly not at what was transpiring around her. Odessa had effectively shut off, but her gaze had suddenly become locked to her father's. Beaten, bloodied, and bruised, Odessa's father turned softly to her. His face was barely recognizable from the savage beating. However dazed and barely conscious, he was able to utter but a few words to her: "Food's getting cold."

Bang.



"SIMPLER"

By: Selin Atak

She runs outside in ugly shoes and an ugly coat.
She falls off her bike and climbs trees.
She finds a bird's nest and leaves it alone.
She drags dandelions on her arm.

She runs back inside with a runny nose and red cheeks.
She lays on the floor after dinner.
Her face rubs against the sharp carpet.

She has the tightness in her chest
And the nausea in her stomach.
She wakes up every hour of the night.

The next day, the moon follows her in the car.
She pretends she's in a movie.

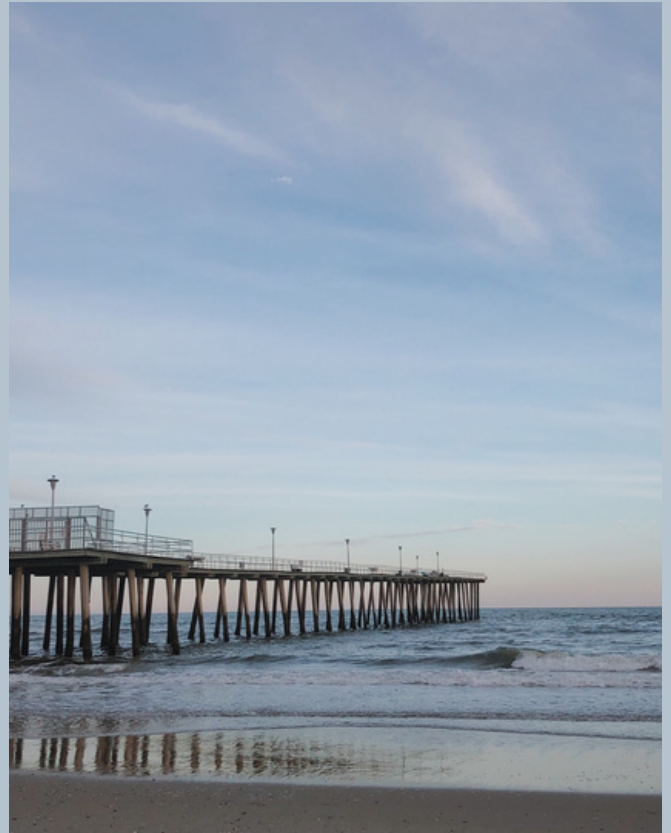
Everyone started staying inside after school.
She still draws with chalk on the driveway.

She loses an eyelash and makes a wish:
"Nothing else will change."

It didn't come true.



Beach Photography By: Angelina Leone



Fwump

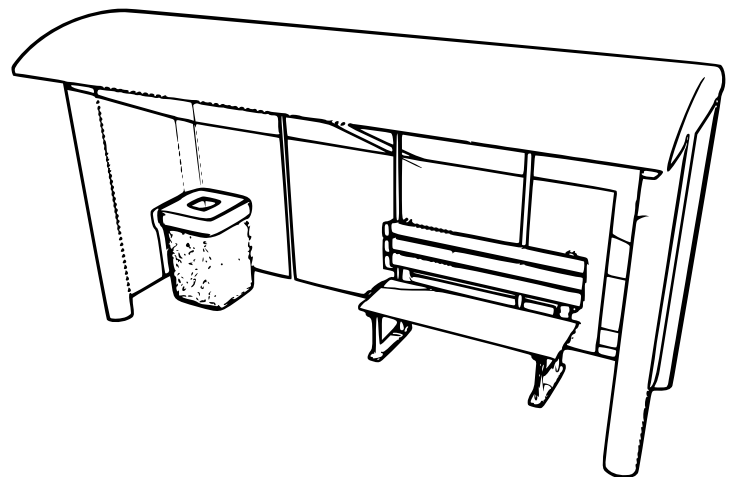
"Jesus, why now?" Arthur fumbles to pick up his bag after kneeling to tie his shoelace, always having a tendency to trip over them at the most awkward times. Arthur hoists his bag over his shoulder and continues walking, his sneakers scraping against the wet blacktop. It had rained the night before, but had all but quieted down now. Arthur had always liked the rain since he was a child, as the pounding on the roof always sounded like distant TV static, sending him to sleep all those years ago.

As he presses on, he sees it; a little bench with enough room to fit roughly three people, underneath a burning bright streetlight, with a dull metal base that shot into the ground, almost as if the light was suspending the pole in mid-air, and not the other way around. It was a bus stop. Nothing special, just a typical bus stop where one would wait to be whisked away to their next destination, often in the face of a roaring hunk of metal barreling toward you. Great. Arthur places his bag on the bench, sitting down next to it in the silence of the evening. It was in the late hours of twilight. Dark enough where any lights that could possibly be on were on, but just light enough to see the last kiss of the sun against the horizon. Just looking at it all makes Arthur sigh a deep breath.

Arthur begins to think about everything that's happened leading up to this moment. It doesn't matter what happened. All that matters is that he can't take it back and just needs to get away from it all. Why did things have to fall apart, why did he run away as he did, and why to a bus stop of all places with nothing more than the clothes on his back and whatever belongings he could fit into a messenger bag? The streetlights continue to shine a burning light between each of them, spanning for miles in a straight line

along the perfectly symmetrical and orderly road, with each light so similar to the last, you can hardly distinguish them from one another. One light begins to flicker further down the road.

Arthur puts his hands in his face and begins to think harder about what he needs to do next, the sweat dripping from his face as he begins to panic more and more about what's to come for himself. "Dammit, man, where's the bus?!" he exclaims out loud, even though no one is around to hear. He begins to pace, walking around the bus stop in circles, as if the rapid and continuous motion will give him control of his circumstances once more. "Once the bus gets here, yeah, once the bus gets here, I can start over, I can figure myself out, I can get some help!" Arthur begins to panic further, and frantically looks down both sides of the road, searching for any signs of the bus. Maybe running isn't the solution here.



One of the lights burst down the road, shattered glass hitting the ground from so far away, yet Arthur hears it like the crack of a whip, and bolts his head in the direction, almost out of instinct to see what occurred. Beyond that of the broken street light, an abyss of darkness. If you were to put your hand in it, odds are it would be coated in a substance a deeper black than squid ink. Arthur's heart drops into his stomach as he realizes he can't see past the fear in his mind and the darkness ahead of him. His mind is no longer racing; instead, he is only focused on disappearing. As that thought appears in his mind, almost as a reaction to these thoughts, another light bursts down the street, making a noise akin to that of a gunshot firing into the night with no one to see it.

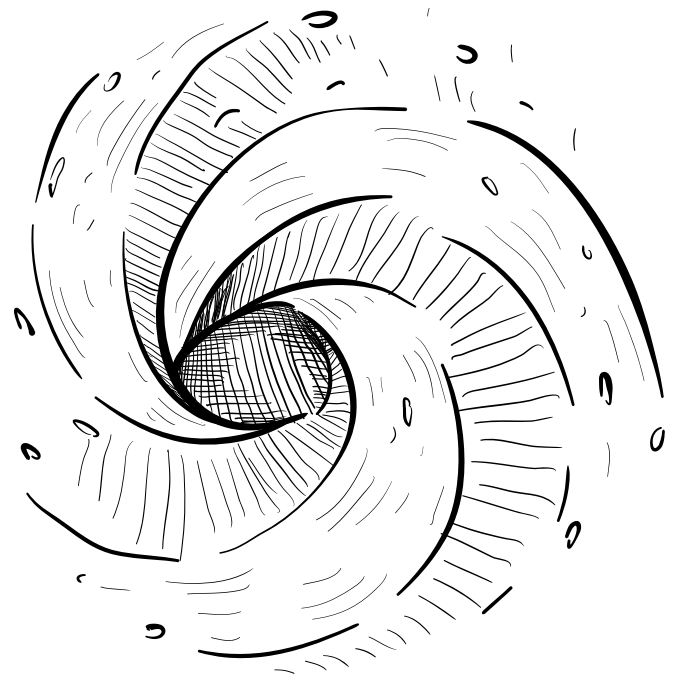
The bus is not coming.

Arthur stumbles and begins to sprint in the opposite direction, realizing that the longer he waits, the more of a target he makes of himself to whatever is in that abyss, completely forgetting his bag on the bench. The lights begin to pop one by one, almost as if they were mocking Arthur's attempts to flee from the void behind him, taking their time to instill fear in their prey, like a vulture eyeing up its latest find.

Arthur runs as fast and hard as his legs will carry him, his life flashing before his eyes, wondering if there is some last-ditch effort for him to find across his memories. In a split second, the only thing he remembers is when he was a child, terrified of thunder—to free himself from that fear, he would stand by a window during a rainstorm and slam two pans together to mimic the loud boom. "Why here, why now?" Arthur said to himself and laughed; that kind of laugh you get when you feel there's nothing else you can do. As he continues to sprint, his lungs feel as though they are about to burst, and he begins to wonder if this running will truly solve anything. He thinks maybe this isn't the right move anymore, almost as if his mind was resisting the ability to run against

his body.

Then, like a switch being flipped in his brain, Arthur planted his feet to the ground, as if he was physically stalling the adrenaline in his body. Every fiber of his being was screaming to sprint forward once more, for hours if he had to, but Arthur had locked himself in place, even to his own surprise. He had no words to say anymore, only the raw instincts that come with being human, and what it means to want to survive. With his hands shaking, blood roaring in his ears, and sweat dripping from his face, he removes his jacket, and ties it around his head and eyes to mimic the darkness in front of him. Arthur breathes in and out once more, then turns to face the abyss around him, knowing that he must quell the fear of the void, no matter what that means for his sanity. Not knowing his fate from this moment on, he screeches out an ungodly scream, enough to make strongest of men's blood run cold, letting the darkness come to him, and is swallowed whole by the void.





Retro Photos
By: Alyssa Connor

Oh, I think to myself, that could be funny. I'm driving home from class, mulling over my options for my first creative writing project. As soon as the essay was assigned, I knew I wouldn't be writing about anything too personal. No offense to my classmates, but my private thoughts and personal experiences are exactly that: private and personal.

Anyway, I've just driven past my old daycare, the Goddard School. Every time I pass this building, I'm reminded of one of my formative experiences, after which I refused to go back. Rightly so, I think. There were other, much more serious issues in this daycare: the floors and toys were always a little dirty, the workers in charge of us were impatient and uncaring; most of the time, they paid us very little attention. However, I, being only three years old, wasn't too bothered by any of this. Only one main issue stands out in my memory: my one awful experience, my point of no return to the Goddard School; my infamous (in my circle of family and friends, of course) block tower story. Inspiration strikes and I make my decision in this moment, as I'm driving past the Goddard School and giving it a much-deserved stink-eye.

For my assignment, I'm going to write my block tower story, because (1) from the perspective of an adult, it matters so little that it's comical, and (2) it was my ticket out of this daycare, which was liable to cause lasting psychological damage on my fragile, developing mind, so, in a way, it's also actually really important. Now, without any further interruptions, here is my block tower story, as accurately as I can remember it: Alone, defenseless, innocent, and far too trusting; at just three years old, I've been left to fend for myself in the big, empty, soul-crushing room I'm told is called daycare. I have to stay here for a little while, my mom

says, because she has to go to work, and no one is at home to keep me company. My face already hurts from the exquisite pout I'm pulling. My incredibly persuasive stubbornness seems to go unnoticed, however, because I end up, against my will, sitting on a scratchy rug in the middle of this strange daycare room, trying to entertain myself with some wooden ABC blocks. It's a cloudy, late-autumn day, perfect for maintaining my aloof and mysterious demeanor, which is my default behavior when I don't get my way. I'm minding my own business, trying to enjoy my blocks, when inspiration strikes. These blocks, I realize, can be stacked, one on top of the other, and, when I put them there, they'll stay. I'm thinking, "This is incredible. A whole new form of entertainment at my tiny fingertips." My gloominess vanishes; with this brand-new, glittering, glimmering, sparkly idea, my mood shifts entirely. I feel innovative, optimistic, and powered by the energy of a thousand suns. And so, I begin my work. It's a thankless job, yet I work tirelessly; the idea has been set into motion, so the tower must be completed. Hours pass, maybe days, who's to say? Certainly not me, I'm still years away from learning how to measure time.

Finally, my masterpiece is complete. I sit down to admire my work; it towers over me in all its 3-foot-high glory. In my peripheral view, I notice another small child making his way toward me, probably to congratulate me on my incredible feat of architecture. He's wearing denim overalls and a pair of athletic sneakers; his blonde hair has been shaped into an unfortunate bowl cut. Just as I'm about to be polite and make conversation, the boy's blank expression shifts into something sinister. Now, remember, I'm only three, so I'm still

learning faces. I've never seen this one before; it trips me up. I'm not sure what to say. I wouldn't realize until much later (third grade, to be exact, when critical thinking becomes part of the curriculum), but it was at this very moment that Bowl Cut gained the upper hand. I let my guard down while my tiny brain attempted to make sense of this strange boy, and he took advantage of my confusion. His next off-putting move: he steps right up in front of my tower, and begins to lift his foot. As it hovers there, I try to make sense of this: what does he gain from standing on one foot next to my tower? Is he jealous of my building skills? Perhaps he feels the need to prove his own worth with a balancing trick? It's possible, and I must admit, balancing on one foot is pretty impressive (a reminder, in case you forgot: we're three). Just as I'm about to compliment him on his stellar balance, Bowl Cut makes his final move. Suddenly, the tiny foot that had been frozen in mid-air swings forward... and it smashes into my beautiful block tower.

Stunned silence follows; I sit there, frozen in shock. Was this a terrible accident? One look at Bowl Cut's face confirmed quite the opposite: he was amused by his destruction, even proud of it. I have no idea how to react. No one has ever done this to me before. What was this terrible feeling? Confusion, disbelief, and utter betrayal all rolled into one. He walks away, smug and satisfied with his evil deeds. He moves on, likely to cause more chaos, quickly forgetting the shock and devastation that was apparent on my face, but I will remember this day forever. I will never forget, nor will I ever forgive the boy with the blonde bowl cut, blue overalls, and tiny sneakers of destruction.

...

Monday, October 17th, 2022.

I'm sitting at my kitchen table, my foot bouncing impatiently as I read over and revise my work. Hm. I think to myself. This must be the root of my trust issues. I guess I did write something personal after all, if only just the beginning...





**Acrylic Painting
By: Allison Hillman**

As usual, the day starts off like any other, with a bagel and orange juice for breakfast, then heading out the door five minutes past schedule. I started my car and realized I needed gas for the fourth time this week, and finally left to go to my minimum wage Mom & Pop fruit stand job.

While I listen to my 'summer songs' playlist, I watch everything in my sight. There are always people walking alongside the road; either about to wait at the bus stop or just getting off, or to simply just embrace the spring sun. *What did people do before cars?* I think to myself, even though I obviously know people walked or rode horses. *But really, before we had cars, there must have been tons of people on the road... well, I guess there would be no need for roads if there were no cars... hmmm...*

BEEEEEEP! The light turns green as I am in deep thought, staring into space. I make the first turn on the right to pull into my work. After seven grueling hours of selling pineapples to suburban moms, strawberries to elderly couples, and the occasional mango to a boy who looks like he could be in the movie *Dazed and Confused*, my shift is finally over! I clock out, jump right into my car, and flip down my mirror to take out my ponytail full of auburn hair. I place my cheap Dollar General sunglasses over my green eyes and head home on the same route I always take, except *Ugh, "Detour," really!* Following the signs to get on this alternate route, I see an old Victorian-looking house on my left. *OOO an estate sale!* I immediately pull in next to a white 2004 Toyota SUV.

The front door is wide open, and a middle-aged woman is shuffling around inside, moving objects onto tables. I knock at the door, although I'm already through, just to give the unaware woman a sign that I have arrived.

"Oof! You startled me!" she exclaims. "My name is Deborah. This was my grandmother's house. She recently passed... something with her heart, the doctor said... you know how those things can be..." I nod to give her reassurance, but I, in fact, do not know how those things can be.

She brings over a picture frame containing a very old photo. "Her great-grandfather built this place in 1901..." she points to him in the photo, then moves her finger over to a woman, "to live with her great-grandmother, Beatrice. They built this house on love. That's why my grandmother loved it so much... generational love ... you know..." She smiles as she stares at the frame before placing it in a cardboard box labeled "KEEPSAKES." Looking around through all the old, dusty items, I am having a hard time finding something to buy. I feel bad about being the only person here, so I figure I should buy at least one thing. A gold watch that tells the wrong time, a cracked flower vase, and a giant canvas painting of three cats on a pool table. *Geez... slim pickin's I guess.*

I finally come across the clothing and accessories table. A bright red and orange glasses case speaks to me to open it, and without hesitation, I do. *Holy Mother of Mary!* Gorgeous, bright blue lenses with black framing, very vintage looking, staring at me from the palm of my hands. "Do you have a bathroom?" I ask Deborah. She points down the small, unlit hallway. Looking in the mirror, I tuck my hair behind my ears and place the glasses on my face. Suddenly, the house doesn't look outdated at all. The mirror has no dust on it, the light switch has disappeared, and there's a candle illuminating the bathroom. *What is going on? Am I hallucinating?*

Let us place this table in the corner over there,” a voice says calmly, far from outside the bathroom door. It does not sound like Deborah.

OMG! Who said that?! Who was that? I frantically look around the bathroom, noticing more of the changes in detail that were not there before I put the glasses on, like the giant bowl on the counter with water in it representing a sink. The shuffling noise outside of my current chambers continues. I quickly pull the glasses off of my face and stare at myself in the mirror. *What is going on???* *Everything is just like it was when I entered.* There are no noises anymore either. I hold the glasses up to my face, right in front of my eyes, and start pulling them towards, then away from my face. *What is wrong with these things?* Every time the glasses are close to my eyes, I see the bright blue tinted vision of the ... *ORIGINAL HOUSE?! No way this was from when the house was built ... The lady said 1901. No. Way.* I keep the movement of the glasses toward my face going until my puzzled expression turns into a curious one. I finally put the glasses back on to satisfy myself.

“Honey,” a man's voice calls out, “Where would you like the clock?” I face the door, ready to peek out and see where I am, and more importantly, WHEN I am.

“By the door, or the vanity?” he calls. I shake my hands as if I'm preparing to get into a fight. *What are you doing, you're acting insane. Just crack the door, you weirdo!*

My hand is on the knob, ready to turn it. “Beatrice? Oh, Beatrice, honey. I need an answer!”

Beatrice? I know that name from somewhere. Beatrice? ... Beatrice? ... BEATRICE!

To Be Continued...





It's never too late
to pursue your passion

Joseph McGovern's
ALL OVER AGAIN

JAM PRODUCTIONS PRESENTS

A JOSEPH MCGOVERN EXPERIENCE

JOSEPH FUOCO CONSTANCE RESHEY

"ALL OVER AGAIN" VINCENT PRIMAVERA

MAHDI SHAJI SEAN RYAN SCREENPLAY BY JOSEPH MCGOVERN

EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS CONSTANCE RESHEY JOSEPH FUOCO CJ NOBLE FRANK FORMICA

SOUND DESIGN AND ORIGINAL SCORE BY MATTHEW AMAOIO PRODUCED AND DIRECTED BY JOSEPH MCGOVERN

G GENERAL
AUDIENCES
All Ages Admitted

"All Over Again"- Short Film
Click HERE To View
By: Constance McGovern

The Ring notification that changed my life forever:

I just left for work; I was about to pick up my mobile coffee order at my favorite café when I got a notification on my phone that there was a motion at my door. I had ordered a Ring for the front door after dealing with countless stolen packages, so I eagerly checked the notification to see if the thief had returned. In viewing the video, I saw a blonde woman with sunglasses I had never seen before entering my home. Well, not before she was embraced by my boyfriend. It felt like time stopped. The world was still in motion, but I was frozen. I messaged my manager informing them I was going to be late, cause now, I had to go kill my boyfriend. Okay, not literally, but at that moment I could have done some unspeakable things. I eagerly put the car into reverse and flew out of the parking lot. Don't worry though, I did pick up my coffee before leaving. I figured I was going to need the energy to battle my adulterer boyfriend.

I was chugging the double shot espresso, mixed with smooth oat milk and frothy cold foam on top. I had all the windows down, it was springtime, and the weather was finally getting warm. Not to mention I was blasting SZA's "Kill Bill," a new song about murdering her ex-boyfriend... something, that may just become my reality.

At that moment, I felt more so on a mission than I did upset. If I said I had no clue my boyfriend was being unfaithful, I would be lying. He had been acting suspiciously for a few months now, but I always just convinced myself he was having a bad day, I never even considered it could be what it was. Later nights at work, picking up extra shifts on the weekends; the more I thought about it, the more I realized he hasn't been around at all lately. How could I be so stupid?

With a mixture of SZA belting, growing feelings of vengeance, and the caffeine running through my veins, I didn't even

realize how fast I had been driving. I only acknowledged the speed when I saw the blue and red lights flashing in my rearview mirror. Dammit.

I try to play it cool and collect myself before the officer meets me at my window. I started to prepare everything needed to speed this process along as quickly as possible. I frantically opened the glove compartment and dug through the trash I had been throwing in there over time. If anything, I learned to keep that cleaner, I never realized how much of a slob I was until that moment. After throwing the straw wrappers, napkins, and whatever other shit I had in there on the floor, I finally was able to retrieve my registration. The license was the easiest part, sitting pretty in my black Dior wallet strapped in the passenger seat.

Finally, I see the officer approaching my vehicle.

"License and registration please."

I oblige and hand over the requested items.

The officer did not seem interested in entertaining any kind of conversation, and neither did I. He walked my information back to the police car to write up my ticket, I had assumed. In those few minutes, I had forgotten about what was going on in my own home. I had hoped this hold-up didn't stop me from catching them in the act. While waiting, I began to throw the trash back into the glove compartment, when I saw a note.

Dear Jennie,

You are the absolute love of my life. I am so excited to move into this new house with you and start planting our roots. I never thought I'd find love until you walked into my life. Each day with you is a gift and I can't wait to see where life takes us. You are beautiful, smart, and kind. I have no idea how I made you mine. (That rhyme was not intended I swear). I thought my life was

complete until you walked into it. I love you so much and I'll never hurt you, my love. Ever.

- Carter

That was in the flowers he had sent to my work, the day after we officially got the house. Tears started to form. We were supposed to be forever and start our lives in this home. I didn't even want to think there was a life after Carter. I had grown so accustomed to him being in my life, I couldn't remember life before him. I wasn't prepared.

The officer comes back and hands me my speeding ticket, a big surprise, and I ever so slowly inch back onto the road.

I was only about five minutes away from home and I was starting to get a little anxious. It didn't help that SZA's "Nobody Gets Me," was the next track to play. A whole song about how she can't imagine her life with anyone else.

Did she write this album about me, like damn. I hadn't even planned out what I was going to say. What was I going to do, just start screaming and throwing punches? No, I needed to have some sort of plan of action before I went in.

No more being sad, time to get angry, get my vengeance. I cued up "Seek and Destroy," another SZA song fitting for what comes next. First, I'm kicking whomever that woman is outta my house, I don't even wanna waste my breath on her. I chose to believe that she didn't know my boyfriend was in a relationship, and that a woman wouldn't do that to another woman. Second, I will show my boyfriend the Ring footage and see if he can explain himself.

I had only figured out a two-step plan before I found myself in my driveway. It was time. I was fired up, and I could no longer stall in my car.

I took one final swig of my coffee and stepped out of my car.

There was an unfamiliar white truck parked out front. The sight of it made me a little nervous. Yes, I'm angry, but I'm also 5'2, and if this somehow gets physical, that other girl

could probably take me. On the footage she appeared to be the same height as Carter, so around 5'9, I would say. Okay, I was starting to overthink, it was time to just rip the bandage off and go in.

My hands were shaking as I tried to put the key into the lock. My whole life was about to change. I had a great job, a great long-term relationship, and a gorgeous new house, and I was about to lose one of them.

I slam the door shut to make it known that I'm home. I wanted to instill some fear into my boyfriend. Even though it did cross my mind to just sneak up on them, I chose to go for a more dramatic entrance.

Immediately, I start to make my way up the stairs. If they didn't feel the house shake when I slammed the door, they can definitely hear my heels tapping up the hardwood staircase.

I brace myself before opening the bedroom door; my life was about to change forever. There was no way of knowing what I was going to witness, no way to prepare myself for this blow. I took a deep breath, hand on the handle, and built up the courage to open the door.

To my surprise, there were rose petals sprinkled everywhere, champagne in ice buckets, and candles set up. My immediate thought was, "Wow not only am I getting cheated on, but he's treating her better than he's ever treated me." He used to always get me flowers, but not as much these past few months. The only thing missing from this whole equation was my boyfriend and whomever that woman was.

"Jennie?" Carter yells as he runs up the stairs. I turn to face my out-of-breath boyfriend as he reaches the top of the stairs.

"What are you doing home?" He has genuine concern on his face.

"Carter, I had a Ring installed, I saw a woman come into the house right after I left. Where is she?"

Macy is downstairs. We were having breakfast. We finished setting up."

Macy is a name that I knew- it's Carter's cousin, but the Macy that I know is brunette and drives a Honda Civic. Does he think that I'm dumb? Is this the best excuse he could

come up with?

“Carter, I’m not dumb, that woman doesn’t even remotely look like Macy. Now, who is she?”

Just as I ask him, I see the blonde woman coming up the stairs. When I see her face, I am in disbelief. It was Macy. I had that same world-stopping feeling I had felt just a few minutes earlier when I thought I was being cheated on.

“Hey Jennie, what’s going on?” Macy also had a genuinely concerned look on her face.

“Did you dye your hair and get a new car? Are you in the witness protection program or something?”

Macy laughed.

“Jennie, I just dyed my hair for fun, and my Civic is in the shop right now.”

Now I was even more confused, and I was really hoping Carter wasn’t cheating on me with his cousin. That would really be a lot to handle... and gross.

So what’s going on, what is this whole setup, why didn’t you tell me Macy was coming over? I would’ve taken time off.”

“Jennie, Macy is here to help me set up the proposal.” Carter couldn’t even look at me.

“Carter I’m so confused, what proposal?”

“Ours.”

For the third time today, the world stopped moving. It finally hit me. The roses, the champagne, the candles, they’re all for me.

An overwhelming sense of guilt immediately flushes over me. All the feelings I had felt today immediately started flooding out of me. I was sobbing.

“Carter, I’m so sorry. I’m sorry I doubted you, I’m sorry I ruined your proposal, I can’t believe I did this.”

He immediately embraces me. I love this man so much and was so afraid that I was going to lose him. Just getting to be in his arms right now, and knowing that everything I thought was real, wasn’t.

He pulls away and grabs my hands. He leads me to the roses set up on our floor. Still holding my hands, he drops to one knee. If I wasn’t crying already, I surely would have started now.





"Mangia Mantis"
By: Kelly Hillias

"A NOT-SO-HAPPY ENDING"

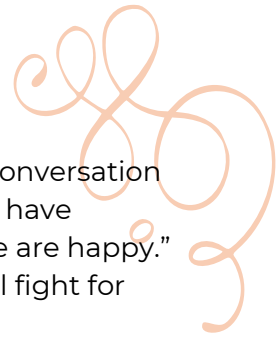
By: Sean Lynd

Ding, as two whiskey glasses hit each other with celebration. Andrew Thompson and Taylor Higgins are celebrating their newly purchased home in Tacoma, Washington; a nice little house in the woods with a stream running through the backyard. Light blue paint covered the outside of their home with windows and a brick chimney. The yard was huge, with bushes and flowers surrounded by stone fences. There was a cobblestone trail covered in moss that led down to a dock at the stream. They were under the gazebo, sharing a bottle of 42 Whiskey, which they both favored. They talked for hours about their jobs, childhoods, and future vacations. They were also reminiscing about the first time they met at a Yankees game in September of 1938 when they lived in New York. They moved across the country to live a private life in the woods of Tacoma, away from crowded chaos. All was going well for both; they had great jobs and started a little garden by the stream with lots of vegetables. Andrew was a bank teller at a local bank and Taylor was an elementary school teacher. Both wake up at dawn and share morning coffee in their stream gazebo. Taylor then gets into her canoe and rows off down to the school, while Andrew goes inside and puts his suit on. He grabs his hat and briefcase and starts to walk downtown. She works from eight in the morning to two in the afternoon, while he works eight to five. Both are very diligent people and take pride in what they do. Taylor is the only teacher in the building because she teaches a small class of twelve children. The building is small, with a playground out front with swings and slides, surrounded by a white picket fence. At the end of the day, she teaches piano to her students at their homes. From house to house, she spends a few hours teaching four to five students, and then takes the canoe back home.

Andrew has his own little office with a big wooden desk, which takes up most of the

room. Papers piled up on his desk and investors came in and out nonstop. He was popular in the financial world and known for his great salesmanship. After work, he occasionally heads to the local candy shop and picks up some chocolate-covered strawberries for Taylor. They both meet back at home around five-thirty and prepare for dinner. They talk about their day and ramble on about extending their home to make an extra bedroom. Andrew likes to cut project conversations short and talk about his upcoming hunting day with his friend, Jim. Andrew loved hunting, and had great aim with his favorite M1 Grand rifle. He would go out and hunt deer a couple of times a year, and every time, he brought back at least one deer. Taylor always asked why the bullet hole in the deer was in the same place every time he brought one back. She thought he brought back the same deer every time. He would save some away for the winters and share some with the neighbors downstream. He kept his rifle mounted above the fireplace to show it off. He had other firearms, like shotguns and pistols, but he favored his M1 Grand out of them all. Taylor didn't like the idea of keeping weapons out in the open, but he reassured her that there was no live ammo in the gun, just in the locked safe he had. She still didn't like the idea, but she knew how much he enjoyed showing off his prized possession.

Taylor always enjoyed being outside in nature. She was out in the garden everyday, planting and watering flowers. She was always making sure the yard was in perfect shape. She enjoys walking up and down the stream with Andrew holding her hand and feeling the smooth rocks on her feet. They played a game where they counted fish and frogs in and along the stream. Whoever has the most gets to pick dessert for that night, and it usually ends with Taylor picking chocolate-covered strawberries and a bottle of 42 Whiskey. The creek was their own little



safe space from the outside world. They spent day after day working, teaching piano, hunting, and tending to the garden. All was going well until a failed art student with a bad-looking mustache rose to power. Adolf Hitler, the Chancellor of Germany since 1933, decided to invade Poland, creating all-out panic. He rolled his armies into most of Europe and down into Africa, and the world went into panic mode. Andrew wasn't that worried about it since this war was overseas, but Taylor was freaking out, thinking the Germans would end up coming to America. For the next three years, war raged in Europe and the Pacific after the Japanese got involved. The Japanese then bombed Pearl Harbor, giving President Franklin Roosevelt no choice but to declare war on Japan and Germany. Taylor was now worried that both countries would invade. She gave no thought that Andrew would ever think about going overseas to fight. Every morning when the paper boy threw the paper on their front lawn, Andrew picked it up immediately and started to read about the men who are currently fighting. Taylor noticed his daily readings and started to worry. Early one Saturday, he was reading in the kitchen when Taylor walked in, and they locked eyes. "Don't you dare even think about going over," said Taylor. "They need young men like me. My coworkers went over and it's only right." "You don't need to go; they have plenty of men... end of discussion." Taylor did not speak to him for the rest of the day. Even when dinner rolled around, she sat in silence at the furthest end of the table. She made him sleep on the couch that night. While he was on the couch, he looked directly at his rifle on the wall. He knew if he went over, he could be useful on the battlefield. He knew the right thing to do was to enlist; the hardest part would be getting Taylor to respect his decision. Dawn broke and again, he grabbed the newspaper and sat down at the table. She walked in and the same thing happened; eyes locked,

and the room fell silent. "Sit down," said Andrew. "I told you, I am not having this conversation with you, it is too dangerous. We have everything we want here, and we are happy." "Taylor, I am going over, and I will fight for this country." "Why... just why?" tears rolled down her cheek. She sat down at the table, holding his hand from the other side. "What kind of man would I be? What man does not go over to fight for his country?" "No one will judge you, you don't have to leave our home. I can pick up extra lessons and, and, and..." sobbing on him. "I will fight, and I will come back home where we will live the rest of our lives," Andrew said as he caressed her arm. "You do not know that. Men younger than you are going over and coming back with no arms or legs. Half of them are not even coming back at all," said Taylor. "Do you trust me?" Andrew asked. "What?" Taylor looks lost in confusion. "Do you love me?" They both looked at each other. All they heard was thunder in the distance. They sat there quietly for a little while, wiping off tears and sipping water from a glass. "I do love you. I want you to be happy and I want to stay together but what happens if you do not come back?" Taylor asked. "I will come back, and we will be together once it is over. After this, nothing will get in our way. Nothing can ruin our future. They need people, men... soldiers." "I guess now it is time for you to enlist, to go to boot camp," she said. "I did that this morning. I leave next week. Boot camp is for six months. I am going to be a paratrooper." Andrew left the following morning with a suitcase full of clothes and a picture of Taylor and him. The first two months of boot camp would be the worst for everyone. It is the most physical part of the camp and the most grueling. Running, jumping, and climbing every day from dawn to dusk. They

marched hundreds of miles and climbed the tallest of wooden obstacles. Once they finished that part of training, it was time for the next part, which was basics; how to fire a weapon, how to look at maps, sign language, and much more. Andrew had impressed the commanding officers with his great aim. They told him it was the best aim they had seen since the beginning of the war. This gave Andrew a huge leap in confidence. Now, he stood out to many officers. Once the basics were over, he spent the last two months learning tactics of being a paratrooper; how to use a parachute, how to land, and how to regroup with your comrades after you land. It was a long six months for him, and especially for Taylor. He then graduated boot camp and was now ready for deployment. He had a week before he was shipped overseas. He went home to see her for one last time before being sent off. They spent the entire week at home, doing little projects around the house. Gardening, painting, and making a little pond that would fill up the stream. That week, the weather was very calming, and it soothed both of them, even though both were highly strung. The day came, and he got dressed and said his goodbyes to people at work and some in the town. Taylor drove with him down to the train station. As the train was filling up with soldiers, Taylor and Andrew were saying their last goodbyes.

"Be safe, please," Taylor said.

"I will," said Andrew.

"Make sure to write to me, I want to know where you will be going."

"I will, I will write a few letters to you when we are not on the front line."

"I love you," said Taylor.

"I love you, too." They both kissed and shared one last hug.

He stepped on the train, and it started its move. Slowly chugging out of the station, the smoke from the engine filled the air and started the journey to New York. It was a two-day journey that crossed farms, lakes,

bridges, and tunnels. It was the perfect way to keep calm before going overseas. Every man in Andrew's cabin was silent during this ride. Not a single word was spoken. For two days, they just looked out the window, looking at the scenery or reading the newspaper. Anything to keep them occupied and not thinking about what was to come. They arrived at the shipping yard and hopped on these huge ships that would take them to Liverpool, England. That was the longest boat ride that the soldiers would take. Weeks out on the Atlantic, they were going over their plans for the upcoming invasion.

It was June third, and they had planned on invading Normandy on the fifth. However, the weather wasn't looking good, and they had to push the invasion back to the sixth. Andrew and his squad were going to parachute in the exceedingly early hours before the invasion began. They needed to knock out enemy bridges so German reinforcements could not advance to their position. They spent hours getting ready, thousands of men loading into airplanes and preparing for a long day.

The clock struck five in the morning and the planes took off. It was a bumpy ride going up, and when they hit the Atlantic Wall, they were met with anti-aircraft artillery. Andrew looked out the windows and saw the night sky being lit up with artillery shells and planes going down in flames. He started to panic and was feeling sick. Suddenly, the red light lit up the inside of the plane.

"Stand up," screamed the officer. Every man stood up in unison.

"Once you land, immediately find your platoon leaders, then regroup with your division. Good luck."

The light turned green and off they went. Andrew jumped out and his parachute released immediately. He looked back at his plane, seeing the other men jump out; that is when the adrenaline kicked in. He was so prepared to meet up with his platoon, but before he reached the ground, he saw his

plane go up in flames. A little more than half the men jumped out, but the rest were lost. He hit the ground hard, wrapped up his chute, and went on to a little barn where they were going to meet up. He was astonished to find that there were a good number of soldiers there. The captain asked where everyone was. Andrew told him there was no one else coming since the plane went down. They took a moment to gather their thoughts and went off to the objective. They ran through field after field, knocking out German artillery and bridges. The Germans were caught off guard; it was a huge surprise to them that the Americans had landed right on them. Hours went by. Andrew kept knocking out objects and gathering as much intel as possible. He grabbed maps and files from bases and camps, which was a huge help to the army groups above them. They kept pushing through until the German army retreated into the woods and away from the beaches. The upper command was thoroughly impressed with Andrew and how fast he and his platoon completed their tasks. They gave Andrew the rank of captain for his regiment, because the original captain took a sniper bullet to the ankle and wouldn't be able to recover. They pushed their way through France and up into Holland, where they met trouble. The Germans had flooded roads and fields to slow the enemy down. Andrew was assigned to drop deep into Holland and take control of bridges for tanks to pass through. Once more, they hopped on a plane and took off. They dropped down, and luckily, this time, every man made it down safely. They battled their way up the biggest rivers and had to prevent the Germans from blowing up any more bridges. They attacked at night, mostly for the element of surprise. One night, Andrew and his men were taking the biggest bridges along the river. They snuck up on them and took each man down one by one. They didn't fire a single round, all they used were knives and gas to knock them out. Andrew had one more to take

down. He snuck up on him, but before he struck, he stepped on a twig, making a loud cracking noise. The German turned around and swung right for his jaw. He landed a hard right hook to Andrew's jaw. Andrew got dizzy, but held his ground. Both men, at the same time, took out their knives and battled back and forth. After a gruesome knife fight, the German soldier stuck Andrew right in the shoulder and pushed him back down against the wall. Leaving the knife inside of him, the German crawled over to the button to ignite the TNT under the bridge. Blood poured from the German's legs, making it impossible for him to stand. Andrew went to grab his sidearm from his back. He pulled it out, but his eyes were blurred from all the blood that had come down from his head. He wiped his eyes on a piece of cloth and aimed down at the soldier. Still struggling to get up to press the button, Andrew fired a round right through his leg, making him scream in agony before passing away. The bullet alerted Andrew's men and they came rushing in. They picked him up and carried him to the medical tent the Germans had built. Andrew passed out, but his medic was able to get the knife out and patch him up. When he awoke, he was surrounded by captains, generals, medics, and even a journalist who was from The States. Everyone clapped and looked down at him. Confused as ever, Andrew started to ask questions. The General sat down next to him and handed him a little wooden box. "Son, congratulations, you just stopped the Germans from blowing up the biggest bridge on this river, and now we can get our tanks and medical supplies through," said the General. "President Roosevelt thought your valiant efforts to secure this bridge earned you this: the Medal of Honor." The highest award any soldier could get, Andrew had received. Andrew, recovering from his injuries, wrote letters to Taylor explaining where he was and the award he had gotten. Oddly enough, she never

responded to his letters. He thought the messenger messed up or was shot out of the sky. He didn't think much of it and continued to recover from his injuries. Months went by, and he finally returned to the battlefield with a large scar on his shoulder. His regiment had been moving all over Holland and Belgium. However, when Andrew returned, the Germans had planned the biggest counterattack and surrounded him and his men. Only a thousand men were surrounded by the German army, but they were low on food, ammo, and medical supplies. They even lacked winter clothing; this would be the biggest hardship he would face. They dug foxholes in the Ardennes Forest. Cold, Andrew and his men had to keep quiet so it would not reveal their position. The line they were defending only had about a hundred men, while the Germans had thousands. Each day, they were bombarded with artillery fire, which slowly injured and killed men. Each day passed and there were fewer and fewer of them. Andrew wrote to Taylor once more, telling her how much he wants to be home with her, sharing a bottle of 42. Just as last time, no response, no letter, no nothing. He was starting to worry, but his mind was on the battlefield. Little did he know, Taylor was off with another man. Taylor reconsidered when Andrew left. It was getting hard for her to be alone in their home with no one to talk with, no one to have dinner with, or even walk up and down the stream. One day, a student in her class was causing trouble with other students. She had to send a letter home with him, telling their parents to come in to speak with her. The dad of the child came. He was shorter than most men but had slicked-back, black hair and a silver necklace. His name was Tony. He was a single dad of Antonio, his son. Taylor got hot when she saw Tony. She loved his hair and green eyes. Taylor kept it professional and told him Antonio was distracting other kids in the classroom by talking over them. He reassured her it wouldn't happen again and

would make Antonio apologize to all the kids. He said he was having a hard time since his mom passed away.

"He has been upset for weeks since his mother's passing. I've been struggling to make ends meet at the shop and haven't been there for him as much as I want to be," said Tony.

"That is understandable. What shop do you own?" asked Taylor.

"I own the candy store downtown, on Market Street," Tony said.

"Oh... with those chocolate covered---"

"Strawberries," as Tony finished her sentence.

"Yes...those. Anyway, thanks for coming in to speak with me. I hope Antonio feels better soon."

After school, she went down to the local shop looking seductive. She walked in and looked around at the glass cases filled with chocolate and sweets. She was wearing heels, a skirt, and the reddest lipstick one can find. Tony came out, surprised to see her standing at the counter.

Oh, hello there. Didn't expect to see you here," Tony exclaimed.

"Well, I've stopped by to say thank you for those strawberries that you sent in with Antonio. The class loved them," said Taylor. Not a problem, I figured it was the least I could do." Silence filled the room as they looked at one another.

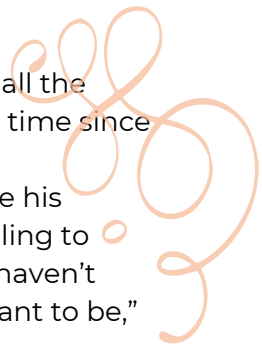
"Would you want to come over for dinner?" asked Taylor.

"I would love to come for dinner. Tonight?" Tony asked.

"Yes, tonight at eight."

"I will be there at eight," Tony said while winking.

Taylor got butterflies. She raced out and headed for home. She started to prepare dinner. She cleaned up the house, taking Andrew's weapons off the walls and stashing all the unopened newspapers and letters in the corner. She didn't open a single newspaper or letter. She left all of them in a pile and threw a few into the fire. The time came and she answered the door. Tony walked in with flowers and a bottle in



his hands. She took the flowers, but didn't notice the bottle in his other hand. She placed the flowers in a vase on the table, and he walked over and sat down.

"Dinner will be ready in just a moment," said Taylor.

"Great. Hope you like whiskey, I brought a bottle of 42. Some of the best whiskey around," said Tony.

She turned around quickly and saw the bottle on the table, with the big, black 42 markings on the side. It made her feel uneasy knowing that was the drink she and Andrew loved together. She put that aside, cracking it open and pouring a huge cup for both Tony and herself. They ate together and laughed at the dinner table for hours. She cleaned up the table and told him he could take a seat in the living room. He walked in and noticed the pile of newspapers sitting down. He picked one up, the headline reading, "Local Tacoma Hero Earns Medal of Honor," with a picture of Andrew wrapped up in the medic tent.

"All cleaned up, would you like anything else?" asked Taylor.

"No, no I'm alright," Tony said as he put down the newspaper.

Taylor didn't see him with the newspaper and Tony had no idea who Andrew was. They sat on the couch, talking about the shop and her days working as a schoolteacher. She started to creep closer to him, shoulders touching, as they continued to talk. Then she started to run her fingers through his hair, saying how nice and dark it was. He laughed and thanked her for the compliments. She then ran her arms down his arm and onto his inner thigh. That is when she kissed him. He then kissed her back, putting his arm on her waist. She jumped right onto his lap, with him kissing her neck and starting to unbutton her shirt. While she was enjoying herself with Tony, thousands of miles away, Andrew was stuck in the middle of a fight. Bullets whipped by him as German forces fired directly at him. He took out a sniper scope and put it on top of his M1 Grand,

which normally wasn't supposed to go together. He started taking out Germans left and right. The German advance came to a halt out in the open field. Snow coming down rapidly was making it hard for the enemy to find Andrew. Andrew had put on white pants and a coat to blend in with the environment. One by one, Germans began to retreat, but just as they were leaving, Andrew's regiment threw out red flares to signal American planes. The planes came crashing down, firing on the retreating Germans. Breaking a hole in the line, Andrew told them to follow and capture those who surrender.

Once the Americans pushed on, word had gotten to them that the German army was retreating way back into Germany. They pushed into Germany and headed down to Austria. They eliminated all forces in their way and got to Austria just as spring was beginning. They then headed into the mountains of Austria, and were headed towards Hitler's personal retreat bunker. They got to the top after blowing up all the rocks the Germans put in the way to slow them down. Then, they made it to the bunker. There was nice furniture, bottles of the finest wine, and photo albums. Not a soul was inside the bunker. Andrew's men were sitting outside on the balcony, looking at all the mountains. It was announced that President Truman had received the unconditional surrender of the German army. The war was now over in Europe. Andrew and his close friends decided to look around the mountains and stumbled upon a



huge home. They went inside and found a whole bunch of German artifacts, uniforms, and even weapons. His men started to take everything, while Andrew took a look in the basement. He flipped on the light, and in front of him was the largest collection of alcohol he had ever seen. He looked all over and took bottle after bottle. As he was leaving, he noticed one last bottle on the bar top. It was an unopened bottle of 42. He dropped everything in his hands and ripped that bottle open. He drank straight out of it. Chugging down the bottle, all he could think about was Taylor. Memories filled his head of her, thinking about the Yankees game, playing that game in the stream, and those chocolate-covered strawberries. He could not wait to go home, since he had the intention of proposing to her.

Andrew had enough points to go home, and that is what he did. He told his friends he fought with that he was going home. The rest of them were planning to go to the Pacific to help fight against the Japanese. That is when he told them that he was going to propose to Taylor. They all wished him the best of luck and a happy future with her. He said his goodbyes and headed for home. He stopped at a jewelry store in London, where he bought a big and beautiful diamond ring. He got onto the ship and headed home. While it was going to take him another month to make it home, Taylor had no idea that the fight in Europe was over.

Andrew got off the boat and onto the train in his final few days of traveling across the world. He had planned on surprising her the night he got home with the ring. Two days passed, and it was a rainy night in Tacoma when he got off the train. He got in a cab and told the driver to take him home. Taylor and Tony were inside drinking and playing a card game. Both were topless and had only underwear on, enjoying a bottle of whiskey. Both were drunk and unaware that Andrew was walking up to the front door.

Andrew wanted to see if she was in the house, so he snuck around the side and

investigated the house. He saw Tony sitting on the ground in front of the fireplace. He saw Taylor with nothing on but underwear, sitting on his lap running her fingers through his hair. She started to kiss him and then stop to pick up the bottle and chug a little of it. Andrew, drenched in rain and cold, threw up in the bushes. Not believing what he saw, he peaked in again, and the same thing, Tony kissing her neck with her arms around him.

She then got up and went into her bedroom. Tony stayed on the ground reading that newspaper he had picked up once before. Andrew then felt immense pain and anger. Andrew entered the house and put his bags down at the front and grabbed his pistol. The record player was blasting at a loud volume so they could not hear him enter. He walked into the living room.

"Who the hell are youuu?" drunkenly asked Tony.

"Who the hell are you?" replied Andrew.

"Get out of my girlfriend's house, asshole!" screamed Tony.

It was then that Tony looked down at the paper and looked up at Andrew. He realized Andrew was the local hero. Andrew also looked to the corner and picked up all the letters he wrote, unopened on top of all the newspapers. He put the pieces together on why she wasn't responding.

"Hey, you're that guy on this newspaper, aren't you?" yelled Tony.

Andrew aggressively ripped the newspaper from his hands and looked at it. He turned up the record player's volume to the max. He then took the bottle of 42 and drank the rest which was half the bottle.

"Woah dude that's impres—" *Bang!*

Andrew put a bullet right through Tony's head. His brains were all over the fireplace and mantle. Andrew is now wet and covered in blood, nothing he hasn't been around. He sits down at the kitchen table and opens another bottle of whiskey. Taylor runs into the kitchen to see what went down, but doesn't notice the body in the living room.

She screams when she sees Andrew sitting at the table.

"A-AA-An-Andrew?" shaking in her slippers, looking at him soaking wet from rain and blood.

"Sit down," Andrew says.

"You're alive? I didn't think you'd be coming back... who's blood is that?" asked Taylor.

"Well, I see you didn't think I was going to be back anytime soon." Andrew looked into her eyes. Hairs stood up on the back of her neck, his pistol in hand and whiskey in another.

"Hell, you didn't even write back any of the letters I sent you? I was over there getting shot at, only wanting to be here with you, and yet I come home to this drunk sitting half naked in my living room!" screamed Andrew. Taylor, now sobbing with mascara dripping down her cheeks onto the table, "I thought you were d-d-de-de-dead—" Andrew cuts her off.

"I TOLD YOU I WAS COMING BACK HERE FOR YOU. I WANTED TO LIVE THE REST OF MY LIFE WITH YOU, TAYLOR. NOT ANYONE ELSE. NOW, WHAT, HUH, TAYLOR? HAVE YOU THOUGHT ABOUT THE FUTURE, TAYLOR? OH NO, YOU HAVEN'T, BECAUSE I GOT A DEAD MAN IN MY FUCKING LIVING ROOM WHO WAS MAKING OUT WITH MY GIRLFRIEND, DRINKING OUR BOTTLE OF 42. THAT'S RIGHT, OUR BOTTLE OF 42. I CAN'T BELIEVE I WAS GETTING SHOT AT BY THE GERMAN FUCKING ARMY AND I COME HOME TO THIS," screamed Andrew from across the kitchen table.

Scared out of her mind, Taylor sat there bawling her eyes out. There were ponds of tears gathering on the table. She sat there and cried while he looked at her. He pulled up the ring and Medal of Honor and threw both into the trash. Sirens went off in the front yard. Six police cars pulled up out front. Twelve men surrounded the front of the house.

"Andrew Thompson, please come out with your hands up!" screamed Officer Horton. The police received a call from a neighbor about hearing a gunshot from Andrew's house. Andrew got up and looked outside. He opened the front door and took two steps out.

"IF ANYONE COMES CLOSE TO THIS HOUSE, WILL NOT HESITATE TO PUT A BULLET IN HER!" yelled Andrew. He stepped back inside and locked the door.

Andrew went back into the house and saw Taylor had picked up both the ring and medal out of the trash. The record player was still playing music loudly, and she once again broke down crying hysterically. They both locked eyes for the last time before Andrew took the pistol and pointed it at his head and pulled the trigger. Blood shot everywhere in the kitchen. The table, chairs, and Taylor were all covered. Taylor screamed her head off and the police ran inside and discovered both bodies on the floor. The police also saw Taylor passed out on the floor. They picked her up, put her on the stretcher, and started to walk out while the record player continued to play "It's Been a Long, Long Time," by Harry James. The police carried Tony's corpse out and then picked up the newspapers.

"Jesus, look at this, John," Officer Horton said. "Well, I'll be damned. A war hero comes home and sees a half-naked man in his home with his future wife. I'd do the same thing. Well, almost future wife," said Officer John.

"All right, clean this place up and we will get a statement from her when she wakes," Officer Horton told his men.

The next few months consisted of people throwing rocks and stones at Taylor's windows. She quit her job as a teacher because she couldn't bear to see Antonio's face. Antonio was adopted by a family in town who loves him unconditionally. Taylor was a shut-in, did nothing for months, and didn't bother going out. One day, she looked out her back window, and through her overgrown garden, she saw someone in the stream. It was Antonio with his parents playing in the stream, catching frogs, and tossing pebbles around. Tears rolled down her face, not because he was happy, but because it is what her life could have been. She left town that week and moved far away. No one in Tacoma knew where she went, and they didn't care. No one left messages, no nothing, just an empty, paint-chipped house with an overgrown garden.



**"My Truth - A Poem of Prayers:
Spoken Word Poetry"
Listen Here
By: LaToya McCoy**

"THE NOTE"

By: Marjorie Redrow

He began digging rapidly and relentlessly, trying to race the time before sunlight. He needed to get to that note within there. He wiped the beads of sweat off of his forehead while shoving his shovel back into the hard, rocky earth, digging to no tomorrow.

You might ask, "what is he digging for?" Well, it's a note that was left by his lost love. He just had to read it. Derrick had to get his dirty, mud-covered hands onto this letter before anyone finds out about his secret.

"Jesus Christ, this is so much dirt to shovel," he exclaims, but he never stops moving. He is so determined to find this little piece of paper that hides all of the secrets he told his lover, Jane. No one can ever know what happened that night in Denver with Gary, not even Gary. Not that Gary could read it now anyways, but something about a letter being there makes Derrick shudder with fright. He has to dig up the letter.

Finally, his shovel smacks onto something hard, like metal. He finally reached it. He uncovered the casket from the soil and mud and bugs that were creepily crawling over it and pried it open with his crowbar he had hiding in the back of his pants. It was weird to see Gary like this, but he had to pay it no mind.

He sifts through all of the condolences and sad letters that people left for Gary until he finally finds the one with Jane's handwriting on it. He swiftly unfolds the crumbled up small piece of paper, and reads:

I know what Derrick did to you. But I'm too afraid to tell anyone. I don't know what he would do to me. Yes, he loves me, but he loves me so much that it scares me. I don't really know what he is fully capable of. Just know, that I know exactly what happened, and one day the truth will come out.



"ANCHOR"

By: Dimitrius DeMarco

Long have I been sat here, long have I had to wait
Longer still has it been since my arms and crown were cleaned. Once a
year do I see the sea, only once I take the plunge
For I am me, but what am I?
Ah yes, I'm just a weight.

This place I lay, these walls I see, these walls I call my home,
This tawdry skiff of oak and pine, I exist here all alone,
Till once this year a thing did come, one with arms like me,
A brave old thing, that year after year, dared to go to sea.
This vessel had ventured many voyages, this boat was battered and
bruised,
But out again like clockwork, this humble craft did cruise

Despite the cracks, despite the waves, the ship remained afloat,
And somehow still, after all these years, smoothly she did sail.
With a mighty heave and hefty ho, the man did throw me o'er,
Sunk I did and cool was the sea below the wooden boat.

But from land afar and shores unknown, the whipping winds did rise,
A storm so harsh and waves so rough with foamy swelling tides,
Thunder roared and lightning cracked in the blackened daytime sky,
But there below I could do naught, for Anchors cannot fly.
Desperately the chain that tied me to my home clasped and clung,
But the iron was worn and the links had torn, and that chain was all but
wrong.

The storm had stopped, the seas has calmed, yet nowhere to be seen,
Was hide nor hair, mast nor sail, in the place that boat had been.
The place I'd lay, the walls I saw, the walls I called my home,
Lives only now in a distant memory, below the ocean foam

I've never been that great of a driver. My car had the marks to prove it. Just some cosmetic damage here and there, nothing major. If my car was a person, a little makeup would have gone a long way.

While my driving record wasn't the best, it never caused serious concern. I had already been driving for about 2 years, and no one's ever been harmed by me behind the wheel. That is, until I ran over a child.

I'm getting ready to go to work on a Friday night. I pull on my black leggings and black top, swipe on a little mascara, brush my hair, grab my server's apron, and I'm out the door. "Be careful, text me when you get there!" my mom yells out to me as I'm walking to the car.

"I will, love you!" I shout back, running across the street as it begins to drizzle. I throw myself into the driver's side of our white Nissan Juke and hold the button down to start the car. I say "our" because my mom and I share it, coordinating our schedules around having one car.

I turn my headlights on, put on my windshield wipers, and slowly back out into the street. I embark on my journey toward work, a route I've taken countless times at this point. Driving always makes me a little nervous, but I remind myself to stay calm. Putting on my playlist, I let the music engulf me, easing my worries. Taylor Swift fills the car, and I mindlessly sing along while driving.

The rain starts to fall heavier.

And heavier.

And heavier.

My windshield wipers are working their absolute hardest to wipe the raindrops from my window, straining against the buckets of water that are falling from the sky. All I can see are the lights of the cars in front of me.

"Just make it to work," I tell myself. Gripping the steering wheel to stop my hands from shaking, I take deep breaths. My heart is beating out of my chest, about to fall into my lap. I put a halt to the tears welling in my eyes. "It's just rain, people drive in rain all the time, you're fine," my

brain tells me, a constant loop in my thoughts.

I finally pull into the parking lot of work, truly never happier to have been there. My boyfriend comes out to greet me in his chef uniform, my personal escort into the building. "Are you on break?" I ask him, puzzled by his timing.

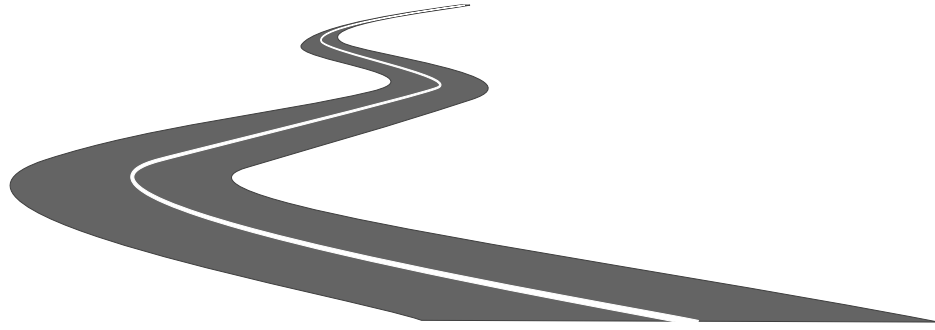
"I was tracking your location, I was worried about you in the rain," he says, planting a kiss on the top of my head. I shake off the anxieties of the ride there and head into work, mentally preparing myself for the rest of the night.

The night goes by smoothly with not much happening. The storm comes and goes, from a torrential downpour to a light drizzle on and off. I'm closing out for the night, ready to drive home. It was around 11:00. The rain was in an off period, and I wanted to start driving before the storm started again. My boyfriend followed me home in his car, so I could drop off the car and we could go back to his house.

I did my rounds of goodbyes at work, telling everyone to drive safe and them returning the sentiment. Driving slowly, I start down the dark, rain-slick roads. A crash of thunder makes me jump in my seat, and then lightning strikes across the sky in an angry streak. The rain is coming down steadily, and my only thought is getting home. It's only 9 miles between my house and work. I can drive 9 miles and get home in one piece.

Suddenly, the rain comes back in full force, and I put my windshield wipers on at the highest speed. The rain is coming down so hard I'm afraid it's going to crack the windshield. The road is dark ahead of me, and not enough cars are on the road to illuminate my path. Fear fills my chest. My breathing picks up and my hands start to shake again. I'm on the edge of my seat, eyes straining to make out any sort of shape or form in front of me. I'm finally in the home stretch, about 6 minutes away from my destination. I lost my boyfriend ages ago. He made a right where I made a left, the guiding light of his red truck long gone.

Thunder and lightning are taking turns terrorizing me, rattling my system every time



they make an appearance. Then, my reality shifts. Everything is happening in slow motion, but, somehow, all at once. I'm in a residential area, with cars parked on the side of the street. THUMP! Airbags surround me. Right in front of my face, covering all the windows. The car is at a complete halt. A single tear rolls down my face. That's all I'll allow myself. "This Kiss" by Faith Hill is playing. In my stunned state, I cannot figure out how to turn the music off.

"It's the way you love me
It's a feeling like this
It's centrifugal motion
It's perpetual bliss."

"Faith Hill, stop singing," I mutter to myself. She's singing so loudly, and her timing is downright inappropriate.

I call my mom. Ring. Ring. Ring. Every second that passes, I panic more, frozen in fear. A curse escapes under my breath. No answer. My next call is to my boyfriend. It rings twice before he picks up.

"Jeff, I got in an accident. I don't know what happened, but I think I'm okay." The words tumble out of me into the phone.

"It's okay, just stay calm and tell me where you are, I'm on my way," he replies in a soothing voice. My phone buzzes; my mom calling me back. I explain the situation again, reiterating that I am okay, but that I have no idea what just happened. Luckily, she's home with a friend of ours, Keri, and they come to my rescue right away.

With every passing car, my heart rate goes up. After what feels like an eternity, my rescue team shows up at the scene. I get out of the car and give each of them a hug, their embrace a little tighter than usual. They start to inspect the car, looking for what I could've hit. I explain in frantic detail that, at the moment, I assumed I hit a parked car. The thought of having to explain the story to people made me cringe with embarrassment. Little did I know, the story would be much worse.

About ten feet behind the car, we found the cause of the accident. A child. Well, a child-shaped sign. Stifling a laugh, our friend Keri picks up the fluorescent green sign. She's the first one to put the pieces together.

"This must've flown into the road because of the storm, got stuck in the axle of your tires, and made the sensor go off for the airbags!"

Relief washed over me, knowing I didn't hit another car, an animal, or an actual person, but irrational anger quickly followed. I looked at this tiny, pathetic, neon green sign in its fake eyes and called it every name in the book. Now, I'm standing there in the middle of the street, in the pouring rain, cursing out a child-shaped street sign waiting for Triple-A. I take a closer look at the sign, fury blurring my vision. Like some sick, cosmic punchline, the sign reads, "Drive Like Your Kids Live Here!" Well.

"WEAK"

By: Connor Miller

Seven days
ago I saw the light
of the sky change
from the dulllest
gray
to the fullest
blue.

And the clouds shifted from their rigid state
to part the way for
the warming sun.
And its blinding gaze
gave relief to me,
the only time ever
I saw the surface clear.
And staring back at me,
its warmth beckoned forth
my shielded eyes to
its sultry embrace.
And despite my caution,
my eyes look on,
for its cast may sting,
I choose to
stay.

And as the spark ignites flame
which broils my skin,
I seek comfort in its
light which still glimpses my
eyes, that newfound
sky which we together
grew
One day.



Digital Art
By: Victoria Strekis

"NOT YOUR AVERAGE AMERICAN CITIZEN"

By: TJ Edmund

The Battle of Red Bank that took place in my hometown was a massive victory for American troops in 1777. Still to this day, the remnants of history remain in town as younger people begin to understand the importance that the Whittall House and the Red Bank Battlefield had in such a crucial conflict for the United States during the Revolutionary War.

Thirty-two years ago, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 granted disabled persons, like me, an equal opportunity to live free and be successful in every life endeavor. This was a measure that would prohibit further discrimination against disabled people and to ensure equity in every facet of their lives, from housing to employment. For young people like myself, it shows that a nation can take strides towards progress and that indeed, there is so much more work that needs to be accomplished in order to secure full equality for all citizens.

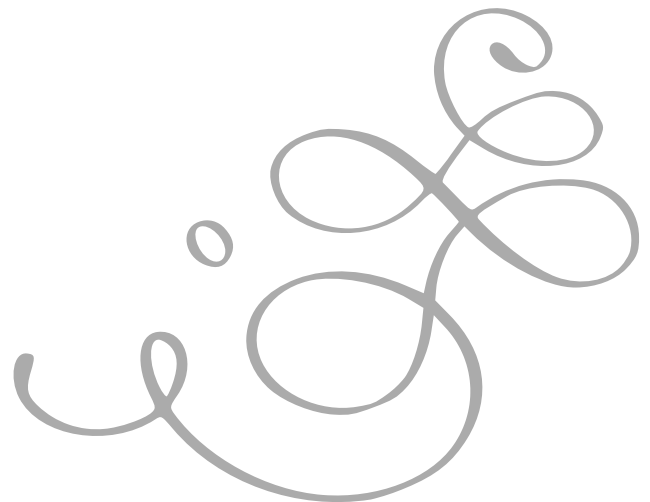
The 9/11 attacks, which delayed my arrival to the United States, laid the groundwork for modern terrorism prevention. In 2001, following the horrific event, foreign adoptions were halted for a while as a way to prevent more foreign individuals from entering the country and to appropriately deal with the repercussions of the attacks.

When I arrived in the U.S. on April 8, 2002, I was eight months and eight days old. In other words, it might be cliché to say, but the history of this great nation touched my life in way one or another because I am not your average American citizen. From numerous stays in the hospital to stares in public, my life is all about rising above obstacles, redefining stereotypes, and overcoming bouts of adversity. When you see me, you might not know my story of great challenge and the details of my mission to use my past to aid me in writing the future, but sit back and take time to listen to my story of identity and perseverance.

About two decades ago and oceans away, a miracle was born in the second largest city in South Korea. Busan is known for its coastal beaches, breathtaking scenic views, and food markets, among others. Meanwhile, in America, a young couple dreamed of starting a little family

of their own and began the process of expanding their family to fulfill their greatest wish— to give a child the chance to live and thrive in the land of opportunity. Early on, I knew that I wanted to give that same opportunity to a young child of my own one day, to carry the tradition that my parents began with me decades ago.

Overall, I believe that society thrives on diversity and full acceptance of everyone, regardless of background. Even with great progress, self-doubt and uncertainty inevitably bubbles to the surface. In reality, Caucasian citizens and natural-born citizens almost never have doubts about status or privilege in their country of origin because they ultimately feel dominant or superior above all else. However, that is not always the case for Asian American, gay, physically disabled young people like me, because we simply witness hatred and doubt thrown against the communities



that make us “different”– communities that help us build our personal identities and live authentically. Sometimes we must try harder for what we want, and feel pressure to succeed in every challenge that comes our way. Almost without exception, nearly every nonwhite and disadvantaged person has faced some sort of discrimination for being true to themselves. Despite the experiences that I have been given in America, I, like many others, oftentimes wonder what life would be like if the color of my skin matched that of my parents, if I was attracted to women, or able to walk without the assistance of a device.

Now, don't get me wrong, I love who I have become as a person and I think that the embrace of my diverse perspectives has made me a more compassionate, loyal, and accepting human. Of course, as much as we live our truths every day, the hypothetical “What if...?” remains a constant reminder of our adversity as immigrants, adoptees, gay men, lesbian women, disabled persons, and nonwhite American citizens.

Prior to my arrival to the United States, random people would approach my parents and ask them what language I would speak, how I would look, and what I would eat as a baby. Now, I am not sure if they were genuinely interested or plain ignorant, but since I was so young when I arrived here, my American life is basically all I am able to recall. There are still some people who say that I resemble my parents (those people probably need to upgrade their eyeglass prescription) because I most definitely look nothing like my parents, but I reflect them in other ways: their strong work ethics, love for volunteerism, and certain habits too.

Truly, I don't speak about it often because being a gay man comes like second nature to me now, but up until June 2017, coming to terms with my sexuality didn't always come easy to me. Despite the early summer heat, it was a chilly evening when my mom wanted to talk about something serious.

Initially, I was nervous because serious discussions give me anxiety, sweaty palms, and enough jitters to remove my hip from its socket, but I guess it was finally time to realize that my life was going in a different direction– away from what I envisioned my life to be, a contrast of what I believed reality to mean to me. She began by saying that she thought that we needed to have a one-on-one discussion after viewing my Internet search history the night before, and I was ultimately afraid to face

whatever waited for me in those next few sentences.

All the details of that summer evening might not come back to me, as I make every attempt to recall its events but first, I remember my mom being the only other person who was home at the time because my dad was at the bowling alley that specific Friday night. I think that I always wanted to tell my mom first because I have always felt a stronger connection with her, but I do not believe that I was fully ready to finally reveal that part of my identity. The events were all so sudden that I was overcome with emotion, and before that moment, I found it much easier to deny that piece of myself until it was coaxed out of me to finally admit to someone.

For most of my life, I tried to ignore a piece of my character that always seemed to exist without my knowledge until that night. I was afraid to turn against what I strongly believed my parents anticipated for my life and I just needed more time to explore. Now, I am thankful that I came out when I did and that I was fully embraced from the outset, but I wonder if it would have been beneficial to wait, sit both of my parents down, and come out when I thought that I was ready to tell the world. That moment was a truly liberating experience, like a weight was lifted off my shoulders, or a secret was released to all that were ready and willing to listen to me. In the end, I never was able to gauge my dad's reaction when my mom told him that I was gay later that night, but I know that no matter what, my parents will always love me. In my heart, I know that he would be as accepting of me as my mom was that night. His brother is happily married to a wonderful husband with a son, so my dad was always aware of the LGBTQIA+ community.

Looking back, I don't why coming out was so hard for me, because I have a loving support system that not everyone has the chance to obtain and I have loved LGBTQIA+ people all my life. I know more now that I am still who I was ten years ago, and I just have more awareness and appreciation of the world. Above all else, I know that I cannot erase who I am, and the best thing to do is to live with kindness in my heart, a fire in my soul, and a burning passion and desire to invoke change in the world. Perhaps I was scared that society would view me differently, judge my lifestyle, and derail me from achieving my highest dreams. All things

considered, that is not the case because people around me love me and support me unconditionally and for that, I can be nothing but appreciative and thankful. Recalling that summer night, I first thought that my reactions were the result of an angsty teenager dealing with the messiness of discovering yet another piece of his identity, but now as kids are embracing their true identities even earlier, my experience was expected or normalized. Many tears were shed that one evening as the ideas that I developed and accepted about myself for so long proved to be false notions that I thought were “normal” for me to have. However, I was never going to marry a blonde woman or see my partner pregnant. As I said, I think I always planned to adopt a child, but my coming out as gay really cemented that for me and made it more evident that the adoption process would help me to form my own little family.

Honestly, I would say that the adversity has mainly been the inability to be as active as my peers or that I’m nonwhite and gay, but I try to look beyond limitations and live the best life possible. As a child, I wasn’t able to walk around without assistance and I have had multiple surgeries over the years. My young presence was there when some of my loved ones left this Earth, I was there when strangers couldn’t see the stage and complained because of my wheelchair, and I was there when homophobic replies were posted because I made a comment on a post about someone living authentic and true to themselves.

Usually, people have ease with recounting their stories of hardship and triumph, but that never came easy to me. As a writer, I try to be honest and true, and letting strangers know more about me has come easier since I came out in 2017. I know that those who really love me will take the time to listen to me, and I know that I cannot change the minds of others, but I hope that everyone feels accepted and not restricted by discrimination. Through difficult times, we learn to flourish and thrive, and I would say that my challenges and “differences” makes me a better person. Those around me might not have to think about the many things that occupy my mind (because that would be scary if you were inside my head) but I think my perspective has given me a unique view of how the world works and

I want to be an active participant in changing it too. It may be decades until my own life changes when I welcome a child into my family, but I want them to know that I love them with my whole heart, that I support their every move, and that I wish the best for them.

Lastly, I want to be a role model like the men and women in my life, and for my children not to follow the lead of others, but to be pioneers in their own right and change-makers for the better.

I may not be your average American citizen, but until the time comes for me to start my own family, I will use my experiences to improve society to foster a more inclusive, accepting, and accommodating platform for marginalized people—those who need a safe space for free expression right now and generations to come. By establishing a digital media platform, I can allow consumers access to a forum where they can be heard, valued as humans, and represented in this “Melting Pot” we call America. Twenty-one years ago, I was told that I could be whoever I wanted to be as a citizen of this country, to love whoever I wanted, and live however I wanted, and I want nothing more than to uphold that promise of plentiful opportunities for future young people. Aside from all the presents in the world, a new chance at life and equal opportunities for all are perhaps the greatest gifts to anybody. After September 11, 2001, and the ADA was passed into law in 1990, my highest hopes were clearer, and every day and I am thankful to be a citizen of this country. I may not be your average citizen, but anyone who knows me well can tell you that I love embracing every part of my identity as a physically disabled, gay, Korean American young man. Lastly, and most notably, I definitely possess the grit and perseverance to live my life free of limitation and rewrite what the American Dream really means.

"The Luna Moth"

By: Katherine Claggett

The light of your life shines bright in the sun,
And your colors of vibrancy rise
As sweet and as mellow as those of the sea
With snowy-white dewdrops of eyes.

From wind and from storm—from downpour of rain—
You hurry to fly and to flee.
You hurry to hide from the cruelest of skies
'Neath the shade of a kind, gentle tree.

And though you be caged behind terrible bars—
Your wings all tattered and torn—
Your last shreds of life will stay by your side
'Til from them, a new life is born.

Let me speak of a tale that I hold dear to my very soul. A tale, as cliché as it may seem, must not be taken very lightly, for a heavy, gut-wrenching burden that I have held for way too long must now be spoken of as I lay weary, dreary, and decaying body within my chambers. I must speak to you, my son. In my dying breath, I must give you heed on what is to come tonight; tonight, as I lay here, sick and dying; tonight, as it is my last. Please, come closer so I can retain what strength I have left; I need every mere ounce for what I am about to spew.

Your mother never wanted you to know who I truly am, and her wish was granted upon her dying breath many moons ago. Even though it wasn't as much of a burden as I am about to tell you, it hurt me every day to not tell you the truth. What truth is this? The truth: I was a pirate, my boy, and I loved it all the same; and so was your mother. Please do not deny my words my son; every word I speak is true. Please, don't walk away, I need you to hear what I have left to say; don't make this dying man grovel. As you are a British officer of the Queen's Navy, you would have every right under her jurisdiction to place me, your father, your mother, in the confines of a dungeon, to then be sentenced to the gallows. As saddening as this might sound, I would have been fine with it; even to the point of the lever being pulled. Even after her passing, I believe your dear mother would also agree through and through. Death at the gallows is a much more peaceful way to go, my son, than what I, your mother, and those who I commanded went through that one, dreadful day.

The skies of that day were by far the fairest I have ever seen. So rich, vibrant, and full of life. Hues of red, flecks of blue transitioning over to magenta, and the white wisps of clouds that danced over the horizon like pixies from an enchanted forest. If the sky of that day were treasure, I would have plundered it right there on the spot. Your mother, a sight of beauty, only made the sight even more breathtaking. It was such a sight of ecstasy, we considered retiring early for the night to practice the devil's tango, but that all changed when the sails drew limp.

It was such a strange situation for the sails to die, for we were not even within the boundaries of the doldrums. To an even greater surprise, there was still a breeze, yet it was an unsettling one. At the time of year we were sailing, there should not have been any notion of a cold, breathtaking breeze bellowing from the south; it should have been blowing a steady, warm stream from the west. Stranger still, and I still cannot believe it when I say it, but time came to a complete standstill; still and motionless as the dead. The waters that surrounded us became mere muses, the clouds within the sky became statues, and the sun that should have set moments earlier hung motionless in the sky, almost like a puppet. You may be looking at me as some deranged, dying old man, boy, but you only have heard just the beginning; the beginning of what should have been the end for your mother and I.

For, you see, this wasn't any mere event; oh no, what was happening makes many sailors who are aware of it wish for the gallows. Even you, as a British Officer, should know what is happening. You don't? Extremely saddening, and disheartening to hear that the Queen's men are uneducated in what I am about to tell you. During the time of, well, time coming to a standstill, the wind which had no life became stagnant. Myself, my wife, my crew, all began to choke on what smelled like the flesh of rotting corpses. The smell, oh god, that ungodly smell was so pungent, we all began to taste it. Many began to hurl, others began to pass out from what became a lingering cloud of death. The air that engulfed us in a straining embrace became colder, colder, and colder, to the point that ice began to form on parts of my ship. At the given time, I didn't know what was occurring, your mother didn't know what was occurring, only that within the confines of the unknown, something was stirring. Some of my finest men began to whimper in fear; fear of a mere fable that I only took as a means to scare young children.

Some of my finest men then began to cry for their mothers, others began to repent, and many more began to take their own tortured lives. To be quite honest, I do not blame them for what was about to unfold; I, too, would have done the same if I knew what was to happen.

Within the freak madness and suicide, a series of screams filled the air that was already stoked with death. At the moment, within the smog of rot, I only thought of it being my men who chose a coward's death; this was mistaken. It only took my dear wife, your mother, to steer me in the right direction. With what energy she had, she screamed to look out over the southern horizon. My dear boy, what I had witnessed was unlike anything in this world. At that moment, I felt for the first time dread, fear, and sadness. On that day, I witnessed the arrival of the undertaker of all undertakers: Davey Jones.

The fabled Dutchman, what I once took to be myth, legend, sailing on a windless breeze; a windless breeze towards my ship. The screams that I mistook as my men were only the souls of the damned aboard that ghoulish ship. As much as I tried to deny what bounded toward me, those tattered colors were enough proof for me to see that I was going to die that day. I, too, like many of my men who still sat in awe and fear, began to repent.

Please, my dear son, you must believe me! I lay here sick and dying, and I wish for you to hear my final testament! Everything I continue to say is true like the hairs on my head, but you still insist that I am nothing more than a fictitious hoax with what I say. Please, my dear son, don't leave! Do you not wish for your wife, and your kin, your daughter, their lives to be spared this very night? Oh, so now I have your attention, now that I speak in an ill manner towards the ones you love? So now, please, sit back down and allow me to continue.

In mere moments of the Dutchman's sighting, the odor of rotting flesh became more prominent. Its choking presence only became more and more dominant. The chilling air became even colder, colder still. Now, the pools of blood that belonged to some of my finest men began to freeze. The frozen blood was almost similar to ruby rose quartz, but putrid in every way imaginable. The departed souls, no, the tortured

souls of the Dutchman began to grow louder, louder, to the point it was almost as if they were within our heads, gnawing at our very souls. It was a never-ending torment that felt like an eternity. Within the agonizing pain, no one took notice of the Dutchman taking a port side; the Dutchman began to board.

No one could move, no one could speak, no one even could muster out a shriek of terror. The dead, not so dead anymore, began to shuffle aboard. Each putrid, decaying soul that walked aboard made every person's skin crawl.

The creaking of brittle bones, the dripping of what flesh clung to their frail bodies, the rattling of chains that were bound to their hands and feet; this was no nightmare, but reality; almost as if inhabitants of the world's graveyards decided to all wake and congregate; skeletons. In my mind at that moment, I knew that the sins I have committed, those your mother committed, and all who served me committed had all funneled out to this very moment; I knew that judgment had come for payment. After what seemed to be the final members of the Dutchman flowed aboard, its fabled captain stepped forward.

That man, or the shadow of what was once man, leered at the dead and dying on the deck. At that moment, I was still in denial. Behold: before me was not a white horse, but rather one of death's devious disciples who prowls the seas in search of the wicked; I was one of those wicked. Denial still filled my mind, no matter how hard I tried to rationalize. The man of myth, the tale of legends, Davey Jones himself aboard my ship. Unlike the rest of the decaying crew, this legend wasn't as menacing but was still hellish in every way. He was borderline dressed like a British Commodore, which was quite an astounding surprise.

His attire consisted of a long, tear-stained coat with what appeared to be valor on his left shoulder— it might have been barnacles or some sort of deep-sea growth mounted on his shoulder, but I wasn't caring. He had an awkward limp with each stride, which made sense, due to his one leg being a wooden, waterlogged peg with patches of green algae. His face was something of terror: blue skin, a slightly rotten jaw, no nose, and two empty voids where his eyes once probably resided. His hat, among other things, seemed to be in surprisingly good condition, aside from it

being stained like his coat, and it housed an estranged, fluffy feather—somehow dry—sticking out of the left side.

His cold, raspy voice spoke softly, but quickly, in a monotone manner. I could barely make it out at the time. Now, looking back upon this moment, I think he mentioned something about twenty-four souls being lost. This would make sense, since that was how many men, my men, took their own lives to escape the purgatory in which we lay dormant. After his short, deathly monologue, he took another leering glance, but this time over in my direction. Within moments, he somehow appeared right in front of me; this sent me further into a state of shock, which then transitioned into a form of insanity. Death became a reality, and I began to accept what was to happen. I quietly muttered something of love to my wife, closed my eyes, let out what I thought would be my final breath, and waited... nothing; nothing still; continuous nothing.

The tension could kill if it were a blade. This tension, this dread, this fear was all nullified when a voice pierced every fiber of my being: "get up." I slowly opened my eyes, seeing the myth standing over me with his left hand extended. He spoke again: "get up." I trembled at the very thought, but without knowing, I took his hand. After taking death's hand, my inner being became whole again; I felt like a new man. The cold, bone-piercing air seemed to dissipate, yet the smell of flesh remained. With the rush of energy that was flowing throughout my entire body, I could have done anything at that moment, yet I just stood there; fear still kept me from moving. Anything could have happened, my boy, but what happened next made my skin crawl. I could have been killed, I could have been tortured, I could have been hung from the mast, or even keelhailed, but I was instead asked a question; a question I still regret answering. You seem to have an attentive gaze, my son, but you still seem to be inquiring, grasping at the reality of what I am saying, or if what is to happen in my departure will be as authentic as the stars in the night sky. Please, do not rush me, son! I am a dying man, and as my final testament, I want to take time and confess what I have been, what I have done, and what is to happen this very night.

So please, let this older adult finish. I feel the room has gotten colder, wouldn't you agree? Well, I might as well try to finish before my spark of life is extinguished.

His eyes, those black round holes that now housed a void, began to show what appeared as interest. To my surprise, he allowed me to speak my deal, for no one has ever challenged him, Davey Jones, the Ferryman of the seas dead, to a deal; he awaited in anticipation. The atmosphere had changed, and I let that monster go and made my deal. The deal was not far off from his own, but with a catch: the souls of my crew and whatever treasure you find to be closest to me deep within my very consciousness, all in exchange for the health and well-being of my wife and me.

A long, cryptic pause fell soon after. I didn't know whether or not the dead man would kindly take my offer or not. The undertaker must have been contemplating whether I was jesting. Am I to think a demon amongst the living would even care for treasure? The undertaker must be contemplating whether I am jesting. Am I to think a demon amongst the living would even care for treasure? The silence continued to grow, grow, and grow. Standing there, I began to sweat even more profusely since I knew this, yet again, might be the end of my legacy. Silence. This stale, mute moment was then broken by laughter. Davey Jones, a mere monster in ferrying souls of the damned to and from this mortal realm, was laughing uncontrollably. Not only did this take me by surprise, but the crew of the undead also began to find it very unsettling. The laughter finally ceased, but now it seemed I had his full attention. He held out his left, grotesque hand that housed a colony of barnacles and said, "Deal."

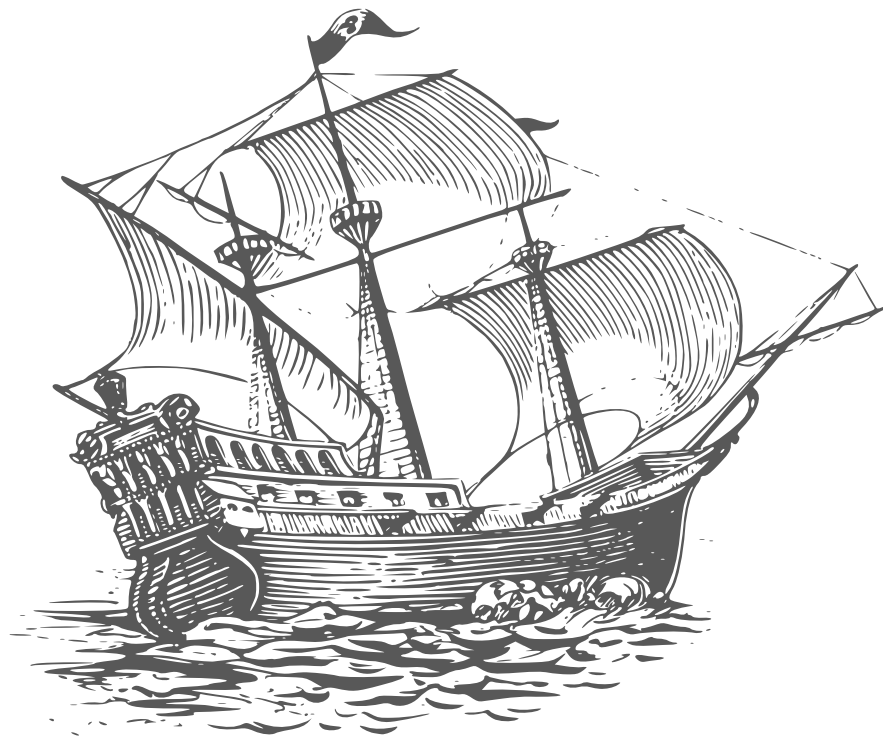


I looked upon my wife's beautiful face with an expression of triumph, and then swung around and shook Death's hand. His eyes, which were mere voids of black, began to glow green. After taking notice, the crew of the damned began to cackle and howl in excitement. I tried to let go, but I was locked into a firm grip. Before I was freed, I was haunted by these mystic words that seemed to seal the deal: "You will die under the light of a new moon, pirate; then is when I will come to claim the greatest treasure you hold close to you." With what seemed to be a nightmare, Davey Jones, the mystical Dutchman, and my once-fabled crew all vanished before my very eyes. The cold, rotten air dissipated, the waves breathed life, the ship began to dance once more, and the sun finally began to set.

You seem to be in a state of shock, my boy; tell your father why this is. Ah, I see what gives you the most dread now. Have you finally concluded what tonight is?

Yes my dear son, for it be a new moon as I lay here sick and dying in my chambers. I do believe that it is becoming colder in here, my son, and do not deny me this fact as a dying man; I see you shivering not in fear, but rather you are cold. No, no this cannot be! I am not dead yet, but why do I smell a familiar stench?

My boy, I cannot muster any strength to see, to feel it for myself, but is that candle over in that corner still burning? The flame is a mere statute?! Then there isn't much time left. My boy, rush to your family, quickly now, and make haste. You must take them far, as far away as possible, into the mainland as fast as you can. Do you not understand what for? It took your mother, my wife, in death to make me realize what Davey Jones meant on that day in purgatory. How can you not understand what my greatest treasure is, or was in fact to be? You are my greatest treasure!





Nature Photos
By: Kayla Reynolds

Deborah struggles to find a way to get herself free. She hears commotion upstairs and wonders what they could be stealing. She thinks to herself about these very hard-looking men ransacking their home, forcefully entering their lives, and violating everything. She looks over at her husband, Andy, who is sitting on the cold basement floor, tied up next to her, not really struggling to get free. He seems totally unaffected by their current situation.

"We saw their faces. Do you think they'll kill us?"

Deborah asks Andy.

"No, don't be absurd. They will just take what they want and that will be that. Going to have to call the lawyers when this is done."

"Sounds like they are upstairs in the bedrooms. What do you think they're doing?" Deborah asks.

"The safe," Andy says coldly.

"What?"

"They probably found the safe. This is not good. If they manage to open it, well, it won't be good. There's a lot of valuables and important documents in there."

She is starting to tremble. "This could be it, you know, and all you can care about is the fucking safe!"

"I'm just not as dramatic as you are. This is nothing, we'll replace our stuff in no time. Our insurance should cover this."

"I don't think you get it; these guys are dangerous. I could see it in their faces." Deborah says.

"All I saw was two guys trying to take the easy way in life, grabbing what they wanted. I didn't see killers, I saw thieves."

"With guns!" Deborah exclaims back to him.

"I told you not to worry about that."

Deborah gives up the struggle with the rope. She knows she can't get free; even if she did, where would she go? She's in her basement, trapped, and all she can see is the light coming from under the basement door. The light shines on a portion of the basement wall that seems to be rotting. She's never seen it before today, which struck her as odd. She can't look away from it.

"You always do that," she snaps at him.

"What?" Andy replies, with a look like he doesn't want to hear what comes next.

"Dismiss everything I say. It's as if I don't have a mind of my own."

"That's ridiculous. This is the stress talking. I told you not to worry."

"You just did it again!" Deborah shoots back.

Deborah starts to think about the last five years since they met. Things were so good back then, she thinks to herself, and wonders what could have happened. She had it all. Top of her class at Harvard Law, she was on her way to being a successful attorney, with a whole career path ahead of her. It was there she met Andy. He was a student at Harvard Business School, eventually going on to take over his family's business. Andy was born into wealth, but that's not the reason she married him. She was swept away by him. He did and said all the right things, she couldn't have been happier. It was within a year after they met that he asked her to marry him. He was the one who decided that Deborah need not work as they planned their future, so Deborah dropped out of law school. Andy convinced her that it would be best if she stayed home and cared for things there. She wasn't crazy about the idea. After all, she worked hard through law school, and felt that she was throwing it all away. However, the idea of a peaceful home life, and taking care of their eventual family did appeal to her.

Unfortunately, once they made the decision to start trying to have children, problems started to arise. After months of trying without success, they decide to consult a physician. It was then they learned that Deborah was unable to have children. Andy did not take it well, despite Deborah's willingness to seek other options. Andy, however, would have none of it. He eventually retreated into his work and money, distancing himself more and more as time went by. It was only a matter of time before Deborah, in her despair, retreated

within herself. She slowly became a shadow of what she used to be; that bright, lovely charismatic girl was never again found, until now.

Her focus is still on the dilapidated wall with a window just above it. She thinks about how close she is to freedom, just beyond that window. She could just climb up and crawl through it, then this will be over. But here she is, trapped and spending what might be her final moments with a man who doesn't love her anymore, and she is uncertain if she really loves him. The two have remained quiet now for some time. The men can be heard descending the stairs from the bedroom. They are talking, but it's difficult to make out what they are saying.

"I think they are in the kitchen again. I'm scared, Andy."

"Keep it together. It will be over soon."

"That's what I'm afraid of."

Deborah is overcome with fear. She feels like she could almost faint. She turns to Andy, tears in her eyes.

"I'm sorry I couldn't be the wife you wanted me to be." She sobs.

Andy waits a few seconds before answering,

"Yes, I'm sorry too." He says with hardly any emotion.

This falls like lead on Deborah's chest. She always knew he felt this way, but to actually hear it was a whole different story. She starts to feel worthless, and that she is now irrelevant to him. And now she might die.

"So, what now, then?" she asks, figuring now is as good a time as any to find out what the end looks like.

"We'll talk about it. Just not now."

"So, it's over?" she asks.

"I said we'll talk about it."

Through all of this, Deborah's focus on the rotting wall has not waned. It's almost as if she found some kind of peace in it for some strange reason. Staring at it for so long, it almost seems like it was coming apart right before her eyes.

The men's voices upstairs are getting a bit louder, and it seems that they got whatever they were after.

"What...them? They...faces.... take care...now."

Deborah tries to put it all together: "What about them? They saw our faces. We need to take care of them now."

Deborah's focus is now on the window. It's a bit

murky, but she can almost see outside. She wonders to herself why they never finished this basement. It's not like they don't have the money. They had discussed it, but nothing ever happened. She thinks that there were so many things that they discussed, plans they made, and dreams they had, but all of it was just that: dreams.

Deborah looks over at Andy, which she thinks may be the last time.

"I just want it to be said that you are a horrible man. Yes, I once fell in love with you, but that was a long time ago, and a lot has changed. As soon as you found out I was barren, you treated me like some object, never cared what I had to say or what I thought. It was as if I was some kind of burden to you. If we live through this, and I almost feel like I hope we don't, I'm going to get as far away from you as possible and start my life over again."

"Oh, and you feel you can do that? You'll never survive." Andy snaps back.

"I'm more than you think I am, you selfish asshole. I had a whole career ahead of me before you came along."

Andy just scoffs and turns away. Deborah, feeling good about what she said turns her gaze back to the rotting wall, and something amazes her: the wall is not rotting at all; it's in perfect shape. The window also is not stained, she can see clearly up to the driveway.

She starts to hear some bustle upstairs, and the men's voices are much clearer, leading her to believe this is all about to end. Despite the uncertainty, she has a feeling of freedom and a will to start her life again, and to reset her ambitions. If she only lives through this.

"Go down and take care of those two. We'll be outside," says one of the men. Deborah can see the shadow of footsteps approaching the door. The door slowly opens, and a bright light shines in the basement that blinds the two. She can see a silhouette of a man coming through the light and descending the stairs. She thinks about the fact that they are both tied up and can't hold hands as this man comes down the stairs. She is almost certain she wouldn't want to hold his hand anyway. She looks up at the window one last time, and thinks if she ever gets out of this alive, she won't waste a moment becoming her own woman, back to the one she once knew.

Digital Photography

By: Jose Luis Osorio



"Where am I?"

Feeble and dehydrated, I cautiously wedged myself up from the sweltering Arabian sand. The whole left side of my frail body felt as if it had been stung by a thousand hornets, and I could hardly get myself to continue. I was struck by relief when I noticed a large body of crystal-clear water in the distance. The sun rays danced on the surface, causing a stunning glistening effect. I stopped and wondered if it was only a mirage. I pushed on, trudging slowly, as if my ankles had been shackled to the earth beneath me. As I traveled for what felt like three miles, I reflected on some questions I had been wondering for some time now, to hopefully distract myself from the excruciating pain. I began to speak aloud, asking questions as if I were speaking to an audience. My voice was hoarse and dry. I didn't sound like myself.

"Am I out of my mind?? Last night, I threw my keys on the table, tore my work clothes off, threw my pajamas on, and lunged myself into my bed. I remember doing so, I know so. But now I'm here. I'm marooned in a desert in who knows where, when I should be where I left myself last night. This makes no sense. This makes absolutely no freaking sense. I'm gonna lose it... I'm gonna freak out."

I felt a stinging in my eyes, and they began to spill over with tears. I tried my best to stop them, but it was as if someone had burst the supportive barrier of a dam. Tepid tears ran down my cheeks, and I caught a few salty pellets with my tongue. I was so tired. So lost. So mentally and physically drained, and all I wanted to do was just go home.

Every so often, I find myself in a strange and unusual location. It hasn't happened in a while, though. At least, I'm pretty sure it hasn't? I don't know. My memory is just one big blur these days. One thing I do know, is that once... no... if I get home, I'm going to figure out the root cause for this.

At last, I reached the ravine, and I violently slung my body towards the water. I cupped my hands and drank of it, feeling pleasantly refreshed. I then applied the water onto my scorched burns

and open wounds. The water sunk deep into the crevices of the large crater on my left arm, causing a vicious sting. I clenched my jaw, squeezed my eyes shut, and scrunched my nose as I waited for the burning sensation to subside.

Suddenly, my attention drifted to an elongated shadow that stood over me. I couldn't make out what it was at first, as the shapes contorted in unnatural ways. I looked up and saw what I assumed to be a merchant and his camel. He had dark frizzy hair and green eyes, the piercing kind. His face was very angular—and intimidating, to say the least. He looked me up and down and spoke aloud in a thick accent, "Elias, we have been waiting for you." His voice was deep and rough like a raging forest stream. "Elias?" I thought to myself. "That's not my name. My name is Peter." I spent a good minute staring at him, trying to compute what was happening before me on this dreadful day. "Uhm...sir, I think you have the wrong person. You see, my name is actually—" Before I could finish my sentence, the mysterious merchant unleashed a hearty laugh. His laugh was quite contagious, and I couldn't help but feel a smile stretch across my face.

I started to feel relieved. "Elias, you've always had a sense of humor. Come, the people await your arrival."

Though I had absolutely no idea who this strange man was, I felt too afraid to go against his desires. I was in no shape or form to put up a good fight, and my gut told me to just shut up and go with it. So I did.

The merchant placed two fingers in his mouth and whistled, causing the camel to fold its legs and lower itself into the sand. I examined the vibrant and silky materials that had decorated the camel. The patterns were mesmerizing. He gave me the go-ahead, and I carefully mounted the back of the camel. The merchant then mounted the front and we continued into the vast, barren region.

It didn't take long for the sun to set, and slowly, but surely, the stars unveiled themselves in little clusters across the deep, navy-blue sky. We entered a village; the architecture was astonishing. Thick clay pillars, hand carved with symbols and details of all sorts, supported every building in

sight. Though the sun was asleep, the village was awake and lively. Strings of warm-toned lanterns stretched across roofs and weaved through the tops of narrow alleyways. People in lavish robes navigated through the village, with looks of pure bliss on their faces. The crescent-shaped moon smiled down on me. I felt safe.

The merchant led me to a temple-like structure. It was enormous, about the size of two football fields, and the ground was paved with yellow, orange, and pink stained clay. It was truly an extravagant sight.

We were stopped by a guard outside of the temple, and he and the merchant began to exchange words that I had never heard before. The only word I was “familiar” with, or newly familiar with, was the name Elias, who the merchant had mistaken me for a couple hours prior.

The guard then spoke to me, and I bit the inside of my cheeks. Sweat pellets ran down my forehead. My face became flush. I offered a nervous smile and spoke with a quivering voice, “I don’t understand.” The guard rose his left eyebrow in concern and squinted his eyes. I shrugged my shoulders and looked at the ground. I wasn’t really the Elias they thought I was. Rather, I was some imposter, awaiting my calamity. This is it for me. I can just kiss all my hopes and dreams good-bye.

I snapped out of my anxiety-ridden thoughts when the merchant began to speak, his booming voice startled me. “Elias just came back from war. He must’ve hit his head; he must rest now.” The guard nodded and let us into the temple.

The inside was as astounding as the outside, as every piece of furniture looked of the most luxurious quality. The merchant guided me to the “master bedroom,” where I was meant to rest for the night. I collapsed onto the bed and sprawled my limbs out in a starfish-like manner. My whole body tingled as my muscles attempted to repair themselves from the trauma they had recently endured. Though I was finally able to rest, I didn’t feel at rest. My head was still spinning. I had many unanswered questions, and a plethora of worries. “I want to go home,” I whispered. My attention then felt a gravitational pull to the wall across from me. On it, I saw these beautiful acrylic paintings, rich in detail and

pigment. I squinted; the figures looked familiar. I hoisted my body up and made my way over to the wall so I could take a better look. I could finally make out the painting. The painting was of a young man, his arms in the air, insinuating victory. I stared at the painting for a good minute, admiring the great detail and the soft brush strokes against the canvas. I noticed that the young man had brown curly hair and hazel eyes, just like me.

I shifted my focus above me, where I saw a shiny plaque made of silver. On it, “The Great Elias” was engraved. I glanced at the painting once more and froze.

It didn’t take me long to realize that I was the man in the painting. “What if I am Elias??” I asked myself. “This can’t be real...” My worry-filled thoughts consumed my mind. I began to shake, and my legs felt like rubber. I looked at my battered palms, my decrepit body. This felt like a fever dream. “No... No... this isn’t real, this isn’t real,” I cried. I dug through my pocket to see if my compass was in there. It was genuine gold, with a distinctive crack that zig-zagged down the center. It was given to me by my grandfather, and in it, a picture of my dog, Bo, was stored. I hastily yanked it out, and just as I thought, the picture of Bo rested in place. I fell to my knees, overwhelmed with joy. My name isn’t Elias. It’s Peter, Peter Hopkins.

It was the next morning, and I was greeted by the cold, hard floor that I had sunk onto last night. I pulled my aching body up and limped over to the bed, where I then placed my hand on it for support. Next to the nightstand, I noticed a telephone connected to the wall. I hopped over and dialed my mom’s phone number. It didn’t work. I tried three more times, and then something inside me told me to try adding 3-0-4 in front of her phone number, so I did.

The phone rang two times, and then the line was picked up. “Yes... hello, this is Mary Hopkins, how can I help you?” My heart was in my throat. Oh, how I missed my mom’s voice. Something was clearly, and rightfully off. Her voice trembled, all shaky and worn out. It sounded as if she had aged ten years. “Mom...” I was dominated by fatigue and could hardly form coherent sentences. “PETER! Oh my gosh... Peter,” she screamed.

Six months later

The doctor's office smelled strongly of "un-scented" hand-sanitizer, and the fluorescent lights strained my eyes. Most of my wounds were still very visible on my body. It took six whole months for us to schedule a specialist for me; there's always some sort of prolonged hold on these kinds of appointments.

I found out that I had been in the desert for five years, and I have little to no memory of it. The thought of this deeply irked me. It seems like only yesterday, I was still nineteen years young. Now, I'm twenty-four, and my years have slipped by.

After tests, scans, and more tests, the doctor walked into the room. A streak of light grazed across his nametag, which read Dr. Osler. He cleared his throat and adjusted his thinly wired steel glasses. He politely asked to speak with my mom in a separate room. He closed the creaky door, which was in some desperate need of oiling, behind him. Impatiently, I

fidgeted my legs and picked at the callouses on my palms. I cracked my neck, my knuckles, my wrists, and took a deep breath. Something felt really off. I wondered why he couldn't just tell me what's wrong with me. "That's it," I whispered under my breath. I tip-toed over to the door and rested my head against it. I overheard what I feared most.

"Well!? What's wrong? Can it be fixed?" my mother worriedly questioned. "Mrs- ermm... Hopkins... After looking at the data, we have determined that Peter is suffering from multiple-personality disorder. We had him see two of our best psychiatrists, and through them, it was determined.

I stepped back from the door, unable to find my balance. Shockwaves ravaged my body, and my heart sunk to my stomach. My ears started ringing and a shroud of fuzzy darkness consumed my gaze.



Digital Photography
By: Mary Malinconico