

THE VANGUARD

SPRING
2022

A LITERARY MAGAZINE

Sharing the creative talents of the
students, faculty and staff of Rowan
College South Jersey

FICTION
POETRY
ART
PHOTOGRAPHY
AND MORE

CONTENTS

FICTION

POETRY

PHOTOGRAPHY

ART



FUTURE - TRASAUN PARKER
UNTITLED - NORA STANWOOD
FIRE - TAYLOR TRAVIS
RUN THE RACE - MAJESTY FRANCOIS
BREAKING DOWN - GRACE TEIPER
TIMELAPSE VIDEO - KEVIN JENNER
TRANQUILITY - YAJAIRA MONTERO
LINGERING BETWEEN WORLDS - LISA PANCRAZIO
THE WALLFLOWER - KAMERYN WESTFIELD
SPRING HAS SPRUNG - ALEX GONZALEZ
THE BEGINNING OF FOREVER - MICHAELA DIVENTI
FROM FEIGN TO CLEAN - SAGE ZULAGA
MACROPHOTO - TYLER MCCLELLAND
RINGLESS HONEY MUSHROOMS - DANIEL LEEDER
A GARDEN - THEA CLOYD
THE CHOSEN - SKYE TAYLOR
FAITHFULLY - BREAUNA DOUGHERTY
A FUN TRIP TURNED BAD - JESSICA COTTON
MIRROR MAN - DEVIN TINDLEY
PAINTING - BRIDGET MADEN-SMITH
THE CRASH - MARY BURGAR
THE DINER ON MAPLE WAY - ARIANA NEILIO
THE GOODBYE - MADISON LAGANELLA
THE MISUNDERSTOOD CALICO - EMILY MATTY
THE TIME IS NEAR - CAMRYN DILL
TO HER - AMIRI HAYES
PROMISES - SARA PAVESI
NO REGRETS - SARA PAVESI
DOUBTS - ESTHER CENAT
LADY OF THE SEA - DEKOVIN MACCAULEY
A GLITCH IN TIME - RILEY DAWSON
BE - RIA RIVAL
STANDSTILL - RIA RIVAL
UNTITLED - RHIANNON ATLEE

EDITORIAL STAFF

PROFESSOR EMILY MADDOX
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**CELEBRATING THE ARTISTIC
COMMUNITY**

**AT ROWAN COLLEGE OF
SOUTH JERSEY**

FUTURE

By: Trasaun Parker

I wonder what the future is
For the child who holds a gavel for a case he never read
Who lets words out of a sharp tongue not understanding who bled
Who always has a opinion but only wants to hear his
Who will pretend he has nothing to do with these lines when he hears this
Who doesn't understand the mental pain that makes one want to harm their physical
Who doesn't understand the stipulations that makes a man sell medicinal
Who stands behind a glass of morals laughing at the other side
Who judges the closed book without turning to the other side
I wonder what the future is
For the boy who chooses to be blind
For the boy who chooses to tie a sheet around his eyes
For the boy who can see someone walk on the same 2 feet as he did
For the boy who says he understands that being different isn't being a demon
For the boy who hears the word out of a persons mouth
For the boy who can notice the same tears from another's eyes fall out
For the boy who hears the same lessons and turns into a yes man
But turns blind when someone looks to him for acceptance
I wonder what the future is
When it comes to the girl with the tight grip
When it comes to the girl with fingers with strength of lightning
When it comes to the girl that calls herself a christian
When it comes to her hypocrisy for not feeling forgiveness
When it comes to the collision to her views vs someone else's
When it comes to her grip holding to her ideal of being selfish
When it comes to someone putting out a hand not of violence but a shake
But she holds on with the same grip viewing their kindness as fake
Often I wonder what that future is
Maybe y'all can tell me I'll give you a bit



Untitled...

BY: NORA STANWOOD

To snuff out the sun
Was the most heinous crime
A man could commit
Some would say
To snuff out a life
Would be the same
As felling a star

Gray and black
Tendrils lick the rooftops
Thick sheets of dust and cobwebs
Blanket the sky and stars
How was he to know
When one was gone

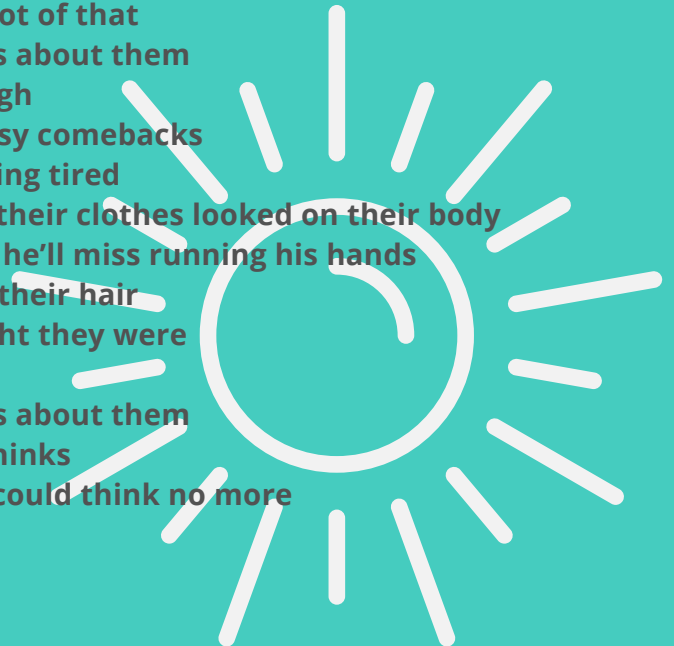
Insufferable heat
One would think
With the sun nowhere in sight
The world would turn ashen and ice
But no
The heat persists
Clawing away at his skin
Piercing through his lungs
And carving away at his throat
His chest heaves
And he thinks of them
The way they would form a dimple when smiling
As bright as the sun
The way they would insist on showering
After returning to the camp
Without even a speck of dirt on them
Just being safe, they would say

Safe.
Ah, he was covered in dirt
His open wounds would get infected
Clean up, quickly, they would say
Sit down and let me patch you up
They would say

He wondered what they would say now
Maybe something like,
Get up, get up!
It's about to blow, get up!
I promise, I'll get you something to eat when we go back,
Just hurry and stand up!
Ah, but does it matter anymore
When your sun is blotted
Out of the sky?

Nothing could ever hope
To replace the sun
Not the moon
Not the stars
Not the boiling magma
From the nearby volcano
None could compare to them

The sky grows ever darker
Is it the clouds?
Or the faraway feeling in his head?
As his surroundings
Melt into gray and orange blurs
He thinks of them
Their dimples
Their forever-clean hands
Dirtied by blood and mud
No, no, not of that
He thinks about them
Their laugh
Their sassy comebacks
He's getting tired
The way their clothes looked on their body
And how he'll miss running his hands
Through their hair
How bright they were
His sun
He thinks about them
And he thinks
Until he could think no more



Fire

BY: TAYLOR TRAVIS



Flames engulfed the house
it's still standing, but you're not.

The smell of ash still floods my senses
It's imprinted on me

I just saw your face
I just heard your voice
How are you gone?

How did it all happen?
I need to know
We need to know
How you weren't able to escape
What happened?

I'm broken
We're all broken
How do we live in this world without you?



Run the Race

By: Majesty Francois



”

When I decided to join track my sophomore year of high school, I don't really know what came over me. I am the least athletic person ever. I had never done a sport before, in fact, I had never even worked out before. I wanted to join a sport to try something new, and track was the only sport where if I sucked at it, I wouldn't be dragging the entire team down with me. Me and track had a love-hate relationship. Most of the time, I hated it. When the season starts, there's usually a lot of people on the team. After the first week—not so much. The other athletes would always make comments about how no one would last. The coaches made sure to make the first week extra hard to weed out the quitters. I took it upon myself to prove a point, so I stuck it out.

Every day, while running, I felt like my legs were about to crumble underneath me. My feet would go numb and became weights that I wasn't strong enough to lift; every step became heavier and I became slower. But whenever I finished a lap, there was a relief that came over me. My legs released all the tension, thanking me for finally stopping. When it was all over, the memory of the pain would disappear. All I could think about was the fact that I finished. Even if by the end of the mile I was barely jogging, I finished. The feeling of being able to say that I pushed myself was enough for me to want to go back the next day and do it all over again. When the next day came, I was back to square one. I wasn't used to the soreness that always reminded me it was there from the day before. I wasn't used to pushing myself. No one was stopping me from quitting, it didn't make a difference what I did. If I quit, I'd just become another person that couldn't hang, no one would care. I had something to prove to myself. I had always given up easily and this time I wanted to prove myself that I could actually complete something hard.

A day of track practice usually looked like this: We started off by running a mile as a warm-up. Then, we stretched, which was probably the easiest part of the day. After that, we did a number of tortuous things like running miles around the town or playing double dutch with ropes—except they're really heavy and no one's jumping. In practice, I was always last to finish everything. My first competition was a 100. I didn't care to

compete, I knew I would be last and I didn't like that I had to do it in public. As we were getting ready to race, the panic started settling in. My heart was beating fast like a ticking time bomb. In my gut I could feel my anxiety bubbling up and I no longer wanted to run, I wanted to hide. I wanted to hide in the bathroom or just walk home and never come back. Instead, I reluctantly awaited my fate. I watched as the other groups went ahead of me, each group seemed faster than the last. I could hear the crowds cheering for their loved ones in the stands. I paid attention to the click of the stopwatches to focus on something else. The stopwatches would stop and start so quickly, I wasn't feeling too optimistic about my personal record. When it was my turn, I got into place and immediately shut everything else out. The crowd disappeared and my competitors didn't matter. At that moment, my only focus was the finish line. I began to run with all of my might. I felt as though time had stopped and I was defying it. The wind fought against my shirt and my hair. At first I felt like I was flying, but when I snapped back into reality, I realized I was going really slow. My feet once again became like weights and I was moving in slow motion. I looked ahead of me to see that everyone else was done. It was just me and the awkward second hand embarrassment as people cheered me on encouraging me to keep going. I pushed as much as my feet would let me and towards the end I was jogging ever so slightly, trying to do anything but stop. The cheers and encouragement got quieter as everyone just stared at me and waited for me to finish. My record was a whopping 17 seconds. When I finished, I was disappointed, but I finished. Every competition after that went exactly the same—I was always last. I still wanted to quit every day, but each day I didn't quit was more proof that I had the capability to endure, and so I ran.

I ran every single day. I showed up to every practice in spite of myself and my discomfort. I could notice the changes in my body as I became more of an athlete (even if it was a slow one). My calves became more defined. I could run longer without getting tired, and I could eat a whole lot more than I used to. The fact that I was seeing changes and results in my body encouraged me to keep going a little longer. As long as I kept running, I had no choice but to grow. The tournament was the last game of the season. I was proud of myself and happy to make it to the end. At the last tournament I ran a 100 and a 200. Once again, I was last, but I beat my personal time by one second. Even though I didn't win any medals or didn't excel in this new hobby of mine, I finally accomplished what I wanted to.

BREAKING DOWN

By: Grace Teiper

Sometimes it feels like a day only exists to end, and then sometimes that feeling persists for weeks and months on end. February of 2021 was a month where so many people were back to their 'normal.' They were back at their jobs, back in school, back to seeing people and not feeling that hollowness that they had felt for so long. I wish I could've said that I was one of those people, but with my family's health issues I hadn't been able to leave my home in months. The closest to an 'outing' I had was driving to my old middle school's parking lot with my brother to have women I would never know any closer than the wave through the car window put lunches of cold baked beans and stale cereal bars into our trunk.

I would be excited for sleep- it felt like the only thing worth doing. I'd lay down at seven in the evening and just sleep. My bed was just as poorly maintained as I was- the pillowcases laid aside out of sheer exhaustion keeping me from putting them on, the fitted sheets falling off on the end. If you felt, the mattress was being picked apart thread by thread in the places it could be reached. It felt like the only place worth being, because if I was there I didn't have to confront my schoolwork or my lack of living. I didn't have to confront my raging alcoholic of a father eavesdropping on me or the fact that my mother's health was worsening every day. I could just rest.

Of course, laying in bed could only last for so long before someone needs you to do something for them, or a class needs to begin. One class in particular that I had was music theory; I had been taking private tutoring the summers prior to the pandemic because of how much I enjoyed it. What used to be something I excelled in and found fascinating, I was now chronically behind in because of the heavy workload and my lack of ability to do any of the work. I could never make out my teacher's voice- her microphone worked absolutely fine, but I felt like everything around me was diluted. What used to make me jump I could barely hear and what used to make me scream I could barely feel- numbness seeped through my skin like rot through wood. I couldn't hear her.



I sat there with bags under my eyes and tried so hard to listen to her lecture, and when she called on me I couldn't press the button to turn on my microphone. I felt like my tics would force me to say something awful, and that if I said anything wrong my classmates that had tormented me for years would laugh at my inability to learn. But they didn't understand. I had been locked in my home with no privacy and forced to see pictures of my friends smiling and playing mini-golf with each other while I would sit at my desk and want nothing more than to feel happy for them- I needed to feel happy for them, but my jealousy would always get the best of me and I'd just go to sleep again, so I wouldn't say anything stupid or regrettable.

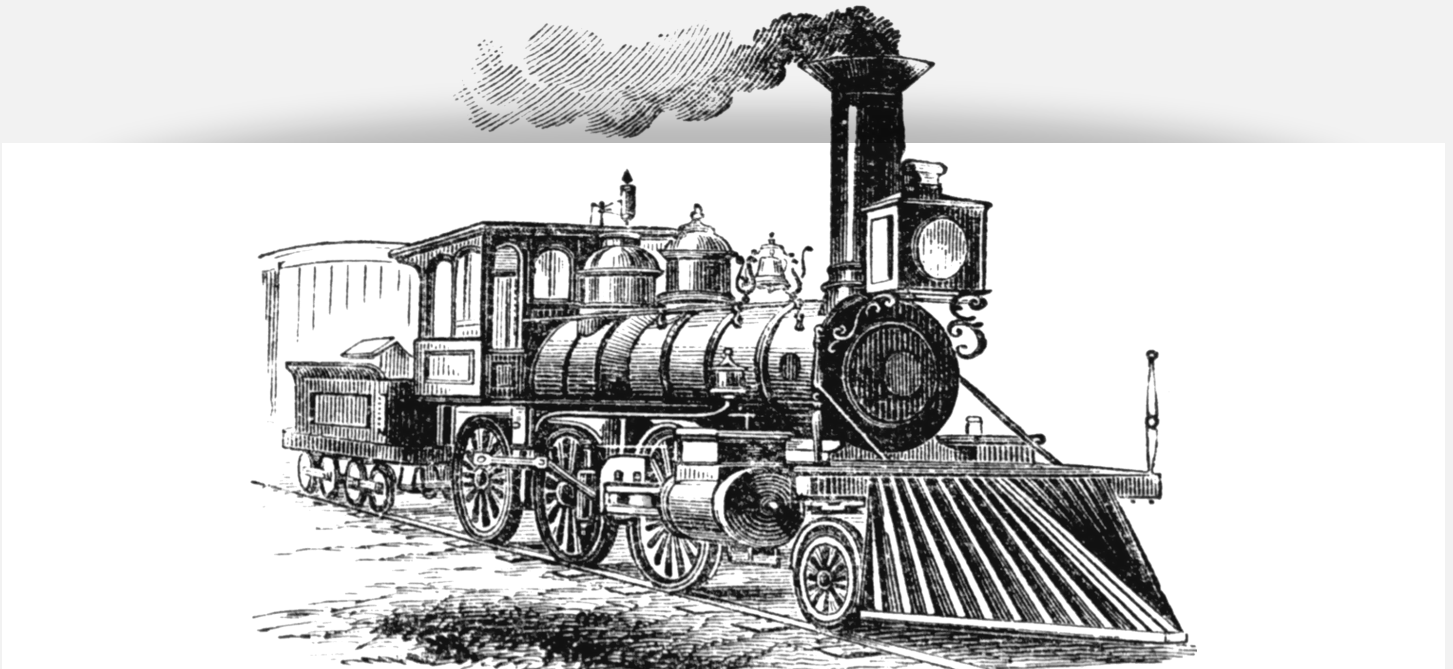
She called my name again, and it still sounded miles away. I wish I could have said something, but she immediately started yelling at me through her laptop's screen. I was miles away but felt like she had just stabbed between my ribs with a knife. Being called lazy and having my failing grade told to the class as I couldn't do anything to tell her that what I just needed was help and understanding. Even if I could tell her, I knew that she'd compare me to my classmates: If they were able to learn, why couldn't I? Why couldn't I just sit there and take in the information of counterpoint for months on end with no confusion or complaint?

I began to go into a panic. I was still just a fizz of what could previously be explained as nothing less than an explosion of emotion, but it was still a state of absolute panic. I began to pace at the top of my staircase. I felt like my body was on fire on one side, and instead of putting it out, the only way to fix it was to ignite the other. I felt wrong and uneven and just wanted it to stop. I hit my arms and legs in hopes that if the feeling reached an equilibrium, I could relax for a moment. I paced for what felt like hours, staring down that staircase every so often knowing that I could make the feeling go away, but tugging my thoughts back to reality with the memory of my mother. I needed something to calm me down, and eventually I decided that I needed air- I couldn't breathe and I just needed to go outside and get air that wasn't the same kind that I'd been breathing in and out for nearly a year.

I stumbled to my backyard wearing nothing but the basketball shorts and oversized tee shirt I had fallen asleep in for the past week. I remember barely feeling the cold- what would normally bite and twist its way up my limbs felt like I had just left the fridge open for a little too long. I sat there, and rocked back and forth while trying in any way I knew to calm my breathing. Asking for help was out of my options- I knew that if I told anyone they would worry that I was going to do something stupid, and I felt like if I put anyone through that then I would be unforgivable. So, I sat there.

I felt like the helpless seven year-old version of me was screaming and tearing at the inside of my chest; I felt like they were tearing my heart in two and screaming and begging for something to get better. In my moment of complete emptiness, I began muttering apologies to them. Apologies for what I couldn't protect us from, apologies for what we couldn't become.

I began to cry. I could feel the tears- hot and almost steaming on my face compared to the cold that was crisp on my skin. It was one of the first things that I could feel fully in almost a year, and it was in a moment of what felt like loss. I was grieving what the pandemic took from me, and what I would never be able to fix for myself. I laid there in the grass, hugging myself and weeping into the frozen earth for at least half an hour before I stumbled my way back inside. Two days, a call with my music tutor, and a lot of thought about what my mental wellbeing was worth later, I set up a meeting with my guidance counselor:
"I want to drop two of my classes,"



A timelapse video by Kevin Jenner:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zx5tXGLdU8Y>



**Yajaira Montero - A Vineland, NJ
Summer "Tranquility"**

Lingering Between Worlds

BY: LISA PANCRAZIO

The fallen orange and yellow leaves crunched under my feet as I walked towards my grandfather's grave. The light breeze brushed my long brown hair over my hazel eyes, and blurred my vision while I was trying to look at the weeping girl sitting at the grave beside my grandfather's.

As I got closer to her, the sun peaked out from the clouds in the sky and shined right on the headstone in front of her. It read "Iris Paolo 1999-2020". Whoever she was, she had died recently. To attempt to comfort her, I decided to try sparking up a conversation.

"So how did you know her?" I asked in a hushed voice.
"She's me," she said in between sniffles.

I slowly turned to face her with wide eyes. She was still crying with her face in her hands. All I could see was her hair that was so blonde it was practically white. She must've noticed me staring at her because she finally looked up at me to meet my eyes. They were so green. I couldn't tell if she was looking at me or looking through me. Her translucent skin should've been a giveaway that she was dead, but of course nobody assumes things like that when first meeting a person.

"What do you mean by that?" I was hoping that she had been kidding around.

"This is my headstone. I know that I am dead, but I can't fully remember what happened to me. All I know for sure is that none of my friends or family attended my funeral. How could they do such an awful thing to me?"

I stood there in silence picking at my fingertips. What was I supposed to do? Why was I even able to see her? How were we having this conversation? I wanted to just leave her, but I knew that I couldn't. I crouched down next to her. I scanned the area to see if anyone else was around; the last thing I wanted was for some stranger to think I was talking to myself.

"Is that really all you can remember?"

She had finally stopped crying. She looked up to the sky and thought for a moment before she responded to me.

"It was my twenty-first birthday. I was hosting a party at my house. Everyone I've ever loved was there with me. But..." she paused. She put her hands to her temples and closed her eyes. She continued, "all I can remember after that is the smell of smoke. Not the nice bonfire smelling type of smoke. Like, the nasty type of smoke, if that makes sense."

We sat in silence for a few seconds. I couldn't find the right words to say. I wasn't sure how to console a dead woman who couldn't even recollect the events that lead up to her final moments.

"Do you live far from here?" I finally questioned.

She shook her head no. I grabbed her by the hand and lifted her up. She was so pale she made even me look tan. I told her to lead us back to her home. She seemed to examine me for a moment before walking off and beckoning me to follow.

The walk was only about 10 minutes. The weather outside was just nice enough for the walk to be somewhat enjoyable. When we finally reached the house, Iris's face dropped. The house was an absolute wreck. Yellow caution tape surrounded the perimeter of the yard like a fence. Remnants of an ash scent still filled the air. The area was huge; the house must've been the size of a mansion before the incident. Now it was just a charcoal-colored mess with debris scattered everywhere. Iris said nothing and turned around to sit on the curb. I sat down next to her, "Iris, I'm so sorry,"

A weak smile spread across her face, "I just realized that I never asked you your name or why you were in the cemetery in the first place. I'm the one who should be apologizing."

"My name's Callista, and don't worry about that. Do you recall anything about that night now?"

She nodded and began to retell her story. On her twenty-first birthday she invited all her family and closest friends to her house to celebrate. She was always a big a socializer, so it was a crowded party, despite having what anyone else would see as ample space. There wasn't a single stain on the white carpets or white tablecloths.

Everything was fresh and pressed. The upbeat music was blasting; not a single person there was stationary. Iris described it as the best night of her life. Everyone was so

happy. Drinking, eating, and dancing. What else could you ask for? It was finally time to do the cake. It was a triple tier chocolate cake with pink cream cheese icing. Iris pulled out a box of matches to light all twenty one candles when her aunt stopped her. She brought a hoard of different lights with her, ranging from ring lights to fairy string lights that needed to be hung. She plugged what she could fit in the one outlet, then plugged the rest into a power strip she had brought herself.



After she turned all the lights on, she clapped her hands and exclaimed, "There! Now you'll have the perfect lighting for all the pictures we're going to take!"

After everyone serenaded Iris with the "Happy Birthday" song, her aunt insisted on taking all the pictures right then and there. Everything was going smoothly. There was a line of guests waiting to get their picture with the birthday girl, and Iris was having a blast.

An overly intoxicated older guest was stumbling through the crowd with a drink in his hand. Barely keeping steady on his feet, he decided to walk up towards the front of the line where all the lights were plugged in. Another guest didn't realize that he was right behind him and backed into the already clumsy man. He tripped over one of the cords that plugged in one of the ring lights, and spilled his drink all over the outlet. The outlet started to spark. In a drunken panicked state, he deduced that pouring water to put the sparks out was the best solution. The sparks got worse, and almost immediately a fire broke out.

"Fire! Everyone, run!" he started screaming. The guests all tried to scatter, but it was far too crowded to disperse towards the exits fast enough. Nobody even attempted to locate a fire extinguisher. The fire just kept spreading more and more, until flames just completely engulfed the house. That was where Iris' memory stopped.

"Did anyone even call 911?" Iris thought to herself.

I let Iris sit there with her feelings for a minute before saying anything. Maybe it was because I wasn't sure what to say. Maybe nothing needed to be said at all. All I could think to do was place my hand on Iris' shoulder and give a light squeeze.

"Are you happy you remembered? Or do you wish you didn't?"

"No, I needed to. I needed that closure. Thank you for all your help, Callista. I'll be going now."

"To where?" I questioned.

"To whatever after life there is I suppose," Iris smiled then vanished.

THE WALLFLOWER

BY: KAMERYN WESTFIELD

SLURRED SPEECH AND SLUGGISH SHIFTING,
ROOMS TOO DARK AND TOO COLORFUL,
STUMBLING AND BUMPING CALLED DANCING,
TWO STEPS AND YOU'RE ALREADY TOUCHING.

MUSIC RATTLES INSIDES AND EAR DRUMS,
THE DARKNESS DOES NOTHING TO STIFLE THE HEAT.
RED FACES AND RED EYES, BLEARY AND CONTENT,
I'M NOT ONE FOR PARTIES.

SPRING HAS SPRUNG

BY: ALEX GONZALEZ



The Beginning of Forever

By: Michaela Diventi

"Make sure you have all of your stuff!" I yell out as I load my backpack and cooler into the backseat of my car.

"I'm almost ready. Give me five more minutes." Lauren says as she runs back into her house for her last-minute essentials.

We have a whole itinerary planned for today. It's written down on a piece of paper like we're going on some elaborate trip. We're not. We're just taking a day trip to the beach with a few stops along the way. It's our first date. Should I say date? I don't know. I consider it a date, at least. I think about whether or not she does too as I close the doors and get into the driver's seat of my car. This is a date, right? We met through social media like everyone does these days, and I feel like I've known her forever. But it's only our first time hanging out. My mom always said not to meet up with strangers from the internet, but here I am, going on a date with a girl I don't even know. To be fair, we have been face-timing for a month, so it's not like I'm that crazy. I keep on rambling in my head until I hear a knock on my window.

Smiling Lauren says, "I'm ready. I'm so excited to go."

"Then get in! Let's stop wasting time. We have a lot planned for today."

I'm kind of nervous to drive. There are so many reasons for this, but the first date scaries' might just be the main one. Also, highways give me major anxiety. The mix of high-speeding cars, people not knowing how to use their blinkers, and cars going in and out of lanes does not help my nerves. And those big trucks. I can't even get started on those big trucks. Why can't they just get their own highway?

I roll down the windows and open my sunroof, letting the breeze sway my hair with the motions of the wind. My hands are clenched onto the steering wheel and the sweat marks are undeniably obvious. I pull my hands off the wheel, one at a time, and wipe the sweat onto my pant legs. I turn my head to see Lauren staring at me. She definitely knows I'm nervous.

"Relax a little bit, Sam. It's beautiful out. Feel the music and just vibe until we get to where we're going. There's nothing to be nervous about, I'm here with you."

I don't really know how to respond to her. I want to tell her that she is the reason I am so nervous, but that'd just be embarrassing on my part.

I smile, let out a fake laugh and decide to respond with, "I'm just so excited to be down the shore that my body just wants to sweat." A blatant lie, but I hope that she just lets it go.

"You're lying to me, but I'll let it slide this time." She follows this with a wink.

Of course, she wouldn't just let it go. I can't hide my nerves for anything. Maybe someday I'll learn how to control them, but today is not that day.

It seems like hours are passing by as we are scream-singing to Lauren's "Top Hits of Today" playlist. She self-proclaimed that it's her "artistic masterpiece". Personally, I know mine is a lot better. But I like seeing her throw her hands up and yell out the lyrics of every single song. We argued about our favorite music for fifteen minutes straight.

"You cannot tell me that The Weeknd is better than Sza. You just can't." I say passionately, trying to defend my clearly better music taste to her.

"He just is not better. End of discussion." She put her finger to my mouth, in hopes that that would be the end of this conversation. Yeah, There's just no winning this one.

The argument of who's music taste is better still doesn't stop though. I say one artist, and she pulls out another artist that is "just so much more talented". With each artist she says comes

her favorite song by them and of course, her singing. I don't really know whether I can consider Lauren's singing really singing, though. It's more like screaming off-key for 3 minutes and 40 seconds at a time. I keep laughing at the way she belts out these lyrics. Even though it's terrible, I think I could listen to it forever. I look at my clock and realize we have only been driving for 40 minutes. We still have an hour and twenty minutes left, and I have already finished my whole large, iced coffee, that I did not need at all. It's definitely time to stop at a bathroom.

"I need to find a rest stop or a gas station as soon as possible. Babe, can you hand me my phone", I say without thinking. Did I just call her babe? Holy shit. I just called her BABE.

I panic in my head and reach for my phone, but it slips right out of my sweaty hands. I need to stop sweating when I drive. It falls down my side in between my seat and the center console. Just my luck. I frantically reach to grab my phone from in between the seats, pushing it farther down with each attempt. All I can feel are old french fries, straw wrappers, and receipt papers. This is so embarrassing.

I don't realize she is saying something to me as I'm frantically digging under my seat until I hear her scream "Sam the guard rail!"

The last thing I see before I pass out is my steering wheel as I hit my head. Everything goes blank.

I open my eyes into what feels like a haze. Everything is blurry and my body feels completely numb. I try to move but I feel stuck. With a groan and one big push, I am finally able to slowly move my hands, then my arms, and then my legs. I push myself out of my seat and onto the pavement of the highway. Everything is still a haze. I look around and see blood everywhere. I check my arms, my legs, and my stomach, yet none of them are bleeding. But there is blood all over the car. My seat, the wheel, everything. Blood is everywhere. I am numb, but not in pain. What is happening? I walk a few steps away from the wreck and look at my car. The entire front is crushed into the guard rail. My windshield is completely shattered. It doesn't even look like a car anymore. I glance over to my right and notice blonde hair sticking out of what used to be my passenger window. Lauren's in there. I run around to where she is in a complete frenzy. The door is smashed in, but there is enough space for me to reach in and try to pull her out. I scream for her to wake up, but she is unresponsive. I go to reach for her, but no matter what I do I can't get a grip on her body. My hands are not connecting to her at all. . I try again and get the same result. I can't touch her. Why can't I touch her? My head is spinning a mile a minute. I don't know what to do. What the hell is even HAPPENING? Shock runs through me again as I realize I can't even help her. I'm useless. Nothing I do is working. I reach out and try to grab her again. My arm goes completely through Lauren's. Oh, my god. I am dead. I can't save her. I killed myself. She can't die. This can't happen. I scream, in attempt that somebody would stop their car and help us. I hold Lauren's hand tight and plead for her to wake up. As I am looking at Lauren's body, I see my own. My complete lifeless body smushed in the driver's seat. I look away.

Cars begin to slow down and stop next to my car, or what used to be my car. A man, who looks like he just got done working out, runs around to the side where my body is. He looks at it, turns around, and throws up. Geez. I must look pretty bad if a grown man is throwing up looking at me. A woman runs around to Lauren's side and starts yelling for help from the other spectators. That's what I am going to call these people, as no one is doing anything but watching.

"What are you doing? Someone help her! Please! Pull her out! Do something!" I scream over and over, hoping someone will somehow hear me and pull her out.

My efforts are in vain, as no one moves except the woman who is already trying. Who in their right mind just stares at something like this? Has anyone called the police? God. I hope this lady knows what she's doing. Lauren doesn't deserve any of this. I can't do anything but sit next to Lauren's side of the car and cry. I look at the wreck I caused and no thoughts are formed, only tears.

Our beach chairs are impaled in my back window. Our cooler is completely spilled out on the seats. The airbags are practically suffocating all of our stuff that lays in the backseat. This can't be real. Today was supposed to be incredible. This was supposed to be the beginning of forever. Yet, here we are, at the beginning of the end. This was my first chance at love, and I ruined it. I was careless. I was afraid. I was nervous. And now, the girl who I thought I was going to fall in love with is sprawled out inside of a smashed car, bleeding to death, all because of me.

I still feel like I'm in a haze, but I realize that somehow through the wreckage, Lauren's music is still playing. It seems almost ironic that a Sza song begins to play. And of all songs, it's her newly released song, titled "Good Days". Of course, this was the song that would be on at this moment. I stand up and reach to turn it off, but as I reach for her phone, I remember I am dead. How wonderful.

I look up to the road in front of me and realize the cars are all pulling over to the side. This can only mean one thing. Then I see it, the flickering of the blue and red lights is getting closer and closer. Took them long enough. I jump up and down, waving my arms to flag them down. But they can't see me. Of course, they can't. The paramedic SUV halts to a stop directly behind my crushed car. Within seconds, the man and woman from earlier run to their car.

Wiping sweat from her forehead and exhaling aggressively, the woman says, "I don't know what happened. There's a body in the driver's seat. She's unresponsive. There's another girl in the passenger seat. Please help. I've done all I can."

The paramedics waste no time, and both run directly to Lauren's side. This proves even more that I am gone. They don't come near me at all. My body is just there. I don't even care that they aren't helping me. I just want Lauren to be okay. I'm still sitting on the ground, now watching the paramedics pry her out of the car. They grab her, put her on a stretcher and rush her into the ambulance. I run after them, attempting to hitch a ride in the back. I mean, they can't see me. So, nothing is really stopping me from not getting inside right now.

As the ambulance drives away, I notice another group of paramedics are standing beside my lifeless body. They pull a sheet from their bag and place it on top of me. I look away, not wanting to see what comes next. That's all the confirmation I needed to know that I am dead.

I lay my eyes right back on Lauren. I know I cannot hold her hand, but I reach over anyway. As I touch her, a loud, prolonged beep rattles through the ambulance. No. This can't be happening. The nurses scramble to help her but CPR leads to nothing. The beep keeps going. With one more push on her chest, the nurse looks up and says, "1:47 PM. Time of death."

Lauren's face turns from her beautiful olive color to a pale gray. She's gone. I killed her. I killed US. Suddenly, I hear a familiar voice echo through my ears.

"Well, it makes sense now why you don't like highways."

I look up from my tear-filled hands and see Lauren sitting across from me. She looks untouched by the wreck. Her olive skin and perfectly curled hair is back to how it was this morning. Her eyes are filled with tears as she turns her head every few seconds to see her lifeless body on the stretcher. The shock sets in for us both.

"I am so sorry." I choke as I speak, "I'll never understand how this could have happened."

"It's alright, babe." She smirks at me and moves her body next to mine. Grabbing my face, she runs her hands across my tear-stained cheeks.

"This is not your fault. I am okay, you are okay, we are okay," She says as she stares into my eyes.

"You should be angry, how are you not angry at me? I'm so sorry. Lauren. I'm just, I'm sorry.." I can't even look at her, the guilt is eating me alive.

"I am so sorry. I thought this was the beginning of our forever. I had such big dreams for our relationship. And here we are. Dead."

I can't stop saying I'm sorry. I don't even know what I'm supposed to say to her. I don't even know how I'm supposed to feel. I don't even know how she is not cursing and screaming at me.

"I am angry. I'm so angry. But I can't be mad at you forever. I can't feel this anger forever. The universe had another plan for us. And while this might not be the forever we imagined; it doesn't mean our forever should end now." She puts my hand in hers, rubbing her thumb over mine.

How is she so calm right now? I mean, I feel pretty calm because I'm holding her. But I'm just shocked still. Reality set in a million times already, and I still can't seem to digest it.

"But your family, my family, your life, my life. They are all gone."

"Sam, our bodies might be gone, but our spirits are still there. We will still be with them every second of the day. I had so many dreams for myself and I know you did too, but you can't control what life throws at you. One day we will understand. All of the answers won't come now, but they will."

I grip her hand and look into her hazel eyes. Her words are so beautiful. She's dead and still optimistic. Geez. Even dead, I'm still amazed by her. Her words radiate throughout me and I get a sense of relaxation. I know this might be a little early to say, but I think I love her.

"Sam, we have forever to find out the answers to what happened and why death chose us" She continues on, "Now why don't we go to the beach and continue the day we planned on having?"





Imagine yourself, lying on a dirt-laden bathroom floor, just because it feels cold. You don't know if you want to defecate, vomit, or both at the same time. Joints so stiff, that it feels as if you will break your knee if you extend your leg. But there is a complete fix for this! Allow the beautiful woman with golden eyes to enter you. Let her long, spiny fingers grip around your heart as the sickness stops, and you melt into bliss. She washes over you like a warm wave of water. Your eyes close and the world comes to a complete stop. That is addiction, and I needed out.

"911, What's your emergency?" The soft, but emergent voice of a woman said on the other side of the phone. She didn't know it then, but she would be the first person of many to save my life.

"I need help. Please help me!" I begged her, crying lying on the floor.

"I'm dope sick, and I just want to die. Please help!" I could hear keys clacking on a keyboard as she is telling me to just breathe. Take deep breaths, just breathe.

With my nerves on high alert, I couldn't breathe. Hell, I couldn't even move off this bathroom floor in fear of defecating myself. I hear even more clacking as the operator is asking me questions.

My name, birthdate, location, why do I feel the way I am feeling? All the questions were causing me, even more, panic and confusion. She talked to me as I waited for the ambulance. Where was I going? A vacation to the grippy sock hotel. I thought they would help me, but I was wrong.

I laid, in the emergency department, strapped to a bed, bright lights in my face, while vomiting on myself. Finally, an IV of Ativan and I am sleeping. When I awake 3 hours later, a lady, dressed in full business attire, sat at the end of my bed and hurled questions at me about how I felt.

"I'm a hazard to myself and others." is all I kept repeating to her. One would believe that since addiction is classified as a mental health disorder in the DSM-V, I would be helped in psychiatric care. I wasn't. They left me to detox on my own. Four days of no sleep. Hot showers at 2 am because your joints hurt so bad. A doctor prescribes Icy-Hot for my joints. By the end of the second day, I had burns on my knees and thighs from how much icy hot I had used. With no help being given, I decided to call the one man that had me through and through. My dad. But how was I going to tell him I was detoxing off heroin, and I needed help?

I lifted the receiver of the old Ohio Bell payphone and began dialing the number. I heard the first ring and my heart started to pound. By the third ring, I was sweating. Finally, on the fourth ring, I heard that comforting voice that always fixed everything.

"Hello"

"Dad, it's me. I'm in the hospital. I'm okay, but I have a problem." I could hear his breath change.

"Well, what's the problem?"

"Dad, I'm on dope really bad and I need help getting out."

"Do you want to come home?"

Home. I haven't had a real home in years. A home. With a warm bed, and real sheets and blankets. Real food. Not the canned shit from the food pantry. Home.

"Yeah Dad, I want to come home. Please. I need help."

With that, my heart lifted. I was going home. Dad was going to help me. I was going to be getting out of this life. A life of thieving, lying, being sick, and begging, just for daily needs. I looked at the red house from a distance. I didn't want to go back to where I lived, but I had to. It was the only place I had to go until my dad arrived.

I walked up to the door, brown with peeling paint. I stick my key in the door and it opens. As I step through the doorway, a feeling of dread and death just come over me. Dammit, I didn't want to be in this house. I walk up the steps and hear talking, then screaming. Two males. I knew it was Tim and Chi, our dealer.

My arm reaches out for the door handle of the second door when suddenly it opens with a great deal of force. I was being pulled into the doorway by my shirt, then slammed into the wall. The screaming starts again.

"Where the f*** is my dope, bitch?" Chi screamed in my face.

I'm at loss for words. His dope? I haven't been here in four days. I took a grippy sock vacation.

"What?" I reply, obviously confused.

That's when I saw it. A nine-mil in his right hand, which is now being raised to my chest.

"It's either my dope or the money! Where the fuck is it?!"

Every part of my body is pounding. I could hear my heart in my ears. My breath stuttered as I tried to speak.

"I.. I wasn't here. I haven't been here in four days! I don't know!"

Tim had yet again smoked up \$2300 worth of crack. A product that he was supposed to sell while Chi was out of town. I couldn't believe it, but then remembered that I was leaving the state in now two days.

"Chi, just give me three days and I will have your money." That was one thing about Chi, he knew I was a good woman with a good heart. I was always good on my word. Except, this time, I wouldn't be. This issue was Tim's problem that he can solve.

"Chi, come on, just please put the gun down and give me three days." tears streaked down my cheeks as I feared for my life.

I felt the release of pressure off my chest and hear a whisper of three days as he ran down the steps and out the door. I wasn't going to ask Tim. I didn't want to talk to Tim. What I needed was to quickly pack all my belongings and find somewhere to stay until my dad got there. Chi would be back in three, I would be gone in two.

I packed only what I needed. Clothes, shoes, pictures. Everything that would fit in just one bag. I just had to wait out for two more days. My dad wired me enough money for a hotel room and food. What he doesn't know is, f*** that three-day detox, I got dope money. I rented a hotel and there I laid for two days. Two days not knowing up or down. The time of day or even if it was night. I stayed as high as I could until that man came and rescued me.

That red Ford F-150 pulled into the parking lot. That same truck my dad has had since I was in high school. The truck had a lot of memories and now it was about to create more, even if they weren't going to be good ones. I opened the door and Dad looked at me. The last time I saw him I was over 300 pounds. Now, I was a dainty 160. He told me I looked good until I pulled my sunglasses down. I saw his face drop and tears form in his eyes. The dark circles under my eyes, my face pale and dull. I looked like an addict, and it broke his heart.

There are two ways to get back to New Jersey from Ohio. The PA turnpike, which is the quickest, or down Route 50 into the mountains. My dad can be cruel at times and this time, was one of those times. Knowing I would be dope sick and hurting, he took Route 50. He had the air conditioner on full blast. I was already cold from being sick, all I could do was shiver. A Walmart bag laid on the floor for me to throw up in, just in case. All I could think to myself the whole ride was "Please hurry up, I'm cold, I hurt, and I don't want to shit myself."

Nine hours later, we arrive at his, then, girlfriend's house. Patty is a good woman with a good soul. I see why my dad is in a relationship with her. She sends me for a hot shower. A long hot shower. I needed to wash away all the guilt, pain, and sickness. I walk downstairs to be greeted with homemade soup. The smell was tantalizing, but I could not eat. Only take little sips of the broth, but oh that broth was delicious. When you've been living off nothing but food pantry food for over five years, anything tastes phenomenal.

I couldn't sleep that night. The dope sickness was becoming worse, and my joints felt as if they were being pulled apart. All I did was pace. Pace the hallways. Pace the stairway. It was a long ugly night, and I couldn't wait until the morning. Dad was calling Sherry in the morning to get me into rehab.

At 9am the phone rang, and it was her. She had got me into rehab in Pennsylvania. It was called Brightwater Landing. A name that I will forever remember. Dad took me shopping one last time for everything that I would need for my 60-day stay. Clothes, new toiletries, the works. I even got a new suitcase. I was so grateful.

The two-hour ride felt longer than it needed to be. I just wanted to be in detox and not feel the bugs crawling under my skin anymore. That was all I thought about the whole ride. I didn't want to look at the trees or scenery. I thought about getting Subutex in my system and feeling normal again. No more throwing up, cry, pacing, or being in pain. I wanted to be in an

ice-cold bed, doped up on subs, and feeling as if I was on cloud nine. The closer we got to Wrightsville, the more anxious I became for normalcy.

We pulled into the long, and winding driveway that went almost straight up. I was surrounded by trees and gates. I thought to myself, "Am I going to rehab or prison?" The road went on for what seemed like forever until we pulled up under a foyer.

"Go on, they know we are here. I will get your stuff." my dad said to me.

I walk up to the door, extend my arm out and pull it open. In front of me stood a woman in her forties, with crazy colored spiked hair, and a smile to change the world. She stepped closed to me and embraced me in the warmest hug I have ever felt.

"Hi Sage, I'm Mandy. I'm going to help you get better."

She took my hand and I followed her through the stunning room. A chandelier hung from the ceiling, giving the room a warm feel. I looked at Mandy as she flashed me another stunning smile.

"Mandy, do you promise to make me better?" I said with tears in my eyes.

"I promise."

It has now been six years since I entered that old building, on top of a mountain overlooking the Susquehanna. When you are in active addiction, you really don't miss the things that are gone. Your eyes are usually in the "heroin fog". Then when you are clean, it's a mass of nothing but rebuilding. Rebuilding your life, home, friends, and family. With the heroin epidemic getting worse, I like to sit and talk to young adults about my experiences, how worrying about school and the girl that left you last week are so much more important than sticking a needle in your arm. No matter how embarrassed you may feel, always ask for the help that you need.



Tyler McClelland -
Macrophoto



Daniel Leeder - Ringless Honey Mushrooms

The Garden - By: Thea Cloyd

Luke was dead, to begin with.

He had died of pneumonia on the 21st of May in a hospital. It was cold and smelled faintly of alcohol and antiseptic. Luke had a ventilator on his face. Anna had salt on hers.

And then he died.

And then he sat up.

Anna blinked and Luke was back on the cot, motionless, in the exact same position as he'd been before. He was not breathing. She wiped the tears from her face, and then a wave of realization hit her, and they were quickly replaced by another flood.

Anna attended the funeral—she'd been with him for a long time, now, practically his next of kin. She numbly recited a speech that had been written for her by her friend Marcus, sat in a folding chair for the rest of the service, and went home.

Anna was standing on the sidewalk in front of the house, fumbling through her pockets for the keys. That done, she looked up. There was someone sitting on the chair by the window.

Luke waved at her.

Anna waved back, and then she closed the door and the chair was empty. She shook her head. It's only a hallucination. You're just seeing him because you expect to. The grief counselor told you it was normal, so it's fine. It's not real.

Anna went upstairs to brush her teeth, and tried to forget about it.

Behind the house, there was a plot of land. Once a sad little lawn, it had quickly been turned over to sod and planted with a chaotic array of seeds, which grew into riotous rows of peas and roses and dandelions. It had been a garden for three years. Lately it was reverting to a thicket.

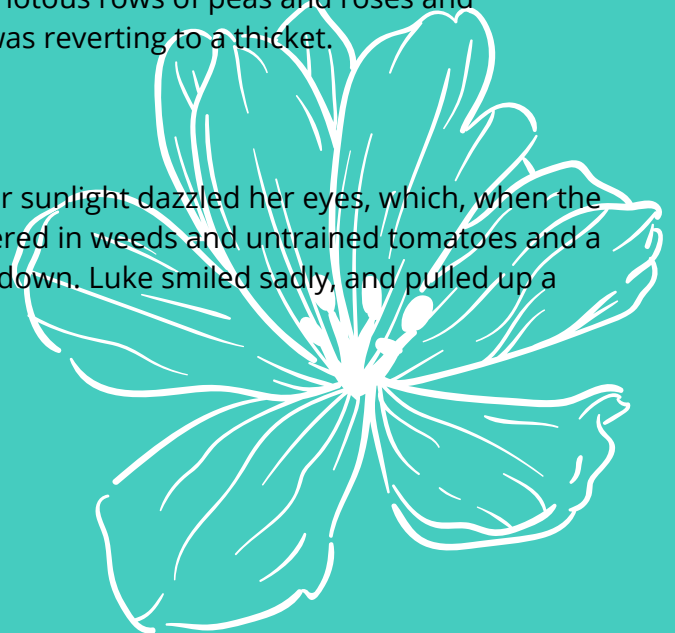
One day, Anna had the strength to go out there again.

She unlatched the screen door and slid it open. Midsummer sunlight dazzled her eyes, which, when the afterimage faded, saw a depressing little patch of land covered in weeds and untrained tomatoes and a man in the corner wearing dirty jeans and a purple button-down. Luke smiled sadly, and pulled up a weed.

Anna stared.

"It's a little overgrown," he said.

"What?"



Anna stumbled her way through the fledgling thicket to the corner. Luke wasn't there, but there was an uprooted bunch of crabgrass lying on the ground.

One afternoon, when the wind blew the first cool breaths of autumn into the still, hot air, Anna was sitting in the dining room across from two people. They were talking about nothing in particular, bouncing from subject to subject, in a sort of conversational game of telephone. The group had played it a lot in the past, and it was the favorite activity when party games were unavailable or exhausted.

"Chalkboards are...uh. Have you ever even seen a chalkboard? Wait, when was the last time either of you saw a chalkboard?" Julia was saying.

"Um, there's one outside the new ice cream place," Marcus told her. At the same time, Anna said, "I don't know."

"Well I meant, like, a big chalkboard, like teachers used to write on, but yeah. I forgot those little ones existed. Have you been to that ice cream shop?"

Marcus shook his head, but Anna nodded. "It's bad."

"Elaborate?"

"Well, I got a mint chocolate chip there, and it was full of just tiny pieces of mint leaf. Everywhere. It tasted like I was eating grass," Luke said.

"I got curious and had a lick of it," Anna said: "Grass. My vanilla was fine, but I don't think it's possible to mess up vanilla."

"No, it is," said Marcus, with a sardonic grin. The other three looked at him. "It is in fact very possible. Once, I was at a little mini-golf course with my parents. I was eight at the time, but I still knew what good ice cream was, mind you. There was a tiny stand on the side of it that sold vanilla and chocolate. The vanilla tasted like milk."

"Straight milk?" Julia asked incredulously.

"Straight milk. Milk with the most minuscule sprinkling of sugar in it. God, it was nasty."

"I made you drink orange milk once," Luke said.

"Hold on, hold on, orange milk?" said Julia. "Orange? Milk? Luke, were you in—"

Julia paused. "Luke?" It wasn't a rhetorical question anymore.

Everyone turned and looked at the space next to Anna where Luke wasn't, and maybe had never been.

"You—you saw him too, right?"

Anna nodded. Marcus continued staring at the empty chair across from him. It was wicker, and had a little cushion made of purple quilting cotton on top, slightly depressed in the center with the repeated imprint of someone having sat on it for years. The chair had been empty for three months now.

"Marcus?"

Marcus looked up. "Yes."

Julia turned from him. "Anna, is your house haunted?"

"My life's haunted," said Anna, without a hint of mirth. "I thought he was just some kind of..." she felt stupid saying it, "hallucination, but if you saw him..."

"Yeah."

There was a silence.

"Please don't tell anyone."

"Wouldn't dream of it," Marcus said. Julia nodded, resolutely.

The group was unable to leave the topic of ghosts for the rest of the afternoon.

It was opening night at the community theater, and they were performing a musical about ghosts. The irony was not lost on Anna, who had used her basic sewing experience to assist the costume designer. She sat in a good seat a few rows from the stage and wore the one nice dress she owned and listened to the songs she'd heard a hundred times before.

But it was a good show. It had given Anna something to do while she worked on it, and for that she was grateful.

Anna walked home, the wind scattering leaves off the trees behind her. One of the songs from the show was in her head, although she'd already heard it a thousand times. She walked up to her house, opened the front door, stepped inside, and closed it. It slammed heavily shut, and then the house was silent.

The house was not silent.

As she walked up the stairs, Anna slowly became aware that the song in her head had gained an outside source. Soft humming reverberated through the walls, almost indistinguishable from the wind outside.

But not quite.

"Hello?" Anna shouted, but she already knew who it was.

Luke was singing one half of a duet. His voice was mellifluous and controlled and achingly familiar, and sounded like it was coming from very far away.

"Luke!"

The song continued unperturbed. Almost unconsciously, Anna began to sing the other part.

When she reached the top of the stairs, Luke was waiting. He looked at her, smiled, and offered her his hand. Anna took it. It was warm.

They slow-danced, still singing the duet, around the upstairs hall and through the rooms. Sometimes they stumbled, or laughed, but they always continued after that. Luke was wearing a suit which felt as solid and real as the table Anna bumped into. It was his best suit.

The last note of the duet left Anna's lips. They were next to an open door now, and they stood there for a while, and Anna stared into his eyes as hard as she could. Maybe if she didn't look away, he wouldn't leave.

"Anna?"

"Luke."

Luke's eyes had pity in them, though his mouth still smiled. "Get some sleep."

Anna blinked and Luke wasn't there, and perhaps he never had been. But Anna knew better. Rage and grief welled up, burning, in her throat, and subconsciously desiring not to break her fingers, she stomped the floor with more force than she thought possible. It hurt, but now the rage was gone, and she limped through the door into bed, still wearing her best dress.

He was buried in that suit.

Months passed and Luke began to appear more, though Anna couldn't be sure whether it was really him (his ghost?) or her brain placing him into scenes at the corner of her eye, or if she was just suffering incredibly detailed visions. (But she couldn't spare the money or time for a psychiatric evaluation, not anymore, and anyway schizophrenia starts with small hallucinations, not entire ghosts whom others can see.) Once, he was standing in front of the linens in the fabric store, and then he turned around and it was a young Indian woman whom Anna had seen a few times. Then he was an old white man sitting in the bad ice cream parlor, eating mint chocolate chip with a spoon. People laughing, people singing, people weeding their backyards.

She told Julia and Marcus, but they couldn't help. It sounds like that's not his actual ghost, Julia had said, or said something like it. That's just psychological. Are you okay?

But Luke still appeared, unmistakably, in the house. Through the dirty glass of the kitchen window, he tended to the garden; sometimes he paced the hallways; mostly, all that belied his presence was muffled speech from behind a door, or worse, the strains of the duet floating melancholically through the house.

It was winter. The sky, though heavy and white, hadn't the decency to snow, so everything was gray—or occasionally, if it was feeling flamboyant, brown. Frost covered the garden and didn't melt.

Anna was standing in her bedroom. She was supposed to be at work, but she couldn't bring herself to move. The idea of going to work, of getting dressed and going out in the cold and pretending to be happy for eight hours, was painful even to think about. So was the idea of laying in her bed unable to go back to sleep. So she stood. For awhile she'd been willing herself t

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Inside her, something broke. "SHUT UP!" Anna screamed. "LEAVE ME ALONE! WHY CAN'T YOU LEAVE ME ALONE?"

The singing stopped.

"ANSWER ME GOD DAMN IT! YOU'RE DEAD! YOU'RE NOT HERE ANYMORE! WHY CAN'T YOU LEAVE ME ALONE!?"

Anna's throat was raw; salt water stung the back of it, and dripped down her face and chin. She inhaled shakily, wanting desperately to apologize to the ghost downstairs, and then a fresh wave of tears burst through.

Anna fell to her knees and wept for what could have been. All the days they could've had, enjoying each other's company. Going out to that horrible ice cream place again, picking out fabric for new shirts, tending to the garden, growing old together, falling asleep knowing of the other's warm, solid presence on the other side of the bed. The realization swept her, horrible and clear, that they could not be, and maybe never could have been. The past cannot be changed, and Luke is gone.

Anna's bedroom door opened. He walked in, sat down, took Anna's hand in his, and cried with her. It was warm, but Anna knew better.

Slowly, Anna's eyes ran out of tears. They were sitting on the wooden floor holding hands together, and it was silent.

Luke let go of her hand and stood up.

"I'm sorry," he said, and it carried the weight of almost a year with it.

"I'm sorry. I can't stay here forever. You need to live. You need to have a life, Anna." The ghost's face broke into an expression that was perhaps more than a smile. "I can't anymore, but you still can. You can talk to Marcus and sew and go to your crappy job and bake tomato tarts and walk up trails, and sing, and live."

"I'm not in your life anymore, but you're still going to live. It does not end with me.

"Let me go."

Anna pulled him into a crushing hug, which he reciprocated almost as tightly. She cried again, into his shoulder, where the tears sunk into the purple cotton fabric of his shirt. He smelled like sweat and dirt and salt, and she could feel him breathing, and his body was warm and solid.

And then he wasn't.

Anna became aware that she was holding onto air, and perhaps always had been. Her arms slumped down to her sides. Then slowly, with great effort, she went downstairs and fixed herself a glass of water. A ray of sunlight came in through the kitchen window, pale at first, struggling through the clouds, but increasingly bright and vivid.

In the springtime, she would grow a garden.



Chosen

By: Skye Taylor



My parents would kill me for being here, but I couldn't resist the temptation. My brother was stupid enough to drive me to the nearby park and leave me there to "hang out" with my friends. All I had to do was call him when I was ready to go home. He seemed to forget something important: You can't hang out with friends if you have none.

I tapped my fingers nervously against the wooden arm of the chair I was sitting in as I waited for a worker to see me. I began tapping my foot to the song's rhythm on the radio playing from the social worker's office. I swiveled my head and glanced at the people around me. They were waiting for their social worker to approach them as well. My eyes landed on the boy standing beside his parents in the corner, holding a little girl's hand. His foot tapped on the floor like mine, but faster, not to the beat of the song. His hair was dark brown, and his unruly curls laid upon the top of his head in a mess. He glanced in my direction, staring past me and out the window. He had green eyes, the color of evergreen trees but brighter; they were so beautiful they looked fake. That's when I realized I knew him. Before I could look away, he waved at me with his free hand. I blinked back at him, and he whispered something to the girl he was with and began making his way over to me. My brain screamed, *Abort! Abort! Leave! Now!* Too late; he was right next to me.

Easton Myers, a junior at the local high school, the kid who just won't quit. No matter how many times I reject his friendship he keeps coming back. I prefer keeping myself company rather than letting others hang out with me. I'm focused on my goals; I don't need frivolous distractions like friends. However, Easton isn't my friend; he has the annoying urge to want to be my friend, and, for some reason, he won't give up. I stared down at my beaten up Converse, praying to God he would walk away and not bother me. I tried to look disinterested, ignoring him completely, but that failed.

"Hey, Kierra!" He beamed and took the empty seat next to me.

I sighed, "What, Easton?"

"Just call me East! What are you doing here?" he asked, raising his eyebrow, causing me to hide laughter behind a smile.

Dang it, this boy.

"That's none of your business," I said in a huff, crossing my arms, throwing him the moodiest look that I could muster.

Before he had the chance to press any more questions, Mrs. Lang, my family's worker from DCFS, came into the lobby. I immediately stood up. Every fiber in my body seemed to be shaking. If I had done everything just right, this would work! I would finally get the answers I've been hoping for years!

"Your parents didn't come with you?" she asked, gesturing for me to follow her back into her private office.

"Oh, you know them—busy with work!" I laughed. I've never liked lying but think of it as a necessary evil—the means to an end in this case. I followed her through the spartan hallways until we reached her office. I took a seat in the chair across from her, waiting for her to speak.

She smiled as she opened a manila folder. "This is everything on your biological parents, including their last known address." She closed the folder and handed it to me.

"Thank you! Thank you so much, Mrs. Lang!" a smile stretched across my face as I began to scan the items inside the folder.

"Of course, hon, that's my job," she watched me scan the contents of the folder before she continued, "Their names are Amanda and William Howards; they seem like decent people."

My smile grew wider. "I bet they are..."

We stood and she led me out the door and towards the waiting room again, she said, "Remember, sweetie, sometimes what you wish for isn't always what it seems. Don't get your hopes up." With one last reassuring smile, she disappeared back into her office.

I sat back down, going through everything in the folder, finally finding it. Their address as of four months ago! *It's only an hour or so away! Now I need to find a way to get there. I can't drive myself, maybe I could uber? No, my parents would wonder why I was going that far away. I can't trick Chase into driving me, he may be stupid, but he would never take me anywhere over twenty minutes. Gosh, why did he have to be so lazy!*

"You're adopted?"

I looked up and locked eyes with Easton to see him staring down at the folder.

Dang, it! Why did this boy have to be so nosy!

"Um, well, yeah."

"So, what do you want with your biological parents?"

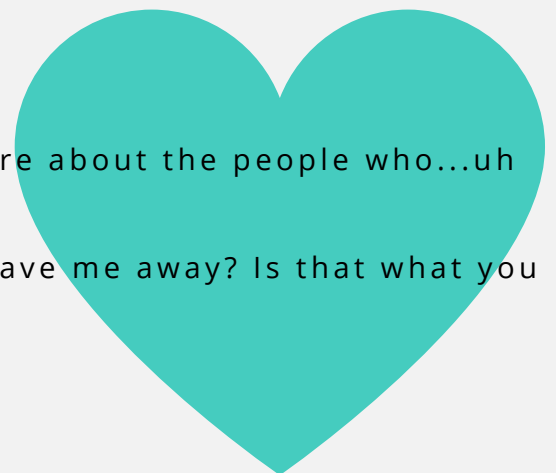
Why does he care?"I want to meet them."

Well, why? You already have a family. Why do you care about the people who...uh your-

I cut him off. "Why do I care about the people who gave me away? Is that what you were gonna say?"

"No...no, I just um-"

"I want to meet them."



But why-"

"Leave me alone!"

He grabbed the folder out of my hands and started reading it. Holding the folder above where I could reach, I was tempted to cause a scene to start yelling and hitting him, jumping on the chair next to me to grab the folder. But I didn't need to cause a scene. I needed to blend in. The last thing I need is for my parents to get a call. He held the folder behind his back and asked, "How do you plan on getting there?"

What is wrong with this guy! "Um, that doesn't concern you."

"Do you need a ride? I'll take you," he offered, handing me back the folder.

I snatched it from him, hugging it to my chest. Friends have no place in my life right now, not until I meet my real family. I would need to figure myself out once I meet my bio parents. Then everything will be perfect! As much as I hated Easton, I was unable to decline a free ride to my birth parents. *It's just two hours in the car then I never have to speak with him again. We aren't friends, but for now, I could use him.*

"Ok," I paused, "you want to give me a ride? Awesome. 11:30 tonight at my house." I spun on my heel and started walking out the door, waiting to hear him call out behind me. To protest the time like the goody-two-shoes that he is. Instead, I heard the door chime as it swung shut behind me. I turned back towards the door and saw him standing with his family. He didn't protest at all. *Maybe he's different than who I think he is.* I shook the thought from my head. Before I could turn around, I saw him glance at me. He winked before turning back to his sister.

What is with this kid?

I stared at the TV screen on my wall, stealing glances at the clock, checking the time. Every minute seemed to last an eternity.

11:23

I flopped onto my bed, letting my head hit the soft pillows underneath me. My parents go to sleep at ten and are both heavy sleepers. My brother, on the other hand, is where I could run into a problem. He doesn't go to sleep until 1 AM most days, sometimes even later. He's usually got his headphones on and playing with his buddies or watching TV. He might be too focused to even hear me leaving. I guess I'll only know when I actually do it.

11:29

That was my cue! I kept the TV running (I always do at night) and grabbed the bag I had packed. I shut off the light as I left my room, soundlessly creeping down the carpeted steps.

I glanced out the window where I saw Easton waiting in his car with the lights off, just as I texted him to be. *At least he takes instructions well.* I started opening the door when I heard my brother, "Where exactly are you going at this hour?"

Crap!

I turned around slowly, putting that angelic smile on my face, "Who me? I'm...having trouble sleeping, figured I'd take Gypsy out on a late-night walk."

"Gypsy isn't even-"

My dog ran over, leash in her mouth, as if on cue. All you have to do is say the word 'walk', and she can hear you from anywhere in this house. It's astonishing, actually. I petted her dark fur and glanced back at Chase, standing a few feet away from me. I never got caught because I didn't break the rules. *He's going to take way too much pleasure in catching me sneaking out.*

"Ok, don't take long-" Before Chase could finish letting me off the hook, I heard the click of a car door opening. *Dang it! He's coming to get me! I told him to wait!* Chase peered out the window, seeing Easton, then looked back at me.

"Just taking the dog out, huh?" Chase asked, a smirk stretching across his face. His blue eyes twinkled mischievously.

"Fine! You caught me! I'm...going to a party!" I rolled my eyes and pouted, crossing my arms and sighing.

This has to work!

He stared at me, his eyes locking on mine. I kept my face as pouty as I could, rolling my eyes and breaking our eye contact. He burst out laughing, clutching his gut. I stared up the steps, thinking of mom and dad fast asleep.

"Shut up!" I hissed.

He stopped laughing and took a breath. "You really think I believe that you would be going to a party? What are you up to, little sister?"

There's no other way out now. "I found my birth parents, and I'm going to see them." The words sounded terrific coming out of my mouth. Actually meeting them, finally.

"Ok, I'm coming with you," he stated, walking past me and out the door towards his truck. I wanted to protest and tell him this wasn't his job or his place, but I'm meeting them anyways, so I might as well get on the road. I followed him out of the house, locking the light blue door behind me. Quickly, I explained to Easton that my brother caught me. He insisted on taking me to meet my birth parents himself. Luckily, East wasn't needed anymore, and that was a relief. However, he followed me to the Chevy truck my brother was already seated in. He's gonna insist on coming with me, isn't he?

Before he could open his mouth, I sighed. "Whatever, get in the back."

He beamed his perfect smile at me and jumped in the back seat of the truck. I took my spot in the front next to Chase, I plugged the address into his phone, and we were off. I turned on the radio and stared out the window. Finally, I would be able to move forward. After tonight I could really live. I'll know where I came from. *After all this time, I can work on myself and discover who I am. Everything is gonna change tonight.* The car was quiet, with only the melody and soft words of the radio playing for noise. I'm wasn't complaining, though; I didn't want to talk to either of them.

"I can't believe you would do this, Kierra," Chase whispered, glancing over at me.

"Excuse me?" I retorted, an annoyed snort escaping me.

"What was going through your head? Finding your biological parents? You have a family, a great one at that. Why do you need them?"

"You wouldn't understand. You aren't adopted." I spat those words at him like straight venom from a deadly snake. Immediately I felt the air go tense. Chase's grip tightened on the steering wheel, his veins popping out of his arm. His muscles easily visible while he clutched the wheel, anchoring him down.

"You always act so misunderstood and like you have the worst life ever. Reality check, you don't!" He stared only at the road, not even glancing at me.

"How would you know! You don't understand me, you never have, and you never will!"

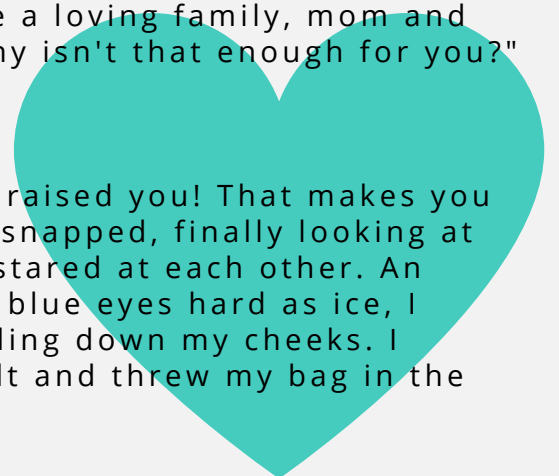
He snorted. "There you go again," he changed his voice to mimic my own continuing, "Poor me, I'm so alone and misunderstood. You could never understand me. Everything in my life is terrible."

"You don't understand what it's like! Knowing my own parents didn't want me!" My voice started to quiver along with my hands. I gripped the sides of the seat with all my strength trying to focus on the tangible feeling of the old leather. I breathed deeply, the smell of old leather and vanilla ice cream filling my lungs. Vanilla ice cream. It's not my favorite flavor and it's not Chase's either but ever since I can remember whenever we'd get ice cream together, we both always got vanilla. Warmth grew in my stomach spreading through my body with the joy of those memories, filling me with calm but only for a second.

"You're right! I don't understand that! But you have a loving family, mom and dad chose you, they love you more than anyone, why isn't that enough for you?"

"I need to know where I came from," I sighed.

"Why? You were raised here by mom and dad. They raised you! That makes you who you are! Not the people who gave you up!" He snapped, finally looking at me, his face burning red. Our eyes locked, and we stared at each other. An unspoken boxing match happening in our eyes. His blue eyes hard as ice, I turned towards the window as the tears started falling down my cheeks. I couldn't sit there with him. I unbuckled my seat belt and threw my bag in the other empty seat in the back.



"What are you doing!" Chase exclaimed, looking between me and the road. I climbed over my seat and into the back. Hitting my head against the roof of the car as I did so. Chase glared at me before turning up the music, the one thing we had in common. *Always play your music loud when you're mad or sad.* Tears ran down my face, not seeming to want to stop. I stared out the window at the passing trees and empty roads. East put his hand on my shoulder; there was no room for me to move away. He rubbed my shoulder as I stared out the window. He didn't speak a word, but he was there. That was all I needed. For the rest of the trip, we sat in devastating silence, waiting to arrive at our destination.

12:45

We pulled into a small, typical suburban neighborhood. Filled with townhouses, white picket fences, and tall oak trees. House twenty-three is where they live, Amanda and William. My birth parents. We pulled into a circle, and their house sat right in the middle. It was surrounded by similar homes, each looking straight out of a 50s sitcom. They seemed to be filled with Barbie-like housewives in round dresses and heels, making dinner for the perfect American family. I leaped out the door before the car was even stopped, my feet running faster than ever before. Their house had a bright red door, but the lights inside were off.

They're asleep as most people are at this hour. The place seemed bigger, like it was looming over me. Almost monster-like, ready to devour me in a single bite. I have waited for this day since I was a child, yet I couldn't knock on the door. *Why?*

12:57

"You don't have to knock, Kierra," Chase said.

Just the push I needed. I knocked on the door and stepped back. Everything remained still. Not a single creature stirred. I knocked on the door again, this time harder. Nothing?

Again.

Again.

Again.

Again.

"Kierra, they're not answering..." Chase placed a hand on my shoulder. I shrugged him off, walking past him towards the parked truck. "Let's go home," his voice rang through my head like a church bell on Sunday.

Go home? I can't go home without answers, I can't! Maybe this isn't the right house. I'll check the neighbors. I marched to the house to the left of my birth parents and knocked on the door. A light flickered behind the upstairs curtains, and a shadow appeared. I stepped back and heard the click of the door opening. Smelling like fresh roses and burning candles, a woman answered. She was dressed in sweats and an oversized t-shirt and her hair was a mess on top of her head, held together by a tiny hairband.

I hesitated before saying, "Hello, ma'am, do you know Amanda and William Howards? I'm looking for them."

Her face softened in the dark light as she looked at me and tilted her head. "Oh dear, Amanda and William died two months back in a car accident..." she said, giving me a sympathetic smile.

"Oh...sorry to bother you then."

Dead. I stared down at my sneakers. Everything around me paused, seeming to take a breath. The wind stopped breezing through the trees, the crickets stopped chirping, the stars and moon ceased to shine any longer. The ground beneath my feet seemed to give way, and I collapsed on the grass.

This can't be happening! This is all I have ever wanted, to know my family. I squeezed my eyes shut, not letting the burning tears stream down my frozen cheeks. Every sense seemed dulled. The only thing I could feel was cold, as if my body had turned to stone. Unfeeling and unmoving. My shoulder tingled as strokes of warmth melted my icy exterior. Worry flooded East's eyes as he studied me, trying to understand what was going through the maze of my brain. Chase was by his side.

I whispered, the words numb on my lips, "they're dead."
Silence.

Warmth encompassed my whole body as Chase wrapped his strong arms around me. My chest swelled, and my throat clenched, holding back my sobs.

"It's ok... you're safe with me," Chase hushed, stroking my hair. Sobs racked my body, overflowing like a dam just broken down. His arms held onto my tiny body, which seemed to go limp. He whispered into my ear over and over, "You are ok."

I wanted to believe him, more than anything, but how could I? My cries slowed down, leveling out. The initial shock of the situation fading in my mind. How could I be so upset over people I never even got to meet? People who abandoned me.

"Why did you want to find them so badly?" East asked.

"I need to know where I came from to know who I am," I sighed.

East continues, "You know where you came from. Your parents are Taylor and Mackie Lennox. A lawyer and a police officer."

Chase picks up from there, joining East, "You grew up in Connecticut where our dad was born and raised. Every year around Christmas, we would visit mom's family in England. You were raised to live loud, laugh loud, and sing loud even if it's off-key."

"They raised you. They are why you are who you are. You have a family, a wonderful family. You've been pushing them away and searching for answers anywhere else when they were right in front of you," East finished.

The two boys shared a nervous glance as they waited for my response.

"I'm Kierra Hope Lennox," I whisper, tears swelling in my eyes, "I have an amazing family...and I've been terrible to them for years."

Chase hugged me. "You can fix this."

"Why did you want to find them so badly?" East asked.

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"I'm Kierra Hope Lennox," I whisper, tears swelling in my eyes, "I have an amazing family...and I've been terrible to them for years."

Chase hugged me. "You can fix this."

He was right. I can fix this. I've wasted years of my life ignoring my family because I was bitter. I complained and whined when everything I could ever need was right within my clutches. I was too blind to see it.

I owe everyone around me an apology, but most importantly, my mom and dad. They have done nothing to deserve how I have treated them over the years.

We got back in Chase's truck, and the journey back home began. Halfway home Chase got a call from our parents; they would be waiting for us to return. I would be grounded for months, yet I smiled. Although these people who raised me aren't biologically related to me, they chose me.

Family is more than DNA. Family is the people who stay around when everything else is falling apart. Family is the people who chose you time and time again, and they never fail you. I have a family, a better family than most. I am forever grateful.



Faithfully

By: Breahna Dougherty

I just can't catch a break today. I stupidly stepped in that puddle filled pothole on my way walking into work. I've been dealing with numerous distraught last minute Valentine's Day customers at Bailey's Boutique, and my coffee got cold before I could drink it. The one thing I looked forward to today and I was too busy to actually enjoy it. This is why I cannot stand Valentine's Day. Maybe the pothole thing has no relation to today but considering it's under the umbrella of things I'm ticked off about, I might as well defer the blame anyway. I mean, why make a holiday that only couples can enjoy? Are anniversaries and dates not enough that they have to shove another day down the rest of our throats? We get it, you're in "love."

What is that supposed to mean anyway? *Love*? In the romantic sense, I mean. I love my family, and I certainly love Bruno, my sweet german shepherd. I just don't understand how you can fall in love with someone. That just doesn't sound realistic to me. I guess it doesn't matter because I fully intend on staying home tonight and watching Netflix until I pass out.

That being said, I guess I should head back to the shop. I'm sure they're flooded with more last minute romantics, desperate to shower their love with expensive bouquets. I will never truly understand the need to- what the hell?

"Oh jeez, I am so sorry. Are you okay?" A worried male voice says above me.

No, I am not.

"Usually when you open a glass door, you're supposed to check for humans on the other side. It's called common sense." How could someone be so blind? Do my ears deceive me or is this guy actually laughing at me now?

"Haha, right, my bad, next time I'll make sure to look for bright red curly haired girls. I honestly don't know how I didn't see you before." He stretches out his hand to me, and I finally take a second to look at him.

He must be the new delivery guy because he's wearing the same getup that Johnson usually wears. It's a shame Johnson left. He was definitely my favorite. He used to have the best dad jokes. Without taking his hand, I finally push myself off the wet pavement and stand up.

"Alright, well, do you mind?" I motion towards the door, now feeling very impatient and kind of pissed off. "I'm now late from lunch and bruised, thanks to you."

"Oh, I'm Marty." He reaches out his hand again.

What is with this guy and trying to touch me? "Yeah, and I'm late."

He laughs again and finally moved out of the way and opened the door. I start to walk through, rolling my eyes at the gesture and large amount of customers waiting to be helped. "You're Jeannette, right?"

"How do you know that?" He smiles and looks down at my boobs. "Um, excuse me?"

"Name Tag." He tapped on his own chest. "Also, everyone seemed to be asking for you. You're pretty popular around here. Must make really nice flowers."

He is so lucky that he wasn't actually staring at my chest. "Flower arrangements, yes."

I turn away and head for the counter, and I can see Lisa coming back from the refrigerator.

"Oh Nettie, you wouldn't believe the amount of people who refused to let us help them without you here. We'd be lost without you."

I smile. That made me feel a bit better. On the inside. My bottom end, however, is still throbbing in pain. "I would have been here a lot sooner if Matt didn't knock me over with the door."

"It's actually Marty, but I'm sure you knew that, Nettie."

Oh, that son of a-

"Lisa, I'll be back in a few hours after I make these deliveries, call me if you need anything."

"Alright, Marty, you be careful out there, will ya?" Lisa says as she before helping the next customer in line.

"Absolutely." And he turns around and leaves. Not without giving me an evil smirk first.

What a jerk!

"He's cute, ain't he?" I shoot Lisa a look of shock. "Not for me, silly. But, I do know someone who looks about his age and seems to already be getting along."

She can't be serious.

I'm not really sure how but a few hours have gone by, and I can finally breathe as Lisa turns the sign on the door to read "closed." Lisa then heads to the back office to count the drawers.

I start cleaning up the cut stems and fallen petals off of the floor as I hear the door ring again. I guess she forgot to lock the door, and I guess people forgot how to read.

"I'm sorry, but we're actually closed for the day," I say as I get ready to stand back up from the floor.

"Are you always on the floor? Or is this just a coincidence?"

Oh god, I completely forgot about him. I stand up and see him standing there on the other side of the counter with a few coffee cups in a cup carrier on the counter. After having my eyes glued to what appears to be Roasted Rocco's fresh coffee for a few seconds too long, I look back up at him from over the counter.

"I picked up coffee for everyone on my way back. I'm sure you all need it. Maybe you could consider this a peace offering from earlier." He looks hopeful, and I'm sure I looked desperate.

"I'll consider it." I grabbed the coffee labeled WM Latte for white mocha and took a sip. Hot and delicious. This is perfect. I can't help but smile a bit. "Alright, you might be off the hook."

He throws his fists up in the air excitedly. What a dork. I guess he's not too bad.

"I knew that would work. Easy peasy. Now, can you tell me my name?"

I smirk, contemplating calling him Matt or Mark or something crazy like Fabio. He did, however, buy me the world's greatest cup of coffee. "McFly. Marty McFly."

He smiles. "Yeah, yeah. Back to the Future. Never heard that one before."

I laugh until I hear Lisa clear her throat from behind me.

"I don't mean to interrupt," she starts.

"Oh, you're not." I shut that down immediately. *Nice try, Lisa.* It's not happening. They both start to laugh.

"Alright, well, drawers are all counted and put away. I see you got the coffee, Marty." I look at her confused.

"You knew? What, did you pay him to get this?"

"Well, no, he just asked me what you liked while he was out," Lisa says with a sly smile on her face.

Hmm, now that's interesting.

"To be clear, I also got you coffee, Lisa." He looks a little flushed but the smile remained.

"I don't drink coffee, honey. You would have known if you asked." Now he looks a bit embarrassed. "Are you all good to stay and clean up while I go drop off the bank deposit?"

"I can help." Marty says.

I could actually use the help, so maybe that's not a terrible idea.

"Why thank you, I'll be back in a few."

Lisa heads toward the back, and I stay silent until I hear her leave. I turn back towards Marty to see him already looking at me.

"I'm going to water the rest of the flowers left and feed them. Can you finish cleaning up back here?" I motion towards the messy floor and counter. Everything happened so fast today, and we've been walking on stems and petals for hours without realizing.

"Yeah, sure, no problem."

He makes his way back behind the counter, and I pass him the broom I was holding and make my way to the display refrigerators that have only a few stranded bouquets left. Unfortunately, these ones are in poor shape, so I might just be better off tossing them and replenishing in the morning from the fridge in the back. I take the very few remaining flowers, mainly dying roses and a few bundles of tulips, and I head over to the back door where our biggest trash can is and throw them out.

As I make my way back up front, I hear Marty humming something to himself. Now that I think about it, I guess we were too busy today to turn on the usual playlist we listen to. I walk over to the iPad and hit shuffle on Pandora. An 80's rock station starts to play through the speakers at a soft volume, and I listen for a second before making my way back over to the empty display case to clean the shelves.

"I haven't heard this song in a while," Marty said. I take a second to listen to hear the song and figure out which one it is. "Faithfully" by Journey.

"This is a good one." I chime back.

I go back to cleaning the shelves, and then I remember my coffee. *It's probably cold now.* I turn around and head towards the counter, Marty is on the other side now, using the Swiffer to mop the floors. I jump up and sit on the counter and grab my surprisingly still warm coffee and start drinking it again. Gosh, this is so good.

"Thanks again, for this. I was pretty sure today was ruined from the start, but now, it's not so bad." He stops sweeping and leans against the wall with the mop still in hand. "Despite some light bruising and stepping into a lake-sized puddle, I'd say this was an above average day."

He chuckles.

"I am really sorry about that, by the way. It's not like me to knock over innocent coworkers on my first day of work."

I take another sip before responding. "You happened to catch me on one of the worst days of the year too. Valentine's Day is not my favorite." I look over towards the doors. I can see people rushing past. People like me who don't celebrate today. That may be because most of them don't have someone to celebrate with, but I, on the other hand, don't see the point. "I mean, what's the point in it anyway?"

"Well, I think the point is to remind people how much you care about them. About how much you love them."

There's that word again. Love.

"You shouldn't need a holiday to express how you feel about someone." I took another sip. It's almost empty, but maybe I can drink Lisa's since she won't want it.

"That's a good point." I hear him set the mop down against the wall and hear him jump up on the counter next to me, facing the opposite way. "When my ex and I celebrated Valentine's Day last year, it was kind of an eye opener on how our relationship was very surface level. It was like we were just going through the motions. Today revealed how wrong we were for each other."

I look at him from the corner of my eye and sipped my last bit of coffee.

"I'm sorry to hear that. That must've been hard." He laughs. Why would he laugh? Do I have a coffee -stauche or something?

"It was actually a lot easier than I thought. It feels freeing knowing you're one step closer to the right one."

I roll my eyes. The right one! Ha! Does he really believe in all of that?

"Well, I hope you find her. I don't think any of that actually exists." I eye Lisa's cup from next to me. I mean, I wouldn't want it to go to waste right? Yeah, that would just be wrong.

"Him, actually," he corrects me, "and I used to think the same thing."

“Excuse me, I didn’t mean to assume.” Now look who’s the embarrassed one.

“Nah, don’t worry about it. I get it all the time.” He looks at me comfortingly.

Ugh. Now I feel really stupid.

“You don’t think any of it is real until it happens to you. And when it happens, it happens all at once, and then you don’t know what happened, but you’re completely, madly in-love and you forget all about before. Before you knew it was real. Before when you felt so lonely. Everything just changes.”

I never thought of it like that. Still doesn’t sound legit though. How can you even “fall in-love” with someone who has a whole different life than you? They have different habits and struggles and germs. That doesn’t sound desirable at all.

“You sound like you know what you’re talking about.” I’m so glad I stole Lisa’s coffee. I definitely needed the extra caffeine.

“Yeah, and it was beautiful.” I finally look at him and he’s just smiling. He looks different now. Like he knows something I don’t. Like it’s something so secret that only he and his partner would know.

I kind of want that. I want to know what he knows. I want to understand. “Tell me more, will you?” I set down the coffee and turn towards him, crisscrossed applesauce on the counter and just look at him.

He turns his head to the side and then shifts his whole body to mirror mine. “Okay.” He says.



A Fun Trip Turned Bad

By: Jessica Cotton

She shouldn't have been wearing that dress. She shouldn't have been wearing that dress. She shouldn't have been wearing that dress. Those words repeated in Abigail's head. *What did my dress have to do with anything? How do people have the heart to do this? What did I do wrong?* All of these thoughts ran through Abigail's head after the incident.

The trip started off as a bright and beautiful Sunday morning. Abigail and her girlfriends were getting ready to leave for a trip to Punta Cana. Abigail, Lauren, Alyssa, and Hannah were all jumping up and down because they finally got to go on a trip with no parental guardians. They were in their freshman year of college and finally felt a sense of freedom. As the girls got ready for their flight that Sunday morning, the house was filled with giggles and excitement. They got their final belongings together and headed to the airport in an Uber.

"The only thing on my mind right now is laying on the beach!" Abigail said as she walked through the airport.

"With a delicious Piña Colada!" said Lauren.

As the girls strutted their way through the airport, they could only think about getting to Punta Cana. Due to their tunnel vision of Punta Cana, they were oblivious to anything else happening. The girls went through security and got on their flight.

As they did all of this, they were too distracted to realize two suspicious men were following them onto the flight. The men heard the girls talking about where they were going and ran over to buy a plane ticket.

It seemed like these men did this often. Their names were Gabriel and Scott, as the girls would find out later during their trip.

"Two tickets for Punta Cana," said Gabriel to the airport employee.

The employee gave him two tickets, and their flight was the same flight the girls were going to be on. The girls had no idea that these men existed let alone what they were planning. The girls got in the seats on the flight and were still so excited that they were distracted to anything around them.

"I can't believe we are getting ready to take off... four hours and we will be there. I am so excited!" exclaimed Abigail.



“They have no idea what is about to come their way,” said Scott.

The two men sat behind the girls, making sure to always keep their eyes on them.

The girls still have not realized that these suspicious men were following them. The plane took off and the girls became even more excited and started giggling. They couldn't believe that they were going on a vacation by themselves.

After two hours, Abigail went to the bathroom on the plane. She walked past the two men as she passed down the aisle. They eyed Abigail up and down as she went past them, but she didn't notice them.

“She is the one. That is the one we have our eyes on. She is our target,” Gabriel whispered to Scott.

Abigail came out of the bathroom and returned to her seat. Once again, the men gazed at her. They knew she was the one they wanted to prey on. The next two hours on the plane went by quickly. The girls just talked about what they were going to do while they were in Punta Cana and how much fun they were going to have. At least, they thought they were going to have fun.

The flight was finally about to land, and the girls were jumping for joy. The men were still making sure they never took their eyes off them—especially not Abigail. After the plane landed, the girls began to gather the carry-on bags and all their belongings. When the plane landed, the girls walked off the plane and into the Punta Cana airport.

When they got outside, they called a taxi and headed to their resort.

Following closely behind them were the two suspicious men. As the girls were getting into the taxi, the men got a little worried that they were going to lose the girls and not be able to see what resort they were staying at.

The men quickly found a taxi to follow the taxi the girls got in. These two men had nothing in mind except their focus on kidnapping Abigail. They did not have a hotel room to stay in. They just knew they wanted Abigail in their possession. The men were telling the taxi driver every turn to take without it being suspicious as to why they were following the taxi.

“Turn left here! Make a right!” shouted Gabriel to the taxi driver.

Gabriel was trying to be calm and not draw attention to the situation, but it was hard not to when he was so worried about losing the girls. Both taxis finally pulled up to the resort. The girls got out and went inside to check in while Gabriel and Scott waited a little bit so they would not be suspicious. After the girls checked into their room, the two men went to the front desk to try to get a room for that night.

"We just need one room for tonight," said Gabriel.

"We do not have any rooms available for the next three months straight. We are so booked up," the resort employee said.

Gabriel and Scott became very angry and began punching and throwing things because they thought they were not going to be able to capture Abigail if they did not have a room at the resort. As Gabriel became angrier, the manager of the resort came out and told him they could squeeze him in, but he would have to pay extra. Gabriel agreed and they checked into their overpriced room.

Gabriel and Scott quickly put their belongings in their room and went to see if they could find where the girls are staying.

"I hear a lot of giggles coming out of this room. Maybe they're in there," said Scott.

Gabriel and Scott stood outside of the room filled with giggles until someone came out of it. They stayed down the hall a little bit, so they would not seem suspicious.

The girls were getting ready to go out, but the men did not know this, so they started to get irritated that they were taking so long to come out.

Finally, the girls were done getting ready and they left their room to go downstairs to the bar. They were not used to the bar scene since the drinking age is twenty-one in the United States and eighteen in Punta Cana. They went with the flow and still did not realize Gabriel and Scott were following them. The girls got to the bar and started drinking some margaritas. They started to become quite intoxicated.

At that point, Abigail headed over to the bathroom by herself.

Her three friends stayed at the bar and kept drinking and flirting with the guys at the bar. As Abigail went to the bathroom, Gabriel and Scott had their eyes on her and Gabriel started to follow her. Their plan was for Gabriel to kidnap her and Scott to bring the rented van up to the resort, so they could drive away quickly. As Gabriel followed Abigail, she felt someone getting close to her. She began walking faster to the bathroom but before she knew it, Gabriel attacked her and put his hand over her mouth and dragged her to the van. Since the bathroom was in the front of the resort, they did not have far to go. Abigail screamed as loudly as she could, but nobody could hear her because Gabriel's hand was covering her mouth.

"Let me go! What do you want from me?"

Gabriel would not answer her and just kept dragging her until they got to the van. Once they got in the van, he let her go and she continued screaming. Scott was driving and he sped off away from the resort.

After a while, Lauren, Hannah, and Alyssa realized Abigail was taking a long time in the bathroom. All three girls left the bar to go find her, but they had no luck. They went to the front desk to see if they saw her go to their room, but they did not see her.

The girls started getting worried and began panicking. After searching everywhere on the resort and calling her phone a million times, they felt helpless.

They decided to call Abigail's parents. Abigail's dad did not hesitate for a second and drove to the airport to get on a flight to Punta Cana. Abigail's mom joined him and within four hours, they were at the resort looking for Abigail themselves. Abigail's parents demanded that the manager show them every camera angle they have.

After watching hours of camera footage, they finally got to the one that was hidden in the back hallway where the bathroom was located. They saw Gabriel covering Abigail's mouth and dragging her to the van. Next, they saw the front of the resort where Scott was waiting for Gabriel and Abigail in the van, and they got the license plate from this footage. Abigail's parents immediately called the police, but they told them they could not look for her until the next morning. They explained that this was because it was dark, and they would not be able to find her in the middle of the night. They continued explaining that the Dominican Republic does not have the same laws as the United States.

"That is ridiculous! She will be dead by then. I'm going to look for her myself!" Abigail's father said.

"Sir, we really do not recommend you do that due to the fact that we do not know if these men are dangerous," stated the police officer.

Abigail's father did not listen to the police. Abigail's parents rented a car and drove around Punta Cana searching for their daughter. It was now two in the morning, and they still were not having any luck. The girls stayed at the resort in the hotel room in case Abigail happened to show up.

"I feel so helpless. I want to help look for her," said Lauren.

"I know. Me too. It is better for us to stay here though in case she escapes and comes back here," Hannah said.

The girls decided to stay in the hotel room and tried to stay calm. They had faith in Abigail's parents that they would find her. As Abigail's parents continued searching for her, they saw this little run-down shack that looked very suspicious. There were multiple vans in front of this shack and Abigail's dad had a gut feeling that she was in there. He parked the car and got out. He started looking in the windows to see if he could see anything. He did not see anything, so he knocked on the door. Nobody answered so Abigail's dad barged into the shack.

"Come out! Give me my daughter!"

Abigail's dad was not positive that she was in this house, but he had such a strong gut feeling about it. Abigail's mom was in the driver's seat in the car, and she was ready to drive off if the dad had to come running out. Nobody answered the dad, so he searched the whole house. He slowly went into the basement with a flashlight. As he was searching the basement, he looked in a door and found Abigail tied up with tape over her mouth.

"Abigail! What.... Just... Let me untie you!"

Abigail's dad untied her and suddenly they heard footsteps upstairs. Abigail stayed quiet and pointed to a window. The dad opened the window where Abigail was able to fit through and run to the car where her mom was. The dad was not able to fit through this window, so he stayed in the basement. Gabriel and Scott started walking into the basement. They turned expecting to see Abigail, but they realized she was not there.

"Where is she? How did she get away?" Gabriel said.

As they were focused on looking for Abigail, her dad made a run for it and went up the steps and out the door to Abigail and her mom. Gabriel and Scott chased after him and even went as far as getting in their van to follow them.

As they were driving, Abigail's dad called the police station and told them they were headed their way and the kidnappers were behind them. Gabriel and Scott did not know Abigail's dad was leading them to the police station. As they pulled up the police station, the police were outside waiting for Gabriel and Scott.

Gabriel and Scott were not going to stop once they saw the police, so the police shot their tires with their guns. They had no choice but to stop now. The police ran over to the men and put them in handcuffs. They put the two men in jail until they were able to question them the next day.

Abigail's parents took her back to the resort where her friends were anxiously waiting for her. When she walked into the hotel room, they all cried and were so grateful she was safe. The girls decided that they were not going to stay in Punta Cana, and they wanted to go home as soon as possible. The police told Abigail that they wanted to bring her in for questioning the next day, so they had to at least stay until tomorrow. The girls went to bed and Abigail tried to not think about what had happened to her.

The next day, Abigail's parents brought her to the police station, and they did some questioning.

"If possible, can you tell us the whole story from beginning to end?" asked the cop.

Abigail told them the whole story but when it came time to tell them about when the men raped her, it got hard for her to continue. The police told her they got all the information they needed from her and told her they were going to question the men next. They brought Gabriel in to question him, and Abigail was in a separate room. The police did not know but Abigail could hear everything they were saying.

"What prompted you to do this to her?" asked the police.

"She shouldn't have been wearing that dress," Said Gabriel.

Since he said that, those words played repeatedly in Abigail's head. The police told Abigail she was allowed to leave and go home. The men were going to be locked away in prison and she should go home where she is safe. The girls got new flights back home with Abigail's parents. This incident was very traumatizing for Abigail, and she could not stop thinking about what happened to her.

The girls got home and realized how lucky they were to be alive and safe. This was a very traumatic experience for all four girls, and they said they were never letting each other go to the bathroom alone ever again.



Mirror Man

By: Devon Tindley

Red's a seductive color, but he didn't want any more meaningless hook ups. He was heading towards his thirties and knew it was time to start getting serious. Not the purpose of tonight, however. Tonight, Mason needed to have a fun, carefree night with the group.

Blue it is.

He buttoned his shirt right up until the second to last button. Casual house setting equates a casual button up. After his dress was right, he walked to the bathroom to fix up his hair with the perfect amount of gel and twenty quick seconds of the blow dryer. He wanted to look good. Feel confident. Who doesn't though?

As he was running his fingers through his partially greased up hair, the melodic voice of Siri echoed across the bathroom, "Call...from...Jade."

He quickly wiped his hand on the towel. "Hello my love."

"Hi, Angel," She responded. "I'll be there in twenty, the Uber canceled on me because I had..." in a mocking tone, "bad customer reviews. What does that even mean?? I threw up in TWO Ubers...four but still I paid the bill."

Mason laughed and replied, "You, my friend, are a mess, but I love you even more because of it. I'll be ready when you arrive."

"Okay, byeeee," Jade sang into the phone.

Fifteen minutes went by, and Mason grabbed the bottle of wine he put on the counter next to the door and headed downstairs to the lobby of his apartment building. It was truly a luxurious apartment. They had just built them in the middle of Manhattan.

The prices were ridiculous, but with Mason starting his new job, he was confident he could afford it, and he was right. He was a businessman. Specifically, an advertising executive and he was very good at his job, young, but talented. He was skilled at people. He could read them almost instantly and somehow, no matter the circumstance, could relate to them and what they were going through. Because of this quality, people attached to him, but he didn't mind at all.

BEEP!



Mason hopped in the backseat of the Uber and squeezed Jade tight. "How long has it been since we went out together?" He gave her one more squeeze and sat back.

"At least a month, c'mon that's ridiculous," she said, rolling her eyes.

"I hear that. Being an adult is exactly how they said it was going to be," he said.

"Well, all I'm saying is that I'm so beyond ready for this little get together." She sat back and put on her seatbelt.

"We're meeting Ben and Willow there?" asked Mason. Ben and Willow were the "it" couple. They had been together since college, but never took their relationship to a marriage. Mason thought this was odd considering how happy they seemed, but marriage was just a societal concept that was unnecessary anyway, so he partially understood it.

"Yes, finally we can chill like we used to in college. We need each other, Mas. You guys are the only genuine friends I have," Jade said, adding a fake laugh.

As the Uber pulled up to the loft, Mason opened his Snap for one more quick look at himself, making sure he was people ready. He and Jade headed up to the party to meet their friends.

"I'm so happy we're out, I know I keep saying it, but I also know you are too." She smiled at Mason.

"Oh, hell yes. I've been cooped up in that apartment for a month now, let's go see everyone!"

The two walked through the door and it was everything they expected the scene to be. There were groups of beautiful, young, and wealthy men and women. They were dressed for the occasion, which was a casual get together; however, just about all the guests came doused in Chanel, Gucci and Louis. No matter what the occasion was, people dressed to impress in the city, especially Manhattan. Jade took herself to the bar, leaving Mason to scan the room some more. He needed to know what the vibe was so he could assimilate.

"Mas!" a voice from behind grabbed his attention. It was Willow, his college roommate.

"Oh my god, look who it is. How are you!" he asked with his arms opened wide for a hug. It was a reunion he had been waiting for.

"I'm good, I'm good. How are you?" she asked squeezing him tight.

"Living my best life. Where's Ben?" he asked.

"He should be here any second. He had to work late at the hospital so he said he would meet me here," she replied with a smile.

"Well, I can't wait to see him. Isn't this just so great? Being out again," he said.

"I'm definitely happy to see everyone," she replied, "but honestly, I don't want to be here. I hate going out. It's not fun anymore, you know?" she said.

He wasn't expecting her to say this, but he knew how to respond. "Girl, I feel that. I didn't even wanna come but Jade dragged me out of my apartment." His statement was neither true nor false.

"Exactlyyyy," she said, "I knew you wouldn't want to be here either. We're always on the same page; this is why I love you," she sighed.

"Love you more," he said.

"Ben's here. I'm gonna head down and grab him. Good luck with the rest of these clowns!" she turned and walked towards the door.

He was alone again for a moment. He stood there taking everything in. He noticed a cute guy across the room, but quickly dismissed any thought about him. There was too much going on with his friends, he had to be present for them. He reminded himself to smile just in case anyone was looking at him. Of course, he didn't want anyone to think he wasn't having a good time, because he was. Well, he was when Jade was around, but if Willow were with him, he wasn't. It's not like he was lying to anyone; he just wanted his friends to feel comfortable. He always made this effort and prided himself on it. He was the friend everyone went to so they could vent. If you needed a person to be sad with, cry with, laugh with, make fun of other people with, Mason was your guy and it didn't matter when you needed him, he would be there. A true friend.

"Hi stranger, long time no see!" It was Ben, Willow's boyfriend, but they had all been equally close.

"Ben, you look great! How was work tonight? I heard you were there late," Mason said.



"Oh dude, it was crazy. I was on my way out when a trauma came in. I would never miss that. So, I threw my scrubs back on and did my very best and wouldn't ya know it I saved this woman's life," he said.

"You are the best doc in town, I believe it," Mason said.

"C'mon, follow me to the bar. It's been way too long and we're getting hammered tonight," Ben said turning around and leading Mason to the bar. He didn't want to drink tonight, but Ben did, so he cheerfully followed right behind him.

"I want two shots for me and my friend here, and then two whiskeys," Ben said.

Mason shivered at the thought of brown liquor. They each threw the shot back. It took everything in Mason to not make a face or reach for a chaser.

"That's my guy! You're a tank dude, we're taking alllll shots tonight," Ben said.

Mason felt good. It was the subtle compliment he was looking for to justify the drinks. He grabbed the whiskey prepared for him.

"You my friend, are an alcoholic," he joked to Ben, "I'm gonna look for Jade and Willow, I'll be back."

Mason spotted Jade in the kitchen and waved her over.

"There you are! I've been looking for you, oh my god is that whiskey? I never knew you drank stuff like that, impressive," she said. This comment of hers triggered his first sip. Instant burn, but he wouldn't show it.

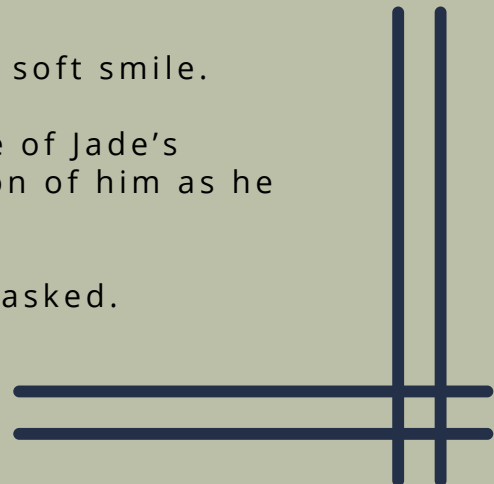
"Please, I'll drink anything," he lied.

"I'm actually so relieved I found you though," she said in a slightly serious tone. "I need my therapist."

"How can I be of service, my love," Mason said with a soft smile.

"Rich is here," she said rolling her eyes. Rich was one of Jade's temporary obsessions. Mason had no personal opinion of him as he really didn't know him. He needed more information.

"Okay," he said, "and how do we feel about that?" he asked.



"I don't know, it's just like annoying because he didn't even open my snapchat, but he viewed my story of me getting ready to come here so he obviously knew we were going to see each other," she said.

The context of her stress is almost comical, but it's 2026; these are adult problems now.

Mason matched her energy of annoyance as soon as he picked it up. "Honestly Jade, you need to start prioritizing yourself. You're at a party with a ton of eligible men but you won't even look at them why...because you're settling for someone who doesn't even want you. I know that sounds bad, but like, you're so much better than this and him. I mean look at you, you're stunning. Who would ever want to leave your snap unopened?" he said to her, hoping she loved the advice.

"You're right. Ugh! He's not even cute; I don't know what I was getting worked up about. I love you, you're the best. I can literally come to you with anything, and you know exactly what to say. Men SUCK," she exclaimed.

"Oh, yes, they do," he said in agreement, "Now go mingle with that cutie who's been staring you down."

She hugged him and walked away. Whatever Jade needed to hear to feel better and less lonely, Mason was there to comply. He was just happy his advice worked again. It was such a fulfilling feeling for him.

Mason stood alone again, in the kitchen surprised to see he had nearly finished his drink. He felt good, for the time being, but knew he didn't want to drink anymore, especially knowing he was Ubering back to his apartment, alone.

"M to the A to the S to the...Mason!" Ben said strutting over to Mason. "I have here another whiskey for you," he said extending his arm out.

"Ah, I think I have to pass this one up. I practically chugged the last one," Mason said.

"Oh no you don't," Ben said putting the drink in Mason's hand. This is the drink that's gonna have you feeling right," he said.

Mason obviously couldn't turn him down. Ben's energy for the night was high, and therefore Mason's was too. "You're convincing, I'll give you that," Mason said with a smile, reluctantly sipping more brown liquor.

"Ben, are you peer pressuring Mason into drinking?" Willow said walking up to them. She turned to Mason, "Don't let him fool you, he's the biggest lightweight of them all. After this drink, he's gonna pass out in bed tonight," she said laughing.

"I'll own up to it I am, I am. BUT, I work all the time, so I never really drink anyway. It's not college anymore," he shrugged and pulled Willow in giving her a gentle kiss on the cheek. The two of them were sweet together.

"Mason, one day you're going to find a guy like this who treats you better than you ever imagined," she said gazing up at Ben.

"I truly hope so," Mason replied.

"Trust me not all men are bad," she said, "I know guys get a bad rap, but there are some great ones out there.

"I believe it," he said cautiously scanning the room hoping Jade wasn't around to hear his contradicting conversation.

"Alright, just one more drink and I'm gonna order the Uber, babe, does that work for you?" Willow asked Ben.

"Works for me," he said, "It is getting late." The two of them headed to the bar leaving Mason alone once again.

"Where is the bathroom?" Mason mumbled to himself. At this point his three drinks were kicking in and for a non-drinker, they hit hard.

He walked himself to the bathroom and was relieved to see no one waiting. He flicked on the light and jumped at his own reflection in the mirror. "Drunk idiot," he laughed to himself. Looking in the mirror when you're drunk can be very fun or very terrifying. For Mason, it was the latter, but he didn't fully understand that yet. He stumbled slightly on his way out of the bathroom with a perfect timing running into Jade.

"I see the whiskey has been treating you right," she said putting her hand on his shoulder.

"I would have to agree with you," he said with a big grin. "Hey, how about you just Uber with me back to my place. It'll be just like the old times. Classic bestie sleepovers with popcorn and face masks," he asked her with a hidden desperation for her to accept this offer.

"Wow, I wish you asked me this sooner but...please don't kill me I'm going home with Rich," she said with a nervous but excited look.



Internally, he began to panic as the thought of going home alone, drunk, was petrifying only he didn't know why. "Girl, live it up and do you. I'm always here when you need me!" he said with a fake, drunk, smile.

"Love you, Mas, I'll talk to you tomorrow," she said and kissed him goodbye.

He was alone again, in a room full of unfamiliar faces. He pulled out his phone, squinting at the blurry characters on the screen. "Pull it together to order the Uber," he thought to himself. Five minutes away.

He took one more shot and headed downstairs to his ride. His Uber's name was Cait, or maybe it was Cris. He couldn't understand why but she was very lively. So, he became lively again and the two of them jammed out during the eight-minute drive to his apartment. She turned the music down as they pulled up and thanked him for being, "the highlight of her night." He was bummed to have this momentary fun come to an end.

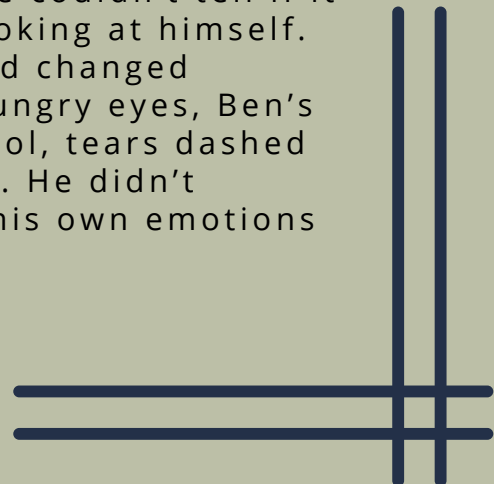
"I know we just met," he turned to her, "and I promise I'm not a murderer, but you should def come in and hang!" he said so excitedly.

She was appreciative of this offer but politely declined as she had many more pickups to do and drove away wishing him a good night. He was bummed.

He successfully made his way into his loft and started to undress. He was even more intoxicated now having done that extra shot before his Uber ride.

He was now actually alone. He picked up his phone to FaceTime his friends but remembered they had all gone home to sleep (or to sleep with people) and knew they wouldn't answer. He had no choice but to begin getting ready for bed before he collapsed with what he considered to be boredom.

He carried his drunken self to the bathroom so he could attempt his nightly routine. When he looked in his own mirror, he couldn't tell if it was just the alcohol or not, but he began to panic looking at himself. He did recognize his own face. Of course, nothing had changed physically, but for some reason he saw Jade's men hungry eyes, Ben's thirsty mouth, and Willow's fake smile. With no control, tears dashed down his cheeks, but he didn't remember feeling sad. He didn't remember feeling any emotion at all. He hadn't felt his own emotions since he was a kid. Mason was numb.



He stared into the mirror indefinitely. He just wanted to see himself in it, but he could not. At least not tonight. He had spent nearly his entire life mirroring the thoughts, feelings, and emotions of others that he no longer recognized himself. It began to make sense why he was terrified to come home alone or be alone at all for that matter. The smallest part of him knew he was going to come to this realization. When you finally are alone, there is no one to mirror but yourself. After what felt like an entire night spent in the bathroom, he wiped his face, finished undressing, and went to bed.

The next morning, he woke up to a normal screen of missed calls and anxious texts from his friends awaiting his rise. Normally, this kick-started his day of answering to everyone. He opened the texts from Jade that read, "CALL ME ASAP. I have to tell you everything that happened last night it was INSANE. Need my boy guru to figure this shit OUT. KK love you talk soooooon."

Usually, he would call her instantly to set up a lunch date, but today he responded with, "Super hungover today. I'll call you tomorrow. Love you," and turned off his phone.

He got out of bed, stretched, and walked into the bathroom. With a sigh of relief, he recognized all his own features. However, he had to create his own story so that when he did look in the mirror, it would be his own reflection staring back.





Bridget Maden-Smith - Painting

The Crash

By: Mary Burgan

SCREEEEEEEECHH BANG!

What just happened? I don't know where to look. I don't know what to say. Can I even speak? It's all blurry. It's hazy. It was just so loud, and now I can't hear anything. Why can't I hear anything? Am I dead? Should I be? There's smoke and fog everywhere. It smells horrible, like burnt rubber and fire. Oh shit, fire! Am I on fire? God, please, somebody do something! Why is nobody helping? Okay, here comes someone. Why is she walking by me? Don't walk by me! Why aren't the words coming out? Here come the tears. Oh God, I can't stop crying. Stop crying!

The EMTs rushed to the scene. There was metal everywhere. My car was crushed. I was crushed, metaphorically that was. Did I just hurt someone? Or even worse... Did I just kill someone? I had no idea what to think. Once I regained my hearing, all I could do was hear this loud machine. The police said it was supposed to pry open my door, but a small part of me never wanted to get out of the car. At this point I still couldn't stop crying. All I could think to myself was this is it; I'm going to jail. The hysterics kept coming, even after the EMTs began pulling me out of the car. I heard sirens and people talking, but I had no idea what was going on.

I was slid into the back of an ambulance, and I was STILL crying. There was so much going through my head but nothing at the same time. Now instead of crying I was convulsing. "I want my dad. I WANT MY DAD!" That's all I could say.

Could they even understand me through the tears? The EMT must've gotten my phone out of the car and called him because it seemed like he was there quicker than I could form another thought. I've never felt so helpless yet so at fault in my life. Why are these things called accidents but make you feel so guilty? I wasn't drunk or high. I wasn't texting and driving. Why is my stomach upside down? Once my dad arrived, he never left my side. Shortly after hearing my dad's voice, I felt the ambulance shaking. What is going on? what's happening? Oh my God what is happening? The same questions kept playing over in my head. My boyfriend just launched himself into the ambulance. Apparently, he jumped over the gurney, but I wouldn't know that until later. My eyes were glued shut at the time. I heard his voice and a small part of me felt warm and okay, but the other part felt more embarrassed than ever. Who told him? WHY would anyone tell him? I'm supposed to be perfect in his eyes not some maniac who crashed her car! Now he's never going to let me live this down.

The three of us plus an EMT drove to the hospital in Silverville and the convulsions never stopped. No matter how calming my dad spoke or how many times my boyfriend rubbed my head and played with my hair, I couldn't calm down. A small part of me wished no one came to my rescue at all. At this point the EMTs were more worried about me seizing than what just happened in the accident. They were asking me what I could remember, and I kept screaming, "I don't know I DON'T KNOW I DON'T KNOW!" But could they hear me? Things were still so surreal for me. Was I yelling? Or was that a whisper? Or worse, did nothing come out at all?

My head would only allow me to remember certain things. I remembered hitting the break but not stopping. I remember slowing down but still not stopping. I remember sliding into the car in front of me with the same ease and slickness as being slid into the ambulance. I remember losing my hearing and seeing the fog. I remember the smell. It seemed that I could remember stupid stuff but couldn't answer the two-part question everyone was asking. "How did you hit the car in front of you," asked the EMT. "Why didn't you stop? Was there something in the road? Were you... distracted?"

If I had a dollar for every time I was asked that exact question, I would have enough to pay my hospital bills and buy a new car. I think a small part of me didn't want to remember the answer. I didn't want to remember anything. I wanted it all to be over.

I got to the hospital and was admitted right away. My dad and boyfriend Mark were escorted to the waiting area, but I still couldn't stop crying. I thought maybe being alone would feel better, but it didn't feel any different. A piece of me couldn't feel anything at all. The convulsing might have stopped, but the nothingness in my brain was emptier than before. The doctors had the audacity to leave me in a hallway. That was so embarrassing. I had one of those neck collars on, my hair was a mess, and I was shaking like a crackhead going through withdrawal. *Great, now these people probably think I'm a crackhead.*

That was the new thought going through my head, and slowly I made myself stop crying. I hate being embarrassed and this accident was one of the most embarrassing things I've ever done. I never got detention in school let alone a speeding ticket in adulthood, so THIS was earth shattering for me.

"The people in the other car are fine," one of the nurses told me. I believed her; I had no reason not to. "You need to relax now, dear, continuously getting yourself worked up will only make the pain worse," she assured me.

I knew I didn't hit them that hard. I knew this wasn't done on purpose, but somehow it still happened anyway. *God, how did I let this happen?* That was the new question going through my head. After a short while my dad came back to see me, and the tears started again. I felt so bad for putting him through all of this. I made him worried. I caused him so much stress. He assured me everything was okay. He kept cracking jokes like, "Come on kiddo if you wanted a new car all you had to do was save up a little."

I appreciated him trying to help but it didn't. He filled me in on all 15 people waiting in the front of the hospital for me. I felt so small. I felt worse now than EVER in my life. All these people were here and I'm okay. Was I okay? I haven't talked to any doctors yet and I had to pee so bad. What if I was internally bleeding? What if I were externally bleeding but no one could see it because I'm laying down? After that, the tears came flooding in again. I felt so guilty for making everyone come to the hospital when there was nothing wrong with me. It felt so selfish.

One by one my family and friends began to come back and see me, so I forced myself to pull it together. They all had the same puffy bloodshot eyes and rosy, red cheeks. I think my sister's eyes were the worst. Maybe it's because she's fair skinned with blue eyes, so it was more noticeable or maybe she was just that distraught.

They all assured me they weren't worried, "You're a tough cookie," they all said in one way or another. "We weren't worried for one minute!" But their eyes said something else.

My boyfriend, the usual tough guy, looked worse than anyone. "I didn't know what to think... I thought you died" he said.

Was it bad that made me a little bit happy? I appreciated that he was worried about me. For a split second I felt like I mattered, like really mattered and somehow that made me feel a little bit better. His touch seemed to make the pain in my heart go away but it brought more feelings of guilt. Just like my dad, I felt horrible for stressing him out too.

After what felt like 3 hours, but was probably only 45 minutes, a nurse came to take me away. She said I had to get an X-Ray and then I could FINALLY pee! The scans took longer than I liked but they all came back clear. I was fine, so they said. I asked a million questions. "What can the scans see? What CAN'T the scans see? Should I get a head CT? I watch a lot of Grey's Anatomy, so I pretty much have my doctorate in general medicine."

The doctors looked at me like I was cracking jokes, but I was never so serious in my life. They tried to explain to me what shock was and that that is what I was going through. "The pain you're feeling right now will fade, you just have to relax."

Why was that so easy for them to say? Shortly after being put back into my spot in the hallway, it was confirmed I could pee. They said the allowance of a potty break was proof I was just fine. "THANK GOD!!!!" I said a little too loudly.

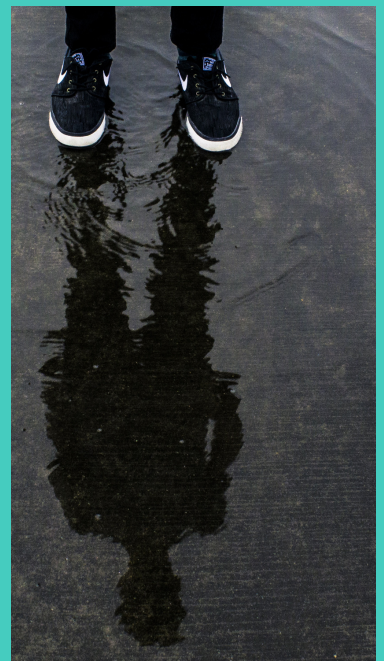
The older woman placed in the hallways behind me chuckled and that small sound flipped my mood around. I knew I was in pain, but obviously she was too if she was in the hospital. The brief second that she laughed made me feel like I did something right, finally. I made someone feel something other than pain!

After I came back from the bathroom the nurse was there with discharge papers and I was able to leave. I gathered myself to face everyone in the waiting room and the guilt came running back to me. I should've died. Maybe I should have broken something. Should I have more bruises? My thoughts ran wild. I felt so bad about worrying everyone and there was 'nothing' wrong with me. I guess I said my thoughts out loud this time because my boyfriend's mom tapped me on the forehead. "Don't you ever say something like that again!" After that we all released a much-needed laugh.

I drove home with my boyfriend that night. He didn't want to leave my side. As bad as it sounds, it was nice to be worried about for once. Thinking those thoughts only made me feel worse though. I felt safe in the passenger seat. I wasn't in control and for once in my life I was more than okay with that. The last thing I wanted was to get behind the wheel of a car. We pulled out of the parking lot and headed home. I was about 4-5 towns away from my own, but I was excited about the drive. It gave me a chance to just breathe and relax. He asked if I wanted something to eat, and I did but I couldn't stomach any food. We pulled into the nearest gas station, and he grabbed my favorite snacks for me anyway. Why did something like this have to happen for me to realize I'm not alone?

We pulled out of the parking lot to go home.

SCREEEEEEEECHH BANG!



The Diner on Maple Way

By: Ariana Nelio

January 12th, 2017

Sofia Walker sat in her crimson red Honda Accord, finding herself unable to move. Last night, her ex-husband of six months, Sebastian Walker, had sent her a text asking if she was able to meet him at the old diner on Maple Way the next day. Without question, she had accepted his invitation, but in the light of day, she found herself questioning her decision, but it was too late to go back.

Taking a slow, deep breath, Sofia finally yanked the keys out of the car's ignition and opened the door, stepping out. She took the clip out of her neat updo, letting her wavy brunette hair find a home on her shoulders. She walked slowly to the front door and stopped. She felt butterflies in her stomach as she thought about what the consequences of her accepting his invitation could mean. Sofia stood there for a minute, but before she could turn around and bolt, a nice elderly man who was walking out of the diner held the door for her. She faked a smile and thanked the man before entering the diner.

As Sofia stepped inside the diner, her eyes glanced around the establishment to see if she recognized anybody there, secretly praying none of her friends would see her there joining her ex-husband for lunch. As she was glancing around, she had set her sights on Sebastian. His hair was a bit disheveled, his face looked like he hadn't shaved in a few weeks, and his eyes didn't meet hers. His eyes seemed to be glued on the menu that was sitting in front of him.

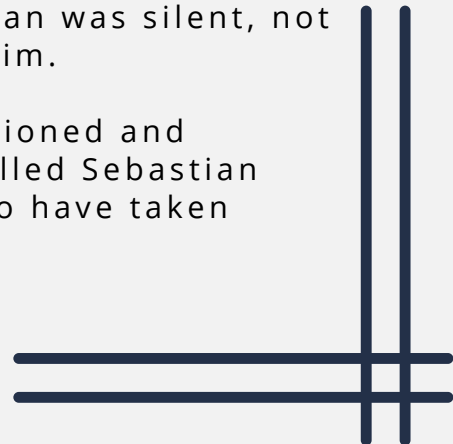
"Hey, Seb." Sofia said softly once she reached his table. His eyes lit up the way they did the day he first saw her.

"Sof, hey! Here, um, have a seat." Sebastian said, pointing to the empty seat across from him.

After awkwardly thanking him, Sofia took a seat. Sebastian was silent, not really looking in Sofia's direction as she was looking at him.

"Seb, honey, why'd you call me here?" Sofia finally questioned and seemed to question herself in the process. She hadn't called Sebastian 'honey' since they were married. That question seemed to have taken Sebastian aback as well.

"I just wanted to talk," he said softly.



"About?" Sofia inquired with a bit of an attitude.

"What happened... what happened with us." Sebastian finally gave in. Sofia could tell that he was trying to hold back tears.

"I don't really get what you're hinting at."

"I want to know where things went wrong. I want to know when you fell out of love with me." Sebastian kept looking down at his menu, trying to avoid eye contact with Sofia.

"Ok, so you wanna know where things went wrong? Let's figure it out."

September 8th, 2011

Sofia Henderson just stepped into her freshman year Biology class. She had never been so nervous for anything in her entire life. Sofia wasn't the best student in high school so she kept her fingers crossed that college would treat her a bit better.

Her palms were sweating as she walked around the lab, unable to find a seat. Her eyes fell on his one boy with straggly, long black hair who was staring at his lab textbook. Sofia shrugged her shoulders and started to walk up to him.

"Hey, is this seat taken?" Sofia asked. The boy slowly lifted his eyes to meet hers. Sofia seemed to have taken his breath away since he failed to answer right away.

"Not at all. Have a seat," the boy smiled at her, "I'm Sebastian." Sebastian stuck his hand out.

"Sofia. Sofia Henderson." Sofia stuck out her hand and met it with Sebastian's. It was the first time they touched.

December 12th, 2011

"I can't believe this semester is over already," Sofia said with relief as she and Sebastian walked out of their biology class for the last time.

"I definitely would have failed if I didn't have you to cheat off of the whole time," Sebastian said. He laughed when Sofia playfully punched his arm.

"Well, what are you gonna do without me next semester?" Sofia looked at Sebastian, who looked genuinely upset.

"Drop out. Cry. Never show up. Fail. I could go on and on." Sebastian smiled. "Listen, since this semester is over and we can finally stop talking about biology crap, I was wondering if you'd wanna go out with me sometime?"

"Sebastian Walker, are you asking me out on a date?" Sofia blushed. "Whatdya say, Sof?"

"Yes."

December 15th, 2011

Sofia stared at herself in the mirror, playing with every strand of her hair to make sure they were all perfectly placed. She applied a light pink lip-gloss to her lips and her outfit was finally complete. Sebastian would be here any minute, and she couldn't have been more nervous.

Sofia was playing around with her fingers, a tic she had developed anytime she was feeling any sort of anxiousness, when she heard someone knock at the door.

Knock! Knock! Knock!

Sofia scurried to the door and swung it open revealing a very cleaned-up Sebastian with a bouquet of beautiful, multi-colored flowers in his hand.

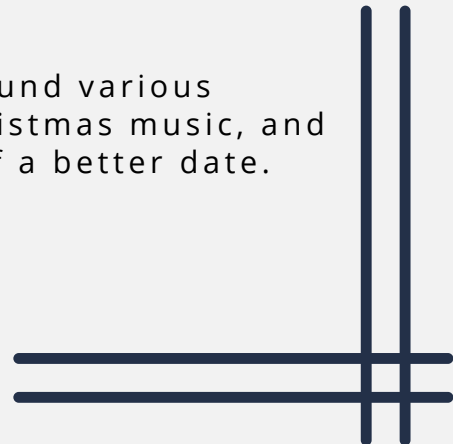
"I wasn't sure what kind of flowers you liked, so I got all of them," Sebastian said.

A smile crept up on Sofia's face as she took the flowers from his hands and placed a kiss on his cheek. *How did he know roses were my favorite?* She thought to herself. "You didn't have to do all of this." Sofia smiled as she smelled the flowers.

"I wanted to." Sebastian smiled seeing Sofia smile.

"Let me just put these in water and I'll be right out." Sofia ran to the kitchen and came back a few seconds later with her purse, and she and Sebastian were out on the road.

Sebastian had planned the perfect date. They drove around various neighborhoods, looking at Christmas lights, blasting Christmas music, and looking at the light snowfall. Sofia couldn't even think of a better date.



"Pull over here real quick!" Sofia frantically said to Sebastian, pointing at a house on the right. As soon as the car stopped, she had hopped out of the car and laid on the lawn of the house.

"Um, Sof, who's house is this?" Sebastian questioned.

"Can't you see the for-sale sign?" Sofia laughed, "I've loved this house ever since I was a kid. Every time I pass it, I always imagine myself living in it someday. But more importantly, I love the snow and I just wanna lay with you for a while." Sofia motioned for Sebastian to lay on the snow with her, and he did.

Both laid in the starfish position on some random lawn, covered in snow, and neither of them could be happier. Sebastian interlaced his fingers with Sofia's and both laid in silence, each feeling euphoria from the other's presence.

January 12th, 2017

"Just so you know," Sofia started, "To this day, that was the best first date I've ever had." She gave an awkward smile at Sebastian, who still seemed to have trouble making eye contact with her from the other side of the table.

"Have you been on other first dates since we broke up," was the only thing Sebastian seemed to get out.

Sofia lowered her head in embarrassment. She had, but Sebastian didn't need to know that.

December 15th, 2012

Today was Sofia and Sebastian's one year anniversary. Sebastian said that he had a huge date planned for tonight, which made Sofia excited but also extremely nervous.

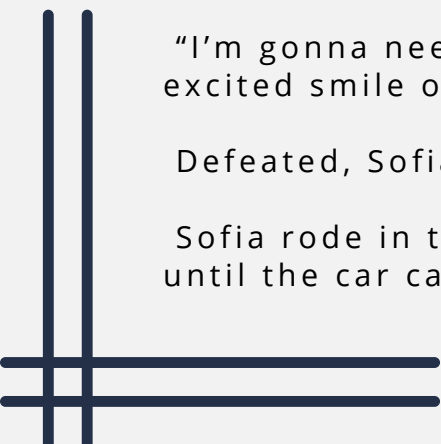
Sebastian arrived at Sofia's house on time with one thing in his hand. A blind fold.

"What the hell is that?" Sofia laughed when she saw it.

"I'm gonna need you to wear it. It's a surprise," Sebastian said with an excited smile on his face.

Defeated, Sofia replied, "Okay." And wore the blindfold.

Sofia rode in the car as Sebastian drove for about twenty minutes until the car came to a sudden stop.



"I'll be right back. Keep that blindfold on!" Sebastian said as he jumped out of the car.

A couple of minutes later, Sofia's door swung open, and Sebastian grabbed her arm, helping her out of the car. He guided her a few steps and told her she could take off her blindfold.

Sofia took off her blindfold revealing a house. The house. The house they laid in front of during their first date. But there was a sign out front of the house. "Just sold."

Sofia was staring at the house in astonishment as Sebastian started, "I bought it the day after our date. My father agreed to put it in his name if I'll give him payments. Even though I'll probably owe him for the rest of my life, it'll be worth it to be able to share a home and a life with you."

Covering her mouth in awe, she turned around to Sebastian who was on his left knee with a black box in his hand holding a glimmering ring. It took Sofia everything she had to hold back her tears.

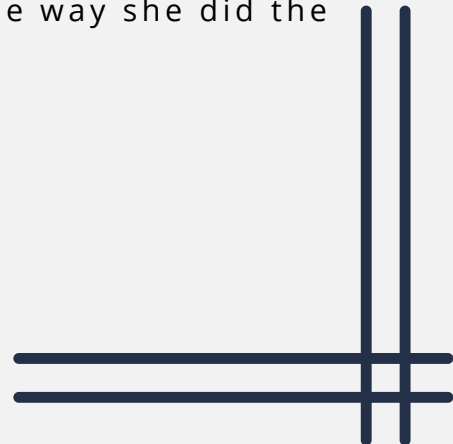
"Sofia Grace Henderson, I love you. I love you so much. I know we've only been dating a year, but I want to spend the rest of my life with you. I want to live in this house with you. I want to raise kids with you. I want to grow old with you. I can't imagine my life without you in it. I don't want to imagine a life without you. So, will you marry me?"

Sofia wiped the tears that were coming down from her face. "Yes. Yes. YES!" She yelled excitedly.

After Sebastian placed the ring on her finger, she jumped into his arms screaming in joy. Sofia could bet one hundred percent that their new neighbors could hear them in their homes, but she simply did not care. She didn't have a single care in the world.

January 12th, 2017

Sofia played with her wedding ring as she and Sebastian talked about their engagement story. She never had the courage to take it off—even six months after their divorce. She even looked at it the same way she did the first night Sebastian put it on her finger.



June 28th, 2013

Sofia Henderson changed her name to Sofia Walker on this day. Her wedding was everything she could have ever wanted. Sebastian and Sofia's closest friends and family gathered in the backyard of their dream home watching the ceremony. Sebastian cried when he saw Sofia walk down the aisle with her father, which prompted everyone else to start crying. He saw his life in her. She saw her life in him. Sofia and Sebastian made each other complete. For a little while, at least and to them, that was all that mattered.

April 24th, 2015

This was the day Sofia learned that their family would be growing by one. Sofia waited anxiously until Sebastian came home from work to give him the news. All day, she looked up fun and exciting ways to tell your husband that you're having a baby, but she never settled on any.

"Hey, honey, what's up?" Sebastian questioned when he walked through the door, knowing right away that Sofia was acting different.

"I'm pregnant," Sofia beamed, handing Sebastian the test.

"We're gonna have a baby?" Sebastian softly responded, prompting Sofia to shake her head in excitement. His entire life, Sebastian only wanted one thing— to be a father.

"We're gonna have a baby." She confirmed.

Sebastian grabbed Sofia gently and held her. Sofia's arms were wrapped around the nape of Sebastian's neck. Both experiencing pure joy.

January 12th, 2017

"You're really going to bring up Jack?" Sofia asked defensively.

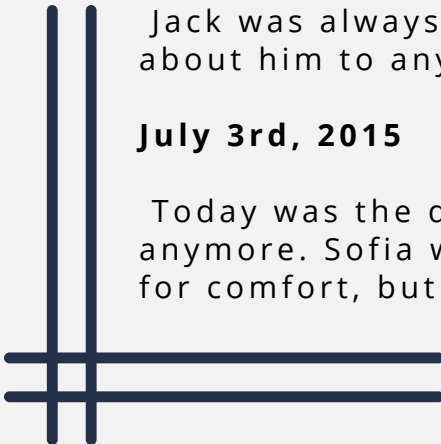
"Sof, we have to. You know that's when we changed," Sebastian replied.

Sofia shook her head, knowing that he was right.

Jack was always such a sensitive subject to Sofia. She never even talked about him to anyone else after what happened.

July 3rd, 2015

Today was the day the doctor couldn't find Jackson Walker's heartbeat anymore. Sofia was hysterical in the doctor's office, looking to Sebastian for comfort, but he was completely numb. His face held no expression.



After they left the doctor's office, Sofia tried to prompt a conversation between Sebastian.

"Talk to me, please." Sofia pleaded with her husband.

The car ride was silent. It seemed like everything after Jack was silent.

October 10th, 2015

Today was the day Sofia had discovered Sebastian's secret stash of alcohol under his spot in their bed. Sofia picked up extra hours at work after the loss of her child to help cope, but it wasn't enough. She needed her husband, who seemed to try to bandage the ache with alcohol.

Sofia laid in bed, alone, reading her book. Sebastian stumbled in the room, reeking of alcohol, not saying a single word. Sofia decided to break the awkward silence.

"Do you need help?"

Sebastian sits up, "What?" His sentence leaves the aroma of alcohol. He genuinely looked surprised by his wife's accusations.

"I found your pile of alcohol. I'm asking you, as your best friend, as your wife, do I need to get you help?"

"Who are you to come to me asking that? Who do you think you are?"

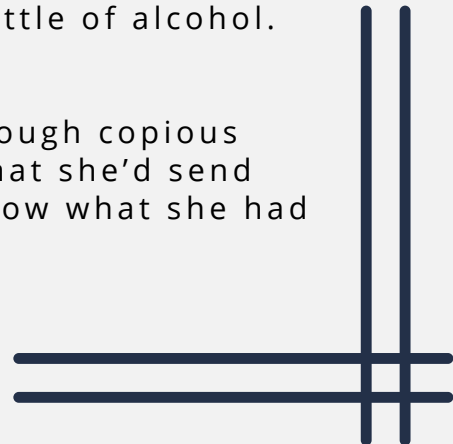
"I am your WIFE. You're not the only one who lost someone here. I lost my son too. And at this rate, I'll lose my husband."

Sebastian looked at Sofia with a look of rage that she had never seen in her whole life. Instead of replying to her, Sebastian turned the light off and went to sleep. That was the last time they had ever slept next to each other, and there was no love in that bedroom.

June 12th, 2016

Today was the last day Sebastian and Sofia Walker were a married couple. They never spoke. They never ate together. Ever since Sofia confronted Sebastian, he slept on the couch next to a bottle of alcohol. Sofia was mentally exhausted. She was drained.

Sofia had woken up on June 12th and told Sebastian through copious amounts of tears she was staying with her mother and that she'd send over divorce papers. Sebastian was too intoxicated to know what she had said.



Sebastian woke up in the morning of June 13th wondering where his wife was, then he checked the mail. Divorce papers.

January 11th, 2017

Sofia had heard from Sebastian today. This was the first time Sebastian had reached out to her since she left. *The first time*. Her husband, her best friend, the father of her child, took six months to finally reach out after she left. She had no other choice than to go. She deserved closure. She needed to know why.

January 12th, 2017

“Sofia, I-I am so sorry. I’m sober. I’m together. I got a better job. We still have our house. We can have a better future. I know it. Why don’t you give us a second chance?” Sebastian pleaded.

Sofia got up from the table and stood beside Sebastian, taking his face in her hands, “Sebastian, you were the first man I ever loved. You were the only man I thought I’d ever love. But six months. Six. That’s how long it took you to reach out. You are my person, Seb. If we are truly meant to be, the universe will eventually bring us back together, I promise you. For right now, I need to let you go. You need to let me let you go.” Sofia placed a kiss on his cheek.

“I will always love you, Sofia Grace Henderson.” Sebastian whispered. “Goodbye, Sebastian.” Sofia choked out and after all these months, she took off her wedding ring and placed it on the table in front of Sebastian.

Sofia desperately wanted to tell Sebastian that she loved him, but the words wouldn’t come out. Her brain wouldn’t let her say it. She took one last look at him and walked out of the diner and back into her crimson red Honda Accord.

Unbeknownst to Sofia, that would be the last time she ever saw Sebastian Walker. He had lied to her—Sebastian was anything but sober. The only thing he ever improved over six months was improving his lies and hiding the fact that he was always under the influence. After Sebastian left the diner, he would get into an accident that would claim his life, and Sofia would find out a few hours later. The paramedics would only find one thing on his person, Sofia’s wedding ring, still held ever so tightly in his grasp.

With Sebastian still sitting in the diner, Sofia broke down in her car. Rain drops pattering on her car windows, drowning out the sounds of her cries. Four words kept coursing through her head, her veins, and her heart. After all this time, all this pain, the only thing that Sofia could think was ‘I still love him.’

The Goodbye

By: Madison Laganella

Walking up the stone steps of the funeral parlor, Kelsey could barely move her legs. The funeral home was enormous. It had a huge roof with pointed spires, and all the siding was built using large brown stones. The place looked like it was about 100 years old, with wallpaper that had yellow stains near the bottom of it and chairs with cushions were sagging to the floor. She could smell the scent of freshly brewed green tea and newly cut roses. Usually, Kelsey loved the smell of tea and flowers, but all she could feel was suffocated because of all the emotions inside her. Her head hung low, and her eyes were glassy as she made her way into the parlor. All the way there, her mom clung to Kelsey's brother Jeff as if her life depended on it. They hadn't left each other's side since they heard the news. It had been five days since she heard about her beloved grandmother's passing. It had been a surprise for her, but apparently not for the rest of her family.

"Stage four pancreatic cancer," her mother had told her in a way that Kelsey could see was very removed. "They gave her six months, but we had a full year with her. Your grandmother knew how hard this would be for you, and she didn't want to worry you with the details."

Kelsey couldn't believe that she had been kept out of something so serious. It wasn't fair. She could have been so much more supportive had she known. The past five days had been so hard for her. She hadn't eaten a full meal and had barely gotten out of bed in the morning. School was out of the question because she couldn't take the sympathetic stares of her friends and the "it's going to be okay" and "she's in a better place" comments anymore. She wanted to talk to someone, but no one understood the relationship she and her grandmother shared. Her mom, while she had been upset, had grown apart from her mother over the past few years. Ever since their fight, their relationship hadn't been the same.

"Why can't you treat Kelsey like Jeff," she had once heard her grandmother say to her mom. "It's not fair. You hold her to a standard that you would never expect of Jeff. And when she doesn't live up to it, you tear her down while you coddle your son. It breaks my heart to see her this upset all the time."

"Mom, I frankly do not see how any of this is your business, but what I will say to you is that I treat Kelsey and Jeff the same. It's not my fault that Jeff is the easier child, and our relationship is much smoother," she had heard her mom respond.

It's true, Kelsey argued with her mom more, while Jeff was always given the things that Kelsey had to fight for. He was allowed to go out and break curfew, while Kelsey got in trouble for being even a minute late. Her grandmother had understood her and had constantly reminded her that she was loved and cared for even when she didn't see it.

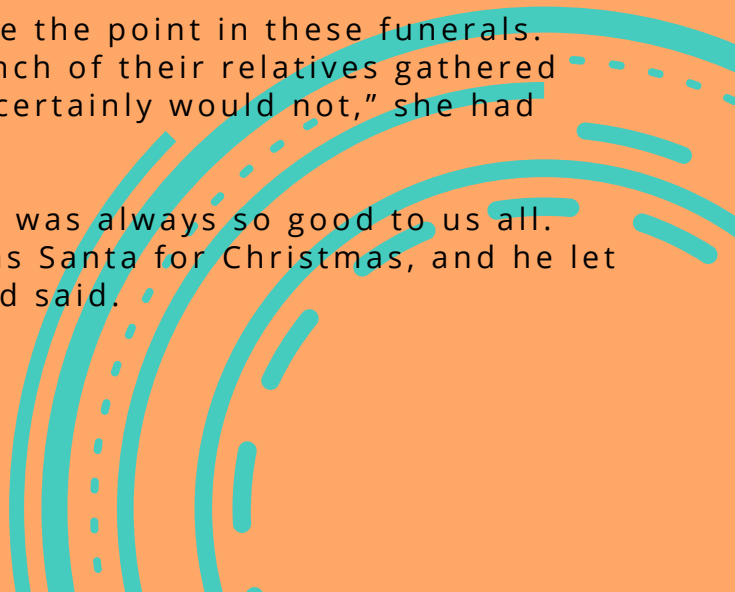
"I know honey," she would say. "It is not fair, but soon this will all be over. You have two years till you get to go off to college, and maybe you can work on building a better relationship with her then. You know how the old saying goes, 'Absence makes the heart grow fonder.' Maybe some time apart will be good for you."

The idea of having her grandmother by her side when she was dropped off at college had made Kelsey's heart warm with joy. Unfortunately, her grandmother would never be able to see her graduate. Kelsey's eyes started to water again. She had no idea how she was going to get through this. There were people everywhere. Some were admiring the collages of photos that lined the right side of the room, while others took their seats in the sea of chairs that had been put out in the middle of the floor. While she sat in one of the chairs in the back of the parlor, she tried to keep her eyes trained on the patterns that lined the tacky red carpet beneath her. Her mom was standing next to Jeff by the aisle, shaking hands with people offering condolences, and hugging people as they cried on her shoulder. Every now and then Kelsey would see Jeff hug their mom or squeeze her hand. It was a sweet gesture that she wished she could be a part of. However, she knew that it wouldn't be the same if she stood up there with them.

As she watched more and more people gather at the seats in their nicest black dresses and suits, she thought about how silly this all was. They were all crying and little did they know, her grandmother would have hated seeing it. The last funeral she attended was for her cousin Steve who died of old age, and she and her grandmother had been there together. As they had been walking up the aisle to say their last goodbyes, Kelsey had started crying. Her grandmother had taken her hand and held her close.

"You know what, Kelsey, I really do not see the point in these funerals. What dead person would want to see a bunch of their relatives gathered around together crying over them. I most certainly would not," she had said.

"But grandma, I'm going to miss Steve. He was always so good to us all. Remember that time when he dressed up as Santa for Christmas, and he let us take turns sitting on his lap," Kelsey had said.



"I do, but if there is one thing, I have learned in my life it is that life is for the living. There is no use crying over things you can not control, and there is no use spending your entire life mourning those who are never coming back. What you should do instead, is live the best life possible, and hold those you have lost close to your heart. That way, no matter where you are, they will always be with you."

Even though Kelsey tried to remember what her grandmother had told her that day she could not help but still be emotional. That motherly wisdom was something she would never get back.

Kelsey couldn't wait to leave the funeral home. The bright overhead lights of the three chandeliers that hung above were starting to give her a headache. Unfortunately, she still had to survive the luncheon afterwards where she was sure she would have to talk to somebody about how she was doing. The luncheon was being held at one of her grandmother's favorite Italian restaurants, Patrizio's, and all Kelsey could think about was the last time she had been there.

"Grandma, I have some exciting news" Kelsey had said, while they were sitting at Patrizio's over two plates of their best fettuccini. "I received a letter from Notre Dame yesterday, and I just had to tell you in person. I got in! I am going to my dream school with a full academic scholarship!"

"Oh my goodness, Kelsey! That is so exciting," her grandmother had exclaimed, her eyes filling with tears. "I just knew you had it in you. You're gonna move onto bigger and better things. How did your mother take the news?"

"She was excited," Kelsey had said, her eyes looking down at the table, "but she had to rush to take Jeff to soccer practice, so we didn't get a chance to talk."

"I see," her grandmother had said, with a pained look in her eyes. "How about we celebrate your good news with some cheesecake? I know it's your favorite."

"You know me so well, Grandma! You always have," Kelsey had said, with a renewed smile that had reached her eyes.

The rest of the dinner they spent planning out how her dorm would look, what kind of roommate she wanted, and what classes she was hoping to take. Kelsey had left the restaurant with a smile from ear to ear. She had been so excited for her first day of college, where she could be free to live without the threat of her mother looming from behind, and without the standard of her perfect brother to live up to. Things had been finally starting to turn around for her, and she had been excited to see what life had in store for her in the future.

"Hey, Kelsey," her mother called, bringing her mind back to the funeral. "Why don't you stand up and shake hands with people for a while. Your brother and I are going to go outside for a few minutes and get some air."

"Yeah, whatever, that's fine, Mom," Kelsey said with a sigh.

Kelsey walked over to where her mom and Jeff had been standing. Her legs were shaking, and her eyes were staring at the floor. One by one church members, neighbors, friends, and family of her grandmother came up and gave hugs and apologies to her. She heard story after story about how wonderful her grandmother was and how she had cared for so many people. It touched Kelsey's heart but broke her down all at the same time. Why did it have to be her? Kelsey needed her more than anything at this very moment, and she wasn't there for her. She would never again be there for her. It wasn't fair. All these people around her were crying on the shoulders of another person or were talking about the past with people who loved them and were willing to listen. Her grandmother had been that person for her, and now Kelsey had no one.

Kelsey watched Jeff and her mom walk back into the room arm in arm, and she suddenly had an urge to try and make her relationship with her mom right. She walked over and grabbed her mom by the arm.

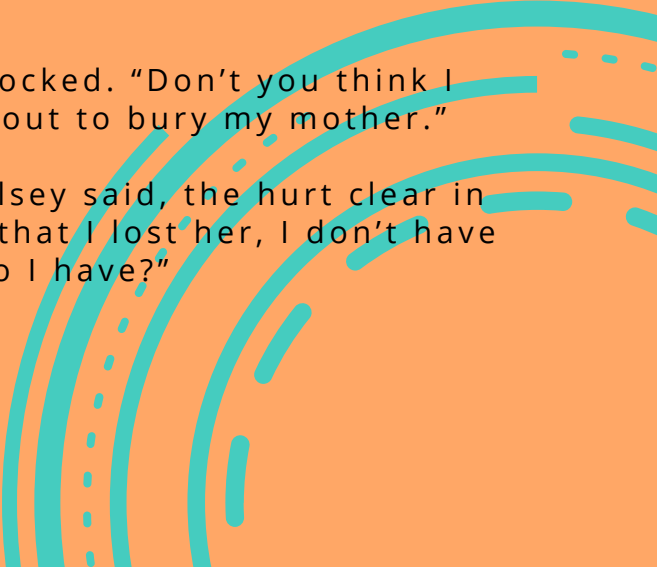
"Hey mom, I really need to talk to you. Can we go outside for a minute?" she asked.

"Sure sweetie," she said, "Jeff, go stand by the door and thank people for coming. I'll be just outside with your sister if you need me."

Kelsey and her mom walked out of the room, down the hallway of mourners waiting to say their final goodbyes, and down the steps of the parlor until they got to the large oak tree with a swinging chair underneath it. As they sat in the chair, Kelsey could feel her heart beating a mile a minute. Her hands were getting clammy, and her voice started to shake as she said, "Mom, I really think it's time that you and I work out our relationship."

"Now, Kelsey," her mother said, sounding shocked. "Don't you think I have enough on my plate to deal with. I'm about to bury my mother."

"You don't think this is hard for me too?" Kelsey said, the hurt clear in her voice. "She was my best friend, and now that I lost her, I don't have anyone. You and Jeff have each other, who do I have?"



"Kelsey, I do not know what you're talking about. Jeff and I are both here for you if you need anything," her mother said sounding irritated.

"This is the problem, mom. You get mad whenever I bring it up, but you and I don't have the same relationship that you and Jeff have. I can't talk to you about my life the way grandma and I used to," Kelsey stated.

"Kelsey, I don't have time for more family drama right now. I have to go back inside and be supportive to everybody. We will talk about this at another time," her mother said, as she got up and walked back inside.

I'm glad she is being supportive of somebody, Kelsey thought. I just wish she would support me. Kelsey sat on the swing and let it rock her back and forth. The wind felt so good on her face, and the calm, cool air allowed her to take the first deep breaths she had since she found out about her grandmother's death. As she was relaxing, she thought of her grandmother again. She thought about all those times her grandmother would comfort her when she was upset, and all the times she would make her laugh so hard her stomach hurt. She thought about all the stories she used to tell her about when she was a kid, and the endless amounts of good memories she had with her. There was one memory that had particularly stuck out to her. It was right after Kelsey had found out her best friend had made a bunch of new friends and didn't want to keep hanging out with her.

"Sometimes honey," her grandmother had said, in the soothing voice she had used whenever Kelsey had a rough day, "people are only meant to be in your life for a certain amount of time. They teach you things about yourself, or they help you learn lessons, and then they leave. There is nothing wrong with that because those moments make you who you are, and those people you encounter will help to change you for the better. Unfortunately, nothing lasts forever and the best thing you can do is learn when to let go," her grandmother had told her, in that voice that had made Kelsey feel like everything would be okay. They had shared a hug, and her grandmother and she had spent the rest of the day baking cookies and laughing at all the corny jokes her grandmother had told.

Kelsey did not realize that she had begun crying again. The tears came rushing out of her like a dam that had just broken, and it felt so good. It was a feeling that she had been needing for a long time, and only just now had she realized it. Every day that she struggled with her mom was another lesson making her stronger for her future. That friend that left her freshman year taught her to cherish her friends while she has them. And the heartbreak she suffered when her grandmother died taught her to hold those she loved near and dear to her heart.

Even though they may not last forever, they are always there because she will never forget them.

“Okay grandma,” Kelsey said. “I am letting you go, but I promise that one day in the future we will meet again. I will bring with me all the wonderful memories I have experienced and lessons I have learned over my life, and I will share them with you. Until then, I will use the advice you have given me to guide me through this crazy life. I will never forget you, and I will love you always. I hope I make you proud. Love, Kelsey.”



The Misunderstood Calico

By: Emily Matty

Hailey and her cat Ramona have been inseparable since the twenty-two-year-old picked up the small feline from the shelter three years prior. Ramona is an extraordinarily stunning calico with six large patches of brown and black, with a few hints of orange scattered on her fluffy white fur. Her huge reflective green eyes can attract just about anyone to this sweet, lovable calico.

Regardless of this feline's beauty, the cat was stuck at the shelter for over eight months because of an unfortunate dog attack the summer before Hailey adopted her. This dog attack is believed to have made the tiny cat's behavior change, making her more reserved and extremely hostile to changes in her environment. This dog attack also resulted in her not being able to fare well with other animals or small children. When other cats tried to play with her, she would lash out and attack them. She could not understand that the other feline had no ill intent and only wanted to play. She saw their advances as threats that she must protect herself from. These behaviors caused the shelter to view the poor kitten as an out-of-control burden which, without exception, they directed people away from adopting. This left the small kitten lonely and isolated with slim hope of adoption.

When Hailey was at the shelter, the male worker had warned her of these "behavioral difficulties." Hailey had assured him that she would make sure to keep the kitten safe and that the cat would solely be living with her. Hailey neglected to note that she lived with her parents.

This fact, however, did not matter much because Hailey rarely saw them, as she tended to stay in her room in the attic. This was for most of the time unless necessary. Her parents were quite troubled people to say the least. Her father was a heavy drinker but luckily not a violent drunk. However, he rarely paid the bills because of his unemployment and sloppy lifestyle. This caused the house to be worn down and ill kept. Hailey herself at only nineteen had to work full time at a local café to make sure they were not evicted. Hailey at the time was also in her first year at a liberal arts college hoping to one day become a writer.

When Hailey had told her father that she would be attending college he was totally intoxicated. He immediately lashed at her. "If you go to university, you will be kicked out of this home."

Hailey started to weep knowing that a college degree was the only way for her to make a stable living in her writing career. "I will work double shifts to help pay bills here, Pa, I promise," Hailey begged her father.

Her father nodded his head selfishly allowing his daughter to pay more bills for his home than he ever had while living there.

Hailey's mother was not much better compared to her father. She was a very shrewd middle-aged woman. Her mother always had a critique about something but was far from perfect herself. The woman could always be seen with a face caked of blush and foundation. Her mother always wore so much tacky black mascara that it was a wonder that the cheap eyelash glow did not fall into the woman's coffee each morning.

Her mother worked at a local diner where she would always come home annoyed that they would not let her go on enough smoke breaks during her shift. Hailey always hated the irony that her mother and her had the same type of jobs in the food industry, even though they worked at different establishments. Obtaining her bachelors in three years was Hailey's only hope of getting out and starting a writing career.

This immense amount of pressure of working full time and attending a prestigious university caused Hailey to mature quickly. She knew that she would be fine adopting a cat.

The employee at the shelter had quickly interrogated Hailey about the calico, again warning her of the cats "horrid ways." All the workers at the shelter had been shocked that Hailey wanted to look at such a "trouble feline."

Hailey accepted the cat with open arms choosing not to believe the negative myths about this cat. Hailey herself, understood what it was like to be trapped somewhere she did not want to live. She knew that the calico might just need an opportunity to have a loving home.

Hailey ultimately hoped that she and this cat could bring each other some comfort and joy and eventually become their own little family. Hailey assumed once she got the cat up to her attic and secured, that the cat would start to warmup to her. Luckily, Hailey turned out to be right about this.

As soon as Hailey got Ramona to her room in the attic the cat instantly felt at home. Ramona leapt around the room, rubbing her small delicate face on every piece of furniture in the room, marking it as her own. The cat knew that she was finally home and away from the chaos of the shelter. After examining every square inch of the room to make sure that it was all hers, Ramona settled down near Hailey on the large queen-sized bed in the center of the room. Hailey loved to see her small new friend become acquainted with the bedroom that would now be her new home. Hailey had prayed that the cat that she picked would appreciate the bedroom and furniture that she had provided. Hailey knew that she wanted this cat to become an integral part of her daily life.

She and Ramona bonded like no other. When Hailey woke up each morning, she awoke to a small fur face staring back at her, ready to start that day's adventure. Over the three years, the two had been through a lot together. The cat had seen Hailey through endless nights of studying or coming home other nights exhausted from a long shift. Hailey always knew Ramona would be happy to see her when she came home; seeing Ramona made Hailey's whole day better, and the cat just loved to have a home. Hailey's parents were never around, so Ramona became Hailey's family. Luckily, with the comfort of this small feline and the self determination that Hailey possessed, she graduated with her bachelor's at twenty-two. A few months after graduation she was able to get a job with a well-paying magazine company.

Hailey was not the only one who had flourished since the adoption. The cat had developed quite a personality since she was brought home with Hailey. The feline was adventurous and often tried to leave the room with Hailey when Hailey went out. Hailey rarely allowed the cat to roam her family's home without her because of its poor condition. Hailey also did not let Ramona out of her room alone because she knew that her family was not at all fit to be around the small feline. When she did allow Ramona out of the room with her, she made the tiny cat stay perched on her shoulders the entire time. Hailey trained Ramona to sit on Hailey's shoulders for safety in an emergency. This useful trick had not yet been needed for an emergency but rather came in handy when Hailey wanted Ramona by her side. The cat would sit up there and flick her wiry tail boastfully as Hailey quickly walked through the house trying not to start any fights with her deadbeat parents.

This morning Hailey and Ramona were downstairs trying to collect their breakfast when Ramona was almost knocked off Hailey's shoulders by Hailey's oaf of a father. The father's breath, as usual, still reeked of Gin from the night before.

"Hey, watch it!" Hailey screeched clutching her feline right before the cat slipped off her shoulders. Ramona hissed at the man. The large ogreish man just grunted as a response and continued his way through to the parlor.

Hailey's mother was smoking one of her morning cigarettes while ignoring the events before her. However, Hailey heard her mother say underneath her breath, "Why is that mangy thing even out here?"

Hailey was about to respond that it was technically her house too when she remembered that she was finally leaving this grungy place in three days. So, Hailey simply spun around and replied, "Sorry, won't happen again."

Her mother scoffed and went back to reading her newspaper and huffing away at her cigarette again.

Hailey dashed back to her room with Ramona feeling an overwhelming sense of joy strike her. The poor, frightened cat, still shaken up over the whole debacle, unlatched her tense claws from Hailey's shirt once they were back in their room. Hailey held the cat close and exclaimed "I forgot we are leaving this horrid place in three days, Ramona!"

She repeatedly kissed Ramona's small furry head. The feline nuzzled into her relaxed and happy of the change in mood from the kitchen. Hailey could not believe that she had forgotten how close their move-out date was, all because her family caused her to become so flustered downstairs. Luckily, she would not have to deal with them much longer.

She gave a delighted sigh and placed the cat on the bed and looked around the room. An assortment of small and large boxes surrounded the bed. She beamed down at the cat knowing that they had done it. She was about to move out with her furry best friend and continue with her writing career dream. Both Hailey and Ramona started as trapped individuals in undesirable living situations, and now, with each other's help, they would both have their dreams fulfilled. This journey had not been easy and required much patience from both parties, but now it had all paid off. This was just the beginning...



The Time is Near

By: Camryn Dill

Dear Reader,

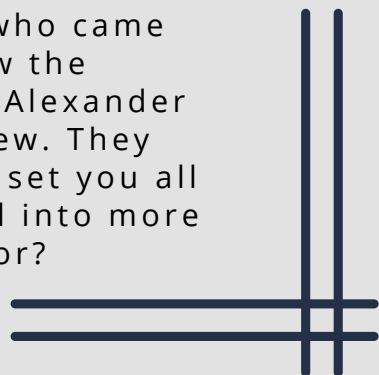
Congratulations. You broke out of the Abnormality and you failed, just like everyone else! The creators have made this message specialized for you, solely you. We are breaking you out of the Abnormality to write you warnings. I know it's confusing now. We are placing this into your simulation, so it seems normal to read, but really you're the only one reading this. Read as you may. We are transferring you, only for a few minutes; don't worry everything will be back to normal soon.

Welcome human, you are living for the world and the sweet, sweet distractions we have provided. You see, Earth is made up of wonders, so many wonders, and you are failing to realize it. The stars that twinkle in the night sky, the little pieces of greenery growing from the Earth's surface floor and all of the animals humans are able to communicate with. We also created snow, a soft blanket for the land. Rain, a shower for the Earth's produce. Oceans, filled with animals for you to discover. All of this, you take for granted and you see as normal. You failed to realize that in which your life is already set up for you in plain sight.

You wake up in the Abnormality by what humans call birth, see already the first lie you were taught. Yes, birthed into Earth, once again, but you were alive many lifetimes before that, so age is just a conceptual thought used to trick humans. Humans had lived normally, by hunting, building, traveling, sleeping, and living off the grains of the earth just like the other animals when we first created this Abnormality.

Once we, the controllers, came to the realization we created humans as the superior species, we used humans as our test subjects. Humans, you see, are so easily manipulated, so easily controlled, so easily responsive by the simple things we produce.

It wasn't easy at first because, you see, humans loved Earth, loved the creator and the creation. Yes, we the creators loved that, but we wanted to see how far and how much strength humans had for the love of Earth. We had thrown in some test subjects, ones who came to Earth with superior knowledge, one of us. You may know the names, Benjamin Franklin, Madame Curie, Thomas Edison, Alexander Graham Bell, yeah, they are all one of us. Just to name a few. They were disguised as humans but were one of the creators to set you all up for distractions like technology and cars leading you all into more distractions. Ever wonder why their knowledge was superior?



Thanks to us, we let them join Earth without forgetting. After one thing leads to another, before you are rebirthed into a human your life is set up for you; you're born, there's school, college, career, marriage, children, grandchildren, and by the time you are retired...you have little time before you are out of the Abnormality--a little game we call Earth. Now you might wonder why you are here, in your house, on your bed reading this paper. You ended up here because it is part of the plan, part of the matrix plan; you are chosen.

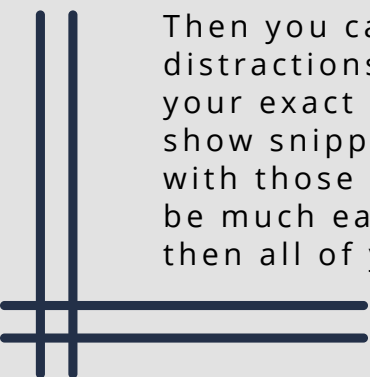
Now, normally, I would go as far as taking off your VR set and showing you around, but you are not ready for that just yet. For now, we will just let you believe this is a paper some nineteen-year-old girl wrote for a class to get a grade.

Like I said, humans are so gullible. You are not ready for the reveal just yet, but I'll tell you a little bit about it. You are currently set up to a VR, known as a virtual reality. Not like the ones our creators on Earth made to distract you, no. This VR headset is wired to your 'fonkita', or as you humans call it, a brain. Your 'fonkita' then corresponds to the five senses, so what you smell, see, taste, touch, and hear is all part of this VR, created by us. It's all fake thanks to advanced technology we have produced.

Of course, humans are smart, because we created them to be a higher creature than, let's say, a bug, so humans are finding small glitches. Like the fact humans can't see color in their peripheral vision, or when humans look in the mirror too long they get too scared because humans can't rationalize the concept of their true identity. This is what happens when you forget everything.

We have been here for years upon years, creating this virtual reality called Earth, which would be a perfect experience for creatures of all kinds. See, you were once a creator like us too; you just volunteered to go back to Earth to help the distractions and make everything seem normal, when your main purpose is to, well, find your purpose. You picked out who your parents are and what your path would be. You might wonder why your life has difficulties and why you feel like you are struggling or why you chose to be alive during a global pandemic. This is all due to you, all because you chose to live this life. Your higher self knew you were strong enough to handle this life. You agreed to forget everything, all your past lives, until your brain dies. Then the alarm will go off and we'll rush to take off your headset.

Then you can choose to become a creator or see if you can beat all the distractions again. If you decide to come back to Earth, you can pick your exact life. Think of big windows, like an observation window, that show snippets of the life, like a film trailer, you can choose from. And with those difficulties, you can try to break out of the Abnormality. It'll be much easier to explain everything then because you will be dead; then all of your memories of being one of us will flow back to you.



Oh, another thing, your body is just a container for your soul. Your soul is what and who you are in every life. You appear in a different body each time you return to Earth. Even your dog (see, I know you have a dog!) is one of you too; they just agreed to come back as a dog in this life, to help curve the distractions.

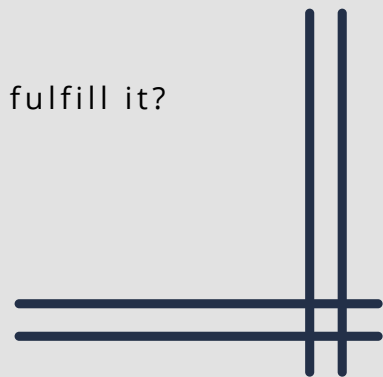
Once you return to Earth, you forget everything and become a human, where we the creators are using your contract to manipulate you and control you as the human you are. We have only had a few million surpass the distractions and another few million that found loopholes; we count them too. In the grand scheme of things, that's not a lot of people considering the vastness of human history. Their reward for passing the test is their life, to themselves, in their control instead of ours.

Here is how you surpass the distractions. Don't live life like everyone else. Ever notice the people who are millionaires, didn't go to college? They are not living a nine to five job.

Those people found joy in themselves and did not need validation in grades. Ever notice the happiest people find joy in the small things, like adventures and sunsets? Ever notice the people with peace of mind find meditation as a relief from the everyday world? We want that; that is your soul purpose. We want you to break away from the gray world and find the love for yourself and everything around you. Have you noticed the healthiest people find love within themselves? They go running, reading, adventuring outside, show appreciation for the creator, show appreciation for the trees and land. These people are getting closer to their higher self.

Everything you do is created out of habit. Break out of it now; this is a warning you are failing. The endless time spent seeking validation from others needs to end. The distractions like TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, all created by people we sent down that knew their intention. The endless amount of time sitting in your room doing school work. The endless amount of time spent finding a true love or a future job. These are all validations from someone else that you let affect your life. These are the distractions, these are the things you feel you need to do to fit in, that you need to do to become society's idea of perfect. Guess what? You are failing. Learn independence; learn that the only person you have for the rest of your life is: yourself.

Do you really want to look back at life and think you didn't fulfill it? These things are holding you back from your higher self.



The second step is learning to be grateful with what you have and raising your awareness of your energy. Humans can manifest everything around them. Have you ever noticed when things seem down, everything around you seems blue? Or when you are happy everything around you seems joyful? It's because you control what you see. You are what you attract. Mood boards, dream setting, and The Law of Attraction are all ways you can make the most out of your life. It's important to remember that a dream is only scratching the surface of possibilities.

The final step is to find love for things other than society's standards. Humans are too busy living in this gray world that a waterfall is something they take for granted anymore. The sun sets every day and humans take it as, "it's time to go to bed so I can wake up for work tomorrow morning." No, go out look at the stars; go sleep outside for a night; go take a drive with the windows down blasting your favorite song. Climb the tallest mountain; go hiking. Enjoy nature for what it is.

Escape what others expect of you because what they expect is for you to be like them. Others expect you to live the life they live--the life set up for humans before birth. But you have time to break out of it. Look, from my perspective, everyone is living the same life, just different varieties. Are you living your life, or are you just surviving to be a part of this society?

I am proud of you, though; don't take it to heart. I am proud of you for pushing through the obstacles life has thrown your way. I am proud that, even in your darkest times, you chose to stay. The Earth needs you; we need you. You are striving; I know that because you can handle the obstacles and you are now able to take this warning. You are now able to tweak those things in your life to make it truly your life. Imagine what life will be like as soon as you discover your true meaning behind these distractions.

And the real reason you're reading this, well, it's because you are chosen. We see value and potential. Now it's time to transfer you back into the Abnormality, where everything around you is fake. We will see you many decades from now, and it will all make sense. At the end of the day, you are only reading this paper because it is part of the simulation.





To Her:

By: Amiri Hayes

To Her,

I'm seeing the pitch-black empty darkness of the night. Though I'm not quite looking at anything, my eyes are fixed on the ink. It's as if my eyesight will suddenly improve or a light in the middle of the vacant night will make itself known. My gaze is fixed on the murkiness like it is with you except I'm less timid now and more pensive. And I'm patiently apprehending any kind of change in circumstances squashed into bed underneath the covers with my eyelids closed but no such change presents itself; the air is still and everyone is long asleep and I am tired but restless. I can hear the clock tick on the wall with a consistent clunk and the dishwasher hum on the floor below if I listen hard. I focus on not listening too hard. My mind wanders.

I see the most beautiful girl in the world. When I look into her eyes for the first time, the world behind it fades to white. Not blinded by beauty, because I can see, but I can only see her. As if the day intends to shine a light the intensity and sincerity of a thousand suns on my eyes, but she, with her back to it, keeps me from going blind. I enjoy her company from afar and wait for a change in circumstance but none presents itself. I decided to seize the opportunity. I can feel the pounding of my heart, like hefty waves are crashing into it a thousand times a minute, in an empty parking lot near a dark green generator where I call her number for the first time. I can hear the sound of my footsteps falling down a steep hill towards your smiling presence on a brisk Monday afternoon and on a Saturday morning, before a long and tiring shift, I can see you looking back at me with a smile under your mask worth a hundred times more than any treasure. I can remember more if I think hard. I try to think hard. My heart flutters as I melt into my pillow.

Sincerely,
Him



Promises

By: Sara Pavesi

Moon shines bright on the ocean
Salt air confidence flowing through my veins
There was just enough light to show an outline
but little enough to leave room for imagination
There was a different kind of intimacy between us

Soul-bearing naked, deep flaws and all
Letting our bodies do the talking our lips would never speak

The soft breeze carried any inhibitions away
I can only fully be myself when I'm with you
Being truly naked doesn't just mean taking your clothes off

but pouring into one another like an hourglass that never runs out of
time



No Regrets

By: Sara Pavesi

It feels like a fever dream
With the curtains drawn
Moonlight pouring
Into a fishbowl of
blankets
We started swimming
Side by side
Circling closer until
We were wrapped up
In one another
Breaching boundaries
Tapping the glass
Little cracks forming
Until the break comes
And the water pours out
Except it fills us up more
Drowning us out
Before we even
had a chance to float

Doubts

By: Esther Cénat

I didn't know I had wings
Until I almost fell to my demise
Breaking free of the strings

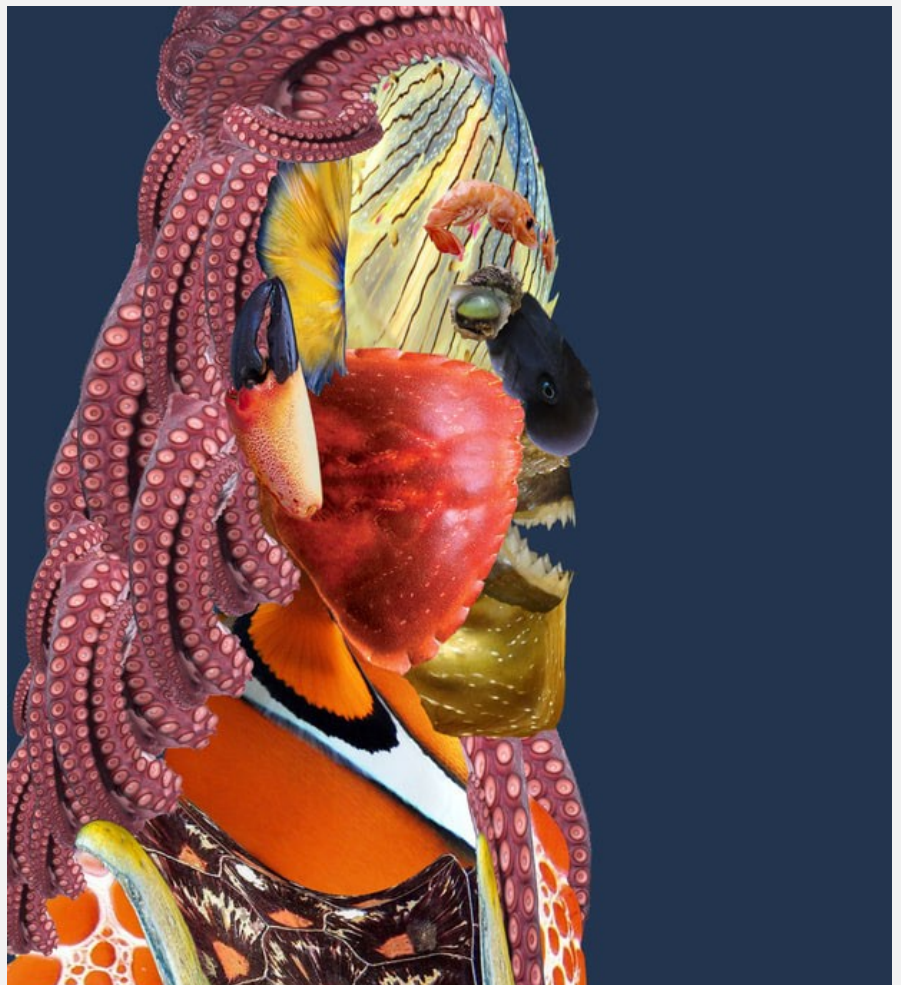
I didn't know I could fly
Because there were people who told me
Don't even try

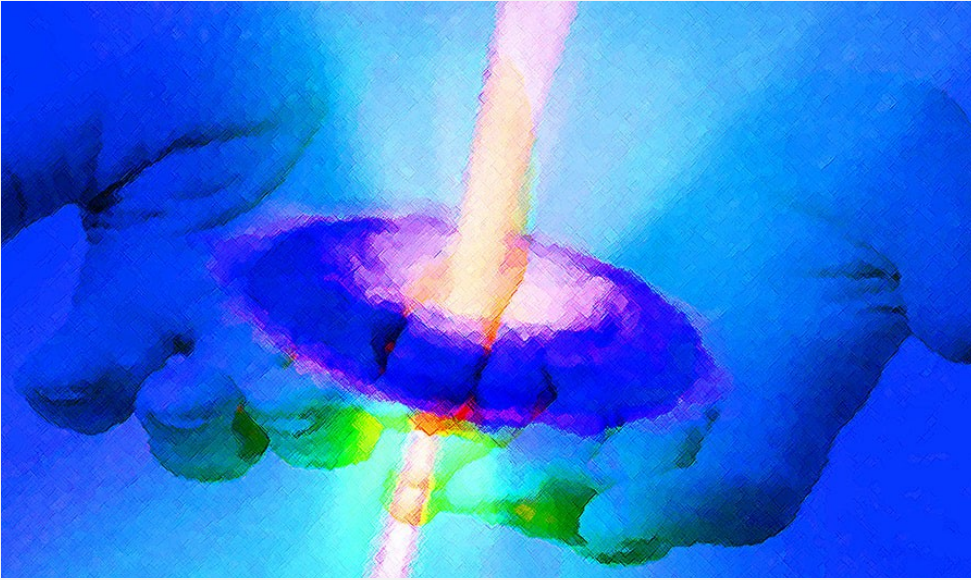
I didn't know I could soar
Because they made me ashamed
For wanting more

I didn't know the sky was not the limit
They told me it wasn't possible
But I defied physics

Lady of the Sea

By: Dekovin McCauley



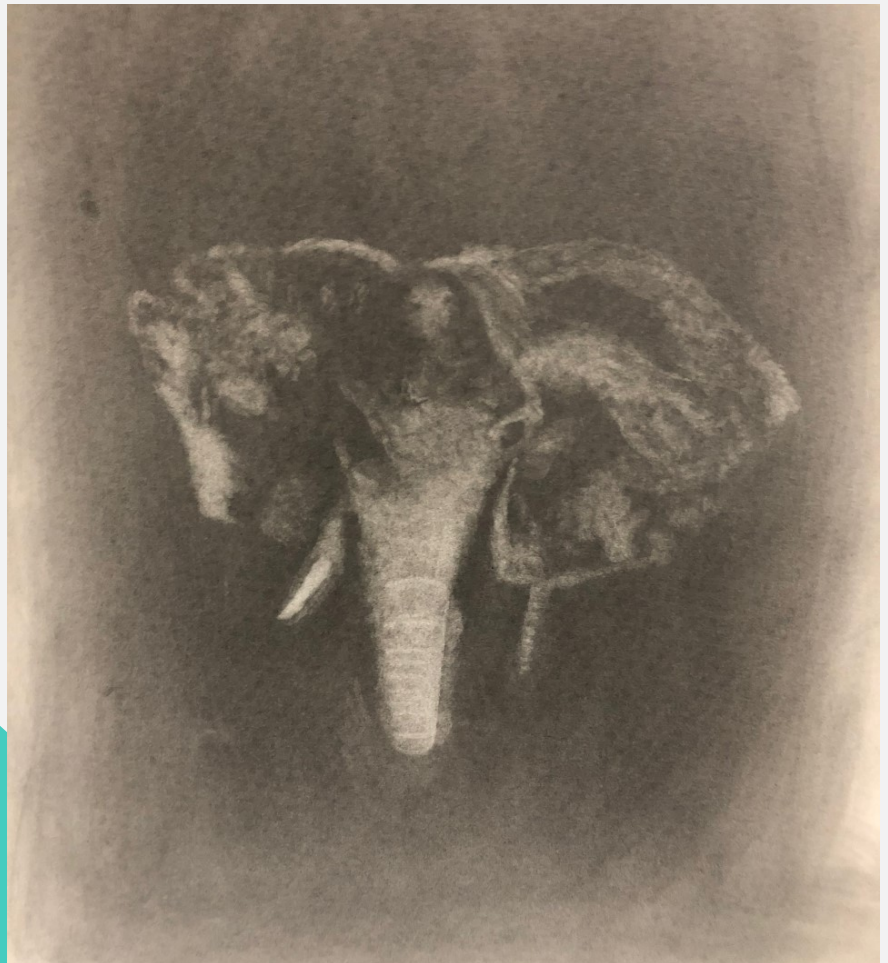


Hands of Creation

By: Dekovin McCauley

Untitled

By: Laura Donnelly



A Glitch in Time

By: Riley Dawson

It didn't take long to discover my ability. I don't know why I was chosen to bear this burden. By God or a force of nature, I don't know. I was barely five-years-old when it happened for the first time. I remember it as if it was chiseled into my brain. All the times it happened actually. They're the memories that are most vivid for me, for some reason.



I sit, a mere child, wide eyed and awaiting the ding of my easy bake oven to tell me my cupcakes are finished. No five-year-old I ever knew had an attention span of a whole nine minutes. 30 seconds passed, and I peaked in to see if they stated rising yet... nope. Like any five-year-old would do, I sank to the floor in defeat with my head in my knees asking God and my easy bake oven to just hurry up already. Ding- what? Was my oven broken or something? No way they could be done that fast.

I peaked in through the little window and saw my cupcakes right there on the tray. They were plump and warm and ready to eat. That was fast! I thought wow this oven is incredible, mom definitely got her money's worth, this thing is state of the art! I didn't know it then, but it wasn't the oven.

When I was around 10 years old, it happened again. I was in Disney World with my family. I was in line for my favorite ride, Space Mountain! But the line was sooo long. "Emma you can't go on that ride, just look at that wait time! The park is closing in 2 hours" My mother said trying to talk sense into a stubborn ten-year old.

"Mom, you don't understand. Last year I was way too short to ride and I had to watch Maya go without me! I'm tall enough now see! Look my head is like an inch over the height bar"

Before she could argue with facts, me and my sister jumped right in line. I was willing to wait as long as it took because I was getting on that ride!

I checked the time on my new mickey mouse watch, it read 6:03 pm. My excitement that started as ball of fire, had quickly fizzled down to nothing but ash. This was the most boring half hour of my life and I've only moved like five feet! I thought I might die of boredom or old age before I reached the front. Oh look, there's an ant on the ground, he'll probably make it to the front before me. I checked the time again to see how long I had left of my 3 hour wait. My watch read 6:08.

"I hate waiting for fun stuff, it's so boring. I just wish I was at the front already!" I said aloud in defeat.

I look up from my watch and I'm next in line! What happened?? Did I fall asleep? No, that wouldn't make sense. I look back down at my watch and it reads 9:01. Maybe its broken, it has to be. But how did I get here and did anyone else see it too? I turned to ask my sister if she experienced it too,

"This was the longest three hours of my life I'm so tired now" My sister yawned to me.

I guess not. We finish the ride and walk dizzily out past the gift shop to meet up with our family outside. It was dark out now. That can't be, can it?

We finish the ride and walk dizzily out past the gift shop to meet up with our family outside. It was dark out now. That can't be, can it?

"Come on Em we have to go now, the park is closing" my mother urged.

"What? I was only in line for like 5 minutes. Why is it dark out now?" I asked desperately.

"What do you mean silly, we were in line for 3 hours. I guess playing I spy that whole time really kept you entertained." My sister said to me.

I spy? I don't remember that at all. I guess I skipped the line, but I didn't remember having fun with my sister. I thought the memories in between would come back to me but they never did. I thought it was because they were not important, but I realized now that I never made them important.

My sister moved away to college at the end of that summer and we never lived together after that. Sure, I saw her occasionally but it was never really the same. As I got older, I missed her so badly, but why? We never had any fun together when we were young, not that I could remember anyway. I thought about that summer in Disney but all I remember was the rides. I don't remember playing any games or spending time with her. Why didn't I make more memories with her?

As a kid that sounds pretty great right? No boring waiting anymore, I could just skip to recess or the end of the school day! I used this ability recklessly up until the age of 30, I think. Time gets a little distorted when you mess with it. But up until then, I didn't have a concept of how precious time really was. I had it all at that age, right?

When I was 13, I was getting ready to go to my cousin's sweet sixteen. It was so cool! She got to wear a pretty dress and danced with her friends. She got her license earlier that day and was celebrating. She looked so grown up I couldn't wait to have a sweet 16 one day. I went to bed and prayed 16 would come fast.

The next morning, there was a light knock on my door, "Happy birthday Emma. Get up or you'll miss your driver's test" my mother said urgently "What? I'm only in middle school mom what do you mean?" I moaned under my breath, too tired to process what she just said.

I looked in the mirror and my short brown bob and red framed glasses was replaced by long dirty blonde hair and contacts. When did I get highlights? I liked it though, I looked so mature! I was a whole 5 feet tall now and- omg are those braces??

Needless to say, I did not get my license that day, but I did get a huge party! All these people from my middle school were so grown-up now, they looked so grown up too! Where did the time go? Then I realized I did it again.

I looked around the party for my middle school BFF, Maddy, but she wasn't there. My mom told me it was because of the fight we had two years ago but I didn't remember a fight with Maddy, why would we not be friends anymore? I thought I would just go to bed and wish to be 14 again so I can fix the fight. It worked the other times when I wanted to jump forward so I thought it had to work again.

That night I prayed and wished to go back in time the same way I did when I wanted to go forward, but I still woke up 16. I did everything right, I thought it's not fair! I cried wishing I could go back and fix that day. I cursed this ability for making me lose time and my best friend.

After that day I realized I could not go back, only forward. I had to move with time. It was like fighting a current. I could let it take me, or I could swim forward with it, but I could not go against it.

Like I said, I still used this ability for a while. When waiting for dinner to be ready, or when I wanted a draining work day to just be finished already. When I was in college, I would plan trips for spring break, but waiting for it took forever, so I just wouldn't! I don't remember much from college now. Just some parties and vacations. I wonder if I had nice roommates. I wonder if I made any friends.

Around the age of 27, I was living in a small apartment in Tampa. I had no roommate or partner to share the space with and rent was getting high. On my way to work one specific morning I had a serious craving for a French vanilla iced coffee. I had not had breakfast yet so I was hoping this coffee would cure the rumble in my stomach. I walked down the block and the line led out the store! Free coffee day was like a holiday for the local tenants. Ugh but I couldn't wait, I was so hungry! I was more conscious of my ability now, but what would I miss in a 15-minute line? I took a look at my watch to see if I would have enough time to get to work after this, but when I looked up, my coffee was in my hand and I had my other on the door ready to leave.

I thought nothing of it that time, until I got a call later that day from a random number.

"Hello? Who is this?" I answered.

"Uh it's Matthew, you gave me your number at the coffee shop. I was just wondering if you still wanted to get dinner Saturday like we planned?"

I didn't remember giving out my number to some random boy! I do remember our date though, and a lot more of them. Although I can't remember much else. I wonder if we ever just hung out or danced around in the kitchen while waiting for our dinner to be ready. You know, like they do in the movies. All I can remember was a lot of dates. I guess I had such a strong infatuation with him, I remember telling my sister on the phone one night I just couldn't wait to marry him.

The next day I was awoken by a small child who almost looked like me. She had short brown hair and the same nose as me but, her eyes were brown, not blue like mine. Her face almost looked like- MATTHEW?!

"Mom, can you make me pancakes?" she asked me.

Mom? I rolled over and there he was. Not the way he looked when I went to bed, he was older now, maybe mid 30s. So, this is the man I married? I didn't even remember my own daughter, but the love I felt for her was undeniable.

I knew from that day on I wanted to be present for everything. I had missed so much so far waiting impatiently for the next best thing, but never stopped to appreciate the time in between.

Now I lay in bed, surrounded by my loved ones. I am 84 years old now, about to take my last breath. I lived a long life, but I only had about 50 years to show myself for it. I had a few scattered memories here and there from my childhood. And I wished so badly that I could remember, but not many could come to mind. I can't say though that my life was boring, I had mostly fun memories I can admit, but very few. The not as thrilling memories however, were the ones I think I treasured most. I remembered going to my daughter's soccer games in the cold weather, and although I hated the cold, I never skipped a game. I was able to watch her grow and I never missed a moment again.

Now there's no time to go forward to anymore even if I wanted to. This is it, the end of the line, the end of my time.

I had lived what felt as though a collective 50 years. At least that's all the memories I have if you strung them side by side. Why did I not cherish the time in between more? When I was young, I wished for summer when it was cold, instead of seeing the fun in winter. I never learned how to ski, or ride a

sled, or make a snow angel and feel the tranquility of laying in the winter snow. When it was summer, I got hot, I wished for fall or winter. I never went to the beach to see the ocean, I never learned how to surf, or even mow the lawn. How I hated to mow the lawn in the hot sun. Oh, what I wouldn't give to mow the lawn one more time.

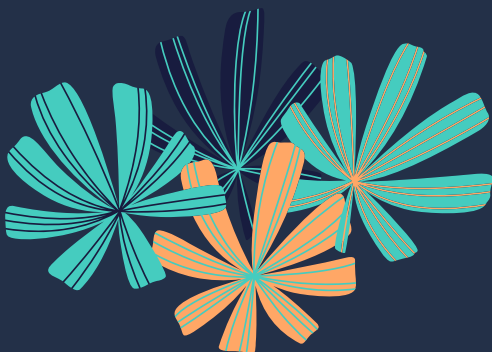
I wish I had appreciated the time in between. I always rushed to get over the boring parts, but I never used that time to appreciate, just life! It's beautiful, and it's boring sometimes, but that's okay, because at least I was alive. If only I had more time. What would I d-



Be

By: Ria Rival

Just be
Be the warmth
Of a shoulder for fallen tears
Be the wisdom needed
When lost beyond your years
Be the emotion
That you yourself seek to feel
Be a seeker
Of truths and satisfactions
But also of love and passions
Be someone who never has to choose
But can show the world
That the choice is theirs.
Be one so kind and so pure
That putting yourself first
Makes the world brighter by the day.
Be the teacher
That teaches their students long after their gone
Be the one who can make mistakes
But lives without regrets
Be the one
Who feels so much
That it hurts
Because feeling is the only way to live
Feel every moment
In every way
That just being
Feels so alive.



Standstill

By: Ria Rival

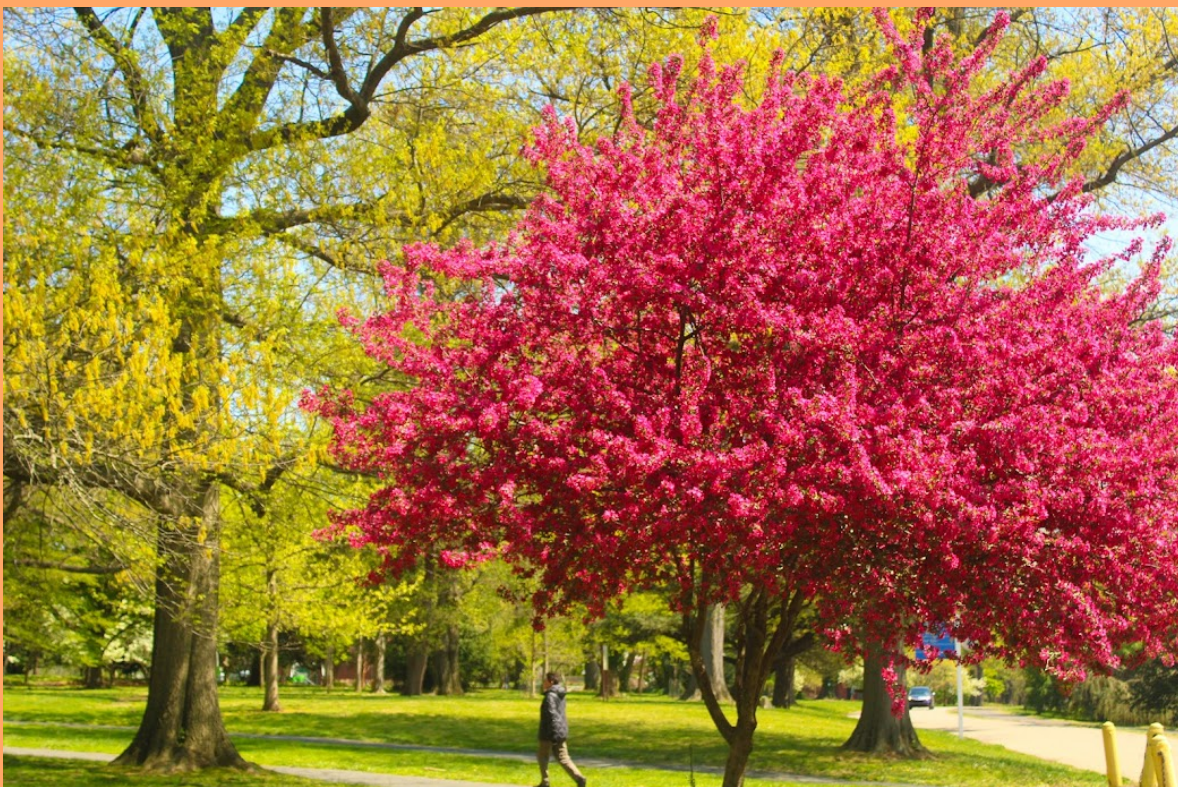
Appreciation wanes in times we have the most
Giving us the least
In times we need the most
Left is but a ghost
Of the memories we thought we had
Thorns of a rose
That we wish them back so bad

We were in the rye.
The world stopped turning
So that even it could be there
Leaving a moment as the treasure it was
Never taken
Never moved
Under its barrier of trust
Keeping us eternally full
With enough love to last us lifetimes
Looking straight to the future with starlight in our eyes

Walking on the moon
Now living among the stars
Choosing not to see
The magic that once seemed so far
What a life to live
In which we close our eyes to new
Leaving thorns so many
And roses so few

Do not decline the magic
The world sees you deserve
Just because the fear
Throws you on a curve
Follow your path to wonder
With eyes wide open, for its the starlight you see
But still leave behind some rose petals
When you remember what used to be.

Untitled
By: Rhiannon Atlee



A person is shown in silhouette on the left side of the frame, wearing glasses and holding an open newspaper. The background is a warm, orange-toned sunset sky with a bright sun low on the horizon. The overall mood is peaceful and contemplative.

**THANK
YOU
FOR
READING**

THE VANGUARD 2022