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Famous First Words @ Writers' Camp

By

Wake Forest University Writers’ Camp 2018
To the marginalized and the silenced

To all those who encouraged us to write!”
ABOUT THE BOOK

The inspiration for Writers' Camp @ ZSR came after a group of ZSR librarians heard Jane McGonigal present “Find the Future: The Game” during the American Library Association’s 2014 Annual Conference. The ZSR Library wanted to provide an opportunity to engage students interested in writing outside of the classroom and to offer these students the opportunity to become published authors. The works are from the second writers’ camp hosted at the ZSR Library.

A group of 25 student authors was selected to meet at ZSR on the evening of Friday, February 9th from 7:30 pm to Saturday, February 10th at 7:00 am and write a collection of stories (or essays or poems) that were then cataloged and published in this book. Each participant is listed as an author and received a copy of the book.

Writers' Camp 2018 was funded by the Z. Smith Reynolds Library, the WFU Writing Center, OPCD, and THRIVE.
"And thou shalt eat the fruit of thine own body, the flesh of thy sons and of thy daughters, which the LORD thy God hath given thee, in the siege, and in the straitness, wherewith thine enemies shall distress thee."

Deuteronomy 28:53

Maura tried to tune the radio in vain, finding nothing but static on the other end. She had long given up on finding anything, but the monotony of the snow-covered landscape was lulling her to sleep, and the motion of turning the dial kept her awake. The radio popped, and a nasally voice crackled from the speakers, delivering the Gospel to a few late-night listeners a little closer to civilization. To Maura, though, the garbled sermon was even worse than the static. She switched the radio off.

The snow was picking up, and Maura’s car was slowing down. She wasn’t surprised. She had purchased the vehicle for $500, a late eighties model Ford LTD sedan, built years ago for Sunday drives to church, trips to the grocery store and back, driving the kids to school. The rear-wheel drive wasn’t made to handle a winter storm in western North Carolina—was she in North Carolina yet? Maura hadn’t seen a sign welcoming her to the state, but then, she hadn’t seen any signs saying anything at all—just their snow-covered outlines against the dark sky.
At the next exit she would have to stop and get gas. She could get her bearings there.

The snow was almost impossible to see through now, and Maura slowed to a crawl on the icy road as she pulled off the highway. *Please, please, please,* she whispered, *just a little farther. Just til I find a gas station. Til I find anything.*

The car wound down through a curvy, mountainous road into a valley, and Maura made it another five miles before she had to stop. The road was too icy, and there were no guardrails. She wasn’t going to drive all the way to North Carolina just to die in a car accident. She pictured the Ford spinning out into a ravine out here in the middle of nowhere, her body to be found days or weeks later by some unlucky hikers, the mad search for next of kin to notify—she squeezed her eyes shut and lit a cigarette, pulling on her coat and hat to settle in for a cold night.

She was wrapped up in a blanket and stubbing the butt of her third cigarette out on the dashboard when a truck pulled up next to her. Maura froze and double-checked the locks, and a tall, broad-shouldered woman in a brown hunting jacket hopped down from the cab and ambled over to her window. She brushed off the snow and then jumped back, seeing Maura’s face behind the glass.

Maura didn’t know why, exactly, but she waved. The tall woman laughed and waved back, then tapped on the window, motioning for Maura to roll it down. Maura obliged.

“Are you okay? What are you doing out here, honey? I ain’t seen this car around here before.”

The woman had a kind, ruddy face and wore her hair in a braid down her back. Her smile was a little crooked, in a friendly way, Maura thought. She was a good Samaritan, a mother hen who can’t let things alone, just trying to help a stranded traveler.

“I—I just pulled over to wait out the storm,” Maura stammered. She felt suddenly like a scared little girl, cold and tired and unsure of what to do. She felt her eyes sting with tears.

“Oh, baby, don’t you have anywhere warm to be tonight? You must be freezing. Storm ain’t gonna let up for a while. I’m taking you into town with me, alright? Let’s get you warmed up.” The woman tilted her head toward her truck.

“I’m alright,” Maura said, but the woman was already opening the car door for her, and Maura stepped out into the snowy night.

“Well hi there, Alright. I’m Carol,” said the woman with a chuckle. She seemed kind. Maura felt a sort of kinship with her already.

“Town ain’t too far: about four miles down the road. We don’t get much traffic down through Henry,” Carol told her new passenger.

“Who’s Henry?” Maura asked.

“This here’s Henry. The valley where I was born and raised.” Carol smiled. “Couldn’t never leave a place like this, you know?”

Maura didn’t know. “Hmmm,” she said, nodding politely. “I’m Maura, by the way.”

“And where’s Miss Maura from, and what’s she doing out here in Henry?”

*Good question,* Maura thought to herself. “Just trying to get to my sister’s. In North Carolina. Outer Banks.”
“Well you’re about thirty miles from the Carolina border,” Carol said. “Why’d you get off the highway out here? Ain’t nothing but hill folk around here.”

“I was looking for a gas station, but the snow…” Maura trailed off.

Carol nodded in understanding. The two rode together in silence, the moment hanging like smoke in the air between them.

“I’m sorry—where are we going, exactly?” Maura asked.

“Oh! Honey! I’ve got room for you to stay the night with me! I live with my brother Mark. He’s a character; don’t mind him. He’s just got some more religion than most of us do, even for Henry. Says God talks to him, and I guess he does."

Maura shifted in her seat, uncomfortable at the prospect of a sleepover in a stranger’s home, but how different was that really from the last few weeks she’d spent in Indiana? She found the parallels amusing.

“I’m headed back from Indiana,” Maura offered. “Evansville. That’s where I got the car. I never thought I’d need it for this long of a drive, or I would’ve saved some money and gotten something decent.”

“That where you’re from?” Carol asked.

“Uh, no, not really. I grew up in Detroit.” Maura felt the need to share. It was nice to have some human interaction, nice to meet someone new. “I moved to Indiana for a relationship but it…didn’t work out.”


“Do you have any kids?” Maura asked.

Carol let out a tiny gasp, as if she’d been pinched. “No,” she said after a pause. “No kids.”

Maura’s phone was rendered useless by the lack of cell reception in Henry. “Do you get any service at all?” She asked, holding her phone up in the air.

“We’ve got WiFi at the house, and a charger. Sorry, we don’t get much signal out here—there are a couple regional carriers that do alright, but it ain’t a place to call your friends about, you know?” Carol smiled good-naturedly. “Here we are, home sweet home!” she said, pulling into what must look like a gravel driveway when it wasn’t covered in snow.

Before them was a squat brick house in the middle of the woods, warm light spilling out the windows into the night. There were a dozen cars in the yard, some on cinder blocks. A concrete out-building with two garage doors stood a little distance from the house.

“I’m a mechanic,” Carol said, nodding toward the building. “Come on in, honey. We’ll put on a pot of coffee and warm you right up.”

Maura followed Carol into the house, where a short, wiry man was waiting by the door.

“And who do we have here?” he asked, eyeing Maura suspiciously.

“This is Maura from Detroit,” Carol said protectively. “She got stuck off the highway driving into North Carolina, and she’s staying here tonight to wait out the storm.”
Mark stood silently for a moment. “Well, alright then. I’ll put some coffee on,” he said. Then, turning toward Maura, he asked “Mind if I speak to my sister in private? Something personal; it’ll just be a minute.”

“Of course,” Maura replied, and sat down on a worn brown leather couch to wait.

Still without a WiFi password or cell service, she could only check the time on her phone. 10:57pm. She tried for a few minutes to avoid eye contact with the deer heads hanging from the wall. Bored, she crept to the kitchen door and stood there, eavesdropping.

“I already told you I’m not going tonight. I’m not ready, Mark,” Carol hissed. She seemed on the verge of tears, but her voice didn’t waver.

“You’re never going to be ready,” Mark slammed his fist on the table, upsetting the papers and pens scattered about. “You have a responsibility to this community, to this church, to me—”

“I’ve done my part, Mark. I did what I’m supposed to do. Leave me here with Maura.”

Mark stood a full head shorter than his sister, but he seemed to loom huge above her in that moment. He abruptly slapped Carol across the face. “You’re still doing your part. You’re not done here, and I’m not done with you. God’s not done with you, Carol. Do you know that?”

Carol was silent, her hand pressed to her cheek. Mark knelt in front of her, leaning his forehead against hers.

“Do you understand me?” he asked quietly.

“Yes,” Carol murmured, tears rolling down her cheeks.

“Good,” his voice and demeanor softened. “Make something up to tell the girl.” Mark kissed her forehead gently, almost paternally, and went down the hall.

Maura waited for a breath, then entered the kitchen.

“Carol? Are you alright?”

“Fine, I’m fine!” Carol wiped tears out of her eyes, shaking her hands and grinning. “I’m emotional. It’s been a long day, hasn’t it? I’m just tired. Here, let’s have some coffee and chat a bit before bed, alright honey? I think we can both use a friend tonight. Why don’t you tell me what happened in Indiana, huh?” She patted the chair next to her.

So Maura opened up her private pain to Carol—it felt only fair after whatever she had just witnessed between Carol and Mark. She told her about Evelyn, mother of three, separated from her husband, who she met by chance in the comments section of a mutual acquaintance’s Facebook post. She told her about the messages that became phone calls, the phone calls that spurred an idea—that maybe it was fate, and maybe they were meant to find each other. She told her how she had fallen in love with a middle-aged woman who she had never met before.

She told Carol how she knew upon arrival that it wouldn’t work between them, how it took Evelyn two weeks to go back to her husband.

“She was rebelling, I think. Trying something new. Emotionally, she needed someone. But I don’t think she ever expected me to actually come. And when I got there, what could I do? I didn’t have a job. I stayed in the house. Her kids didn’t like me. They didn’t understand why I was there, and I didn’t either, not really.” Maura paused. “She met me at a diner
after work and told me she was going to try to work things out with her husband. She said she was grateful for our time together, that I’d reminded her what’s important in life. But she needed to move on and I wasn’t the person to do it with. So I used all the money I had left and bought a car and called my sister. We aren’t close, but she said I can stay with her while I figure things out. I don’t think she felt like she had much of a choice.”

Carol held Maura’s hand to her lips and kissed it. “You’ll be okay, sweet girl,” she said. “Things’ll shake out alright in the end.” She stood then, tense. “I’ve got to go.”


“Oh, honey, just some family stuff to take care of. Don’t you worry about it.” Carol patted her hand. “You’ll sleep in J—in the guest room,” she said. “Let me get some extra blankets. It’s chilly tonight.”

“Carol—” Maura started, then stopped. What could she say? What was there to say? “I want to help you,” she began.

“Oh, it’s just a couple blankets, sweet pea! You can run some water in these mugs, though, if you want to help out.”

“No, I mean, I want to help you…get out of here. I saw Mark—”

“You don’t know what you saw,” Carol snapped.

“I think I do know what I saw,” Maura protested, “and I don’t think you should let him treat you that way.”

Carol stepped back from Maura and spoke slowly, chewing her words as only mountain folk can. “My brother,” she said, “is a good man. He is the leader of our church. He is well-respected in this community. There are not words kind enough to describe what he has done for the people of Henry. I took you into our home tonight because I was afraid you’d freeze and die out there, because you seem like a sweet girl, and someone who needed help. Don’t you dare disrespect my family in my house, and don’t you make me regret doing what the good Lord wants us to do. ‘For I was a stranger and you took me in,’ just like the Good Book says.”

A shadow seemed to pass over her face just then. She took a breath and nodded toward the hall. “Come on. Here’s your room, honey,” she said sweetly.

Maura followed Carol into a small room with a twin-sized bed, a mismatched desk and chair, and a tall dresser all crammed into it. The desk was piled high with papers and books. Clothes hung in the closet, and a deflated football was on the bed. It looked all in all like a teenage boy’s room. “Does someone live here?” She asked.

“My home is home to all of God’s children that need it,” Carol sighed. “Here are some extra blankets. You gonna be alright for the night? I’ll be back before the sun comes up.”

“I’m fine. Thank you for your hospitality,” Maura said stiffly.

“Goodnight, honey,” Carol said as she closed the door.

“Goodnight,” Maura called back.

Maura knew she couldn’t stay in that house, but what choice did she have? She could either risk the night in a stranger’s room, somewhere she felt uneasy but at least warm, or she could trek back out in a snowstorm for miles to get to her car. No, she couldn’t do that. She’d die in the cold, she was
sure. But she didn’t feel safe in the house, either. She lay in bed, ruminating, trying to come up with a plan of action.

She remembered the out-building. I’m a mechanic, Carol had told her. There were lots of cars in the yard, and there must be some inside the building. If she could get into the building maybe she could find some keys, borrow a car with four-wheel drive, find somewhere with at least cell signal…

She got out of bed just before midnight. The house was empty. Carol and Mark had left half an hour ago. Maura dressed quickly and hustled outside. The weather had turned to freezing rain. She pulled her hood down low over her brow and ran toward the out-building. It was farther away than she had thought upon first glance, and by the time she reached it, her fingers were stiff with cold, and she struggled to lift the garage door.

Curiously, the lights were on. The air inside was stuffy, and smelled like rubber tires, oil, and barbecue pork. There were five vehicles in the bay, only two of which had four wheels on the ground. One, a Subaru Outback, had obviously been rear-ended. Maura hoped that all it needed was body work. Now you need to find the keys.

She spotted a cork board of hooks with a dozen keys hanging from them. As she approached, though, she thought she heard voices. Not one or two, but dozens, in unison. They were singing, or chanting, or…what was it she was hearing? A hymn? She stopped to listen for the sound. It was coming from behind the wall of keys.

It’s not a wall, it’s a door, Maura realized, noticing the carriage tracks in front of it. She slid the door open with a little effort, revealing a wooden staircase that led into a basement or storm cellar. The voices grew louder, and she could make out the words of a hymn as she began to descend the staircase:

> Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,  
> but trust Him for His grace;  
> behind a frowning providence  
> he hides a smiling face.  
> His purposes will ripen fast,  
> unfolding every hour;  
> the bud may have a bitter taste,  
> but sweet will be the flower.

Maura stopped halfway down the stairs, her stomach queasy. The room she was looking into was an unfinished basement, with a cement floor and bare beams. There was no light except that given off by fat red candles, standing upright on the ground or held in the hands of the thirty-odd people who were singing. There was no furniture. At the front of the room, Mark and Carol stood together. In Mark’s hands was a goblet of red wine, and in Carol’s, a bread basket.

“Now let us prepare to receive Holy Communion,” Mark instructed the congregation. He bowed his head as if to pray, but then turned suddenly and faced the stairs. “And let us invite our newest guest to the Lord’s Table,” he said, turning to Maura. “Welcome, sister.”

“Welcome, sister,” the others repeated. All eyes turned to look at Maura as she descended the stairs. Mortified and red as a beet, she took a place among the congregation, near the back. As Carol and Mark blessed the bread and wine, a small, birdlike woman led the worshipers in song.
There is a fountain filled with blood drawn from Emmanuel’s veins…

The dim candlelight cast eerie shadows across the faces of everyone in the room, and Maura could hardly make out the features of the woman next to her.

“Is this your first Communion?” the woman whispered from the side of her mouth.

Maura vaguely recalled attending mass with her grandparents as a child. “It’s been…a long time,” she replied under her breath.

A long time.

“We are so grateful to Carol for all her sacrifice,” a man behind them whispered.

“Bless her,” replied the woman next to Maura, and her eyes were glassy with tears. Maura felt the same uneasiness gripping her stomach again. It was as if she had walked into a different world, she thought. Religious sacraments made her uncomfortable, and she hadn’t set foot in a house of worship since she came out as gay, almost a decade ago. She wished that she had just gone to sleep in that strange bed in that strange house. She wished that she had taken a different way to her sister’s, or stayed on the highway a little longer, or left a day sooner. She wished that she had just stayed in Indiana—or that she had never gone to Indiana in the first place.

This is where Maura’s thoughts were when the song ended and Carol lifted her bread basket above her head. “For God so loved the world,” she began in a low, clear voice, “that he gave his only begotten son…” her voice cracked, and her shaking hands dropped the basket. It landed with a thump and something round and solid rolled into an arrangement of several candles, knocking two of them over. Those closest to the action shrieked. Carol fell to her knees. “Jack,” she sobbed, “Jack, my baby, I’m so sorry…” She reached for the fallen object, fumbling again. The candle sizzled against it, and Maura smelled pork barbecue again. Then she came to the sickening realization—Carol had dropped a roasted human head.

Maura felt faint. She tried to scream, but only gagged. The smell of burning flesh filled the room, and she stood there, retching, while Carol sobbed, and Mark attempted to gather chunks of meat—human meat, Maura thought in horror—that had fallen from the basket. The congregation was restless, some rushing to help Mark, others to comfort Carol, and still more pushing Maura out of the way, restraining her as she lashed out, arms swinging and legs kicking. She couldn’t escape; there were too many people holding onto her.

“Please, please, let me go, please, no!” she screamed. Someone tried to cover her mouth with their hand, and she bit down as hard as she could until she tasted blood. Blood. She remembered the goblet of wine.

Jack’s blood. Carol’s son Jack’s blood. Jack’s head. Carol’s son Jack’s head.

I was in his bedroom. I was in his bedroom.

Maura gagged and vomited again. Several people jumped back, and Maura lurched forward and up the stairs. Her vision blurred and began to go dark around the edges.

Do not faint. Do not faint. Do not faint. Get out.
She had a few seconds’ head start before they began to follow her up the stairs, but she didn’t know which key she needed. Oh, god. She grabbed four and ran to the Subaru.

She only had time to try two before Mark wrapped his hands around her throat. He was strong, stronger than his small stature suggested. Maura gasped for air, finding none. She kneed him in the crotch as hard as she possibly could, and he fell to the ground, bringing her down with him before releasing her and clutching at his groin. Two followers knelt to help him. A third knotted his hands into Maura’s hair, pulling her head back before slamming it against the concrete floor. Once, twice, three times for good measure. He stepped back to admire his handiwork, nodding in satisfaction over the caved in places on the dead girl’s skull. Her blood pooled around him where he knelt.

The man stayed by Maura for a moment and sank down, drinking the blood that spilled from her broken body. He kissed her collapsed forehead and crossed himself, the sacrament complete.

Kari Burgess fell in love with reading early in life and writing shortly thereafter. She mainly writes poetry and has had her work featured in Wake Forest University’s student publication 3 to 4 Ounces as well as Washington, D.C.’s Who Want the World Like It Is: An Election Anthology. Kari hails from Granite Falls, North Carolina. She is a junior English and Political Science double major with a minor in Linguistics.

FROM AFAR

Courtney C. Wadley

To anyone suffering from heartbreak,

Cheering you up seemed so simple, but nobody could ever quite reach you in the way that they could. And how could anyone blame you? They had it all; brains that would make your head spin, beauty that people write songs about, and a spirit that had enough energy to fuel a thousand burning suns. Their eyes always had a certain fire to it, as it seemed like a flame that would never go out. When they left you, they left a hole in your heart bigger than the circumference of the bowling ball you two used to share on Friday nights. It crushed you, and as it crushed, I tried my best to draw your attention to the one who had been there for you all along. However, your heart did not belong to me. They took it with them.

What made me most upset was that they did not know the value of what was stolen. Your uplifting and supportive smile went first, with you starting to drift from abyss to abyss without looking ahead to see the light at the end of your magnificent tunnel. Your comforting voice somehow got drowned out by theirs, making you sound like their echo. I miss that bright light in your eyes, but it is like their disappearance has dimmed them, and along went your sunny aura. While I could not sense whether or not they ever loved you, I knew without a doubt that you loved them. It is just so sad that one
day they decided not to love you for good, wiping away all hope you had.

Trust me, I know a lot about one-sided love, as I have been on both the receiving and giving end. That is actually why I am writing you this letter. I had hoped, even though I am not them, maybe I would do? Ha-ha, that honestly sounds a little awkward, but as someone who might not be conventionally beautiful, I do not feel as if I have the right to suggest the radical notion that we were absolutely meant to be. In terms of what I cannot offer you, it consists a lot of the things society aesthetically values most. I may not be able to adhere to the traditional standards of beauty (by no fault of your own) you might hold so dear, as I have determined myself being neither ugly nor pretty. But what I can give you is a promise. A promise that I may love you for you, embracing and celebrating all of the things that they swore they could never love. This may or may not be what you want to hear now that your heart is suffering, but I am going to offer it to you anyways. Here is why:

You deserve the love of every person in a Super Bowl football stadium and then some. You have the kindest heart of anyone I have known in my years of existence, the largest sense of compassion, witty comments that make me laugh like it is nobody’s business, and random philosophically valid points that make my head spin. The complexity of your soul mesmerizes all, and through everything you do your energy inspires others to live their best lives. Even I have been captivated by your radiance from time to time. You are an amazing person whose voice and spirit should not serve as anyone’s echo. Every part of you is loveable, and all of you deserves to be loved.

Love,
An Admirer
THE PEN--AN HEIRLOOM

Courtney C. Wadley

If I could tell you why I write, I could penpoint it all back to your Great Grandmother Cordelia. She was a beauty that one, as radiant as the sun and as strikingly beautiful as the starry night sky. One time when the power was cut, she walked into the McCarty’s diner and my life all just as the lights turned back on. Ha-ha I tell you, she literally lit up a room as she walked in. She was also as smart as a whip, although I am not sure how I tricked such a genius into marrying me.

Cordie had always done right by herself, making sure she went to college while also keeping up with her responsibilities back home. However, most people just knew the responsible Cordelia. I knew the real her. Cordie had daring dreams of becoming an engineer and inventor, as she tinkered around with different items on a daily basis. I tell you, when you have an inventor as a wife, your birthday presents are always unique.

When Cordelia was still my fiancé, I got drafted for the war. I had to go relatively soon, but as I spent my remaining days with her in the states, I knew I needed to do something. So, I looked around in the Matthew’s shopping district for about three hours, looking at fine jewelry, fancy brimmed hats, and satin-silk scarves, but then I saw it. Sitting atop a wooden podium behind the Jackson and sons glass window pane, was a set of his and her pens. These pieces of fantastic craftsmanship were made completely of wood, but with swirling flower designs on the sides and refillable ink tips. After observing the pens in all of their glory I thought to myself, “this is it, this is what we need!” I bought about forty of them, and gave her one as a future wedding gift, promising to always write.

Now most would not see pens as such a marvel, but I saw it as an opportunity for Cordelia and me to stay connected during the war and our marriage. When I was in battle, Cordie and I would use those same pens for every letter we would write to each other. It was amazing to see how our thoughts, emotions, and minds were connected even during this difficult time apart. When I returned home, we both wanted it to continue. We saw those pens and letters as a symbol of our love’s strength and strong connection. We would write with those pens whenever we had good news to share, bad emotions we wanted to get out, or even to have an open discussion about the things that mattered to us. Those letters, but especially the symbolism of those special pens made our marriage better. They made us better. And as such we decided to pass them down. So, at every family wedding since then we have given the newlywed couple a set of these pens, so as to encourage them to foster great communication within their marriage and through letters. And you know what? None of the couples who we have given them to have ever gotten divorced. I honestly believe it’s the power of the pen.

Courtney Wadley is currently a freshman at Wake Forest University. She is an intended biology major with a psychology/Health Policy and Administration minor. She enjoys writing, dancing spontaneously, crafting, and exploring the world.
The first book I see is Lucretius’s *De Rerum Natura*, which ironically is the book my friend David had attended a talk on the previous day. We had both said that after listening to the talk by one of our former professors, we now wanted to read the book ourselves, but he insisted that we would have to learn Latin before we could. I wanted to tell him that we could always read an English translation, but he just kept talking, so I never took the opportunity to tell him. I never want to interrupt my friends when they talk.

Despite having grabbed doughnuts at the talk, we both decided that they didn’t count as a full meal, so we ought to go to Chick-fil-A so that we could have a real meal. I also just wanted to keep talking to him. Since the end of our first-year seminar, where the two of us had met, we’d stopped having a reason to meet. We had each other’s contact information, so we could have always hit the other one up to grab coffee or just hang out, but with so much going on in our lives, neither one of us bothered to pick up the phone.

We hadn’t even planned on meeting each other at the talk. I had gone to hear our former professor speak from his new book, while he had instead gone so that he could get the free doughnuts they had available and consequently “didn’t have to grab dinner.”

“I wasn’t originally planning on going to this, since I knew I’d be hungry at this time and would want to have
dinner,"—he said at the end of the talk when we finally had a chance to speak—"but when I heard that there were going to be doughnuts, I finally had a way to go to this and grab dinner. It worked out perfectly."

I rolled my eyes as he said this. "Do two doughnuts honestly count as a dinner, though?" I asked.

"I mean, technically they do—it's just not healthy."

We both laughed at that.

"Say," he said. "We haven't gotten a chance to hang out recently. Why don't we go grab Chick-fil-A for a real dinner?"

"It sounds good to me," I said. We each grabbed our bags and took the less than five-minute walk to our University Center, which is conveniently the building right across from the classroom building we were just in.

As we walked into the mini food court that is the ground floor of our University Center, we gazed upon the immense amount of people that had gathered here for dinner. Looking at the line for Chick-fil-A, we were intimidated by the roughly twenty people who had assembled a queue of hungry college students.

David pointed out to me the burger and Chinese food place that was currently dry of customers. There were never any customers there, as the Chinese food typically sat out all day and the burgers swam in a tray full of ice before placed on the grill and cooked right in front of you.

"You know what," he said. "I think I'm going to grab some of the shitty Chinese food. Come find me when you get done."

I considered going over there to get some shitty Chinese food as well, but I've eaten there out of impatience so many times and neglected to get Chick-fil-A so many other times for the same reason that I decided that I would finally put in the effort and wait in line. I trusted that he would still be waiting for me by the time we both got out.

While I stood in line to get some chicken nuggets, I looked at my phone and began scrolling through Twitter. I've been trying to back away from social media, but it was inevitable that my habits would pull me back into the world of fake people and surveillance of the joyous lives of others. Ironically, one of the first tweets I saw was "I fucking hate being so fucking depressed all the time and not having someone around that I can immediately vent to." I considered messaging this person to check and see if they were okay, but I tweet stuff like this for attention so often that I was sure they were just doing it because, as the tweet said, they didn't have someone they could immediately vent to.

When I was about halfway through in line, and fifteen other people had replaced the ten other people that had just grabbed their food, I decided that I was bored with Twitter and switched to Grindr (Yes, you read that correctly—Grindr). I hadn't gotten any new messages, but that is most likely because I hadn't put a profile picture up, as I am shy about my appearance. There is one message I got from this one guy (whose name I shall not mention for privacy reasons, but whom we shall henceforth call "Mr. Rochester") I'd been talking to recently. He didn't have his face in his Grindr profile picture, but I was able to recognize him from his Instagram profile picture he had cropped into this one. I found him
attractive and thought he might make a suitable romantic partner, so I opted to message him in order to try my luck.

I'd figured out that he didn't get online much, but he still made an effort to reply to my messages whenever he could, leading us to communicate only every couple of hours or so.

The last thing I said was “Did you get that work done?” We were both talking about how much work we procrastinated on. I texted this to him when I woke up and just didn’t take the time to check in it since then.

He replied, “Haha nope XD”. This was how our conversations usually went. Neither one of us were making much of an effort to talk about anything else besides school.

"Same here lol,” I chose to reply. He was online an hour ago—also the same time he sent that message—so I didn't think he would be getting to this one for a while. In addition to that, he had a habit of not replying to simple messages such as this, but I couldn't hold that against him since I usually did the same to other people. He would often double-text whenever I did this, so I considered doing that, but I decided to try my luck and see if he could think of anything to reply to that.

By the time I was done addressing this matter, it was about time for me to order my food. I looked over to see one of the employees making a milkshake, causing me to sigh. I couldn't believe someone had the audacity to make one of the workers take the time to make a milkshake when that worker could've been helping this line go down.

Finally, one of the underpaid employees yelled “Next guest!”, which led me to go over there as quick as possible to place my order. We went over the usual script.

"I'd like an 8-piece combo.”
"Drink?”
"Just water.”
"Sauce?”
"Chick-fil-A.”

She handed me the sauce and started on my drink. By the time she was done with this task, another worker had grabbed several bags and shouted “8-count meals!” She places them on the counter. “Come get ‘em.” It reminded me of how similar everyone is when they come here. It puts the dumbass milkshake-drinkers to shame.

As I walked away from the counter, I saw my friend David by the table full of ketchup, napkins, and utensils waiting for me.

"Shall we find a place to sit?” he asked. We both looked around only to find that there were no available tables in sight.

"It doesn't look like there is anywhere to sit,” I observed.

"Should we just go back to the dorm?” he suggested.

"That sounds like a good idea.”

We're lucky that we live in the same building, so we didn't really have to debate whose residence hall we were going to go to. Instead of one of our rooms, we chose to simply eat in one of the lounges in case someone wanted to come in and join us. We each took a seat at one of the lounge chairs that conveniently have desks built into them.

Once each of us had our food spread out, David initiated the conversation.

"So how's your semester been going?” he asked.
"It's been going quite well," I answered. I was such a generic response that's so impossible to respond to that I decided to continue speaking in order to keep this conversation interesting. “All of my classes are in the same building this semester.”

He widened his eyes at this. “That's lucky,” he said. “I wish all of my classes could be in the same building. I'm taking an organic chemistry course so I have to walk all the way to North Campus just for one class.”

"That sure sucks," I remarked. "Is the walk at least worth it?"

"It's a divisional," he sighed. "I don't even want to take the course."

"Damn, I feel bad for you," I tried to say with some sort of empathy so that he knew I honestly cared. "Are you concentrating on finishing divisionals this semester?"

"Yes, but I'm at least trying to make sure it's an enjoyable semester. I have at least two classes that are part of my major."

"What are they?" I asked.

"Latin 111 and Dr. Cox's Greek and Roman Comedy class."

I was shocked by this revelation. “Wait, are you trying to become a Classics major?” I asked with excitement.

"Yes."

"No way! I'm trying to become a Classics major too!"

"Seriously?"

"Yep, except I'm going the languages route. What about you?"

"I'm just doing Classical Studies. Languages are definitely not my forte."

"I feel that. How're you doing in Latin 111."

I'd clearly embarrassed him. “It's...rough—to say the least.”

"I tested into LAT 153," I informed him, “and I'm in LAT 211 right now. If you need any help, I'd be glad to assist you."

"Aww thanks, Jonathan. You're such a sweet friend.

"It's no problem at all. Just let me know what you need."

"Would you mind teaching me about the third declension?" he asked. “I still don't understand it.”

"Oh, sure. Would you want me to explain it to you sometime this weekend?"

"That works out perfectly."

"Oh," he said sprouting a huge grin on his face, then bending over to makes sure I was the only one who could hear what he was about to tell me.

"I got my first blowjob yesterday."

If I was standing at that moment I would’ve fallen to the floor. “What the fuck—are you serious?”

He was satisfied that he had shocked me. “Yes, I am dead serious.”

A smile crept onto my face as well. It was a way of communicating that I was happy he'd come of age.

"Oh my fucking God...tell me about it."

"Well, you know that girl I started seeing last semester?"

"Yeah."
"Well, the other day, we decided to go grab Moe's, then come back to my room in order to eat it. We were both on my bed just talking. When we were done with our food, we tossed it into the trash can and scooted closer to each other. That's when one thing led to another and..." I didn't think he would be able to continue without cracking up some more.

My jaw dropped. My sweet and innocent David!
"Wait, so did you two not want to go any further?" I procured.
"I didn't have a condom."
I rolled my eyes. "David, how can you not have a condom lying around?"
"I've never had a reason to," he said innocently.
"But have you never had a thought that you might be with someone like that and then suddenly be in the mood?"
"No!" he gasped. "I never thought this would actually happen!" I suppose he truly is innocent.
"Well, I hope you ate her out," I remarked. "You know how much I support gender equality."
He laughed. "What the fuck does that have to do with gender equality?"
"If she's going to do you a favor and suck your dick, then you need to do the same for her and eat her pussy."
He laughed even harder at that. "Eating her pussy did not come up, but I'll make sure to do it the next time we're together."

We were in an awkward silence before I spoke up.
"But did you enjoy it?" I asked impishly.
He was embarrassed by this point. "Yes, I did, in fact, enjoy it."

I shook my head at this. "Oral's really not all that it's cracked up to be in my opinion. In fact, it doesn't even really feel like anything."
"Seriously?" he asked in disbelief. "I thought it was pretty good for my first experience."
"It's nothing like real sex," I reassured him.
"Well, it's probably different since you're having sex with guys and I'm having sex with girls."
"It can't be all that different. Only I've heard that assholes are tighter than vaginas."
"I didn't know that," he snickered. "Thank you for informing me of that."
"No problem." I say with a smile.

We were silent again for a moment, then he decided to ask a question I would never have brought up myself.
"So have you had any sexual experiences lately?" I was surprised to find that my straight friend wanted to know about the sex life of a gay man.

I didn't say anything at first. "Well, there was this one guy I met during my family trip to D.C...."
"You were in D.C.?" he said with astonishment. "Why didn't you tell me? I live right outside of D.C."
"Seriously?" I responded. "I thought you told me that your hometown was in Florida."
"I lived there at one point," he said, "But remember: my Dad was in the military so we were always moving around a lot."

What a horrible friend I was to not remember this simple fact!
"I wish I knew that when I was there. I would have definitely hit you up."
"It's okay," he reassured me. "You didn't know."
I still felt like a horrible friend.
"So, you were saying?" he incited me to continue.
"Right," I began to tell him the story.

***
I’d gone to this gay bar where I met this guy named Tyler. I’d been too nervous to approach him, so I kept giving him the Eye, hoping he would come over to introduce himself. It wasn’t a creep look; I made sure it was a look that showed I was genuinely interested in him.

When he finally got the nerve to come over there and sit next to me, he just pretended to be getting a drink at the bar. He ordered a dark beer, which I used to make an introduction.

"Interesting choice," I remarked. "I find it unusual for a guy to order beer at a gay bar."
"I'm aware of that," he said, "I like to be different.'
"I admire that," I said. He smiled.
"I'm Jonathan, by the way," I said.
"I'm Tyler," he replied.
"That's a pretty common name for gays," I remarked. "I honestly don't think I've ever met a straight guy named Tyler."
"I've come across lots of straight guys named Tyler," he said.

It was then that I made my move. "Have they all been as cute as you?"
He blushed at the compliment.

I won't bore you with the rest of the details of what we were talking about. I'll only say that I had to do most of the leading. He was really shy, so I was the one asking all the questions and doing all the flirting. I knew he was comfortable with what I did by this adorable laugh he had where he would just give out this really high pitched "Ha!" followed by what sounded like he was trying to catch his breath.

I could also tell from his smile. God, he had the most adorable smile. Whenever he'd do it, his face would fold in on itself around where his dimples would be. He hadn't shaved in a few days, so he had this really fine ginger five o'clock shadow, which I let him know I also found very attractive. His defense was that he'd forgotten to bring a razor when he got into town. I told him I was glad he did.

Eventually, we both decided that the bar was becoming too noisy for us to talk, so we decided to go somewhere different. By this point, I knew what I wanted to do with him, so I offered to go to wherever he was staying. I didn't want to go back to mine since I knew my family would be there.

"I'm not sure if we can go back to mine," he said. "I know my roommates aren't there right now, but I'm here with my Catholic university, so I'd hate for them to walk in on us."
"Do they not know you're gay?"
He shook his head.

But then he shrugged his shoulders. "I think you're really cute, though. It might be worth taking a risk."
I was seriously against that. "Are you sure about that?" I asked. "You just told me you were nervous about your roommates finding out."
"Yeah—but I'm really into you. Besides, I've never been with a guy before. I'm not sure if I'll ever get another chance."

It's here that the thought crossed my mind that perhaps he was just using me to lose his virginity. I made up an excuse to stop it.

"Tyler, a guy as cute as you is surely going to be able to find another guy who's willing to fuck you."

"But I want to fuck you," he pleaded. By then, I was sure he was just being nice, but I was at a loss for how to convince him of why this would be a bad idea.

"Fine," I said. "If you really think it's worth the risk, then I won't argue with you. I just don't want anything to happen to you because of me."

We called an Uber and had it go back to his place. We sat in the back seat, where I decided to pull a risque move: brushing my hand against his. He blushed at the gesture.

"Do you mind if I hold your hand?" I asked seductively, trying to make sure the driver didn't hear me.

"I'm not really into public displays of affection," he said, but I could hear in his voice that he honestly wanted me to. Nevertheless, I was forced to back off.

His hotel was only about five minutes away, so the ride there wasn't too awkward. I let him lead me to his room. As he did this, I noticed that he made sure to remain several feet in front of me, as if he was trying to keep me at a distance.

"Are you trying run away from me?" I asked him while we were in the elevator.

"No," he said with astonishment. "Why would you think that?"

"You kept me at a distance on the way here."

"Did I?" he asked with guilt. "I'm so sorry. I'm just nervous about getting caught." He was letting his guard down.

"We don't have to do this unless you really want to," I reminded him. "If you're not into me—" Suddenly I was letting my guard down as well. I wanted him to be into me as well.

"No," he said firmly. "I really want to do this."

I was forced to believe him, no matter how much I thought he was just doing this to be nice. Or if he was just using me to lose his virginity before he returned to a life of being in the closet forever.

When we finally got to his floor and walked into his hotel room, it was all I could do to keep my hands off of him. My hands were immediately wrapped around his waist and my lips were pressed against his. He didn't hesitate to put his hands on my shoulders and respond eagerly to my passion.

After several minutes of making out, we decided that it was time to move over to the bed. It was him that had his back on the mattress and I that was on top of him taking control.

I asked if he had a condom not long after that, to which he replied that he in fact did. We then knew that the next step was to take our pants off, which neither one of us had trouble doing. The trouble began when we got to the top layer of our clothing.

He had no issue taking his own shirt off. He was a twink, having a body that was so skinny that I could see his ribcage. It was I that didn't want to take my shirt off.

"I'm sure you look fine," he reassured me.

"I used to be fat," I informed him.
"I don't care," he said, nudging at the base of my sweatshirt. "I just want to see you."

I couldn't do it myself, so I let him be the one that lifted my clothes off me. My arms immediately clung to my drooping chest that I was so insecure about. The stretch marks were still all over my body, and there was nothing I could do to hide them.

"I'm sorry my body is so ugly," I apologized. I was sure he could hear tears in my voice.

"No no no," he whispered reassuringly into my ear. "You look fine. I don't have a problem with you at all."

But I knew he was lying. No one could ever be pleased with a body like mine. That's why I could never get many guys to have sex with me. Whenever someone asked me for a body picture on Grindr, I always tried to find some way of dodging the question. When it was no use, I always took them at weird angles so that my body wouldn't look as ugly as it actually was. That was usually when they would block me, or if they were feeling nice, just refuse to respond.

But with him it was different somehow. He accepted my body for what it was, making no complaint or judgment. In fact, he seemed to enjoy the sex as much as I did, if not more. He closed his eyes and moaned when I penetrated him. He also came a lot, saying that it was all thanks to me. I still didn't believe him. I still thought he was doing all of this to be nice or using me to get something he wanted. There was no way a guy like this would like a guy like me.

After we were both finished, I immediately put my clothes back on.

"Do you not want to make out some more?" he asked.

"Your friends might come back soon," I reminded him. That wasn't the reason I was putting my clothes on, though.

"I don't care if they come back," he responded.

I still wouldn't believe him. Hadn't he had to put up with me for long enough?

"I don't want to be the reason you come out to your friends."

"I don't care if you are," he said desperately. "It'd be worth it."

We were both fighting back tears, but for different reasons. I continued trying to get ready to leave, but he was in a rush to reach for the pen and notepad laying on the nightstand right beside of his bed. He wrote something down and then handed it to me: it was his phone number.

"I know we just met and we'll probably never see each other again, but I thought you should know that I actually did have a really great time tonight."

"We live so far away," I said. "There's no way we could actually be together." He lived all the way in Denver.

He shrugged. "Just in case you ever wanted to talk, or are ever in town."

I took the slip. Now that I had all my clothes on, I could finally rush out of the door. I stuffed the paper deep inside one of my pants pockets.

I cried for an about an hour once I finally got back to my own hotel room, knowing full and well that he would never pick up the phone if I ever tried to call him.
By the time I was done telling this story tears were spilling down my eyes. David didn't know what to think.

"Wow..." he said. Apparently he didn't know what to say either. I hadn't expected to pour my guts out to him like that.

"Jonathan..." he continued. "Why were you so nervous? Wasn't it obvious that this guy liked you?"

"He didn't like me, David."

"Of course, he did! You said it yourself: he didn't care what you looked like."

"Yes, he did, David," I pressed. "He was just being nice. Every guy does it because they're just desperate to get in your pants."

"And how do you know that?"

I didn't want to tell him. He would know too much about my past. "Because I've done it before."

He looked at me in horror. "What do you mean?"

"I've slept with guys out of desperation before," I clarified. "I've never been into a man the same way they've been into me. I only slept with them because I was sad and desperate. I never enjoyed it."

"Then why'd you do it? Even if you were desperate, why be with someone who's not going to turn you on in any way whatsoever?"

"Because I had hope: I told myself that I could force myself to enjoy them; I just had to try harder—either that or I would eventually find someone who I was attracted to that was also attracted to me."

"And you haven't found that yet?"

"No."

"And why not?"

"Isn't it obvious?" I said gesturing not only to my body but to my face as well. "Look at how hideous I am."

"No the fuck you are not!" he exclaimed. "Jonathan, you're beautiful!"

I was shocked. Was this his way of coming out to me? Surely, a straight guy wasn't actually complimenting me.

"You're just saying that to make me feel better about myself."

"No, I am not. Jonathan, any guy would be lucky to have you."

I was sobbing now. It always happened when people were affectionate towards me. I could never handle the love I'd fought so hard to suppress.

"But you're straight," I finally spit out as if it meant something. "You couldn't possibly know such a thing."

"I don't have to in order to know how perfect you are."

"Stop it!" I commanded. "You don't know what you're talking about!" I got up to leave the room, but he grabbed me by the arm. I fell to the floor.

"Jonathan," he said firmly. "I'm saying all of this because I care about you as a friend. I couldn't possibly imagine my life without you in it. Yes, I am straight, but I'm comfortable enough in my own sexuality to tell you these things. You've always been there for me, so it's time for me to be here for you. So listen to me: you are funny—you are creative—you are smart—and you are the most passionate person I have ever met. I want to see you be yourself. And you deserve a man who can let you be yourself as well."
It took a while for this to set in.

“Promise me you’ll start believing in yourself from here on out.”

I had no choice but to consent.

***

My eyes finally leave the bookshelf. How long had I been staring at it? How long had I been absorbed in that flashback?

I check the time on my laptop and see that it's only 2:20 pm. That means I've only been daydreaming for about ten minutes. Not too much time has passed. I only had one class this morning at 9 am, and then I have a class at 3:30 pm, so this period gives me plenty of time to allow me to do work, usually to do the work for my 3:30 class.

I've already finished the work for that class, so I decide to open Grindr and see if Mr. Rochester ever responded. I haven't checked since I was standing in line for Chick-fil-A yesterday, so that gave him plenty of time to respond. I guess I'll have to double text if he didn't.

When I pull up my messages, I see that he has, in fact, sent me a message, only it has nothing to do with what we were talking about before. It reads “Hey, are you going to a frat party tonight?” It's a Friday, which means that many of our university's frats will be doing something.

"I'm not sure yet,” I respond. It's not a lie. David invited me to watch a movie with some of his friends tonight, but my friend Paul was wanting to go to a frat party tonight. I'd already told David that I'd most likely be going frating with Paul, since I typically do like to party on the weekends, but for some reason, I feel guilty about doing this.

I put Grindr away for now. I can always look at it after I'm done with my work.

It's a successful strategy. I work on an essay that's due on Monday, and it's only 3 when it gets done.

I check Grindr again to find a message from Mr. Rochester, and conveniently, he happens to be online.

"How'd you like to party at my frat tonight ;)" the message reads. Now I am definitely going frating tonight.

"That sounds like a lot of fun,” I reply.

It immediately gets delivered, so I know he's read it.

"Great,” he responds. “Here's my number. Text me and I'll get you the numbers of tonight's pledge drivers.” His number is placed in the next message. I make no hesitation doing as he says.

Before I can wait for him to send me the numbers, I have to pack up my things and head to my next class. When I'm in there, I'm not able to concentrate one bit. All I can do is think about the pledge flyer that sits in my messages as the professor speaks.

When class is finally dismissed, I pull out my phone to reveal the golden ticket that gets me to one of the best nights of my entire freshman experience.

I text Paul this wonderful news I've just received.

"Holy shit man,” he replies. “How the hell did you pull this off?”

"I know a guy,” I say. He doesn't question it. We make plans to grab dinner and pregame for tonight.
The restaurant we choose for dinner is the pizza place that our campus has conveniently provided for us to use. It's equipped with a pool table and foosball table, which we never use. We only ever come here on Friday nights.

It's not only he and I tonight; we share two other friends who frequently join us. Paul's the only one that's not a freshman—a junior, in fact. He considers himself our role model, which we've happily taken on. It's starting to get a little old, though.

We all split the cost of one large pepperoni pizza, which takes about thirty minutes for the waiter to bring. It's only 8:30, so we have plenty of time to pregame and get to the party.

"I still don't understand how you got those numbers," Paul remarks.

"I told you," I say. "I have connections."

He eyes me with suspicion. "You didn't have to go out of your way to do that. I'm the one who usually gets the numbers."

"But I just happened to get lucky."

He's upset that I've surpassed his abilities. He can't handle the fact that I could easily do something without his aid.

It's the bulk of what he says to me at dinner, as he usually does. Other than that, whenever he has a question to ask, it seems like he directs it at either Mary or Gabe. I'm sure it's all in my head, though. I'll probably feel better once I have enough alcohol in my veins.

After eating, we all go back to his room and start pregaming. In order to make things fun, we play a drinking game, where I get talked over ninety percent of the time. I don't know why I ever bother with these three. I'm confident now that it's not in my head.

Paul finally decides he has to go to the bathroom. I use this opportunity to talk to the other two.

"What's Paul's deal?" I ask them. "He's been treating me like shit all night."

They look at each other. "It's really not our place to say," Gabe says.

I roll my eyes. "What do you mean?"

"We'll let you talk to him about that," Mary replies.

Paul finally walks into the room.

"Can I talk to you for a minute?" I ask him. I'm not about to go through this night being a fourth wheel. Only it won't matter once I'm finally with Mr. Rochester.

"Sure," he says with no emotion at all. We walk into the hallway.

"Okay, what's up?" I ask. "Are you mad at me?"

"I'm not mad," he says. "I'm just really concerned about you. And your well-being."

"So why are you choosing to ignore me in favor of everyone else?"

"Because they don't do the stupid shit that you try to get away with."

"Stupid shit?"

"You know exactly what I'm talking about," he says. "Look, I'm not gonna be looking after you anymore. It's stressful having to make sure you're not getting your ass beat by someone. Remember what happened last time? You were all over that straight guy. I'm surprised he didn't have the nerve to knock you out himself."
We both go silent.
“You’re a really self-destructive person, and it hurts me to see you suffer like that. It’s not good for my health to have to take care of you all the time.”

“I never asked you to take care of me,” I say. “All I want is for you to support me and my decisions. Nothing I ever do is to hurt myself. It’s all just me enjoying life.”

He crosses his arms. “Well, I don’t believe it. You know how I am. I have to be the one that takes care of everyone. And if you don’t like it, you don’t have to deal with it.”

I should be hurt by this conclusion, but somehow, I feel nothing. He knew how I used to be and somehow, the person I’m about to become scares him. I can’t wait for him to take a sight of the new me.

We finally walk back into his room where Mary, our sole female friend, makes the call. The driver tells us that he can be there in about fifteen minutes. The time passes slowly.

When we all finally get to the party, we stumble out of the car, into the back door, and down to the basement. I suppose I should say they do these things. Paul has the other two in his arms and away from me as soon as we're on the dancefloor. He doesn't even get to watch as Mr. Rochester approaches me.

"I finally get to meet you in person,” he says.
"You finally do,” I echo.
"You know, you're a lot cuter in person?”

I blush at the compliment. “You are, too,” I say. I'm so drunk that I can't even think of my own compliment, even though I really want to. He deserves his own compliment.

He finally has the audacity to take me into his arms, and I let him, holding nothing back. I know he's going to make love to me tonight. And when he does, I'm going to take my shirt off— and he won't have anything to say about my body. He'll just grab my drooping skin and kiss and run his tongue across every single one of my stretch marks.

And we'll both cum. There will be lots of cum, because that's how into each other we'll both be: two sloppy pigs pressed against each other with not a care or insecurity in the world. We'll both be free. And it will be because we'll be free together.

***

I wake up hungover the next morning in his bed. He's still asleep, so I try not to disturb him as I reach for my phone. I'm surprised it still has a charge.

I have two texts messages to send to my friend—my best friend—David.

Text #1: “Are y'all planning to watch a movie tonight, as well?”

Text #2: “If so, can I bring someone along?”

Jonathan Henkel is an author and poet who is originally from Boiling Springs, North Carolina but now resides in Winston-Salem, North Carolina where he is a student at Wake Forest University. He is currently a freshman there and plans to major in Classical Languages and English with a minor in Creative Writing. Some of the things that he is involved in include a work-study in the LGBTQ Center, an active
membership in LGBTQ organization Spectrum, and a radio show for student-run radio station WAKE Radio. He has previously participated in NaNoWriMo events and Wattpad Story Contests. In his spare time, he enjoys reading novels, writing various works of poetry and prose, listening to music, learning languages, drinking coffee, and binge watching TV shows and movies.

LIFE'S ADVENTURES

Jennifer Rokus

Life. Life is something that we only have one of yet we don’t treat it with the level of value that it truly deserves. When someone owns a rare object, it is considered to be extremely valuable; yet, our lives are the rarest thing of all and we don’t treat them nearly as valuable. We not only have just one life but every single life is utterly unique from all others. But here’s the thing about life, it isn’t fulfilled by just existing, life demands to be lived.

I grimaced at my mom as Dr. Mayer politely asked her to leave while she asked me what I thought would be the normal extremely personal questions that my mother couldn’t be here for in case it hindered me from being truthful. As my mother left the hospital room I turned back to see my doctor staring at me with despair in her eyes. My heart sank. I knew that face; that was the face worn by the hundreds of other doctors and nurses I had seen over the years. That face screamed pity, fear, sadness, and the knowledge that something terrible was happening but that they didn’t have the power to stop it. These men and women, these doctors who were supposed to help and heal humanity, they had no idea how to even remotely help me.

“I don’t know how to say this Brooklyn…” Dr. Mayer began.

I interrupted her before she could continue, “Please don’t sugar coat it. Rip the Band-Aid off, I can’t handle any more doctor’s sympathy.”
She sighed and gave me those eyes again, “The way in which your heart is currently pumping blood and beating, it is not ideal for operation, and even if it was, there is not a heart currently available for transplant. I’m afraid you have very little time left.”

I could physically feel my heart skip a beat as I asked, “How long exactly?”

“Brooklyn,” Dr. Mayer took a breath and hesitated, “I don’t think you’ll have more than 24 hours.”

My brain was exploding. My ears felt like they were bleeding the ringing in my head was so loud. I couldn’t breathe, I couldn’t process what she had just said. A day to live. A day. My entire body ached with the struggle to breathe as I realized I was holding my breath. I gasped for air as I looked up from my feet to meet the strained face of my doctor.

“Legally I had to tell you first since you are 18, do you want me to get your mom now?” Dr. Mayer asked with a pained expression.

As I was about to say “yes” I paused and thought; I didn’t want my mom to have to deal with the pain of knowing that her only child was about to die. I couldn’t imagine carrying that weight and having to go home and tell my father. Maybe it was rash and impulsive but as Dr. Mayer’s hand was reaching for the door handle I exclaimed, “Wait!”

Dr. Mayer whipped around. “It is technically within my rights as a legal adult to withhold this information from my mom, right?” I asked gasping with every word since I still hadn’t been able to gain my breath back.

Dr. Mayer looked in my eyes with a look of hurt yet understanding as she said, “Yes, it is your right to withhold any and all information,” she stopped, “if that’s really what you want, Brooklyn.”

I sat and thought for a moment then said before I could change my mind, “Yes, it is what I want,” a pause, “I’m sure.”

***

I didn’t say much to my mom as I asked her to please get me a cup of coffee while I got dressed and gathered up my belongings. Before my mom had entered the room I had convinced Dr. Mayer to leave my mother under the impression that for right now I was fine and could go home. As I was gathering up some clothes and my computer I heard someone enter behind me, expecting my mom I turned around to find a girl around my age looking at me extremely confused.

“I’m sorry for barging in… the nurse at the front desk told me this was my room. Do I have the right place?” the girl laughed nervously clearly flustered.

“You’re probably in the right place, I was just getting my stuff, I’m being checked out.” I forced a smile since I should be jumping for joy at the prospect of going home.

The girl could see through my smile immediately, “What’s wrong with you?” a question that is not deemed as rude when posed by a fellow sick teenager.

“Wow, now that’s a loaded question. I mean we could hit emotional issues, physical, mental or even social, I’m gonna need a more specific topic of my issues.” I genuinely smiled at the girl’s laugh.
“Fair enough. I too have a broad spectrum of issues one could discuss. I’m Jane by the way, it’s nice to meet a fellow hospital-goer that understands the self-medication of sarcasm and humor.”

I could see Jane thinking that this statement would cause me to open up to her, and I was about to brush her off and leave, knowing I would never see her again when that thought echoed back into my head: I would never see her again. This girl would have no significance in my life, what harm would it cause if I told her?

“I only have 24 hours left to live,” I studied her face waiting for the pity that usually follows any bad medical news. Jane had a look on her face that I could only place as a sort of understanding and yet a hint of opportunity, “You should spend it in the best way possible. Don’t leave anything on the table. Seize this last day. Live.”

I paused, taking in the words that she had said and the meaning behind them and I said with complete honesty, “I intend to.”

***

When I got home I immediately ran up to my room, the plan already formulating in my mind. The first thing I needed to do was call Zoey. The call was short and to the point, “Be at my house in 20 minutes, it’s an emergency.” I heard her grab her car keys before she hung up. Zoey was my best friend on this earth. She was the kind of bubbly person that appreciated some good sarcasm and thus we worked perfectly together.

With Zoey on her way I set to work on the letters I was writing for my parents. I knew that if I were to even begin to say these things in person I would burst into tears and abandon my plan. I started with the letter to my dad:
Dear Dad,

You are not only the best father in the entire world, but you are an incredible example of what all boys should strive to be. I know that if I were to live long enough to marry someone, I would want him to be like you in the way that you treat Mom and the way that you look after and raised me. You have taught me how to truly laugh and love and that is all I could have asked for. I love you so much Daddy. Take care of Mom.

Love,

Your loving and admiring daughter, Brooklyn

I folded the letter shaking from the tears I was attempting to hold back. I choked back a sob as I began the letter to my mom:

Dear Mom,

You are the strongest woman I have had the privilege of knowing and I am grateful every moment of every day that I get to say that you are my mom. You not only know me better than anyone else but you have shown me the kind of woman I would want to grow up to be. You have taught me to be a fighter as well as humble and I am grateful for each lesson you have provided for me. I can honestly say that you are my favorite person on this planet and I love you more than you can ever know, no matter how many times I roll my eyes at what you say. You are an incredible person. Take care of Dad. I love you so much Mommy.

Love,

Your loving and admiring daughter, Brooklyn

I was shaking harder than I thought was physically possible as I sealed up the letters and placed them on my desk. I had simply labeled the envelope “Open Tomorrow.” After I had slightly composed myself I wrote down my list of things that I had to accomplish today.

1. Write to Mom and Dad
2. Tell Zoey how much she makes me laugh
3. Give the people at school a piece of my mind
4. Do things I would never do
5. Tell HIM

I smiled down at the list proud of what was going to happen today, when I heard the ding of my phone. Zoey’s message said “Out front.” I ran downstairs, quickly kissed my parents and told them I loved them before I could chicken out and stay inside.

Before I was even fully in Zoey’s car she started yelling, “What is going on? What sort of emergency? Are you ok? WHAT IS HAPPENING?!”

I couldn’t help myself, I started hysterically laughing. She only glared at me waiting for an explanation.

“Don’t freak out,” I started, “I just need to do some stuff today. Some crazy but important stuff.” I showed her the list. To my surprise she didn’t ask any questions except for, “Where do we start?”

I smiled. “Did you know that you are the absolute best human on this planet?”

Zoey faked astonishment then flipped her hair before pulling out of my driveway saying, “Tell me something I don’t know.”

***
We decided that the most appropriate place to start was at the place of most misery, high school. We pulled in after making our pit stop at the grocery store for supplies with smiles on our faces from either bravery or insanity. I was determined to walk through these doors for the last time with absolute confidence. I strode in, spray paint in hand and immediately started on the first set of lockers I saw. As I started defacing school property, something I had always wanted to do, I thought of some good times I had had in this wretched building. I thought of the dances that I had usually taken Zoey as my date because I was always too scared to ever attempt to get a real date. I remembered the dreaded classes but the friendships that were cemented in them. I wanted people to understand that there was a life outside these halls and that life demanded to be lived to its fullest capacity.

I was almost near the end of the lockers before anyone made any form of response to me running through the hall spray painting the lockers, probably because everyone was in a state of shock.

I could hear the voices of the students chorusing behind me, “Isn’t that the sick girl? Why isn’t she in the hospital? Is she ok?”

I wasn’t sure if I ran out of paint or lockers first but it didn’t matter as I was sure my message was pretty clear. I turned around to see Zoey beaming from ear to ear having accomplished her first task, having retrieved the third member of our party, Drew.

My heart contracted slightly just at the sight of him but I told myself to calm down, it wasn’t time to tell him yet. Drew grabbed my hand as we ran out of the school yelling at the top of our voices and with smiles on our faces as the lockers dripped the message “Stop Standing in these Halls and Live.”

***

Drew was that boy, the one that you were never looking for but you look up and suddenly you realize he was there the whole time and you cared for him more than you could care for anyone else. He had been in my life for as long as I could remember. There had never been a day in my life where I hadn’t loved Drew. I wanted to spend every waking moment with him because he made me laugh in a way that no one else could, a deep genuine laugh from the heart, the kind that made you feel safe and loved.

I was lost in my thoughts when Drew leaned forward from the backseat of Zoey’s car and gently pulled a strand of my dark brown hair saying, “Hey there.”

I turned around in the passenger seat smiling, “Hey back.”

“So what exactly is going on, not that I’m complaining because whatever that was back there was absolutely amazing!” He smiled and shook his head but I caught him shooting a questioning glance at Zoey as if he was hoping she could explain what was happening.

“We are on a mission,” was all I said.

“Hell yeah we are,” was Zoey’s response as she sped off.

“Really, In N Out? This is a part of your mission?” Drew asked with a laugh on his face.

“What? We need fuel! I explained. “Duh!” Zoey and I exclaimed together. He just rolled his eyes as we drove through...
the busy line to get our burgers. We parked on a side street as we ate and explained our next course of action.

“So let me get this straight,” he paused wiping the ketchup from his mouth, “we are on a mission for Brooklyn to basically do crazy and very un-Brooklyn things?”

“Basically,” I said.

“Am I going to get a reasoning behind this new daredevil streak?” Drew inquired.

All I said was, “Nope,” as I continued to eat my fries laughing at him roll his eyes at me. As I ate the fries that I have savored my entire life I was hit with a sudden and overwhelming sense of fear. This was a last moment. The last time, something I would have to get used to during this day. I was saying goodbye to something that had been a part of my life. This was just another parting in the string of goodbyes I would have to make today. I closed my eyes for a brief moment, took a deep breath and promised to keep going for the time I had left.

***

Zoey came up with the idea of Santa Monica Pier and we agreed it seemed like an appropriate location to accomplish some crazy tasks we had come up with. The drive there consisted of loud music, laughter, and rolled down windows. I had never felt so utterly free.

After parking on the pier, we set out immediately for the Ferris Wheel. Standing in line I turned to my friends, “Do you remember that time we came here in the 6th grade and Drew was so terrified of the wheel that he vomited on Zoey’s shoes?!” I could barely get the sentence out before I was nearly on the ground laughing.

“Hey!! It’s not my fault I had just eaten lots of cotton candy,” Drew tried to defend himself but he was on the verge of tears from laughing.

“You guys it’s not funny those shoes were brand new.” Zoey tried to keep a straight face but soon burst out into laughter.

“You know that’s when I knew that being friends with you guys was going to bring me nothing but trouble,” I said with complete seriousness but still laughter in my voice.

Laughing with my friends in this moment made me grateful that I had even met them. They had impacted my life in a way that I had not realized until this moment. I just continued to smile and laugh, soaking in every moment as much as possible.

We had decided that my task for the Ferris Wheel was to scream how much I loved everything at the top of the wheel in order for everyone to be able to see and hear me. We settled into the cart and I watched the ocean spread in front of me as we climbed up and up. The water was so full of possibilities as it spread to the ends of the earth and beyond, and in that cart with my friends rising up, I felt as full of opportunities as that powerful natural force beneath us.

A few moments later we got to the top and I took a deep breathe before standing up and yelling with a smile on my face,

“I love the ocean! I love the pier! I love this wheel! I love you and you and you!” I finished by pointing at Drew and I sat blushing knowing the truth behind that exclamation. We couldn’t stop laughing as we got off the ride, and we were desperate to keep the adrenaline going; so, we set out for the
rollercoaster followed by leaning over the edge of the pier watching the waves crash into the wooden posts and rejoicing in the mist that sprayed up in our faces.

Drew bumped my shoulder and his eyes said, “What’s next?” I smiled as I grabbed his hand and sprinted through the pier and onto the beach singing whatever songs came to mind. We ran and fell into the sand with Zoey close behind. For a while we sat there playing with the sand between our fingers and I closed my eyes settling myself entirely into the moment. I decided in that exact moment that was what happiness was.

***

We sat on the beach watching the sun set in mostly silence but sometimes reminiscing past memories and just enjoying each other’s presence. On the drive home, I rolled down my window and let the wind blow away my thoughts. I reveled in this exact moment and didn’t think about anything else but being present, just living. I turned to my friends with a devious smile, “Anyone up for some pizza?”

We sat on the hood of Zoey’s car enjoying our pizza and I know that it was probably just because it was the last slice of pizza I would ever have, but it really was the best pizza I had ever eaten. I was starting to get nervous though as night continued to settle around us and I knew that my time was getting shorter. I struggled out a breath as I thought about the fact that I could count the number of hours I had left to live on one hand. Zoey dropped off Drew and I at his car in the school parking lot before heading home, making me promise that I would call her when I got home before going to sleep. Standing in the school parking lot I thought back to that morning; it had felt like years ago that I had burst through those doors and spray painted those lockers. I smiled at the memory of the shocked faces of the faculty members I had seen.

I turned to see Drew smiling too. “What are you smiling about,” I asked.

“I’m just in a good mood, today was an incredible day. I want days like this to happen more often.” Drew looked at me and I knew he was waiting for an agreement.

This was it. I had to tell him.

My voice shook as I began, “I wish it could.” He faced me with furrowed brows, a look of hurt hidden in the inquisitive look. “I have to tell you something. But please don’t interrupt me because I don’t think I’ll be able to get it out if you stop me.” He only nodded, his face looking more concerned than hurt now.

I took a deep breath and opened my heart to him. I told him the moment that I knew that I loved him, the time he had helped me home when I had fallen off my bike. I was 9 and I was crying on the side of the road when he had ridden up; I told him how when he made me laugh that day it was like nothing I had ever experienced before. He knew exactly what to say to always light up my day. I told him about how my heart had broken when he had gotten his first girlfriend in the 9th grade. I told him about how every day in English class I had positioned my desk so that I could always see him out of the corner of my eye and was easily able to turn and receive the dazzling smile he would give me. I told him about how I felt like I couldn’t breathe when I was without him and not just because of my messed-up heart, he laughed at that. I told him that I had been so scared of losing him and jeopardizing him
in my life that I had never dreamed of telling him how I really felt. I finished by telling him that he could make my day by just being near me and that I would spend the rest of my life with him if I could.

When I stopped I realized then that tears were slowly falling down my cheeks. I tried to catch my breath as I looked up into his eyes and to try and see what he might be thinking.

“Why can’t we spend the rest of our lives together?” He exclaimed.

I was taken aback I had forgotten I had said that, “It’s not that I don’t want to, it’s all I’ve ever wanted... it’s just that... I have something else to tell you.”

When I said that I was most likely not making it through the night he fell to his knees letting a gasp out of his mouth. His hands covered his face and I couldn’t tell what he was thinking. I dropped to the ground in front of him and gently pried his hands from his face to find tears steadily streaming down his face.

“Why would you wait to tell me how you felt? I have always felt the same way. We could have had so much time together, Brooklyn.” Drew shook as his tears turned to sobs.

I didn’t know how to respond as my heart began to shatter. This was the worst moment of my life. The boy I loved returned the feelings just as we had no time left. I had genuinely not expected him to feel the same way. Why didn’t I tell him sooner? Why had I let fear rule my life like a sovereign rules a kingdom? Suddenly I was washed over with what we could have been and the memories that we could have made. It would never exist, though. I had let fear rule my decisions and

my heart and it had led me to be shattered by what I had always wanted but it was already too late. I had started living too late.

My first kiss with Drew was overwhelmed with a sense of pain and longing. As I saw him drive away from my house for the last time I shivered with the overwhelming emotions that were threatening to drown me. My feelings were complete chaos, I felt like I was struggling to catch hold of something, anything solid to help me up to the surface. I wasn’t sure I was going to be able to hold it together for the time left. I climbed the stairs to my room and plopped on my bed, staring at the ceiling lost in the emotions that were becoming too much for me. So, I did the thing that I had done every other time I was unable to deal with anything alone, I called Zoey.

The phone call with Zoey was like every other call we had had. We laughed and cried together and when I told her I loved her and said goodbye for the last time I was slightly uplifted because this goodbye felt like the right way to end our years of being best friends, on the phone just enjoying each other’s personalities and each other’s ability to make the other feel better.

As I crawled into bed I thought about all that I had accomplished that day. I smiled at the very crazy un-Brooklyn things that I had pushed myself to do. I thought about how the people I loved and who loved me had impacted every moment I had been alive, but I hadn’t lived to my fullest, not until today. Today I lived. I had learned what truly living was on my last day alive. It was too late, I was too late.
When I woke up in the hospital I thought that this must be some sort of really strange heaven, but no, there was my mom and dad smiling down at me with tears in their eyes. They soon explained that my mom had checked on me during the night to find me unresponsive with my heart barely beating. They had rushed me to the ER and while Dr. Mayer had said my heart was most likely inoperable this morning, they found that the swelling around my heart had slightly diminished enough to safely operate and luckily a heart had just become available for a transplant.

I started to shake with my sobs of relief. I wasn’t going to die. I was going to live, truly live for the rest of my life. I would get years instead of minutes and I was going to spend each and every one of them living my life to the absolute fullest. I hugged my parents and let out a cry of relief at the love I could feel emanating from them. I called Drew telling him the news and could practically hear his shattered heart repair itself at hearing my voice come out of the phone. I told him to get Zoey and to come to the hospital immediately.

As I waited for my best friends to arrive I noticed the small note folded on the nightstand by the hospital bed. I opened the note to find a short message that said,

“Use it well. Live fully and completely. Live. Just live.”

–Jane

As the realization of what this note really meant and who had left it for me washed over me. I pictured that flustered looking girl I had met, wow just yesterday morning, it felt like a lifetime ago. As I looked up to see Jake and Zoey enter the room with happy tears and smiles on their faces I embraced the task the note had left me. As I looked at these people that I loved and who loved me I glanced back at the note and promised that I would.

I would live. Just live.

Jennifer Rokus is an aspiring author from Arcadia, California, just outside Los Angeles. She is currently attending Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Jennifer began dreaming of becoming a published author since she could read and she is now completely ecstatic that her dream is becoming a reality. Her absolute love of reading and writing has caused her to want to impact others’ lives in the ways in which authors have affected her with their powerful words.
I thought I was done with my childhood until I lost my grandfather and all I wanted to do was wear an Easter dress just like the ones he and my nana used to send. I thought I was done with my childhood until I lost my grandmother the following April and all I wanted was to be transported back to kindergarten in December, when I got to embrace the Swedish roots she passed down to me and dress up as Santa Lucia.

I found out my grandmother was sick during Spring Break of 2017, so, in March. My friends went home and everyone I followed on Instagram went somewhere warm. I stayed on campus for Spring Break because I’m in a “low-income” bracket and my “boyfriend” decided to visit me.

I used to hate labels, but now I busy myself with using them. I’m a “daughter” and a “sister” when I’m “home,” but “busy” and a “friend” when I’m at school. Those labels tell me I lead two different lives. One in which I’m stripped of my independence and another where I lack the kind of familial understanding that allows me to behave poorly simply because “this is who I am, damn it!”

My relationship was rocky at that time; he was choosing between X and Y schools for his graduate research in Blah Blah. He spent our time together asking for my input on what “our future” could be like while reminding me that he was going to make the decision that was best for him regardless of what I thought. Our constant fighting over the week told me of the wrongness of our being together. Even so, he held me as I cried over my grandmother’s and my family’s pain.

When my friends came back to school, I didn’t tell them what I was terrified of happening, or that I felt helpless and alone.

College has felt a little like each plane ride back and forth is a pause button, that being at school pauses my life at home and that being home pauses my adult, academic life. It feels true until home doesn’t have the same people anymore; then it is hard for me to remember the truth.

I drowned in my school work and disappointment in myself and had increased anxiety every time my phone rang. My boyfriend made the decision to go to the school I had grown up learning to hate.

I thought I was done with my childhood until he told me I was immature, not yet fully formed, not yet capable of understanding all that be already understood.

The by-the-hour counselor I had been seeing encouraged me to tell someone and eventually I told my friends. I don’t know why, but I thought they would be mad at me for telling them, burdening them with my pain.

The last time I talked to my grandmother was on the night of Easter on the phone, my parents and aunts listening over speaker phone at the hospital. I told her I love her and that I was looking forward to seeing her again, once I was home in three weeks. My dad told me I had been brave. The next morning, I ran to the stairs of the library as my dad talked to me over the phone, confirming the only thing a 10am phone call could mean. Two weeks later, I saw my boyfriend for the last time. Days earlier I had told him we should break up but he told me he believed we could stay together through his five years of graduate school and then forever. He told me this
while reminding me in the same breath that promises are rarely kept.

I thought my childhood was over until I started trusting my gut instincts again.

I’ve been thinking a lot about regret lately. Sometimes I regret coming to this school. I thought I knew what I was signing up for: Four Thanksgivings away from home. I didn’t account for the silent kiss of death that is April: the end of classes, the end of Lent, the endings of lives and relationships once vibrant.

I thought I was done when my heart was ripped from me and left me gasping for any air that wouldn’t remind me of him but might remind me of who I am.

My dad told me a while ago that even though I act tough, the little girl in me is crying out and feeling everything that I won’t yet let myself accept. Sometimes I look at pictures of myself from when I was younger and get angry at myself for making so many mistakes and for letting so many people hurt her. I am fiercely protective of the little girl I see in photos but constantly degrade the one I see in the mirror.

Two questions play against each other in my head: How could I have accepted such abuse? But, why would they be nice to me?

Part of what I know to be my truth now is: This too shall pass, let that be a comfort in the bad times and a source of humility in the good times.

I thought my childhood was over until I remembered that it doesn’t have to be.

Hannah Goodwin is in her third-year at Wake Forest, majoring in Computer Science with a Writing minor. Her current motto is: “visualize success!” and is going to pursue graduate research in computer science, potentially in machine learning and natural language processing.
Warm rain splashed on my head and seeped into my hair. I don’t like rain, yet I was here in the park. It was two hours after sunset, and all the children on the playground had scurried to their mothers’ vans to go home for the night. The park was closing, but I was still here.

To think I was doing all this just for some money: taking care of a few birds in the park’s dilapidated aviary after hours. The aviary was a failed project by the city council to try and gain the public’s interests in nature. We’re in the middle of a metropolitan cesspool; how the hell did they expect an aviary in the middle of an already failing park to get visitors? Of course, my aunt happens to be one of the council members who supported the decision, and here she was, hiring a teenager to take care of “her” aviary instead of someone who actually has a degree in biology.

“I think it’d be good experience for Laura. I don’t like seeing her sit in her room and watch TV all night, especially after she stopped talking to her friends.” That’s what my aunt said to my mom and dad. I accepted her offer on the basis that I’d get paid for my work, not for a fun time with a few diseased birds. Besides, I was only taking this job over the summer. Three months wouldn’t be such a struggle.

The rain continued to fall as I approached the little bird cage. The structure looked like reused patio screening shaped in a hexagon. Inside, there were only a few small trees, covered in dew and bird droppings. I could smell it too: that pungent scent of rot mixed with the earthy scent of the plants. I walked to the screen door to enter the aviary, and on the door was a ripped piece of notebook paper duct taped to the screen. The paper was soaked now but still legible, as the author had written deep in the paper with pencil.

“Pascal isn’t feeling well. He’s the mourning dove in the back. Please give him extra food and love. —Cindy”

Cindy was the caretaker of the birds during the daytime hours. She sent me an e-mail the day before my work started with a detailed list of what to feed each of the five species of bird that lived in the aviary. She didn’t mention Pascal being ill, though. I thought to myself that he must’ve had something terminal.

After shoving the note in my pocket, I pushed the rusted door open. The sound of the rust scraping off the sides of the screen woke all the birds as I started to hear faint chirps and squawks. But none of them showed their faces. I stepped over bird droppings and seeds to get to the food preparation area in the right corner of the aviary. The food preparation area was merely a small metal end-table with a medicine cabinet hooked onto the screen wall. On the end-table there was one of those office water dispensers: a three-foot-tall blue jug with a little knob on the bottom for the water to pour out from. I knew the aviary was in bad shape but not as awful as this.

I poured five different bowls of seeds for each bird species. Two of the five types of birds needed to have dead crickets in their bowl, but would they really notice if their food bowls had no crickets? I wasn’t about to touch that grime-covered jar of dead bugs even if I had gloves on. According to
Cindy, all the birds knew their feeding locations by heart so there was no need to search for them in the aviary. The lark sparrows wanted their food bowl to the right of the half-dead dogwood tree. The gray warblers and the cardinals wanted their food bowl up on a wobbly shelf suspended off the ground by the sassafras tree. The crow and the mourning dove wanted their food bowls on a raised cement platform at the back of the aviary.

Even after placing all the food down, I noticed the birds were still hiding in the bushes, but I could hear their quiet hums to each other. It was time to feed the crow and the mourning dove, so I trotted through the dense grass accumulating at the bottom of the unkempt aviary until I reached the cement block. To my surprise, I saw a dove sitting by the cement block. Back then, I thought he was some kind of skinned chicken. He had no feathers on his left side, including his wing, which must explain why he wasn’t flying into the bushes. The bird was shivering, too, as the rain soaked into his bald skin.

“I have your food,” I said as I placed down the bowl for him and the crow. The dove didn’t budge, even though I had stepped only a few inches away from him. He cooed though. The sound was so soft, I thought it was my shoes scrubbing against the Augustine grass beneath me. Then he went to his food bowl and started to peck away at the multicolored seeds I provided him. Then I heard a loud caw from the dogwood tree. I could make out the shape of a crow in the higher parts of the tree. He was looking at me and continued to caw, so I moved out of his way to let him eat. He flew down right beside the balding dove and shared the bowl with the dove despite the fact that he had his own bowl. I was tempted to shoo him away so that the dove wouldn’t starve, but the dove was already destined to die, so I let them be.

As the rain started to lighten, the other birds began to escape their shelters and feed on their seeds. The three sparrow sisters fought over their seeds while the warbler couple and the cardinal couple would only eat a few seeds at a time before flying back to their sassafras tree. I became intrigued, however, at the crow and the dove. The crow had stopped eating the dove’s food and had flown back to the dogwood tree, leaving the dove with a bowl and a half of seeds. Not only that, but the crow was watching the dove from his tree, cawing every few minutes. The dove pecked and pried at his food at a snail’s pace.

I had an hour left in my shift, so I started passing around bowls of water. Again, the crow cawed at me as I placed the two water bowls for him and the dove. I backed off and watched to see what would happen. The crow came down and sipped the dove’s water, flapped his dark wings, and flew back to perch on his tree. I decided to kneel by the dove.

“You must be Pascal,” I said to the dove. Pascal knew his name immediately and twisted his mangled head to look at me. He cooed again and walked towards me. I didn’t want to catch whatever disease he had, so I got up and stepped back which seemed to have upset the crow. The crow cawed louder and louder as Pascal waddled back to his water in disappointment.

“Look, I don’t want bird flu,” I yelled at the crow. I shook my head, realizing I was talking to animals. Now I knew
why my aunt sent me here: if I can’t have human friends, maybe I can have some bird friends instead. How demeaning.

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I came back to the aviary every other night to do the same routine, and the birds did their routine. Every time I fed the birds, Pascal and the crow would share their food and water. Every night, Pascal ate the food slower and slower to the crow’s worried caws. Out of curiosity, I sent an e-mail to Cindy asking about Pascal and his dynamic with the crow. I learned from her that the crow’s name was, amusingly, Poe after Edgar Allan Poe. The two birds had grown up together as orphans, but Pascal had some type of cancer that was ending his life prematurely. At least now I knew it wasn’t something contagious.

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She watched me fill their bowls to the brim. I gestured her to follow me as I stumbled over the tall Augustine grass near Pascal and Poe’s cement block. Pascal was standing by the back screen of the aviary as he always was.
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Warm rain splashed on my head and seeped into my hair. I don’t like rain, yet I was here in the park. It was two hours after sunset, and all the children on the playground had scurried to their mothers’ vans to go home for the night. The park was closing, but I was still here.

To think I was doing all this just for some money: taking care of a few birds in the park’s dilapidated aviary after hours. The aviary was a failed project by the city council to try and gain the public’s interests in nature. We’re in the middle of a metropolitan cesspool; how the hell did they expect an aviary in the middle of an already failing park to get visitors? Of course, my aunt happens to be one of the council members who supported the decision, and here she was, hiring a teenager to take care of “her” aviary instead of someone who actually has a degree in biology.

“I think it’d be good experience for Laura. I don’t like seeing her sit in her room and watch TV all night, especially after she stopped talking to her friends.” That’s what my aunt said to my mom and dad. I accepted her offer on the basis that I’d get paid for my work, not for a fun time with a few diseased birds. Besides, I was only taking this job over the summer. Three months wouldn’t be such a struggle.

The rain continued to fall as I approached the little bird cage. The structure looked like reused patio screening shaped in a hexagon. Inside, there were only a few small trees, covered in dew and bird droppings. I could smell it too: that pungent scent of rot mixed with the earthy scent of the plants. I walked to the screen door to enter the aviary, and on the door was a ripped piece of notebook paper duct taped to the screen. The paper was soaked now but still legible, as the author had written deep in the paper with pencil.

“Pascal isn’t feeling well. He’s the mourning dove in the back. Please give him extra food and love. —Cindy”

Cindy was the caretaker of the birds during the daytime hours. She sent me an e-mail the day before my work started with a detailed list of what to feed each of the five species of bird that lived in the aviary. She didn’t mention Pascal being ill, though. I thought to myself that he must’ve had something terminal.

After shoving the note in my pocket, I pushed the rusted door open. The sound of the rust scraping off the sides of the screen woke all the birds as I started to hear faint chirps and squawks. But none of them showed their faces. I stepped over bird droppings and seeds to get to the food preparation area in the right corner of the aviary. The food preparation area was merely a small metal end-table with a medicine cabinet hooked onto the screen wall. On the end-table there was one of those office water dispensers: a three-foot-tall blue jug with a little knob on the bottom for the water to pour out from. I knew the aviary was in bad shape but not as awful as this.

I poured five different bowls of seeds for each bird species. Two of the five types of birds needed to have dead crickets in their bowl, but would they really notice if their food bowls had no crickets? I wasn’t about to touch that grime-covered jar of dead bugs even if I had gloves on. According to
Cindy, all the birds knew their feeding locations by heart so there was no need to search for them in the aviary. The lark sparrows wanted their food bowl to the right of the half-dead dogwood tree. The gray warblers and the cardinals wanted their food bowl up on a wobbly shelf suspended off the ground by the sassafras tree. The crow and the mourning dove wanted their food bowls on a raised cement platform at the back of the aviary.

Even after placing all the food down, I noticed the birds were still hiding in the bushes, but I could hear their quiet hums to each other. It was time to feed the crow and the mourning dove, so I trotted through the dense grass accumulating at the bottom of the unkempt aviary until I reached the cement block. To my surprise, I saw a dove sitting by the cement block. Back then, I thought he was some kind of skinned chicken. He had no feathers on his left side, including his wing, which must explain why he wasn’t flying into the bushes. The bird was shivering, too, as the rain soaked into his bald skin.

“I have your food,” I said as I placed down the bowl for him and the crow. The dove didn’t budge, even though I had stepped only a few inches away from him. He cooed though. The sound was so soft, I thought it was my shoes scrubbing against the Augustine grass beneath me. Then he went to his food bowl and started to peck away at the multicolored seeds I provided him. Then I heard a loud caw from the dogwood tree. I could make out the shape of a crow in the higher parts of the tree. He was looking at me and continued to caw, so I moved out of his way to let him eat. He flew down right beside the balding dove and shared the bowl with the dove despite the fact that he had his own bowl. I was tempted to shoo him away so that the dove wouldn’t starve, but the dove was already destined to die, so I let them be.

As the rain started to lighten, the other birds began to escape their shelters and feed on their seeds. The three sparrow sisters fought over their seeds while the warbler couple and the cardinal couple would only eat a few seeds at a time before flying back to their sassafras tree. I became intrigued, however, at the crow and the dove. The crow had stopped eating the dove’s food and had flown back to the dogwood tree, leaving the dove with a bowl and a half of seeds. Not only that, but the crow was watching the dove from his tree, cawing every few minutes. The dove pecked and pried at his food at a snail’s pace.

I had an hour left in my shift, so I started passing around bowls of water. Again, the crow cawed at me as I placed the two water bowls for him and the dove. I backed off and watched to see what would happen. The crow came down and sipped the dove’s water, flapped his dark wings, and flew back to perch on his tree. I decided to kneel by the dove.

“You must be Pascal,” I said to the dove. Pascal knew his name immediately and twisted his mangled head to look at me. He cooed again and walked towards me. I didn’t want to catch whatever disease he had, so I got up and stepped back which seemed to have upset the crow. The crow cawed louder and louder as Pascal waddled back to his water in disappointment.

“Look, I don’t want bird flu,” I yelled at the crow. I shook my head, realizing I was talking to animals. Now I knew
why my aunt sent me here: if I can’t have human friends, maybe I can have some bird friends instead. How demeaning.

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I find the world to be quite cyclical. The sun rises, and it falls, day after day. I see the same people; I laugh at the same jokes. I sleep, only to be awakened by the start of another monotonous day. I run, and still, time follows. I lash out, only to have the pain returned to me two-fold. I’m sad and happy and sad and happy. The seasons of life come and go, and I find myself horribly incapable of escaping the winter months; at times, they feel like years. They say when life kicks you down, you should pick yourself back up. But maybe I’ve learned to like the feel of the biting concrete against my cheek. If this life is indeed cyclical, how do people ever find their direction?

I don’t say this to her, of course. I don’t say it to anyone. I sink further into the plush seat and avert my gaze. I’m carefully watching her pen tap anxiously against her clipboard. She’s strangely jittery for a shrink, not a very comforting front for someone in whom I’m supposed to confide my own anxieties. Just another waste of a Thursday morning. Dr. Madison clears her throat.

“So, Emma?”

I wait, thinking she’s going to proffer more. Dr. Madison shifts slightly in her seat, uncrossing and re-crossing her legs.

“Yes, Dr. Madison,” gently giving her the affirmation she needs to continue.

She smiles, clearly pleased. “What do you think?”

I have to refrain from rolling my eyes at her. After all, I am a 25-year-old, future business woman who must conduct herself in an orderly manner—to quote my mother.

“How…”

“Opening up to your brother.”

This time I do roll my eyes. “It’s a stupid idea.”

“There’s nothing stupid about vulnerability, Emma. He should know what you’re grappling with.”

I sit quietly, and will myself to process the implication of her words. But of course I can’t burden my brother with my own insecurities. I shake my head, giving up immediately on her proposition, as per usual.

“I’ll think about it.”

“You say that every week, Emma.”

I grit my teeth. Shut up, Jane. I take a calming breath, and then another one, more than ready for this session to be over.

“I mean it this time,” I tell her, smiling sweetly.

She sighs, and I can tell she feels defeated, like she will never break through to me. She’s not wrong. The bags under her eyes have become more prominent within the last few months, and her clothes are hanging more loosely around her shoulders and waist. Her hair, which is pulled back but extremely unkempt, seems to be in dire need of a wash. I pity her. She wants to fix something that is much too broken.

“Well, I better head out,” I say, rising as I speak. “Take care of yourself this week, Dr. Madison.”

I don’t make eye contact, and turn quickly on my heel, practically running for the door. I keep my head down until I’ve made it to my car. After fiddling with the lock for an
obscene amount of time, I all but break into my car for the opportunity of escape. I slam the door shut, and the silence is welcoming. I sit, unmoving, staring just beyond the steering wheel. I don’t think, I don’t breathe, I don’t blink. For a moment in time I simply exist.

Breathe in.
Breathe out.
Breathe in.
Breathe out.
Breathe in…
Hold it.
Hold it.
Hold—
Breathe out.

I grab for my keys, and make my way home, wanting to put as much space between me and that damn office as possible. Too close, Emma. Everyone just gets too close. And I keep driving.

The house looks the way it always looks—protruding two-car garage, pristinely cut grass, stately brick features—situated nicely in a good school district with friendly neighbors, etc. etc. I pull into the driveway and hop out, eager to seek shelter and the comfort that accompanies it. I’ve grown to love this place, even if I’ve only been here for about a year. It’s home, now. If I can get over the fact that it’s not exactly mine, which I can’t, entirely.

The interior smells of warm vanilla, and I have to chastise myself for not blowing out the candle before I left earlier. Too risky. I set my things on the table by the door and head to the living room to rid the space of any evidence of my mental lapse in judgment. My pace slows when I see the candle on the wooden mantle has only recently been blown out. Oh, no—

“Emma!” The voice pierces the air, traveling easily from the kitchen.

Shit. This really isn’t my day. I make my way gingerly to the far side of the living room, which connects to the kitchen. Once in the doorway, I see my brother, Tommy, sitting leisurely at the breakfast table, enjoying a light snake of apples with peanut butter—his favorite. I still flinch when my eyes fall on the chair. It’s been five years since the accident, and I’ve only been seeing him for the last two. Barely. I still have nightmares about that wheelchair. I fake a smile for his sake, and come up behind him to take a seat at his side. Ever the dutiful sister.

“Tommy,” I say, greeting him, “I didn’t know you were going to be home for lunch.”

When he sees me, his face lights up, and he cracks a big grin. He reaches over to give my hand a squeeze before returning to his meal. For the millionth time, I feel my heart breaking. I’m suffocating, and I want to run. I stay seated before him.

“Well, I thought I would be having lunch with Andrew,” he starts, “but he scheduled lunch with his wife. So we’re meeting up after to go on the course.”

He’s all energy and enthusiasm, and it feels genuine. I can’t tell.
“That Andrew…he golfs a lot, I’d say,” I offer, making light of the conversation, trying to mimic his airy tone.

Tommy shrugs, either letting my false pretense go unnoticed or genuinely not recognizing it. I’m not sure which is worse.

“He knows I like to caddy, and he’s been a good friend to me, all these years,” he responds, more to his apples than to me.

What is he hiding from me? Is his brain working overtime, thinking about what was and what could have been and having to settle for what is and what never will be? I dig my nails into the palm of my hand, frustrated and fearful.

“But hey!” He almost shouts, making me jump in my seat from the shock of his shift in mood. “Andrew and Lorraine are expecting their first child! How great is that?” He’s back to wearing his goofy, lopsided grin that covers his whole face. His eyes are crinkling around the edges. I let my hands relax.

“The greatest,” I whisper.

I sit, too tense to do anything except breathe, and watch Tommy finish his meal. He remains intent on finishing before he turns to me, questions at the ready.

“You’re home early from work.” It’s not a question.

“I had a half shift today.”

He nods, knowingly. “That’s nice of them. To give you time off, I mean.”

I’m almost certain he knows I don’t actually have a job, but I pretend anyway because it’s what feels most comfortable by now. To say otherwise just wouldn’t feel right. The shame I should feel has long dissipated.

“Yeah, it is,” I say easily. “I think they’re giving me a full schedule next week, though.”

Tommy pauses, and I follow his eyes as he comes to terms with what he wants to say and how he wants to say it. Whatever it is, he’s not happy about it. After what feels like too many minutes, he finally musters up the courage to confront me.

“I was wondering,” he hedges, “when was the last time you called Mom?”

“HA!” I laugh, too loudly and too abruptly. The sound startles us both. I quickly compose myself, still giggly. “Karen Foster. I’ve missed that woman.”

I haven’t, though, not really. She calls about twice a day, and I’ve just recently decided to send her straight to voicemail for the past week. Some days I’ll press ignore immediately, and others I’ll wait till about the fourth ring to end the call. I like to keep things interesting.

Tommy feigns disappointment, but ends up shaking his head exhaustedly, chuckling to himself.

“She calls me every day, you know.”

I grin the slightest of grins. “I know.”

“Like multiple times a day. Like too many times a day.”

“That’s why you gotta ghost her,” I say, matter-of-factly.

His eyes widen, appalled. “For a whole week?” I nod.

“You want me to avoid our mother for a whole week?”

I think this over, taking my time in fake-pondering to really play it up.

“You might need longer. To really get the point across,” I decide.
Tommy acts like I've just cursed the both of us with his pain-stricken face.

“She is going to destroy you.”

The thought gives me a chuckle. “Maybe.”

His phone, which has been lying dormant beside his plate, illuminates with a ding, and for a fraction of a second, I’m frozen with fear. How did she know?! But then I realize it’s probably—

“Andrew.”

My exhale is much too audible. I try to hide my embarrassment.

Tommy wheels away from the table with expert precision before stopping suddenly.

“Shoot. I have to go. Emma, do you mind just quickly throwing my dish in the sink? I would, but I don’t want to make Andrew wait.”

I wave off his concern. “Go. I can get it. No worries.”

“Thanks, Ems.” He beams in response, and hurries out through the living room. “Love you. Call mom,” he shouts, calling over his shoulder.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” I grumbled, clearing the table.

I’ve hardly begun wiping down the table when the home phone rings. My body tenses. It’s probably one of Tommy’s doctors wanting to schedule an appointment. Maybe the physical therapist. The line rings again. Play it cool. Just answer the phone. The ringer sounds a third time, and I pounce on the phone.

“Hello?”

Beat. Nothing.

“Hello?”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” The shrill voice is bitter and short, each syllable making an effort to snap at me through the receiver. “It took an entire week, and me calling on the home phone for you to finally answer my calls?”

Karen freaking Foster.

She finally caught me. Tommy was right.

“I told Tommy we needed to install Caller ID.”

I settle onto one of the barstools, resting both elbows on the countertop and preparing for an insufferable conversation.

“Oh, sweet Emma. I’ve missed your voice,” Karen says in a sickeningly sarcastic voice.

I gag into the receiver. I can practically see her recoiling. Ha. “OK, Karen. Calm down. What do you want?”

“What do I want?” She gasps. “Where do I even begin?”

I groan, and drop my head to cool granite.

“Why have you been ignoring me? You didn’t think I would notice?”

“What can I say? I’ve been really busy, mom.”

Now she’s laughing at me. And she doesn’t stop. So I wait. Lord. I close my eyes.

“Emma!” She breathes between bursts of laughter. “You have no job, you go to therapy twice a week, and you live at your brother’s.” Another fit of laughter. “I wouldn’t really qualify that as busy.”

I’m 25 years old, and she’s still trying to put me in my place. Why am I not surprised? And Tommy asks me why I send her straight to voicemail.
“Well, Karen,” I say, sternly, “when you put it like that...I can see how ‘busy’ would seem misleading.”

“Oh, honey,” she responds quickly, controlling herself. “I’ve missed your humor.”

“I just don’t see how that’s possible. I’m the least funny person I know.”

“Agree to disagree.”

“Whatever.” Thankfully, I’m out of sight so I can freely roll my eyes without repercussion. “Was there a point to this phone call, or...”

“Of course!” She shouts, unamused. “You think I just call because I’m lonely?”

“Yes, I think that’s exactly why you do it.”

“Well,” Karen stumbles over her words, “you’re wrong. I do it because I care about my kids.”

“Whatever you say, Karen.”

“Emma, dear,” she begins, “I called Dr. Madison, and she won’t tell me anything.”

“Of course she won’t.”

“I’m concerned about you.”

“So?”

“So,” Karen searches for the right words, “maybe you need different medication. Maybe Dr. Johnsen can help?”

“Oh, screw Dr. Johnsen,” I scoff.

I can’t tell her it doesn’t have anything to do with Dr. Johnsen, and everything to do with the fact I haven’t taken any form of medication in more than six months. No way in hell am I telling that to my mother.

“Emma.” I can hear the strain in her voice. This isn’t fun for either of us. “I’m just trying to help you, sweetheart.”

I sigh, exasperated and infuriated. “Well, your idea of helping is just bouncing me around different rehab facilities for two or three years until something works.” I lift my head from the countertop, but it continues to droop heavily.

A soft sob breaks through the receiver, and I jerk away from the phone. I wait one minute. Two...At 3:13, the rustling on the other end indicates she is either picking up her mobile again or switching hands to hold the device—no one really knows. I wait again.

“I don’t know how many times I can say I’m sorry, Emma.”

It’s unclear to me how our roles have so evidently and so quickly reversed. My mother is acting like an uncontrollable child, while I am presumably the one needing to put her at ease. I can barely take care of myself, let alone another human. Come on, Karen.

“It doesn’t matter, mom,” I tell her. “It won’t fix anything, so just give it up.”

“Still—”

“Karen, stop. I don’t want to talk about this.” My voice is harsher and my words sharper than I intended. I hold my breath, hoping not to have just instigated a bigger argument.

“OK.”

I exhale gratefully, as if the release can’t come quick enough. This is what peace is.

“Thank you.”

“How’s the house?”

I shrug, ambivalent. “It’s fine. I’m cleaning up the kitchen now.”
“Good. That place needs to stay in pristine condition. If your brother comes home and—”

“Hey, I’ve got everything under control,” I promise her.

I can hear her nodding her assent. “Of course you do, honey. I’m just saying…”

She doesn’t finish her sentence, but she doesn’t have to because I know what she’s implying. But I know, I know, I will not make Tommy’s life any harder. Or any worse. I just can’t.

“Accidents happen, Emma dear,” she says earnestly, “it’s not your fault.”

“I’m really trying to make this work, mom. Please.”

“I know,” Karen mumbles, and then softer to herself a second time. “I think it’s good for you both.”

I’m about to respond when I hear a low groaning sound from the back of the house. I jump instinctively to my feet, knocking the barstool over in the process. I’m vaguely aware of Karen screaming from the phone, which fell onto the counter in my moment of fright. The sound of running water seems to become more prominent, too, or maybe I’m just imagining that. What the heck? I grab the cordless phone, and dash through the living room to the hallway at the other end.

The room is an array of color and texture, but I don’t allow my brain time to process the world around me. I simply run. When I reach the door to Tommy’s room, I stop short. I try to grasp the doorknob, but the receiver, which is still in my hand, poses a few problems. I bring the phone by my face, breathing heavily.

“Hold on, mom. Gimme a sec.”

The door swings open easily, and I step carefully into the room. My feet slip on the slick hardwood, and I have to catch myself by grabbing the doorjamb. I turn my gaze downward to see water streaming into the master bedroom from the bathroom.

“This can’t be happening.”

“Emma, dear. What did you—”

I don’t think. I end the call faster than my brain can deliver signals to my extremities, and before I know what’s happening, I’m throwing the phone onto the bed and running quickly, and cautiously, toward the bathroom. This really is not my day.

A respectable birdbath has formed across the floor of the master bath. I have to keep telling myself that I am indeed living a nightmare, and I am not going to wake up from some horrible dream. The source of the leak is evident at first glance. The cabinets below the vanity are visibly warped in shape with water damage. The rest of the bathroom looks untouched, except for the minor fact that there is an inch or so of water covering the floor.

I throw myself before the origin of the damage, and all but rip off the doors to uncover the busted pipe where water is freely flowing from inside. Towels. Where would I be if I were a towel? I scan the room too quickly the first time around, not allowing myself to process anything of value and have to rescan the room before I find them shelved to the right of the vanity. I rocket to my feet to retrieve an armful and begin throwing towels on the floor at random. Horrible technique, but at this point, I just need to do something, anything.
Once those towels have been dispersed, I grab another armful and turn, too abruptly, back on the cabinet. My feet, slick on the tile, leave the floor, and my head meets the unforgiving marble countertop.

I’m gasping, someone is screaming, and the ground comes up to me, hard. Tears stream freely down my face, and I struggle to pull myself up to a seated position against the vanity. My entire body is shaking, my breathing is ragged, and my eyes won’t stay open.

The front door slams shut. A shock so primal and instinctual runs through me, waking me up, quick.

“Emma! You here? I saw your car’s still out front.” Tommy’s voice cuts through the pain ringing in my ears, the pounding in my head, the surge of water from behind me.

I curl into a ball, wet and pitiful, willing myself into invisibility. A fit of sobs is raging for control within me, and it’s all too much. I’m whimpering like a pathetic child, but no part of myself can put a stop to this madness. My head is spinning, and I need my thoughts to form coherent sentences.

The floor of the hallway groans under his weight as Tommy grows closer with every passing moment. I hold my breath, but cannot bring myself to close my eyes against what happens next.

I wait. I know he’s nearly to the bedroom door by now. The door creaks.

“What the…”

Tommy appears in the doorway of the bathroom, eyes wide and uncomprehending. His gaze meets mine, and something mixed with resignation and hurt washes over him. His hands are still tightly wrapped around his wheels.

He does not move into the bathroom.

Tommy shakes his head, still unbelieving, and does not bother to cover his eyes as they tear up.

“I came back for my wallet. ID,” he tells me, as if he needs to ground the conversation in something real. I can’t fault him for that. “Emma, what happened?”

His voice cracks on the last syllable, and his head collapses into his hands. I haven’t seen my brother cry in years, and I’m terrified. The tears already burning my face pick up their pace, and my body shakes in time with each sob produced. For a period of time, there are no words; there is just us. Two people, two broken people, laying their cards out on the table. No lies, no deceit, no distrust. We release our pain in equal measure, so it can be shared and picked up by the other—so neither of us has to carry our burdens alone. The years slip away, and together we seek shelter from the hailstorm of insecurities and impediments.

**Lena Hooker**, a Winston-Salem native, is a Junior at Wake Forest University. She has adored her time as a WFU Press intern, doing everything from proofreading to hanging out with the pugs. Lena enjoys alternative music, kittens and café au lait, in that order. She is currently studying English and French Studies.
FIRE POND

Lillian Johnson

That 1965 beige Vista Cruiser blended in perfectly with the dirt path it drove up on. And that’s really just a metaphor for it all: nobody saw it coming.

When I look back on that moment from last summer, it doesn’t seem real to me. I remember it as if I were watching a movie of myself; everything and everyone moves in slow motion, and there’s no sound, although people are talking, only white noise. I can’t even remember hearing the news, but I remember catching Jacob in my arms as he collapsed. Holding him, I fell to my knees. Although I must’ve been crying, I can’t say for certain. I can see myself, but only Jacob’s face is clear.

That was almost a year ago, and I don’t know if Jacob had built himself up again. He said he was doing fine in his letters to me, but what good were they? It’s easiest to lie on paper.

I was surprised when he wrote saying that he would definitely be coming back as a counselor. I thought that it might be too painful for him. So when Jacob wasn’t at counselor registration that morning, I couldn’t be shocked. As I reached my cabin, Pussy Willows, I wanted to cry. I burst into my room and flung my duffel down on the nearest bed in frustration.

“Hey,” spoke a disembodied voice.

I spun around and saw an unfamiliar girl, my age, in my doorway.

“I’m Lisa.” Smiling, she extended her hand. “I’m a new counselor; looks like we’ll be handling the Pussy Willows together for the next seven weeks.”

I took her hand and forced a smile. “It’s nice to meet you, Lisa.”

Her brown eyes moved to the duffel. My cheeks blushed red with embarrassment; she had seen my aggressive handling of the bag. “I’ll take the bed over there.”

There was still no sign of Jacob by dinnertime down at the Inn. Lisa sat with me and the other female counselors, but I didn’t listen to the conversations. I kept looking around after every bite of fried chicken—Jacob’s favorite. My heart was holding out hope that he would show up and walk through the doors to the mess hall. We would immediately catch each other’s eyes and smile and sigh in huge relief.

No relief came—not having either Schwartz brother at camp felt weird, like an itch I couldn’t scratch. At least on the counselors’ night hike I could relax. Every night before the first official day of camp, the counselors took a hike up to the peak of Mount Woodland where we could clearly see the stars and constellations. Jacob and I had been looking forward to this tradition since Eli told us about it when he was a first-time counselor two years earlier.

“Okay, everyone ready?” called out Ms. Boyd, the camp director.

“Am I too late?” Jacob ran up beside me, out of breath.

“Jacob!” I gushed. He pulled me in for a hug, and I held him in my arms. “I thought you weren’t gonna come,” I whispered.
“And miss the night hike?” He pulled away. “Think again, Andrea.”

“Oh, Jacob, this is Lisa, my co-counselor.” I moved aside to reveal Lisa, standing behind me.

She extended her hand. “It’s nice to meet you, Jacob. Andrea’s told me plenty of good things about you.”

He shook her hand and just nodded.

Lisa adjusted herself in her bed later that night, so that she was laying on her side facing me.

“What’s Jacob’s deal?”

I turned over to face her. “What do you mean?”

“Well, you know him better than I do,” she said, opening her magazine. “I could be wrong.”

I bit my lip. “I mean, last summer Jacob’s older brother, Elijah—Eli, we all called him—died. In the war.”

Lisa solemnly turned on her back, folded her hands over her stomach, and let out a quiet “oh.”

“Jacob’s parents drove up to tell him the news. He and Eli had always been close,” I turned on my back to reminisce. “Eli was one of the best people—if not the best person—I knew. We’ve all been attending this camp since Jacob and I were eight and Eli was 10. Eli had the kindest heart. Even as a young camper, he acted like a counselor. Always a man, always willing to help another. He even had beautiful blue eyes, exactly like the color of the lake here, Fire Pond. And a nice smile, too. Just like Jacob.”

“Sounds like a real special boy. You and Jacob were lucky to have known him,” she sighed flatly, as if she hadn’t been paying attention. “It’s such a shame. That horrible, horrible war. This world needs peace.”

The next few weeks passed without notice. Jacob, Lisa, and I became the Three Musketeers. When we were on duty, we signed our campers up for the same schedule of activities. When we weren’t on duty, we were hanging out in the cabins together. One warm, rainy night, Lisa came back late to the cabin.

“Where were you?” I asked. “Lights out was almost an hour ago.”

“Oh, nowhere,” Lisa responded, as if in a dream.

“Nowhere sure doesn’t sound like nowhere. Nowhere sounds like somewhere…with a boy,” I smirked.

“I don’t kiss and tell,” Lisa stated.

“Oh, don’t be a cliché.” I rolled my eyes.

She pressed her lips together and turned out the lights.

The next morning, Lisa and I were brushing our teeth in the small sink that pumped cold water from both faucets.

“Okay, I have a confession.” Lisa spit out her toothpaste.

I raised an eyebrow in question, my mouth full of minty foam.

“Jacob and I kissed last night.”
I almost choked on my own spit. “Oh!” I rinsed my mouth and feigned happiness. “That’s...great!”

“He just gets me, you know? We talked for hours about the horrors of the war, the senseless killings. I had no idea all the actual politics behind it, like how it’s totally illegal for us to be there.”

“Yeah,” I paused. “We better finish getting ready.”

I walked back into the room. I was hurt, somehow, by what Lisa had confided in me. I didn’t understand why until we were at breakfast at the Inn. I looked at Jacob, and it all made sense. The nice smile, the kind heart, the history.

I resigned to tell Jacob that afternoon when I knew he’d be off duty for a few hours. Together, we hiked up to the peak of Mount Woodland.

“Sure looks different in the daytime. Less creepy.”

“Jacob, I...I think I love you,” I blurted.

He stared blankly at me. “No,” he shook his head as if confused.

“This isn’t something you can say no to.”

“You never loved me, Andrea!” He shouted, confusion turning to anger.

“Yes, I always have!”

“No, you love what I remind you of,” he said slowly.

“It was always obvious, except to you. You love Eli.”

My brow furrowed, I stared at him.

“But I’m not Eli.”

The thought of me being in love with Eli was ridiculous. I licked my lips slowly and headed back down the mountain, towards my favorite thinking place.

Two summers ago, I sat in this same spot at the edge of Fire Pond with Eli. It was the last day of camp, most other campers had gone home by now, and we were waiting for that 1965 beige Vista Cruiser to come pick up Eli and Jacob. The lake was calm, its south end shaded by the overhanging pine trees that formed a ceremonial arch of branches covering the stream feeding into the lake. The only sound was the serene humming of insects and rustling of wind dancing through leaves.

“I have a bad feeling, Andy,” he told me after a few minutes of silence.

“What?” I asked.

“You know, the war.” He looked down at his knees. “I think I’m going to get drafted.”

“Eli,” I began softly.

“Andy, I know I’m going to get drafted,” he said, looking over at me. “I mean, c’mon, look at me.” He laughed.

“Eli!” I exhaled.

“I’m exactly what they’re looking for—fresh meat.”

I covered my face with my hands and laughed.

When I uncovered my face, Eli smiled at me. “I don’t think I’ll ever again in my life be anywhere as beautiful, as idyllic as here.” He picked up a rock and held it in front of my face. “I belong here, in the Catskills. I seriously might not be here next summer.”

I directed my gaze back to the lake, where the rock splashed with a pllop. “I know,” I stated, imagining where he could end up.

“I’ll make sure Jacob looks after you, Andy.”
“Andy.”

My ears perked up at the nickname; it sounded just like Eli. When I turned around, I saw it was Jacob. Just Jacob. He came over and sat down next to me, in the same position his brother would have sat in: back slightly curved, knees propped up, arms draped in a circle over his knees.

“You know, Eli considered this you guys’ spot.”

I swallowed hard, staring intently at the deep lake.

“It doesn’t make it any better—I know, trust me, I know—but he loved you.”

Tears welled in my eyes. “Then…then why didn’t he ever say anything to me?”

Jacob shrugged.

“Maybe had he told me, then I would’ve…would’ve known that I loved him, too.”

“We all thought you knew, even Ms. Boyd.” He laughed lightly, trying to make me feel better.

I sniffled and wiped my running nose against my forearm. “God, I’m a mess.”

“It’s okay. Here, I’m going to keep my promise to Eli.” He scooted over to me and held me tightly in his arms.

Author Bio:

Lillian Johnson grew up in a small town in New Jersey, called Ho-Ho-Kus (according to her mother, the name is Native American for “close to the mall”). Having taken art classes since she was two years old, Lillian grew up with a creative imagination. In the 8th grade, her English teacher wrote on her review of the opera of The Little Prince, “You have voice!” That comment made her want to be a writer, and has stuck with her ever since. Lillian is currently a sophomore at Wake Forest University, where she has unlimited access to sweet tea and Krispy Kreme. She is the News Editor for the Old Gold & Black, a color guard member of Spirit of the Old Gold and Black, and a student worker in the library. Lillian has high aspirations of going to graduate school and not being in debt her whole life. Mostly, Lillian writes about her cabin in the Catskills. She also likes to write comedic short stories, but she never thinks they’re good enough. When she is not writing, Lillian loves square dancing, buying every used copy of Hamlet she finds, and being a snob about pizza, bagels, coffee, and delis, in that order.
“Her name’s Jane.” His voice was love.  
“How old is she?”  
“She’s only three.” His words hung heavily on Azrael’s heart as He continued, “She doesn’t need to fully understand. That will come. She just needs a hand to hold along the way.”

When Azrael didn’t answer, He gave her a stern look, but she didn’t see it. Her woeful eyes were framed by a furrowed brow as the sound of waves crashing softly on the shore summoned a landscape. The horizon created the illusion that the ocean was bounded. The sandpipers were hopping on the line where the waves had run as far as they could before receding back to Mother Ocean. Each wave betrayed the sand crabs burrowing below. Past the shoreline, the sand dipped, making a golden bed for shells and rocks of different sizes and colors, previously homes for a variety of creatures.

And there was Jane, not far from the shoreline but more inland than the shells. She was close enough to the ocean that she could catch the occasional seaspray if the wind was just right, which acted as a cool surprise against her warm skin. The sand warmed her toes and matted her hair into blonde ringlets against her head. She was building a sand castle that was taller than she. It was obvious she had been working on it all day. She was focusing now on the very top tower, the final piece of her creation. Jane scooped the sand with both of her hands, and then reached up, pressing the squishy pads of her toes to the ground, and flexing her strong feet to get just a little bit higher to place more sand on top. Her pudgy hands worked with a toddler’s precision as the real world melted away to make even her wildest dreams come to life in the sand.

Once the shape and height of the top tower was acceptable to Jane, she scampere off to the shell bed to find decorations for her castle. In the bed, she found pearly white baby ear shells, and white slipper snails and plenty of black bay scallops. She found white coral and blue sea glass and even a crab leg! She found lots of rocks, all different sizes, shapes and colors. Then, quick like a gull diving for a fish, Jane’s face lit up and her hand plunged into the sand, retrieving the most precious shell. With her new treasures cupped in her hands, her little legs pitter-pattered on the wet sand back to her castle. She handled the shells with a toddler’s grace, picking them up one by one and putting them in special places on the castle, enthusiastically talking through her rationale despite her lack of audience. Jane put the baby ear shells in a swirling pattern on the front and pressed the black scallop shells gently into the bridge that was crossing the mote. The white coral was placed to frame the front door and the blue sea glass lined the bottom of the mote. Her other shells were scattered on the walls and sides of the towers while the rocks were scattered around the moat.

When all of the shells and rocks had found their place on the castle, the toddler excitedly reached down for her special find: seaweed ensnared in a barnacle that had latched onto a blue mussel shell. Jane took the mussel shell in both of her hands, careful not to drop or squeeze something so precious. Again, she pressed her toes into the ground and
flexed her feet for height. She squinted her eyes and furrowed her brow as she slowly, gently stuck the blue mussel shell into the top of the highest tower, protruding like a flag.

Jane stood back and gave the castle a long look. After a moment, she was satisfied, so she sat down to rest and admire her work. All this time, Jane hadn’t noticed Azrael standing behind the castle, watching and listening to her process, so Azrael said, “Hi Jane. I’m Azrael. What a beautiful castle you’ve made!”

“Thank you.” Jane replied in her shy, sing-song way. “And these shells! How wonderful!”

The toddler sat upright, proud to have someone to show off to, “I put the white ones on front ’cus they’re the windows ’n the black ones on the bidge so the horsies don’t fall through ’n da ones on the wall are ‘portant ’cus when the dragon breeves fire the princess’s saved.” Jane looked up to the blue mussel shell and lowered her voice to a whisper, “And this is the flag of the Seaweed Queen.”

“You really thought this all through. It is beautiful!” The toddler nodded and wiped imaginary sweat from her soft brow.

“But it looks like the tide’s coming up.”

“It’s ok I gots a moat.” Jane replied confidently.

“Jane,” she said gently, “do you know where you are?” The toddler’s eyes got wide and bright as a blissful smile broke out on her face, “The beach! I love the beach!”

“I love the beach too, but Jane—”

“But…” Jane looked around. She paused, noticing that something was wrong. “Where’s Mommy?” she asked. “Where’s daddy?” The toddler’s mind was pulled out of her make-believe and onto the lonely beach where she and Azrael were the only people. Jane began to cry.

Azrael looked to the horizon and noticed that the sun was setting; she knew that Jane would have to go soon. She took the child’s hand, trying to get her mind off of the sadness. She asked, “What’s your favorite thing to do at the beach?”

Holding Azrael’s hand made Jane’s body relax, but her lip was still quivering when she said “I like to get seashells with Mommy.” Her voice cracked and Jane used her free arm to wipe her face of tears. “And sometimes,” her breath caught in her chest as sobs were pushing through, “when I get hot,” Jane paused to wipe her tears and sandy hair away, “Daddy,” she let out a sob, “he takes me to the ocean, an-an-and we dip in our toes.” Jane’s beautiful face that was elated just minutes ago had turned into a picture of despair, as she continued “and he lifts me up. So I-I-I can jump over the waves. And he pretends a crab gotted his toe. And I laugh with him. We laugh all the time.” Jane sobs.

Azrael scooped the child into her arms and held her against her chest. “Oh, Jane, my love. Don’t be afraid! There’s so much beauty and bliss to come.”

“But where’s Daddy? Where are they?”

“They’ll come and get you soon.” “How soon?” Jane wailed.

Azrael patted her sandy hair, “It’ll feel like no time has passed at all. All you have to do is go to sleep, love. They’ll be here by morning.”

Through sniffles Jane said, “but Mommy always sings me a song when I go seeps. I can’t go beddy without Mommy and Daddy’s goodnight kisses.”
“Close your eyes, sweet baby Jane. Listen.”

The sound of the crashing waves soothed the child and her sobs slowed down to a steady cry. Azrael kissed the toddler’s forehead and Jane’s eyes began to get heavy. She had had an exhausting day. The sun was halfway below the horizon now, and the rays were tiptoeing over the waves as Azrael began to sing:

The gulls sing our song,
And the ocean is our mother,
The fish are our friends,
And the crabs all play!
The sun is setting now,
Dancing on the horizon,
The waves come and go,
But you will forever stay.

As Azrael kept singing this tune, time shifted on the sandy shore. The waves crashed in slow motion as the rays of the sun moved more quickly. The colorful streaks in the sky began to blend like freshly painted watercolors. The sky was transitioning from light to dark while the sun remained in place, half obscured by the horizon, sending out its faithful rays to warm the waters of the ocean waters and welcome their newest guest. Azrael, with sleeping baby Jane, walked through the waves that were suspended in time and invited the sun into their moment. The sun greeted them with warm kisses while the water cleansed the baby of the sand in her hair and in between her toes. Azrael extended her arms, laying the softly snoring baby afloat on her back, as the sun pulled Jane closer and closer until she was completely engulfed and had passed on to bliss.

Maggi McCann is a junior Communication major at Wake Forest. She is also the Editor-In-Chief of the Wake Forest chapter of the Odyssey Online. She feels so lucky to have been able to participate in both sessions of Writers’ Camp that were offered during her time at Wake and looks forward to applying her passion for writing stories to the world of marketing after graduating.
With the alarm set and all of the perimeter doors dead bolted, the house felt safe, cozy, and calm. The outside world filled with terrors was locked away. There could be no troubles now, not with the security blanket covering the house. She began to walk around, tidying up the little remains of the dinner party from the night before as she made her way towards the bathroom. Turning the water to the hottest temperature, letting the room fill with steam as it warmed up, she stepped in. The warm mist surrounded her and filled her lungs with heavy but satisfying air. Now, not only was the surrounding world locked away, but she was too. Locked away in the comforting mist of her daily bathroom escape. The mist slipped swiftly under the doorway, making its way towards the windows in the hallway across from the bathroom. From the outside window, it was clear to see that she was in the shower at this moment, vulnerable.

Though she felt locked away from the trouble of the outside world, she was not locked away from him. He walked around the perimeter of the house, backpack secured, looking for the best possible entrance. There were sixteen windows on the perimeter of the house. He had counted over the last few months while learning his routine. It took exactly one hundred and sixty steps to walk around the perimeter of the house, although it was a bit harder now that the snow had been falling more frequently. He observed in the past week that she had set the alarm six out of seven days, the lone, alarm-less night being the weekly dinner party that she hosted with her colleagues. That being the day prior to his planned attack day, he knew he was safe; she would be alone tonight.

The bathroom door opened, engulfing the hallway in a thick fog that covered each of the windows that would have exposed her to the world. The fog coated the window, just as the mirror steamed up in the bathroom, so she never worried about walking naked from the shower to the bedroom. Not only that, but she lived in a remote area, a safe area. The closest big city being almost twenty miles away, she never saw much traffic in her neighborhood. Crime rates were low, although that didn’t stop her from using the alarm religiously, as an extra safety precaution. As she made her way to the bedroom, she peered out the foggy window and saw something quickly move across the window. It was a figure, dressed in all black? No, it must have been an animal—a bird or a deer darting by the window looking for the food scraps she often leaves in various spots around the perimeter of the house.

He just missed her. Within seconds of the bathroom door opening, she was in the hallway facing the window that he was peering into, not her normal routine. He ducked just in time for the window to fog up, for her to look away, concealing his identity. If there were any neighbors, or if she ran away from the window in fear, he would have been worried, but since she continued to look into the darkness for a few seconds after he ducked, and there are no neighbors to be seen, he began to walk away slowly to the left of the house, her bedroom side. He knew that there was a window that she often opened at night, next to her bed, which meant that the alarm
must not be linked to that window. He searched in the dark for the right place to hide out near the window in the increasingly dark night and began to formulate his final plan.

After dressing, she made her way to the kitchen to prepare a wonderful Friday night meal: leftovers. Peering into the fridge, she decided on Shepherd’s pie, a childhood favorite. Each week as a child, her family chose a topic for dinner discussion from a jar that they added to whenever they saw fit. It was a way to keep the conversation fresh and to help the family members discuss and debate their opinions on a variety of subjects. One evening when she was sixteen, there had been a long, drawn-out, dramatic capital punishment case on the television. Everyone was watching the case live in the evenings to see what the outcome would be. At family dinner the week the case ended, the topic of discussion was capital punishment, and subsequently last meals. Although the capital punishment discussion was a likely winner for most heated, in actuality they fought more about their last meals. Although it was a hard choice for most, it had been an easy decision for her: shepherd’s pie would be her last meal.

After staying near the bedroom for a safe amount of time, he made his way to the kitchen. Peering through the window behind her, he saw she had just started eating. Picking up his backpack from the dewy ground below, he made his way towards the alarm-less window. Now was his time. He began to crack open the window slowly, as quietly as humanly possible. She was two rooms away, and he was determined to not let this spoil his plan. Inch by inch he opened the window and made his way through it. He knew the inside of the house from the deeds online and knew exactly how long it would take him to get into position: twenty-five steps. He slowly walked down the hallway as soft music played in the kitchen, concealing any unavoidable noises he made while walking. As he became comfortable with his pace and the concealment of his footsteps, suddenly, the music stopped.

Her heartbeat raced. Had she seen something outside? Was that thing she saw the cause of the sound in the hallway? Was she being paranoid? Since she was young she had a tendency to fear evenings alone, imagining that there was someone or something in the house out to get her. Tonight, something didn’t feel right. She worked her way towards the kitchen sink and dropped her plate, making a loud sound as it hit the basin and shattered. She turned to her right to grab a knife and made her way to the hallway.

Katie Sprague is a writer and artist who loves all things creative. She started her own photography business when she was sixteen and has been publishing written work in the form of blog posts and marketing materials, along with artwork since before the start of her business. She has received many awards for her creative work, on both local and state levels, from her home state of Maine. Katie is currently in her first year at Wake Forest University, and she hopes to publish a book of her own before the end of her career at Wake Forest, combining her two favorite creative mediums: photography and writing.
UNTITLED
Kaya West-Uzoigwe

I can recall the softness
of your hands
as you slid my panties off
and kissed my stomach
ever so lightly.

DEVoured
Kaya West-Uzoigwe

In a life wrapped with despair,
even the strongest fall victim to it.
those little blue pills,
encased with the promise of amnesia from the pain,
the side effects;
your little girls.
DISEASE

Kaya West-Uzoigwe

The murmur began to comfort me,
ringing in my eardrums,
reverberating off of my stomach lining.
I would listen for you while I slept.
your hum trespasses into my dreams,
so I think about you consistently.
you hide in the crevices of my brain,
and attach yourself to the insecurities stained into my cerebral
matter.
I can see you when I gaze at myself in the mirror.
I locate you in the new indentation of my ribs.
you stretch the ends of my smile from cheek to cheek,
you find satisfaction in your manipulation of my grin.
I spot you in the resurrection of my collar bones.
I know you are bad for me,
yet I became obsessed with what you accomplished.
I rub my ribs with satisfaction,
and am pleased by your internal roar.
I know you are bad for me,
but I cannot seem to release my grip.
your murmur began to comfort me,
ringing in my eardrums,
reverberating off of my stomach lining,
I found solace in your screams.
DEVOURED

Kaya West-Uzoigwe

judgements so easily
roll out of your mouths
without realizing
the impact your harsh words
have on me
your criticisms sting my self worth
like a bee
burrowing into my flesh
leaving a scar
I can’t seem to aide
bequeathing a throbbing
that I can’t seem to shake
producing a self-hatred
I can’t eradicate
no matter how hard I try
but then I remember
I cannot let poison
occupy my body
or else
I will become poisonous too

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN...

Kaya West-Uzoigwe

I wanted to sit here and write this because I believed that you
have made some grave impact on my life. I want to say you are
the person I can tell everything to, who will care for me no
matter what, but in actuality these things aren’t true because I
don’t really know you. We think as humans time isn’t real, yes
in theory but not when it comes to relationships. Somehow in
every other aspect of life, time is a prominent determinator of
right from wrong, decision making, life planning but when it
comes to love, time throws everything off kilter. I want to be
able to say that when I have a problem you are the one I want
to tell because we have this incredible, wonderful bond, but I
don't really know you. I'm holding onto what I met that first
night, when I saw the purest form of yourself. I've known you
for a short yet brutal four months
of my life. Four months that
shaped me, lacerated me into bits I'm still trying to put
together, challenged me and probably changed my outlook on
life. Time; four months seems like a small amount of time to
fit such magnanimous experiences, yet it is quite spacious. Life
can change in four months, even two months by the people
you meet. Before this I never thought I would meet anyone
who would change my mind about love. I was set in this space
of naivety about who I loved, what it meant, how I needed to
hold on to it to “be myself”. Now looking back, what does that
even mean? That I needed to define myself by one past lustful
love? It doesn’t make sense, just like the mark you made on
me. Like every girl, I fell in love with the love movies portrayed. I wanted to have the courage to love a beast like Belle, and to have a romance like Troy and Gabriella that made a mark on the East High hallways forever. Somehow sitting in the front seat of your Honda Civic, listening to Sweet Disposition as wind slowly sauntered into your car, I had a different outlook on love. An outlook I had envisioned could have been you. I appreciate how you appreciate everything. How you found substance in anything that you came across. I loved how your brain worked and analyzed all your eyes saw. Most importantly, I loved the way you viewed me and my life. You became so invested in me and what I cared about, who I was, who I wanted to be, who you could help me become. That last one, that’s what I believe drove you to what you did. Part of you I know cared about me and as you liked to say, had love for me, but a part of you was just as selfish as you were savvy. You wanted to be a part of what I represented for you, not me. You craved what came with being with someone who is successful, beautiful, on the right path, and mostly someone wanted by many. As you know, I have a long history of choosing men to be in my life who tend to have their feelings wrapped up in sorrow and painful memories. You knew this all too well, you knew a lot about me all too well for such a small period of time but you exploited this. Not intentionally, you never meant to disappoint me intentionally, but who ever does? Who means to impact someone so heavily and then obliterate it? At this point I’m not sure why I’m still writing or what I still have to say. I’m not sure there is anything I do still have to say, but I feel as if you need to hear this. Not that you ever will or probably won’t because if you see me or my name anywhere you cower. I hope one day you read everything I have written about you, so you can understand what I could not put into words. What I couldn’t fathom sending you over text message or uttering from my lips to say to you. I hope you understand that time screwed us, screwed this and I couldn’t begin to fix it. I want you to remember that four months is not that much time, and I wish we had known that before. I wish I still could understand the concept of time. The notion that time does not equate love or respect. That men abuse time like they abuse love. I want to venture to say that I loved you, to write it down so I can visually see what that means. I don’t think I can, or ever will, because it is a four month love. Not a real, vibrant love, but a four month love. Something about four month love to me seems just as important, just as significant. Time is scorned, just like you. You were my time, time wasted was you.
ENFANCE

Kaya West-Uzoigwe

I misplaced my innocence somewhere between the azure skies and the brazen allure of despondency.

UNTITLED

Kaya West-Uzoigwe

my hips act as an invitation for stares
my ass as a provocation of lies
my waist as bait for criticism
it gives people a reason to talk
a reason to lie
and makes it harder to hide
WE THE FEMALES OF THE UNITED STATES

Kaya West-Uzoigwe

Can’t recall where it states that only men have the luxury of freedom. We The Females Of The United States, cannot wait for the day women are freed, to not be defined by the utterance of the male perception. tied by the shackles of a male’s opinion. to no longer see that society deems “men” synonymous with “freedom”. and “Woman” synonymous with “subordinate”.

SINCERELY, THE MIXED GIRL

Kaya West-Uzoigwe

I’ve become a connoisseur in trying to prove my spot in the social hierarchy that is whiteness to the general population that interestingly enough I wear it so visibly it’s hard for even myself to detect.

Kaya West-Uzoigwe was born in New York City and is a current freshman at Wake Forest University. She has been writing since she was ten years old. Her love of poetry began early on and blossomed into a cherished hobby for her. She has partaken in a copious amount of writing opportunities, and has had her writing included in one of her High School’s published written works crafted by students. One of Kaya’s aspirations within her writing is to connect to her audience and cultivate a sense of relatability through her words. Given that Kaya wants to pursue a possible major in communications with a minor in journalism or creative writing, she holds the art of writing dear to her heart and incorporates it into her daily life. She hopes that with a degree in communications, she can combine her passion for writing with public relations and advertising as a career in her future.
OCTOBER RECOLLECTIONS

Maddie Boyer

After all this time
I still feel your hair tangled
Between my fingers

The electric space
Between our curious lips
Strangely infinite

Soft flesh upon flesh
You traced my face's outline
There in the darkness

Learning every curve,
Each imperfection you swore
Gave beauty a name

Inconspicuous
You brushed your hand against mine
Gentle, but lustful

Your eyes' piercing gaze
Spoke more than any words could
Hungry. Yearning. Starved.

I recall you asked

What chains shackled me from you.
I softly replied,

"I am but the wind,
Always there e'vn if unseen
Yet I must be free"

How naive I was,
For you were a hurricane
And I a mere breeze

You loved in tempests
While I feared the seasons and
Thrived best in sunshine

Your eyes turned cold, black
Your fingertips grew talons,
Ruthless, determined

Your mouth dripped venom,
Every word spat as if bile
Each glance with disgust

I suppose to you
Attainability was
Synonym to love

And my refusal
Shattered your ego into
Shards you chased me with
No longer pursuits
Of enthrallment, but of rage;
Adamant revenge

So comes the twilight
October recollections
Haunting me once more

And fight as I do,
Ghosts of you plague my each move,
One promise you kept.

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**Maddie Boyer** is a writer, poet, and lyricist from Morristown, NJ. Maddie primarily writes for music, being particularly fascinated in the analysis and meaning of lyrics, however, Maddie is also an avid poetry and fiction fan. Her favorite poet is Robert Frost. Her lyrics have been featured in a number of artists' recorded works, as well as in her own music, which can be found on Spotify, iTunes, and GooglePlay. Maddie is currently a student at Wake Forest University pursuing a degree in Communications and Music.

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**THE LAST DAY**

Michelle White

Her life was never supposed to turn out this way. She wasn’t supposed to be behind the iron bars of a jailhouse cell, glaring at the contemptible man in the neighboring cell. She wasn’t supposed to be waiting and praying that the hanging judge Isaac Parker would decide her sentence with mercy. She wasn’t supposed to be an outlaw, or a horse thief, or the “Bandit Queen.” Yet here she was, perched on a rotting wood cot that seemed as if it might give out at any moment and draped with a moth-eaten piece of cloth that the jail keeper considered a blanket.

“Belle…” came the hushed voice of the man from the other cell. “Come on, my Myra Belle. Don’tcha gimme the cold shoulder like that.”

She rolled her eyes and turned to stare in the opposite direction.

“Knew I shoulda got me a catalogue woman ’stead of a hellraiser like you…” the man muttered, tossing a splinter of wood in her direction.

She continued to ignore the man who was fourth in the long line of detestable little beasts she had called husbands. This one was simply a means to an end. After Sam’s death, she refused to give up the land that was rightfully hers. If keeping her land meant marrying another member of the Cherokee tribe and the Starr family, that’s what she had to do. And that’s what she did do.
“Shut it, Starr!” today’s jail keeper, the town deputy, barked without bothering to look up from his newspaper.

“Cool yer heels. Yer just mad that ya have to sit here all day,” Jim July Starr retorted with a gruff chuckle. Somehow Jim’s crude sense of humor and persistent need to stir things up survived in the brutal cold of the jailhouse. The sun had not yet risen to the point where a few rays could slip through the window and warm the skin of Belle’s face. While Jim tested the deputy’s thin-stretched temper, Belle sat motionless in an attempt to retain what little energy still rested in her bones. She closed her eyes and wondered where everything had gone so wrong. But she was lying to herself if she pretended, for even a moment, that she didn’t already know. How unbelievable it was that a single day could alter the entire trajectory of a person’s life.

Belle’s elder brother Bud had been one of the brightest spots in her life. He had been the first person to shorten her lengthy moniker Myra Maybelle Shirley to just Belle. Bud had been the only person, not just throughout her childhood but also her entire life, to accept and appreciate who she truly was. Bud encouraged her preoccupation with horses, even going so far as to buy Belle her very first. A young girl at the time, Belle did not realize the significance of his actions or just how much the horse had cost him until later on in life. The mare, with a coat as dark as freshly tilled soil and a mane and tail golden as the sun, had surely cost him an entire summer’s wages. She loved that horse with every fiber of her being, and while she didn’t know how to thank her brother properly as a child, she hoped that her adoration of the horse and of all the things her brother taught her had been a sufficient show of gratitude.

It had only occurred to her gradually, over the course of many years, that she had Bud to thank for more than just her beloved mare Whiskey, some riding lessons, and secret target practices. Only Bud had taken the time to show her that she could be more than the straight-laced housewife role being forced upon her. Bud had shaped her into a strong, self-sufficient woman. A woman who was capable of surviving against all odds. A woman capable of inspiring fear and respect in both her children and the most notorious outlaws in the West. The harsh, stringent Carthage Female Academy that her father insisted she attend hadn’t taught her that. The ceaseless piano lessons that left her fingers blistered and bloodied hadn’t taught her that. The sharp crack of her father’s belt across her back or legs when she behaved like a man instead of a lady hadn’t taught her that. Her mother’s mending, cleaning, and cooking lessons hadn’t taught her that. Her entire youth consisted of constant lessons that reminded her to hide her personality, hold her tongue, and appear worthy of marriage. Bud was one of the few who knew that the young woman with eloquent penmanship and impeccable elocution was also secretly a crack shot who wore men’s trousers and rode her horse at breakneck speed.

It had always seemed fitting to Belle, in a macabre sense, that the vision of the delicate housewife her parents had destined her to be died with Bud. A part of her very soul was stolen from her that cloudless April day in 1864. The War Between the States had made their old homestead in Missouri uninhabitable. The family had fled to Texas, with only her brothers Preston and Bud choosing to remain behind. She should have begged harder, cried more, feigned a faint. She
should have done more to prevent her brothers from staying in Carthage. Her parents should have done more. She never forgave her family or herself for their inaction in the face of her brothers’ inevitable executions.

Her mother had tried to prevent her from reading that fateful letter, but was too consumed in her grief to truly make an effort. The battered piece of scratch paper detailed the horrible demise that Bud and Preston had met. However, the earth-shattering reality of the situation didn’t truly hit Belle until the pair of corpses arrived by wagon a fortnight later. As much as the undertaker had tried to hide it with thick, black clothing, the bodies were mangled beyond belief. It was obvious that the Union troops who surrounded the home where the brothers were meeting fellow Confederate sympathizers had had no intention of letting anyone survive. A deep rage had bubbled within Belle when she gazed over the sunken, gray faces of her brothers. Preston had already married and started his own family by the time Belle was old enough to walk and speak. With no shared experiences or interests, Preston was more of an uncle to Belle than a brother. She cared for him, but she did not love him like she did Bud. Belle mourned Preston, but she despained over Bud. In her eyes, Death was not fit to be in the presence of Bud’s soul.

In that moment, standing above the final resting place of her own blood, she vowed that she would never again hide behind the façade of perfection and eloquence. She would allow herself the luxury of emotions, a personality, and a mouth that spoke freely. She would live and die like her brothers before her—independent and free. And less than a week after their funeral, Belle made good on her promise. She ran away with a man who took advantage of her anguish and confusion. Belle’s elopement with Jim Reed became the first step on the long road to the jail cell she was currently trapped in. Belle felt as if her whole life was just a constant series of cages—dissimilar in appearance, but cages designed to ensnare her nonetheless. Childhood, school, marriage, motherhood, and jailhouse cells. Every institution a piece in an infinite circle from which she would most likely never escape. Each parent, instructor, husband, child, guard, and judge placed in her path to prevent her from truly being free. Persistent obstacles that prevented her from keeping the vow she had made over Bud and Preston’s bodies. Belle resumed glaring at her husband in the neighboring cell.

Just after the second tolling of the town’s church bell, the jailhouse door creaked open. The sheriff stepped through the opening, the beard he had grown for the winter adding an unkempt and weathered facet to his appearance.

“They behaving?” the sheriff inquired of his deputy who had lowered his newspaper just enough to see over it.

“Well enough, I reckon. That one’s got quite the mouth on him though,” the deputy responded, jabbing a thumb in Jim’s direction. Jim grinned widely as the sheriff turned to look at him. The sheriff sighed heavily.

“Keep him in line. Judge wants to see the missus,” the sheriff informed his deputy, and he shifted his gaze to Belle.

For the first time that day, she moved from her perch on the cot and got to her feet. She folded the cloth blanket she’d been given slowly, as if she were enveloped in molasses. The sheriff noticed she was only wearing a chemise and stay.
“Deputy, why is this woman only wearing her undergarments?” the sheriff questioned, averting his stare from the improperly clothed figure in the cell. The deputy finally put his newspaper down on his lap.

“Higgins said her dress was too purdy for a criminal. Thought she mighta had somethin’ hidden in it,” the deputy replied with a shrug.

“She cannot go before the judge like this. It’s indecent. And she’ll surely freeze. I’m surprised she hasn’t already. Give her the dress back,” the sheriff commanded. With a huff, the deputy rose and strode over to a trunk that sat in a corner. He opened the lid and withdrew a black velvet riding habit. He tossed it to the sheriff and returned to his chair and newspaper.

“My apologies,” the sheriff expressed his regret, handing the habit through the bars to Belle. She accepted it and pulled it on hastily, a look of relief flashing briefly across her face. The sheriff was shocked at how a simple riding habit altered the woman’s appearance. Before, Belle had seemed delicate and weak. The midnight colored dress transformed Belle into the outlaw the sheriff had heard so much about. She stood taller and seemed more resolute. The lines of her face sharpened and her eyes appeared darker. When she was ready, the sheriff unlocked her cell door, placed shackles on her wrists, and led her out of the jailhouse.

Belle had never been so grateful to walk outside in the bitter cold. Her claustrophobia and distress got worse each time she was arrested or spent time in a cell. Even the few short paces to the sheriff’s office where the judge waited for her was enough to settle her shaking hands. She had made this walk enough times to know better than to look toward or acknowledge the gallows that were placed strategically between the jailhouse and the sheriff’s office. It didn’t seem to matter what town or state Belle was in; the sight of gallows was unavoidable.

“I assume, based on your record, you know how to conduct yourself in front of a judge?” the sheriff quizzed, stopping to look at Belle. She nodded, and the sheriff opened the door to Belle’s judgement day.

Despite being in his late fifties, the judge appeared much younger than Belle expected. Tall and broad shouldered, he was an imposing man even from behind the desk he was seated at. His hair and beard were pristine white and groomed to perfection. The white color only made him appear sophisticated, not aged. He furthered his intimidating presence by forcing the pair to stand in front of him, unacknowledged, while he finished reading a collection of notes jotted on a scratch pad.

“Mrs. Myra Maybelle Starr, you stand before the court yet another time,” the judge began, finally looking up from his papers, “this time accused of stage coach robbery. How do you plead?”

“Not guilty, your Honor,” Belle answered, in a soft, yet pronounced voice. “I’ve done the time for my past transgressions, and I’m reformed.”

“Reformed?” the judge posed, cocking an eyebrow.

“I haven’t been arrested in three years, your Honor. I live a different life now. I make an honest living. I don’t harbor criminals or fugitives anymore. I follow the law. The accusation isn’t valid,” Belle insisted, her voice sincere. The
judge shifted the scrutiny of his tired eyes from Belle to the sheriff.

“Do you have any evidence of her involvement in this crime?” the judge questioned as the sheriff nervously wrung his hands.

“She’s married to a known outlaw and is part of a family who has run elaborate criminal enterprises for decades,” the sheriff blurted out, perhaps a bit too defensively. The judge audibly sighed.

“Is that it?” he queried, glancing down at the notes sprawled in front of him.

“Well, yes… but…” the sheriff attempted to justify Belle’s arrest, when the judge interrupted.

“Mrs. Starr, you are free to leave. I trust that the court will not see you again,” the judge ruled, his second statement laced with a subtle threat.

“Thank you, your Honor.” Belle breathed, a burden visibly lifted off her shoulders. “With all due respect, what of my effects?”

The judge simply glanced at the sheriff, who was still in a state of disbelief from the notorious hanging judge’s swift and surprising ruling. The sheriff quickly snapped his mouth shut.

“Follow me.” The sheriff beckoned through gritted teeth.

The pair exited the office and stood, staring at each other in deadlock for several moments. Belle held out her shackled wrists and the sheriff grudgingly removed the restraints. He pulled a cloth bag from under his coat and handed it to the waiting woman. He watched in dismay as she

removed a pearl-handled revolver and fastened its leather holster around her waist. A smile spread across Belle’s face as she withdrew a second revolver and holster from the bag. It was obvious that she was far more comfortable now that the guns were on her immediate person. The sheriff didn’t understand how Judge Parker could simply let a woman like this go free.

“Sheriff, I can’t say this has been a pleasure,” Belle quipped with a grin. “I reckon my horse has been stabled at the livery in wake of my arrest?”

All the lawmen in Texas had learned the hard way that selling one of Belle Starr’s horses was good way to end up dead in a ditch. The sheriff nodded, unable to find words. Belle gave him a mock salute, turned, and strode off toward the livery. The sheriff watched as she disappeared behind a building, anger boiling up within him at the idea of a habitual criminal going off to terrorize the world yet another time.

Once out of view of the fuming sheriff, Belle allowed herself to drop the confident charade. Every inch of her body was trembling, and tears were welling in her eyes. She hadn’t expected to walk out of the hanging judge Isaac Parker’s court with her life. She had been making her peace with hanging from the town gallows. Now she needed to get to livery as quickly as possible and get out of town. Belle feared that the judge would realize he had made a mistake and change his mind.

Belle’s horse nickered and came to greet her the moment she walked into the livery. The daughter of her cherished Whiskey, Scout had come to fill the void that had been left in the wake of Whiskey’s passing. She had eagerly
done all that was asked of her from the moment Belle set a saddle on her back. As Belle quickly tacked and mounted Scout, she knew that today would be no different. The pair paused only long enough to throw a penny to the stable boy before taking off at a gallop. The sooner Belle was out of this town, the better off everyone would be.

There was no greater feeling in the world than that of the freedom granted by a horse. To experience the wind whipping through one’s hair, brushing the skin of one’s face, and billowing through one’s clothes was a thrill beyond any other. For Belle, her horses were a projection of her dreams for herself. They were beautiful, powerful, and, on some level, incapable of being tamed. They represented the potential and promise of escape. They filled places in Belle’s heart and soul that she was not capable of filling herself. There were no secrets between Belle and her horses. They understood her on a level that no other creature on earth would ever be capable of achieving.

As the town faded into the distance, Belle allowed Scout to slow to a walk. They had been still for so long that any unnecessary exertion would leave them both sore for days. After sitting in that cell, any thought of limited mobility was agony for Belle. She leaned forward to rub Scout’s neck, thankful that she had been blessed with such a loyal animal. There was a small creek near her homestead, and Belle planned to let Scout get a long drink. The water was always crystal clear, and all of her horses seemed to think that the grass on its banks were the sweetest of anywhere in the region. Belle could sit and let the warm, golden sun wash over her as Scout enjoyed a rare treat. It may have only been February, and that morning may have been bitter, but the sun had become glorious now that it sat high in the sky. There wasn’t a single cloud in the wide, sapphire expanse above her.

Belle was so focused on what she planned to do with her recently awarded freedom that she didn’t immediately notice Scout’s ears prick up and swivel to listen behind her. More concerned with soaking up the sun’s rays and rewarding her horse, Belle didn’t realize that her plans were quickly unraveling until she hit the ground.

“Scout!” Belle yelled, as she writhed in pain on the hard earth. Her ears were ringing as if God had thrown a thunderbolt right next to her. Belle had fallen off her horses more times than she could count, but nothing had ever hurt as badly as this. She felt as if she had been hit by a train, like a dull-witted cow who hadn’t bothered to get off the tracks. She tried to mentally narrow down where she thought her injuries were, but she couldn’t focus on anything but the sheer agony. Her entire chest throbbed in time with her racing heart, and she started to feel light-headed.

With a yelp, Belle managed to roll onto her back. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a black figure stalking toward her, the clear shape of a shotgun cradled in their arms. Belle almost laughed when she grasped that she had avoided the gallows only to foolishly ride into right back into Death’s arms. There would be no escape this time. No miraculous jailhouse
break, no judge to give her another chance. Only the inevitable end that would come when the figure finally closed the distance between them.

Regret instantly flooded Belle’s mind. What she wouldn’t give to see her daughter or son’s faces just one last time. To have known that this ride on Scout would be her last and that she needed to treasure it. To have been able to taste the creek’s pure waters and smell the fragrant grass on its banks a final time. To have stood on her small farmhouse’s porch and gazed out upon the land she had fought so hard to keep. To have accepted the path that her life had taken and forgiven the people who had influenced that path. To have forgiven herself.

The sun’s comforting beams upon her face were blocked by the dark figure that had finally come to stand over her. Belle couldn’t see their face, couldn’t tell who they were, or even tell what gender they were. At this point, she didn’t particularly care anymore. She was surprised to realize that she didn’t fear the end or what would come after like she had when she passed the gallows. She simply laid there, listening to the wind whisper through the foliage, as the muzzle of the shotgun swung to hover over her face. She didn’t hear the click of the trigger or the thunder of the blast. She felt no pain as her world went black.

For the first time in over thirty years, Belle Starr was finally at peace.

[Notes: This work is a fictionalized account of the last day of Myra Maybelle Shirley Reed Starr’s (Belle Starr’s) life. Starr was a known outlaw and “Bandit Queen,” but very little is actually known about Belle’s life and the extent of her involvement in the criminal affairs of her husbands. A relatively obscure figure outside of Texas for most of her life, her story was picked up by publisher Richard K. Fox shortly after her unsolved murder in 1889. The story of the Bandit Queen has remained a captivating fragment of historical imagination ever since.]

Michelle White is currently a junior at Wake Forest University and is pursuing double majors in History and Sociology. She, her family, and their seven pets live in Mooresville, North Carolina. Michelle enjoys writing pieces of fiction, particularly in the genres of fantasy, science fiction, and historical fiction. She hopes to finish and publish one of her many fledgling novels in the near future. In addition to writing, Michelle also enjoys reading, spending time with her cats and dog, riding her horses, and painting.
NOW OR NEVER

Sara Isabel Coronel

The picture on the wall was skewed at an angle that portrayed the reflection of the man in the room. He was sitting on the bed, his weight choking the mattress. His fingers looked like dead curled tree branches with parasitic moss sticking to the stumps. His square glasses rested on the top of his white head. Finally, the mountain range on his forehead smoothed out as the cat that sat on his lap stopped twitching. The man threw the sack of organs on the floor.

He looked up and saw an old woman sitting on the armchair. The old woman looked at him with the side of her mouth tilted up. She shook her head.

“What?” he asked.

She opened her mouth to speak as a young man came out of the adjacent bathroom.

“I did what you told me to do,” the man said, standing up. “Don’t you dare look at me that way.”

“What way?”

“Like I did something wrong.”

“Did you?”

“I…” said the man, sitting back down again.

“Leave him alone,” the young man said. “He has to a lot on his mind. Today is an important day after all.” The young man sat next to the man. His weight did not make an impression on the mattress.

The old woman sighed. She hated getting into an argument with the man. He could be very unpredictable, and she liked to have control of the situation at all times.

“Fine,” she said, “get on with it then.”

She pointed at the wrinkled curtains. The man turned to look at the younger man to gauge his reaction. Would the young man do anything to stop him? Did he want the young man to intercede? He did not have an answer for himself at that moment. However, he knew that if he did not act right then he would back out. He knew that this was the last chance he would ever get to make his own decision. The young man stared back at the man, his expression unreadable. Unlike the man, the young man had the face as smooth as the skin that is sewed on celebrities. His blue eyes made the man feel that he was suffocating every time he gazed at them. This time, though, he felt liberated. This would be the last time he would ever feel like drowning.

“It is your choice,” the young man said, inclining his head towards the curtains. They seemed to flutter as if afraid of the young man’s direct gaze.

“Waiting…” said the old woman. She could not stand seeing the interaction between the young man and the man. She wanted to be the man’s sole focus, but she had always had to share him with the young man. She sometimes felt self-conscious about her age because she couldn’t compete with such flawless looks. She was well into her sixties at this point, and her appearance didn’t concern her. Unless the young man was around. Then she turned the shade of puss that usually appeared on the crevices of her body. But she had one weapon
that the young man did not possess. She could influence the
man with her words.

“You must make the right choice,” she said.

“Would that make you happy?”

“No. But it would free me.”

The man laughed. The sound echoed in the room,
lifting the particles of dust from the picture frame and swirling
them in the air. None touched the old woman or the young
man. Instead, they all clung to the man like worms clinging to
fishing hooks right before they are submerged in the water.
The man used his hands to wipe the dust from his jacket.

“I want you to rot,” the man said.

“What you want won’t free you, my dear,” she said.

“But it will make you suffer,” he said.

The man stood up again. He kicked the sack of organs,
this time as he paced. He shoved his fingers, which flashed
with freshly made red marks, into his pockets. The organs
fluttered in the sack, scrambling around as the man moved.
The mountain range yet again appeared on the man’s forehead,
deeper this time. He knew he was running out of time. If he
wanted to continue this existence, he would not do what the
old woman had offered for him. However, she was right. This
was the right choice to make. At least for him. The young man
would disagree. He looked at the picture frame again; his
reflection was the only one he could see in the glass. The old
woman and the young man’s reflection did not appear, even
though the glass faced towards the room. The man was used
to this. He had become used to looking at any reflective object
when he entered a room.

While the man paced, the young man went to take a
closer look at the curtains. He touched them lightly with his
fingers. The curtains did not stir at his touch. His eyes held
longing and desire. The young man had always wished he had
the power to affect things the way the man could. The young
man had no concrete power. His only weapon of persuasion
was his gaze. However, he only used it towards the man
because it only worked on him. It did not even work on the
woman. Sometimes he would listen to the woman speak and
wish that he could grab the skin that began at his jaw line and
pull until he ripped the outer layer of skin. That way his power
would not come from his persuasive gaze anymore and he
could get a more useful skill like the woman’s. He knew that
somehow his power of persuasion came from the youthfulness
that exuded from the open pores of his skin. He knew that one
look could make the man understand the general gist of what
he wanted. However, the woman’s voice was more forceful.

“Do you want us to go?” the young man said. He
turned to look at the man. The man stopped pacing, his back
to the young man, his shoulders hunched over.

“Yes,” he said, while both the young man and the old
woman had to lean in to hear him speak. “Don’t get me wrong,
you both have been there for me, but I can’t…I can’t keep up
with this anymore.” The man kneaded down and carefully
picked up the sack of organs. He turned the head to the side
and traced the whiskers that were left softly. He used his thumb
to rub the spot were a bone in his neck jutted out the way an
old lover would trace the line of a hip. Delicately. Lovingly.
Taking the torso in his hand he pushed the sack onto the wall
and used his other hand to pummel the organs. His fist
touched soft and rubbery tissue until they became wet. Touched hard surfaces and popped balloons of liquid. When he was done he turned around. The sack slid to the floor like a drunken man. The man saw the young man and the old woman both rubbing their hands. Their hands seemed to have been dunked in a tub of red paint. The man’s hands were soaked. Dark spots glistened on his shirt and pants.

“Do you have to be so aggressive?” the old woman said, wiping her hand on her shirt. She hated when the man hurt himself. It only caused her pain.

The man looked at the young man and handed him a tissue paper. The young man tried to grab it before it slipped through his fingers and floated to the floor. Everyone stared at the tissue as it slowly fell. Nobody made a sound. The young man thought of the life he would never have. He thought of all the moments the man had experienced that he would never experience. He even thought of the kindness the man had given him that he had never returned. All he had ever been to the man was a burden. Now he could redeem himself. But that would mean letting go of his only source of life. The young man opened and closed his fingers.

“Stop,” the man said.

“You know I can’t. All I have to do in my life is talk to you and that cranky old woman. I can’t stop myself from thinking”

“Thinking about what life would have been like if you had been in my place won’t get you anywhere.”

“No but at least it makes me feel better for a few seconds.”

“A few seconds for an eternity torturing yourself. That doesn’t sound like a great bargain.”

“Well, eternity being as long as you are alive.” The young man’s eyes widened. “Wait, I didn’t mean to say that. I’m so-”

The woman stood up. The decision had been made. The man turned his face to look at the old woman.

“I will do it.”

“Wait. No. Let me explain,” the young man said, not being able to look into the eyes of the man.

“You don’t have to. Remember, I am you. I know.”

The man walked through the young man and opened the curtains. Light shot through, grabbing everything it could and strangling it. When the man turned to look at the room, all he could see was a bed with the imprint of where he had sat, the cat’s body laying on the floor, and a tissue with his footprint. He looked at himself one last time in the picture frame on the wall. His glasses were still on his head. He carefully placed them on the nightstand by the bed. Then he opened the windows and walked onto the balcony.

He could hear no sound inside his head. The old woman and the young man had disappeared for just a second. Long enough for him to jump.

A sack of organs spilled onto the floor.
Born in Paraguay, South America, **Sara Isabel Coronel** has lived in four different countries throughout her life (in case you were wondering: Paraguay, Guatemala, Luxembourg, and the US). She has gained not only amazing friendships, but also great memories that she wants to share with the world through her writing. She is a senior Psychology and Anthropology major who is looking to make a change in the world one word at a time.

**THE BEAUTY OF VISITATION**

Sequola Collins

I do not presume to come to this thy Table, O merciful Lord, trusting in my own righteousness, but in thy manifold and great mercies. I am not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy Table. But thou art the same Lord, whose property is always to have mercy: Grant me therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of thy dear Son Jesus Christ, and to drink his blood, that my sinful body may be made clean by his body, and my soul washed through his most precious blood, and that I may evermore dwell in him, and he in me. Amen.

[The Prayer of Humble Access, Book of Common Prayer, 1662]

“I’m so ugly,” Ms. Ruby proclaimed as she reflected on her aged face which now displayed a smile and a few missing teeth.

Such a precious jewel, Ms. Ruby, diagnosed with heart disease, failing eyesight, and currently bedridden, pointed to a picture of herself on the wall in her assigned room of the nursing home. In that picture, she had to be in her late twenties or early thirties, standing tall in a pretty skirt with a hand placed intentionally on her hip. In that picture, she appeared to be going up the stairs of a porch to her home. She appeared to be entering her home, a place where love abounds and where people are gathered and await your return, your entrance. In that picture, there was no sign of pain or suffering. Death was nowhere to be found, just howdy-howdy. There she declared
her beauty as if she longed for those days once more. Who wouldn't want to go back home?

Oh Yes! I thought. “The picture is lovely.” However, as I looked at her, I did not see the ugly lying before me. My mind, heart, and eyes were fixed on seeing Jesus. But as a human being could I somehow understand her words? Could I possibly relate to her feelings? My Grandma Duke used to say, “beauty fades and ugly (well ugly) holds its own.” At that time, I had no idea that some of grandma’s words held a biblical connotation. Interesting how life inevitably ushers us into what is really important, what is really beautiful, like a picture of home.

The Beauty of Holiness

The old preacher teaches that ministry is serious business where the lives of people are at stake. When in critical times, people want to see Jesus. In critical times, one believes that the servant of God (on whom we call) has been in communion with the Lord and can speak to God on one’s behavior through intercessory prayer. In critical times in a hospital or nursing home when one is away from family and away from things which are familiar, there is space for huge adjustment. These spaces yield heightened senses and desires for God to intervene on one’s behalf. Ministry calls for its representatives to seek God like never before—even before serving, before the laying-on of hands (touching someone and praying over them), before the visitation. There is something beautiful about centering oneself in prayer and praise, in dialogue with God, calling on the name of Jesus, listening then following God’s instruction; then stepping out.

For the minister, it is imperative that one prepares and is intentional about living holy in efforts that God will honor the human effort and will do the supernatural with our efforts. With prayer and fasting—a most powerful spiritual disciplines, I engage in ministry. These acts translate into a lifestyle of fasting and praying, seeking God’s face for his glory for direction, and not his hand, making God into a personal go-fer. In prayer, God is to be exalted and thanked for His goodness. I ask for forgiveness of my sins and for deeper discernment. It is something simply beautiful about living a holy life. With God’s help, one is ready to visit, to minister to others and to intercede on the behalf of others. From there, one can step out into ministry in the beauty of holiness, asking God to allow you to see further than what the natural eye can see. It is there, inside of visitation, that I wish desperately for the people to hear from heaven, and most of all to receive Christ in one’s heart and to be drawn closer to God as never before. Through the reading of a daily devotion, scripture, prayer, friendly conversation, a touch, or a song, Christ is lifted to ease all of the heavy burdens.

During this season with Ms. Ruby, I participated in visitation weekly. Even in my brokenness, I found strength as I reached towards heaven on the behalf of others as I prepared for the week, for the day. I would pray, calling out a name one by one unto the Lord, asking God to do the impossible, the miraculous, the things I cannot do, all before I get to the physical place of visitation. My God-given assignment. As I go on the visitations, I go to meet Jesus. To see God in all things. So, as I entered I saw the tangible things and the people, yet I
didn't. I was looking intentionally to see Jesus, looking further than what my eyes could see.

Before entering the building, I speak to God a final time. With my prayer partner(s), we would touch and agree and pray “in the name of Jesus let the people see you.”

That is the place and space I was in when Ms. Ruby shared her deep thoughts about herself.

**The Beauty in Relationship**

I got to know Ms. Ruby and the others assigned during this season of visitation. In that season, hospital visits were made as needed, but those that were sick and shut-in (as called in the old days) were routinely scheduled and visited. I would wake up knowing who would probably be on list to see that day: Ms. Ruby, Ms. Hazel, and/or Mr. David. I would get excited to see each person. They too would be waiting and expect the visit. I remember the uniqueness of each person. Many things stood out for various reasons. I developed real relationships with these people.

Ms. Ruby moved from one nursing home to another. At one place, she complained about the workers and the food. She became so flustered that with the help of her family members, she moved to a new nursing home facility. She appeared to like this new place a lot better. It appears these assisted living or nursing home facilities are found by trial and error. One must find the right one for you and your situation.

Before she moved, Ms. Ruby was in the nursing home with Ms. Hazel, listed on the regularly scheduled visitation list. They knew we were coming. Together yet individually each would wait for their individualized unique visit.

Ms. Hazel was wheelchair bound and ate little to nothing. She was bone thin yet could muster up enough strength to roll herself around in the wheelchair and to point and to reflect on a picture of herself with her sisters on the wall of her assigned room. Pictures on display are great points of engagement during every visitation. I watch as the person comes to life inside of that picture.

Mr. David would always sit quietly awaiting a visit from his wife of over 60 years. He knew that every day she would come. “I’m waiting in Margret”, he would say. “She is on her way.” Every time, if Margret was not already there, he would be waiting on her to return. For Mr. David, his wife, her cooking, and their children would be our talking points of interest. He loved to talk anything Margret.

Ms. Ruby loved to eat. She loved fruit and would ask us to bring it. One year, before she became totally bedridden, in addition to fruit, she asked for a coat. Not ever wanting to disappoint, we knew never to make promises to bring anything. But my heart wanted so much to get her that coat. But everyone’s situation is so uniquely different. However, there was one promise made at the end, the promise to come back: “We be back to see you.” Due to a shift in church assignments, I did not visit Ms. Ruby nor the others from that season as often as before. However, I understood they asked about me, and I would ask about them because in those scenes of our lives, somehow, we build eternity, we build relationships with each other but also with the Lord.

**The Beauty of Knowing the Lord**
Being associated with the same church, most all of the people visited know the Lord. Knowing the Lord makes the visit very pleasant. However, we would find people at different places in their walk with the Lord. But at the season in life, all those visited needed encouraging and at time reassuring. Often, during the visitation, whether in the hospital, nursing home, or at a residence, the scriptures would be read, and friendly conversation would be shared. From one bedside to the next, we would travel. For me, one of the highlights is communion. The sharing of Christ’s body and Christ’s blood and remembering the Lord until he comes. Often before leaving, we would sing the songs of Zion. It would only be three or four of us singing, but such precious memories were made. Knowing the Lord makes the difference. When a person knows the Lord, we have something to be happy about and to celebrate. We are saved from the penalty of sin. Death and the grave have no victory in the life of a Christian. The last time I saw Ms. Ruby in October, not only did she point (again) to the picture, but she shared a feeling of not making it to the New Year. We assured her of God’s promise to never leave her nor forsake her. We took communion and sung the songs of Zion. Ms. Ruby knew the Lord, so therefore, we rejoiced.

Ms. Ruby did make it to see the that New Year and the New Year after. But just into the New Year, in January, I received the word that Ms. Ruby had passed, gone home to be with the Lord. Once again, a word of one’s departure came just like the others: Ms. Hazel, Mr. David, and now Ms. Ruby.

The Beauty in Death: Gone Home

After her passing, I was told that Ms. Ruby was ready to go home to be with the Lord. Upon hearing of her passing, I went to Ms. Ruby’s viewing at the funeral home, a final visitation on this side of glory. As I walked up on the outside of the door of the funeral home stood a stand which displayed her name. “Yes, that is her,” I thought to myself. As I entered the funeral home chapel, I noticed the open casket, then was immediately greeted by a representative. I signed the guest book, as I did every time I visited her in the nursing home. From the back of the chapel, I began to walk towards the casket. From the building and from the casket, lights shone down on her. From the back of this small chapel, I begun to see a beautiful woman lying in peace. I began to walk towards her, towards that beautiful peace. I finally reached her casket side. She was dressed in winter white with her hair pulled back. She was adorned in pearl earrings.

I imagine the heavenly home with the Lord where there is always howdy-howdy and never goodbye, and “there are pleasures forever more” (Psalms 16:11). That is where Ms. Ruby longed to be: a place very close with God. Now, there she is in the presence of the Lord where there was fullness of joy (Psalms 16:11) and eternal life, with no more pain and sorrow. Who wouldn’t want to go home? This belief, this trust in the Lord made this final visitation for Ms. Ruby one of beauty. I knew I must look beyond what my eyes could see. In my humanness, I will miss her. My heart is saddened, and I cried, but there is hope. At this time and in this moment, I must look beyond my own failing eyes, my broken heart, beyond the hills to see Jesus. Jesus makes it all beautiful. Ms. Ruby is now home with the Lord.
Now she and the others of that season are all gone home. Now, I look back as I write in humble submission to the Almighty God; One who knows all and who sees all, the One who can eternally perfect the work of visitation, thanking God for allowing me to enter the private spaces, the precious scenes in the lives of God’s people; and in such a vital way, those precious people impacted my life in a very real way.

Ugly, Oh No! God makes all thing new.

**Sequola Collins** was licensed to preach the Gospel in January 2011. She currently serves as Director of Bereavement and Visitation at Stanton Place Church of God of Prophecy in High Point, North Carolina. Before joining Stanton Place, she was assistant to the Pastor of Bereavement and Visitation and an Associate Minister at Mount Zion Baptist Church of Greensboro, Inc., Greensboro, North Carolina. Sequola is a U.S. Army veteran and a current Master of Divinity student at Wake Forest University. She lives in North Carolina with her husband, Floyd D. Collins, Jr. They have two daughters, Nicole and Destiny.

Kayla is ten. Age ten is a contradictory period for anyone’s life: You are still a sweet pea, but you have one of your feet stepping into the zone of problematic teens. You have to choose what identity you will be living in the future. A religious vampire, maybe, or a fearless zombie, or a poor artist. It’s a big decision, Kayla thinks.

Let’s go out and explore.

“Kayla, where are you going?” her mother asks.

“On a pilgrimage.”

Usually Kayla sneaks out at night, because darkness creates some perilous excitement. Street lights are sparkling white ghosts’ eyes. Wind drives them high up to the sky, and not even the frequent sirens of ambulances, fire trucks or police cars will scare them. Among the mysterious ghost congregation sits a lady on the bench, always holding an elegant cigarette in her hand. She looks like Audrey Hepburn (weird that a ten-year-old knows her, huh?), but a darker and more dangerous one. Kayla always sees her at night with a black cat sitting on her lap. Kayla approaches the woman out of curiosity.

“Oh kid, who are you?” She asks Kayla, exhaling the smoke onto Kayla’s face.

“Kayla. I live with my mom several blocks away. My dad went somewhere and never came back.”
“It is past midnight; why are you here alone?”
“My mom locks me in the house in the day, and I can only sneak out after she falls asleep.” Kayla suddenly feels the desire to reveal everything about herself to the lady.
“How do you feel about the city’s night? Quiet? Creepy?” The lady strokes her cat.
“I’ve not seen much of a city’s day, and I can’t compare.” Kayla answers, “What about you?”
“Same. I can only go out at night. Sunlight makes me sick.”
“Are you a vampire or something? I only saw them in books and TV.”

This is the first encounter with the lady that Kayla recalls, and her mother’s furious scream breaks so nice an image in her head right now.
“What does pilgrimage even mean? You are not going anywhere Kayla; you stay home.”
Pilgrimage is actually a cool word that Kayla finds in a book. She likes to use it a lot recently, and it adds some religious color to herself.
“Mom, can I go out for once? I want to enjoy the sunlight!”
“No. I can’t let you out alone. You are not capable of dealing with the dangers outside, and I don’t want to lose you.”

So Kayla stays home as usual, but she is still able to sneak out while her mother starts to take a nap. She recalls what the lady said to her once, after Kayla went to the same place and found her sitting there again: “You should go out sometimes in the day, explore the city, and feel the air, the smell of flowers, coffee beans, car exhaust, beggars’ stink. See people rushing to the subway station, people wearing suits, people crossing the road in weird postures…and another me. The city changes you, as much as it changes me.”

For the first time, Kayla doesn’t know how to walk in the city. She has long been a “vampire”, feeble and weak in the too ardent sunlight of a compacted city, and only feels comfortable at night. She stares at the traffic light, and ends up getting lost at a crossroad. People come, people go, and they disappear.

II

In a very big city, crossing the road is a big decision to make: Once stepping out, you never come back. The right way to cross is to look at every direction to check if there are cars: decent cars from the left, the right (thanks to the horribly messy traffic lights), and indecent cars from left, right, front, behind, and 45-degree angle from the corner that they could make a turn.

Leo doesn’t usually follow traffic rules during the day. He walks through the diagonal of the crossing, and that’s why he has to be super cautious about cars behind him, in which the drivers definitely have their right to drive along the road because the green light is on. Sometimes the drivers protest against Leo’s misbehavior by rolling down their car window and cursing at him, but Leo doesn’t care. He is a risk taker, was, and will still be one in the future.

Ten years ago, the city was still a dream to Leo, who lived in an impoverished village then. He insisted on going to the city he now lives in despite of strong opposition from his family. With little money, he hopped on a train and left his
hometown for the city. He changed his old name to Leo, and found himself a job that was low-paid but fair enough for someone like him. Wearing suits seems to be a superior thing to do, though many people in the city wear the exact same suits as him. Other people who don’t wear suits describe them as a zombie gang which sweeps across the city at 7:30 am and sweeps back at 6:30 pm.

On one normal day, Leo gets off work at 9 am, so he finds himself out of the gang. He walks on the street, which is quieter and less crowded, and breathes the air heavily. He walks across the road in the diagonal, which is something he will never do inside the gang. He is alone, but unique in the darkened air. He wants more of his own spirit to spread in the air, so he takes a longer route home.

“You should go out sometimes in the day, explore the city, and feel the air, the smell of flowers, coffee beans, car exhausts, beggars’ stink. See people rushing to the subway station, people wearing suits, people crossing the road in weird postures…and another me. The city changes you, as much as it changes me.”

Leo suddenly hears a lady talking. Her voice is as gentle as the moonlight, and beautiful as a mid-summer’s rose. By the way, is she talking about me? Someone “crossing the road in weird postures”? Out of curiosity, Leo peeks at the direction of the voice, and he sees the lady and a girl sitting on the bench. The lady wears a long black dress, and her silhouette is perfectly lined.

Leo thinks about the lady night after night, and after that overhearing, always goes diagonals at crossroads. He is waiting for her to see a unique him—not a zombie, different from everyone else, just him. He does see her one time after he gets off work. She’s in a white dress, elegant and fairy-like, looking exactly like Audrey Hepburn. Leo hasn’t seen her face before, but he knows it’s her. The roses in her hand give off a sweet odor, different from the oily, mundane smell of the city. Leo wants to attract her attention, but he fears that too bold a move will scare her away.

She passes by him quickly. Then suddenly, Leo finds himself still in the zombie gang. It is so crowded that the members in the gang push and pull each other consequently. Leo drowns in the ocean of the crowd before the street lights are turned on.

III

Cal doesn’t have a home to go back to, so he sleeps in the street. Cal doesn’t have money, so he begs for money in the street. He was not poor a while ago, but he used all his money up for his cause of art. He graduated from a famous art institution, and his passion for art drives him to pursue what he wants—some achievement in art. After days and days of failure, he finally loses his energy and ends up begging in the street.

Being a beggar in a big city is lucky and unlucky. Lucky in a way that rich people are generous, unlucky in a way that you get a tag on and people recognizes you as that tag. Cal’s tag is a beggar and he cannot even tear it up himself. It’s probably demanding too much out of the urban people because who cares about a damn beggar, sticky and filthy, wandering like a ghost here and there?
There is an exception, though. Cal remembers the first time he encountered this lady, he was stunned by her appearance. The sunlight is ardent at noon and Cal looks at his empty bag. Nothing, no money. He is worried about having no money to buy food today.

A woman stops in front of him and blocks the sun. Her shadow falls on Cal’s beggar bowl. Then she crouches down, a move that a fair lady will never do but she does it so elegantly. Her white dress wrinkles. “Here.” She hands him five dollars, together with a fresh rose. Her smile resembles that of Audrey Hepburn’s. “Thank you.” Cal utters. And she leaves.

He doesn’t expect that he will meet her again at night. By then she has changed to a black dress, and is smoking a cigarette. Her eyes look different, sharper and more dangerous. This time she stops by Cal and sits down next to him. Together, they look at the stars in the sky and share a moment of peace between them.

“So you remember me from the morning?” Cal asks.

“Do I know you?” The lady throws back another question.

“Well you stopped by this morning and gave me five dollars. Oh, and this rose!” Cal carefully takes out the rose that he tucks in his pocket.

“It must be Stacy. She plants rose in her garden and gives away them everywhere.”

“Is she your twin sister? You look so similar!”

“Well, I guess so. I know her but she doesn’t know me,” The lady exhales the smoke in the air, “What a beautiful night.”

“If I tell you that I was an artist, will you laugh at me?” Cal sighs.

“No. People chase dreams in the city, but the city also makes them lose their dreams. It’s quite normal and it’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

The lady’s words heat Cal up. The next day Stacy gives Cal another rose and five dollars, and her sister buys a sketchbook and colored pencils for him. “Go for it.” And she leaves.

That night Cal draws a picture of the city. The trees, the roads, the street lamps, the people.

And himself.

IV

My name is not Stacy.

My name is Alex. I’m the one who grows out of Stacy’s body every night and crawls around the city like a beast. I feel like I act more like Stacy these days, and have done things that I would never do in the past—talking to a disoriented girl, buying stuff for a beggar, and taking care of the cat.

She is white and I’m black. She is the girl of the light and I, the darkness. I know her but she doesn’t know me. I know how I am created: I am her dark side. Living in the city is not easy. Negative emotions come out more and more, but Stacy tries to suppress them, lock them inside like what Kayla’s mother does to her daughter, and here comes me. I am the one who helps maintain Stacy’s normal self during the day, but she doesn’t know me at all.

I envy her, and sometimes I admit to myself that I want to be like her: kind and pure, loved by everyone else in the city.
I begin to lose my consciousness more often though. This is something good—when Stacy eliminates me, all the bad emotions will be gone. Away in the wind of the city.

V

Today.
Kayla sneaks out. Leo gets off work late. Cal in the street.
They see Stacy walk across, with a vicious smile.
They follow her in the dark.
Oh what do they see?
Stacy kills the cat.
Stacy kills the cat.
The cat’s golden eyes shoot out ominous light.
Stacy takes the cat, kneels down and her eyes redden
Forgive me, forgive me
It’s the city’s debt
I’m no longer Stacy
I’m no longer her
The sky blackens and wind toils
Eating away every person in the city light.

**Ziwei Chen** is a senior majoring in English and double minoring in creative writing and economics. Writing means a lot to her, and she has been trying different styles of writing in the past few years. This is her second time attending Writers’ Camp and she is confident that she is presenting something totally different from her last work.

DON’T EDIT THE HUMAN

Zoe Stuckey

Often times we make mistakes
Some big some small
Some not noticeable at all
But our stories are not written with lead
It is written in thick, dark ink
It is typed in **bold**, italicized, or *underline*
Some defining moments make our true colors shine
We try to white out the errors
But what’s the point of deleting
What is already in the process of fleeting
We can’t simply forget the past
We shouldn’t hide who we are
For each person should **highlight** their scars
For we are a living, growing document
We are the writers of our own story
For we get to experience pain and the glory
So don’t forget you are more than just words on a page
We are not simply just black and white
We are love, we are the imperfect, we are human
And with that in mind, we’ll be just alright.

My name is Zoe Stuckey and I am a freshman at Wake Forest University. My intended major is psychology because I enjoy getting to learn and empathize with other human beings. I also enjoy writing poetry
occasionally to get through my feelings and to express ideas that I cannot even articulate through verbal communication. I enjoy spending time with friends and family, especially when there's food involved.

Ron began the walk home as per usual, just as unfulfilled and bored as the day before. Day in, day out, all he did was wake up, work, and sleep. However, he liked his job at the local grocery store, primarily because it was the only activity which he engaged in consistently. He enjoyed the interaction with customers, but more often than not he was tasked with thoughtless duties that left him to consider in great depth just how bored and ultimately lonely he really was. He just wanted something to happen.

He sauntered along the length of the small town in which battered old shops looked as though they could hardly stand another day, and the street lights couldn't even serve to light their own base. Void of any stress, or really any captivating thoughts, he pondered only what he saw as he strolled. Looking into a pet store he noticed fish on display and took comfort in the thought of their lack of capacity for any concept of consciousness. Ron hadn't become depressed, or even generally unhappy, but developed a sort of stoicism due to the lack of excitement which he so deeply desired; which was one of the reasons why as he returned to look forward he couldn't help but notice the gun pointed at his face.

“Gun,” he blurted instinctively, almost as if it were a question. Though correct, it didn’t really express of the gravity of the situation, which seemed to have frustrated the unnamed gunman who Ron had walked straight into.
“Give me your money, or so help me God!”

Ron was, needless to say, shocked. However, it’s worth mentioning that it was because he thought the action of robbing someone at gunpoint was cliché. He’d seen it in movies but never considered it happening in real life. He then realized he should stop distracting himself.

“Put the gun down,” Ron replied slowly with his hands up. He didn’t expect that to happen; he just felt like it was what he was supposed to say next.

The gunman was not fond of that response either. “Man, you watch too many movies,” he said. He was right. “That’s not how this works. You’re going to do what I say, because I have a gun in my hand!”

At that point, Ron felt something change. The adrenaline seemed to hit him all at once, and he almost began to feel happy that he was met with some sort of conflict; something interesting was happening. Feeding off this energy, Ron swiftly delivered a right hook to his foe’s jaw, knocking him down. Although he should’ve been nowhere near physically incapacitated, the gunman did not then execute Ron, as one might expect; instead, he began to sob on the ground. On account of the pathetic display, Ron lost all fear and even felt disappointed to see the dispute develop in that way.

And although Ron’s life had fairly recently been threatened by this man, he felt a need to console him. “Hey, man, you win some; you lose some. If it makes you feel any better, that was the most interesting thing that’s happened to me since I can remember.”

“I’m so sorry,” the gunman wept. “I could’ve never brought myself to hurt you. I just—” he paused, gathering his thoughts. “I just wanted to feel in control of something. I feel like my life isn’t in my hands. I can’t make anything come out right.”

Ron didn’t know what to say; he hadn’t expected this to take such a dramatic turn, and he really didn’t care to learn more about the gunman’s life. He was returning to boredom. He grabbed the gun from the gunman’s hands, effectively making him just a man. Ron pointed the gun at the man.

“Well, crying isn’t doing anything for you. Get up.”

The man did just that. Horrified, he began to wonder if he had tried to rob a lunatic.

“If you want to take control, you have to just… do it.” Ron turned the gun around as to hand it to the man. “Now, really rob me. *Come on.*”

Ron wasn’t sure if he wanted to see this man succeed, or if he was just doing this for the thrill, but either way, he was having fun. The man grabbed the gun, somehow looking confused, afraid, and relieved all at once. He pointed it at Ron, who continued to coach, “Now say it like you did before: *give me your money!***

“Give me…your—money!” The gunman stuttered.

“With confidence! You have to want my money!”

“...Give me your money, you son of a bitch!”

“Drop it!” a third voice furiously commanded.

Ron and the gunman pivoted to see a stout police officer who had been on patrol, now with his gun drawn and aimed at the gunman. “Drop it, I said!”

They were both equally surprised that they hadn’t expected this. The gunman did not retain his newly instilled
confidence and immediately dropped the weapon per the officer’s request.

Ron objected, “officer, you don’t understand!”
“Uh, buddy—I think I do! You were gettin’ robbed!”
“Wonderful deduction, officer, but—”
The gunman interrupted, “Don’t bother, I’ll be taken in regardless, and once they find out I’m on parole, I’m going back to jail for sure. There’s nothing you can do.”

After having experienced his menace first hand, Ron finding out that the gunman had performed any crime before may have been the most surprising thing to him so far. The officer called for backup and restrained the gunman. Eventually he was loaded into the squad car and taken to the station. Ron was left alone where he stood. He then realized, he just single-handedly curbed a crazed, gun-wielding murderer with both his fierce combat skills and acute knowledge of psychological manipulation. At least that’s what he would tell his coworkers.

“How interesting,” he thought, then becoming dismal as he realized that that was probably the most interesting thing that would ever happen to him. “It’s all downhill from here,” Ron sighed. He continued his walk home.

My name is Ryan King. I plan to become a physics major, but I enjoy writing. This short story is my first work of fiction.
Happy I was meant to be,
   But inevitably,
   My joy comes with a fee,
   Not of entry,
      Mind you, but of glee,
   That is, happily,
      Only temporary.

Your name itself, Love,
   Lofty, from above,
Is nigh unutterable
   Even to the loveable,
   For yours is a power invoked,
   Lest mine beloved be provoked,
   Only in silent prayer
   Where you I can safely bear.

What I do in your name
   Is not for fortune or fame.
What I do for you
   Is for me my glorious hue.
Think me not too naive
   If my sense I leave.

For anything I achieve
   A great weight I must heave.
   Spar me not,
      Though, a whim or thought.
Your temptations me sustain;
   Of them I dare not complain.

For you are everywhere
   And to you nothing I compare.
Yours are the sleeves I wear,
   Yours is the oath I swear.
You focus me on a few
   Who are for my world glue.
I question not your judgment
   But what I see in the firmament.
I am never off your scent;
   Your whispers my feelings vent.
Your commands feel heaven-sent.
   You are verily omnipotent.
I did not know you well
   Until you twirled me in a swell.
You were always elusive,
Your usage inconclusive.

Your shadow I chased,
Not the figure on which it was based.
If I had not fallen,
Your name I would still be calling.

You keep me grounded
And dispel affections unfounded.

From you I desire no permanent bliss
But rather savor an eternal kiss.

Merciful you are not to share
My passionate affair.

It is not ignominy I fear,
But the loss of she whom I hold dear.

I wait in muted excitement
With purpose unbent.

My course is set now,
My doubt cut by the prow.

I see land on the horizon,
But even if it be an illusion,

I have known a great love,
And that is for me the sweetest dove.

*William Morgan* is a junior from Winston-Salem, North Carolina.
He is a Major in History with Minors in Politics and International Affairs, Latin, and Creative Writing.
We're in the fruit section, and she asked me to pick out whatever I wanted. I went over and grabbed a medium sized, slightly squishy, yellow pomelo. I haven’t held one of these in years. Holding it took me back over three decades ago and across the seas to my two first loves.

Like many great stories, mine starts with a girl. It began when I first met Joanne. I told myself, “this is the girl I’m going to marry!” We had been dating for about two months, and I was on track to pop the question, but then the sirens sounded and changed our lives forever.

Classes were over for the day and we were enjoying a picnic lunch by the apple orchard. It was October 5, 1973; a beautiful afternoon that remains forever etched in my memory. The sun was high in the sky, and a cool breeze wafted through the air. We were in Israel’s northwest Negev region, spending our junior year studying on Kibbutz Nahal Oz. I didn’t know it at the time, but that afternoon was my last day of innocence. War broke out the next day, and whether I liked it or not, I would grow up.

Joanne was learning to play the guitar to Simon & Garfunkel’s old song, The Sounds of Silence. She was so focused, I hated to interrupt, but I called out to her. “Hey Jo! Do you want any grapes?” She nodded and motioned as she replied, “Yeah, Andy, toss some over here!”

“I have bad aim, but I'll try!” She grinned. I threw a grape over and she caught it in her mouth. “Nice shot!” she said when she finished chewing. “Nice catch!” I replied.

As she went back to practicing, I went on a little walk. As I took in the sweet smell of blossoming fruit, I couldn’t help thinking about how much I loved Israel. I’ve never been to a more beautiful place. Our semester had three main courses that use Israel as the classroom, so there were lots of in-depth trips.

I remember going to Mount Masada and The Dead Sea on one of them. Mount Masada is symbolic of the ancient Jewish Kingdom of Israel and acts as a reminder of the grievous days where the Jewish refugees occupied the fortress at Masada as they fought against the Romans. It was really special for me to be in a place that played such an integral role in the history of my people. I can’t find my pictures anymore, but the view from the top of Masada is unbelievable. Not far from there, we went to The Dead Sea—which is cool since it’s nigh impossible to sink because of its extremely high salt concentration.

While on my walk, I came to the largest apple tree I’ve ever seen. Although the apples wouldn’t quite be ready to harvest for a few weeks, I was determined to get one for Joanne. I spent about five minutes plotting the best route up the tree. Fifteen minutes and three scrapes later, I walked back to Joanne with an apple in my hand.
“Have I ever told you that you’re the apple of my eye?” I said as I gently tossed her the apple. Her eyes sparkled behind her glasses as she burst out laughing. I think she knew I meant it because she blushed, blew me a kiss, and tossed the apple back at me. “Shut up,” she said.

I zipped my lips and tossed her the key, walking towards her humming The Sounds of Silence. She picked her guitar back up and started playing along. Before I knew it, though, the sun began setting and it was time to get ready for dinner and services.

***

As I was walking into my room, my best friend Jeff ran out saying that my brother had sent a postcard. I followed Jeff back inside the host home we were staying in and grabbed the mail. The postcard read:

Hey Brother,

Mom and dad are making me a little mashugana[1] getting ready to come visit you. I hope you’ll show me all the cool hangout spots and good restaurants. I’m really excited to try some new foods—mom’s cooking is, well, the same.

See you next week!
Love,
KT

I thought about writing Kenny back, saying how I was excited for him to come visit, and to hang in there with mom and dad, but I knew he wouldn’t get my letter before he boarded the plane. Instead, I got ready for services. In Judaism, holidays span from sundown to sundown, and October 5th was Erev Yom Kippur, the beginning of the holiest day of the year in Jewish tradition. Yom Kippur is also known as “The Day of Atonement,” so many people—myself included—wear white as a sign of renewal.

During our picnic earlier, Joanne suggested we sit together during Kol Nidre, so I put a little more effort than usual into my appearance. I polished the large silver frames of my glasses, slicked my curly dark brown hair into submission, and ironed my white linen pants and shirt. Jeff and I walked into the main sanctuary and saw Joanne talking with some of her friends. Her white floral dress wonderfully accented her petite, yet pneumatic frame. Her shoulder-length brown hair was pulled back into a bun, and her face lit up when she saw me. That was the best feeling.

She came up to me as she said, “You look really nice, Andy.”

Blushing, I kissed her, and then replied, “Thanks, Jo. You do too.”

We stared at each other for a little bit, then I asked her to sit down. I told Jeff I would catch up with him later, and he winked at me and went off to find some other friends. Joanne and I went to the nearest aisle and took our seats, waiting for services to start. After services, I walked Jo back to her room and kissed her goodnight. I didn’t know at the time that it was my last night without responsibility.

A few hours later, a siren jolted me out of a sound sleep. My head was spinning. I hadn’t had any food or water for close to twelve hours because we have to fast for Yom Kippur. As a growing teenage boy, I can assure you that it’s not a lot of fun. I turned to wake Jeff up, but he was already getting dressed. I followed suit and stepped onto the porch.
with him. Despite practice drills, I had never actually heard a siren screeching, and was shocked at how loud it was. Jeff and I looked at each other in horror. We knew what the sirens meant… Israel was under attack.

Jeff and I ran to the bunker, where the Kibbutz was gathering. We searched the crowd for our friends’ faces. I didn’t see anyone, but then Jeff elbowed me.

“Look,” he said, pointing. “Over there.” I turned, and I saw Joanne with her friends Penny and Deena running towards us. I was so glad that they were here and safe. We all hugged each other, and I pulled Jo aside.

“Are you okay?” I asked her.

“Better now. Thanks,” she said. “How are you?”

“Better now, too.” I replied.

We walked towards the other study-abroad students. When we got there, the chair of the Nahal Oz council used his gavel to get everyone’s attention. A silence swept over the room. The meeting was called to order, and we heard the news: Egyptian and Syrian forces launched a coordinated attack against Israel to reclaim captured territory.

As the holiest day of the year for Jews, many officers in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) were away from their posts observing Yom Kippur. The attack caught us off guard, and all able men and women from our Kibbutz were called to action; they were going to leave for the front lines that night.

At first, I wasn’t quite sure what I could do. Should I try to go with the conscripted to the front lines? On the one hand, I knew my family wouldn’t want me to go, or to even stay on the Kibbutz. Israel was at war, and who knew how long the war would last. On the other hand, I’ve never felt more of a connection somewhere than I have in Israel. I’m surrounded by my people and my heritage in Israel. As a Jewish nation, it’s my home. I knew what I had to do. I wrote my family a letter telling them that I was going to stay and do my part—later learning that my family never got my letter.

When the sirens finally died down, I went to find Joanne. I searched for twenty minutes and finally came across Penny, who said that Joanne and many of the other young ladies are being asked to leave by boat to Saudi Arabia, and then go home, to escape the war. Penny said Joanne was packing her stuff as we spoke. I went to see her. Her eyes were red and swollen from crying. She obviously didn’t want to go. I knocked on the door and stepped inside.

“Hey Jo,” I said.

“Andy, it’s not fair!” she said as she flung her arms around me. “I don’t want to go home!” she wailed.

“I don’t want you to go home.” I said, hugging her tightly. She sighed.

“I’m going to talk to the chair of the Nahal Oz council and see if I can stay. I want to help in any way I can,” I said. “Do you want to stay here with me?” She nodded her head fervently. “More than anything,” she replied. “The council doesn’t want us to stay, though, and there’s nothing that I can do.”

My heart sank. She was leaving, and there was nothing I could do about it. I didn’t know what to say or what to think. I just wanted to spend as much time with her as possible. It was strange because we hadn’t been dating each other for very long, or known each other very long for that matter, yet there...
was something about her that made me want to stand on the
top of Mount Masada and proclaim my love. It was weird. But,
hey, love is weird.

I asked her when she was going, and she replied in
three weeks. A sigh of relief came over me—at least I would
have some time to say goodbye. I told her that I had to go see
what I can do for the Kibbutz, and she told me to stay safe.

When I arrived at the Nahal Oz council’s office I spoke
with the chair. He told me that I couldn’t go to the army since
I was still underage, but with all the people going off to fight
they needed people to tend to the orchards and groves. Eager
to help in any way I can, I told him I would do it.

Because all the able-bodied men and women were gone
to fight the war, I had to learn the ins and outs of fruit
harvesting from the warehouse manual. I learned how to drive
on a green fruit truck—sort of like a tractor, but with a two
metal arms that extended from the front and thin wired baskets
on both sides that store the fruit.

As I was getting situated on the job, Jo kept me
company. She sat in my lap as we drove the fruit picker around,
and I would teach her how to operate the machines.

“You’re getting good at this, Andy” she told me one afternoon
in the fruit picker.

I told her, “I’m just trying to help out and do my part. That’s
all.”

“You’re going above and beyond,” she said. “You’ve enrolled
the other students to help out here and are making sure there’s
food for all the families.” I shrugged, but she continued, “I’m
serious. You’ve really stepped up and taken on a huge
responsibility. I’m so proud of you.”

She smiled at me, and a flurry of excitement passed
over me. She leaned in gently and kissed me. Her lips tasted
sweet like oranges—which, thinking back on it, makes sense
considering we were harvesting them. In the moment, though,
I just thought this is the life. I’m in the land I love with the girl I
love. It was surreal.

Unfortunately, it was surreal because before I knew it,
she told me one afternoon that she was leaving the next day.
That hit me hard. I knew it was coming all along, of course,
but that didn’t make it any easier. We enjoyed our last
afternoon together, and the next day, when it was time for her
boat to come, I dropped her off at the dock.

I told myself it was now or never… I had to tell her
how I felt, or I would never get the chance to. So, as she turned
away to step on the boat, I pulled her back and whirled her
around. She faced me, nose to nose. Her breath was shallow,
and her hair tousled in the wind. Her big brown eyes looked as
gorgeous as always, and I held her tight.

Under my breath, I whispered “I love you, Jo.”

She kissed me softly and told me five of the best words any
person has said to me: “I love you, too, Andy.”

With that, she turned away, stepped onto the boat with
the other young girls, and left. I stood on the dock watching
her sail away into the sunset. She was on her way back home
to Philadelphia.

The war came to an end a few days after Joanne left. I
was out in the orchards picking fruit when the news came. We
won the war, and the men and women of Kibbutz Nahal Oz
would return shortly. My time managing the fruit factories
taught me a lot, as did my whole experience living for a
semester in Israel. On one of my many trips back to Israel, I tried to go back to Nahal Oz, but it had moved. What stayed, though, were the beautiful orchards and groves. One day, I hope my family will get to experience the holy land like I did. My first love was Israel, and my second love was Joanne.

I went on to study at the University of Pennsylvania, in Philadelphia, secretly hoping Joanne would be there. Unfortunately, while college was a wonderful experience, rife with engaging educational discussions, interesting research opportunities, and meaningful relationships, it wasn’t the same because Joanne wasn’t…

“Hey hon?” my wife said, snapping me out of my flashback.
“Yeah?” I replied, my mind still elsewhere.
“I’m going to go checkout. I’ll meet you at the car?” She asked.
“Sure Jo, I’ll meet you there,” I said as I put the pomelo in the cart and gave her a quick kiss.

[1] Yiddish for crazy or silly.

[Notes: Parents and Pomelos is a historical fiction based on my dad’s experiences studying in Israel during the Yom Kippur War. I took some liberties with the story to preserve and embody my parents’ love for each other. This story is really in honor of my mother, Joanne Fink, and in loving memory of my father, Andrew Trattner.]

Jonathan Trattner, a freshman at Wake Forest University, has many interests, ranging from broadcasting and journalism to economics and neuroscience. Jonathan’s media-related endeavors include hosting “Podcasts@WFU,” contributing to Wake Forest’s student-run newspaper, The Old Gold & Black, and developing “Chat with Trat,” a night-time talk show that looks at society from college students’ perspectives. When not in class, he can usually be found hanging out with his friends or working out at the local gym.
I.

Max hates his job. He hates his cubicle in the windowless room, the stupid “eggshell” walls (who the hell names paint colors?), the fluorescent lights in the ceiling. He hates the guys from the fourth floor who stomp around as if they’re elephants. And he hates the company’s no earphones or headphones policy. Except if you’re on a conference call or something like that.

It’s not like he lets those small things interfere with his work. That he has to do day in and day out – that’s what work is.

Max sighs softly and drops his shoulders as he blinks blearily at his screen. It’d be nice to see the sun sometimes. And get out of his seat more if he weren’t sitting right in front of the Director of Finance. Julianne is nice and all, but she is still his boss. And can still scare the absolute crap out of him during presentations.

“Hey Mark.”

“Hey,” Max says. And that’s Charlie. He sits three cubicles over and still calls him Mark even though Max has been here for three years now. Charlie thinks he’s funny. Max thinks not. But, why correct him if he is never going to listen? It’s a small thing anyways.

The soft tap, tap, of muffled heels against the ground approach his desk from the doorway behind him. A pretty brunette walks by him not a moment later, arms laden with a jacket, lunchbox, briefcase, and coffee.

“Morning Max.” Leslie smiles and wiggles the fingers not holding the coffee cup in her right hand at him. “Hope you had a good weekend.”

Max nods at her in return, though she’s already gone. “Morning.”

Julianne pops up from behind her desk and opens the glass door separating her from the rest of the office. Her hair is pulled back into a loose bun and held together by one of those sharp teeth clip things she always has in her office. It looks like a chip clip but with giant teeth. Max is pretty sure chip clips don’t have teeth. Otherwise they’d puncture the bag and be completely useless at what they’re supposed to do, right?

She peers over the cubicle and taps a long finger against the edge. He hurriedly straightens his spine. “Did you finish the plan for this month?”

The one that she’d asked him to do at five in the afternoon on Friday? Course he did. Spent the rest of his night in the office making sure he’d done it correctly.

“Yes, ma’am.”
Julianne smiles, apple-red lips bright against her tan cheeks. “Perfect. Send that to me and put it in the slides for the presentation.”

Seemingly satisfied with his nod, she slips back into her office and slides her office door shut.

Slumping once more, Max tugs at the collar of his dress shirt and clicks away at his screen. It’s mind-numbing work, staring at numbers all day and making sure the calculations are correct. Then there’s the rush during month’s end – especially when the business units don’t get their information in on time. It’s always a fight to get information (that one unit that never delivers products on time and that unit who can’t be bothered to fill out forms correctly no matter how many times he sends them simplified directions).

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He gets to go home at seven and he walks. It’s a February night, bringing with it a chill that bites at his legs and hands. But it’s a welcome pain. Anything to that isn’t an office setting is nice right now.

The deli shop he usually grabs lunch at is bustling with people. Hungry people. Max’s stomach growls as if to remind him that he is included in that category, but he ignores it. He has food at home – healthy food. Not sandwiches that he already eats on a daily basis.

So he keeps walking down the straight streets, stopping when he’s supposed to stop, turning when he’s supposed to turn. He keeps his head down, hands tucked in his pockets until he reaches the park by his apartment.

It’s a little park, sandwiched in the brick red apartments that line the edge of Uptown. He can hear the cars running on the highway and the whistle of the train that runs on the edge of the city. It’s far enough away from the city lights that it doesn’t drain the glow of the stars, but it’s not too dark that he feels unsafe.

This is his favorite place. It’s not super quiet – the quiet reminds him far too much of the office. That and the tick tick tick of a microwave oven. The nice old secretary two cubicles down to the left of him has one hidden in her desk drawer and uses it every morning. But people rarely visit this place at night – probably cause it’s a residential area. It’s why he likes it. No need of more small talk, no need to put on a big fake smile. And best of all? He can relax.

He sits down on a wooden bench and drops his bag down by his feet and tips his head back. The moon isn’t out tonight, though the clouds hint at its brightness. His breath mists in the air as he sighs and closes his eyes –

“Woooooh.”

His eyes fly open. That sounded really close to him. He looks up at the trees a couple feet away from him, still barren. There is no way that there are owls in a city. Also, there’s nothing in the tree.

“Wooooooh.”
It’s a pitiful kind of squeak howl thing? Max looks around the park again, squinting at the dark bushes to the right of the tree. It sounded close. Really close. Almost as if it were right by him?

Feeling foolish, Max turns around with his knees on the bench and peers into the prickly bush behind the bench. He reaches over and pushes the branches aside.

There are glinting eyes peering up at him.

Yelping, Max jumps back, heart pounding. What in the world?

The thing in the shrub yips then whines softly. What in the world is he doing looking in a bush at night? Max scrubs a hand through his hair. He shouldn’t be doing this. He should’ve gone straight home and not bothered looking in the shrubbery when he heard something.

It whines again, drawn out and sad.

Max squeezes his eyes shut and tries to shun it. “Don’t do it Max, don’t do it Max. Go home.”

“Wooooooob.”

“Ah fuck,” Max says. He walks around the bench and sinks his hands back in to the prickly branches. Again, it’s the eyes that he finds first. They’re big and round and a color he can’t make out with cold leaves whacking him in the face.

“Come on, buddy.” Max can’t imagine what he looks like right now to people who live in one of the four surrounding apartments. His hands wrap around something soft but coarse? It is like the fur could be soft, but it got covered in something that made it dry weirdly? Either that or it’s a rabid squirrel and he will die thanks to curiosity.

His jacket sleeves catch against the pricks in the bush as he pulls the soft furry thing out – oh. It’s definitely a puppy.

“How’d you get here?” Max holds the puppy at arm’s length.

The fur is matted on its back, paws, and tail as if it had rolled in mud. Getting stuck in the bush didn’t help either. Briars and leaves cover both her belly and back. Max brings her close to his chest and brushes as much as he can off.

The poor thing snuggles into the warmth of his jacket, nosing at his armpit. It must be tired and tuckered out, Max thinks. So is he, but who knows how long it has been out here alone. And hungry.

“It’s a good thing you’re cute,” he says, stroking the puppy’s chin. Looks like he won’t be going home anytime soon.

***

When he does get home, it’s nearly eleven. The puppy isn’t chipped – but she is a sight to see. The twenty-four hour vet he had Uber-ed to was nice enough to wash her off and remove all the brambles and mud in her fur. Once she was clean, the workers there had “oohed” and “ahhed” at her coloring and her big cerulean eyes. They said she might be a husky mix, with eyes like these, but they weren’t sure.

She is currently snuggled in the blankets they had swaddled her in, all tuckered out and breathing puppy breath all over his arm.
Max can feel a smile touch his lips as he brushes the strip of white fur that runs from between her eyes and ends at the top of her head. She has these spots of black, brown, and white that speckle her coat and her tail. Her white paws are a little too big for her, just barely poking out from beneath her head in the blanket.

“What am I going to do with you?” Max says, still stroking her hair. “Maybe someone can come pick you up and take care of you.”

The puppy sleeps on with only a little snuffle when he sets her down into the crate he bought from a pet store minutes before it closed.

He feels a little stupid talking to the sleeping puppy, but he can’t help himself. “You’re so tired, huh? Must’ve been scary getting stuck in that bush.”

Pausing, he reaches out to pet her head again. “You know I can’t keep you right? I’ve got a job. A life.”

Yet something inside him whispers that no, he doesn’t have a life. He goes to work, goes to lunch, eats the same thing every day, goes back to work, works some more, and just works and works and works until his eyes bleed.

But that’s how life is. Max takes his hand out of the crate. “Don’t get attached. You don’t have time.”

He drags his feet to take a shower, but can’t help but peek out at the little slumbering form by his bed every so often when he brushes his teeth. And he tries to repeat the mantra in his head, “Don’t get attached. Don’t get attached.” He goes onto the Internet and searches whether or not someone has lost a puppy that looks just like her.

When his head his the pillow, he promises himself he’ll make a poster tomorrow after work. Someone could give this girl a better life than he can. Someone who will give her the time and the attention she deserves. He looks over at the crate one for what he promises is one last time and he finds her staring sleepily at him.

Her eyes glint like they did in the bush, but they slip closed easily as she yawns and rearranges herself to something more comfortable. Max tries and tries, but he can’t stop the way his heart melts at the little thing beside his bed. He won’t keep her – he won’t.

II.

“Luna!” Max says as he opens the door. “Hi! Who’s a good girl?”

Luna wriggles around, her tail wagging back and forth enthusiastically as she noses his legs and licks his shoes. Max laughs and pushes her head out of the way. “Let me in, silly.”

Luna obliges and waits until he shuts the door before she does that half jump she always does when she thinks they should play.
“What?” Max pretends as if he doesn’t know their routine and her quirks. “Oh, were you a good girl? You didn’t chew up anything?”

She gives him this eyebrow wiggle - honestly, he doesn’t know how a dog manages to look so unimpressed, but she’s done this for two years now.

“You want to go to the dog park? Is that what you want?”

His dog gives this excited yip before she takes off towards the table where he keeps her leash and collar, slipping on the wooden floors. When she was still a puppy he had been a little worried that she was going to hurt herself, but he’s long since learned that even if he buys her rugs, she won’t use them.

Shaking his head, Max looks down at his legs. His dress pants are covered in brown and white dog fur and his shoes are covered in Luna slobber. It’s another thing he’s gotten used to. Luna prances back to him, her blue leash in her mouth, her tongue lolling beside it. She then proceeds to head butt him gently in the leg as if to alert him of her presence once more.

Max dutifully clips her collar on her neck and opens the door. Luna takes off into the yard. They’ve only been in this house for a few months – Luna needed a yard, somewhere she could run and have fun when he was at work. For him? He had all he needed. Some noise, a change of pace – and boy, was Luna a change of pace.

No one ever came to claim her, so he kept her even though his head kept telling him no. She was going to end up hating him, crying when he wasn’t home. But he managed. He came home for lunch instead of going to the deli. And if he couldn’t come home, he asked one of his neighbors (thankfully they were always nice enough to say yes) to help him out.

Max smiles as he locks his front door and looks out into the yard for his dog. And the sight shocks him. That is the biggest dog he has ever seen. It’s the big fluffy golden? Luna’s leash has fallen beside her as she sniffs the dog in front of her. Her tail is doing its thing, waving back and forth as if there is no tomorrow.

If it weren’t for the leash in the woman’s hand, Max would have thought the dog was walking on its own. All that golden fluff must be covering the leash or harness. But it’s just standing there, letting Luna sniff him.

“Oh hi! You’re so pretty, aren’t you?” The woman ruffles Luna’s head when she decides she has had enough of the big dog. Luna licks her hand before nosing at her pocket.

“You must have treats on you,” Max says as he walks over and picks up the leash from the grass beside his dog.

“I do,” the woman laughs. “Can she have one?”

“Go for it.”

Luna backs up a little bit when the woman gently pushes her nose away from her pocket and pulls out a small bone shaped treat. Her blue eyes dart from the treat up to Max as if in askance.

Max laughs and points to the treat. “Go get it.”
Luna darts up and nabs the treat from the woman’s hand, crunching away happily.

“What do you say, Luna?”

His dog looks up at him then does a woof not like the whines she had made at him the night he found her in the bush.

“You’re welcome, Luna. You’re so talented!” The woman gushes. She ruffles Luna’s ears but Luna gets in the way as she noses her hand to look for more treats.

Max looks down at the quiet giant beside them. “You’re not getting enough attention, huh, buddy?”

The dog moves his eyebrows and pants at him. It sniffs at Max’s hand cautiously before he lets Max pet him. Even when the dog is sitting down, it comes up to Max’s hip. And Max isn’t a short guy by any means. He is a solid six four if he could say so himself.

“Benny likes you,” the woman says, now kneeling beside Luna. Luna is beside herself with joy, her tongue falling out of her mouth and she paws at the woman’s legs for more attention.

“You’re not getting enough attention, huh, buddy?”

The woman wipes her hands surreptitiously of dog drool on her leggings when she stands before taking his hand. “Shannon. Nice to meet you, Max. Your dog is beautiful by the way.”

“Don’t tell her that, you’ll give her a complex.”

Luna barks as if she can understand. Both Max and Shannon laugh, with Max reaching out to card his hand through her fur to quiet her.

“See, she already has a complex.”

Shannon points at her dog. “Can’t be worse than him. He usually ignores everyone on the street cause he thinks he’s better than everyone else. Don’t you Benny?”

Benny yawns and they both laugh again.

“Well, I don’t want to hold you up from wherever you’re going,” Max says as he pets Benny one last time.

Shannon shrugs. “We were just heading out to the dog park. I’m trying to get him to go as far as I can before he decides he is too tired to play fetch.”

“Oh no way,” Max looks at Luna. Her ears have perked up and her tongue has slotted itself back into her mouth. “That’s where we were headed. It’s her favorite place to go.”

Benny woofs and gets back to his feet, eyes looking from Shannon to Luna. Shannon laughs again and offers Max another smile. “Looks like Benny has decided that you guys are best friends and wants you to come along.”
“Can’t say no to Benny,” Max says. He gives Luna back her leash, which she takes happily back into her mouth. “Come on Luna, we’re going to the park!”

***

They end up watching Benny and Luna wrestle one another in the park. Well, more like Luna run around Benny while she chases the tennis balls that Max occasionally throws. Benny is content to chew on the tennis ball rope that Shannon had brought along. She had been chasing Benny around a little earlier, while her golden dog danced and dodged away from her happily. A slight breeze wafts through the park, the long, casting waves on the long unshorn grass.

As the sun casts a purple pink into the sky, he and Shannon are slumped in their seats on the hill watching their dogs. They’re both sweaty and tired, Max’s shirt sticking to his chest no thanks to the humid North Carolina summer. Benny seems unbothered about the heat as he chews on his toy. Luna forgets about her tennis ball for a moment as she goes after the new toy that isn’t hers.

“So, how’d you get Luna?” Shannon asks. She pulls the band keeping her amber hair up and cards her hair through it.

“Huh?” Max says, he looks away from Luna and looks at her. “Oh, I found her in a park near my old apartment. I think someone left her in a bush on purpose or something. She’d been covered in mud.”

Shannon gasps and looks at him eyes wide. “You’re kidding. Someone didn’t want Luna? I bet she’d was adorable when she was a puppy.”

“I have photos,” Matt says. He pulls out his phone and goes onto his Facebook. It takes him a bit (he has tons of photos of his dog and not enough storage, so he posts a lot of them, okay? Stop judging).

“Oh she’s so cute!”

Max laughs and puts his phone back into his pocket. He runs a hand through the grass beside him absentmindedly. “She was a menace. She used to chew through everything and wouldn’t listen.”

“Well, she’s really well behaved now.”

“Yeah, it took me a while and a lot of doggy training.” Max throws the tuft of grass he pulled out. “Guess I’m just really lucky with her.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he can see Shannon nod. “I get what you mean. For all that dogs can be a mess sometimes, they just love you for you.”

Yeah. Luna’s the light of everything he has. He can’t say he loves his job, but he likes it more now – they promoted him and moved him to a different office so he no longer has to deal with the sound of the microwave oven or the asshole Charlie. Turns out there was so much more to the name calling. But that’s done and over with.
“I nearly gave her up.”

“Why?”

“Someone could have given her more attention and a bigger place to run and have fun. I didn’t think I was going to be good enough for her,” Max says.

It’s nice to say it aloud. He never told his parents that. They didn’t think he could handle it either, and it nearly broke him. That was the night he sat on the ground with Luna in his lap, asking her questions that he didn’t think she’d understand. She had looked at him all floppy ears and happy that he just couldn’t. She’d made him happy with her tiny paws pitter-pattering on the floor whenever he called her name. The utter delight whenever she saw him. Sure, she was crazy and chewing up his furniture and causing more apartment damages than he could have ever asked for, but. She pulled him out of this endless spiral he kept falling into. She literally pulled him out of the same circles he was going in. He was happier than he had ever been in a long time.

“But something about those big blue eyes and that smile kept you around?” Shannon has a knowing grin on her lips.

Max nods. “Something like that. How about you?”

Shannon shakes her head. “I don’t think I’ve ever had a moment of whether or not I was going to keep him. Bennington --”

Max cuts her off. “Wait, Bennington?”

“Yup. Doesn’t it suit him? A big fluffy aristocratic dog. It’s just a bit long of a name, so I usually call him Benny when I want his attention. He’ll respond to both.”

Benny – Bennington – has an ear perked in their direction with a large stick in his mouth. Luna just so happens to be hanging onto another end of the stick, both of their toys forgotten.

“Okay, maybe not right now. But even when he was a puppy he was this aloof thing that just looked like he wasn’t going to listen to anyone.”

“He listens to you.”

Shannon laughs. “Now he does. Took a while though.”

“How long have you had him?”

She cants her head and chews on her bottom lip. “Almost three years now. I’d been planning on getting a dog, but I never went through with it. My parents got tired of me waffling back and forth on whether or not I was going to get a dog and just got me one as a gift for finishing grad school.”

“Oh wow, that’s a big responsibility,” Max says. Getting a dog fresh out of college and right when you start a job is no easy task. He doesn’t have any room to stand on, but still, he had a years worth of getting used to the work life before Luna showed up.

Shannon lies down on the grass with a huff. “So much responsibility. But I loved him so much as soon as I saw him.
He was just so happy and oblivious. I got to bring him into work a couple times too.

“Where’d you work?” If only the office would allow him to bring Luna in. She isn’t a service dog – he could train her, but he doesn’t need her as one. It’s enough to see her at home to cheer him up, no matter how late it is. Don’t get him wrong, sometimes she will still nibble on his shoes and ruin them, but then it’s his fault for not putting them on the shelf.

“I work at the engineering site for this Aerospace company. You know, the one in Monroe? There’s nothing there otherwise, so I live around here.”

“Engineering, wow,” Max says.

She sits up and playfully shoves him. “What are you trying to say?”

“No, no --.” Max puts his hands up as if he were surrendering.

“I’m just teasing,” Shannon says. She stands and dusts off her leggings and offers him a hand. Maybe it’s the heat or the exhaustion, or maybe just how good he feels, Max is willing to let his mind drift. It’d be nice to let their dogs hang out again, wouldn’t it?

Max looks over at Luna where she sits against Bennington, eyes watching them intently. “I think they’re tired out.”

“I think so too. Time to get them home before they refuse to walk home, huh.”

“Bennington does that?”

Shannon smiles at him, brown eyes alight in the setting sun. “Course. He’s part Chow after all. Come here, Benny!”

Bennington just looks at her for a long minute. After she calls him a couple more times, he slowly gets up with a huff and trots over to her. Luna follows closely behind, her leash dragging in the grass.

With a lopsided grin, Shannon puts her arms up in the air as if challenging him and Luna. “You coming or not? You think Benny can beat your dog?”

Max glances down at his beautiful mottled dog. She stares up at him with her tongue hanging out the side of her mouth, though there’s that determined look on her face that she gets even while looking as goofy as she does. There’s no other way to answer.

“Not a chance.”

***

When he gets back home, Max has one more number in his phone and a lot more dog slobber on his pants. In hindsight, maybe he should’ve changed out of his work clothes, but right now he can’t bring himself to care.

“You’re one sly dog, aren’t you, huh, girl?” Max kneels down to scratch Luna beneath her chin. “Running out there to get yourself a treat and a big new friend.”

Luna licks his face in response; likely chasing the salty sweat caked on him.
“Yeah, yeah. You’re a good girl.”

He walks into the kitchen with Luna dogging after his heels. He usually only gives her one treat after a walk, but today, she gets two.

His phone buzzes.

Unknown: Hi. Bennington says he wants a playdate soon.

Max grins. He loves his dog. She’s a gift that pulled him out of his funk and is truly a gift that keeps on giving.

Luna agrees.

Jessica Hung is a senior from Maryland majoring in economics and computer science. She began writing extensively in her sophomore year after taking creative writing and journalism. At Wake Forest, she actively participates in TaeKwonDo. In her spare time she enjoys running, sleeping, eating, and coding. Her friends will attest to countless moments watching her wave her hands wildly at her computer saying, “Why isn’t this working?!” all the while laughing at her woes.

I went to a weird elementary school. We didn’t have desks, our classes were combined first, second and third grades, and we called our teachers by their first name. All of my neighborhood friends envied my school, not for the above reasons, but because we had two recesses every day.

That’s right, two recesses a day, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. It was awesome! Afternoon recess was the same as most other schools, but to go to first recess you had to finish all your work from the morning. I usually worked very diligently every morning to ensure that nothing stood between me and the playground. However, even the best first graders slip up every once in a while, and one morning I didn’t quite finish the reading and worksheets we were assigned. I thought that if I just slipped out the door no one would notice. But I was not as stealthy as I imagined, and as I was leaving the teacher called me back in.

“As she was talking, I saw the other kids running out the door and up the hill to the playground, and this is when I started to get angry. Nothing could be worse than this! My
mind shut off. I started breathing heavily, panting, screaming! I ran out of the door in rage. Right outside of the classroom was a small school garden. My eyes fell on a tall tomato plant—it was almost as big as I was.

*This will show that stupid teacher!*

In one swift yank, I pulled the plant out of the ground and threw it in the air. Before it landed, my teacher grabbed me from behind, and the look on her face was as if she had just witnessed a murder (in a way she had). I was brought to the principal’s office and my mother was called, and before I knew it I was sent home for the day.

Mother was not pleased, and understandably. This was my third “call-home” of first grade (in my defense I did not know what the middle finger meant when I was triple-dog-dared to point it at the teacher. However, I do take full responsibility for the milk incident). My mother told me that she would always love me unconditionally, and that going forward we were going to work together to find healthy ways to handle my anger. Then she took out her belt and spanked me harder than I had ever been spanked before.

A few days later, the tomato plant showed up on my front porch in a trash-bag, dried-up and withering. There was a note on it from my principal, telling me that the third-grade girl who planted the tomatoes was very upset that her hard work was destroyed. The bag stayed in our kitchen for days, the small unripe tomatoes reminding me of what I had done.

***

My high school didn’t have two recesses, or even one, but we did have house parties. The last Saturday night of summer before Junior year, a kid threw what was supposed to be the biggest party the school had ever seen. It was called “Junior Bonding,” the idea being that the whole junior class was to build lifelong relationships by drinking cheap beer in Matt Roberson’s backyard. Unfortunately, my mother thought I would be better off bonding with my summer reading book Othello that I had yet to crack open, so I wasn’t able to go to the party.

I wasn’t thrilled about having to stay home, as I wanted to spend time with all my best friends and my girlfriend Amy, but I wasn’t too upset either. I had matured a little bit since first grade, and I knew there would always be another party next weekend. I had an uneventful night with Shakespeare and some leftover lasagna.

On the first day of school, Junior Bonding was all anyone talked about. It was “who got the drunkest,” “who hooked up with who,” and “who punched a hole in Matt’s kitchen wall.” A lot of people asked me why I wasn’t at the party, and a few gave me some funny looks, but I didn’t think too much of it. Besides, my mind was on football anyways, and our first game of the season on Friday.

After school I was suiting up for practice in the locker room, listening to my buddy Tommy tell everyone a story of his crazy night.

“...and the whole time I didn’t spill my beer!” Everyone burst out laughing. As most guys made their way to the practice field, Tommy and I stayed behind still changing. He said, “Man, I still can’t believe you didn’t make it out Saturday.”

“Yeah that really sucked, but you know I’ll be getting hammered after our win Friday night!”
“You’re damn right, you and I both!” He paused and the look on his face hardened up. “But there is something I need to tell you about.” He took a breath. “Saturday, you know Amy was at the party. I saw her talking with John Barnes over by the pool. Now, I didn’t see anything, but I’ve heard rumors…”

“Dude, what are you saying?”

“Look, I know this isn’t easy to hear. But I think she cheated on you.”

This is when I started throwing things.

First it was my helmet, which cracked as it bounced off the locker room floor. Looking back, I’m glad that I found out it didn’t hold up to contact before the games started. The next thing I saw was my iPhone, which I spiked towards the ground like a touchdown celebration. The glass screen shattered, but I still gave it a kick across the room for good measure. But I wasn’t finished yet. I took the wooden locker itself down to the floor and started beating it with my now broken helmet. As splintering wood was flying across the locker room, I got tired and stopped to catch my breath. Panting in anger, I grabbed my car keys and made my way out of the locker room and towards the parking lot. As I was approaching Amy’s silver Volvo, I thought of what I should carve on the side. Deciding between “BITCH” and “WHORE,” I heard a friendly voice from behind.

“Hey Jacob, what’s up! Why aren’t you at practice?”

So it turns out that she did not cheat on me. The rumor I’d heard, which had spread through the school, had been started as a joke. In fact, she was only at the party for a few minutes, which most of the kids there were too drunk to realize. My coach didn’t seem to care about this fact when he suspended me for the first game for destruction of team property. And once Amy figured out what I was planning to do to her car, she gave me more hell than a belt ever could. Worst of all, I was stuck with a flip phone for the next two years.

***

The cool thing about college is that no one ever makes you stay in and do your work. Some people go to parties every night, while others spend all their time studying. I do a little bit of both, but I always work hard when I have an important exam or assignment. One Tuesday night during my freshman year I was in the library until 2 AM preparing for my 8 AM history exam. I was exhausted and saturated with the information about early agricultural civilizations, and all I wanted was a good night’s sleep during the few hours before my exam. I came back to an empty room, so I figured my roommate was studying late as well. I finally fell asleep around 3 AM, but my rest did not last long.

I woke up to light and weird noises in the room. I opened my eyes and genuinely couldn’t believe what I saw. My roommate was urinating on the side of my dresser. I thought I had to still be dreaming, but I looked at my alarm clock—3:24 AM—and knew it was all too real.

I got up and yelled, “What the fuck are you doing?”

Clearly drunk, he mumbled, “B301.”

“What?”

“B301.”

I was as confused as I was angry. “Why are you saying our room number?” His reply was not audible.
He stopped peeing and sat down on his bed. I ran to the bathroom to get paper towels so he could clean, but when I got back he was already asleep. I had no idea what to do—nothing in my previous nineteen years of life had prepared me for this moment. So I cleaned up the piss, washed my hands until they nearly bled, and went to sleep.

***

Two months later I came back to the room around 2 AM again. Though I was not quite as studious on this Friday night, I was still looking forward to getting a good night’s sleep after a long week. When I opened the door to my room, my roommate had my dresser opened and was peeing into my t-shirt drawer. He must’ve known he was doing something wrong, because he jumped when he saw me. Unfortunately for him, in doing this he slipped on and fell into the puddle of his piss on the ground. Trying unsuccessfully to stabilize himself on the wet tile, he flopped around on his stomach like a fish on an ice rink.

It took a while to get my roommate into his bed, but once he was there he was asleep in an instant. At that moment all the commotion quieted down, and I was left with a room that reeked of urine. My roommate’s Xbox looked very appealing to throw out the window, but I decided against destroying his personal items. Instead I took my mattress off of the bed frame and carried it down the hall into my friend’s room. He had just enough space that could I fit the mattress on the ground. This is where I slept for the rest of my freshman year, and I slept very well.
I slid my hand down the rounded edges of the wheel, breathing in the smell of cows and broken down gas stations, attempting to relax for the what felt like the tenth time despite the film reel on incessant repeat in my head. Circling and circling, I felt my grip tighten and loosen as I watched myself yell those final, cutting words at her. Every few minutes I snapped back into the expanse in front of me, locking the yellow lines and black tar into focus until the horizon fuzzed out again.

This argument wasn’t much different than usual, at least at its core. I was anxious, Mom was convinced such a state could never happen to her perfectly raised daughter, and neither of us was willing to back down. Even the setting was the same as she sat at the kitchen table and I perched on the edge of the counter, ready to take flight at any moment. It had been this way since my dad left, and I think I was her last chance at getting it right. I could usually stomach her berating, but that day she was at peak performance. Aunt Jo’s wedding date was quickly approaching and though I had spoken to her approximately three times, mainly about her dog and recent vacations, Mom was hell-bent on me giving a speech at the reception. Knowing myself better than she did, I insisted that the result would not be a funny or even endearing speech, but rather a showcase of the recent three course meal in various chunky forms. Perpetually vexed by my lack of the calm she herself derived from meditation and a concoction of herbal teas, she stared at me blankly and then continued to map out the details of the wedding. As she obviously wasn’t going to conclude the conversation in any sort of productive manner, I pulled the rebellious move expected of my eighteen year old self, biting each word of my “you don’t understand me and you never will” manifesto and chewing it before slamming the front door into its ragged frame. The space between the door and my silver Jetta a blur, I jammed my key into the ignition and took off.

The mile markers flicking by, I found myself counting them and realizing how far I had gone. Normally on these drives, I found myself circling familiar neighborhoods, naming the members of each household and wondering if they ever did the same. This time I felt the need for a little more expanse, a little more space. I also have a terrible sense of direction and ended up crossing the state line. The jitters I had were just too much for the state of Ohio to handle without spilling over into Michigan. Reaching out for the volume dial, I stopped halfway to see if my hand was shaking. I reveled in the freedom of being able to watch it shake like a leaf without warranting a scathing glance from my mother. As much as anxiety was an internal thing, the physical symptoms helped it feel more valid against my mom’s claims otherwise.

In the midst of my observations, I heard a Pop! and my hand jerked upwards in a motion that was not generated by my own synapses but rather by my car. It now moving like a defunct washing machine, I pulled the resistant wheel to the right, tumbling to the shoulder. I felt the sense of relief that can only be achieved when something far bigger than yourself
requires your full attention, if only for a few seconds. Hesitantly stepping out to examine the damage, I circled around the hood of the car, again relieved to see only a flat front tire, and exhaled my tired body into the grooves of the passenger side door.

It was then that I came to the realization that in my dizzied haze I had found myself precisely at the center of nowhere. I tried to swallow up the gradient auburn sky in spoonfuls, moving my line of vision down in segments until I reached the dusty green grass. Taking a horizontal approach this time, I saw the bare back of the “Welcome to Michigan!” sign in the distance on my left, panning next to an array of scattered trees, and finally landing on the only sign of human existence in sight, the Bono Baptist Church. I smirked at the thought of an entire congregation reading their Bibles through purple tinted glasses, the occasional U2 rock song interspersed with the hymns. Looking down at my phone to document my moment of comedic genius, I came to the rather pleasant realization that it was dead and that my future would now, in fact, lie in the hands of the Bono people.

The setting sun on my back, I moved towards the slatted white building, my stomach clenching between nerves and excitement. Spaces like this had always been my favorite part of family vacations, the in betweens, no city or even city beginnings. They always seemed to move quickly past the backseat window, but as they blurred by I questioned the lives that could go on within houses separated by miles. I always imagined their small and simple lives with a tinge of envy, though I knew my puritan visions were far from the truth. Now that I was about to come face to face with people who had existed solely on the peripheries of my mind for years, I didn’t know how to feel. It was strangely like meeting your childhood hero. I wasn’t sure how to start the conversation. Should I ask for a photo? Their life story? A phone? Yes, a phone. That’s what we’re here for. And unfortunately the here had arrived as I found my involved thoughts had brought me to the stone steps more quickly than expected.

As I reached the top step, the common sense goblin who had chosen so kindly to power nap during this entire decision making process, finally decided to jump in with some poignant observations, attempting to tune out my adventure-fueled delirium. I was alone, had no phone, it was getting dark, and was now expecting the Bono Baptist Church’s people to come to my rescue. On a Monday night. But before I could allow the next round of panic to set in, a puzzled face appeared in the doorway.

“Looks like you’ve hit a bit of a rut, little lady,” spoke the older man in a weathered tone, probably mid-sixties, vacuum attachment in one hand and collection of keys in the other.

“Yes, sir. Not quite my day. Maeve, by the way,” I said, throwing my hand out to shake despite his being full. I was almost spooked by my own confidence but figured at this point my body was down to functioning solely on adrenaline.

“Yes, sir. Not quite my day. Maeve, by the way,” I said, throwing my hand out to shake despite his being full. I was almost spooked by my own confidence but figured at this point my body was down to functioning solely on adrenaline.

“Miles, nice to meet you,” he said, graciously slipping the keys into his pocket before extending a calloused hand, “You need a phone?”

I nodded, following him through the cavernous sanctuary, into a back office. He gave me the number of the nearest mechanic, but I was quickly met with a droning
voicemail that informed me I would be going nowhere until 7 A.M the next morning. Placing the phone back on the ringer, I saw Miles nodding.

“I figured. Thought it might be worth a shot. You’re welcome to stay here if you like, we’ve got some couches down in the youth lounge, unfortunately the closest lodging is about 25 miles out,” he said, moving towards the door.

“Is that alright? If I stay here? Since you’re leaving, I mean.”

“Oh no, ma’am. I’m here for the evening.”

“Just, um, cleaning?” I was trying desperately to ignore the common sense goblin who was now throwing a fit, but for whatever reason Miles didn’t jar me. He was a grandpa type, and in any case, how bad could someone working in the name of a man like Bono really be?

“No, ma’am, cleaning’s just about done for the day. I’ve been doing my nights in the Lord’s home recently, taking up some painting projects with the leftover paint and canvases from Bible school. Really eases the mind. And the council’s agreed to let me show ‘em off on Sundays, maybe sell a few if the congregation likes ‘em.”

I muttered my best attempt at a casual, “Gotcha…,” before taking the plunge that my gregarious self couldn’t resist. “Would you mind showing me some?”

He nodded, and gestured for me to follow. As we made our way back through the deserted sanctuary, I noticed an easel I had missed in my initial walk through, centered at the altar. Sitting on it was a blank canvas, seemingly awaiting some divine intervention. My boots echoed against the wooden steps, following Miles to the back of the decorated table where a triptych of completed scenes sat. Each burst with the colors of washable poster paint. The first was a man and a woman laughing, the next a couple walking hand in hand, and the last a father and mother, baby in hand. The strokes were broad and sweeping, the outlines vague but distinguishable.

“That’s the dream isn’t it?”

I jumped, being pulled from the depths of my thoughts by his voice as it bounced from wall to wall in the empty room. “What do you mean?”

“A happy family. Laughter. Love. It’s all there. That’s why I keep painting, I think if I can put it out there in the world, who knows? Maybe the big man upstairs will see it. I don’t know. I think it’s mostly for me. I just gotta keep workin’. Keep seein’ it. And one day it’ll be real.”

I sat with that for a moment and went on, “What’s your family like, Miles?”

“It’s uh, it’s been a bit complicated,” he said, pulling each word like teeth, “Me and my baby, we used to be just like those paintings, the first two at least. We left school, crammed into the tiniest apartment you could imagine right outside the city, but it didn’t matter ‘cause we had so much love. Then she, um,” he faltered, “She lost the baby. And it just ain’t been the same ever since. That’s why I’m here, just tryin’ to figure it out.”

“I’m sorry,” I paused, unsure of where to go next, “Miles, you wanna show me how to paint?” This seemed to bring him back to where he was comfortable, and I felt the tension relax in both of us.

For the next few hours, we sat side by side at the altar, trading colors and stories. He broke out his FM radio, and I
giggled as U2’s “You’re The Best Thing About Me,” floated over the airwaves. Miles didn’t ask why, he just smiled. He told me I could paint whatever I wanted, but I felt his gaze on my canvas. With each stroke, I assembled a messy mother and daughter, and tried, despite my lack of artistic talent, to make them look happy.

When I finally put my brush down, Miles pointed and said, “That you? And your mom?” I nodded and he continued, “That the dream or what you got?”

“Not quite sure, I think somewhere in between. We’re working on it.”

“Working on it, I like that.”

At the back of the sanctuary, the sun came through the stained glass in shafts, warming my back once more. The still wet paint glinted in a new light and I looked up at Miles, our eyes engaged in wordless conversation.

“Repair shop should be open by now, if you wanna give ’em a call.”

In twenty minutes time, I walked out onto the pavement to meet the mechanic, feeling a tug in my stomach as I exited. Just as I was finishing up the paperwork, I turned to see Miles striding toward me, arms outstretched around my painting, the top wrapped in plastic covering.

“Can’t forget your masterpiece! Just make sure ya keep it flat, alright?”

“You got it,” I said, pushing down the lump in my throat. I laid it gently in the backseat, shutting the door and reaching for the handle of the driver’s seat door, but felt a hand on my shoulder.

“Keep working.”
OBLIGATORY HELLOS

Antayzha Wiseman

I would like to start this with a loving hello,
And I would if it weren’t expected.
Things aren’t respected when they are expected and
I have elected to be quite eclectic and refuse to do so.

Arbitrarily we do these things out of perceived necessity
Socially, we have acquired the notion that
greetings are not only necessary but required.
We don’t yet know one another and so I will not
Disgrace you with an obligatory “Hello”

The sentiment is lost in these moments,
like when a stranger averts eye contact only to look up
again after a roll of the eye and says a reluctant
and even dreaded “Hello”.

I am not in an appeasing mood tonight and so…
I will not address you with a “Hello.”

I will tell you instead, “Welcome to my inner thoughts, come inside.

TO ALL THE ONES WHO HAVE TOUCHED MY HEART

Antayzha Wiseman

Anywhere in the world you wanted to go, I would’ve followed.
Nothing or no one could have changed my opinion of you.
Turmoil marked the end of my innocence, when you convinced me that I did not belong to you.
Healing from that dismemberment took years, you were god-like to me almost untouchable.
Only a god could have hoisted me upon his shoulders and promised to protect me from harm.
Never did I suspect that you would be the one to harm me the most, only you had the power to.
You broke my heart before any lover had the opportunity to, every tear is yours.

Being young and naive is to blame for my misfortune with my first love.
Really... I carried us, you carried your vices...my back became labored...and I broke.
Aggressively, we fell into the depths of the hell that is suppressed emotions.
Dealing with this now, you appear to me as a dream-like figure of who I once was.
Early in life was when I met you, I needed you to come when you did. Daring to give me a voice until I found my own, you were my first true friend. When no one understood a beauty like mine, you workshopped a piece of art from my soul. I had given up on any hope of having more, giving more, achieving more, you saw me. No charade in the world could’ve fooled you, you chose me instead, you always chose me.

Giving me humor and happiness and hope of a future was cruel. It was the thought of me you liked, not the true version, just the one who laughed at your jokes. Rewinding back to our best moments I now see the signs, you wanted her for her beauty. Only looked to me for support and validation. You felt that you deserved more than I could give. Now I see that you never had the courage to reciprocate the care I gave to you.

Cunning minds think alike, I still remember the feel of the smile that spread across my face. How your lips spoke riddles and I feared I would succumb to your stunning intellect. I felt compelled to have a part of me connect with a part of you. Dimming lights put me in mind of the way your humor transformed my every expectation.

I was willing to sacrifice my disposition for your pleasure, to have a part of something special.
NEVER HIT SEND

Antayzha Wiseman

I have resolved to draft a message,
I want to tell you to fuck off,
That the day I met you was a mistake,
That every part of my body that yearns for you is mistaken.

I don't need you,
I'll never miss the way that we turned the simplest
conversations into the most complex matter.
I damn sure could live without you diminishing our every
move.
Like I was nothing, like we were nothing.
We beared it all, I've seen your most private side and I felt
lucky.

You say that you care, but you never make sense.
I want to say that I don't want to be friends
that you're not one of the most brilliant people I've ever met.
I want to say that I didn't hope for more
I want to say that all of the others were the same.

But what if I said that I would rather be nothing with you,
than to be anything with anyone else.
What if I told you that although I've never cried a tear for
you,
You've shaken my entire core.

Your smell is euphoria,
your smile is lightning,
Your energy is magnetic.
You and I are unnecessarily complicated,
and we question things way too much,
and we argue over nothing,
but somehow we work.

So, although I drafted that message, I'll never hit send.
I care too much, I'll always care what you think.
ATRIUM
Antayzha Wiseman

My mind is but an atrium.
To all those who dare to enter,
you will see more than you've bargained for.

My eyes give the clearest of views into my soul.
I am giving you courtside seats to the show.
Don't you want to join?

Play my twisted mind games,
as the remains of my shattered expectations
cause fragments of glass to puncture your smooth young flesh.

You may see things far darker than you would expect.
Especially from such a “small girl,” such a “sweet girl,”
such a “smart girl.”

You don't know where my scars have emerged from.
Would you like to see?
Oh no, I've said too much.
You must leave.

TO MY BABY SISTER
Antayzha Wiseman

You are the light of my life.
Everyday when I get out of bed
I think first of you.

I wonder who holds you at night and if you're ever hurting
and how you've grown so big without me noticing.

I wonder if you notice I have gone
and I feel grateful that you don't know the pain of longing
that I do.

Sometimes when I miss you I sit in my bed at night
and look at your picture and kiss the screen.

I remember when you were a newborn and I held you in my arms
and I was so afraid that I would screw it up.

It's so hard being a big sister to an angel,
You are becoming strong and audacious and fun.

I want you to understand that I can't be there for everything
because I'm trying to make things better for us.
I want to make sure that you, my love, have the same opportunities as I have. I need you to understand that every moment I am away I am missing you.

You are so loved my angel. I want you to know that you will be better than I am.

I am so lucky to know your spirit. You are my most genuine fragment of self.

The truest form of your mommy and daddy and everyone who loves you, and even those who never got a chance to.

We have seen the grip of angry fist. We have dreaded the pleas for mercy that wouldn't be answered for years.

You have protected me from ghosts, monsters, bullies, mother, and myself. You are my built-in best friend.

You have taught me to fight and inspired me to write and have been more proud of my accomplishments than I myself.

You have always wanted me to be better, knew I was worth more, assured me that I could keep going.

I have never doubted your love, loyalty, or consistency for a moment. You have always been my solace.

On those long nights, I would crawl into your bed and hold you tight because I knew as long as we were together, I was safe. WE could save HER. You would protect me.
You were strong, and wise, and fierce, and I looked up to you. When I formed my own opinions you respected them. You fostered my gifts. You stroked my ego. You validated me so much I resolved to do it for us.

On days when I miss you, I look at the sky and remember holding your hand and running down hills, and laying in bed and I feel thankful to have someone like you to love me.

So, although I am here alone, we are together for always, and forever.

UNLIKELY PAIRS
Antayzha Wiseman

Who would have thought seven months ago that we would be together? I just think it’s extraordinary that all of the decisions that we’ve made in our lives up to this moment, have led us here, to this very university, at this very moment.

How did we just mesh so perfectly, vibe so seamlessly? How could I have a family away from my family? I think that it must’ve been fate that made our unlikely pairs attract. Before WE were US, I was just me. I had never been a part of something bigger than myself.

We are all on completely different sides of the spectrum, but somehow we have built something beautiful. A sisterhood of sorts.

When one cries, we all cry. If one triumphs, we all triumph. Some may say we’re cult like, how could we be anything but? With this kind of balance we can’t risk messing it up.

I hope that when I am older we will still be friends, and we’ll tell our kids about late night Subway runs and college heartbreaks and mental breakdowns.
Then maybe they will understand that anything is possible with a slight twist of fate. Even the most unlikely of pairs could become something spectacular.

Being a black woman in America, I am always expected to prioritize being one over the other. Although I am never one and not the other. I am never simply black. I am never simply a woman.

I always am. By “am” I mean present, aware, conscious, and often disadvantaged. There is a mold for black women in this country. Where do you fit when you are not what society expects?

I especially love to see the shocked expressions of my peers when I speak eloquently about the works of the Brontë sisters or Vonnegut's skilled use of rhetorical devices in his early literature.

I have shattered their images of a black women in America. I mean after all aren’t we supposed to prefer Beyoncé over Celine Dion and choose a Toni Morrison novel instead of Dante’s Inferno.

Why must you tremble when we speak of social justice and I raise my hand? Am I not a student? Am I not an American?
I’m sorry, does my intellect inconvenience you? I’m sure you would rather see me shaking my ass in a music video than reciting a speech in your communications class.

Why should my non-conformity cause others discomfort? I am not here to prove a point. I don't want to have to always represent women, or black people, or any other disenfranchised group.

So excuse my position when I say with derision that being a black woman in America is like being an attorney in a courtroom.

We must always present our cases and leave it to others to validate our points, and if that doesn't work we have the pleasure of doing so again...and again...and again.

Just for the enjoyment of others. I rest my case.

SILENCE

Antayzha Wiseman

One of the most frightening things to me is silence. I mean complete and utter silence. For this is when your demons elect to come out and play.

This haunting silence will toy with your thoughts, tear apart your emotions, and make you second guess everything.

I prefer chaos, calamity, disaster.

There is nothing more fierce than your inner thoughts. The tiny assailants that are your fears creep up with their sharpened blades and inflict maximum damage.

Before you can escape this deafening silence, you notice that a part of you has been unleashed. Your demons have faced you.
I have written many poems about you. More than you deserve. The ways in which you have affected my life. I am tired of writing about you. I am sick of feeling hurt over past wrongs. I have resolved that I will never understand, the inner workings of your twisted mind. I blame you for my inability to distinguish a lovers fist from the caress of a hand. I will learn on my own, the love of a man. But I have wasted too much time writing And fighting the battles that should belong to you. I am doing well and you have again disappeared You gave me life but little else, except pain and nightmares. You never even apologized. It always strikes me that you were always around, but you were never present, and when you were I had come to regret it. Sometimes I wish you were different. We were different.
Sunlight leaks through the window and drips onto my skin, emitting warm ripples through my crossed arms, up to my shoulder blades, and into my spine. I close my eyes.

I am sitting in the passenger seat of my brother’s Ford truck. The sunlight beams from cloudless June skies as it seeps into the shiny black leather of the seat. My denim cut-offs provide my thighs little protection from the heat radiating beneath me, before me, and within me. Burning, I smile. As I roll the window down, air heavy with whatever steam arises from evaporating mud alongside the back roads which we follow rushes into my face. The wind presses against my sticky cheeks, weaving itself through the tangled waves of my hair. Suddenly, I fear for my bandana. I tighten the red paisley cloth against my forehead and lean out, inhaling deeply the aromas of pine and honeysuckle. Ah, sweet honeysuckle. My tongue stretches out from in between my chapped lips, as if I could almost taste the air, as if I could almost—

“What the heck are you even doing?” My brother briefly shifts his gaze from the winding two-lane road, to my tongue dangling in the breeze like one of a panting retriever.

“Don’t you remember in elementary school, when we would go to the playground in the evenings while Mom worked? There was that huge honeysuckle bush by the swings. Remember? We’d pinch the bottom of the blossoms and sip the ‘honey’?”

He lightly chuckles, as he so often does when I recall our childhood memories.

“Yeah, I remember. Man, that stuff was too sweet!” The humor in his voice then, in an instant, vanishes when he glances at me again through his peripheral vision. “What the crap do you think you’re doin’? That is a girlfriend privilege only!”

I shrug, reluctant to move my bare feet from his dashboard, and inquire, “Don’t sisters get privileges?”

“Hey now, who strapped the kayaks in, huh? Who’s driving? Is it you? Nah, I don’t think so. There is your privilege. This is my truck. My rules. Your feet stay down.”

To mask my involuntary grin at my brother’s ranting about how no one properly respects his belongings, I turn my face once more to the open window. Whatever words depart from his mouth drift into the wind. As siblings, we never pass the opportunity to challenge each other; as best friends, we never take the challenge seriously. He did, indeed, strap the kayaks down in the truck bed. My gaze shifts behind me, and I witness the uneasy bouncing of the kayaks coinciding with every curve in the road through which my brother recklessly speeds. He swears that this back road is a shorter route to the lake, though I point out that we seem to be taking an additional ten minutes to arrive. I say that perhaps he just prefers driving among wildlife, beneath towering trees and alongside the mountain cliff sides. “No,” he finally admits. “There’s just always a lesser chance of cops on these roads.” I roll my eyes, then focus my attention once more on the light seeping through the windshield and spilling out into my lap.
How little often, perhaps, do we appreciate the gentle miracle of light. How often we take for granted the manner in which the sun, after a long day of burning brightly upon earth, slowly retires into hues of gold across a sky streaked with crimson and magenta, softly fading into the twilight. The twilight, then donning its own artful blending of shades such as lavender and azure, then greets faint, white stars which spot the sky like freckles on a child’s nose. The lessening of celestial light allows for the visible glow of fireflies from May until September, dancing about us as stars we can actually reach out, capture, and draw near. How little often do we marvel at how the sun, come dawn, never fails to rise. Stretching his beams eastward, he once more shines upon us for another day. Once more, we have the opportunity to behold our lives illuminated, one day at a time, before evening comes again and today becomes yesterday—before our present becomes the past.

However, sitting in the passenger seat of my brother’s Ford truck, I refuse to contemplate the past or even the future. Rather, I want to appreciate the light where it is shining right now, in this moment of time.

Suddenly, as my brother continues gripping the steering wheel with his left hand, he reaches his right hand toward the volume knob beside the radio. “Oh yeah, baby! It’s Stapleton himself!” he exclaims. My brother and I delighted in few, if any, of the same musicians with equal fervor as we did in Chris Stapleton. Pressing his foot ever downward on the gas pedal, my brother simultaneously rolls down every window in the truck. We are trapped in time, caught in a dizzying whirlwind of verdant shades flickering through the trees we pass and blistering sweet air rushing through us. Our lungs feel as though they will burst as we loudly sing out every word of the chorus:

“But she finds it hard to believe that she’s turned me around. . .
“You know I’ll probably die before I live all my
Up to no good livin’ down!”

Sunlight pouring in from above, beating down onto my flesh, reminds me of the life burning within me. I never want this moment to fade. I want the sun to burn forever. My fingers stretch far toward the sky as if I can capture the light, like fireflies. As if—

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My eyes open. Before me are scribbled physics notes, metallic foil gum wrappers, and a ballpoint pen that once legibly read “Wake Forest: Department of Admissions.” Sunlight leaks through the window, drips onto my desk, and casts a glare on the corners of my notebook. The silence and tension in the library contrasts so sharply with my daydreaming that I must pause to readjust myself, like pupils must do when eyes enter a dark house after spending hours outside in broad daylight. Looking again at my arms that, now, are no longer crossed, I notice that some reality of my nostalgia has lingered. My fingers are still stretched out before me.

Rather than attempt to grasp the light, I grasp the pen, and continue to scribble mathematical equations in the margins of my notebook.

Cassie Ball is a freshman at Wake Forest University from Beckley, West Virginia. She graduated from Mountain View Christian School.
in 2017. Since elementary school, she has pursued writing. In high school, she helped publish her school’s annual literary magazine, wrote for her school newspaper, the Mountain Muskett, and won the 2016 Young Writers Award for Fayette County. At Wake Forest, Cassie is an active member of Can-I-Poet, and she writes weekly for the Odyssey. Her poem “Insomnia” was published in 3-4 Ounces this past fall. Her plans are to major in English and minor in writing.