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FICTION



WELCOME TO THE POCONOS

BY : ZOE REALE

The winding road cut through the dense forest like a jagged scar, leading deeper into the heart of the Poconos. Sophia glanced out of the window, her fingers tracing the patterns of frost that adorned the glass. Her sleek, dark hair rested at her shoulders as she curled up with her feet on the passenger seat. She was bundled up in a fleece-lined flannel but still slightly shivered as she rested in her seat. She watched out the window as the scenery began to change as they got closer to their destination. The late afternoon sun cast long shadows across the snow-covered landscape, painting everything in a cold, eerie light.

Beside her, Pierce gripped the steering wheel with white-knuckled intensity, his eyes narrowed as he navigated the twists and turns of the unfamiliar road. Pierce was a tall, handsome man. Dark hair, bright blue eyes, and perfect dimples on each side of his cheek. Even with confusion on his face, he still managed to look put together. They had been driving for hours, leaving the city life far behind them in search of a peaceful weekend getaway. But as the miles rolled by and the trees grew thicker, Sophia couldn't shake the feeling of unease that settled over her. At last, they reached their secluded cabin, nestled behind the whispering pines. Its rustic charm motioned them towards the door, but as Sophia crossed the threshold, a chill crept up her spine, casting shadows over the warmth of anticipation.

"This place feels... eerie," Sophia confessed as her eyes wandered around the aged cabin. Each corner of the small, cozy space told a story, adorned with a carefully curated collection of wildlife and ski memorabilia. The walls, weathered with time, boasted a rich, dark wood that enveloped the cabin making it seem smaller and darker than it really was.

Pierce offered a reassuring smile, though his own eyes betrayed a flicker of doubt. "It's just the isolation playing tricks on you," he ventured, though he seemed uncertain about his own words. Despite their efforts to shake off the unease, it clung to them, an invisible specter trailing their every step.

As night descended and darkness surrounded the cabin, Sophia couldn't shake the feeling of being watched. As she made her way throughout the cabin, trying to enjoy the peace and quiet and company of her boyfriend, she couldn't help but feel that there were eyes amongst the woods watching their every move. The pair snuggled up on the couch in the center of the darkness. Sophia used her book as a distraction from the thoughts racing through her head about what could be going on in the surrounded wilderness.

In the stillness, a sound pierced the quiet—a soft, insistent scratching, barely audible over the wind's mournful howl. Sophia's pulse quickened, her senses on high alert. "Do you hear that?" she whispered, her voice barely audible. Pierce tensed across from her on the couch, his gaze darting about the room. "Probably just a tree branch scraping against the window." But Sophia knew better. It was a sound far more sinister, a signal of unseen horrors lurking in the shadows.

As the scratching intensified, Sophia held her breath, heart pounding in her chest, waiting for what would come next. Yet, as quickly as it had begun, the noise ceased, leaving behind an oppressive silence. Exhaustion eventually overtook them, dragging them into a sleep filled with tossing and turning. And with the first light of dawn filtering through the trees, they awoke to find that their nightmare had only just begun.

Sophia slowly woke up and made her way to the tiny kitchen of the cabin. She was still fogged from her sleep and it took her a moment to discover all the cabinets and drawers to be

open. Her eyes widened and her heart sank to her stomach. She felt as if something had just walked through her, she could feel the presence of who or what was in their cabin with them the night before. She quickly ran back to the bedroom and woke up Pierce to come out to the kitchen.

“Maybe I was sleepwalking?” Pierce questioned Sophia with a small chuckle. He had been in complete denial of the fact that something sinister could be going on.

“Pierce, something is going on and we are not alone.” Sophia abruptly shut him down.

“I don’t know what is going on, but I am trying to have a relaxing weekend and cannot keep dealing with you thinking a ghost is coming after us.” Pierce closed all the cabinets and drawers and began to make a cup of coffee. Sophia did not say anything. She sat at the kitchen table in disbelief that he was so unphased by everything going on. But maybe he was right, and she needed to calm down and enjoy the weekend away even though the unsettling feeling in her stomach remained.

The couple had spent the day in two different head spaces. Sophia was trying to hold it together and enjoy the weekend away with Pierce, but the uneasy thought that someone or something knew that they were at this cabin and wanted to scare them away did not sit right with her. She could feel the same feeling coming from Pierce, but he was too much of a man to admit that he was just as scared as she was. The day was slowly coming to an end and the sun was slowly starting to fall. The dark woods around them were becoming darker and more frightening.

Pierce was in the kitchen preparing dinner and Sophia was laying on the couch with a book and a hot cup of tea when there was a knock at the door.

“Who the f*** is that?” Sophia quickly turned to Pierce.

“Calm the f*** down.” Pierce whispered to her as he slowly, but nervously walked towards the door.

“Who is it?” He questioned from the other side of the door.

“Is Isabella home?” The voice of what sounded like a young woman replied to Pierce. Sophia stayed on the couch, now sitting up with fear in her eyes.

“No, I’m sorry you have the wrong house ma’am.” He politely replied to the young woman and locked the bolt lock on the front door. The fear within Pierce was becoming impossible for him to hide. “No one lives around here. Why would someone come to our door asking for some random girl? Something is not right Pierce.” Sophia’s voice was shaking along with the rest of her body. Her intuition was telling her that something was not right, and it was time to leave. Pierce tried to play it off, insisting it was probably just a lost hiker or someone confused about the location of their friend’s cabin. But Sophia couldn’t shake the feeling that there was more to it than that. She couldn’t ignore the sense of feeling that seemed to hang heavy in the air.

As the night deepened, so did the uncomfortable feeling. Every creak of the old cabin, every rustle of the wind outside, sent shivers down their spines. Sophia found herself constantly glancing out the window, half-expecting to see someone—or something—lurking in the darkness. Their dinner was eaten in silence, the atmosphere thick with tension. Pierce kept trying to lighten the mood with jokes and forced laughter, but it only served to heighten Sophia’s anxiety.

After dinner, they headed to the living room, where Pierce attempted to distract himself with a movie while Sophia pretended to read her book, her eyes darting nervously around the room. It was then that they heard it—the sound of footsteps, slow and deliberate, echoing through the stillness of the cabin. Sophia’s heart leaped into her throat as she locked eyes with Pierce, both frozen in fear. The footsteps drew closer, coming from somewhere just outside the cabin. Sophia could feel her pulse pounding in her ears as she strained to listen, her mind racing with terrifying possibilities. Without a word, Pierce got

up from the couch, his movements cautious and deliberate. He crept towards the door, his hand trembling as he reached for the doorknob. Sophia wanted to scream at him to stop, to run away, to do anything but open that door. But her voice caught in her throat, paralyzed by fear.

With a shaky breath, Pierce swung the door open, revealing nothing but the darkness of the night beyond. For a moment, there was silence, broken only by the sound of their ragged breathing. And then, from the depths of the forest, came a chilling whisper—a voice so soft, so sinister, it sent shivers down their spines. "Welcome to the Poconos," it murmured, "I hope you enjoy your stay." The whisper faded into the night, leaving Sophia and Pierce standing frozen in terror, their minds reeling with the realization that they were not alone in the woods. And whatever—or whoever—was out there, had been watching them all along.



THE DRAGON AND HER FAIR MAIDEN

BY : STEPHANIE LOMBARDO

The marketplace was crowded, with market goers buying what they needed, merchants trying to get people to buy what they have in their inventory, and children running about and chasing each other. Stormscorcher approached a satyr behind the little market stand. The dragon grabbed a bag of gold and showed it to the satyr. "I would like a basketful of apples, please."

"A basketful of apples it will be," the satyr said as he grabbed some apples and put them in Stormscorcher's basket, "Running an errand for Crystalheart, I see."

"Indeed," Stormscorcher answered as she grabbed the basket of apples. "Thank you very much."

"You and Crystalheart are most welcome."

As she walked away from the stand, two children chased each other and crossed her path, making her stumble backwards before someone grabbed her arm and kept her from falling, before pulling her back up on her feet. "Are you okay there, Stormscorcher?"

Stormscorcher looked up and saw a gryphon in commoner's clothing. Knowing who it was, she smiled, and her tail swished back and forth. "Windsong! Oh, I am okay, better now that you are here!"

Stormscorcher had known Windsong when she was not quite a hatchling, but still rather young. The two bumped into each other in the same marketplace. Stormscorcher was very apologetic, and Windsong was very forgiving. They talked with each other and explored the marketplace together until Windsong left. They would do the same thing every time they met. They got closer and closer to each other, until one night, Windsong took her to see the stars by the great tree, where she told Stormscorcher that she was actually a princess, and feared that Stormscorcher might only like her because she was royalty.

But Stormscorcher saw nothing different in Windsong, and the two eventually became friends. As they saw each other even more, Stormscorcher started to see the chance that Windsong could become more than just her friend, but she had yet to tell her.

Windsong placed a finger over Stormscorcher's muzzle. "I know you are very delighted to see me, but please keep quiet. I don't want any eyes on me, knowing I am royalty. Especially not when news of my coming marriage is spreading around."

"Marriage? What marriage?" Stormscorcher knew that there would come the day that Windsong was going to marry, but she never knew that the day was coming so soon.

"I was kidnapped by a prince who wanted to marry me, and then a knight rescued me. I was grateful for his rescue, but now he's demanding that I marry him as a means of thanking him. I tried to offer something else, anything else, but he kept insisting that I marry him. And the king and queen are arranging that marriage, so I have no choice but to run."

Stormscorcher, upon hearing the news, took Windsong's hands in hers. "Do not worry, dear Windsong. I'll make sure they never see you."

"No. If they see me with someone else, you will be thrown in the dungeons and face unimaginable torture. I don't want you to face such a fate. I'd rather go alone."

"But Windsong--"

"I understand you are willing to tempt such a fate for me, but I cannot allow it. I must go on my own." Windsong nipped at her arm and plucked a feather. Stormscorcher plucked off a loose scale from hers. "Here. Should we never cross paths again, a feather to remember me by."

"And for you, a scale." The two hugged each other tightly, close to tears. And that was the last Stormscorcher ever saw of Windsong.

She went back to the library, gave Crystalheart the apples, ran her other errands, and went back home to sleep.

When Stormscorcher went to the marketplace the next day, a pegasus came trotting in and approached her. "Are you by any chance acquainted with Princess Windsong?"

"Yes, I am."

"Well, I have come to inform you that the great knight, Sir Stormrider the Brave, has taken Windsong away, and they are to be wed today."

"Today?!"

"Yes, today. Give your blessings to the soon-to-be newlyweds!"

"No, it can't be!"

"Ah, but it is. I wish to talk more, but I must deliver news to everyone else."

The pegasus flew off, leaving Stormscorcher in shock. Windsong said she'd run. That she'd escape. That nobody would catch her. Yet she was captured anyway. Stormscorcher ran to the library, hoping that a book would keep such feelings at bay.

When Stormscorcher ran in, Crystalheart placed a hoof on her shoulder. "What's with the running? Is there anything that needs attending this instant?" he asked.

"Windsong is to get married to a knight that rescued her. But she never wanted this marriage." Stormscorcher answered in tears, "I wish there was something, anything, I could do, but there is nothing."

The unicorn thought for a moment and then went to his desk. "I wouldn't say there is nothing you could do."

"What do you mean?"

"You'd always come in here, reading stories of brave knights saving princesses from evil princes and monsters, and you'd always talk about how you wished to be like those knights, but how such dreams are merely dreams?"

"You'd always say that fate may have other plans, and I'd never believe you."

"You should have believed me, my dear."

Crystalheart presented Stormscorcher with a dagger. "Ironhorn made this dagger, and I believe it would be very useful on your quest."

"A quest? I doubt I could ever go on one!"

"You want to save your dear friend, do you not?"

"I do, I really do!"

"Then go, take the dagger and go on the quest the brave knights have gone on."

Stormscorcher took the dagger from Crystalheart's hooves. She wasn't too sure about going on this quest, but if it was to rescue her friend and get married to her as well, she was willing to take the risk. Stormscorcher put the dagger in a sheath by her side, and ran out the library, out of the town, and into the woods.

The woods were rather quiet, too quiet for Stormscorcher's liking. Her heart racing, she was ready to pull out her dagger at any moment. She wasn't afraid of whatever is in the woods. She has hunted before, once killing a wolf. If anything were to test their luck with the dragon, they wouldn't even have the chance to regret it. Stormscorcher tried to calm herself down by thinking about the quest itself. She will rescue Windsong, and Windsong will be amazed by her bravery and be so grateful for the rescue that she would want to marry her. And Stormscorcher would profess her love to her, and they would get married and live happily ever after. Stormscorcher was starting to feel calmer, but was still alert for any dangers.

Stormscorcher did a lot of walking; she'd expected there to be something in her path, but there was nothing. Other than killing a wolf or two that tried to kill her, Stormscorcher didn't face anything else. That was when Stormscorcher finally heard something in the distance.

"I don't want to marry you! I'll offer anything else to you, anything you want, just as long as I don't have to be wed to you!"

“Have you never been taught gratitude? I rescued you from an evil prince that wanted to lock you away, so you must show your thanks to me!”

Without a single thought in her mind, Stormscorcher ran towards the sound, even pushing the troll aside to cross the bridge and slashing at him when he grabbed her. She made her way through bushes and found Stormrider with a tight grasp on Windsong’s arm. “Don’t you try to run from this marriage! I promise you that you may not like the idea, but you’ll come to realize I am a pleasant fellow, and marriage won’t be as terrible as you think of it.”

With rage burning inside her hotter than a great blaze spell, Stormcorcher roared at Stormrider, making him let go of Windsong and turn to the dragon. “I demand that you let Princess Windsong free at once!” Stormscorcher shouted, “Windsong has made it clear she does not wish to be wed to you!” “And what makes you believe you have a say on the matter?” Stormrider asked as he approached the dragon, “I rescued her, and now she shall reward me with her hand in marriage.”

“No, she shall not! And she has offered to thank you in any other way!”

Stormrider got closer to Stormscorcher, now towering over her. “Windsong shall marry me, and that is that.” Stormrider then gave Stormscorcher a twisted smile. “That is, unless you wish to duel.”

Stormscorcher drew out her dagger and pointed it at Stormrider, unafraid of the gryphon knight before her. “If it is a duel you wish to have, then a duel it shall be!” Stormscorcher turned to Windsong. “Run, my fair maiden! Run far from here!”

Stormrider drew out his sword. “If that’s what you wish, but have no anger in your heart, should I best you and win over the fair maiden’s hand.”

Stormscorcher tried to slash the knight with her dagger, but the knight blocked it with his own sword. The knight tried to strike back with his sword, but Stormscorcher jumped back and blocked the strike with her dagger. The two went back and forth, trying to strike the other but blocking each other’s attacks, locking eyes with each other to make it clear that neither were going to back down. Stormrider tried to strike Stormscorcher once more, but Stormscorcher moved out of the way, which made her see a bare spot in the gryphon’s armor. She lunged in and grabbed Stormrider’s wrist, digging her claws in enough to draw blood. Stormrider yelped in pain and dropped his sword, and Stormscorcher came in with her dagger and tried to strike him once more. But Stormrider just grabbed her wrist, pressing on her hand and forcing her to drop her dagger.

Stormrider reached for his sword, but Stormscorcher grabbed his arm and began to soar upwards, barely managing to lift Stormrider high enough so he couldn’t reach his sword. Stormrider then flew upwards, and Stormscorcher let go of him. The two fought each other in the middle of the air, soaring across the sky and striking each other any chance they got. Neither Stormscorcher’s claws, nor her fangs or wings could pierce the knight’s armor, but neither could she strike him where he is bare without him striking her first or flying to the side. So Stormscorcher had to think of another way to have the upper hand in this duel, and think of it quickly. As Stormscorcher flew circles around Stormrider, she saw him looking in all different directions, and had an idea. She came closer to the gryphon, delivering false strikes and flying back. Stormscorcher then had another idea. She could use her fiery breath, something she only used when helping others with favors until now, on Stormrider’s armor. Stormscorcher focused on her breath, took a deep breath in, then blew out a powerful stream of fire Stormrider’s way, but the gryphon flew away

from the stream. Stormscorcher blew out more streams of fire, trying to strike the armor. Instead, she just breathed fire in all different directions, even setting a tree on fire. But then she finally struck the gryphon's wing, making him shriek in pain. Another stream of fire struck his armor, and Stormscorcher came closer to sink her claws into a bare spot in his armor, but he grabbed her leg and dragged her down as he fell.

When they both hit the ground, Stormrider got up and slammed Stormscorcher against a tree, not willing to fall, even with grave wounds. He pinned her in place with a footpaw pressed against the dragon's stomach. He grabbed his sword, ready to plunge it into Stormscorcher's stomach and slay her. Stormscorcher still had a little determination in her, but what was there she could do now? "And now, the foul beast shall be slain!" Stormrider declared as he raised his sword. Stormscorcher closed her eyes and tearfully whispered an apology for Windsong, knowing that she failed to rescue her like she swore to do.

Stormscorcher suddenly heard a shriek from the gryphon, and when she opened her eyes, she saw Windsong, holding onto Stormrider and having pierced his neck with her beak. As Stormrider backed away in pain, Windsong helped Stormscorcher up and clawed at one of Stormrider's eyes and kicked him back. "Windsong?" Stormscorcher said, "I told you to run far from here." "But I couldn't let you die! I had to be there for you!" Windsong then handed Stormscorcher her dagger back. "Now strike him, while he is weakened!"

Stormscorcher nodded and ran to strike the knight in the forearm and face, making him back away and clutch his forearm in pain. The knight was huffing and stumbled backwards, until he stumbled too far and slipped, falling off the cliff.

The tree that had been burning so brightly gave out and fell down the cliff with a great thud. Stormscorcher stepped back, letting everything sink in. She did it. She actually did it. She bested the knight and saved the princess from him.

Windsong tackled Stormscorcher with a hug. "Oh, my brave Stormscorcher, you did it! Oh, what could I ever do to thank you for rescuing me?"

"You need to do nothing to thank me, my fair maiden. I rescued you because I love you."

Windsong looked at Stormscorcher in surprise. "You do?"

"I have been in love with you for very long. Your kindness, your beauty, everything has enchanted me. And I have always dreamed of a day where we would vow to be by each other's side until the end of time."

Windsong smiled sweetly at Stormscorcher. "Then I shall marry you as thanks."

Stormscorcher was more than happy to accept Windsong's offer. She's always wanted to fulfill such a fantasy. To rescue a princess and for her to marry her as thanks. And the princess, being one that she has been in love with for a long time, made it even better. But before she said yes, she bit her tongue and thought about it. Does Windsong really love her back? Or is she only doing this to thank her? Because if she's only doing this to thank her for rescuing her, and not out of love, then Stormscorcher would be no better than the knight that tried to marry her against her will. "Windsong, do you love me as I love you? Be honest with me, my fair maiden."

Windsong looked down, but then looked up at Stormscorcher and said, "I don't. As much as your heart yearns for me, my heart never yearned for you. But I will marry you either way."

"No, you will not. I cannot marry someone whose heart does not yearn for me as mine yearns for them. I'd be no better than Stormrider if I did that."

“But you are better than him! He tried to force me to marry him!”

“And your heart never yearned for him.”

Stormscorcher took Windsong’s hands in hers. “If you were to offer your hand in marriage to someone, offer it to someone you are in love with.”

“But what could I do to thank you then?”

“I have told you, you don’t need to do anything. I rescued you out of love, and seeing you free is all I need. Come on now, tell me where you wish to go. I will be your escort.”

Windsong smiled and nodded, and the two walked together to somewhere that Windsong would be safe.

The days after, Stormscorcher felt a lot of sadness. She knew that it was right for her to reject Windsong’s offer to marry her when the gryphon didn’t feel the same way, but knowing that Windsong was not in love with her made her heart hurt. Stormscorcher, deep in her thoughts, was unaware of two children running by, and she stumbled forward before being caught by someone.

“Are you okay?” she heard them ask.

“I’m okay. Thank you for catching me.” When Stormscorcher looked at the one who caught her, she saw a beautiful jackalope, with antlers spread like tree branches, and soft tan fur. “Who are you?” Stormscorcher asked.

“My name is Moonshadow. And do not be fooled by my antlers, for I am truly a maiden.”

“And a fair one at that. Do you want to explore the town for a while?”

“Oh, I do.”

The two went off to explore the town together, and Stormscorcher felt a strange, warm feeling about Moonshadow. Was her heart yearning for Moonshadow as it once was for Windsong? Stormscorcher asked herself.

If it was, then fate really does work in mysterious ways.



THE GOOD MAN

BY: SARAH KENNEDY KEYS

(Trigger Warning: Death, miscarriage)

“He’s a good man, Elmira,” my mother said to me as she buttoned up my wedding dress. “You’ll be well looked after.”

I pressed a hand against my stomach, trying to soothe the nervous fluttering beneath the sensible blue fabric. After today, this gown would become my usual for Sunday preaching services. I wondered what sort of church there’d be near my new home.

“I just wish I didn’t have to go so far away with him,” I replied. My eyes roved over my childhood room, desperate to catalogue each corner of it now that I might never see it again, from the faded yellow gingham curtains to the quilted bedspread. It was too far of a journey by wagon to come back just for visits and the railway didn’t run that far west yet.

“You’ll be so busy setting up your new home, you’ll hardly have time to miss any of us here,” Mama said firmly, doing up the last of the buttons.

“And soon you’ll be busy filling that home up with your handsome husband’s babies,” my sister, Hannah, put in mischievously.

I felt my face redden but before I could answer, Mama scolded, “None of that talk, young lady. It’s hardly proper or fitting.” I wanted to ask when it would be proper and fitting to speak of such things, if not on my wedding day. I had learned most of the facts of life from growing up on a farm and the rest from one hurried conversation with my mother after Thomas Marshall proposed to me. As a result, I felt woefully unprepared for what was to come... but Mama assured me that every new bride felt likewise, and it was the husband’s job to know more about such things.

“Just be an obedient, submissive wife, and you’ll do fine,” she told me. “Thomas Marshall is a good man, and you’ve always been a good girl. You’ll have no trouble.”

I repeated those words to myself over and over in the weeks following the wedding. When Thomas drove us out to his ranch, three states over in the middle of nowhere without a neighbor for miles. When I was slow to learn the rules of being a rancher’s wife and he grew cross with me, his smile tightening and words sharpening as I rushed to please him. And when my monthly courses stopped after the wedding and a couple of months later, the morning sickness started.

“It’ll be a fine, healthy baby boy,” Thomas declared when I told him, his smile genuine this time. “We’ll call him George, after my father.”

I wanted to call him William, after my own father. If it was a boy at all; I suspected a girl. But I said neither thing to Thomas and just replied agreeably, “George is a strong name.” As it turned out, we never got to call that baby anything. A few weeks after the sickness began, the bleeding and the pain came. They stole my baby away, leaving me with an empty womb and heart.

Thomas buried the remains of our child beneath an oak tree some distance from the house. I was too weak to walk out and witness it, so I observed through tears and the bedroom window. When he came back in, he hardly looked at me before he said resolutely, “There will be another.” I wanted to tell him no; that I couldn’t bear this again, least of all anytime soon. But I dried my eyes and nodded obediently, repeating, “There will be another.” My voice shook with the words, but my husband didn’t seem to notice.

He just nodded grimly before going back out to his work.

His declaration must have been a prophetic one. My courses returned and then vanished again, replaced by the now familiar morning sickness. Thomas's smile was more cautious this time, but he once more proclaimed the impending arrival of a healthy son.

Once more, he was mistaken. This time, I went out to the oak tree to watch the tiny box being buried in the ground. My weeping watered the soil but Thomas's face remained stony. He barely spoke to me for three days. I told myself he was grieving, too. I tried to do what I could to ease his pain, but I couldn't do the thing he most wanted. I couldn't give him a child.

He couldn't seem to accept that, though. A couple of weeks after our second loss, he again declared we'd have another baby. Each night, I prayed that this one would have time to grow and be safely delivered. Then I wondered if my absence from church had rendered the Almighty deaf. I'd asked Thomas a few times to take me to the preaching services, but he always claimed to be too busy to drive me into town and it was too far to walk. We did our Bible reading at home, and Thomas seemed to favor the passages about submissive wives above all else.

The weeks seeped into months which slowly became a year, and then two. I stopped asking to attend church or go into town, apart from once suggesting I might consult a physician. Thomas said something about snake oil salesmen and the need for greater fortitude in me, and I let the topic drop.

The monotony of my existence on the ranch was broken only by the brief interludes of anguished hope when I believed myself to be with child again. Twice, I was mistaken. The third time, I was certain it was different but Thomas refused to believe me.

"Perhaps I might see a doctor to be sure," I ventured to suggest.

"We aren't throwing away good money to find out you're imagining things again," he answered coldly. "If you are with child, we'll know for certain soon enough."

His tone invited no argument, but perhaps it was some maternal instinct which drove me to quietly insist, "If I am, it might be wise to get help. To be sure all goes well this time."

"Women have managed on their own without doctors for centuries," he replied. "There's no reason you can't do likewise, Elmira."

I wanted to tell him that over the centuries, women at least had the comfort of another woman – of a midwife, a mother, a sister, even a friend or neighbor. I had no one, apart from my husband and our dog, Ranger – who was often out on the ranch with Thomas instead of in the house with me. In the two years since he brought me here, Thomas had only taken me into town twice. Apart from him, my only socialization came from occasional encounters with the ranch hands – and most of them steered clear of me, making me wonder if my husband had forbidden them from my society. I had the occasional letter from Hannah or Mama back home, but I never told either of them of my troubles in the letters I wrote back.

"You have been blessed with a good man and a proper home," my mother had written to me on more than one occasion. "The blessing of children will soon follow."

I continued to repeat to myself that Thomas Marshall was a good man; that he had given me a good life here, and I had no right to complain. Some days, like when the calving season had gone well and Thomas was in a good mood, I almost believed it.

But most days, I felt myself fading, even as my body began changing to accommodate

the new life growing within. Thomas believed me at last, but again dismissed my plea to at least see a midwife. He also insisted I keep on with my regular chores, saying the exercise would make me strong. Ranger had been keeping close to me for a week now, like he sensed something was the matter.

I was out hauling water from the well when something wet and warm rushed down my legs. My back had been aching for days already and my undergarments lightly spotted with blood, but I had kept that knowledge to myself. Now I no longer could, as my abdomen spasmed with pain that doubled me over. The water bucket slipped from my grasp, sloshing out over the frozen ground. Half-formed prayers passed from my lips as I tried to hasten back inside, but the edges of my vision had already turned hazy.

Everything else went hazy, too. Later on, I'd have only vague remembrances of all that took place. But it had all happened before, so those memories tangled with my others until I couldn't sort them all out. Not that I wanted to; I wanted to forget all of it.

One thing was starkly different this time, though. Thomas didn't help me with the burial. I managed alone, digging up the frozen ground and shedding silent tears with only Ranger to witness.

There wouldn't be another child. That decision hardened in me like the earth beneath my feet and I carried it back to the house with me. It was all I carried back.

I woke late the next morning, astonished that Thomas had let me sleep so long. Even more astonishing was the presence of another man in our house when I came into the kitchen and that I hadn't heard Ranger barking at him. The stranger was seated at the table across from Thomas, nursing a mug of coffee, but he got to his feet when I came in.

"Good morning," he greeted, his voice pleasant and gentle. His dark eyes were pleasant and gentle, too, I noticed, the opposite of Thomas's cold blue ones. Almost immediately, I chided myself inwardly for thinking any such thing.

"Good morning," I replied, a beat too late. "I'm sorry, I don't believe we've met?"

"This is Doctor Spencer," Thomas said before the other man could reply. "I fetched him from town to have a look at you."

Thomas brought a doctor for me? I wanted to tell him that it was too late; that maybe if he had brought the good doctor before, my third baby wouldn't be buried beneath the oak tree. But I was too stunned to say anything, and it was Doctor Spencer who spoke before I did.

"If that's agreeable to you, Mrs. Marshall," he said, all kindness and concern.

Unexpected tears sprang to my eyes and I quickly blinked them back.

"Of course it's agreeable," Thomas answered for me. "We didn't have you come all this way for a social call, Doctor." His tone indicated this was meant as a joke, but his eyes said otherwise.

"Mrs. Marshall?" Doctor Spencer asked quietly, his gaze on mine.

I found myself nodding my agreement and in short order, I was back in the bedroom for the doctor to conduct an examination while Thomas looked on. Doctor Spencer was polite and professional, and clearly knowledgeable despite being on the younger side – he couldn't have been more than thirty. He listened attentively as I relayed my troubles as succinctly as I could.

But he didn't seem to want me to be succinct. He asked careful questions, appearing to care about each answer – so much so, that he often directed questions back to me when Thomas tried to answer on my behalf.

Finally, the doctor set aside his scuffed

medical bag and said, "Relatively speaking, you are fairly healthy, Mrs. Marshall. But I believe you have some disease of the womb and you have been overtaxed. And I am sorry for the losses you have suffered."

"Disease of the womb?" Thomas asked incredulously. "Are you saying my wife has hysteria?"

I winced at those words and his tone. Doctor Spencer seemed to notice my discomfort, because his tone was more measured when he replied, "Not hysteria, no. Although miscarriages can take a mental and emotional toll as well as a physical one."

"Then she had better have a child sooner rather than later," Thomas said. "That will put her right."

"I must advise against any further pregnancies for the time being," the doctor said firmly. "Mrs. Marshall requires a regimen of rest, nourishing foods, and gentle exercise. Marital relations should not resume for some time."

Thomas scoffed. "I don't need to be told how to manage my own wife."

Doctor Spencer looked up at him unflinchingly. "Then I'm sure you understand the importance of rest in her condition."

"Isn't there something you can dispense to her? Some tonic or elixir?" My husband asked indignantly, like bringing the doctor here was a waste otherwise.

"I will leave a tonic, yes. It will help to ease some of Mrs. Marshall's discomfort and aid her sleep. But it will not work unassisted; she must have the other things I prescribed."

"Thank you, Doctor," I mumbled, although I knew I was as likely to follow his orders as to discover the fountain of youth.

"Yes, thank you," Thomas echoed briskly. "I'll see you out."

When Thomas took that tone, everyone always hurried to obey him – his ranch hands, his cattle, his wife. But not, it seemed,

Doctor Spencer. The doctor ignored Thomas entirely and kept his eyes on me. "I'll leave instructions with the tonic, Mrs. Marshall," he said. "And I'll call on you again in a few days to see how you're faring."

"That won't be necessary," Thomas said, sounding irritated by the presumption.

"Your wife is not out of danger yet," Doctor Spencer said, his own voice hardening. "It would be prudent for her to remain under a physician's care for the near future. If my treatment has not been satisfactory, I'll ask Doctor Ford from Desert Creek to attend her."

His insistence surprised me. Even more surprising was the tight nod Thomas gave after a moment. "You may return if you deem it necessary. Although I fear you'll be wasting your time."

"I hope so," Doctor Spencer answered lightly. Turning back to me, he said, "My sympathies for your situation, Mrs. Marshall. And my best wishes for a quick recovery."

With that, he stood from the chair at my bedside and followed Thomas from the room at last. I stayed in bed for the rest of the day, and astonishingly, Thomas didn't complain. He even brought me supper and sat with me to eat it.

His uncharacteristic tenderness continued for the next few days, and by the time Doctor Spencer called again, even I could see the change in myself. The doctor looked surprised to find me in a better state than I was, but certainly not displeased. He cleared me to resume some light work around the household, but left other restrictions in place for the time being.

Thomas thanked him more warmly this time and paid him for his services, and for a moment, I thought my husband had somehow become a changed man from these two calls... a good one, as Doctor Spencer seemed.

But perhaps he had only wanted to be rid of the doctor. Without another visit looming over us, Thomas quickly returned to himself – to the particular, demanding, distant man I had known him to be throughout our marriage. I caught myself thinking of Doctor Spencer more than once as the days gradually lengthened and thawed into springtime. It was pitiful, I knew, and maybe even sinful, but I couldn't help myself. I saw his kind, dark eyes when I closed my own, and I caught myself staring out the window while I completed chores, hoping to see the handsome doctor riding up again. To what end, I couldn't say. Perhaps just to have someone to speak with again.

Instead, my circle grew smaller when Thomas announced one morning that he and some of the ranch hands were leaving to drive the cattle to market. He would be gone for two months, at least, and I tried to pretend I would miss him. But mostly, I just felt a sense of relief.

My husband had been gone for a week and I had easily settled into the quiet rhythm of life on my own. I found myself wishing Hannah might visit, but since such a thing was impossible, I consoled myself with writing a longer letter to her than I had lately. Her last letter told me she was to be married soon – to a good man, one she couldn't wait to make a life with. For her sake, I hoped he really was a good man.

I was putting the finishing touches on the missive when the sound of hoofbeats reached my ear. My brow furrowed as I set down my pen. No one ever came to visit out here. Thomas had taken Ranger with him and I suddenly felt the dog's absence anew. My gaze fell on my husband's shotgun. He had shown me how to use it before he left, but I wasn't sure I remembered now. Trying not to think the worst, I carefully took down the gun and crept to the door, my back

pressed against the wall. If anyone broke in, I could take them by surprise before they overpowered me.

But then somebody knocked on the door and called out, "Mrs. Marshall? Are you there?"

All the air left my lungs in a rush when I recognized Doctor Spencer's voice and I quickly opened the door. I didn't remember I was holding the shotgun until the doctor's brow knit and he asked, "Were you expecting somebody else?"

"Oh—" I quickly lowered the gun to my side. "No, nobody else. Nobody at all, really. My husband is away, you see." I regretted the words as soon as I said them, since the doctor might depart – and I didn't want him to, I realized. Perhaps that was why I quickly added, "Would you like to come in?"

I half expected him to refuse but he didn't. Instead, he gave me a smile that I couldn't help but return as he stepped over the threshold.

"I hope I'm not interrupting your supper," he said. "I was paying another call and thought I'd look in and see how you're getting on."

"That's kind of you," I replied. "And no, I haven't had supper yet. Perhaps you'd like to join me? I can never seem to cook for just one person."

If the forward invitation surprised him, he didn't show any sign of it. He simply agreed and allowed me to show him to the kitchen table. I suddenly wished that I had something finer to serve than the simple pork stew I'd made for myself. But there wasn't time to linger over that, so I ladled the soup up into bowls and set one down before the doctor, along with a thick slice of generously buttered bread.

"This looks wonderful," he said gratefully. "And it smells delicious, too. Much better than the food I get at my boarding house."

That made me smile again, and I wondered

when I had last smiled this much. I asked him about the boarding house, wanting to hear about the town I'd only twice visited. He obliged me as I sat down with my own portion of bread and stew. By the time he finished his tale, I had laughed so much my face had gone warm from the heat of it.

Or maybe that was from the heat of his gaze. His dark eyes never strayed from my face, and I found myself looking back unabashedly. It had been a long time since anybody seemed to see me, and it felt like Doctor Spencer did.

That must have been what drove me to invite him back to dinner the following night, long after we had finished our stew and some leftover cake with coffee. Maybe he felt sorry for me, or maybe he shared my loneliness. I didn't care much what the reason was, just that he accepted my invitation. I spent the next day preparing for that dinner and trying to quiet any uneasiness I had about it. I told myself that I was allowed to entertain callers; that it was kind of the doctor to look in on me. But I knew that Thomas wouldn't like it. He especially wouldn't like that I put on my blue dress – the one I had been married in, that I never got to wear to church.

Deep down, that knowledge only made me want to see Doctor Spencer more. It made me braid my hair up more carefully and weave a green ribbon through it.

Perhaps it was my imagination, but the doctor's eyes seemed to light up when I answered the door. They glittered as we talked and laughed across the table, and I wondered if Thomas had ever made me laugh like this. I couldn't recall a single time.

My mother would say that Doctor Spencer was an immoral man for accepting my invitations, and that I was no longer an upstanding woman for offering them. But that didn't stop me from extending a third

one, and it certainly didn't stop the doctor from accepting it.

As the dinners continued, it became easier and easier to forget that Thomas would one day return. There was nobody here to care what I did, not even Ranger. And there must have been nobody to care what Doctor Spencer did, either, because he kept visiting. After two weeks of his visits, I asked to show him something. The evening was balmy than usual for this time of year and the sun hadn't fully set yet as we walked out from the house. I wasn't sure why I wanted to show him this; perhaps because it was the first time in years that I had anyone to confide in. Or maybe it was the way he seemed to understand even the things I didn't say. How he wanted to understand.

Whatever the reason, I led him out to the oak tree that night, wrapping my shawl a bit more tightly around my shoulders. Beneath the tree, were three small, crudely fashioned wooden crosses. They bore no inscription, not a name or date, but they didn't need one. I knew what they signified and I could tell that Doctor Spencer knew, too, as soon as he saw them.

Without a word, he reached over and took my hand. His was softer than Thomas's, although there were still some callouses, and his touch gentler. He pressed my fingers carefully before he said lowly, "I'm sorry, Mrs. Marshall. Truly."

The kindness in his tone made me turn towards the doctor. I intended to answer him, but his closeness arrested me and all the words left my head.

I kissed him instead. It was an impulse, one that overtook me before I could rein it in. But maybe I didn't want to rein it in, because I kept on even after I realized what I was doing.

He kissed me back, his hand coming up to cradle the back of my head. I had only ever

been kissed by Thomas before, but this was how it was supposed to be done, I thought. My lips were still parted slightly when Doctor Spencer drew back and both of us were breathing harder.

"Forgive me, Mrs. Marshall," he said, although he did not move any farther away.

"Elmira," I replied breathlessly. "And it's you who must forgive me, Doctor Spencer."

"August," he corrected.

"August," I murmured, and then he kissed me again.

I didn't have to invite August for dinner anymore after that. He came every night, and only left in the mornings to tend his patients. There was nobody to care if he remained at the ranch; he kept odd enough hours in any case. The first night he took me to bed was the first time I felt love there. I wanted to weep when I woke in the doctor's arms each morning – not from guilt at what I had done, but from the realization that this would end all too soon.

He must have felt our time slipping away, too, because early one morning he said to me, "Run away with me, Elmira. Today. We can be gone before he ever comes back."

I turned to look up at him, my head resting on his chest. "Truly?"

"Truly," he affirmed.

We lingered in bed a little longer, talking of our plans until they became a reality. Then he went to prepare some things for our departure while I cooked breakfast.

I was just moving the skillet away from the stove's heat when I heard the door open again.

"Breakfast is ready, August," I called out. But it wasn't August standing there when I turned around.

Thomas filled the doorway. I had almost forgotten his height and broad stature, but I shrank from them now as he advanced towards me. "Th-Thomas," I stammered.

"I didn't know you were coming back early."

"Clearly," he said, his eyes and voice like ice.

"Let me get you some breakfast," I said, hating the placating tone I automatically took on and the way I felt myself shrinking. The door opened again before I could do anything to prevent it.

This time, it was August and he looked stricken when he saw my husband standing over me. A familiar hazy feeling started to fill my head, rendering me useless.

I tried to protest and plead when Thomas shouted his accusations, but the words barely felt like they came from me. There was nothing I could say in any case. We had been caught; Thomas would never let me leave now.

But my husband was less focused on me than he was on the doctor at the moment. I was focused on August, too. So much so, that I didn't realize Thomas had a gun until he pointed it at August's chest.

I screamed and lunged for it, but I was too slow. Or maybe I was the reason it went off. It all happened too quickly for me to tell. Red blossomed over August's white shirt, and the sound that tore from my throat was not quite human.

Who can say what Thomas would have done next? Perhaps he would have turned and had another bullet ready for me. But I was still standing at the stove, with the cast iron skillet within reach. My hand curled around it and I lifted the heavy pan. And then brought it down against the back of my husband's head.

There was a sickening crack and he swayed for a second. Then he crumpled forward and didn't move again.

It was August's side that I rushed to, but I was again too late. The doctor's kind, warm eyes had slipped shut, never to be opened again. Biting back sobs, I lowered my ear to his chest. The heart I had fallen asleep

listening to these past nights had ceased to beat. There were two dead men on my kitchen floor, and I had only loved the one I was never supposed to.

But there was no time to dwell on that or to grieve it, because there were two dead men on my kitchen floor. I could not stay here.

Moving with a presence of mind I hadn't known I possessed, I gathered my essential things from around the house. I found money from the cattle drive in Thomas's pocket and slipped it into my own. Ranger was whimpering at the scene in the kitchen, so I took him outside with me and hitched up a wagon.

And then I left.

I looked back at the house because of August and at the oak tree because of my nameless children. I did not look back for Thomas.

By the time I reached my parents' house, Hannah's wedding had come and gone. My monthly courses had gone, too, but I thought perhaps that was from the shock of all I'd endured.

My mother fussed over me, sympathetic that I was now widowed; that I'd had to bury a man as good as Thomas Marshall. I didn't tell her that I hadn't bothered to bury Thomas or that he never deserved to be called a good man... or that there was another man who had warranted the description far more, who I also hadn't been able to bury.

All of that, I kept to myself. And I kept other news to myself, too, until I could conceal it no longer. Mama was pleased for me, that I'd have a child to remember my dearly departed husband by. I felt only cold fear, which gripped my heart until the day my baby boy was placed in my arms.

"He's just perfect, Elmira," Mama said, standing proudly by my bedside. "He'll grow up to be a good man, just like his father was."

"He will," I said, gazing down into my son's familiar glittering dark eyes.

"Will you call him Thomas?" She asked. I shook my head and finally said a name I hadn't spoken in nearly nine months.

"August."



BY: JERRY PHILIPP

Inspector Kelly arrived on the scene at 8:00 AM after the call came in. He'd been in the office for only five minutes, waiting for the vending machine to spit out a Twix bar, when he was called. Sadly, the machine had other plans and ate his Twix, and instead spat out a Snickers. He began to wage war with the machine due to it not giving him his change, but was pried away by his partner, Inspector Julius.

That candy bar resonated all the way to the scene, even after exiting the squad car. Everyone, including Julius, treaded carefully not to step on Kelly's toes. He never got out of the office till 10, as it took half the morning to get going; these were usually on good days. Shoes clashing with the asphalt, meeting the pavement, he proceeded toward the crime scene.

He snarled at another inspector, Inspector Howard, who was currently scrawling away in a notepad. "What's the deal, what's going on here?" Kelly asked, gritting his teeth. Howard almost dropped his pen from fright, but saved the fumble quite well. "Suicide by the looks of it," he said, still shaken by Kelly's demeanour, "real messy I tell you."

This was not how Kelly wanted to start his day. "What are you suggesting? Brains all over the wall?"

No, sir, just a bunch of busted windows, smashed doors, and piles of what appear to be burned furniture."

The inspector along with his partner were just about to enter the home, but stopped after hearing Inspector Howard out. As the man had said, many doors and windows, from the outside, were destroyed, one of which was the front door. "Suicide?!" roared Kelly, standing above what was the front door, flattened on the ground, "this sounds more like a home robbery gone wrong if you ask me."

Julius interjected. "Um, sir, if this was a break in, then why is the front door out here?"

It took a while for Inspector Kelly to notice, still fixated on the pseudo Twix bar in his pocket. He huffed at his partner, but not in an irritable way. Kelly had a strange way of accepting good rapport or a well-input thought, as he usually didn't have the guts to say kind words. Shrugging everything off, the grouchy inspector entered the home, and sure enough, by the account of Inspector Howard, the whole place was trashed. Stepping around and over the evidence was next to impossible to do. Kelly got to the point of throwing care aside, and began tromping through the mess. Some of what claimed the floor was in Howards description, but Kelly picked up something rather odd about the entire mess. Cabinets with their doors beaten in, a closet and bathroom door in splinters, even what appeared to be a trapdoor to a crawl space were all severely beaten, some with human hands due to the thick stains of blood coating the debris. Making his way to the room with the victim, sure enough: suicide. At the center of the room, strung up like an ornament, was one middle-aged male on a rope. His eyes were bloodshot, hands bloodied and bruised, and his clothing was tattered as if he got into a fight with a dog or bear. Kelly brought his derby to his heart, and scratched his head at the fright before him. "Jeez, what the hell caused all of this?" "Person of interest is one Jason Dawson," said a forensics personnel, entering the room. Turning to see who it was, Inspector Kelly hollered "Charlie! Geez, don't sneak up behind me like that!" Charlie approached the body, looking up at it, taking notes on a notepad. "A housekeeper called this in, saying the door was busted in, house destroyed, and Mr. Dawson here was strung up as a decoration."

Julius caught up with Kelly, but ducked out the room after seeing the scene. He was still new to the force, and green—especially now—with cases regarding death. Kelly would keep telling the boy he'd needed to grow a pair to be on the force, but that still didn't help the kid's stomach one bit.

"So tell me," asked Inspector Kelly, eyeing the room, "how long has the piñata been up for?" Charlie began eying the scene. Kneeling to the floor, he looked at the pool of blood from the lacerated hands and groaned.

"Judging by the state of the body, and dried up blood, I'd have to say for about several hours at most."

"Oy vey," sighed Inspector Kelly, walking around the room.

As Kelly eyed the room, he began to absorb a similar scene to what the rest of the house was. The bed was tarnished, dresser smashed, all tidied up with smashed windows and a door which was mulched. He was about to head out of the room, seeing nothing more needed from the situation, but something funny was out of place.

Everything in the home was destroyed beyond recognition, all but this one closet door which the deceased Jason Dawson faced with an icy stare. Inspector Kelly approached the door, strangely fascinated by the fact it was unscathed by any damage or soiled in blood like the rest of the home. Opening it, the contents of the closet were just closet things: clothes, shoes, a suit and jacket, and a small hat box on the floor. This was extremely strange, especially so that, leaning out of the closet, all the carnage around the doors frame and floor were miraculously spotless of blood or trauma. Hey, queasy!" Kelly blared, "get on your feet and fetch me Chuck, as I have a question for him!"

Julius stumbled on his feet, almost heaving his breakfast he had—unlike Kelly—, and proceeded to scramble out the door. His studious-pitched voice could be heard outside, growing faint as he called for a Chuck. "Well, I better take this out for the chief, as he'll be hounding me for a report," said Charlie, leaving out the door, thumbing the wad of paper with his scribblings, "as you should too, Barney."

"Yeah, I'll get to it," Kelly mumbled, still fixated on the closet.

Soon, Inspector Kelly was alone, all but for the company of his stiff friend. Something was off about the whole ordeal, that it crowded out his anger over the vending machine. Whenever a homicide, a break in, and, yes, a suicide took place in a home, the scene of the crime was riddled with destruction. However, this one corner of the room, the room where the victim took their life, was out of place due to it being spotless, clean, free of any intervention. Kelly closed the closet, seeing no use mucking around it, and proceeded toward the exit. A loud bang put a stop to his plans, making him jump. Turning to find its origin, his eyes became fixated with the mysterious closet. Odd, Kelly told himself. Thinking his blood sugar was acting up, he paid the noise no mind and started to leave again, but stopped once more at the sound of another bang.

"Hey, Howard!" shouted Kelly, "you and the boys doing anything out there to make gaveling noises?"

From across the room, a distant Howard shouted back "No! Probably a rogue pipe or something knocking!"

He was probably right. The house, in Kelly's best interest, had to be thirty or so years old, possibly older. Much of the woodwork, though scuffed and stained, did seem a bit old fashioned. To his knowledge, Kelly thought it reminded him a bit of going to grandma's house as a boy, and all the home was missing was quilted sheets and fine china.

Chalking everything up to being neveres, Kelly once more began to leave the room. His plans, again, without rhyme or reason, were interrupted again by a bang, but this time a flurry of them like a drum beaten loudly. Turning to meet the noise, it did in fact sound to be from the closet.

“Haha, very droll Howard,” blasted Kelly, heart pounding in his chest, “you think you're so funny don't you.” Charlie peered through the doorway.

“What are you talking about Barney? Me and the boys right now are taking photos.”

“You mean to tell me you did not hear that?! If it were any louder, I'd think it was Tchaikovsky's Overture in here!” Charlie shook his head no, leaving from view. “Maybe work is getting to you. You are a few months away from retirement after all.” The troubled inspector placed his now crumbled hat back on his head, though crooked.

“Maybe, Charlie, maybe.” Inspector Kelly approached the irrational closet and stared at it all over again. He walked up to a wall and placed his ear on it. A bit of time passed, and nothing like pipes or rats in the walls could be heard. Maybe his nerves were getting to him, or perhaps age being cruel like Charlie said; who knows. He opened the door, looking at the contents, still the same as before, closed the door, and repeated the process over and over again. Several reps of this gave him satisfaction that he was losing it. He shut the door and growled at the door smugly.

“Stupid house probably crumbling away for I damn care.” Kelly cheekily banged on the door, mocking the apparent noise he heard, and began to leave the room.

BANG! BANG! BANG!

This time there was no denying it: there was something that made that noise. Looking at the closet again, Kelly stomped over to it and stood right before it.

His chest was puffed out, almost touching the door. He stood there for who knows how long, waiting for whatever it was to make the noise again, to prove that he wasn't hearing things. Hey, Kelly, Chuck isn't here, as he's on his way now.” Inspector Julius's voice cut through the tension abruptly, causing Kelly to shout. “For everything good in this world, don't send me out to the grave just yet!”

Julius was given more of an earful as he entered the room, and too began looking at the closet door. “What do you think caused our victim to go out like this?” he asked Kelly. Kelly, readjusting his gaze upon the door, said, “probably a bad day, dead wife, who knows really?”

Julius began to leave the room, but Kelly flagged him down. “Hold up,” he said, tugging at his arm. Kelly began to follow Julius out of the room, but then stopped as soon as he crossed the threshold. “Now why the hell didn't it do it this time?” Kelly stormed back in the room, and banged on the door viciously. “Hey, whoa, what's wrong? Why are you beating the crime scene?” Julius pulled Kelly away, who was laboring to breathe. “Nothing, nothing boy, just an old man's nerves getting to him.”

Some time passed as Julius left the room, wondering what had come over Inspector Kelly. Meanwhile, Kelly was still hellbent on whether or not something really did or didn't bang on the door. Again, he opened it up, looked inside, closed the door, and repeated the cycle over and over again, till his arms grew numb. Yes, he finally told himself, walking out of the room, just my nerves, age, or some unforeseen heart attack or stroke playing me for a fool is all.

BANG! BANG! BANG!

Without hesitation, Kelly stormed back into the room, and threw open the closet door. Whatever was raising a fuss within the walls or confines of this room or closet, he was going to get to the bottom of it. He was going to prove once and for all he was either going nuts or that there was indeed something stirring up a drumming frenzy upon that eerie door!

Throwing open the door, a concussive blast of torrential heat and wind blasted outward. This almost knocked the portly man over, but soon Kelly got his footing. Looking into the closet, neither clothes, shoes, jackets, nor the innocent little hat box peered outward. Instead, a landscape of a strange, malevolent world took their rightful places, which to Kelly's best imagination could be seen or conjured to be Hell! and didn't make sense or shape, let alone what appeared to be a sky or ceiling of this morbid world. There appeared to be a river of sorts, but neither made of water or fire; something like water, something like fire, but nothing in between, as it was indecipherable. The inspector's eyes widened, jaw agape, peering into an indescribable world that bled light and darkness all at the same time. Kelly couldn't move or speak, as what resided beyond that curious closet could not be made into words at all, as he felt compelled to look onward. Without warning, an ominous sense of dread overwhelmed him. Peering deep into the scape of interminable mass and features, a figure loomed in the distance. Unlike the shapeless world, it bore resemblance to a man.

Kelly's eyes weren't as good as they used to be, but he couldn't mistake it for anything other than humanoid. Slowly, the entity approached him. Fear began to overthrow his equilibrium. As the humanoid figure approached, its features became more and more clear, causing Kelly to grow cold and weak in the knees. Some strange, iridescent white toga or tunic-like clothing was worn by the entity from head to toe, and it donned a pair of gloves which were an all consuming black, shackled with broken chains. Growing closer, the humanoid bore no face or head, but rather a pyre resided in its place. Fire it was not, and Kelly was sure of it, as it didn't seem to be fire, but something akin to it. As the being grew closer and closer, the wind of the unknown realm grew louder and more intense. Kelly felt the urge to wake up, feeling that what was all before him was a dream, and soon his alarm would chime, and it would all be a distant memory. Soon the being was nearly upon him, and the old inspector felt small, as the being towered over him, standing at what appeared to be eight, no, nine, possibly even taller than ten feet! "Close the door," wailed a voice from behind Kelly.

Turning around, Kelly's skin crawled, looking at an animate Jason Dawson pointing at the queer, bitter world beyond the door. "Close the door!" shrieked the sickly corpse, "of the nature you see should not belong in this world, as the Boundless is neither of this world or the next. Neither the divine or the damned wish its existence, but existing it does and existing it shall till the end of time!"

Turning back to meet the world, the creature was now in full view. At eye level, Kelly stared only at the chest. His eyes slowly worked their way up the creature's body, and met with the burning head. There were no eyes, but Kelly felt little in its presence, judged for being alive. It began to move its left arm, reaching outward as if to touch Kelly's face. Soon, Kelly screamed, slamming the door shut on the monster, and pulled out his gun and began firing at the door.

Falling to the floor, panting, there was nothing beyond the door. What once was a closet filled with ornaments of clothing, shoes, and a coinkydink hat were now filled with holes. Julius, Charlie, and a few men came rushing into the room, but by then it was too late. On the floor, just before the battered closet door, were the lifeless bodies of both Jason Dawson and now Inspector Barney Kelly, sharing the same, cold, irredeemable state of petrified fear.



ROOTS IN A FOREIGN SOIL

BY: EVA CASTALDI

“You’re driving me crazy! What the hell is wrong with you, Marie? Huh?” Her mom fumed. What is wrong with me? She thought long and hard, so much that her mother’s words and face began to fade from her senses. What reason is there for me to feel this way? What is happening in my life that is making me feel this way? Her thoughts were interrupted by a stinging sensation on her cheek; she was brought back to reality. She stared at her mom, expressionless. “Do you have any idea how difficult you make things for our family? For me? You’re so selfish. You only think about yourself...,” everything started to fade again. Selfish. Is this what being selfish feels like? Maybe I am selfish. I should just stop acting like this. She grimaced at the thought. Is it that easy? Maybe I’m overreacting. She opened her mouth and was greeted by her own trembling lips and strained throat. “Tell me what’s wrong with you!” her mom got in her face, continuing to berate her. All she could hear now was her own heart pounding. Stone-faced, because there is no reason to cry. Crying would be selfish, manipulative even. So, she stood still and silent, until hearing, “Get out of my house. I’m tired of you.”

How long have things been this way? That’s a question to an answer she didn’t know. She stood at the end of her street, in a trance. Her feet felt light, ungrounded. A million thoughts running through her head, the sound of her heart pounding, and the unrelenting feeling of the bottomless pit residing in her stomach. When was the last time I felt normal? She stood still, feet impermanently planted in the grass, thinking of the things she had been taught over the past few months. She had heard many things: doctors, therapists,

psychiatrists. They all had their own distinct ideas of the situation: “A chemical imbalance, it’s no one’s fault” the safe option, appeasing her parents.

“Social situations won’t be solved with mood stabilizers”, is that all it is? “All teenagers have depression.” Why can they manage it and I can’t? If it won’t get better, what’s the point of trying so hard to make it better? Her body started to move on its own, she made her way through town. Her pace was slow, she appeared lethargic. She stumbled along the sidewalk until she was brought out of her trance by the loud screeching of the bus. She stopped there and considered for a moment. Looking at the bus, and looking back at the direction she came from, she boarded the bus. Sitting down in the back, she slumped into her seat and laid her head on the window. The bus hummed to life, its engine a steady rhythm beneath her. With a gentle lurch, it pulled away from the curb, merging into the flow of traffic. She watched each building pass her by, and her eyes began to flutter shut.

“Excuse me, hun?” She hated being woken up abruptly. “You’ve been asleep for about two hours. Did you miss your stop?” She wiped her eyes, processing what was happening in the moment. She looked up at the older woman and simply shook her head no, stating: “I’m ok, thank you.” Avoiding eye contact, she began to gather her things and make her way off of the bus. As the train pulled away, leaving a gentle puff of steam in its wake, she stepped onto the platform of a town that seemed perfect; ethereal, even... untouched by the gruesome ways of the world. Sunlight dappled through the leaves of towering oak trees, casting playful shadows on cobblestone streets that wound their way through the heart of the small town. The air was sweet with the scent of sea salt and sand, and in the distance, the faint sound of the ocean, and the ambiance of a town bustling with people. Was she still dreaming? The houses,

painted in soft pastels, boasted gardens meticulously cared for, brimming with roses and hydrangeas.

Each home appeared to have its own personality, with quaint shutters and whimsical weathervanes. The main street, lined with old-fashioned lamp posts, hosted a variety of shops, each with an inviting display window. She couldn't spot a single chain restaurant, as the street was filled with two small, family-owned businesses. People strolled leisurely, some with dogs on leashes, others pushing strollers, all nodding with warm smiles as they passed her by. It was a town where everyone seemed to know each other, yet she felt an immediate sense of belonging, an unspoken welcome that was almost palpable.

She wandered around the town, taking in everything around her. As quickly as she felt a sense of relief, there was an innate sense of suspicion and anxiety rising within her. She felt silly for feeling a semblance of belonging to a town she doesn't even know the name of. Why would these people be so welcoming and kind to someone they didn't know? Maybe it was an act. She stared at the ground as she walked, trying to avoid being seen. As she passed by the local cafe, a warm aroma of freshly brewed coffee and baked goods beckoned her inside. Reluctantly, she stepped through the door, the tinkling of the bell announcing her arrival. Inside, the cozy atmosphere enveloped her like a comforting embrace. Soft chatter filled the air, and the gentle hum of laughter danced beneath the steady rhythm of brewing coffee. She hesitated, unsure of where to sit, that familiar feeling of a pit forming in her stomach, when a friendly voice broke through her thoughts. "Hey! Do you wanna sit here?" A pause... eye contact... a smile. "We have an open spot," a melodic voice called out from a nearby table. As Marie's tension subsided, her tunnel vision

unveiled the remainder of the group, in addition to the girl who called out to her. A group of young people, their faces radiant with warmth and kindness. "Come join us!" another voice chimed in. She hesitated; her first instinct was to decline.

It always is. So why did she feel herself moving closer? Before she knew it, she found herself seated amongst strangers.

Over cups of a variety of iced coffees, teas, and plates piled high with pastries, Marie listened as her newfound companions shared stories of adventure and joy. They spoke of their love for the town, its vibrant community, and the beauty of the natural world that surrounded them. She couldn't help the feeling of suspicion she felt, and the assumption that they were glorifying their lives, or maybe secretly out to get her. However, as the hours passed, Marie began to feel a warmth growing within her chest, a spark of joy flickering to life in the depths of her soul. For the first time in a long while, she found herself smiling, truly smiling, as she carelessly laughed and joked with her new friends. These people who had nothing negative to say about her; these people who could see the light in things, and enjoy themselves, no matter what they were doing.

Eventually, the afternoon sun began to dip below the horizon, casting a golden glow over the town. Marie didn't want this time to end, but inevitably, she had to bid her new friends farewell, promising to meet again soon. That night, in a nearby inn, as she lay in bed beneath a canopy of stars, Marie reflected on the events of the day. She couldn't help the feelings of peace and contentment that embraced her, no matter how much she unconsciously tried to fight it. So, she embraced it. She considered the possibility that things could be different. She could feel her body relaxing, and feel herself becoming grounded, and like she was able to rest without worrying for once. She'd give this a chance.

POETRY

Ubi est tempus
Sed tempus quod est
Sed tempus quod est
Sed tempus quod est

Sed tempus quod est
Sed tempus quod est

Sed tempus quod est
Sed tempus quod est

Sed tempus quod est
Sed tempus quod est

Sed tempus quod est
Sed tempus quod est

Nullam sed tempus
Faucibus ipsum
Vires ac laque
Sed autem conque

Nulla magna dicit
Mauris id interdum
Gravida comedit dicit
Vidit a rithum

Vivamus quod
Purus sedales laque
Vivamus quod
Ante laqueum

DEADLINE

BY : CHRIS OTTO

Am I a monster for being glad that it's over?
I keep thinking it's over every time I think I finally found closure
I thought I found what I was looking for
And yet I still don't sleep much anymore
There's still a part that feels hollow
Because it's a pill that I don't want to swallow
I think I've shed enough tears to fill a dam
Put to bed, no, put to bedlam
Losing patience much quicker than I used to
My thoughts have more meaning than my words do
Never felt more alone or free
Smothered with serenity, is it something wrong with me?
The question still suffocates me
When I reach my deadline, is it the end of the world or just the end of mine?
Keep locking myself in metaphorical cages
For I still don't where all the rage is
Coming from above, below, and in-between
What does it all mean?
Thought I found a haven, it was saving no one
This peace that I'm craving as the last living son
What kind of survivor's guilt is this?
There's no bliss with or without ignorance
It's getting harder to breathe, everything hurts
Is it the crack in my heart or something worse?
A paranoia I just can't seem to shake
The last thing I need is more heartbreak
The more I try to make sense of it
The more it becomes a bad habit
Mirror, mirror, on the wall I guess I'm just like my father after all

THE MOON AND OCEAN

BY: MARKEE LOVE

I yearn for you.

But we pull away from each other.

Like magnets we attract, but we are the same so we cannot connect.

I yearn for you.

Like the spring time flowers and the rain above.

Yet i am not in bloom when your showers come.

I yearn for you.

Like the ocean reaching out its waves for the moon

hoping that one day their love will bloom.

I yearn for you.



CASTLE IN THE SAND

By : J a m e s C o n n e l l

The castle stands tall and grand
Within its perch among the sand
It's moat draws from ocean north
As it's waves go back and forth
Sadly one day you will see
The castle has been washed to sea
No more tall walls of thousand stones
Empty ground and empty throne
As the last shell widow sinks into sand
A new castle is built with a guiding hand



DEATH OF A POET

BY: KENNEDY AORA

Is it the words?
Those trimmed verses
Seeds best sown
Or the inspiration best calculated
To stir us forthwith

Is it the volumes?
That behind he has lost
And the agony of remembrance
That he lives no more
Smart brain buried yonder

Is it his very works?
That amidst he went
Hanging words to grope
In their belated drop

Is it the communication
And the breakdown abound?
Failure of the words to hold
And the destination so directed

What
When
How?
Yes, death of a poet!

OF LIFE

BY: KENNEDY AORA

This much is known and precise.
That a while into our miles,
Throttling steep to destination,
And devoutly in our midst,
For every all and sundry,
Life glides, and in bliss.
And blossoms in suppleness.
Save though for the hapless,
Sunken deep and further into abyss.
Their kindred flows,
and collectively so,
But each to their own.
Each to their own.
To their own.
Their own.

WHAT IS IT?

BY: SIANI JULES

Day before Thanksgiving, 2017

School was over, my friends and I split the scene.

“Siani, you look crazy growing that adam’s apple,” one spewed,

Taken aback I thought, “Hmm, that was rude.”

Got home as soon as the street lamps were lit,

Made my way to the nearest mirror, saw the lump, and wondered,

“What is it?”

Thanksgiving morning I woke up last

Made my way to the kitchen, needed food and fast.

All eyes fell on me, or on my neck should I say,

And everyone’s face had a look of dismay.

Instantly my heart dropped into an endless pit,

As my mother looked at me and asked,

“What is it?”

Two days before Christmas I was in a hospital bed,

Waiting for the “okay” for my planned biopsy ahead.

My surgeon came in and wondered why I was here so young,

I shrugged while saying, “So far it isn’t fun.”

They wheeled me in and I thought, “Will the answer be definite?”

Will they finally be able to answer

“What is it?”

The first week of January, the lump had disappeared,

Along with a ton of my questions and fears.

But my mother’s phone rang, “You need surgery.” She told me.

The situation was getting worse, and that I couldn’t believe.

My family assured me that it was for my benefit,

But I couldn’t help but wonder,

“What is it?”

Leading up to a month before my 17th birthday,

I was sitting in the exam room, the surgeon had something to say.

He walked in with swiftness, “I’ve got good news and bad.”

“The good news is, we got it out, no need to be sad.”

“For the bad news now, I recommend that you sit.”

I couldn’t contain myself,

“What was it?”

“Cancer. Thyroid cancer.”

LOVE

BY: MADILYN EXLER

To me, love is the little things.

It's in the way my mother tells me she's proud of me.

It's in the way my dad works hard everyday pretending that it's easy.

It's in the way my brother helps me with my homework even though he doesn't have to.

It's in the way both my sisters laugh with me over jokes we never outgrew.

It's in the way my best friend calls me to tell me about everything and nothing at all.

It's in the way I get back up even when I feel like I hit a wall.

It's in the music I listen to.

It's in the food I eat.

It's in the hobbies I have yet to pursue.

It's in the people I have yet to meet.

To me, love is the little things.

If you look close enough, they are easy to see.



FALLING

BY: BRIAN WARRINER

I had a dream in which the man appeared in front of me. But it was always a mystery to see your face. After every dream, I saw more and more of you, but not all of you. I believed you were meant to remain a dream. Then I laid eyes on you and knew you were from my dream.

I didn't know how to approach you , but I knew I had fallen in love with you. I was lost in this stranger. I saw my dream playing out before me—a question formed in my head. But I understood there was plenty I didn't know, whether or not you would feel this way. It became so much harder to think about the dream being a joke.

I was falling in love at a distance that was safe to keep a secret. I didn't want to say it only to have you say you didn't feel the same. But I saw you didn't because you were with him. It broke me to see someone else live the dream that I had. What am I to think?

It's okay to fall in love, but when someone has a hold on you, they capture your heart without a word or action. It makes you question everything. How can two strangers find a love that they fell into? But that's just a question that lingers. I'm falling for you, and I am hoping you are falling in love with me.

If possible, you are waiting to see me to realize we dreamed each other up and made it to fall for each other.



TOO BUSY TO GIVE A SECOND

BY: REBECCA FORCE

I like to be alone in my mind,
 where the world gets to be mine, refined.
 I'd never impose, knock on doors closed.
 My voice is AI generated, I suppose.
 I like verbs that throw birds, smirk and chirp,
 I like to sin and binge, whiz around bends,
 I like the social cringe in a fixated quirk,
 I like jerks with perks and hemmed in friends.
 I like the expendable, the despicable,
 for they're often more reliable.
 The chicken yelled, "That's not viable!"
 crossed the road, got struck to a tumble.
 Have you ever listened when meta-thinking?
 Opened your eyes right before sinking?



YOU, THE PUNCHLINE TO EACH ANECDOTE CONTINGENCY IS OMNIPRESENT

BY: REBECCA FORCE

Have you ever felt driven with nowhere to go?
 Like when they say, "Never use second person."
 The thing is, I really like you, my solo glow.
 Thoreau was alone, yet you listened, his foe.
 You caught his eye before he looked, slick hook.
 Otherness interrupts the best notebook.
 For two years, he gobbled your habits.
 He could not be present without your absence.
 You meant every line he wrote, yammered, choked.
 You were even sentenced to the gibbet,
 made to picket with a bigot, swig it, provoke.
 Point of view, remote; the coupled antidote.
 The other, contingent, as mother to infant,
 never to constant, and first to second.

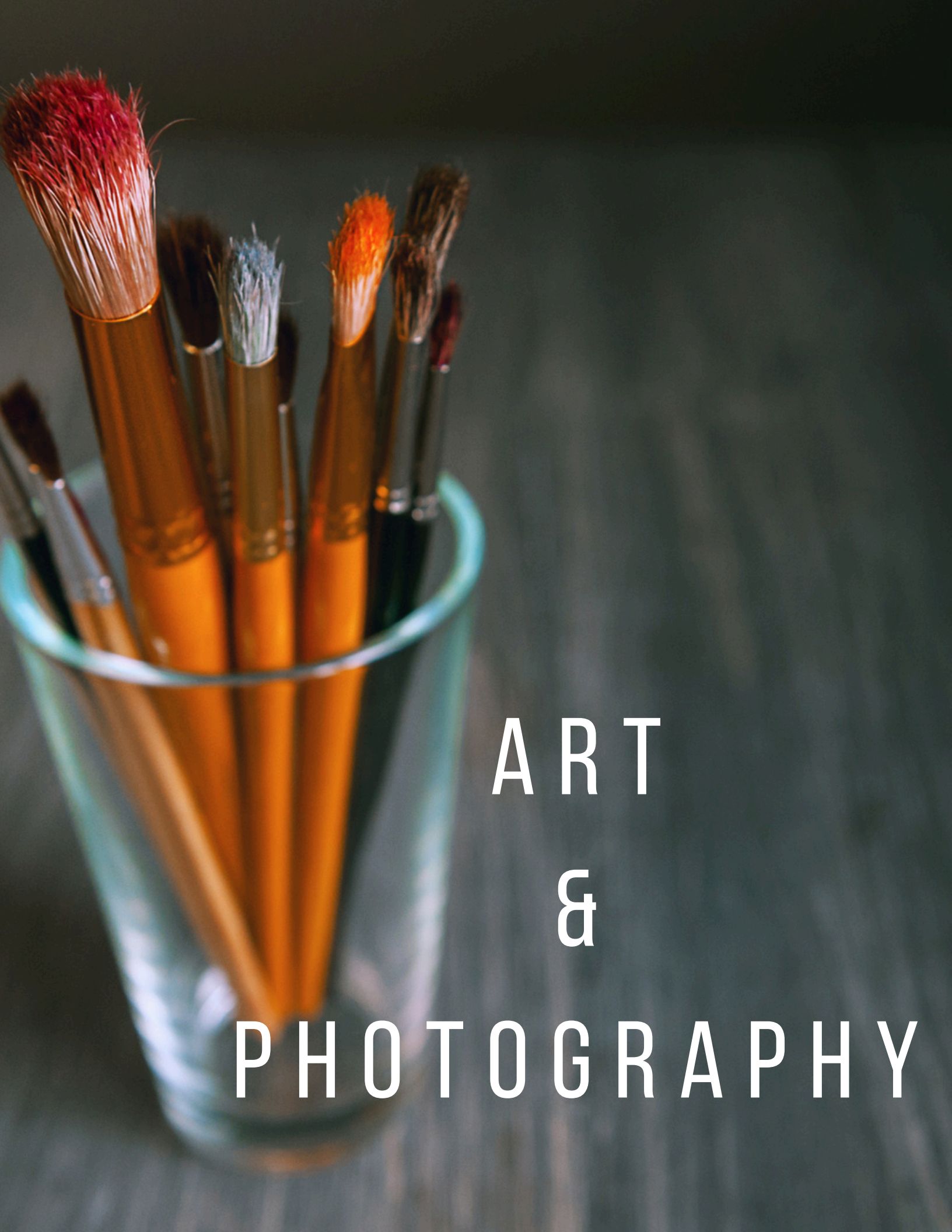
IN THE ABYSS

BY: LINDSEY BLITHE

The hot sand tickles my feet
Hands on the clock never meet
The burning rays of the sun
Always seem to melt my fun
I feel the sand pulling me under
Hear the boom of the thunder
There is no way to go home
I am completely on my own
The water is warping my mind
In the desert, time is never kind

Look up at the clouds rolling in
Raindrops pinching my skin
Trapped in the shadows
Sand flying up my nose
I cannot breathe
Feel the cold breeze beneath
One tap and I am awake
Finally realizing that it was all fake
Sweating and gasping for air
It was just another nightmare





ART
&
PHOTOGRAPHY

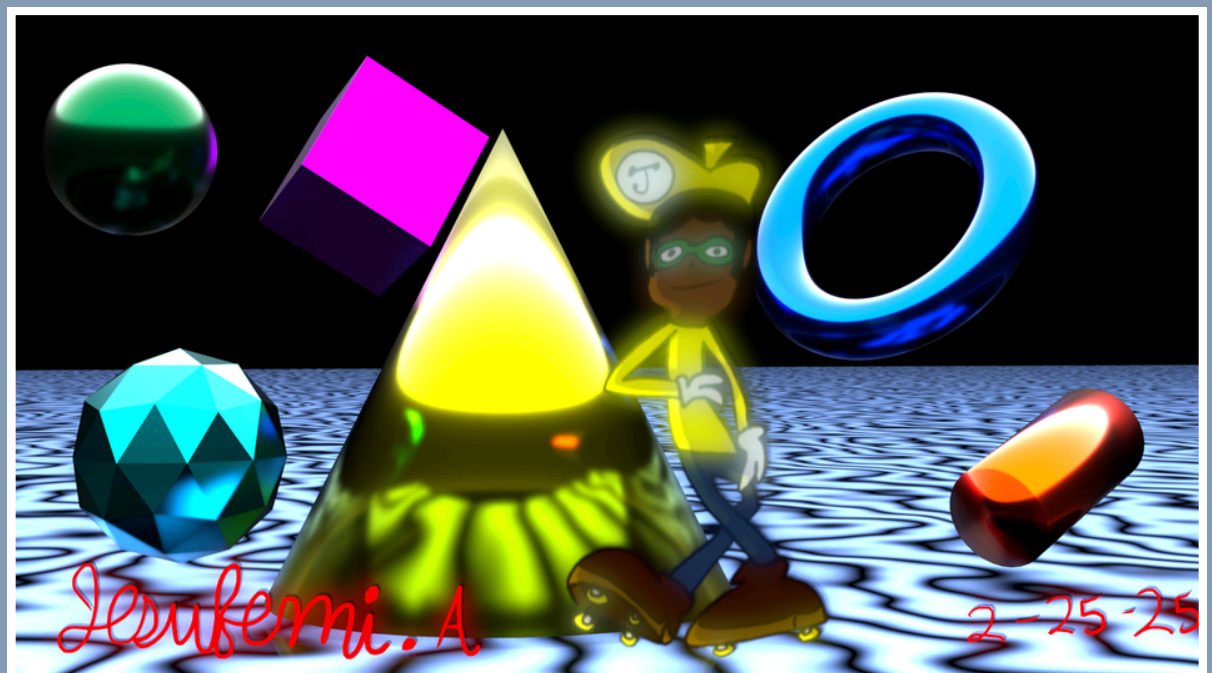
BATTLE FOR THE FATE OF CREATION

BY: KAGE LYLE



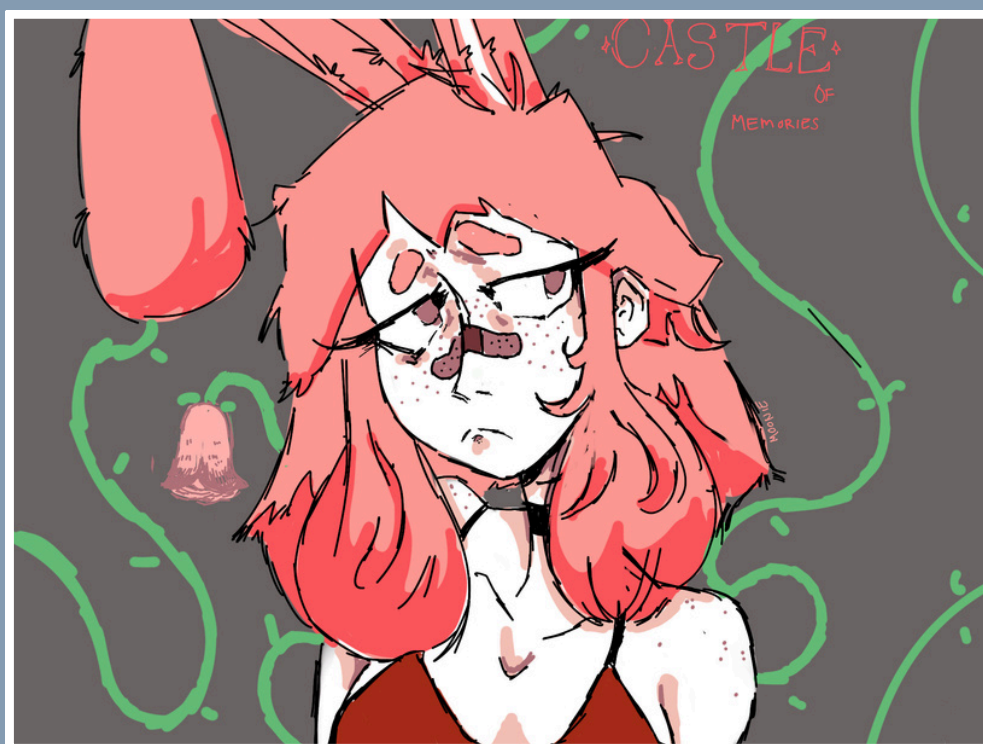
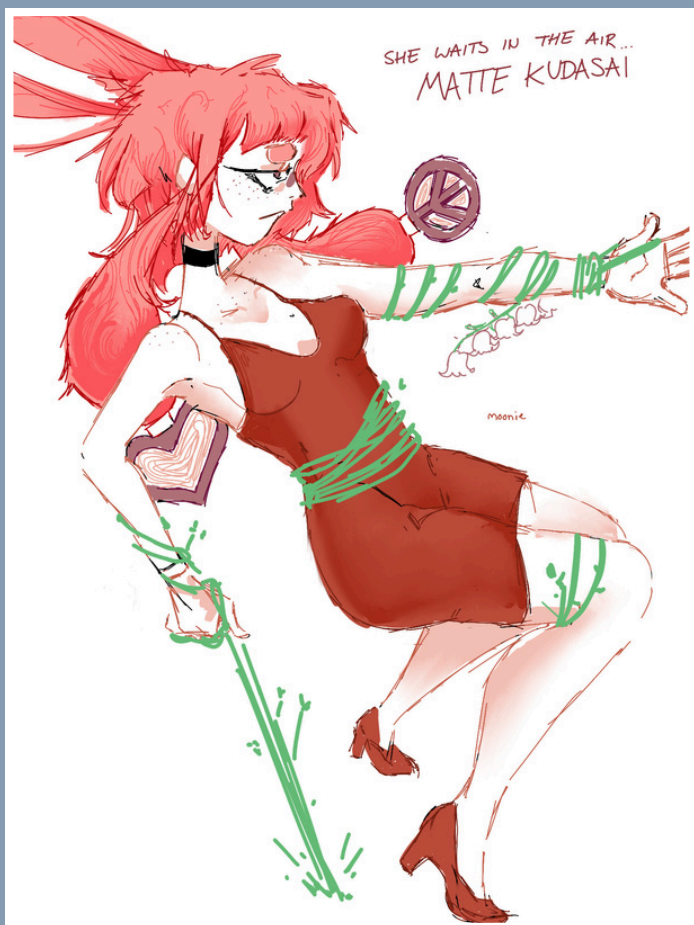
DIGITAL ART

BY: JESUFEMI AKINYEMI



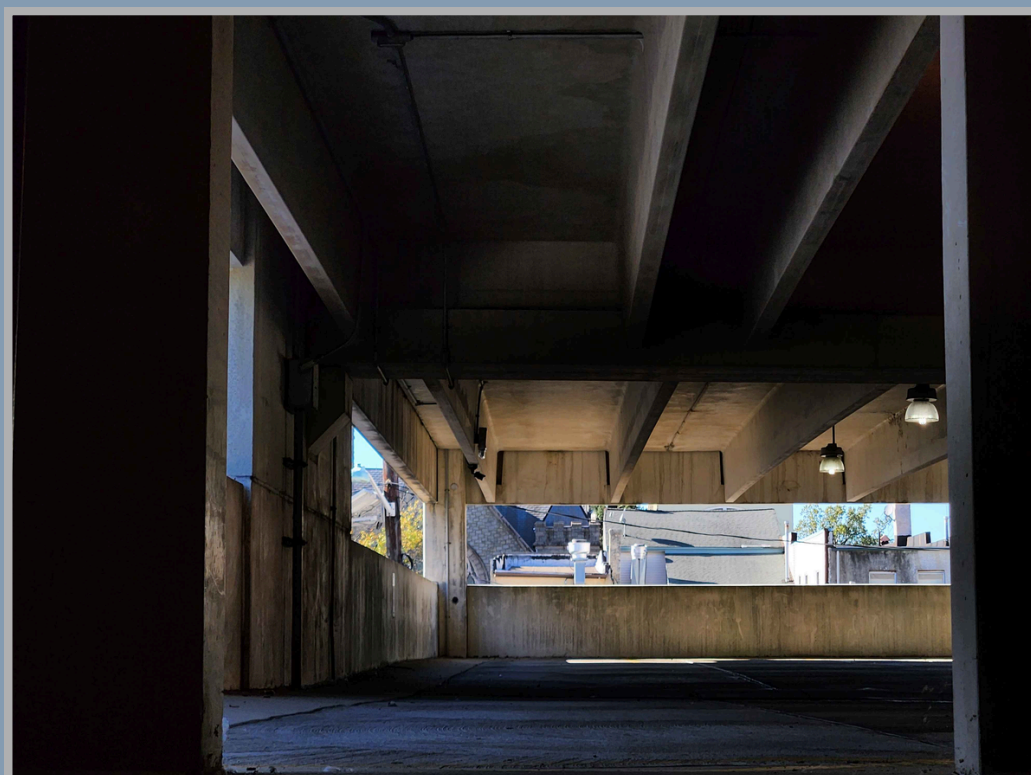
DRAWINGS OF THE CHARACTER ROURKE

BY: MOONIE WALSH



PHOTOGRAPHY

BY: NATE KEIR



PHOTOGRAPHY

BY: JAEDEN THORSON



MEET THE VANGUARD TEAM



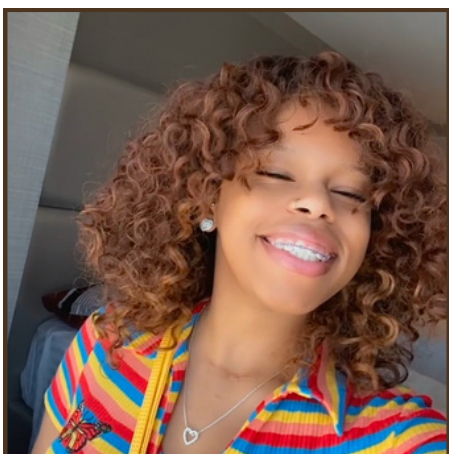
Lindsey Blithe

“Be happy.”



Raquel Blair

“Let Go and Let God!”



Siani Jules

**“Do good and
good will come.”**



Jackson Diehl

**“You win some, and
you lose some”**



Professor Andrea Vinci

“Writing is the painting of the voice”