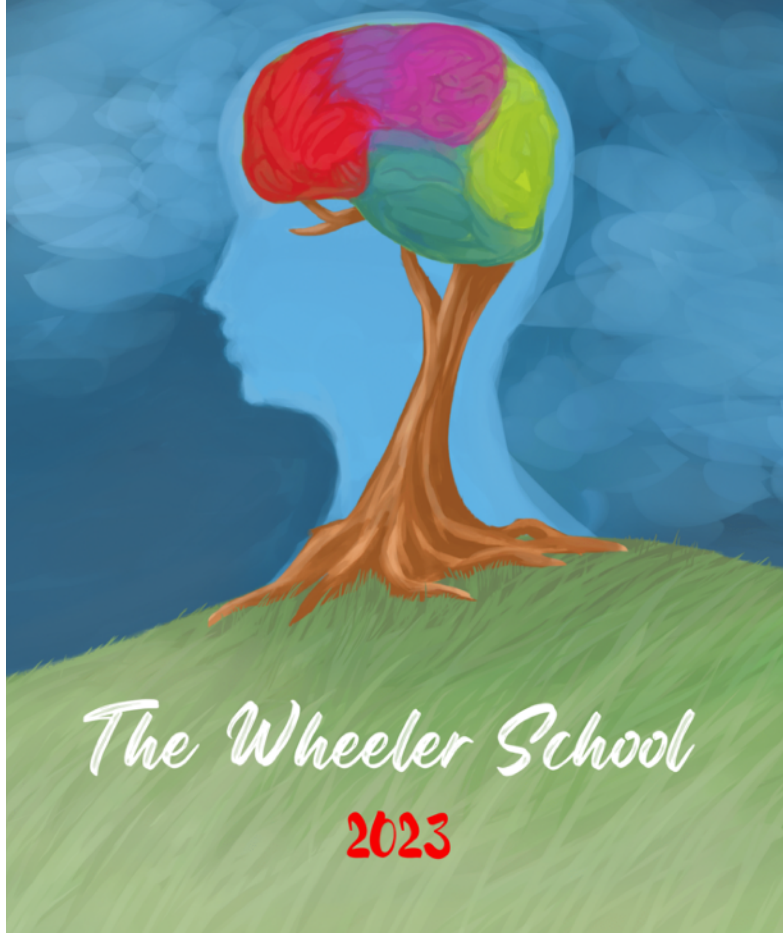


# **AERIE**

## *Literary Voices*



*The Wheeler School*

**2023**

AERIE

LITERARY VOICES

2023

AERIE



Providence

THE WHEELER SCHOOL

“All literature is, finally, autobiographical.”

*-Jorge Luis Borges*

This is the fourth annual publication of *Literary Voices*, The Wheeler School's Aerie writers' journal of poems, short stories, flash fiction, memoirs, and long-form fiction. Full copyright of all works reverts to the authors upon publication. The members of ALV staff are Co-Editors-in-Chief Sophia Blythe and Samantha Flum; Art Director Xiao Maddock-Mark; writers and editors Jacquelyn Song, Fredy Norin, Ivy Linardos, Anneka Jenkins, Henry Krex, Gunnar Eggertsson, and Robin Linden. Faculty advisors: Robert Koppel, Mara Koppel, and Jonathan Migliori.

## CONTENTS

Introduction .....	9
POETRY .....	11
SAMANTHA FLUM '23	
Trying Hard .....	12
Lil Rhody State of Mind.....	15
People Watching in Blue State Cafe .....	17
Flower Truck .....	20
Panigacci Notte .....	22
Cowgirl Cookies .....	25
Vernazza .....	27
IVY LINARDOS '25	
Tom .....	28
The Cockroach Waits .....	29
Ella's Angels .....	30
Rituals .....	31
Flying Lessons .....	33
JACQUELYN SONG '24	
Frayed Perfection.....	35
Falling Tower of Lire .....	38
Across the Courtyard .....	40
Still.....	43
Reminiscence in Red.....	45
Ceramic Boys .....	50
Blooming .....	53
If Mourning Blooms.....	56
319 .....	59
Earrings.....	61
XIAO MADDOCK-MARK '23	
Thirty Day Prodigy.....	63
Railroad .....	65
Cafe.....	66
Tub of Kimchi .....	67
On the Other Side of a Screen .....	68

ASHLEY HILL '26	
Life of a Girl .....	70
World of White .....	71
SOPHIA BLYTHE '23	
Remember?.....	72
Dear Expectations .....	74
à Table .....	75
Fall Back.....	77
Why Eat Gourds?.....	78
Snoopy's Gone Loose! .....	79
Thankful.....	80
Golden Light .....	82
New Year's Day.....	84
GUNNAR EGGERTSSON '26	
Words.....	85
ROBIN LINDEN '26	
Words I Didn't Say.....	87
Realization .....	89
Acceptance .....	90
Repetition .....	91
SHORT FICTION.....	92
PETE PROMRAT '25	
The Bicycle.....	93
Tuesday .....	95
Nine.....	99
NIKOLAI SUCHMAN '25	
Shedim .....	104
Sons of Cain .....	106
SAMANTHA FLUM '23	
Camp Rhody.....	114
The Reinvention.....	119
If We Were Fish .....	124
Chipotle .....	129
Friends .....	130

#### XIAO MADDOCK-MARK '24

Time, Passing .....	133
An Unfinished Story .....	135
Boxes .....	136

#### SOPHIA BLYTHE '23

A '90s Rom-Com Type of Love .....	137
Maeve Meets Jo March .....	141
Funeral for a Goldfish .....	149
Magic at Merlin .....	154
What Floor? .....	158

#### JACQUELYN SONG '24

Benjamin .....	160
Truth Stares Back .....	166
Counting Cycles .....	180
Ship of Theseus .....	185
Forgiveness for Rose and Min .....	190
Cherry .....	198

#### IVY LINARDOS '25

Everything is Living, Nothing is Cold .....	202
Something In My Ceiling .....	205
The Man Next Door .....	209
A Bird .....	212

#### EDAN DAVIS '25

Curious Boy .....	216
Surrender .....	217

#### GUNNAR EGGERTSSON '26

House with a Thousand Doors .....	219
Warrior Planet .....	222
A Letter in Regards to Art and Perhaps the Nature of Life Itself .....	224
All the Time in the World .....	227

#### HENRY KREX '24

Randall .....	229
The Podiatrist .....	238
The Long-Necked Guitar .....	241

Poppy .....	247
Alister Soot.....	251
Five .....	256
FREDY NORIN '24	
Rhody from Rhody .....	258
[THE BLANKET KEEPER] .....	262
ANNEKA JENKINS '24	
HandyMan .....	283
The Silver Man.....	286
MEMOIR.....	290
ROBIN LINDEN '26	
Watch and Learn .....	291
JACQUELYN SONG '24	
Grandma's Thumbs .....	293
SOPHIA BLYTHE '23	
85 Congdon.....	299
Samantha Flum '23	
Under the Surface.....	302
NOVEL EXCERPTS.....	308
Gunnar Eggertsson '26	
Bred by Steel.....	309
FREDY NORIN '24	
The Inbetween.....	316
SOPHIA BLYTHE '23	
Your Rhode Island Page Six .....	332
SAMANTHA FLUM '23	
Annie in the Here and Now .....	348
Acknowledgements .....	360



## INTRODUCTION

In his last novel, *In The Winter of Our Discontent*, John Steinbeck writes, “A man who tells secrets or stories must think of who is hearing or reading, for a story has as many versions as it has readers. Everyone takes what he wants or can from it and thus changes it to his measure. Some pick out parts and reject the rest, some strain the story through their mesh of prejudice, some paint it with their own delight. A story must have some points of contact with the reader to make him feel at home in it. Only then can he accept wonders.”

A good story is something *worth* telling, something others want to hear. But writing well is a lonely task. It involves talent, originality, vision, and the search for truth, that is, the belief that everything is fair game, even—perhaps especially—the writer’s own secret motives! Story is metaphor for life that creates an understanding of the relationship of art to daily experience. Screenwriter Robert McKee observed, “Story is not life in actuality. Mere occurrence brings us nowhere near the truth. What happens is fact; truth is what we *think about* what happens.”

In the following pages you will discover exceptional poems, short stories, flash fiction, memoir, and novel excerpts. All written by Aerie writers—freshmen, sophomores, juniors, seniors—whose wide-ranging subjects are as rich as life itself. You will come to discover the radiance of a golden light along the FDR Drive, the subtle beauty of flower trucks, the allure of a tub of kimchi, the complicated emotional bond of a father and daughter by way of their yearly trip to Cape Cod. There are also stories that question life and death, identity, race, gender, and sexuality; and on the lighter side, the hilarious experience of a busboy working at a kosher caterer. There are also the requisite fantasies, fraught with all manner of supernatural creatures, many in hiding just inches from wherever *you* are right now.

Please enjoy these works which students have diligently worked on for you, our readers!

Robert Koppel  
*Aerie Writer-in-Residence*



## POETRY

SAMANTHA FLUM '23

TRYING HARD

I'm trying hard  
to write a poem  
Any poem  
Even one that rhymes—  
But I'm stuck  
Out of ideas  
outta luck!

Who knew it  
Could be so  
Tough  
to sculpt  
words  
into something  
seamlessly read  
like Shakespeare's Sonnet Eighteen  
next to my bed

Shall I compare thee to a poem?  
But, I'm in a poem desert  
sweating  
shaking my head  
Not a single thing  
Here to be said  
Not even a letter  
I need to do better!

Oh, wait,  
A pink croc  
In the corner  
my desktop calendar  
a watercolor hanging

on the wall  
A sun-lit Seine  
in early fall

A ladybug  
on my ceiling  
taking a stroll  
in and out  
of a tiny paint-chipped hole

Is that a flower I see  
About to bloom?  
How'd I arrive  
at this poetic rainforest?  
fairy dust  
spinning down  
from bright neon clouds  
superheroes  
shattering  
windows  
Martians singing  
a pet dog  
Taco—  
who talks

Suddenly  
I can write about  
dodging dragons  
spewing fire  
from reptilian lips  
or a goldfish  
striking  
paydirt

But its not enough to force  
the poem  
I'm trying so hard to write...  
Because  
In an ideal world  
writing a poem  
would be easy as pie  
or some other simple simile  
or metaphor.

## LIL RHODY STATE OF MIND

Bound between  
Benevolent and Angell  
I write  
sipping an Awful Awful  
in the heart  
of Providence

America's  
baby state  
wicked awesome  
Rhode Island—  
never too small  
to contain  
cosmic thoughts  
or welcome into  
its tolerant vastness  
those who dream

The Atlantic  
filled with steamers  
and quahogs  
only waves  
away from  
South America  
Europe  
Africa  
accepting the displaced  
onto the shores  
of our Ocean State

Here people talk loudly  
about our heritage  
justice and liberty  
with a side of calamari  
honoring  
Roger Williams  
acknowledging  
Native tribes—  
Narragansett  
Niantic  
Nipmuc  
Pequot  
Wampanoag—  
all who  
protected this land  
as we go forward  
Hoping



## PEOPLE WATCHING IN BLUE STATE CAFE

The morning  
of my AP psychology exam  
textbook open  
a page  
reminding me that  
cramming is ineffective  
I sit  
against cold brick—  
the perfect perch  
for people watching

Kids behind me  
stuff their faces  
with cinnamon raisin bagels  
shmeared with cream cheese  
whining—  
their parents force them to go to school and  
“third grade’s such a nightmare.”  
poor them!  
if only  
they could go back  
to the dreamy world  
of kindergarten

To my left,  
college girls  
in plaid pjs  
with fashionable crop tops  
pinks and blues  
remembering  
half-forgotten stories  
laughing out loud  
then turning their heads

like synchronized swimmers  
making sure no one's  
noticed

The man behind me  
phones his mother  
pacing  
condensation  
forming on the side  
of his iced espresso  
like the sweat dripping  
down his face  
telling her  
about a job offer  
his gut tells him not to take  
there's a lot of back and forth  
until he slips on a puddle  
of latte

At the register  
a bald  
hipster  
describes how  
he needs his muffin toasted—  
both sides grilled  
and slightly burnt  
then storms off  
and fires a cigarette

And then there's the old lady  
alone  
fiddling with her glasses  
reading about  
the leaked document  
concerning  
the overturn

of Roe v. Wade—  
she mumbles  
“nothing has changed”  
shaking her head  
forcing a smile

I spy  
my sandwich,  
turkey hummus  
and mixed berry smoothie  
sitting on the counter  
next to tip jars  
labeled  
cabinets  
or milkshakes  
just then  
the woman behind the counter  
bellows to a friend outside  
“make him suffer!”

I wonder  
what’s her story?  
after all, I have  
always been better  
at thinking about  
other people’s lives  
without spending time  
reflecting on mine

what would any of them  
say about me  
the seemingly quiet  
high schooler  
studying  
nature vs. nurture  
in Blue State Cafe?

## FLOWER TRUCK

A mile down the road  
in Music City  
Hillsboro-Belmont to be exact  
the streets are lined  
with boutiques  
cafes  
and flower trucks

The signs  
inviting only dreamers  
have disappeared:  
now everyone is welcome

A smile blooms on  
Mother's face  
when we notice Amelia's  
forget-me-not blue-  
painted Ford pickup  
a garden on wheels of  
lilies  
tulips  
carnations  
hydrangeas—  
Mom's favorite

Reminds me  
of our flower truck—  
the red wagon  
that Nate and I  
squeezed into  
Mom pulling us around  
singing  
It's a beautiful day in the neighborhood

delivering May Day flowers  
celebrating spring

No matter how old I get  
the traditions never fade away—  
the Easter bunny hiding eggs  
Fat Santa bringing toys  
my mother  
handing out lilacs  
saving one bouquet for the centerpiece  
on our yellow kitchen table

I always thought her obsession  
silly  
strange  
in the same way, she must view  
my love of country music,  
Luke Combs,  
tropical fish and  
Minnie Mouse

## PANIGACCI NOTTE

chipped circular clay discs  
glow on orange-blue flames  
muscular ex-sailor flaunting  
flying dragon tattoo  
wrestling  
wood-burning oven  
perspiring profusely  
half-juggling  
terracotta  
onto marble table  
where sous chef  
invents batter:  
flour, water, salt  
stacking testi  
scrunching sizzling dough  
that slides over the edge

seconds later  
Panigacci—heated  
placed in baskets  
rushed to tables  
served to families  
the foundation of  
courses to come

round one:  
aperitivos  
crunchy pancakes  
sauce-lathered  
tomato,  
pesto,  
parmesan cheese  
munch-sized

so everyone  
has a bite  
before secondi

round two:  
petite plates  
of prosciutto  
mortadella  
pepperoni  
capicola  
provolone  
mascarpone  
evenly spaced  
for the taking  
and tasting  
and making of  
jaw-dropping  
panigacci sandwiches

all the while  
waiters and waitresses  
teleport to  
humid kitchen  
then again  
to dining room  
flash of bread baskets  
all you can eat

round three:  
dolce  
for salivating dessert eaters—  
spreading Nutella  
on  
what else!  
panigacci  
still warm

eating and  
repeating  
till stuffed  
then  
squished in Alfa Romeo backseat  
climbing the Appennini  
back to Prota



## COWGIRL COOKIES

I'm a giver  
showing up  
on a friend's  
doorstep  
delivering homemade  
cowgirl cookies  
fresh off the range  
cookies baking all day long

cookies  
left on the front porch  
the ring of the doorbell  
echoing through  
a lonely night  
I stand there  
wondering  
will I ever have a friend  
just like me?  
a real straight shooter—  
but, isn't this all  
the product of  
overthinking  
a scheme  
to be good  
following the recipe  
someone has written for  
Perfect Cowgirl Cookies!

my kitchen's  
a mixing bowl  
of ingredients  
chopped pecans  
old-fashioned

rolled oats  
sweetened coconut  
and the scent of vanilla  
beside a single cookie  
posing perfectly  
on shiny plate  
just where I left it  
hot pink sticky note  
addressed to  
myself

it's only on second glance  
I realize  
someone's already taken a bite

## VERNAZZA

Leaping off Vernazza pier  
sea-slap to face  
saltwater swirling  
in throat  
tiny ocean crystals  
scratching  
blue eyes

expecting to default  
to dead man's float  
instead—  
spinning  
scissor-kicking  
smiling  
for disposable camera  
Camille dangles  
daring to drop  
for the picture-perfect  
moment, interrupted  
by ferry  
tourists waving  
whistling  
shouting  
“Will you just  
look at this place”  
in Italian

“Look at me!”  
“guardami!”  
I scream  
reaching out to candy cane ladder  
rocking to the  
gentle Mediterranean

## IVY LINARDOS '25

### TOM

He's a stray, with headlight eyes and high-beam yellow fur. Though only a cat, Tom carries himself like a bear, leader of the parade, with his tough guy face, saying, try me, I dare you. When we fight, I know I'll win and so do you. I'm Grandfather Cat and no one's beat me yet! Life's taken chunks out of his ears and pride, but Tom rebuilds himself every time, digging his claws into whatever hope he can find, wherever he can find it. And he always finds it, whether it comes in the form of a squashed donut, or a nine-inch-open garage door on a rainy night, or just the lap of waves on the Seekonk River to tell him, without a single meow, in which mud he is lying. And he never stays in the mud for long. Perhaps it's his strong immune system or his resistance to water that keeps him going, or perhaps it's something stubborn rooted deep within him, something that refuses to let go—to let him let go. Grandfather Cat's tongue never stops licking and his inner clock never stops ticking. Grandfather Cat's seven billion grand-kittens never waste a single one of their nine lives, and by Cat, neither will he. Because these mud puddles are his home, and Fox Point is his world, and Providence is his universe, and he's King of it all. Because when Tom patrols these sidewalks and alleys, he feels his authority and so does every other living thing. He is the second coming of sliced bread and he damn well knows it. This is Tom's life, the boss cat, who's never going to die.



## THE COCKROACH WAITS

Afterward, the air ripples fiercely, caustic and boiling hot. Most things are piled in chunks of varying sizes, melted, warped, blackened beyond recognition, which is why, even if there was anyone around to look for the cockroach, it would be quite difficult to spot. It's there, though, right there- crawling, rather stunned, over that hunk of sooty sidewalk. Its legs fumble and catch on the unfamiliar terrain, but, sooner or later, it'll figure it all out. Besides, as of some undeterminable time previous, the cockroach is, in fact, the steadiest living thing in the world (by virtue of being, in fact, the only living thing in the world). We could be wrong, though. There could be other things out there, things trying a little harder not to be found. The cockroach is, however, definitely the only cockroach, not that it matters to anyone or anything. It had siblings (or, at least, other cockroaches that shared its egg sac as larvae), but they're all gone by now, some in recent events, some earlier in life, under more rubbery circumstances. Chance is funny like that; sometimes you'll weather a great explosion, not losing a single leg, and sometimes you'll die flattened with the force of a Walmart flip flop belonging to a woman named Patricia, in whose bathroom you've taken residence. This woman would've scoffed before, if you'd told her what would happen (always a skeptic type, she'd called herself, never too quick to believe just anything), but now she's mixed into the same ash as everyone else. The cockroach doesn't stop to ponder the metaphorical significance; despite being, by default, the smartest creature alive, it is still very much a cockroach. Instead, it stops on the jagged precipice of this concrete slab. And the cockroach waits; waits for the dust to settle, waits for the sun to sink, waits for a drop of searing, chemical-rich rain. It knows that, eventually, something is bound to happen. Something always does.



## ELLA'S ANGELS

Angels visit Ella every seventh midnight, on the side of twelve that means it's Wednesday. Whether she sees them is not their problem, nor is it hers; they just visit her at precisely the beginning of the day, once a week, every week, and that's that. Nobody sees them save her, and she is cursed with a constant, creeping uncertainty of how real they are. But they are there, at least for her; sometimes, she wakes to greet them, sometimes, she sees them and rolls back over in bed, sometimes, she sleeps right through it and when the sun rises it's like they were never there. Never are there footprints, never are there lingering whispers of quiet divinity. The angels do not talk to her. The angels have no mouths. She's stayed awake, a few times, for the duration of their visit. She's listened to the high, scraping song that leaks from her window when they're there, stared into their shifting, oscillating eyes. It is so hard to tell if they are staring back at her, or back through her. They do not crawl beneath her door, out of her closet, in through her window, perpetually ajar. When they arrive, it's like spotting something that was hiding in plain sight, and when they leave, it's like looking at an optical illusion and losing the old woman; seeing, once more, the boulder. The angels are made of broken glass and caution tape. The angels are made of oil, and also of puddles, and also of fog and streamers and an old, weathered train. Ella has never touched the angels. The angels, ever stationary, have never touched her. Are they here? Are they waiting? Are they ever going to leave? Ella doesn't know. Ella knows nothing, in comparison to them. All she does is wait for Wednesdays. All she does is hope for sleep. All she does is watch. And every Wednesday, at midnight exactly, the angels return the favor.



## RITUALS

Hello, Mr. and Mrs. Conrad,

We are once again contacting you regarding your son's unacceptable behavior at school. We would like to keep this as brief as possible, but, considering your inattention to our previous emails, we are operating under the assumption that you do not, in fact, have any idea as to what has been going on for the past three months.

The fact is that Henry, regardless of his teachers' consistent reminders, has continued to practice dark magic in the classroom, which, as we are sure you know, is very disruptive to his fellow students and individual learning progress. We have received numerous complaints from teachers and students in surrounding classrooms, not to mention several dire pleas, desperate cries for help, and cryptic last words from his classmates, regarding the unearthly vibrations and distracting noise caused by your child's incessant demonic chanting. In addition to the disarray caused by his efforts to open wider the pathway between worlds in the math classroom, this makes it very difficult for his peers to hear what is being taught, and for his teachers to teach in the first place.

You may be aware that your son has been assigned permanent detention during recess. You may not be aware that this is because, less than a week ago, he used this time to construct a makeshift temple to a nameless but very malevolent god, effectively summoning a constantly-screaming abomination, which he has informed his friends (such that he has), is named Annie, short for Anthrax.

This is a worrying influence on the other members of the third grade class, which has been made clear by a number of remnants of attempted rituals and inexplicable ancient ruins our cleaning staff have had to clean up around the school.

Our board has discussed possible disciplinary actions towards your son for his repeated harmful actions, and we have reached the decision to give him three more chances. Henry will be warned each time he attempts to create another such disruption during school hours, and if a third warning is reached

but not heeded, we will be forced to suspend him indefinitely and contemplate expulsion.

It is important that you know that, since this ruling was made yesterday, he has already blown through two of these warnings.

We urge you to sit down with Henry and educate him on the importance of classroom decorum, as well as the reality that distracting and very obviously evil ancient rituals do not lend themselves to the former. It may also be helpful to provide him with another outlet for his violent impulses. Consider soccer!

We expect a confirmation email.

Best,  
The Board



## FLYING LESSONS

"Flying Lessons," reads the blackboard. Nobody knows what this means, and Mrs. Peters' second grade class sits, for once, in silence, some leaned against walls, some with legs criss-crossed in the middle of the room, everyone arranged in neat rows, which, as the children came in early in the morning, seemed to form themselves. Ripples shaped in the sand of a turbulent beach. Magnets spinning apart, and then together. The desks have been pushed out of the way, today.

The sun is green, dousing the walls in deep, stagnant light, millions of tiny, flickering motes drifting in the thick air. Deep, too, are the shadows. Green, too, is the dusty board, something that has steadily slid out of the class' focus. None of them know just how long they've been waiting. Caleb doesn't have a watch, nor does Sarah- or Coco, or Annie, or Tom, or Becky, or anyone, really. Little Bobby, who skipped a grade and sits in the back of the class, does; but he's too busy to look at it. He's sat at the front, today, staring at the way the midday haze bathes the door in saturated green and brown, a tiny reflection of outside glimmering in the ten-by-ten glass pane. There's something so thrilling about it all, hungrily drinking in reality now before it turns to reality past. Losing track of the day of the week, the hour, the minute, the year. Mrs. Peters is not here.

And then she is. Bobby's gaze shifts and rearranges itself as the door quietly opens and she ducks beneath the top of the frame, a stalk of nameless grass swooning in the breeze, a heron leaving the ground. Her hair is not tied in her usual bun, and she pushes it out of her face quite often, a movement that reminds Coco, who normally sits in the front of the class but today is hidden in the back, of a dolphin's tail moving through water. Coco has always loved the water, and always hated the beach.

Mrs. Peters is at her desk, standing behind it like a preacher at a pulpit, a pianist poised to play. Her voice is musical, and nobody knows what she is saying.

"Flying Lessons," reads the blackboard.

One by one, the children file out; Annie, first, then Tom, then Sarah, then Becky and Caleb, who everyone knows are too different to really be twins. Coco imagines a graph, a line sloping gently down, the vertical axis marked

“People”, the horizontal axis, “Sun.” Soon, y equals only three, only Coco, Bobby, Mrs. Peters.

Bobby follows the directions he is given, and sinks into the deepest slumber of his life, a torpor that will only break when Mrs. Peters says so, when it is Coco’s turn.

For a moment, everything is just how it was before- oblivious, blissful, air full of warmth, overflowing everywhere. And then, as if lifted by a thousand tiny hands forming one much bigger, Bobby begins to rise, his eyelashes fanned serenely over his cheeks, his short limbs knocking into each other as he unfolds, floating slowly up, suspended in the honey that’s become the space next to the window. Dust swirls around him like a halo, like bubbles, like uncountable atoms if they really were all visible. Coco wears glasses, but even she can’t see everything.

And, at Mrs. Peters’ instruction, Bobby awakes- hung, for a moment, by nothing, three feet off the ground with his eyes open wide and deep, and then it is done, and Mrs. Peters says to him, in a sentence that sounds more like a song, that he has done a wonderful job.

Coco’s turn begins, and she has never been so awake, never felt so deeply, never seen the world from this high up.

“Flying Lessons,” reads the blackboard, until it cannot anymore, because, together, they wipe it off, Mrs. Peters standing at her full stature, Coco and Bobby eye-to-eye with her, because height is no longer a problem when you can fly.

The blackboard is blank, and, outside, Bobby silently weeps as he waits, beside Coco, for the school bus to arrive, weeps because everything is different now, weeps because he will never sleep so soundly again, weeps because it is over.

Bobby weeps because he can fly now, because now he and the sun and Coco and Mrs. Peters and the air he breathes are just a little bit less different. He cries until he can’t think, until he can’t see, until he can’t feel anything but the wash of everything that surges around him like a vast ocean over a tiny pinprick of sea glass.

The school bus arrives, and when Coco steps on, her eyes are dry.

**JACQUELYN SONG '24**  
**FRAYED PERFECTION**

daybreak whispers  
revelation  
through plastic shutters;  
a small world widens to  
infinitely smaller details.  
the patchwork doll stares  
into vanity mirror—  
sparks caught in chasms  
beams refracted, tilted facets  
light slowly scrutinizes  
unveiling shadows.

once, she fancied herself queen  
perched upon toy-crate throne  
yarn locks set by gold-trimmed ribbons  
lush lips, apple-red  
love her  
worship her.

now, like all fallen monarchs,  
wings fray  
gold grays  
dreams weigh...  
today  
a new culprit emerges—  
a loose thumb thread.

so she pulls  
and crooked stitches  
two degrees short of right  
splay  
a knot in the back of her mind

loosens  
and numb exhilaration  
floods her patchwork heart  
here  
something she can fix  
something she can rule...

so she pulls, pulls  
faded patches tumble  
designer flaws unspool  
tufts of cotton spill into  
euphoria, emptiness  
stinging—the precise pinprick  
of stars and needles  
she hides beneath thimbles  
that suffocate fingers.

so she pulls, pulls, pulls,  
conquering every stitch  
her mistaken patchwork  
a trail of obliteration  
loops around her torso  
knots at her ankles  
perfection  
unraveling...

still night drapes  
simplicity  
over distortion  
darkness blurs  
the trifle of a trivial world  
formless,  
faultless.  
staring down at  
the penumbra of a person  
crushed beneath her heels

patchwork doll seeks  
a girl, even her  
stitched simulacrum  
in this patched-out  
stranger...  
was it right?  
what was left?

## FALLING TOWER OF LIRE

If decisions are blocks  
stacked upon the table's edge  
tapered in precarious overhang  
hovering above an abyss—  
can I stack forever?

I'll build the Leaning Tower of Lire  
write the harmonic series, tip-toe,  
layer by layer  
untied from gravity,  
its center of mass  
unshifting.

If only I'm clever, careful, correct  
my blocks  
will never topple.

So, I stare at the edge  
envisioning infinite staircase  
leading to promised success  
every block  
perfectly chosen, perfectly placed  
no faults, no falls

Building  
Farther  
Building

Further

Building

Forever

yet why can't I  
place the first block?

why  
when it touches  
does my staircase

collapse?

The Leaning Tower of Lire  
ceases to lean forever  
no matter how clever, careful—  
it will never be erect.

So I'm stuck,  
never moving, always waiting  
for the resolution of a paradox,  
terrified of building a stack  
dreading its inevitable fall

But what if I set my blocks down  
without counting infinite steps?

leap farther, faster, freer

conquer without misgiving...

build a sanctuary

rather than a staircase...

forsaking my fear of Failing,

Falling

Faltering

But if I do,

where will I

land?

## ACROSS THE COURTYARD

Across the courtyard,  
On the seventeenth floor, there's a boy—  
Brown curls, freckles, eyes; Brown University hoodie;  
Brown framing his watercolor painting of a  
middle-aged celebrity, whose non-Duchenne smile  
fixates out the window  
across the courtyard.

Summer, when I first set eye on  
vacant walls of a vacant home  
I spotted him on the balcony, veiled in smoke  
hamburgers sizzling on grill, its cinnabar hood  
refracting sunlight to black-eyed Susans.  
His sleuth of friends—tropic crop-tops, cheap Bud Light cans  
laughed at his jokes  
and I laughed too...sighed immediately after.  
Longing for his ease and confidence,  
the friends he'd claimed, the home he'd built  
the planets he'd pulled into his orbit,  
while I sank from the weight of a new school  
new friends, new home...an uncertain future.  
And I was his painting,  
staring at him from empty canvas  
across the courtyard.

Autumn, I filled my closet with Lucky Brand  
my shelves with Six of Crows, AP BC Calc.  
I spotted him in the kitchen, lost in call.  
Wind knocked the tarp from his cinnabar grill  
overturning black-eyed Susans.  
As dirt spilled from the pots, he jumped to his feet  
shoulders tense, jaw clenched  
eyes burning into his home, frightened, cornered



I opened the shutters...closed immediately after.  
Returned to differential equations. My phone buzzed—  
classmates, not friends, friendly. A conversation later,  
I spared him a glance,  
but he'd drawn the curtains.  
And I was the black-eyed Susan  
watching him from my far corner  
across the courtyard.

Winter, I decorated walls with fantastical art  
brought Ferdinand, my Arabella palm, inside.  
I spotted him, confronted by two older boys  
hands knotted to fists, faces flushed fever red  
despite the bitter cold.  
Yet when rage overflowed, it turned to despair...  
The intruders stormed out the door.  
Drawing head in hands, he collapsed in his couch—  
a snowflake caught in the flurry.  
I knocked on the glass...recoiled immediately after.  
What help could I offer? So I scrolled through a poem  
that my teacher recommended. Texted a joke to a friend.  
And I was the snow  
watching him on a distant wind  
across the courtyard.

Spring, or late February, I sit on my balcony,  
surrounded by Dad's diaolan and tanhua blooms  
sinking into my sister's blue beanbag.  
I spot him on the balcony, uncovering his grill  
discarding yesteryear's withered Susans.  
Brown curls, freckles; Brown University hoodie  
though eyes seem slightly grayer.  
He leans on the railing, breathes dew-tinged air  
and almost tumbles over the edge.  
I spring to my feet; panic sears—  
but he's safe!

Regaining his balance, hand clutches racing heart,  
and eyes raise abruptly to mine. But he  
draws himself up, spins back—  
vacant walls, vacant home  
couch sold to the neighbors  
painting propped against suitcase.  
And as the door clicks shut for the final time,  
I turn my gaze to the array of windows  
rocking chairs missing their armrests  
jeans draped upon drooping lines  
porch plants placed atop piled papers  
across the courtyard.

## STILL

It might be that speck of glass  
windowpane facet turned diamond by  
angular planes of light, cascading from  
the weary sun  
that possesses you to stop along  
the waterfront.

Sliding over stainless steel,  
landing on a wooden dock  
staring at shadows.  
Ancients,  
boarding elongated canoes  
traveling from summer cove  
to autumn Atlantic...  
The waters, still.

Today, reflections teem with chaos  
on paved Benevolent, Hope,  
Providence Place—wily winds wind  
through crowds, snatching receipts, plastic bags,  
chocolate cheesecake containers  
abandoned upstream  
in a plastic grave, crushed under the  
webbed feet of Canadian geese.

You stand, watercolor's muse—  
Since when did a reflection  
make you still, not bring out the  
restlessness in your eyes?  
Perhaps restlessness is uncertainty.  
Providence Place covers itself with  
symbols, slogans, shifting ads.  
Will Providence bless business?

We've named streets Hope, Benevolent  
never Quiet.

Who will shop on Quiet Street?

Even the silken river—  
by day, adorned with red rubies  
from withered winterberries,  
by night, gilded with crimson threads  
from WaterFire wisps...

Even your reflection is always  
what is missing, what is needed.

Who notices?

Entranced, you lean forward  
reaching for  
the unattainable.

Splash

Windowpane speck tumbles,  
water colors dissolve, and  
stillness descends into a turmoil  
of ripples that carry the stranger,  
the refraction staring back  
past Hope and Benevolent,  
past Providence Place  
past winterberry blooms, plastic graves  
past Cove Basin and evaporating memories.

The moment drifts by  
and though part of you longs to retrieve  
that submerged speck of glass

Still, you rise

Still, you retreat

Still, you relinquish

Still

## REMINISCENCE IN RED

Summer,  
a sultry season where Sun  
embittered in mid-life  
glares at verdant Mother Earth.  
Ire burnishes terracotta skin,  
wrath singes, scorches  
Toronto tourist T-shirts  
fluorescent pink Crocs...  
Abandoned on winding  
terrace roads,  
we seek refuge within the  
scarlet canopy.

Don't you remember?  
Our times  
spent within these  
glimmering towers  
of wild cherry and plum trees.  
How  
we hoisted ourselves up  
entwined...  
enigma and escapade—  
How  
precious,  
precarious,  
our fearless  
flights  
free  
falling  
back into gugu's laughing arms.

How could I forget?  
Yet now,  
brambles brattle  
branches break  
at our calloused touch.  
Gold fades in the wake of  
such jaded memory.  
How do we fly  
when underbrush  
refuses to release?

But don't you long for it?  
Sifting satin petals  
for such forbidden fruit?  
How  
cold opalescent dew  
trickled  
down our chins  
snaking in the  
creases of our palms,  
How  
intoxicating  
the sweet sting of  
triumph.

Haven't you noticed?  
Forbidden fruit was  
never so forbidden  
practically public domain.  
Tentative, we pick one,  
teeth tear purple flesh—  
Bruised, acidic.  
Wouldn't we prefer  
Costco cherries?

But more magic remains!  
I implore you, look farther, further...  
See?  
How  
light turns dew to diamond.  
How  
shadow-roots coalesce to faces.  
How  
sylphs whisper honeyed breezes.  
There  
our favorite tree! We took a  
shard of shale,  
etched our name  
into its bark.

More magic to mourn.  
Villagers, mosquitoes swarm,  
ravenous  
hands hide hearts  
in woven trays.  
I drift through limbs and bodies  
yank straw hat over hooded eyes  
saunter down beaten rise  
towards highway  
towards village  
towards AC.

So you've abandoned me.

Flowering moments  
evanesced  
Summer fruits  
tumbled...  
Before realizing  
I was suffocating  
the roots interlocked.  
You buried me.

I'm sorry.

But perhaps...  
we buried each other?

For aren't trees  
perpetually  
in the act of  
burying themselves?  
How  
if their roots do not  
cling to darkness  
if their branches do not  
create the canopy  
if their fruits do not  
sweeten the soil,  
do they still stretch  
skyward?

Look up.  
Dusk descends.  
Velvet clouds drape  
burnt-out Sun.  
Dandelions dance in  
spotlights, moonbeams  
wispy gowns woven  
of crystalline threads.

I'm starting to understand.  
Our scarlet canopy's  
vanished, vanquished  
by the trickle of time  
every day, every hour  
weathered  
red...



But isn't it grand?  
How  
in this moment,  
we linger on the path  
between then and there  
adventures flickering  
on the back of our eyelids  
sparks etched into bone  
Hearts burning with  
red reminiscence...

Breathe.  
I miss this.  
How  
unexpected.

## CERAMIC BOYS

Nin smiles at every stranger,  
falling for the ones who smile back  
She describes her world in  
pastels I can never remember:  
crushed cigarettes  
ripped “free Tibet”  
T-shirts, tanned arms  
rose quartz charms  
secret cuts, a bruise  
floral tennis shoes  
as if reciting lyrics—  
taken from Taylor Swift,  
carved into pottery. I recall  
evenings, hovering over her left shoulder  
shiny black boots working the pedal  
hands spinning mud into art;  
alone, I collect a lump from the  
bent bucket’s plastic walls and  
try to spin  
but mud slips and  
lodges in bitten nails.

Nin is the greatest romantic I know,  
and the greatest cynic.  
She thinks hearts are clay—  
muddy brown, coarse, cold.  
Ceramic boys,  
polished mouths, glazed faces  
sculpt wonder  
Sometimes, we call  
her voice—glitch  
rambling, evoking  
startling images:

a shared moment in time  
a 'how's your life going?'  
a reciprocated smile—  
common courtesy, a miracle.  
I long to see through her eyes,  
but cynicism's lost in translation:  
I expect nothing from strangers,  
they still disappoint.

Nin builds altars for her little men,  
decorated with flaws.  
She clings to quick encounters,  
safe, superficial relationships;  
1:30 AM, her thoughts spinning,  
cupping paragraphs:  
Lizard Tech-Bros, Elusive Seniors  
insecurity, self-deceit  
problematic parents  
drunken hook-ups  
SoundCloud albums—  
she claims they're torturous while  
listening to every track,  
memorizing every word.  
On the phone, I tell her they're toxic;  
"I know," her voice, lighthearted  
places them on far-flung pedestals  
she cannot reach but never stops trying;  
misplaces her heart, transforms it to art  
shatters it, shelves it, starts anew.

Nin is two years older than me,  
but sometimes I think she's ageless.  
She doesn't date, doesn't want to date,  
lives a Taylor Swift song with  
every boy who doesn't know her  
turns her life into a one-woman play,

pastel loves, ceramic dreams.  
She talks more, laughs more, recollects  
mundane conversations that have  
long slipped my memory.  
I don't like pink, nor pottery, nor Taylor  
but sometimes, I want to remember,  
so I find myself keeping her words  
in the lopsided mouth of the pot she  
gave me to glaze and when  
her texts illuminate it  
in late-night musings,  
I stroke down splotched walls and  
pause  
contemplate  
the strangers to whom I smiled  
and the ones who smiled back.

## BLOOMING

She wakes in obscurity  
observes your facade  
floral fragrance  
brushy filaments  
blooming across your brow  
pulls petals, necks, waists,  
years ripen, light nipping  
collarbone sepals  
v-necks dip  
torsos, hips  
pieces, strips  
black cuts contours  
caressing supple curves...  
there weren't thighs  
yesterday, but all is  
forgotten, for  
Now, they say, is  
nothing  
more than eulogy  
for Then.

On the train,  
She traps waking dreams,  
fluorescent screens,  
iPhone 13, ultramarine,  
every swipe, She lurks  
scarlet lips, sensual smirks  
light starved skin  
dainty, diaphanous  
phantom flowers  
eyes caged in wings,  
double-lids taking flight  
glitter and paint

rigor, restraint  
shackles look so  
free in gold  
self-imposed  
For isn't freedom  
just the side  
through the slits  
where  
the world unfolds?

Suddenly, he stumbles  
through closing doors  
never mind the gap  
his eyes hitch on  
curves  
lips curve  
steps swerve  
words drag from  
the back of his throat  
"You're so beautiful"  
he starts, you start, he  
grins, spins, pins  
you between him and  
Her—follow Her lead  
feigning interest  
in earbud songs  
nose twitching  
twitching from his  
cheap cologne  
alcohol pads or  
just alcohol  
age sags in bags under  
eyes, time flies  
you stare at him  
staring at  
"long pretty legs"

he compliments too  
you thank him for nothing  
but stomach knots  
flowers fall, fragrance fades  
chains contract, curves cinch  
tighter  
tighter  
tighter

So you dash off at the next  
STOP  
thrust yourself in a public  
bathroom, a scream still  
building but why is it  
THERE  
wash him off but  
She'll never come clean.  
So you stand, trace  
budding hips, floral lips  
filaments  
sepals, petals  
stigma  
legs he called so  
BEAUTIFUL  
wondering how you looked  
at yourself before Now  
buried Then  
in blooming.

## IF MOURNING BLOOMS

I could not bury my grandfather, so I buried his stories  
dug a hole in barren ground      between rivers of blood      his trace lingering  
planted seeds they tossed backseat      on winding car rides to Providence      watered with  
tears— they knew him enough to weep      waited for memories to bloom      in perpetual  
emptiness.      I never remembered, but the stories went like this:

Story One, my mother's,  
slate gray pathways      shaded fountains dipped in Spring      dappled leaves catching  
white foil, Haagen Daz      he bought from Shanghai last week,      thinking of Now  
crisp breeze, pollen stains      crisp professor's suit      crisp chocolate crunches beneath his teeth,  
her teeth tainted black from cheap cough medicine      he spooned her  
when she still fit in his arms

now she dances, he glances,      entranced by her smile      sweeter than any American dessert  
years later,      Mom chases      dreams to America,      yet she's lost her sweetness,  
so Mom leaves Häagen-Dazs back      There      Slate, Spring  
tasting childhood vicariously      through chocolate grins      vanilla laughs...  
why do memories melt so fast?

Story Two, my sister's,  
pale couch, mahogany shelves      spinning fan stutters      heat creeps through shutters  
he grabs her mind, spins      Shui Hu, Ne Zha,      thousand rivers, ten thousand mountains  
She loves Journey to the West      Monkey King's fiery temper  
he brings his wrath upon      White Bone Demon; she's clever,  
so she sheds her body before she dies      transforms, evades, survives      three chances,  
three lives  
though foxes have nine,      so three isn't many, my sister replies,  
before realizing most people hardly live one  
As she grows, adventure slip      farther, reality      bombards her      but sometimes, she  
closes her eyes      envisions demons in disguise...      childhood dwindling.



Story Three, my own

scrambled    secondhand    diary entries    scraped 2 AM memories    back when he held a pen  
steady,    strong, unflinching    calligraphy numbers arching    across endless pages  
so he filled one sheet    set a timer to two    sat on a stool as I languished  
four times seven is twenty-seven    no, twenty-eight, you fool  
he never called me fool    even when I belittled myself;    when I finished he took  
scallion soda crackers from    the cabinet by piano room    presenting my Nobel Prize  
crossing his legs as warmth    evanesced negative space    savoring silence.

When they ask me to bury him, I bury his stories  
cut, copy, craft details    disfiguring the page until I forget what they mean    sacrificing  
for what I want them to mean    snatching the person woven    between disjointed threads,  
he disintegrates    dirt sifting through fingers, abandoning a mirage,    an  
empty grave.    So lately, I've excavated    what remains:

His name.    scrawled in looping physician's letters upon    translucent orange flasks  
lids twisting, twisting    CVS pills—white, blue, red  
I laughed; it sounded like    "Good Egg" double entendre    though it was only that way because  
romanization know no characters.

His age.    sagging weight on    lips, legs, laughs    he eased in rocking chair  
watching neighbors    walking huskies, shepherds    swerving scarlet convertibles  
moments, minutes, millennia    zipping past, gaze trailing    back only to fixate on  
gleaming graphics    air-conditioned voices—    Jinan's weather. Time settled in eyes,  
unfathomable.

His silence.    silence I despised, for it weighed upon me like it    weighed upon him,  
but just once    I recall stumbling home, collapsing in tears. He rose, light tugging Time  
as he worked tissues from the little box, lying by Grandma's    lemon cough drops  
on the nightstand.    Crossing the room, every step  
fell, elongating seconds, pressing    fragile love into palms, pulling    flesh beside lips  
upright... silence never felt so soothing.

His death, my sister cried, my mother didn't I shrugged off his weight, went about my routine  
 two weeks later, a conversation poked out of school's fresh soil: Grandfathers  
 I opened my mouth, dirt flooded in, words buried I had no more Grandfathers,  
 so that day I dashed home, collapsed by the rocking chair waiting for a tissue he  
 never gave me, suspended silence, suffocating Death, though I've never died, never lost,  
 never buried more than silence to start.

Look.

A picture of us smiling. I hover over his shoulder glasses slipping down my  
 nose, his nose, he points to my phone my sister's old iPhone laughing the first laugh  
 I don't recall hearing  
 What enigmas lie upon photographed screen? I'll never know, though  
 I pretend it's a photo of us smiling at my iPhone with a photo of us smiling at my iPhone,  
 looping recursively extending one photo forever.

See?

Once, between when he died in body, and he died in spirit Grandma  
 called claiming he spoke our names amidst muddled dreams so we clamored to screen  
 smiles pinned, high, wide glitch see glitch glitch see She pointed us out,  
 but his eyes vacant He never saw us. He never saw me.

So, in the end, I bury absence, a language I never shared never cared to learn for him  
 a silence I never waited always hated to bear with him  
 a smile I never offered every morning he flipped my switch on new light  
 every evening he flipped the news of a country he left for my tongueless, witless, mindless  
 presence

I bury grief for how do I grieve someone I hardly knew?

So, Yaya, if mourning blooms or if stories wither or if somewhere in soil  
 sweetness, silence, slate, spring, skies, stars  
 every trace of my face that once was yours every breath you left me to breathe you see me  
 I'm sorry I couldn't love you as I should but I hope, in parting you loved me too.

It's late autumn,                      backseat piled high                      leeks,                      hardneck garlic  
tomatoes burnished blood-red                      by yesterday's light                      sweet potatoes we pulled, pruned,  
one by one,    earth to hearth                      bed to breakfast                      wedding bands, chipped nails  
tangled in twine, rust, roots                      dusted with dew,                      forgotten farewells.

Should we take a drive? Why not? But where?      Back home, of course. But home's not here.  
Home used to be.      So it would seem...san-yao-jiu then.      as in 319?

Now, scarlet smears windows, wind winding past windshield wipers, cracks carved from  
every New England snowfall... That one. Once, or twice, or too long ago,  
I thought it a dragonfly, immobilized in glass poised for the day when  
we sold our Lexus to some secondhand dealer on Route 1 where a scruffy, overalled man would  
scrub it clean, fling it free. sometimes I see it writhe when I'm half-asleep,  
or half-depressed, or a mess enough to hallucinate dead dragonflies broken glass  
But, for now it contemplates stiff, steady, silent awaiting our turn.

Which one is it?      Around the corner.      The one on the hill?      The one behind it.  
It looks so strange.      I figured.      Was it always so small?      It looks the same.  
You've just gotten bigger.

I never envisioned 319 as a mass of cracking paint beige rooves, cobalt panes,  
summer's remains white dusting stairways night staring outwards eclipsed in maples  
Shrubs flat as tables  
food shoved in cans, blue Subaru, asphalt, road salt, porch pumpkins perched,  
plain, pale, stale... shorter than trees shorter than me though only by the garage  
if I stand tiptoe though that won't happen unless I tiptoe across  
yellowing yard, toy truck in the grass no longer mine to claim redder than flame  
redder than shame but why blame myself for forgetting this place as home?

There was a heart, no? etched in glass, I stared through one face      my sister stared back  
we raced between shutting doors      as my father fried      rice and egg in wok  
it wasn't all talk...      I remember a heart.      where is it?

Dad's towers too!      big brown buildings between                      traffic lights, four or five  
ducks, trucks, telephone poles   hills framed in crimson                      in November's dim sun  
we drove past every evening      for dripping dip cones down by Dairy Joy, but      now it sells  
prawns for way too much      and the hill's gone brown      and the towers are Dad's      no longer.

There it is!      down Concord Road      amidst rain-soaked eaves                      crunching maple leaves  
metal sprigs, raking                                      stone wall snaking—                      the sign!  
book shape, black trace,      insignia, blue, font reused, 1835                      two-minute drive  
all those 7 AM strolls to its                      rusted metal pole...      it hasn't changed.      And yet,  
when all the remains                      is a sign      not a place                      you know you've lost.

Let's go.                      So fast?                      What's left?                      We might never come back.  
No need. I'm done.      Said good bye?...good bye. Now let's go home. All right. Good bye—  
Wait.

Home... Bye bye, 319      welcome sign      stone street, fresh leeks,      paint, panes, maple tree  
two towers Dad owned when world spun around me      little shop selling      prawns I'll never buy  
I tried, alas... Bye bye, me every cell replaced                      every moment misplaced  
buried summer buds      reborn from yet another autumn      but why grieve falling leaves?  
what is memory      when feelings fade?      what are we, but      moments remade?  
It's 3:20 now                      let's go home.

## EARRINGS

Delia's boyfriend called her "Queen"                      bestowing Crowns from Claire's.  
glass and jade, gold inlaid,                      diamonds, faux                      but who knows; they glimmered  
and lit her heart aglow.                      Who cares for \$9.99 love                      purchased for show?

Every date, couch movie,    pool party at Julia's where they ravaged her father's wine cellar,  
collapsing on grass,                      yellow, parched,                      Delia posed before mirror  
painting lashes, cat-like girls    on Instagram, swiping earrings,                      dangling Crowns;  
he twirled them 'round                      tennis-callused fingers                      before leaning in...  
when she danced home                      they smelled of love                      and liquor                      and \$9.99 nothings  
parched of sweetness    on yellowing grass    Do you love me? she asked,                      but who cares?

On the rack, other earrings—    oyster-ish pearls from a mother                      she couldn't recall  
woven wires back    last Winter Ball                      patterned tablets for                      some political cause  
lucky draws, thrift stores                      Natick Mall, third floor                      memories left to drown...  
Each despised Crowns—    for Delia never took another                      just Crowns, always Crowns.  
When Delia departed,                      they swung, every thrum                      air and floor, pendulums  
knocking Crowns off-kilter.                      Backs chipped, gold stripped,                      pairs falling loose,  
still, Crown clung,    upon rack's high rung                      precious, precarious                      waiting for a savior.

The earrings watched TV                      with Delia's mother                      harem dramas,  
banned in the crackdown                      tales of silken women                      adorned in mourning  
scraping snow off branches                      scraping skin off hands                      perpetually preparing  
for an Emperor who    never arrived                      they strived for favor                      died in waiting.  
Consorts, concubines, noble ladies    attendants and second attendants                      even palace maids,  
though those    affairs flared up quickly                      dissipating in episodes                      for a breach in code  
or more likely for wine                      filled with cyanide                      all's fair, love is war.

As flowers faded,                      women jaded,                      earrings wept,                      Crowns kept  
silent    for Delia loved them                      and they loved how her eyes shone                      when she hung them  
from her ears, illuminated in                      blushing joy of \$9.99 present                      meant for ever...

But he broke up with her      on Sunday      at Julia's pool      kissing her cousin,  
fingers tangled in      false earrings,      she tore one Crown off ear,      thrusting in water; it  
sank, cried, begged,      shared mornings, moments      devotion, delusion, despair...  
Delia turned until      Crown drowned      in muddy chlorine and Love lost its \$9.99 Queen.

When Crown tumbled off      dead bottom, others scoffed—      losing favor was common  
but a pair      missing one      was hardly a pair...      so who cares?  
Who weeps      for the      cheap      broke      broken?

So when a new pair      Hearts      twisted themselves around      rack's prongs  
Crown said      "Fine"      for love was everything      until it was gone.

**XIAO MADDOCK-MARK '23**  
**THIRTY DAY PRODIGY**

I looked at her. She was thin, delicate, as if the force of a rose petal falling on her head could break her.

"Is it true?" I asked

She stared, her eyes, dark, void. I had to look away.

"Is what true?"

As she spoke, the world stood silent, extending its reach, catching every syllable blowing in the wind.

"Is it true that you can create a violin prodigy in thirty days?"

She paused before speaking. I imagined her words more important than all seven wonders of the world.

"No, it is not true," she said, "but I do know the secret."

"How to become a violin prodigy?"

"What you do depends on you," she stated.

The words rolled in my mind.

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"I cannot make you one, it is up to you!" she repeated.

Twisting and turning, my hands picked at the hem of my shirt.

"What will it cost?"

Delicate Features looked down at me. Her face tired, exhausted, also proud, projecting mysterious pride.

"A lifetime."

"A lifetime?"

"Every day you will live to play the violin. And when you are not performing, you will play in your mind. The violin is your future!"

"Will you teach me?"

She bowed her head slightly

"Come inside."

I followed her and began my climb.

In the great scheme of things, my mountain was a mere grain of sand.

But I needed to climb this mountain.

The first of many.





## RAILROAD

He remembers the final nail  
The completed track  
Snaking around the county  
Watching day by day  
People passing  
Conductor shouting  
A woman's high heels click clacking  
Workmen loading carts filled with crates  
He waits  
Hoping to see her  
Hoping she will return  
A wish not to be fulfilled  
He knows that too  
But he keeps dreaming  
For just a glimpse  
A crow caws  
A broken promise



## CAFE

A place exists  
neither here nor there  
larger on the inside  
smaller on the outside  
A cafe  
existing only in dreams,

A mystery  
beyond time  
where it is always  
morning,  
evening,  
night  
Only here  
Can my cafe be found.

Walk through the doorway  
to your destination  
be willing to pay the price

Don't get distracted

The streets never end,  
alleys loop in on themselves,  
Non-existent buildings appear and disappear  
In the morning mist...  
Even the breeze that blows  
Serves a purpose  
Be wary, it is nature's infinite maze.  
A complex journey, but worth it all the same

There is a gentle, tranquil peace  
to this cafe  
That can only exist in our dreams.

## TUB OF KIMCHI

My sister bought  
a gigantic tub  
of kimchi—  
three pounds  
if we're being exact

We let it ferment for two days  
and suddenly I discovered endless possibilities  
In rice  
Soup  
Dumplings...  
good even by itself  
yet  
I was petrified  
by a permeating  
indecisive nature  
since I was young

In my hesitation  
I found that in only a few days  
most of it was gone  
Desperation calls for action  
but I thought no thoughts

Eating straight from the tub  
I came to the joyous conclusion  
it's better not to think all

Unless, of course, you're planning to cook—  
which never turns out well otherwise  
So my advice:  
think only about that  
all the rest—  
insignificant

## ON THE OTHER SIDE OF A SCREEN

I hear feet shuffling  
Glasses clinking  
People speaking  
The pitter patter of playful footsteps  
Emanating from the other side of a screen

I see faces  
Looking  
at me  
But mostly  
Looking  
at themselves  
Making sure  
they look  
as good as they feel,  
Maybe even better.

Life all about  
People moving from here to there  
Gliding across my screen in a fluid motion  
Like raindrops on a car window  
So, not all that fluid.

Sometimes, I see people speaking  
outside the frame of this little box  
Muted,  
A game of charades  
I can only guess what they are saying  
based on their few movements,  
or the words I imagine  
From the shape of a mouth.

I'm a spectator,  
Outside observer  
Ghost,  
Phantom  
Unseen  
Unheard  
unless I forget  
to silence myself  
And I might say  
or do  
things I wouldn't normally  
in front of people.  
It only lasts a second,  
Before I realize, or someone else realizes...  
And then I, in great shame, hide myself inside the comfort of  
the blank screen.

When the day ends, I stand up  
My back concerningly sore,  
Due to bad posture  
and it makes odd cracking sounds when I stretch  
Then I lean over and shut off my computer  
Until I need it again the next day  
But I try not to think about that  
too hard.

**ASHLEY HILL '26**  
**LIFE OF A GIRL**  
*(Inspired by Jamaica Kincaid)*

Wear more makeup; you look tired. Wear less makeup; you look like you're trying too hard. Put on less clothes; no one will like you unless you show some skin. Put on more clothes; you're distracting the boys. Workout more; I don't like girls who are fat. Workout less; girls with muscles look manly. Eat healthier; you're showing your lunch. Don't just have salads; you eat like a bird. Dye your hair; I like blondes. Go natural; I don't like girls that are fake. Don't get pregnant; your life will be ruined. Don't make a guy use protection; that doesn't feel as good. When are you getting married? You would be a great wife. Don't get married yet; you're too young. Get a job; earn your own money. Stay at home; take care of the kids. Why isn't dinner ready? I want a home-cooked meal. What is this? Your food tastes bad. I like a woman who knows what she wants; be authoritative. Why are you talking? Your opinion doesn't matter. Wear a suit; they look professional. Why are you wearing men's clothes? Go back to dresses. Get some botox; your wrinkles are coming through. What's wrong with your face? You don't look any younger. And why are you sitting here, crying, instead of doing what I've asked?

## WORLD OF WHITE

You roll over in bed, feeling it's later than usual. Then it hits you. Your eyes fly open, finding the window. Everything, as far as you can see, covered in snow. Glittering, glistening, glistening in the sunlight. A perfect, untouched world of white. Darting downstairs, you wrestle with snow gear. Mom offers a woolen scarf and hat, but you just ache to be out there. Opening the door, a blast of cold slaps your face. But you don't care. Racing outside, you fling yourself into fresh powder. Spinning around, dragging yourself through snow banks, flopping down to make snow angels, building igloos with bricks of ice, throwing snowballs at your little brothers who are so annoying. But sledding is the best part. You stand atop the hill, a little scared but mostly excited. Traveling down, down, down, picking up speed as you go. The wind whips cheeks, spraying snow in your eyes. Eventually, you come to a stop. Several hours later, you arrow back to your house. Fingers, toes, ears, nose — all as cold as snow. Soon, roads turn to slush. Grass and dirt peek to the surface. The world of white disappears. Still, you smile, knowing it was there.

**SOPHIA BLYTHE '23**

**REMEMBER?**

Do you think of me, the way I, you?

Your wistful face

appearing

in math class,

calculating numbers,

when I run,

writing,

at dinner,

in the shower,

falling asleep,

and

when I wake up.

You conquer my thoughts,

my very being,

occupying all of me.

I call out your name,

but my voice doesn't touch you.

Why so far away?

My words grow thin,

cracks in the sidewalk,

cocooned,

only hatching when I will feel you near.

Like the moon,

a point in the distance,

I see you glowing,

gleaming,

glistening,

every fiber of my being

wants to hold you,

be held by you.



Then in a blink,  
you are out of reach,  
out of sight.  
The moon, the sun, the stars,  
the cosmos,  
I know you are out there.  
My heart,  
searches.  
My brain,  
spirals.  
Alone  
my thoughts filled with you.

I have written your name till my fingers ache,  
in my journal's locked pages,  
asking questions, needing answers.

Why  
Why  
Why  
Why

I see you through a jalousie,  
you are busy inside.  
My perspective, clouded  
my view, foggy.  
What hurts is  
I am not at your side.

Love,  
a duality—  
depths of despair  
elations of light  
Why  
Do I love what I cannot have?

## DEAR EXPECTATIONS

Dear Expectations,  
i'm not sure how to feel  
about you.  
You've tormented me,  
    Like a puppeteer.  
You've sucked all the energy out of me,  
i'm a battery,  
constantly on low-power mode.

On the other hand,  
I wonder if it is you who has made  
me  
driven. Pushing me, taunting me,  
I'm a puppy, and you are holding  
the bone  
just  
slightly  
out of reach.

I can thrive without you,  
You're just in my head,  
saturating my being.

I'm writing you away,  
I expected this poem  
to heal,  
and it did in  
a way.  
We'll always  
have a convoluted relationship.

Yours sincerely.

## A TABLE

à Table,  
our call to dinner,  
hungry,  
happy,  
faces gather around  
oak dining table,  
once belonging to Great Grandmother  
Gisele, whom my middle name comes from.

First Mom and I

prep,  
chopping,  
sauteing.

We  
caramelize,  
dice,  
fry,  
blend,  
adding  
salt,  
fat,  
acid,  
heat.

Hands working,  
heads down,  
blabbing about boys,  
recipes,  
trips to Iceland,  
daily dramas,  
snippets.  
Tectonic plates shift  
as our creation transforms  
from raw to cooked.

Onion shells,  
pepper seeds,  
pieces of dried spinach pasta  
fall at my feet.

Flour,  
lemon juice,  
olive oil,  
stains on my gingham apron.

Chaos—  
our kitchen transforms into  
a Michelin-starred restaurant.

à Table  
we gather,  
brought together by  
a sumptuous meal.  
All pots and pans employed,  
remnants of ingredients scatter  
on oak floor and marble tabletop  
We don't mind.  
Relishing the moment  
spent together  
around the table.

## FALL BACK

Midnight comes in  
the afternoon.

Daylight savings ends,  
time slipping—  
    a little girl on ice skates.

Trees shiver, shake,  
roots warm with deceased

leaves. World quiet,  
hibernating,  
hiding,  
healing,  
staring out my window,  
just  
darkness. I need more

light to warm frozen fingertips.  
A fire to stare into,  
    igniting thoughts.  
What do I fall back on—  
    these dark days?

## WHY EAT GOURDS?

I don't get it.  
When the first leaf falls  
pumpkin lines shelves,  
    spices,  
    breads,  
    purees.

New recipes featuring  
    field pumpkins,  
    butternut squash,  
    calabash,  
    acorn squash.

I don't want to eat

spicy peanut and pumpkin  
soup or pumpkin parfait.  
I've heard through the vine  
it tastes fine.  
I think

gourds belong as centerpieces,  
    autumnal decorations,  
not a dish on my plate.

## SNOOPY'S GONE LOOSE!

Down Central Park West the floats fly.  
People peering out of penthouses,  
oohs and ahhs.  
We all watch,  
turkeys, basted  
potatoes, mashed,  
smeared.  
Shivering in my parka,  
seated on bare stone,  
encircling Central Park,  
imagining what if Snoopy get's  
loose. Headlines read  
Snoopy over Central Park!  
I wonder where he'll go,  
visit Rockefeller tree,  
munching on super-salted pretzel  
a bratwurst from the corner  
kiosk, before checking in  
at the Plaza for the night.  
He would be alone on Thanksgiving.  
I'll invite him,  
lasso him, dragging him across the park.  
An extra seat at my table, Snoopy!  
Alas,  
he  
just drifts,  
bobbing up and down.  
Bye, Snoopy. See ya next year.  
I whisper,  
stomach growling,  
preparing for a turkey  
coma.  
I wonder,  
if Charlie Brown  
will pay him a visit,  
for old times' sake.

## THANKFUL

A day of thanks,  
historically distorted,  
marked on our calendar:  
Thanksgiving.

Sharing thanks,  
    friends,  
    family,  
    et cetera,  
    et cetera.  
I am thankful for them.

And the etceteras, but  
what about little things?

(and imagine all that follows in tiny font)

Ask me now,  
I would say  
Tea.  
I'm thankful for tea  
in my cornflower Le Creuset mug.  
Cupping it in my hand,  
smiling amicably.

I'll take any brew,  
pg tips,  
homemade chai,  
assam  
any breakfast,  
    preferably English  
    or  
    French,



green,  
ginger,  
jasmine,  
chamomile—  
lavender. I'll take a cuppa

any time. Is it so hard to believe?

So, on this day of thanks,  
I'm thankful for many a thing,  
especially the little ones.

(and this phrase too.  
In tiny print)

## GOLDEN LIGHT

Racing down the FDR  
Our Audi arrows to Tribeca  
Coca-Cola sign on my left  
A crimson symbol  
In Queens  
Not unlike  
Fitzgerald's green light

Pink sun  
Bleeds into sky  
A bloom of violet roses  
Buildings  
Awakened  
By the golden light  
In the city that never sleeps

A feeling of sonder—  
The realization that  
Others live lives  
Vivid and complex  
Hits me  
Hurtling through Manhattan  
To the base of the fish  
Each passing car  
Yellow taxi  
Apartment  
Containing people  
With their own complicated  
And twisted lives  
Lives  
Well and poorly  
Lived  
It's not all about me

I think  
My cheek pressed against  
A smudged window

\*\*\*

Now a memory  
Replays  
A favorite song  
Like Grandmother's perfume  
Lingering

Perched at my desk  
Alone  
Yet aware  
Of the myriad lives  
Outside my window  
Beneath a lamp  
Casting a shadow across my face  
Juxtaposed from my computer's fluorescent light  
Words peel from fingertips  
Crawling like ants along the page  
Keys click  
Passing time  
Time well spent  
Crafting words  
Capturing  
That time  
We sped down the FDR  
In a black Audi  
In the golden light

## NEW YEAR'S DAY

What makes this day different?  
I ask the empty room  
Removing bottles  
Picking up crumbs of the past year  
Or is it merely cracker crumbs?

Above my pale blue eyes  
Sparkles  
Speckle  
A starry night sky  
A remembrance  
Of last night—  
Flutes of Champagne  
Caviar on blinis  
Glitter on the floor  
Gatsby, proud

Resolutions?  
People ask  
Why do we only start anew  
Now?  
2021 is gone  
But the memories—  
Fragments of the past year  
Linger

Nothing feels different  
Just  
Another  
Day ticked off the calendar  
We simply begin  
Again  
Another twelve months  
Before one more  
Champagne bottle  
Pops  
And hors d'oeuvres  
Served  
Happy New Year  
I guess

**GUNNAR EGGERTSSON '26**

**WORDS**

Words and I have a bad relationship  
Words are illusory  
Fleeting images, fragments of meaning  
Creating a semblance of thought

Words careen from the back of my mouth to the tip of my tongue  
Trying not to fall down my gullet  
But falling anyways  
Gripping the sides of my throat preventing me to speak  
Stuttering  
Stuttering

Words and I have a bad relationship  
Words fail me  
When I try to relay a story  
Explain an event  
Salvage a long-time relationship  
Words betray me

When I call on words they refuse to listen  
Appearing of their own accord  
Sounding at their own direction  
Rebellious  
Uncooperative  
Occasionally, taking me hostage

Famous actors, ones with charismatic words  
Bring men and women to tears,  
Dazzling them even  
In dimly-lit cinemas along the interstate  
Their words when strung together with gumption and force  
Like those of fearless leaders

Move mountains  
Tear families apart

Words and I have a bad relationship  
They don't listen,  
They don't care  
Dogs just bark  
They don't need words  
So, why do I?

But I am defined by my words  
No, addicted to them:  
Their sound,  
Taste,  
Texture,  
Smell

Words and I have a bad relationship  
But what am I without my words?

**ROBIN LINDEN '26**  
**WORDS I DIDN'T SAY**

Three months after my third birthday, I attended my mother's funeral. A week before, she took her life in a cramped Boston apartment. At the time, I could barely read, much less write. I sat and watched as others spoke about the wonderful and confusing person she was. It's been twelve years, I can read well now, write even better. These are the Words I Didn't Say.

My mother reminds me of art.  
The kind that makes you stop in your tracks.  
The kind that forces you to stare.  
Magnetic  
My Mother was magnetic  
Drawing in others  
With a smile  
Laugh  
Words  
I lack this gift.

My mother reminds me of wind.  
Transient  
Unpredictable  
Drifting from place to place  
Lingering  
then departing.  
In the summer, an occasional warm breeze  
But in winter all I could feel was cold.  
Even little children  
A perfect family  
Beautiful home  
Couldn't make you stay.  
I didn't leave.

My mother has missed twelve years.  
She has missed ear piercings  
First kisses and  
Christmas.  
Missed her two kids  
Growing up,  
Becoming strong women  
Who are  
Nothing like their mother.  
She has missed us crying for her,  
We're puzzled  
She left,  
Missing all the pain she has caused.  
For twelve years, she wasn't a parent.  
We were here the entire time.  
My mother was loved.  
Loved by her children,  
Who saw no wrong  
In her tendency to destroy.  
Loved by her friends,  
Who saw her breathtaking art.  
Loved by her partner  
My Mom,  
Who followed her wind like autumn leaves.  
And just like my mother,  
I too am loved.

That is where similarities end. Only love ties us together. There is nothing else. At least, nothing that I'm able to see or understand. My mother is gone; I am here. Now, I have said the words I didn't say before, even though she is unable to hear them. I'm not comforted to know there's no other way to let go. Nothing I do will ever be enough. But, at least, I can write these words.



## REALIZATION

I lie on the cold kitchen floor.  
I'm wearing your sweatshirt, the scent of you sewn into every strand.  
The refrigerator, my only source of light, its bulb persists,  
Its door shouts, "close me."  
I sit there from one in the morning to three.  
And all I think about is you.  
I check my iPhone, listen to your voicemails, read your texts.  
You are sweet. Lovely. Compatible. Kind.  
But you are nothing else. You are the bare minimum. You choose when to love me.  
You will never and have never sat on your kitchen floor, waiting for a message, inhaling my sweatshirt, pretending I'm there.  
This is because we accept the love we think we deserve.  
I accept your mediocrity and your bare minimum and your Wednesday morning type of feeling.  
Let's be honest, you're a Wednesday kind of guy. You are the color orange, and the feeling before a test.  
Burnt bread.  
And I am so much more.  
I am Friday night, forest green, the feeling of getting a 100 on a test.  
I am perfectly baked meringue.  
I accept you because I have a distorted image of what I deserve, and you accept me because you think that you're better than you are.  
Lying on the cold kitchen floor  
I realize this.  
We accept the love we think we deserve.

## ACCEPTANCE

You tell me every day that you love me.  
And every day I know it is a lie.  
Because love does not look like us.  
I grew up seeing what love looked like.  
My parents. That was love. There were no lies.  
Sunday afternoon walks.  
The white and brick house next to the lake.  
The spontaneous dinners on a Wednesday night to a club they were far too old  
to go to.  
The brown piano in the living room, filled with music.  
That's love. Really.  
Our love is more like this:  
Falling, and skinning your knee, with no one at home to kiss it.  
Three text messages, sent at fifteen minutes intervals.  
I'm sorry.  
Please come back.  
I didn't mean it.  
Coffee, when it doesn't have enough sugar.  
The sound of slamming doors.  
We are the epitome of not being in love.  
So don't lie.  
Don't ever tell me again that you love me.  
Because you don't.  
We are out of love.  
I do not deserve this.  
I deserve pianos and Wednesday night dinners.  
And I no longer accept you.

## REPETITION

His texts light up my phone. 12:57 AM.  
I want to not respond. Pretend it's not real.  
But he's enticing.  
The way he smiles like he knows something I don't.  
He has hazel eyes. Blond hair. That's the best combo, and he knows it too.  
Maybe he's Wednesday, but maybe the middle of the week is the best. Maybe  
that's what I want.  
Maybe I want burnt bread, when it looks and talks like him.  
I read the text. Respond. And Repeat.  
This goes on for a whole nother hour.  
Then we want breakfast. Tomorrow. Today actually, since it's one in the  
morning.  
Croissants. Chocolate maybe with almonds on top.  
That's what we will get. And coffee, so you feel more interesting.  
When there's caffeine in my body you're not that boring.  
More of a Thursday.  
We'll be over by next week. Trust me. But then we will rinse, wash and repeat.  
Repeat me till I die.  
And I'll rinse and wash.

## SHORT FICTION

PETE PROMRAT '25

THE BICYCLE

“Why are we stopping?”

Two and a half hours before Anna Saetang hurled her bright orange twenty-one gear bicycle out the ninth story window of her downtown Canford apartment, she received a phone call.

As a child, Anna visited Thailand every summer with her family. But as college began, she found herself in the lab or the library late into the night, while her family, halfway around the world, was having a lunch of khao soi in the sticky Chiang Mai heat. The last time she had spoken with her ta was the night that she graduated college. They spoke briefly, and his voice through the phone was as garbled as his English, more noise than language. She hadn't seen him in person in seven years. He was gone now.

“Who was that?” asked Catherine, the shift manager.

“Just my mom checking in,” she lied, as she placed her phone deep in her pocket.

“Oh.”

The rest of the shift passed quietly, minutes and hours slithering past like worms in mud. After mopping the floor and clocking her hours, Anna biked back to her apartment.

\*\*\*

“You shit!”

The elevator was still broken. She knew that the landlord had no intention of fixing it, but there was some deep down part of Anna that thought today might be different.

She began to climb the stairs, her spine arched under the weight of her bicycle. It did not fit with the contours of the stairwell; she sweated and strained as she forced it through tight corners and around an unruly banister. Grease from the chain and dirt from the tires coated her forearms.

Earlier, during the call, her mother wailed. Grief resonated through her chest, spilling through the phone. Anna, however, couldn't sob, she couldn't even bring herself to cry. A mass of discomfort sat in her shoulders and the back of her throat.

She tried to remember her ta, recall his face and voice, but he was little more than a blurry shape in the back of her mind. In fact, so too was the rest of her family. Either halfway around the world, or a six hour's drive away, they were nowhere to be found. Not in front of her eyes, nor inside her head. She was alone in the stairwell.

This thought made her stagger momentarily, losing her hold on the bike. The sharp metal gear plunged into her calf.

Closing her eyes, she drew a careening breath.

Rage and blood seeped down the steps as she charged. She stomped forwards with all the force in her tired legs, trying not only to climb the stairs but to splinter them in the process. Her bike flailed around in tow, chipping paint and peeling wallpaper.

She tore open her door, and dropped her bicycle on the floor, opening the window with such aggression that a spider web of fractures spread through the glass. Her room was nine stories above the parking lot. That would be enough. She began to clamber out the window, the currents of night air poking and prodding at her body like small hands.

She was interrupted by the sight of her landlord. His car was parked in the space directly below where she perched. He sat smoking a cigarette and scrolling on his phone.

Walking to the living room, she retrieved her bike. Her breath, ragged, heaving like a dark sea. She had changed her mind.

She screamed as she shoved the bicycle through the window, the sound scraped against her mouth. Guttural, visceral; her palms, slick with sweat. One wheel emerged. She wailed, throwing her weight against the back tire, forcing it through the window frame. The handlebar. The seat. She gave it one final push, and it was plummeting to the earth below, Icarus falling into the sea.

It collapsed the roof of the Ford, slamming into her landlord's head. His body slumped forwards onto the steering wheel, pinning down the horn. Its sustained cry howled through the streets of downtown Canford, and Anna closed the window. She slumped onto her bed, letting the noise fill her ears, mourning her bicycle's brief and wondrous flight.

## TUESDAY

The noise was sharp in her ears, jabbing and shrill. A low groan escaped her lips as she reached for the alarm clock. She paused, her hand suspended above the nightstand like a goldfish in a tank. She let her arm fall limp. The clock continued, the sound a shrieking, pulsing stab.

She laid in bed for a minute or so, sinking deeper and deeper into the pillows, until the sound was little more than a dull thumping, a ball thrown repeatedly against the back of her mind.

\*\*\*

Her murky reflection stared at her from the mirror. She splashed cold water in her face, and let it drip down her chin. Her glasses sat on the toilet, her vision blurred. She leaned in closer to the mirror, and let out a sigh as her reflection came into focus.

Blackheads and whiteheads dotted her face, scattered upon her forehead and smeared in the crease between her nose and cheeks. Her lips, chapped, hair tangled and oily. Her teeth were yellow, slightly crooked in the front.

She ran her thumb along her jaw, and felt the small black hairs that scratched gently against her finger. Insects crawled just below her skin, their antennae protruding from her pores. They chittered and scurried, their limbs sending shivers up and down her body.

She began to pick at them with tweezers, uprooting as many as she could. She dropped them into the sink, down they fell like shot birds, accumulating in the white, porcelain basin. But ten minutes passed, and she was nowhere near done; in fact, it looked as though she had never started. She brushed her teeth hard, drawing blood from her gums. She turned on the water, washing pink toothpaste and black, severed antennae down the drain.

\*\*\*

The drive to school was a time and place of forgetfulness, as all too familiar shapes rushed by, blurring to a single hue, a single swirl. Fifteen minutes, for five mornings a week, that would be lost forever.

\*\*\*

"I'm sorry, I thought I put it down for today, I could've sworn that I did."

"Jesus."

"Will we be able to make it up on Sunday?"

“Will you be able to?”

“I’ll try.”

“Fuck’s sake.”

The bass in her voice bit her throat, and tears pricked her eyes. She hated herself when she was angry. The voice that emerged was not her own, it boomed and snapped maliciously. She stood silent for a moment, unable to look at anything but her shoes.

\*\*\*

She ran in a different direction than the others. They went down to the boulevard, where tall trees shaded the gravel path. She ran along the pedestrian bridge that lay parallel to the highway. The cars screamed by, the noise louder than the rain. She took her glasses off often to wipe them on her sleeve.

She ran quickly, but without strain, her feet landing gently upon the walkway, avoiding puddles and soggy leaves. She took care to never place more than two steps in each slab of sidewalk. Time dripped off of her watch, miles dripped from the back of her legs.

She passed a woman, and faltered momentarily. She was running too quickly to see her face, hear her voice, or touch her skin; she was a passing thought. But the afterimage of the woman flashed through her mind, again, persistent as an alarm clock. With each blink she saw her.

In puddles, she observed her own reflection. The rain plastered her short, black hair across her forehead and face. Her arms and legs were hairy, with lean muscles that rippled beneath her skin with each stride. Her jaw, sharp, shoulders broad and brutal.

She ran faster, trying to outpace the flickering, peripheral woman.

She did not cry until the run was over. In the stairwell, on her way to retrieve her backpack, she collapsed, body slick with rain and sweat. Soft sobs racked her body, the stairs pressed awkwardly into her ribs.

She remained there, curled like a withered leaf, for some time, contorted by her crying.

\*\*\*

“Remember Coach Eddie?” asked her mother.

“Hm?”

“You know. From tee-ball.”

“Oh. Right.”

“Did you know that he’s running for mayor?”



She laughed and set her fork down for a second. "That's hilarious."

"Isn't it? I saw him in the supermarket today."

"What'd he say?"

"He said that he hopes you're doing all right. Isn't that nice?"

She smiled. "Yeah, it is."

"How long ago was it that he was your coach?"

"Like eight, nine years maybe?"

"Wow. He still remembers you from when you were just a little boy."

"This town never forgets," her dad remarked.

"That's true. I think he'd make a good mayor."

\*\*\*

She felt the weight of the ceiling upon her slouched neck, pressing her into the floor, her spine buckling and her head bowing. Her hands trembled, causing her fork to clatter against the countertop. After some time, she excused herself, and went upstairs.

\*\*\*

She screams into her pillow, she beats her fists against the mattress. She tangles herself in blankets, an ensnared, thrashing thing. She cries herself hoarse, whispering to herself in a low voice, words that leave incisions. She calls herself terrible names, refracted echoes of the world around her. Before long, she believes herself. She claws at her pimples, pulls out the hair on her arms and legs. Agony.

Eventually she is spent. She lies on her back, a stuffed penguin pulled close to her chest. Tears in her eyes, rolling down into her nose and onto her pillow. She can't bring herself to brush them away, pulling the blankets over her face.

She yearns to be the woman in her periphery. She yearns to have slender arms and legs, and a voice that rests upon her head like a sheet of paper. She yearns to be smooth and gentle and herself. She yearns to be unremarkable, a face in a passing car. Instead of being garishly, wincingly present.

She is followed by little men, with beady eyes and hooked fingers. Nobody can see them, not even her, but they're always right behind her. Looking at her. Pointing at her. Laughing, spitting, whispering.

She stands, the blanket still draped across her body, a Halloween ghost. Slowly, carefully, she creeps around her room. She finds the little men, and

takes them by the neck. She feels them crunch in her hands, she feels them ooze down her forearms.

All night, she creeps around her room, killing. The floor is covered in bodies, her arms soaked in blood. The blanket over her head damp with sweat. Bags of sleep form beneath her eyes, fatigue fills her back and shoulders.

She continues until her alarm clock rings, the noise, water in her ears. She brings her bloody fist down onto the machine, leaving her room as still as a battlefield. She is too tired to be tired any longer.

## NINE

I woke up in the field behind my house.

Or, at least, I thought that's where I was. There was something familiar about the earth beneath my back, the way that it held my spine and cradled my shoulders. I stared up to the sky, a comfortable child in bed. Quietly, the creek bubbled in the distance; I decided I'd catch frogs later.

On the other hand, it did not seem like the field behind my house at all. For one, there were no birds. On any other early fall day, there would be sparrows, blue jays, cardinals, chickadees, flitting through the sky, singing and squawking. I listened for them, but heard only the creek. Could it be that they had already gone south for winter? Were they even the sort of bird to migrate? I couldn't remember.

I loved birds as a child. On Sundays, my dad would take me out to the field behind our house, where we sat with a cooler of drinks and watched them. He told me all sorts of interesting stuff. He'd say, "Go fetch your dad a beer, and I'll tell you a bird fact."

My dad knew lots of them. Owls can rotate their heads. Chickadees are called chickadees because their song sounds like "Chickadee, chickadee." Blue jays are notably aggressive, except for one week out of the year, when they are searching for a mate. Nobody has ever seen an oriole's egg. Most robins are right-handed, which is an uncommon trait in flying animals. A sparrow's foot has profound healing powers when removed from the bird, but highly venomous when still attached, hence the expression "As venomous as a sparrow's claw." Falcons can't resist the smell of honey, but if they get their feathers stuck in it, they never escape. Only male turkeys gobble. A left-handed robin is most surely an evil spirit, a harbinger of ruin. I could go on.

Somehow, I didn't recall any facts about migration. The only one I knew was the monarch butterfly, who migrates two thousand miles to Mexico, then dies. But a butterfly fact is barely relevant when talking about birds, so I just shrugged my shoulders.

The other thing that made me think that I was not in the field behind my house was the fact that everything was grey. The clouds were grey, the landscape blanketed in ash and dust. The blades of grass, the wildflowers, the dirt, the trees, everything was a stale, slate grey.

I decided to stand up, and investigate. I walked towards the creek, but couldn't find it, despite hearing it. This happened to me a lot as a kid. The creek was mysterious and slippery, and few knew where it truly was. But I was dead set on catching frogs, so I started to look for someone to help me find it.

I scanned the field, but the grass had grown so tall and so grey that I couldn't see anybody. I could only see the rustling of something making its way towards me. I watched the movement for a few minutes, but by the end, it was just as far away as it had been at the start. I lay back down in the grass for a couple seconds, and heard a voice.

"Hello?"

"Hello," I replied. "Where are you?"

Without saying anything, the boy emerged from the tall grass with a simple smile, holding a cattail above his head.

"Hey," I said again.

"Hi. Are you lost?"

"No, I was just looking for the creek."

"Oh. How come?"

"Frogs."

"Oh." He looked relieved.

"Do you know where it is?"

"Yeah. Come with me. You'll need a cattail too." He gestured to the one he held above his head.

"What?"

"To ward off foxes."

"I didn't know that. That's a good fox fact."

"Thanks."

"Did you know that a fox's cry is lethal to birds?"

"Of course."

We set off together in search of a cattail. We found a few just on the border of the woods, and threw one on the ground for good luck. It burst like a bang snap, sending shrapnel fluff everywhere. It was cream-colored, which looked otherworldly against the grey grass. Then, I picked another to hold above my head.

"Perfect. Let's go find that creek."

The trick to finding the creek was to always trust your ears. Your eyes would fool you, making hills that blocked the way or paths that went

backwards, but your ears were always trustworthy. Eyes are presumptuous, they try to steer you clear of things that they think might be trouble. But who are they to decide what's trouble and what's a good place to catch frogs? Ears, sound, noise; now those are your friends. Chickens are the only birds that have ears.

Anyhow, that's what we did; we followed our ears, the sound getting louder and louder as we walked, trampling grey flowers and abandoned anthills. The clouds were like hotel bed sheets overhead.

Before long, we reached the cemetery. The headstones, like teeth out of gums, cut through the dirt. We tried to read some, but most were covered in dark grey moss, or chipped beyond the point of legibility. We only saw seven that we could decipher, and I didn't like any of them.

There is a pond in the middle of the cemetery. It isn't attached to the creek, or any water for that matter. Nobody knows how it got there, or remembers a time before it appeared. An ivy-covered stone wall juts out into the center of the pond, which is strange, because it is hundreds of feet deep. It must be a very tall wall. Not that it matters, for only a small portion is visible, the rest disappears beneath the jet black water, and might as well not exist. We stopped and sat on the wall for a while, cattails held carefully overhead.

"Look at the fish," I pointed.

They were big and stupid, swimming in slow, hypnotic circles, like tethered balloons. At least I hoped they were tethered, weighted down to the bottom of the pond, for if not they could float into the sky and scare everybody.

"They're the first animals we've seen," I noticed with a start.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean we haven't seen any other animals than these fish," I said. They blubbed at me in confirmation, which made me smile. Ospreys eat fish because fishbones are rich in calcium, and the skeleton of an osprey is notoriously flimsy.

"Well, no foxes, that's for sure," the boy smiled prettily, waving his cattail at me.

"No, I guess not."

The sky was turning red, and the color hurt my eyes, because it was the first color I'd seen in a long, long time.

"Is the sun setting?"

"No."

"Oh. Is it rising?"

"No, they're lighting the fires."

"Fires?"

He looked incredulously at me. After a few minutes of silence, I was unsure if I had even asked him anything.

"What are the fires for?"

"The festival."

"Oh. Okay." Sure enough, I soon heard music and laughter wafting over the cemetery gates. Somewhere, a party was happening.

"Would you like to go?" he asked me, his smile so pretty I could kiss him.

I thought about it for a moment, and then remembered. "No, I'd still like to go find some frogs at the creek."

He said nothing, for a long time. It must've been an hour. The fish below gurgled, bloated and odd. My response to his question had been snatched up by some birds, torn away from time and space, never having existed in the first place. In this silence, I noticed that I could no longer hear the creek. The party was getting louder, the drums beating a dancing rhythm.

"Would you like to go?" he asked, his smile so pretty I could kiss him.

"All right," I felt myself say. We began to walk, and I was terrified.

I felt a tremendous weight in my chest, my lungs were filled with pebbles and rocks. As we walked, leaving the cemetery behind us, the weight grew heavier. I fell down, toppling in the grass. There was a hole in my chest, it went straight through my body. I bent downwards, and peered out to the other side. Had it been there all along? My wrists were completely crushed, my hands dangling from my forearms by mere tendon. But the boy was getting further and further away, so I stood, brushed myself off, and jogged after him.

Then came the faces. They were people like me, walking around great white pillars. I couldn't see the fires, nor hear the drums. All I saw were faces, they loomed from the grey, smiling and frowning at the same time, looking through me. I massaged the hole in my chest gently, and calmed down a little bit. After a moment, I mustered up the courage to yell to the boy, who was walking much faster than me. In fact, he was sprinting. Away.

"Hey! Hey!"

He was running too quickly. I had never been fast. I could do distance, but whenever I tried to run too hard, my lungs clamped up and I collapsed. It

didn't help that my chest was mangled, my hands almost falling off. Joyously, he held his cattail, whipping it back and forth in the air with his left hand, whooping and hollering, a robin in flight. Before long, he was in the air, and I was alone with the people and the faces.

\*\*\*

The pillars we walk around are not vertical, they curve towards each other. They are the ribcage of some enormous thing. I've seen the thing's skull a few times, but I couldn't make heads or tails of it; nobody really knows what it is. The hands are easier, they are only about as big as cars, and it's comforting to look at them. Some of the others hang out inside the skull, where it's cool and shady. I would like to do that, the air out here among the skeleton is a humid soup. But the skull scares me too much, so I steer sweatily clear.

I've long since stopped being a boy with dangling hands and ruined chest. I'm something else now, I think. Something with a face and some eyes and a heart that flutters like a falcon trapped in honey.

It was a mistake to leave the place in the field where I first woke up. Maybe, had I stayed, I could've found the creek eventually, and caught some frogs. But that's neither here nor there. I've heard that touching the water of the creek makes you forget everything you've ever known, so it wouldn't have mattered much anyways.

It was a mistake to follow the left-handed robin-boy with the cattail. My dad taught me better than that. Every so often, he brings over new people. They're always scared at first, but I help them calm down by telling them a few bird facts, and before long they're just like the rest of us. The left-handed robin-boy with the cattail sticks around for a little bit whenever he brings new people, which is nice, because it makes the foxes leave us alone. They're always snapping at our heels or taking our jackets and socks.

NIKOLAI SUCHMAN '25

SHEDIM

Where I come from, no one dies.

No one dies, but I haven't ever seen the same face twice. Ms. Horowitz, two doors down, was Mr. Liebmann yesterday. Solomon was Ben yesterday, and Judy the day before that. Does my face change too? I wonder who I was yesterday.

Where I come from, no one takes off their shoes.

I don't know why. None of it makes sense to me, really, but no one else does it, so I don't either. They wear shoes around their houses, they wear them into bed, they wear them to bathe, so I wear shoes around my house, into bed, and to bathe. That's just how it is.

I don't remember how it got to be this way. Was it ever even different? I've visited other towns before, and they're not like us. Abram, who lives six miles away, thinks something's wrong. He fills my head with stories of striyot and dybbukot, and tells me I need to leave as soon as I can.

I tell him no, and that, even if she were Ms. Greenblaat, who terrifies me, two days ago, she's Zazie today, and Zazie is my best friend.

Where I come from, no one is lucky.

I am perhaps the unluckiest of all. My first house collapsed into a sinkhole, and the second caught fire. I'm not excited to know what'll happen to this one. I brought my littlest brother to live with me five years ago, and as soon as he arrived, he came down with a terrible fever. My mother still has not forgiven me. Sometimes I think I see him flying around the graveyard.

They don't like how I spend time with the graves. I can't imagine why. I don't think it's very important, but when little David Geller, who was Ms. Weinberg the day before, threatens me with a knife, and old Bubbe Zerin hides shards of glass in my food, I stop going.

I don't know why we have a graveyard, in a town where no one dies. The graves are unmarked, and no one ever visits besides me, as far as I can tell. The things I see flying late at night aren't real, Rabbi Gelb told me. If the tracks around my house aren't there when I get home, they're not real. If I see anything I'd consider out of the ordinary, it's not real. He's helped me a lot.



I've been sick every day since I moved here. Some days it's just a migraine, some days my nose won't stop running, some days I get dizzy every time I stand up. It's like a game of Russian Roulette. I'll break out in hives, maybe, and then every time I look at something brighter than a firefly I'll nearly pass out. My mother says it's because of the shoes.

When I was a kid, I asked my cantor why we never take our shoes off. Young as I was, I knew I was out of line the second I finished my sentence. He gave me the most chilling glare I've ever been a victim of, and that night, I found my cat hung by its own intestines on my doorframe, covered in flour, and I never asked again.

## SONS OF CAIN

Gabriel has always needed some way to blow off steam. One year, he had spent a summer poisoning animals in the neighbourhood, before that grew too suspicious. Another, he picked a target who lived nearby, a nervous man whose only crime was living too close. Gabriel had slowly but steadily tormented the man from the shadows, leaving dead raccoons and dogs on his doorstep and haunting his steps until the man finally took his own life. But with the rush of death also came a hollowness once Gabriel realised he was without a distraction once again.

The opportunities have been slim in the last few months. He can't afford to be caught meddling or scheming or doing anything too obscene. So, no people and no animals (or at least no pets), and nothing too public or easily seen. It must be an act that, if caught in the midst of it, will seem as harmless hijinks, or at least easily excused.

And so, he had found a small but worthy distraction in an abandoned church a few miles away. That was where he headed tonight, his coat pulled tight around him.

As he walks, he stops now and then to gather rocks, filling his pockets to the brim. They grind against one another with each step he takes, the noise grating but satisfying. It's a promise of what is to come, and with each step, he feels a small rush run through him. The anticipation is nearly as satisfying as the deed itself. It wasn't as interesting as hurting a person, but to hurt a thing, a sacred thing? That was a close substitute.

The church is easy to miss. The trees grew around the building some time ago, enclosing the entrance and the sides. When he had inquired, Gabriel found it had been shut for at least thirty years. Catholicism had fallen out of favour in these parts and those who followed that particular faith chose to travel to the next town over, to a church with a larger congregation.

This place was empty, abandoned, and a perfect location for him to release some otherwise dangerous aggression.

Gabriel slips through the trees and finds his way to the door. He had cut them back a few months ago when he first found the church. There's an opening just large enough that he can open the door wide enough for his body to slip through.

Once inside, he pulls the wooden door shut behind him with some effort, not stopping until he hears the wood grind against the stone floor. It's a hard one to open and harder still to close, but that's good. It means he can't be snuck up on.

Gabriel makes his way forward, one hand on the wall to keep from stumbling around blindly. It's so dark in here at night, especially when the moon is waning. When it's full, enough moonlight comes through the windows that you can see the shapes inside, from the sagging pews to the rotten banners half-hanging from the walls, to the places where the stained glass was now broken or shattered.

There's still enough left for a man to have some fun. Gabriel's fingers finally find what they're looking for - the lantern hanging on the wall, right where he left it. He lifts it up and holds it in one hand, his other pulling the chimney free from its collar. Gabriel crouches and tucks the glass under his chin, holding it still while he fumbles with his box of matches. He's had plenty of practice striking them one-handed and he quickly lights one, kindling the burner and getting a flame going. He slips the chimney back on and turns up the oil, raising the lamp to seek out some pane to shatter today. Is there one of the virgin still intact?

Any thoughts of choosing a target slip from his mind the moment the light illuminates the church. Something is wrong.

The last time Gabriel had been in here, a little over a week ago, he had made quite a mess of things. There had been a dozen delicate glass decorations in the back, packed in a box long forgotten. Gabriel had smashed them all in the aisle, throwing them down and watching them break and scatter. And the time before that, he had amused himself by catching a bird in the woods and killing it on the altar, acting out a mockery of some grim ritual from one of his father's less boring books. The smell had grown strong and he had mounted the head where the dead eyes would meet Gabriel's each time he walked in.

But the glass is gone and so is the bird. There was no smell. There are other changes as well. The sagging benches have been cleaned up or removed entirely, the rotten wood missing and dark stains left on the floor where it once sat for the better part of three decades. No more banners are hanging from scraps on the walls either. But worst or most damning, someone has come through and covered the glass. There's something thick and black in the way, blocking out any light from them. Gabriel looks around and he feels his

stomach pitch as a rotten surge of fear starts to swell. What was the meaning of this?

He steps forward slowly, looking to see what other changes have been made. At the front, the altar has been cleaned. It's not just that the dead things have been removed and the other filth Gabriel spread across the altar has been taken away, but that someone has come along and cleaned it with soap and water and something else. The rusty stains are gone and a fresh cloth lies over it, and in the center sits a candelabra set with fresh, unlit candles. Someone has been here recently. Someone—

"So, you're the other visitor. I see..." A man's voice, directly behind Gabriel. He spins around, lifting the lantern high. In his fist, he grips a rock taken from his pocket, ready to throw it in the face of whoever has discovered him here.

A priest...It's a priest, but not like any Gabriel had ever seen. He looks Catholic from his robes, and his hair is long, curling to a stop below his ribs. There's something wrong about the robe he's wearing, purple instead of black, with gold around the collar and the cuffs. It seems too decadent for a priest to wear, but then Catholics were like that, weren't they? And he's young - as old as Gabriel. That clinches it. He can't be a priest. Whatever he is, he's faking it and doing a piss-poor job.

"Other visitor? I was just out for a walk and saw it through the trees. Wanted to see." Gabriel has an excuse on hand, prepared long ago when he first came across the building, and he quickly moves to position himself as the friendly and inquisitive local, turning the intruder accusations away from him. "What are you doing here? This place is abandoned."

"Was abandoned. But not any longer." The man just smiles. Gabriel doesn't like it much. He's too friendly—he should be, at the very least, confused by Gabriel's presence. Instead, he seems pleased. "I hadn't planned on running a midnight mass tonight, but if you'd like, I'm sure I can put something together."

"No, no, don't trouble yourself on my account. As I said, I was merely investigating." He's dismissive, moving quickly away from offers of mass and onto other business. "I wasn't aware this church would be reopening. My father would be very interested to know. Will you be providing Catholic services or some other kind? There's a church in the next town over, Our Lady of... something or other."

“Charities? Graces? Sorrows? Don’t worry yourself if you don’t know. They’re all very popular names.” The man cranes his head slightly to the side. The smile is still on his lips and at the edges of his eyes. For a ‘holy’ man, he seems untroubled by Gabriel’s flippant remarks. “But, I’m afraid this church won’t be dedicated to Mary. This place has no title, yet. That will come in time. I find that all things come when they are meant to.”

Something is wrong with him. Gabriel feels it in the deepest part of his stomach. It’s more than just being a liar. No, it’s as if there is a hole in the world that surrounds him, a place where the light itself goes to die. Gabriel is afraid of nothing, and yet when the man steps towards him, cassock smoothing out the lines on his body, making him appear snakelike, it takes all Gabriel has not to step back. His fist squeezes tight around the rock. “I should tell my father, he would have suggestions. If you’ll excuse me—”

“Have you ever heard of predestination?” The priest carries on, as if he hadn’t heard what Gabriel said. He comes closer still, his hands laced together before him. “It’s a doctrine that states that all things happen as they do, because God wills they must.”

“Yes, I’m aware of it.” His voice comes out peevish and irritated. Better than frightened. Gabriel moves, pivoting to place one of the pews between him and the priest. “Free will is an illusion, no man can know God’s will, fascinating stuff. A conversation I would love to have with you sometime, Father—”

“Father Adonis.” A name. Adonis. God. He itches for the door, but the priest has neatly and easily positioned himself in between, all the while speaking in that calm and methodical voice, as if their conversation is welcome in every way. “Predestination raises an interesting question. If God is all-knowing, it means that He is aware of every action that will be taken. From our births to our deaths, He is aware of each decision we will be presented with, and He knows which decision we will make. So, for God, He knows the destination of each soul before we even quicken in our mother’s wombs, which of us are destined for Heaven...and which of us are destined for Hell. If that is true, then even now, there are some who walk here, damned for the flames before they ever committed a single sin.”

Gabriel wishes he had his knife on him. All he has is the lamp and the rocks, and he trusts that neither would be enough to buy him time to escape. The door is heavy, it takes at least two good shoulders to it in order to make it

budge. But then, Gabriel is larger than this priest. He has half a foot on him, and he's stronger. Gabriel could rush him, knock him down and hit him with the lantern. But what if that wasn't enough? The priest—Father Adonis—is unafraid. No matter how Gabriel tries to casually put space between them, his steps are followed without any effort, always managing to be just a few feet away.

"It means that all of us were meant to live the path set before us. Each action that happened to us was meant to happen. Each death. Each sin. Every cruel word and careless thought were decided for us." His dark eyes bore into Gabriel. Father Adonis's pleasant smile seems a cruel mask, a smile that hides something unfathomably dark beneath. "It was decided that I would arrive here, on this day and in this year. And it was decided that you would be drawn here before my arrival. We were meant to meet one another."

Adonis unclaps his hands and extends one to Gabriel, a greeting as forward as the rest of his demeanour. Gabriel is clearly meant to reciprocate. He does not, keeping the lantern at the ready as he firmly rejects the offer. "An interesting theory, but I do not believe in things like that. Nor does the church I attend. Nor does your order, if I'm not mistaken." He tries to match the elegant way in which the priest speaks, but he can hear how stilted it is as it passes his lips.

"You're correct. It's very Calvinist of me, isn't it?" Adonis treats it as if it was nothing but an amusing joke. His hand slips away then, tucking into his cassock. "I'm afraid my beliefs are perhaps a bit heretical for the church. In another era, I might have been burned. But times have changed. We're far too civilized for torture or anything of that nature. Just excommunication is all, and then very rarely. But, if you'll keep my thoughts a secret, I can keep your actions one as well. What were you planning on doing tonight? Throwing stones at windows?"

His eyes drop noticeably to Gabriel's hand and to the stone within it. His fist tightens but Gabriel doesn't let that reach his face. "Of course not. That's quite a dangerous accusation to make. I come from a very good family, my father would be displeased to hear such an insinuation. This stone is for my brother. If you must know, though it's none of your business, he has an interest in geology and I thought he might find this one interesting. It has a fossil in it."

It has no such thing, but he hardly plans on letting this Father Adonis see it. As far as this man needs to know, it's a gift for his beloved brother.

“How kind of you. But, you appear to have misplaced your proper stone. That one has no fossil in it.” Adonis nods to Gabriel’s fist. “Perhaps it’s with the others in your pocket?”

Gabriel refuses to look at his rock. To look would be to acknowledge that the priest is right about anything. Gabriel simply lifts his chin, staring him down with the same contemptuous look he saves for all who are below him. “I refuse to stand here and be insulted further. You will step out of my way and you will leave immediately, or I will inform my father and the constables that you made threats against me.”

“I’ve uttered no threats.” Father Adonis moves then, deliberately walking towards Gabriel. He means to stand his ground but something about the way Adonis moves frightens him. His hips sway and he prowls towards Gabriel, more like a beast than a man. Gabriel’s feet betray him, taking him one step back and another, and another, until he is retreating and the Father advancing. “I doubt you will tell anyone you or I was here tonight. You should be in bed at this hour. Where else were you going with a pocketful of stones but here?”

“I—my business is my own!” Gabriel feels fear grip him. Something is terribly wrong here. This man and his robes and his unsettling walk and those eyes—

Those shining eyes. Those unnatural eyes. Gabriel knows now that he can’t talk his way out of this one. But he won’t need to. He’s running out of room. So he acts. Gabriel raises his hand and throws the stone, aiming for the priest. It’s a straight shot, a fast and heavy throw. The stone flies true and fast.

The priest snatches the rock out of the air. The movement is fluid and fast, so quick that Gabriel barely registers what’s happened until the priest opens his fist and reveals the stone. He holds it up, turning it between his fingers. In the light of the lantern, Father Adonis examines it. “As I said,” he says solemnly, his eyes bright and locked on Gabriel, “This is the wrong stone. There’s no fossil in it.”

Gabriel smacks into the altar rail, nearly falling over it as it hits the back of his thighs. Father Adonis is there in a moment, closing the space between them and grabbing onto Gabriel. He pulls him upright, pulls him in close. His grip is like iron. Adonis shouldn’t be this strong, and Gabriel knows he has no chance of breaking out of his grip. All his threats have gone—this is a man who does not care who Gabriel’s ‘father’ might be. So he fights like a dog, dropping his lantern, tearing, punching, kicking, and biting. Gabriel’s teeth graze cloth and

where his body connects, the priest takes the blows without a single flinch. Only the biting gets a reaction, the priest dropping the rock to grab Gabriel's hair and yank his head back.

"I've seen a thousand boys like you. You think the world is yours to pillage, that due to your birth, you are owed a certain level of respect. You feel entitled to break into a church and destroy it, because you are filled with an unearned ennui." Gabriel's eyes tear up as his hair is pulled too hard and no matter how he tries to move, he's trapped in the priest's grip. "But the world is filled with more than you."

But he feels indignation flare within him as well, a burning rage that grows with each word directed at him. How dare this priest claim to know what Gabriel does or does not deserve! How dare he condescend to Gabriel as if everything he has was given to him, not fought for with every last, desperate shred of his being! The priest looks at Gabriel as if he is nothing more than a rich man's son in need of a lecture.

"Listen to me carefully. You feel humiliated right now. I can see the desire for revenge burning in your eyes. Perhaps you will come up with a story for your father to cast me as the villain. Perhaps you will return with a torch and try to set fire to the building." The hand pulls tighter and Gabriel cries out involuntarily. The priest is cast in shadows, only the whites of his eyes showing as he holds Gabriel tightly. "Your actions have already been decided for you, as they have been decided for me. But know this: if your path returns to me, then your path will end there."

The grip loosens then and Gabriel is cast back, stumbling and falling to the floor. He scrambles, his hands gripping onto the nearest pew. The wood is rotten and it crumbles under his hand, leaving him gripping a long shard. The priest hasn't noticed what Gabriel holds yet.

"Go home and pray to God that He has given you a chance to repent and live a long and easy life of leisure." Father Adonis raises a hand, pointing it towards the door. "Go home, and-"

Gabriel lurches. He doesn't flee. He throws himself forward. He runs the splinter into the priest's belly, putting all his weight behind it. The cloth tears and Gabriel hears the familiar sound of flesh giving way. That condescending look is gone, erased by wide eyes and a quick gasp. Gabriel does not slow down. He drives them both back, forcing them into the communion rail and over it, knocking the priest to the ground.



He grabs at the candlestick. It's heavy and ornate, iron beneath the gold and silver plating. Gabriel pauses for a second, the candlestick over his head, and savours the moment that shock turns to horror on Adonis's face, and then he brings it down with a swiftness that betrays that he is no rich man's son. He is Gabriel and he will let no one in this world have dominion over him.

The skull crushes nicely. The sound will stay with Gabriel forever. He lifts the candlestick and brings it down again, smashing in that lovely face, destroying the priest with the same glee that he felt when he destroyed stained glass. Bone cracks. Blood spurts. Again, he lifts it up and again, he brings it down, and the body beneath Gabriel spasms.

Gabriel lifts the candlestick to look at it and sees how the blood runs over the surface of it, following the patterns and decorative whorls. It's beautiful in the flickering lamplight, dripping over the once fancy robes, now stained black with blood. "You were right. My actions were decided long ago. And when I'm finished here, I will fetch a torch and burn your precious church to the ground, and piss in the ashes each time I walk past. I am Gabriel and I will let no one in this world have dominion over me."

## SAMANTHA FLUM '23

### CAMP RHODY

#### Clubs: the air element

I reach across the red-painted surface, placing my card. A black nine of clubs, my final move. Slap! Bracing myself for the hard top of the splintery picnic table, I feel the warm, calloused palm of Liam, my opponent and co-counselor. "C'mon!" grunts Julia, a ten-year-old, attaching herself at my hip, deciding to root for me, today, and everyday, into the foreseeable future. Her sister, Ava, a four-year-old, bleats in my ear. I guess she's a fan too, but I also let her down. Liam shuffles his cards preparing to keep playing, and slides the pile I must take over to my side. I learned Spit when I was younger, and it's just like riding a bike, the rules returning after nearly a decade. Julia screams "I've never played a game of cards before, except for Uno!" Somehow her comment gets me thinking about my childhood, where I spent summers swimming at the beach at Watch Hill near Grandma Ida's house (and Taylor Swift's!), floating hours on end, letting the waves toss me up and down, a remarkably freeing feeling, akin to gliding. The Kesselman house always ran cold. Entering Grandma's foyer, soaked and shivering, I needed to jump right into a warm bath. All the while, the old gal prepared slightly-burnt oatmeal-chocolate chip cookies in her kitchen. She was forever baking. Baking and playing cards. At five, she taught me Old Maid. At six, Crazy Eights. At seven, Spit.

As a counselor, I must keep a close eye on the campers. I concentrate on the game while occasionally looking up to make sure no one's bleeding. Little boys pull themselves onto the "climbing tree," spewing "I hate you" taunts for no reason. A group of six-year-olds bang on occupied porta potties, giggling "let me in!" A preteen huddles by her backpack, hoping not to get caught Snapchatting. This was a typical day at Camp Rhody, changing anything would only detract from the experience. My first morning here and I'm left with three takeaways: most kids are out of their minds, the mosquitoes are out for blood, and I miss Grandma's air conditioning. Oh, and one of my co-workers is cute.

I didn't notice him on our staff orientation days, which is strange, because when I'm not out with my high school friends, I'm always looking. Sometimes it goes too far, to the point where I'm in Walmart, sporting my Halloween-minion pajama pants and Rhody Rams navy T-shirt, imagining guys falling in

love with me as I'm sniffing Herbal Essence shampoo. Not in a self-obsessed way, but rather, I'm a hopeless romantic, going through life pretending I was the protagonist in an Emily Henry novel. But it wasn't like that when I first met Liam. Slouched in the corner, hiding his unkempt hair underneath a scruffy gray baseball cap, even I couldn't romanticize that.

All of the other nine counselors attended Camp Rhody since they were barely-functioning human beings: they couldn't read, draw, or swim but managed to climb trees and make box-stitched lanyards and friendship bracelets. I wonder what it would have been like to grow up here. To come back every summer and start again where you left off. Most of them don't wear shoes despite the numerous overgrown roots creating a bumpy path, and I've even seen three of them chomp on grass when bored. Being the new girl, I imagined I'd be the center of attention but no one seemed to notice me. I'm used to it. Most of the time it's my friends who people ask to hang out with, or, start up a conversation when they're part of a crowd.

But then Liam handed me the deck and I thought maybe I could be someone that the others would want to get to know. Playing with him, I felt like the child who sat across from Grandma, listening to Christmas songs no matter the season, snorting out laughter, concentrating on victory. I practically felt myself getting cold.

#### Diamonds: the water element

Mud sticks to the bottom of my soles as a school of minnows skitters across my toes. Trying to raise myself, I realize this end of the lake is too shallow. Four-year-olds swim around on hot pink pool noodles; I'm envious of their tiny legs that can swim in two feet of water. Dog paddling my way to the dock, kids swarm on my right and left, craving attention. We play duck-duck-goose and water tag and my favorite game—Everyone Attack Sierra! After a few minutes, when they've turned away, I go underwater, hoping they are still young enough to not have object permanence, the idea I learned in psychology last year: that before a certain age, kids don't realize things continue to exist once they cannot be seen. Another broken dream!

Finally, I'm floating in Lil Rhody Lake. From where I am, it is so vast I can't see the far end. Although our camp is named after it, we only have access to a tiny portion, red and white buoys defining the swim area. Liam sits on the shore where he focuses on drawing lines in the sand. He writes one word at a

time, his leg sliding across each letter, causing whatever he wrote to disappear. His face is serious as if a multitude of thoughts are jumbling around his brain. By the dock, three older campers scream out, "Liam! Liam!" It takes him a second before he looks up to acknowledge them. I wonder why he chose to be here since he doesn't seem to like kids. A tall boy with one blue eye and one green, Marcellus, the clear leader of all the other eleven-year-olds, holds a football, faking throws across the water, begging him to join. Liam hesitates but gets up, running full speed and crashing once he hits the part of the lake where he no longer has to stand. I chuckle at his tactic to avoid stepping on the mucky bottom. He palms the football, spiraling it halfway across the pool area. Being in the water he seems different, relaxed, as if there was an Invisible Fence at the shoreline, keeping whatever was bothering him out.

"Hey Sierra! Catch!" I whip my head to find where his voice is coming from, as the ball travels in my direction. I fumble! I've never been good at sports. He laughs and suddenly I'm embarrassed. My gut reaction is to say something snarky, the way I usually do when everyone around me treats me like I'm a joke. But when I look up, he's stopped, instead a soft smile forming on his face. I try not to stare—I still have a water-logged football to throw.

Other campers join in. We try to form a circle, but it proves to be a hard task. We end up all over the place, vaguely in the shape of a diamond. Two other counselors, Emily and Bella stand by my side, including me in conversation between our turns. Ava climbs onto my shoulders so she can catch a high throw, Julia clings to my hand for dear life, ducking every time the ball is in the air.

The lifeguards finally blow their whistles, belting out their signature line: "all fish, out of the water!" Everyone scurries to grab their towels and a cup of Del's Lemonade, a special treat to kick off week three. I lay back for one more float, fifteen seconds to myself before I continue the second half of my day. Lifting my head, planning to see I'm the last to exit the pond, I spot Liam, floating on his back twenty feet away. With my head out of the water I can hear him humming the words to Cigarette Daydreams. Laying back down, the lyrics "you wanna find peace of mind, looking for the answers" surge through my mind, lake water rising to the brim of my ears, no doubt poisoning me with toxic bacteria.

### Hearts: the fire element

Camp Rhody staff huddles shoulder to shoulder, squeezing onto the bench opposite the rising smoke. It's summer's halfway mark, and to celebrate we have a bonfire, where hours earlier campers ate lunch. Goldfish crumbs and cherry pits surround us as we share stories.

Liam sits beside me. Every morning, before the rush of nine o'clockers, we played a game of spit. Sometimes it lasted ten minutes, sometimes thirty. It became our silent pact to stick to the routine, other campers knew not to take the deck before we'd finished.

As summer wore on, Liam spoke a few more words, but not a lot. It was less about the things he had to say, but more about the tiny things I began to notice. Like the way his dimples appeared whenever I got frustrated with the game, or how his foot bumped against mine when I won a round. When he did talk, he rambled, expressing disjointed thoughts. He told me once my hair looked nice, and it was sweet to think that he probably practiced that. I was more conscious of who I was when I was around him, hearing myself speak, wondering what he was thinking.

The girls around us ramble on about boy drama, every one of them bouncing complaints off of each other. I stay silent, wanting to move closer to Liam as much as I want to sprint in the opposite direction, scared that the more time I spend thinking about him, the more I could end up heartbroken.

"Do you want to go for a walk?"

Catching myself by surprise when I say it, even more so when he stands up, grabbing my hand, leading us into the pitch black. We walk down the path toward the lake, sharing small talk.

"Do you want to go for a swim?" Liam asks.

"Sure," I say, trying not to sound overly excited. When we get down to the sand, I throw my shoes off and run straight in, clothes and all.

"C'mon!" I shout, watching him stand there awkwardly as if unsure what to do with himself. He's holding back from something and I can't tell if it's the water or me.

"I really like you," he whispers.

And before I can answer, telling him the feeling is mutual, he's sprinting in the water, the same way he always does, and I'm splashing, both of us giggling.

It's not long before we are shivering, teeth chattering, Liam saying we better go back to the fire. He wraps me up in my towel, squeezing me into a

hug at the end to warm me up. We sneak back up to the fire, holding hands over our mouths so our laughter doesn't cause a scene. When we make it back to the pit, everyone's gone home. I realize, laying my head on his shoulder, he never gave me an opportunity to respond. Maybe that was on purpose, perhaps he was scared to hear that I didn't feel the same way, just like I was.

"I really like you," I whisper back.

### Spades: the earth element

I stare out the window, unable to focus on the new formulas that I'm supposed to have memorized by tomorrow, watching traffic pile up on the busy road outside of my classroom. Mind wandering, I think of Camp Rhody. Leaving on clean up day was easier than the day all the kids left. With the tents taken down, and docks moved to shore, I could finally see it as it was—a tract of grass with a lake. We all knew it wasn't the same place when no one was there. Sitting inside now, looking out on Providence, I long to be criss-cross applesauce in the hot sun on a plot of land that some may call the middle of nowhere.

Saying goodbye to Liam was hard, not because we wouldn't see each other again, we only lived forty-five minutes apart, but because who knew who we would be when we weren't here. Part of me worried us wouldn't exist in the real world, when we went back to our school lives, not spending all day together.

Weeks later, after my first calc exam, I get a text from Liam. "Meet at Rhody this weekend? Want to give you your birthday present." I'm sitting in the same spot, room 104, math with Mr. Cromwell, but for the first time I can't help but smugly smile, causing him to call on me assuming I know the answer, which I don't.

Saturday morning, at nine, I drive to camp. Liam stands in the middle of the main field holding a tiny wrapped present with a bow that's too big for the box. We say our hellos, walking toward the picnic benches, the only man-made objects left out here. I rip open the wrapping paper to find a deck of cards. All fifty-two cards, each with a different hand-drawn scene from the summer: Julia and Ava running around in a game of tag; a line of campers behind me as I lead them to the gaga ball pit; Liam and I in the lake, tossing a football.

"Let's play Spit," Liam says. As we set up, the cottonwood trees around us shake in the breeze, spade-like leaves falling, one landing on the table perfectly atop the draw pile.

"Happy birthday," he whispers.

## THE REINVENTION

In the village of Libro, books bloomed on trees. In autumn, when pages fell, the entire town assembled, picking them off the grass, placing them in frames, reading them over and over, gaining inspiration. In Libro, townspeople proudly said, knowledge, its most important commodity, “grew on trees.” There was never such a thing as too many books, and instead of playing video games or watching football, people spent their free time reading.

Ever since the town was founded, three hundred and eighty-seven years ago, there had been a tradition that when the leaves started to fall, anyone who was eighteen-years-old was required to stand under the ancient oaks on the first day of the season. Whatever page landed on them determined which world of the imagination they would enter, becoming the protagonist of their own story. It was a bitter-sweet time as they started a new life, leaving their old one behind, never to return. And when they traveled to their new world, what in Libro was called, THE REINVENTION, they took their story with them which no one would ever see again.

At the center of town stood a magnificent bookstore, Tree of Knowledge, a four story building, each floor appearing to the outside as the internal rings of an ancient sequoia. Carved into the front door were the words: Always Open.

In Libro, there was no need for rules of any kind. Most people just knew the right thing to do. They read it in books! No need to rush about, people walked everywhere, and never flying off to some dead-end desk job. Instead, the town employed only creative thinkers: librarians, teachers, writers, editors, and amazingly, all under the age of eighteen.

The Vita family had owned the bookstore since the town was founded. Only relatives worked there, never hiring outside the Vita name. Remarkably, when anyone in the family turned eighteen, nothing happened. They didn’t enter a new world, forgoing THE REINVENTION, staying put, continuing to sell books and growing old.

One of the daughters, Isabel, a child prodigy, who was seventeen and three-quarters, looked like everyone else in town. She moved about with a book under her arm, always greeting everyone she saw. She was respectful, kind, and a straight A-student who always had something insightful to say. But,

the other teenagers found her strange. Isabel talked to herself while walking in the street, at times making weird sounds and comments while thinking.

Libro was safe. The only time townspeople got a taste of what it was like to be scared, lonely, or hungry, came from books. Isabel's birthday was September 1, the day of the ceremony. This was unusual—she was the only one in town who had that birthday. Typically she would remain home, celebrating with family while her friends participated in the proceedings. The whole event didn't matter to her because she wasn't effected. She chose to eat birthday cake and open presents rather than take part in painful goodbyes. But this year was different. She was the youngest of her friends, so for them, this was their time for THE REINVENTION. It felt wrong to celebrate her birthday when her classmates were leaving. Julia, Isabel's best friend, was excited. She loved books and had been praying every night for a future that resembled the world of a romantic comedy.

Isabel thought about being transported into an epic love story, but she also had a gut feeling that it wasn't going to happen. It was difficult to imagine what would occur when all of her friends left, but she felt grateful, knowing at least she could stick to the life she knew, without change. The others couldn't say the same.

THE REINVENTION ceremony occurred on a glorious fall day. Perhaps that was intentional by whoever ran their world to distract them. Most people thought the Vitas were the most important people in town, but in truth it was The Authors who created the destinations. No one ever got to meet them or learn their identity.

Looking back, many people would say that it was Isabel's own fault for showing up at the ceremony. That she should have known better than to tempt fate. Whatever the case, Isabel left that autumn. The title of her reinvention was The World Afar.

\*\*\*

Isabel was alone. As far as her eyes could see there was nothing. In leggings and a sweater, she was sweating, moisture dripped down her face, not only because of the temperature. Anxious, Isabel looked for shelter or for anyone to come to her rescue; to shake her awake and tell her this was all a dream. Loud roars echoed across the desolate landscape, causing Isabel to aimlessly speed up, unsure of which way to go. She bumped into a speckled baby goat, a creature which she had just seen in books. Back in Libro, they only had birds,



dogs, and cats. She had read that goats were gentle and liked to be petted and fed by humans. Isabel wished she had something to feed him, but then again she was hungry herself. Slowly approaching the goat, holding her hand out, as if to say don't attack me, I'm friendly, she ran her fingers through the soft hair. Isabel said hello, hoping that her story would be a fantasy, one in which she got to communicate with animals for the rest of her life. But the goat stood silent, making no sound at all. Isabel knew she had to keep going to find somewhere to sleep and get water to drink. The creature followed her. Great, she thought, now I have to take care of a goat too.

The two walked all night. Isabel wondered if Julia or the others recalled their prior life in Libro when they took part in THE REINVENTION. Now she knew that they did. She missed her warm bed, mother's food, and books. There were no books here.

At sunrise, Isabel heard voices. She couldn't decipher what was being said. Perhaps they spoke a foreign language, or were simply too far away to be understood. She had to get closer. Approaching the sound, she arrived at a small wooden shack. Isabel could hear the hiss of the tea kettle. She had never felt as thirsty. Knocking on the door, Isabel tried to figure out how to explain who she was. Would they know her? She didn't even know her own name. Isabel thought that when they got to a new world they would feel like a novel character, but she didn't.

Inside were five unusual looking people. An older man with a single leg, wearing a Rolling Stones T-shirt, spoke with only his hands. Another, presumably his wife, was sitting on the couch knitting, laughing at the others' conversation, before jumping up to greet Isabel at the door.

"She's here," an extremely tall younger woman with a heart-shaped birthmark on her cheek said, which made Isabel shiver. Who was she in this world?

"Hi Isabel," the guy missing a leg said. Isabel? Was it possible she got assigned a character with the same name or was this some glitch?

"Where am I?"

"Have a seat. You're just where you're supposed to be."

But what about Libro? She wasn't meant to leave.

"Who are you?"

"The Authors!" a skinny man with a blue mohawk announced.

“Authors of what?” Isabel asked. It couldn’t be related to Libro. She was always told the stories would be completely different than where she came from.

Finally, after some time had passed, the woman who opened the door for Isabel, spoke.

“Almost four hundred years ago, fifty of us came to the town you call Libro. There was nothing but us and the woods, and just like you now, we felt lost. How were we supposed to create a community out of nothing? We tried to build our own houses, find our own food. But that’s when the real challenges began. Violence seized our village and we had to fight back against a group of outlaws with guns, when we had none. Lions, and tigers, and bears (oh my) attacked us; it never rained and the rivers were all dry. We documented what was happening on Oak, Elm and Aspen leaves since they were the only things we could find to write on and then save in our pockets. By the time things started to clear up, only the five of us remained. We continued to write stories, hiding them, which helped us cope. As our community started to grow, so did new trees. And miraculously, at the very top, hanging off the branches were our stories. All the struggles we faced were in view but out of reach. Or at least we thought. But then the leaves began to fall.

That’s when all the new people who came to our village started to disappear, taking our stories with them. We never knew where they went. When your family came along, we had to run away. The Vitas were immune to whatever made the others vanish and we were scared you, being the little genius that you are, would figure out this was all our fault. Last week, we completed the epic story of where we are now, and how we got here. And just as we finished, you appeared.”

Isabel was speechless. For once in her life she didn’t have a response. She didn’t even know how she felt. She wasn’t exactly angry, mostly confused.

The woman continued, “We don’t have any books here because we have experienced the horrors of the world. We don’t need to read what life is like. We are The Authors.”

“But if you don’t have any books, what do you do all day?”

“We live our lives.”

“I have to go back and tell them,” Isabel said, almost pleading.

“Of course you do. But, what will you say?” The older woman asked.

“The truth! That there's a larger world beyond Libro that we've never known. And it's time for us to escape. Maybe that's the only way we can stop THE REINVENTION and evolve like real people.”

“Ah, we knew she would figure it out,” the four on the couch, now standing around her, nodded.

“But what about you?” Isabel asked.

“We already have everything we need. We've lived fully: experiencing pain, loss, joy and best of all, love. And we won't stop writing, just in case you need books to convince people of your time here.”

“How do I get back?” Isabel whispered, unsure.

The silent little girl with pink braces and oversized glasses finally spoke. She reminded Isabel of herself. “You start telling your story. This is only the beginning,” she said.

The Authors offered Isabel a chair and an ice-cold glass of water. Then they placed a pencil and a large Maple leaf in front of her. Isabel began writing...

## IF WE WERE FISH

Cruising down Main Street at 45 miles per hour, Aly couldn't notice all the stores she was passing. She definitely wouldn't have seen the fish aquarium inside a broken building hidden behind overgrown bushes with a big wooden sign that had nothing written on it. "Pull in here," Andrew said abruptly. He hadn't given her enough time to turn, so naturally, she missed it. Looping around a second time, she shot him a look that said, "seriously?" figuring that the worst that could happen was that they'd have to turn around again. Eventually, she parked her car next to a giant outdoor tank. Inside were schools of large orange-red fish, that for a second, Aly thought were lobsters (cooked ones). It looked like a lonely place to live, and Aly couldn't but help wonder what would happen if the tank was ever knocked over. Andrew sighed. He was used to Aly stating worst-case scenarios. She wondered if her anxiety about seemingly meaningless things bothered him.

Andrew opened the door to lead them inside to the main attraction: fifty fish tanks lined up inside what resembled a storage garage or an unfinished basement. There was fish food, on top of fish food, sitting on shelves stacked to the ceiling, and even more underneath the tanks. As Aly walked in she was reminded of the last time she'd been looking at fish, a few months ago with Andrew at Petco. They had been laughing so hard, about God knows what (fish, perhaps?) when an employee came over and asked in a rude, I-hate-everyone voice, "can I help you?" They scurried out before they could be asked to leave. Aly wondered if he was thinking about the same thing. She wasn't sure.

They went around silently looking until either one of them found a fish to which they felt a special connection. When that happened they would give each other a look and point to the tank. After discussing the neon tetra that was Aly's favorite color blue with a hint of a maroon red, which Andrew said was probably his favorite color if he had to pick (which Aly said he did), Andrew asked a question. "What would you do if you were a fish?"

Aly laughed. If I were a fish, she thought, well I'd swim away. Instinct. But where would she go? Who would she take? Perhaps it would all be simpler living like that. Her face wouldn't burn red when she got embarrassed, like it was now. Instead she'd be her favorite color: smalt blue. She'd know what it was

like to stay underwater for the whole length of a pool, and not feel out of breath, but to instead feel liberated. The truth is Aly didn't know what she'd do, if she weren't, well, herself. Her younger brother would tell her, "well duh, Aly, you'd just swim in the ocean!" But she felt like Andrew was asking more than that. When he had asked her what she wanted to be when she grew up, and she had replied with "an elementary school teacher," he had said, "Ok, why?". No one had ever really asked her why. She was used to saying that and people responding with "that's cool!" or "you'd be great!" But Andrew wasn't going to satisfy her like that. Instead he was going to ask her hard questions, and she was going to obsess about how she answered.

"I'd swim to the very bottom of the ocean and look up," she said. Andrew didn't respond. Suddenly, he didn't have a snarky comeback. Because he understood what that was like. Hidden where no one can see you and just living, looking out to the world trying to find beauty. Of course, Aly was thinking of exploring the world from a different perspective, one she'd never seen. Andrew was more practical. He smirked, and said, "first, I'd learn how to swim."

The truth is that they were both treading water in the middle of nowhere, intruding on fish, in the dead of winter, and ironically, both Andrew and Aly felt like fish, taken away from where they belonged, which was back at the lake where they'd met that summer, shouting at campers to put on life jackets for boating time. Nothing between the two of them, or the others, Ryan and Johnny would ever be the same again.

\*\*\*

Nine years earlier, in the summer of 2012, Aly's grandparents, Nan and Papa, were staying with her and her brother Nick, while her parents spent a week on a Florida beach. The children dragged their grandparents to the July 4<sup>th</sup> carnival. This was the event that little kids across town waited all year for, and that year, even without Mom and Dad, Aly was sure it would be the same adventure. They usually did the classic spinny rides because Aly has always been a scaredy cat, and her parents never wanted her to do the games where you pay for prizes. "What are you going to do with another stuffed animal?" her mom would say. But on that 95 degree summer day at the Franklin July 4<sup>th</sup> Carnival, they were giving away goldfish, and all you had to do was get a ping pong ball in a cup. It was something their mom never would have gone for. But that's what grandparents are for. Aly and Nick came home with two fish,

Minion and Rose. One town over, on a street with the name of a season, Summer, Andrew's big sister drove him to the carnival that all his friends had been telling him to go to. He also arrived home with a goldfish that he named —Goldfish. Because he was straightforward. And Andrew took care of that goldfish like had never cared for himself. He knew what it was like to feel alone. Aly's parents came home annoyed to see the two new members of the family swimming on the kitchen table because they knew Aly would forget to feed them. Of course, they were right. Aly didn't care for the fish the same way that Andrew did.

Who knew the two of them would be standing on a field across the street from the July 4<sup>th</sup> carnival, watching other children having the time of their lives, while they stood drenched in sweat from their first full day of work? Andrew invited Aly to go on a ride when their shift was over, convincing her to take the drop tower, because she was excited to have a new friend. If she were a fish, and had the whole ocean to herself, she thought, although crazy as this idea is, I'd stay in this little town. Because where else could you find a warehouse of, yes, fish, on the side of the road? Or better yet, someone to share this with.

\*\*\*

Three! Two! One! Go! Tiny first grade voices chanted, "Aly! Aly!" on the shore of the lake. They may have been the youngest campers but they were the loudest. And they could sense that this was Aly's chance to shine. She hadn't won very many of the counselor competitions, but it was hard when she was up against a football player, a hockey player, and a state record holder in weightlifting, and the challenges were tug of war or arm wrestling. But Aly had one talent that none of the other boys had, no matter how "fit" they were. She swam like a fish. That was a fun day. Winning a swimming race is always good!

Aly's mom had signed her up for swim lessons when she was only two and as her mother would recall, "she was a swimmer from the first time she jumped in the pool." She belonged there. A mermaid in another life. Perhaps, a fish. People began to see her as "a swimmer" and she saw herself that way too. So no matter how many times Aly may have wanted to quit, swimming was the one thing she couldn't let go. Because what would a fish do without water?

Her favorite part of practice was pencil diving herself down to the bottom of the pool while coach explained the set. She would simply blow bubbles and

come back up. People told Aly that swimming was a boring sport. “Do you just go back and forth for hours?” they would say. And her answer would be, “Well, yes.” Most things in life aren’t that simple. You have to pick and choose. What should I eat right now? Who should I hang out with? Counting laps until you’ve done the amount on the board, is a routine that Aly has learned to appreciate. She had some of her best thoughts while swimming in a straight line for two hours. It was her personal time to get to know herself, debrief about the day, or wonder about hard questions, like why didn’t summer camp last forever? Or how could you spend everyday with a group of people, only to end up almost strangers?

For a while, swimming was the only thing that kept Aly connected to Franklin, her town, other than the house she lived in. It was how she met people that lived near her, since she hadn’t gone to school with them since second grade. But when the carnival came around every summer, Franklin seemed like the only place to be.

\*\*\*

The joy of the holiday season is a wonderful thing, Aly reminds herself when it comes every year. Even in the dead of winter, when lakes have frozen, there are still things to celebrate, thanks and gifts to be given. Ryan and Aly sit across from each other in a circle of at least fifteen other lifeguards, most of whom worked at a Wiggy Camp that summer. Aly and Ryan looked at each other and made small talk for a minute, but that was the extent of their relationship now. These conversations were usually about Johnny, and how he had abruptly moved on from all of them when summer ended. The irony was that Ryan and Aly talked about him as if they hadn’t done the same to each other. Aly texted Andrew to tell him of the awkwardness of it all: that she still had no one to sit next to and that she hadn’t been told to bring a yankee swap gift to staff meeting. Perhaps a silent, why did you have to fail your lifeguard test was implied but never stated,

Aly’s number in the swap was seventeen so she was close to picking the last gift. She felt guilty, since she practically could have anything she wanted, even when she hadn’t brought in anything herself. There were a bunch of Dunkin Donut gift cards, keychains, even a toy truck. Teenagers that work with kids for fun have that sense of humor. And then someone opened a large hot pink gift bag. Hidden inside was a styrofoam fish with the instructions, put in

water to grow! These were the type of things even Aly's eight-year-old brother found silly. They were slimy and had no real purpose once they had "grown."

For no reason, Aly found herself thinking about the importance of water. How people need to drink enough to survive, but for Aly to feel alive, she had to be submerged in water. Like a fish.

When it came her turn, she took the big hot pink bag with the tiny styrofoam fish in it. Nobody commented on it because she was the girl they all barely knew. And nobody bothered to try and win the fish back, because if they really wanted it (which they didn't), they could have bought it at the dollar store.

\*\*\*

The next summer, Andrew and Aly went their separate ways, no longer distracting each other from doing their jobs at work, or finding themselves laughing hysterically in the middle of some off the beaten path pet store. But every now and then, Andrew and Aly will text each other a picture of a fish that they may have seen at the dentist, or, at the weird brunch place, Cap'n Billy's, that Aly goes to in Boston. Because, unlike fish, they remember each other—the moments they once shared, and the many fish they got to know together.



## CHIPOTLE

“Can you pick up Chipotle?” Annabelle’s father texts her the moment the clock strikes six, just when she gets out of work. Annabelle sighs. Ever since she got her license, two years ago, she’s been running errands for the family, and although she enjoys it most of the time, she’s tired today. Annabelle had high expectations for the first day of her new job at an elementary school, but instead she feels drained, already regretting her job choice. Buckling her seatbelt, she receives another text. “Here’s everyone’s order.” No time to object, she’s on her way. Chipotle is overwhelmingly understaffed. Upon entering, Annabelle sees crowds of people, the serving line closed off with a sign: Online Orders Only. Her dad told her to order ahead, but she had strong feelings against it. It takes longer, she thought. Now she’s upset that he’s right—he always strives to be right. Behind the counter is Annabelle’s friend Andrew. They haven’t hung out since the summer, but Annabelle is happy to see him. She tries to talk to him while he works, begging for a free meal, but he’s swamped. Annabelle pulls out her phone to place an order, but the wifi crashes. Annoyed, Annabelle calls her younger brother. “Nick!” She screams. “Order online, now.” Nick doesn’t even know what she’s talking about, but it wouldn’t have mattered anyway because he’s clueless about most things. She continues to yell at him impatiently, when she looks up to see the tallest boy she’d ever seen in front of her. “You don’t have the app?” he says smugly. Annabelle scoffs. What is it about people and their apps. Doesn’t anyone just do things face to face anymore? Annabelle sits down and hangs up the phone. “Sorry about that. My stupid brother!” she says to the stranger, as if somehow she owes him an apology. He sits down next to her, and shakes her hand. She can’t remember that last time someone of their age did that. Back in the kitchen, Andrew observes the interaction, raising an eyebrow. Annabelle laughs. “Nice to meet you Matt,” she says, typing her number into his phone. “Well, I’m going, I’m not waiting in this long line,” he blurts, walking out the door, leaving Annabelle wondering if she’d ever see him again.

## FRIENDS

### Alana

Alana packaged her life in neatly wrapped boxes for all eighteen years. It was her habit to shop for a new desktop calendar every August 30, one day before she crossed off the final box, inevitably ripping off the page, bidding summer farewell. As Alana got older, and things grew less certain, she switched to using Ticonderoga #2 pencils, outlining her future with question marks. But, that hadn't prepared her for senior year. Trying to picture where she would be next, Alana panicked. Some things were just beyond her control. Alana was tasked with something new: fitting herself into someone else's boxes—activities; passions; goals—boiled down into one sentence descriptions to get into college. Questioning the things she thought she knew about herself, revisiting choices she'd made in the past four years, Alana tried to figure out the best way to characterize herself. How could she successfully convey empathy or compassion? Could words capture her infectious laughter? Her love of creative writing? Alana made lists and outlines, scheduled meetings and tours, wrote and edited compact essays, trying to convince herself of what her mother always told her, "you are perfect just the way you are." It was the one thing she never had trouble believing—until now.

### Cassey and Millie

This is a story of mothers' choices. Isn't that what all daughters' lives are made of—the decisions and places our mothers guided us to? At least that's how it was for Cassey and Millie. Jo, a retired preschool teacher, lived alone in a small house, her kids off to lives of their own. One sleepless night, she had an idea to start a daycare, on the cul-de-sac of Emery Lane. Cassey and Millie's mothers, Jenna and Aria, both followers of the Franklin Facebook Mothers, but not friends, signed up at the same time. On the first morning of daycare, Jenna sat outside on the front porch of Jo's house and cried, "My baby is leaving me." Aria, who never cried, invited Jenna to coffee, commiserating, "You're stuck with her for a while, don't worry!" The women inevitably became each other's best friend. Both newcomers to Franklin, they invited each other to events and hosted weekly dinners to gossip, sipping sauvignon blanc, while two-year-olds Cassey and Mille, born exactly two months apart, slathered themselves with

pineapple-pizza and strawberries. Cassey was a curly red-head with blue eyes and a larger than life personality. Millie, a wavy brunette with hazel eyes, tended to keep more to herself. When they were three their mothers took them to the zoo where they both decided their favorite animals were giraffes. At four and five, the girls became big sisters, holding their new baby brothers instead of their American Girl dolls. Their mothers signed them up for the swim team at age six, then gymnastics at seven. They had their first sleepover at Cassie's house when they were eight. At nine, they went to different schools for the first time, which was somehow sadder for their mothers. For their fourteenth birthdays, they went on a girls' trip to Paris. At eighteen, Cassey left for college, leaving Millie behind for Washington, DC. The girls couldn't have been more different. Like their mothers, Millie was emotional, she worried and held things in. Cassie would blurt out hysterical comments that always made those around her laugh—and shake their heads. Perhaps the girls never would have been friends if it weren't for their moms. Or Jo, who calls them up every year to remind them that it all started with her.

#### Mary and Kate

On the first day of work, Mary bounced in, spilling mindless gossip and oversharing, then settling into her role as a lifeguard, bossing everyone around, or, as she would say, keeping them in line. She wasn't expecting a new friend, or even hoping for one—her mind had been preoccupied. But the other thing about Mary was she was a planner. She wanted the staff to get closer, so she coordinated weekly outings. One time, They went bowling, or to see a play at the local theater. Another time, after their trip to Ikea, they ended up back at camp, setting up a large tent that was too small for all of them to squeeze into. Struggling to retrieve blankets and pillows from the car, Kate, the new counselor, offered to help. She was looking for a new friend, as much as she tried to hide it. She had the same bubbly personality as Mary, but hadn't had the chance to show it. The rest of the group had gone off to play Manhunt, but it was too dark, and neither Mary nor Kate had the energy to chase teenagers after a long week of running after toddlers. Making their way to the fire pit, both realized they didn't know how to start a fire, and began chatting about themselves. Mary talked too much, and Kate's neck got sore from nodding. Hours later, when they returned to the tent, Mary and Kate huddled together, laughing about random things, feeling as if they'd known each other forever.

### Karleen

Karleen took each of her friendships seriously—it was not in her vocabulary to call someone a “friend” unless she treated them like one. She was the person that girls came to, not for advice, because she wasn't always well-spoken, especially when she had to say something heartfelt, but rather, to feel like someone was listening. Karleen cared for her group of friends: Alana, Cassie, Millie, Mary and Kate. And when she stood next to them, she felt tall, stronger somehow. Far more girls swarmed to her to spill romantic stories, than any guys confessing love. And often, Karleen offered an apology when she really wanted to let someone know how she felt. Still, she believed being sensitive made her a better friend, able to understand how others felt. It also meant her heart was broken, time and time again.

XIAO MADDOCK-MARK '24

TIME, PASSING

Birds sing in the elms as we play in our neighbors front yard, taking shots on their hoop. Why do they keep it around? They never use it! Probably, because they are all grown.

The basketball hits the ground in a repetitive thump, a rhythmic heartbeat, as I watch with only half-interest as my sister prepares to shoot.

She raises the ball close to her chest, like an old granny appraising a prized diamond, then tightens her young muscles, preparing to jump.

It isn't a particularly good shot, and really, it can't even be considered a proper one, still, it deserves admiration—tangerine leather teetering on the edge of the rim, finally falling through.

\*\*\*

"What are you afraid of?" My sister asks, retrieving the ball from the dog-dug hole it rolled into.

I'm caught by surprise.

"I don't know, why do you ask?"

She takes another shot. This time, bouncing off the front of the rim where she catches it.

"I was curious."

I think for a bit. A vague idea of what I might be afraid of forms in my mind.

"What are you afraid of?" I ask in return.

"I'm afraid of dying."

An expected answer, but I don't have the same fear. I'm not afraid of dying, because if I were, it would be similar to already being dead. So, why would I care? Even so, I'm afraid of others dying, the people I care about, but all of that is in the future.

"Being abandoned," I answer.

Xan stares at me, rolling her eyes. "But that's not going to happen, why be afraid?"

I don't really have an answer. It is probably because the abandonment I am thinking of is not the same one she is thinking of. In fact, it is not really abandonment, but absence. I don't know how to verbalize it.

"I guess that's true."

I lean back on my arms as I sit on the grass. The sky, a startling blue. Wisps of clouds float in its expanse. I think about my warped vision of abandonment, of fear, of death, of time.

The clouds travel through the sky, running away from me.

\*\*\*

That night, I had a dream. My grandmother died. My sisters and I sat in the living room wearing black. A space filled with melancholy. I wake up feeling nothing, my tears evaporate.

I wonder about what's next: next day, next week, next year. Next time...

Time moves relentlessly forward. Some days I think little of it, other days I feel every second slipping by, evading me whenever I reach out.

I am not old and I know I have a lot of time ahead of me. Yet, I still find myself wanting more. Even so, all I can do is watch time pass while writing.



## AN UNFINISHED STORY

They opened their eyes for the first time with a singular mission—to have their story told. They were an idea. Nothing exact, no face, shape, form, but they existed. Really existed! And that mattered.

Their destiny determined by the whims of the written word, they had no independent thoughts except for the ones inserted into their heads. No feelings, except for the ones they were programmed to feel. It was a decent existence. Tales of fame and glory. Hardship and struggle. But they only possessed qualities written into them, and the words were known solely by the writer who gave them life.

At some point, they didn't know quite when, the frequency with which they were written decreased. Eventually, they were only disjointed ideas, skeletons of a story never completed. The writer was moving onto bigger and better... There was no more room for their story.

And so, they were abandoned, frozen in time in scenes yet unfinished. Riding on a horse towards a golden sun that would not set, preparing for a battle that would not come, holding out hope for a victory that was already lost, or perhaps, just for the time, unwritten.

## BOXES

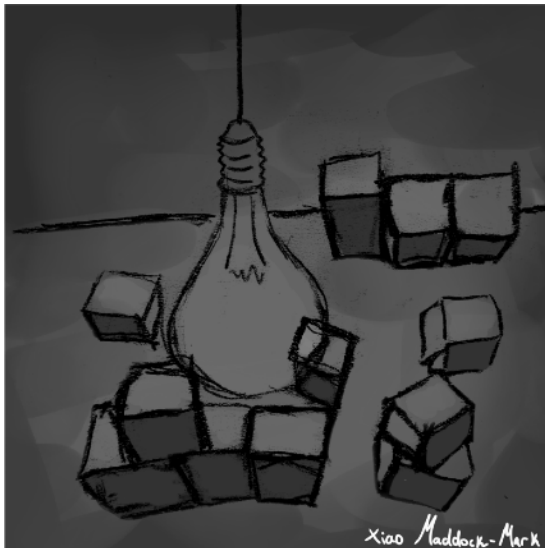
He reached out weakly towards nothing, left leg dragging limply behind him as he tried to force his battered body up. Slowly, leaning against the wall, he felt his way in the unfamiliar darkness.

Although he had no memory of it, just a few hours earlier, the room had been filled with the warm glow of a rising sun, yet now, it was despairingly black.

The darkness clung to him, clouding his eyes, covering his face, except for the very edges of his vision, where shadows danced in circles. The only sound, labored breathing and the whimpers of pain emitted as he brought his left foot to the floor.

Inching forward, his hands slid across the wall, searching. His fingers landed on something. The switch. In a fit of relief, he fumbled to figure out which way to flip it.

The room, bathed in fluorescent light, revealed mountains of cardboard boxes, enough to make him groan. Near the door was a fallen stack. The overwhelming number of parcels revealed little; however, offered a necessary reminder to watch where he placed his aching foot, especially in a room full of boxes.





SOPHIA BLYTHE '23  
A '90S ROM-COM TYPE OF LOVE

Candle wax slowly dripped onto the table, each bead telling time, marking that the evening was slowly coming to an end. The sumptuous meal that brought people to the table was devoured faster than the time it took to create it. But, the conversation was still bountiful. Seated around the dining room table were Orla and Arya, sisters, and their parents, Meg and Tom.

“Would you like to hear a story?” Dad asked.

“What’s it about?”

“A love story.”

“Princes and princesses?”

“No, about how I met your mother.”

“Oh, god!”

“Come on then,” the eldest, Arya, said.

“It was 1990...”

“Ancient history!” Orla whispered.

“After high school, I was supposed to go to college. But I felt stuck and I wanted to travel.” Dad grew up in Corby, a small town in the south of England, consisting mainly of houses, schools, and a pub, the Red Lion. “I was supposed to go to the University of Saint Andrews, but really, it was just my parents who wanted me to go. I told them I’d attend university if they let me travel first. They were against it, even hid my passport.” A small gasp was let out by Orla. “But, in the end, they relented, I traveled for two months, and then I had to come back. So, I left Corby, with about a hundred pounds, heading for Israel.” As Dad told the story he felt the attentive eyes of his two girls, magnetized by each word, wondering what would happen next. “When I got there I had no idea what to do, I didn’t know anyone and I needed to find a place to stay, somewhere to work.”

“Scary,” Arya interrupted.

“I worked on a kibbutz.”

“What’s that?” Orla asked.

“It’s a community, where people live and work together.”

“Ohhhh!”

“Anyway, I joined and stayed in Israel for two years.”

"Wait, I thought you had to go home after two months?" Arya asked, always the nit-picker.

"Right! But I didn't."

"When do you meet Mommy?" Orla insisted.

"Be patient, sweetie," Mom chimed in.

"After Israel, I went to Australia..."

"Did you see a kangaroo?!"

"Stop interrupting," Arya scolded.

"Sorry." Orla slouched in her seat, and her dad looked at her, kindly.

"Yes, I did," Dad replied, and Orla's smile returned to her face.

"I liked Australia, and I made many friends. You would love all the beaches, it can also be dangerous. I was stung by a scorpion!"

"Aren't they deadly?" Arya questioned.

"My Aussie friend said that the antidote was drinking a lot of beer and that I did. But don't tell your mother I told you that." Arya chuckled.

"I am sitting right here," Mom said. The two girls giggled.

"Then what happened?" Orla asked.

"Then I was off to Thailand and the Philippines."

"Then what?"

"India."

"Where you met Mom!"

"Yes, but not that time."

"Hmph!"

"First I traveled to Japan."

"Ooh, tell the story about the jewelry."

"Jewelry? What about Mommy?"

"We are getting there..."

"So, when I lived in Tokyo, I needed to make money, and I had bought some jewelry while in India...I decided to sell it in Japan. One day, this guy, who kind of ran the block, said that I couldn't sell my jewelry on his street. I didn't listen, but almost every day he would come to my stand, with a new girl, and buy a piece of jewelry. We became friends of sorts and when I ran out of jewelry, I would send people to India for me. I would pay for their trip and give them money to buy me some pieces, it took some persuading, but it always worked.."

"We should go to Japan one day," Orla said.

"I completely agree."

"Then where did you go?"

"I went back to the Philippines, and finally, I went to India, where I met your mother."

"About time!"

"I returned to India so I could explore more, and it just happened that we were in the same town on the same day. We were both waiting in line for food, and Mom was in front of me..."

"I was teaching English at a local school."

"Yes, and then I asked her what she was ordering, and we began to chat."

"He called me a baby."

"Well, I asked how old you were, you said twenty, and I said you're only a baby."

"Was it love at first sight?"

"Not quite. Mom went back to America, and I continued to travel and then soon went back to. But we wrote letters."

"Letters?"

"It was something that existed before email!"

"Weird!"

"But, later mom was traveling around Europe, and I was on summer holiday, so we agreed to meet in Paris."

"I've always wanted to go."

"You will. Anyway, I got there a day before Mom, and I went to the hotel that she was going to be staying at and I gave the concierge money to buy her a beautiful bouquet of flowers to be sent to her room. The plan was to meet at the top of the Eiffel Tower. Mom arrived on one side and I on the other, but we got in the same elevator that took us to the tippy top. When we locked eyes in the elevator, we didn't speak. When we both got out, we kissed, and the people around us thought that we were engaged, but in fact, it was just our first date. I had snuck a bottle of Champagne and two glasses under my coat, and we drank while looking down on Paris. It was in that moment we fell in love."

"It sounds like a movie. Are you sure you aren't making this up?"

"It's a true story."

"But there was a problem, and it wasn't as perfect as it seemed. At the time, I was engaged to another woman, and I had to return to England to marry her. I had no idea what was going to come of meeting up with Mom that

day. But, I was torn and I didn't know what to do. We spent the rest of the day together, but when I told her that I was engaged, she wasn't happy. That was the last we saw of each other for a while. She returned to America to continue with her studies, and I went back to England to get married."

"But that can't be the end of the story, right?"

"It's not. When I got back to England, I just wasn't the same. I missed your Mom. So, I broke things off with my fiancé, who was pretty mad at me, and I bought a plane ticket to America. I had no idea what I was doing, I was leaving behind everything that was familiar, heading to a new country. I was nervous.

When I traveled, I sought the unknown, always game for adventure. But this time, I was worried that when I arrived, she wouldn't be waiting for me. When I reached New York, I was overwhelmed, I had been to many cities but Manhattan was different. I took a taxi to Mom's apartment, and by this time it was pouring Tabbies and Dalmatians, a real torrential downpour.

There was a bell to get into the building, and I rang her apartment, 12A, waiting in the rain, staring up to the twelfth floor. I guess she looked down because minutes later she appeared. When I saw her through the window at the door, I didn't know what to think. We didn't embrace as we did on the Eiffel Tower. We just stared at each other for a while. She stood beneath the building's awning, watered dripped from my leather jacket, standing partially in the rain. 'I thought you were getting married.' She finally said, and I replied, 'Only if it is to you!' She ran into my arms. It was a happy moment. And that's how I married your mother."

"I hope I fall in love like that," Orla said, being picked up from the floor by her dad, carried off to bed.

"Time will tell."

## MAEVE MEETS JO MARCH

### Christmas (2002)

Now blanketed Memory Lane, the street outside Maeve Little's house, glistening as it fell. It was the day after Christmas, just hours before the neighborhood bustled with activity, but now all was quiet. Only a few children and their parents were out, their oblong footprints imprinted in the snow, soon covered by glistening flakes. Maeve awoke, not sure what to do. Old Saint Nick arrived, presents opened, Christmas crackers popped, family and friends departed. She felt there was only New Year's Eve to look forward to, but as a ten-year-old, she had little interest in a celebration that was primarily for adults.

Reluctantly, Maeve tumbled out of bed, shivering as her toes grazed the cool oak floorboards. Covered in goosebumps, she quickly got dressed. Maeve hated them, she thought they made her skin look like raw chicken. She threw on brown corduroy pants, an off-white cable-knit fisherman's sweater, heavy woolen socks. Waiting at the top of the stairs, she petted Willow, a springer spaniel, soundly asleep on a thick hooked rug. Peering over the banister, perched on her tip-toes, Maeve noticed that the tree lights were off. With a harumph, she sulked downstairs. Not even remnants of green, red, or gold wrapping paper could be found in the living room. Maeve's family was the type to clean up holiday wrappings as the presents were opened, avoiding the inevitable mess after all joyful chaos subsided.

"Hey, Maevey," her dad, Niall, greeted.

"Hi," she said, plopping down at the kitchen table, generously pouring maple syrup over her buttermilk pancake in the shape of a snowman. A Little tradition.

"Why the frown?"

"Nothing to do!"

"What about the playground?"

"No one there."

"Ah." Niall sipped his coffee, as Maeve's mom, Dot, sat at the table.

"Hey, I have an idea. Didn't a grown-up girl get her library card?"

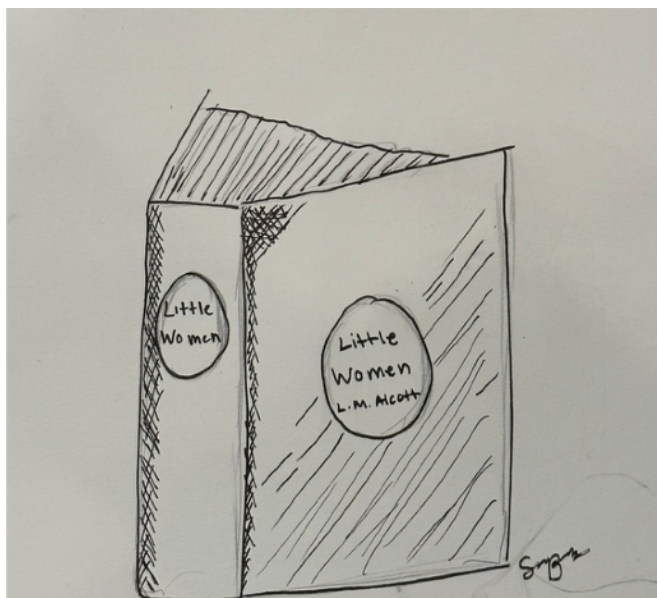
"Yeah."

"Why don't you pick up some books?"

There were many things that Maeve loved. Two of them were books, and her independence. A sudden smile appeared on Maeve's face, as she quickly wolfed down her pancake. She didn't want to be late for the library, believing that all the good books would be borrowed. Quickly, Maeve bundled up, her mom wrapping her in an extra scarf and hat. She looked like the Stay-Puft Marshmallow Man. Securely tucking her library card in her pocket, Maeve was on her way.

It was a short walk, but it was difficult to move quickly because of the snow. Maeve admired its fluffiness. It was the desirable consistency.

When Maeve arrived at Margaret J. Pendleton Library, she stomped her feet at the door and walked in. It was quiet, Maeve found the silence reassuring. She undid layers and arrowed over to the kids' section. Maeve felt grownup, inspecting the bookshelves, tracing her small cold fingers on spines, reciting the titles quietly to herself. She was particular, her books needed to be nothing short of riveting, preferably with a female protagonist and a compelling cover didn't hurt. In the ten-and-up bookcase, Maeve's fingers stopped at a leather-bound volume. Its spine, wide, a grown-up book like her dad read, decorated with green vines with pink berries and delicate red flowers. The title was *Little Women*. In its pages, Maeve discovered herself.



### Valentine's Day (2014)

Maeve sat at the reception desk of Small Door Veterinary Clinic & Hospital in the West Village. She watched people pass the storefront, shivering in their puffers and parkas. It was ten degrees out, Maeve hated February. This year in particular. She just broke up with Arthur Vanderwelt, her boyfriend of four years. They met at Brown, but he was now working in LA at an online grocery delivery service start-up, and she was in New York trying to make it as a freelance writer. The long distance wasn't working, so they bade their goodbyes, it was mutual. Maeve felt like an elephant was sitting on her chest, her heart hurt. It certainly didn't help to work in a room decorated with pink and red hearts, dog treats with frosting that read "I LOVE U" and cutesy valentine-themed animal calendars all around. On top of it all, her apartment's propane heater was on the fritz, and Maeve spent the night shivering in her sixth-floor walk-up, alone. Usually, she sat in her desk chair, taking calls from frantic dog and cat owners. But, today was a quiet day. Her boss, Ted, who preferred to be called Teddy, was finishing with the afternoon's last few clients. Maeve thought it would be a good time to try and write. She promised herself that even though she was working at a vet she would work on her short story. She pulled out her journal from her tote and looked at the crisp blank page. Nada. Nothing came to mind. All she could think about was how tired and hungry she was, and how to free herself from this pet palace on Valentine's Day.

Maeve reminded herself that she was lucky to have a job that paid decently. But it was hard to be positive when it smelled like animal feces and kibble. Just as Maeve was about to eat her everything bagel from Murray's, the coffee shop down the street, a bearded, heavy-set man walked in.

"I'm Borris' dad."

"Ok, let me check with Theodore."

"Dr. Kimmelman, Borris' owner is here."

"Do you mind getting him? I'm tied up. Oh, Meg. Pick up my dry-cleaning too. Make sure they used the good detergent."

"Dr. K, that's not my job!"

"Meg, call me Teddy."

"Maeve."

"Huh?"

"My name is Maeve."

“Don’t use that tone with me.”

Maeve turned to leave, but Ted said “Who is Borris’ owner? Is it the hot girl with the red hair?” He attempted to whistle, but he just spat. Maeve grimaced and tried to leave again. “Please smile and be more cheerful.” Maeve’s face turned red, and her ears felt hot like steam was emanating. She left, discreetly flipping off her sad excuse for a boss.

Maeve returned to the front, and said “I’m going in the back to get Borris.” She glanced at herself in the hallway mirror. Dark bags under her eyes, the color of a winter sky, also looking frail. Her cheekbones were too defined and she had lost weight, her sixteen-year-old self wouldn’t have minded. Tears welled. She clenched her fists hard, her nails digging into her palm, and she had the urge to destroy something. Maeve pulled a plastic object off a nearby shelf and chucked it down the hall. It landed with a squeak. It was a dog toy, a chewed-up green bone that drove everyone crazy. “Goddammit, I can’t even break anything,” Maeve thought to herself. Clutching her face in her hands, she sobbed, wishing she could go back to Memory Lane, where everything was orderly, familiar, like the world of the March sisters. But now she was alone, and couldn’t bear the humiliation of Kimmelman seeing her this way. Wiping away tears, she went to the back room, to fetch Borris, a one-hundred-and-fifty-pound Saint Bernard. His size deceived many, but he was sweet. He greeted Maeve with a slobbery snout, his tongue dropping as he panted. Maeve pulled him out of the crate and just as they were about to leave, Borris dumped on her foot. “Goddammit, Jo March, this is another fine mess you’ve got me into.”

#### Passover (2015)

Springtime for Maeve in New York. Cold days were now in the past, the city slowly emerged from its seasonal depression. Buds sprang, birds returned, the sun’s warm rays experienced again. Maeve settled into a new apartment and made friends. One of whom, Jonah Fishblatt, was hosting a Seder in his Upper West Side apartment. Maeve took the 1 Train at the 14<sup>th</sup> Street Station up to Columbus Circle. She didn’t know how to dress, it was her first one. To be on the safe side, she wore a forest green slip dress, a chunky black cardigan, and her Doc Martens Chelsea boots. Why that? She wasn’t sure.

Walking through Central Park, she admired the blossoming trees and lush grass. Maeve thought the park was a good place to observe New Yorkers, there



was always a range of characters, some of whom would make a good story. She exited the park at 72<sup>nd</sup> and Central Park West and walked over to West End Avenue.

She was heading to Zabar's to buy chocolate matzah. Knowing Zabar's, she anticipated that it would be overpriced. Still, the thought of their rich cakes made her mouth water. For Maeve, Zabar's was a gastronomic temple. She thought about Jo March and wondered, what would Jo have chosen? She browsed the shelves, and treated herself to a babka she couldn't resist. And she heard from a little birdie that Seders take a while, and she was hungry. In the cookie section, she spotted a box of half-moons, Arthur's favorite. She hadn't thought of her ex for a while. A friend from college said he was dating a redhead, and said: "he was fulfilled." Maeve never understood why they couldn't be happy together. Long distance worked for some couples. She knew she didn't actually miss Arthur, rather she missed the idea of Arthur. A support system, a shoulder to cry on, someone to hold her, encourage her...Just be there and take her to Nobu! Maeve felt torn, but quickly shook herself back to reality and found what she was looking for. On the box, the label read, Bread of Affliction.

"How fitting!" Maeve whispered to herself.

"Huh?" The guy shopping next to her said.

"Oh, nothing."

Embarrassed, Maeve walked away. "Happy Passover," he said. She chuckled. As she expected, it was \$11.99. Maeve made her purchase and left the store. Pulling out the babka, she spotted a small bookstore across the street. Its carts were lined with used books, tucked under a green awning. In white letters, it read "Westsider Rare & Used Books." She stuffed the babka in its bag and quickly ran across, avoiding oncoming traffic. It was small. Bookshelves covered the walls, and Maeve had to crane her neck to see the top shelf. A small cat named Pig slept in the corner. Maeve wasn't a cat person, maybe after working at the vet she wouldn't be much of a pet person anymore. But when she was two, her neighbor's cat almost scratched her eye out. She cautiously greeted Pig and crept away.

The floor creaked under her Docs as she wove her way through the few rows of shelves. Her nose tickled from the dust that lingered on the books and in the air. She felt like she had to sneeze, but it was all part of the experience. She climbed the small staircase to a little landing. Leather-bound first-edition

books were tucked into the wall, worn, but loved. Maeve spotted an old copy of *Little Women*. It was maroon and the title was stamped in gold on the front and spine. Its corners, tattered, but she didn't mind. Maeve held the book delicately and fingered through the pages, smiling. She put it back on display, wishing she could afford it. She was about to descend when she saw a flier tacked to the wall near where the book stood. It was from *Narrative Magazine*, advertising their Story Contest. Maeve felt the anxious excitement that comes with putting yourself out there. She had the sudden sensation that she needed to go run a marathon and crack all her knuckles at once. Maeve quickly flew down the stairs and asked the harried college student behind the counter if she had an extra notice for the contest. She pulled out a copy from under the desk.

"You're a writer?"

"Aspiring."

"Cool."

"The deadline is next week."

"Then I better get on it."

The girl nodded, and with a smile, Maeve departed, whispering "Nothing's ever easy, is it?"

### Independence Day (2020)

Summer arrived, bringing with it long days in the sun. The city's elite escaped to their Hampton homes, while tourists meandered through sun-baked streets.

It was Fourth of July weekend, and Maeve escaped Manhattan to visit her friend, Nigel Hickinbotton, whose family had a house in Sagaponack. Nigel was born in Sussex but attended school in America. His parents had homes all over. Maeve wasn't sure what they did, Nigel never said. She had heard it had something to do with the stock market, or maybe art. It was anyone's guess.

American flags waved from front porches. Fashion magazine families dressed in matching outfits sped around in BMWs, Audis, and Range Rovers. Botox lips on beautiful women seemed the norm. Maeve loved the scenery, but was turned off by the people who lived there.

Nigel's house was on Parsonage Lane. The gravel driveway was always combed, the lawn, finely manicured, and everything about it, picture perfect. His parents were away, somewhere in Europe, and Nigel took this as an opportunity to throw a party. Nigel loved hosting, especially if there was a theme involved. Maeve expected that it would be red, white, and blue since it

was the Fourth. She felt slightly out of place among the glitz and glamor, like Jo March at any party that Meg forced her to go to, and any that Amy longed to attend.

Maeve took the train from Penn Station to East Hampton. She was grateful to have the weekend off. Nigel met her in his vintage, British racing-green Austin Healey.

"Hello, m'lady," he greeted, bowing. It was funny, sometimes he had an accent, and other times, it was hard to tell.

"Good afternoon, kind sir," Maeve mimicked.

"Ready for the weekend's festivities?"

"Can't go wrong with red, white, and blue!"

"You've underestimated me. Who do you think I am? We're not having an Independence Day party. We're having a Good Riddance Day Party. After all, for the British, it is the day we got rid of you!"

"How do you throw a Good Riddance Day Party?"

"Well, the dress code is British soldiers from the 18<sup>th</sup> century: classic red coats, powdered wigs, and tricorns. We will form a procession around the lawn, marching to "God Save the King" a tribute to Mad George. Also, there'll be a twenty-one-gun salute. Don't worry, they're professionals."

"Oh my."

"Fantastic, right! There will be plenty of beer, fish 'n' chips, and all the good things Mother England has to offer."

When they arrived at the house, caterers and staff were already setting up.

"Your room is on the second floor, third door on your right. The others just got back from the beach, showering."

"Who else is here?"

"Jonah Fishblatt, Briar Villarreal, Atticus Yarbrough, you, and me."

Lying on Maeve's bed was her costume. Nigel had gone above and beyond. Maeve started to get ready, the party was at five and it was almost four o'clock. She anticipated that it would take her a while to button up her britches and securely fasten the wig.

At five, Maeve descended the stairs and found all the guests dressed alike. She couldn't help but laugh. They walked across the lawn, marching to the national anthem, and when they came to a halt, Nigel yelled, "God save the Queen!" The "professionals" fired the salute and then the best part of the party

commenced. Beer, fish 'n' chips with Branston Pickle and HP Sauce, and Knickerbocker Glories for dessert.

When the sun dipped below the horizon, fireworks exploded. Still in costume, the party gathered, gazing at the spectacle. Oohs and ahhs were heard. Maeve reached into her pantaloons pocket, fishing out a brand new book, the amplification of this very short story. Holding it up, its blue and white cover sparked gentle applause and congratulations. Taking Maeve's debut novel, Nigel read from its back cover, "Any reader who adored *Little Women* should read this book. They may find themselves in it, and come to love it." It was a quote from *The New Yorker*.

"I did it, Jo," Maeve whispered softly.

## FUNERAL FOR A GOLDFISH

It was a sad day. Cecilia, or Cecie, was mourning the loss of her beloved goldfish, Bartholomew, or Barty. He had a long life, about three years. Cecie had gotten him after a play date at her best friend Orla's house. Orla received a goldfish for her birthday, and Cecie couldn't bear not having anything that Orla had. Cecie cared for Bartholomew up until the final moment, greeting him in the morning, changing his water, giving him lots of treats. It was her first real responsibility, but just two days ago, pressing her nose to the bowl, Cecie found Bartholomew floating at the surface. She had watched enough cartoons to know that this was not good. Cecie was distraught, she kept yelling "I murdered him!" Her mothers did their best to empathize, but Cecie couldn't be consoled. She didn't even tell Orla, because she knew Orla would brag that her fish was still swimming.

Cecie had spent the last day planning his funeral, making sure all the right people were invited: her stuffed animals and Kiki her right-hand friend. When discussing the funeral with her parents, Cecie insisted that Bartholomew have a dignified funeral in the backyard, none of this flushing down-the-toilet business.

When Cecie awoke, she put on a black velvet dress that had a flower at the hip, a Christmas gift from Granny, a big black hair bow, and her signature ladybug tights. No matter the outfit or the occasion, Cecie always wore her ladybug tights.

"Nice outfit," Kiki said admiringly. She went with Cecie everywhere.

"Thanks! I think Bartholomew would've liked it. He had an eye for fashion," she replied, turning towards Kiki who sat on the corner of her bed. Cecie checked the ladybug clock on her desk, it was time. She gathered all her stuffed animals and headed downstairs. Her parents, Addie and Meg, were sipping coffee at the kitchen table.

"Good morning, sweetie. Want some cereal?"

"Can't eat. Not when I'm in mourning. Kiki doesn't want any either."

"Hi, Kiki," Addie said, waving to thin air at the left of Cecie.

"Mom, they're not next to me. Kiki is already outside."

"Oh, I see," Addie replied.

"I have to finish setting up, goodbye Moms."

Cecie turned on her heels and went into the backyard. The air was cold, and the grass was covered in the season's first frost, crunching underneath her Ugg boots. Beneath the oak tree, where Cecie's swing hung, she began digging a hole with a small garden spade. Cecie then assembled her stuffed animals around the hole. Sparky a dragon, Todo a turtle, Mr. Whale—yup, a whale, Floofie a sheepdog, Norman a Highland Cow, Sparkle-rainbow a unicorn, Mrs. Mitzia an owl, and Floppsy a Bunny. "All right guys, I'm going to get Bartholomew. Please be on your best behavior while I'm gone, Mrs. Mitzia is in charge. I'm talking to you Todo."

"How come I'm not in charge?" Kiki exclaimed.

"Kiki, you're clearly in charge. I just want to give Mrs. Mitzia a confidence boost. She really loved Bartholomew."

"Got it."

Cecie skipped over to the shed where Bartholomew was being kept. She placed him in an Old Whaling Company box she found in her moms' closet. Cecie also grabbed the rock she had chosen as his tombstone and decorated it with glitter glue. Box and rock in hand, Cecie returned to her friends. "Guys! I said to be on your best behavior. Todo, you made Norman cry. You know that he is sensitive about all his fur. Don't you crawl into your shell, I'm talking to you, mister!" Cecie pointed a stern finger at Todo, scrunching her nose as she does when she is angry, forming a small crease in between her eyebrows. After giving Todo a proper scolding, she went to console Norman. "It's okay, Norman. I'm here. You have beautiful fur, no need to feel ashamed." Cecie gave Norman a tight squeeze. "Mr. Whale, please stop blowing water everywhere. Now Sparky is all wet. You know how he hates that. Don't pout Sparkle-rainbow, I can give you a hug too. Come on everyone, group hug. Oh, I wish Bartholomew was here to join us!"

Cecie carefully placed the shoe box in the hole, along with a few of Bartholomew's favorite things: his fish cave from the bowl, a sprinkle of treats, and a picture of Cecie and Bartholomew when they first met. Cecie patiently spooned dirt over, burying Bartholomew, but holding on to their memories. She patted it down and placed the bedazzled rock on top. It read, "Here lies Bartholomew Goldstein, a good fish friend." Cecie shed a tear but quickly wiped it away. She wanted to stay strong for the rest of the party. "In honor of Bartholomew's death I want to have a moment of silence, and then I will play his favorite song, Rolling in the Deep by Adele." The party was silent, Cecie

stood tall, and her heart ached. She had never experienced loss before. Is this what loss feels like? Why isn't life everlasting, but love is? She asked herself. She shook herself back to the real world and hit play on her hot pink radio. The melancholy voice of Adele emanated from the speakers. Cecie began singing. Well, more like she shouted the lyrics off-tune. "There's a fire starting in my heart/ Reaching a fever pitch, it's bringing me out the dark/ Finally I can see you crystal clear/ Go ahead and sell me out and I'll lay your ship bare". The rest of the group chimed in. Floofie and Floppsy sang best of all, Cecie believed, in a past life, they were on Broadway. "Thank you for coming. We can now move inside for tea and sandwiches." Cecie collected her stuffed animals and brought them in, Kiki at her heels.

"How was it?" Addie asked.

"Sad, beautiful. We've come in for the service," Cecie replied.

"Want some snacks? Goldfish?"

"Mom! Are you kidding?"

"Right, sorry honey."

"We're going to have tea. I'll make it myself."

Cecie went upstairs to her playroom, furry friends in hand. She seated them around her table, where her butterfly tea set was already set up. "Ok, Norman and Todo, I am separating you guys. No more drama. Norman, you can sit here, next to Sparkle-rainbow. Sparky, you go here. Floofie and Floppsy, over there. Mrs. Mitzia, here you are. Todo, right there, and last, but not least, Mr. Whale. Perfect! I'll go make some chamomile, hope it's okay, Moms said we can't have caffeine. I'm making my specialty, a butter sandwich! Be back in a second. Kiki, you're in charge."

"I'll make sure everyone is well-behaved," Kiki excitedly replied. Cecie gave them an air high five and then skipped downstairs. Meg helped her make the tea, Cecie hadn't reached kettle status yet. While the water came to a boil, Cecie made the toast, placing a hunk of butter on each slice. Carefully, Cecie carried the tray of toast up to the room, Meg following behind with the kettle. "Thanks, Mom, that'll be all!" Cecie exclaimed, practically shooing her mom out the door. Turning towards the party, Cecie found Sparkle-rainbow on the floor, his smile turned upside down. Sparky and Mr. Whale were sitting on top of the table, Sparky looked ready to set Mr. Whale aflame. Who would extinguish it if Mr. Whale caught on fire? "What happened? Kiki, I thought you could manage things. It's like you're not even here! Poor Sparkle-rainbow,

you're still glimmering in my eyes. Who pushed you? Norman? I can't believe it! I'll deal with him later. Sparky and Mr. Whale, get off the table now. 1, 2, 3. Ok, that's it. Time out! You guys are going in the Naughty Nook. No tea and toast for you! Well, Sparky, if you are so hungry, you should have thought about that before you nearly lit Mr. Whale on fire. All right, who here wants tea? Everyone? Ok. Help yourself. No spilling on other people, Mrs. Mitzia. I expected better from you. Come on guys, now the bread is soggy, and the tea has gone cold. I just wanted this to be perfect. Perfect for Bartholomew." Cecie began to cry. She couldn't be brave anymore. What she had hoped would be a lovely funeral had turned to chaos. She was so worried about all her guests that she had forgotten about why they were all here.

Cecie plopped down at the little table, her face in her hands. The day had failed. Cecie had failed. She tried to be grown up and put on a brave face. Bartholomew was her responsibility, and he died. Cecie couldn't help but wonder if it was her fault. She had this feeling weighing her down. She thought it was this thing called guilt. She had heard her parents talking about it before, but she had never felt it. What can I do to make this feeling go away? She wondered. "Guys, the party is over. I need some alone time." The stuffed animals dispersed and Kiki sat by the window. Cecie sulked down the stairs and walked into the kitchen where her moms were sitting.

"Hi honey, need more tea?" Meg asked. Cecie's lip quivered.

"What's wrong?" Addie inquired.

"I just feel so bumed. The funeral didn't go as planned. All my friends are fighting, and I can't do anything to stop them. I feel like I'm not honoring Bartholomew, and I just feel like there is something nagging me. Like it is my fault he died, and I just don't understand."

"What don't you understand?"

"Why do we lose the things we love?"

"Oh, sweetheart! You don't need to worry about that."

"But Bartholomew is gone."

"That's normal. It's called love. When you love someone, sometimes things happen and you have to say goodbye. It's hard and it hurts, but even if things are blue, you will always be loved."

"It's not a good feeling."

"I know," Meg chuckled.

"Do you feel better?"



"A bit. I think I'm ready for some cereal."

"Honey Nut Cheerios?"

"Can we get a dog?"

"Oh dear..."

"What! I'm very responsible and it would help me feel better about Bartholomew."

"Cecie."

"So you'll think about it? I don't mind waiting. I was thinking Arthur would be a good name."



## MAGIC AT MERLIN

It was Parent-Teacher Conference night at Merlin Elementary. Arthur sat quietly outside his classroom, playing with his Valiant hoodie's gold zipper, while his parents, Sarah and Gary, the Wallaces, talked to Mrs. Knight. He found these events boring but always tried listening through the door, even though conversations were muffled. Guin was standing in front of her classroom, one door down the hall. It was Mrs. Marshall's. They had seen each other on the playground, but didn't know each other too well.

"Hi, Guin," Arthur said, delicately waving.

"Hey, Arthur."

"Wanna do something?"

"Like what?"

Arthur shrugged. Without warning, a deep rumbling erupted from beneath the floorboards, and the surrounding third grader's artwork fell from the wall. The two looked at each other, unsure of what was happening. Lush vines and snaking roots emerged from the tile floor. The walls crumbled, castle walls taking their place. The school's roof blew off, revealing a vibrant blue sky and plump cumulous clouds. The seats that they were sitting on fell apart, and tree stumps appeared. Soon, Guin and Arthur stood in an overgrown field, surrounded by Enchanter's nightshades, Kingcups, Water avens, and a large patch of Forget-me-nots beneath a towering oak tree.

"Where are we?" Guin asked.

"Looks like a meadow leading to a castle!"

"How?"

"Magic? Let's explore!"

"Could be dangerous."

"It won't, I promise. You just have to believe," Arthur reassured, holding out his hand; Guin took it. They frolicked through the lush grass, full of birds, butterflies, squirrels, chipmunks, and long-antlered deer—but, no people. When they reached the castle, they found the front door open. How easy. The castle was silent, only the echo of their footsteps on the cool stone and the distant caws of crows.

"Where is everyone?" Arthur asked.

"So quiet!" Guin nodded.

"Where are we?"

"I bet there were knights, princesses, kings, and queens!"

"It's our castle now. King Arthur and you, Guinevere, are my Queen."

Guin giggled, no longer afraid, wandering the vast halls, wondering what life would've been like teeming with knights guarding entrances, jesters juggling, and King and Queen ruling. Golden light streamed through stained glass, creating a colorful glow. Heavy oak cabinets were covered in layers of dust, and hand-woven tapestries lined the walls, a legendary tale sewn into each one.

Eventually, Guin and Arthur came to a large foyer, and at the end stood a double door, fit for a giant. The hallway was decorated with paintings. They stopped at a landscape titled "Castle Ialogarth and the View Beyond".

"Castle Ialogarth."

"Never heard of it."

"Me neither."

"I've never seen Ialogarth on a map either."

They kept walking down the hall. Right by the heavy door, a large portrait hung, almost from floor to ceiling. An elegant lady sat poised in it, and a nobleman with a benevolent face stood behind her, resting his hand on her shoulder. It was titled "King Hodgkin and Queen Iselota".

"Guin, you look like her."

She stared at the Queen, and like Guin, the Queen had dark chestnut hair, with little curls around her ears. Her skin was fair, her nose speckled with freckles and her cheeks rosy. She had baby blue eyes, but at a certain angle, they looked almost emerald.

"I guess you're right," Guin replied after some time.

"Maybe you're related."

"I've never seen her before."

"Strange."

"Queen Iselota," Guin said quietly.

"Come on, let's keep exploring."

Guin didn't want to leave the Queen behind. Turning to follow Arthur, she felt the gentle eyes of Iselota on her.

Coming to the large oak door, Arthur tried to open it. Pulling on the heavy brass handles, it wouldn't budge. Guin knocked, tap, tap, and the door creaked ajar. But no one stood before them. "Welcome," someone greeted.

Guin and Arthur jumped. "I'm down here," the voice said again. They looked down, a kit fox stood on its back legs, looking up.

"Welcome to Ialogarth."

"You can talk!" Arthur exclaimed.

"Of course. And so can you!"

"All humans can talk," Arthur added.

"And all animals in Ialogarth talk too."

"Amazing!" Guin jumped in.

"You must be Guin," the fox said, looking at her.

"How di—"

"The resemblance between you and the magnificent Queen Iselota, uncanny! I suppose it runs in the family."

"We're related?"

"Yes, didn't you know?"

"No!"

"Surprising. Who is the friend you brought with you?"

"I'm Arthur."

"Interesting name, kingly."

"What's yours?"

"Mr. Folonius."

"Nice to meet you."

"Please come in."

They followed Mr. Folonius through the door and entered a large room. Candles hung from the ceiling, casting a warm glow on the stone facade. Mr. Folonius sparkled in the candlelight. He was a majestic fox. Knight armor lined the walls: spears, halberds, flags, and swords. In the center of the chamber, stood two thrones. The seats were embroidered with flowers and vines, ornately decorated with gold thread. Two long tables were placed on either side of the thrones, set for dinner, it was quite a spread. Large candlesticks, fine china at every place, across the table were dishes and delicacies, and in the center, a suckling roast pig lay on a silver platter, a sumptuous red apple in its mouth.

"Who is the food for?" Arthur asked, always thinking about his stomach.

"The coronation for the new queen."

"Oh, cool!"

"We've been waiting patiently for the Queen to arrive. It's been years since Queen Iselota passed. The castle has been abandoned for years, now. Only a few creatures like myself roam the kingdom."

"What happened?"

"The Great War of Ialogarth cost us many lives."

"And the King and Queen?"

"The King died valiantly in battle, and the Queen died shortly after."

"Heartbreaking!"

"Did you know them?"

"Barely, I was only a kit when they died. But my father did, and after he passed, I have been the castle's caretaker, waiting for you."

"For me?" Guin asked, stunned.

"Yes, Ialogarth requires a new Queen."

"But, I'm only eight!"

"You'll be ready when the time comes."

"When is that?"

"You'll know. You just need to believe."

"How will I return?"

"I'll send for you like I did tonight."

"Wait! I have more questions!"

Seconds later, they were back in Merlin Elementary, in the same hallway and chairs. Guin's mother walked toward her, asking, "Where have you been?"

Quin thought for a moment before answering.

"Do you think I'd make a good queen?"

"I sure do," said her Mom, adding, "and you can start by improving your penmanship!"

## WHAT FLOOR?

**A**ugustus Riddelthorp, who went by Auggie, pressed the elevator up button in the ornate lobby of the Belnord, where he lived for most of his life. With a light touch, the worn square glowed pale red. He was visiting his parents, home from the University of St Andrews for the Christmas vacation. Jet-lagged, he felt sluggish, longing to flop onto his bed, covered with his parents' large pillows. Ding. The doors slid open, revealing a rosewood interior, redolent of other riders: Chanel №5, Febreze fabric softener, Fromage d'Affinois.

When Auggie was younger, he rode up and down, pretending that the wooden box was a magical wardrobe, and each floor, a gateway to a fantastical adventure. Just as closing doors sealed off views of the lobby, a gnarled sculpted wooden hand prevented them from fully closing. They receded, revealing an unusually large man, and a puppet version of himself.

Slightly out of it, Auggie thought he was having some odd nightmare, a daymare if you must know the truth. Built like a giant, the man ducked to avoid hitting his head as he entered. He had caterpillar eyebrows, obscuring his eyes, and a mustache that looked like the hairs of a bristle brush. He wore a black fair-isle sweater and black corduroy pants. His hand-held dummy looked the same. How odd it was to see such a large man with such a small doll?

"I'm Otis Cashmere."

The elevator doors closed. Auggie stared at him.

"Ello!" He had a deep, soothing voice. His size didn't allude to kindness, and the warm greeting surprised Auggie.

"Hey?"

"What floor?"

"Huh?"

"You didn't press a button."

"Oh, forty-three."

"What luck! We're headed to the same place."

Otis leaned over Auggie and had the doll press forty-three, the Belnord penthouse. Perplexed, Auggie looked at the doll and wondered Why is he going to the forty-third floor? It was awkward. Both the silence and stares from the doll.

"I hate quiet elevators," Otis stated.

"And I'm Lobby," the doll interjected.

It suddenly clicked, Otis was a ventriloquist.

"Lobby? Like of a building?" Auggie inquired.

"I guess!" Lobby replied.

"And you are?" Otis asked.

"Auggie! Just following my dreams!"

JACQUELYN SONG '24

BENJAMIN

**Y**ou wake up one sparkling morning, and Benjamin is holding your hand. You gape at him over a cold bowl of leftover broth. He hasn't visited in a month; his eyebrows are bushier, his forehead, rounder, but he still studies you in the same manner—pursed lips in a sharp line, chin raised firmly, eyes locked onto your face as if you're the only person in his world.

You know you're not. But your heart skips; the aching corners of your lips twitch. And though you warn yourself not to be fooled again, there's something about those emerald flecks in his eyes that you've desperately missed, rendering you helpless.

Benjamin grabs your hand, pulling you out the door. There's a note on the counter, left by your boss, but he folds it in half, sticking it in his coat. Protesting, you remind him that the psych midterm won't pass itself, that you're covering Xiao Li's shift because he bought Universal Studios tickets for his girlfriend, that your own girlfriend needs you to cook dinner so she doesn't starve before the MCAT gets her. But Benjamin's eyes implore, and your heart melts like the pork fat in a xiaolongbao dumpling.

Just one day. He begs. You've worked so hard.

You don't argue.

After all, it's Benjamin. And what harm can a single day do?

Beaming, Benjamin pulls you into an Uber. He introduces you to Miguel, a 4.97-star driver with a British racing green Honda. Though it's 7AM and you tried (and failed) to pull an all-nighter with Sigmund Freud, Benjamin coaxes out your energy. You engage Miguel in conversation. He frequents the restaurant where you work, he shares your love of champagne mangoes, and he's just emigrated to the US as well. Sentiments bounce back and forth, but you don't speak Spanish, Miguel doesn't speak Mandarin, and both of your English is abysmal. After a few laughs about 'odd Americans,' you promise each other 5-star ratings.

Leaving Miguel, Benjamin pulls you onto Hollywood Boulevard. Glitzy shops, cheap keychains. Scarlet stars, backward, forward, blank, Sharpied, cracked, misaligned. Old alleyways lined with chains of light. New theaters



painted 18<sup>th</sup> century. Every three feet, Benjamin insists you photograph Stan Lee or Anne Hathaway or Mickey Mouse. You haven't watched their movies. The images will sit in your album, extra kilobytes sapping storage on your 2012 iPhone. However, Benjamin claims they're critical indoctrination into American culture. You wonder why these celebrities want strangers stepping on their stars; Benjamin explains that an American's pride comes from being seen—the 'how' part matters less. You find it foolish, but he is the authority.

Benjamin pulls you behind neon billboards and up hidden escalators. He shoves trinkets into your hands—tickets for Madame Tussaud's and the Guinness Museum of World Records; a mug for your girlfriend with the Oscar statue and 'World's Best Significant Other'; an Apple watch alternating between numbers and hanyu outside the TCL Chinese Theatre; a cashmere suit modeled after 'Tom Hanks,' though you don't remember which Hollywood Tom he is. As hours and items pile, a knot tightens your gut. Aren't you missing something? You turn to Benjamin; he cures the feeling with a pain au chocolat. Creamy cocoa coats your tongue. Noticing your smile, he sneaks a few crème brûlées and crêpe sucrés into a pink box, aware that you'll swallow it all, along with your doubts. You elbow him, pointing out that every bite of pain au chocolat is a bite into your inflating tuition. Benjamin nudges back, countering that a fraction of your tuition could buy a hundred pains au chocolat...a hundred pleasures still out there.

It's afternoon now. Benjamin reflects on the beautiful weather in the most American fashion, suggesting that you walk downtown. But he's right—the sky's brighter than royal-blue icing, sugar clouds piped luminous, voluminous. You're floating from the chocolate on your lips...the buttery spring light caressing your face. Gleefully, you leave Hollywood Boulevard, shopping bags dangling within interlocked fingers.

People stream past you, all different shades and sizes. Gazes brush over you, lighting on Benjamin, who smiles and waves like a Hollywood Tom, pulling them into his orbit with that burning gaze of his. Usually, in a crowd, you note some American eccentricity—the teenagers' low-cut necklines, the provocative hoodie slogans. This time, it's the amount of balding, older men. It's not a crisis unique to America, yet back in China, your father, grandfather, bai-bais, and shu-shus, all faded silver without losing a strand. Your girlfriend claims it's related to the excessive consumption of beef, though her medical assumptions prove implausible too often for an aspiring physician.

With a start, you notice that Benjamin's head is shiny as a hard-boiled egg. An epiphany strikes. Love brings two people closest, and everyone loves Benjamin...so what if they're bald because of love? Goosebumps erupt along your arm. Oh no. Since coming to LA, you've been falling for him too. What if the cost is your hair?

Apprehensive, your fingers slip Benjamin's. When you swivel, he's stumbled into the street. Panic sears through your veins; diving into traffic, you snatch hold of him. Screeching tires, honking interspersed with screams, pedestrians fumbling for cameras. Click. Click! You smash into the LaLaLand shop, breaths erratic. Onlookers shake their heads. You feel sick to your stomach. But, a single smile from Benjamin washes all that away. He helps you up. You agree to walk slower.

At an intersection, there's a young woman in a rumpled jacket, leaning against cardboard. She holds a Coke can, sliced crudely in half, imploring passersby for help. Most stroll past, shoppers rambling about plans to visit Griffith Park, high schoolers sharing insights on UCLA and CalTech. When you first emigrated, the indifference appalled you. Yet now, you've been here for two years. Though you still fumble with language and pop culture, you know you've acclimated to some degree...how else could you saunter past as if she's invisible, unfazed by the desperation in her eyes?

Like everyone else, the young woman fixates on Benjamin. He's staring at her too. You know that if you give him up, he'll help her stand...bring a sparkle to her eyes, draw laughter from her lips, even polish her whole life anew, because Benjamin works miracles. Yet when he slipped earlier, you thought your heart might stop beating. Just today, Benjamin is your miracle. Tightening your grip, you yank him away. The young woman's eyes fall to the ground.

Downtown, skyscrapers pierce the sugar clouds, six lanes race between sidewalks, and posters for the Halftime Show and the 'Hulu Original: *The Dropout*' flash upon building facades. You shrink into tangled limbs and voices, reflecting on how much you despise the busiest parts of the city. It's not because there're too many people...but the opposite. You take in thousands of faces in a millisecond. There's someone's Rolex, another's beaten Sketchers. Every particle slips through your fingers before you can examine it. Part of you knows that everyone's an individual. Yet, somehow, viewed in blurred snapshots, no one is. It makes you feel like anyone, insignificant...dehumanized, even.

Benjamin, on the other hand, looks at ease. He's always been terrified of being alone. Yet the second he steps out, he solicits love from all and gives his heart to none, so he's tugged this way and that way by desperation until they tear him to shreds. Only in this crowd, surrounded by fleeting shadows of people, can he truly achieve his balance.

But, noticing your discomfort, he leads you to dinner. He chooses The Capital Grille, which you know you can't afford because that extra 'e' at the end means an extra 'o' on the check. Benjamin rolls his eyes, affirming he will take care of it.

The waiter places you at a corner table. You order a New York Strip, medium, and a Cabernet Sauvignon. The red wine lacks structure, but you don't like wine anyway—you just ordered it because the exquisite jazz and three forks demanded it. An hour later, the steak arrives, more plate than steak. The first bite melts. Benjamin remarks on marbling and texture; you don't understand his vocabulary, but it makes you feel sophisticated, so you savor each bite, laughing between sips of water...red wine. When the waiter comes with a box, you pack the last bite and offer Benjamin your hand.

His seat's empty.

But he hasn't left the restaurant...you see him everywhere. Rearranging forks on a waiter's tray. Resting his elbows on the tablecloth of an elderly couple. Embracing a young man, sitting alone with a promotion notice and a plate of Brussels sprouts. You wave to him, but he doesn't breathe your way.

Suddenly, your lungs contract, and you're bolting down cracked cement, dry wind sifting through your hair, unable to think about anything except escaping the heaviness of the ribeye, the bags dragging your wrists... everything keeping you from flying out of the mess and back into those bygone days where you felt like your own person.

You find yourself eclipsed in Coca-Cola and Pepsi, battling for the spotlight on the screens of LA Live. There are seven missed calls from your girlfriend. One by one, you listen to them, her voice dragging you back into your body.

The sink's broken, but oh my skies, plumbers are so expensive! Get a wrench and a few pipes from Home Depot; I'll fix myself.

I checked gas prices—they're practically double what they were last month. Isn't that crazy? Let's buy metro cards. Or how about we walk to campus tomorrow?

The cabbages were on sale. I bought five. They might last us until Thursday.

Please pick up. I'm worried.

Where are you?

What are you doing?

You look down at your shopping bags, souvenirs of a fading day. Suddenly, you can't stand them. If only you could turn back time, return the mug and suit and pastries. The thought of Benjamin remorse fills you with rage. Does he enjoy making you suffer? Stringing you along on escapism, cutting you loose when you're spent?

With dull eyes, you stare down the street. A young woman drags a suitcase, dirt matted hair, bare feet bruised. You rifle through your tattered wallet—a crisp new bill. Before you can rise, a fierce gust tears it away. Jumping to your feet, you chase it to the stoplight, watching in amazement as it flutters on the Gulf Stream, settling right by the hand you intended. The woman turns it in her palm, eyes widening.

As she departs, Benjamin falls in step with her. Fists clenched, you scream after him; alas, beaming, he turns away, leading the young woman into McDonald's.

On the floor above, a waiter leaves his evening shift, a bounce in his step, pocketing a hundred-dollar tip. As he starts his motorcycle, Benjamin eases behind him, grabbing his waist. They zip towards the highway, humming '24 Karat Magic' from the radio.

Higher, a doctor leaves a meeting in the Convention Center and joins her family, announcing that a few thousand dollars of travel expenses will be covered by the AACR. Benjamin saunters over, offering them a top-ten brochure for their five-day vacation.

Even higher—Ritz Carlton. You can't see him, but you know there's a businessman sitting by the pool, counting the millions he's just made from Crypto. Benjamin massages his shoulders, handing him a chocolate-covered strawberry and a flute of Champagne.

Inexplicably, their faces overlap, blurring together until they become... you. Maybe, in a few lucky days, your tip jar will reach one hundred. Maybe, in a few lucky years, you'll earn your MD and step into the Convention Center. And, just maybe, in a lucky lifetime, if you keep your nose clean and make the

right connections, you'll fly to the Ritz and reach the angels. Life's never about destination...it's all about the journey.

At that moment, Benjamin swivels back and offers you a smile. Forsaking your bags, you bolt in the opposite direction, losing yourself in the labyrinth of people. Part of you is terrified to look back and accidentally lock eyes with him. Yet most of you is certain that he was never really looking at you...he was looking at the crowd, the country, the world pursuing his shadow, unaware he's just that—a penumbra of the pursuit of happiness.

## TRUTH STARES BACK

**Y**ou wake up at a bus stop.

A mushroom sits beside you, singing Natural by Imagine Dragons. You prefer lofi to rock, but you've had a soft spot for Imagine Dragons since you saw one of their animated music videos. The mushroom covers Dan Reynolds' original performance; his voice, rich, resonant, his flow, smooth and steady. However, his chord jumps are just a semitone off. His stubby legs bounce to the upbeat rhythm, counting half-notes. Stretchy, rubbery arms, two on each side, two in the middle. The side arms are longer, so he plays a patient game of finger chess, the shorter ones keeping score. It's a clean tie: 4-4. However, his left is on the verge of winning.

You scoot closer to him, suggesting, "Tap here"—his left-side right hand—"with this one"—his right-side left hand—"and it'll make perfect five. Afterward, it's easy to win."

He spins away, the back of his fluorescent green cap facing you. "Out of balance."

You don't understand. So, you switch the subject. "Is the bus coming soon?"

"Hope so. They said the bus has no shadow."

"What does that mean?"

He ignores you. His singing rises in volume, cracking after he breathes: "Cut until it bleeds inside a world without the peace, face it/a bit of..." He pauses. "A bit. A bit of..."

"The truth."

For the first time, he stops his game. "The truth, love?"

"That's the lyric."

"It can't be," he replies, shaking his head. He studies the red-tinted sky, then the Samsung watch on his left-side left wrist. The batteries have been taken out, but he groans, "They told me it wouldn't come. I should've listened. Come on, love. We're going to be late!"

You look around. "Me?"

"Who else?"

"Late?"

"To Truth."

"What—"

“Oh, just come on,” he snaps. He tries sliding off the bench, but his rubbery flesh catches against the wood. You watch him struggle for five seconds; then, realizing his impatience is only hindering him, you brace your hands beneath his bottom arms. Though he’s less than the length of your palm, he’s startlingly heavy, like an enormous World History textbook. You deposit him on the cobblestones. Without thanking you, he marches furious circles around the bench, muttering, “Where was it? ‘Deeper below,’ they said. So the chasm road...”

“Excuse me,” you interrupt, “but where are we going?”

“I told you. We’re seeking Truth,” he repeats. “Don’t be silly, love. Grab your umbrella.”

You don’t remember bringing an umbrella. But it lays on the bench—an odd hue of Christmas-tree green, covered with strawberry-pink polka dots. You know it’s yours, but you wonder when you bought it. What possessed you to choose two colors that clash so blatantly? When you pick it up, water droplets cling to the canopy. It hasn’t rained in days. Shaking it loose, you rest it upon your shoulder, holding it just below the bus stop’s slanting roof.

Swift, crippling dread.

When you step outside, it knocks the oxygen from your lungs. And, though you haven’t looked down, though you haven’t confirmed its danger, you know you’re terrified of that dimensionless mimicry beneath your feet. It’s watching. Waiting. Hastily, you obscure it with your umbrella.

The mushroom squints. Or...he doesn’t have eyes, so his muscles scrunch. “Careless. You know what’ll happen when your shadow’s free for too long.”

Cold sweat gathers between your fingers. “What?”

A dark chuckle.

“A shadow will swallow you, love.”

You shake your head. “Shadows...shadows can’t ‘swallow.’”

“Perhaps they were servants in your realm,” he muses, crossing his upper arms. “In the Refraction, we mistreated them. Since Truth abandoned us, they’ve been untethered thieves. Nasty things. They’ll steal your body if you don’t hide. Now, lower your umbrella. Not a hair visible, love.”

Your knuckles fade white against your umbrella shaft. He leads you onto the sidewalk, pointing out the ‘crack’ in the street—a monstrous web of fractured cement, coalescing into a chasm wider than the lane lines. Eroded rocks crumble and tumble; you hear them smash against the bottom within

seconds, reverberations echoing up to the surface. You wonder if the chasm's shallow enough to walk in...perhaps you should take a peek. And yet, some part of you knows that the rocks are still falling. Your perceptions are playing tricks on you. It's probably your shadow.

"Hey," you venture. "Why...why am I here?"

You expect incredulity, but he merely scoffs. "For our Hope, you're hopeless, love."

"I didn't choose to be here," you protest.

"It doesn't matter. You were sent here by the bent clouds, so you must be the Hope of the Refraction," he insists, tone edged with severity. "You must recover Truth."

"Recover Truth..." Your head hurts, but you nod slowly. "Why can't you?"

"I'm just your guide, love. I'm not a Hope," he sighs.

"How'd you get to be a guide?"

"There aren't many options," he responds, massaging the creases in his stem. He points to his shadow—an enormous circle cast by his cap—and explains, "Only we mushrooms have built-in umbrellas. It's just too difficult for other species to get out nowadays. You understand, right?"

Again, you nod in exasperated consent, fearing your head will come off before you reach Truth. Your eyes steal to the skyscrapers. They're distorted—an odd luminescence misaligns their windows and spires. They're symmetrical, but proportions are uneven—different parts bulge out randomly. You recognize a few—Burj Khalifa, Oriental Pearl, Empire State. In your world, they're oceans away.

The mushroom reads your expression. "Great people hold meetings. Why not great structures?"

"They don't have shadows," you note.

"Of course not. They're not alive."

You glance down to the round silhouette of your umbrella. "But that—"

"Umbrellas are alive."

"Excuse me?"

"Umbrellas hold emotion. The fear"—he taps the mushroom-equivalent of his chest—"contained here. They came alive alongside the shadows. Our protectors."

"But skyscrapers hold emotion too. Pride. Admiration."

"Perhaps," he concedes, "but there's not enough, love. People. Emotions."



Your heart skips a beat. "What happened to the people?"

"Their shadows. But at least the buildings are free," he says, waving at the Leaning Tower of Pisa. It dips closer, though retracts when you wave too. Unsettled, you hurry in step with him.

"Is Truth in one of them?"

The mushroom glances back. "You'll know Truth when you see it."

The sidewalk ends at a barren nothingness. It reminds you of the plots of land for erecting new buildings, except after the construction company takes away their heavy machinery and stainless-steel bars and orange vests. A well sits on a small mound. Though every stone is a polished, uniform hue, they are each distinct—flint, smoke, charcoal, Payne's gray. An abandoned bucket dangles crookedly over it. Close by, a hole defiles the earth. A pile of displaced dirt sits beside it, green-handled shovel protruding. You peer over the edge, approximating three feet in length and width, six in depth.

The mushroom hops onto the mound of dirt to reach your eye level, though he falls four feet short. Rapping his fingers against the shovel, he declares, "Truth often lies below the surface. How will you descend, Hope of the Refraction? Choose. Water or Earth?"

"An elevator?" When he glares, you rush, "Fine, fine! But what do you mean?"

"Water. Descend through the well!" he says, pointing to the well with his left-side left-hand pointer finger. "Earth. Descend six feet under!" He juts his right-side right-hand thumb at the hole.

You almost drop the umbrella. "Water."

"What a pity," the mushroom mutters, jumping down. "No mulligans, love."

"I don't want to be buried alive!"

"I said, descend. Not surround," he replies, dangling his legs over the edge of the hole. "Earth moves for the living. The hole is dug. You simply need to jump. But water..." A trace of apprehension lurks within his creases. "Water moves for the dead, love. Die quickly. I'll wait on the other side."

Without another word, he plunges into the hole. You rush to the shovel, but he's vanished without disturbing a grain of soil. Burning with frustration, you drag yourself back to the well, staring into the murky waters below. One leg over the other. You close the umbrella, holding it close to your body. Warmth...absorbed from a non-existent sun. Gravity wraps around your

ankles, pulling you into its embrace. No mulligans, love. His words echo on repeat.

You push off.

Empty air whistles in your ears, forcing your eyes shut. Your stomach lurches as if it'll spill out of your mouth. You consider approaching like an Olympic diver—arms outstretched, feet together. But you're afraid, so you grip your knees and curl into a fetal position, tucking your head in to protect your neck. The water is glass, fragments tearing forearms and calves. Cold, slick hands sift through your hair, slipping beneath your clothes. You curl tighter, hoping to sink. Alas, within seconds, it shoves you back to the surface.

Gasping, you break out, inhaling sweet, stale air. After filling your lungs, you decide to swim to the bottom. Fierce kicks slice through the depths. Yet the well is bottomless. Soon, it's so black that you can't see the silhouette of your fingertips. And, as bubbles expand before your face, you kick desperately back up, tossing your head to light trickling in from the unreachable opening.

A second attempt. A third. A tenth.

Chattering teeth. Swollen, purple fingertips. You've lost sensation in your feet. Unable to keep afloat, you lunge for the wall, sinking your nails into a depression in the clay. It's too slippery.

The water pushes you up, but it won't push you out.

It pulls you under, but it won't pull you down.

You know it senses the blood rising to your cheeks and the breaths you desperately steal. Water moves for the dead. Die quickly.

But you don't want to die. Otherwise, you wouldn't care if Truth could restore the chains on your shadow. Otherwise, you wouldn't have followed the mushroom and dove into the well. He wanted Hope; surely, he had better advice than abandon it. He was your guide to the Refraction. On your walk here, what did he say? Do? You recall him on the bench, playing finger chess and singing Natural.

Fragments of the lyrics scroll through your mind.

Natural

The glass

To make it in this world

I can taste it, the end

A beating heart of stone

Stone. Water accepts stone. It splashes, descends.

Possessed by the epiphany, you smash your knees against the wall, gripping the largest, loosest stone. Slip and slide. Your nails shatter—dark trickles of blood. But soon, you dig a hole beneath it. Grabbing your umbrella, you lodge the handle within and press sharply on the top. Hairline cracks run up the stone's face. A low groan echoes through the structure.

It crashes out—a sizeable third of your mass. Water floors its gap, pressing against reinforcements behind it. You inhale a deep breath and obtain a secure grip as it sinks. After short struggle, it yanks you by the arms on a swift descent. You squeeze your eyes shut, staring fiercely at the back of your eyelids. It's cold...colder than your shadow. The pressure smothers you—

Your back smashes into something solid.

A green glow. You're sitting in that rocking chair you saw at Costco, sinking into the foamy cushions. Except, instead of Costco's dull gray, it's vermillion. Blinking the phosphenes from your eyes, you notice tables and chairs, arranged like Angel's Café down the street from your house, all the same, oversaturated hue. There's no water. But...there's no earth either. Your feet dangle over oblivion, illuminated by the burning green, which neither weakens nor dissipates.

You look up.

A shuddering breath escapes you. It's the meeting of great buildings! Only this time, they're not mountains, but stalactites, dangling from an endless stretch of pavement over a mile above. The inversion of their foundations and spires makes them oddly unrecognizable. You never realized that Burj Khalifa looks like a layered icicle. That Empire State is not a perfectly square prism.

"You made it, love!"

You force your head down. The mushroom sits before you, six sets of fingers interlaced in three nets, cap tipped in cheery congratulations. He's still humming Natural; this time, his pitch is spot on, though his lyrics are random words that fit the rhythm, like 'star' and 'idiot' and 'flamethrower.' You pull your umbrella closer, realizing, with a start, that your clothes are dry.

"How in the world—"

"Water let you descend."

You lean forward raptly. "Is Truth here?"

"Not yet," he replies. "To find Truth, one must play a game."

You look around. "I don't see a game."

"In front of you, love," he says in exasperation. And, though you paid it no heed, two dice lay on either side of the napkin dispenser. He takes the left one, tossing you the right. To your surprise, it's normal—six-sided, black-and-white, discernibly fair. The mushroom explains, "Our game is Green or Gray. So, green or gray?"

You've learned not to make hasty choices. "What do they mean?"

"If you choose gray, you choose artificial destruction," he replies, nodding at the Eiffel Tower, which looks like a lopsided funnel. "If you choose green, you choose natural life."

You raise your brows. "What happens then?"

"You'd work as its ally," he explains. You detect a smile in his voice as he continues, "Your moves in our game will decide whether our ceiling becomes greener or grayer. If it goes to the extreme in your favor, then you win. My favor? Then you lose. Truth, our referee."

"Your favor?"

"I'm your opponent. If you choose green, I choose gray."

"But I'm your Hope," you try, crossing your arms. "Just let me win."

A brittle laugh. "Truth won't honor your victory, love."

The word 'green' is on the tip of your tongue. Before the well ordeal, you wouldn't have thought twice about avoiding the phrase 'artificial destruction.' But while it sounds unpleasant, it's an accurate description of the 'ceiling,' where no trace of green can be found.

"Gray," you decide, "because it has the advantage."

The mushroom nods. "Wise choice."

"So," you ask, bracing your elbows against the table, "how do we start?"

He sets his die down. A green cup appears on top. When you do the same, a gray cup appears on yours. He moves his cup in slow circles; the die clatters around, ricocheting off plastic walls. You mirror his movements. Vibrations tingle through your palm. Ten seconds later, he spirals to an abrupt stop.

A rough, brown sheet pushes out of the napkin dispenser. Smoothing it down, he reveals two numbers, written in italicized Times New Roman: 6, 2.

"Now, we debate which number is greater," he states.

"Six."

"Good for you, love," he chuckles. "Lift your cup."

Six dots await you. The mushroom applauds, pointing up. Cement pushes the structures closer until they're a single unit of rooftops, domes, and

windows. Pisa leans into Eiffel, reinforcement beams locking them closely together. Empire State welcomes Oriental Pearl until they settle in a balance of prisms and spheres. New structures bloom in their cracks—skeletal frames for modern marvels.

Transfixed, you manage, “How?”

Impatiently, the mushroom raps the table. “A discussion for later. Next round, next round!”

You set your cup back onto your die, circular motions gaining speed. When the time comes, another napkin pushes out. Instead of numbers, it states: Fuschia, Aquamarine.

“Which color is greater?” the mushroom asks.

“Fuschia,” you respond.

“Ah, but I think aquamarine.”

“Then aquamarine.”

“Don’t tell lies on your search for Truth,” he scolds.

“I’m not lying.” You lift your cup; the die side facing you is aquamarine.

A crash from the ceiling. Fire rages within the interior. Charring debris plummets to cement, etching fractures that merge into a gaping mirror of the chasm road. A stone wall crumbles to dust, casting a plume of stinging smoke that drifts down to where you sit. Your lungs fill. Coughing violently, you fan in front of your face, tears forming in the corners of your eyes.

“I told you,” the mushroom mutters. “What an impulsive Hope!”

“This is green?” you manage.

“For green to grow, gray must go,” he replies. “That’s the law of order and chaos.”

“But...” you struggle. How do we come to a consensus without lies?

The mushroom holds up his hand. Scrunching his stem, he orders, “Play again. You betray Truth with your tendencies.”

Fuming, you slam the cup down harder than necessary. When the napkin pushes out of the dispenser, you snatch ahead of him, reading, “Rage. Curiosity. I choose rage.”

“Ah,” the mushroom sighs, “but I choose curiosity.”

“Do you need to always disagree with me?”

He lifts his six arms, an unapologetic shrug. “I cannot lie. Curiosity led the first humans to step outside with an umbrella after the shadows took over.

It united buildings from every corner of the Refraction. It is our reason to continue pushing forward and waiting for Hope.”

“But rage causes conflict,” you argue. “Conflict leads to war. War unifies divided countries and divides a unified world. It fuels our progress while tearing us down. Without some form of rage for their predicament, the curious wouldn’t have thrown themselves at the shadows’ mercy.”

“I see,” the mushroom muses. “In many ways, rage fuels curiosity.”

“So rage is greater.”

“It appears so,” he admits.

You lift your cups in unison. Your heart sinks as you study the question mark, symbolizing curiosity, on your die. Overhead, the smoke dissipates, leaving the charred corpses of the skyscrapers. Metal bones protrude randomly out of melted glass skin. Vines tangle into the remnants of their insides, sinking into abandoned desks, offices, and escalators. The fragrance of wildflowers floods the air. Green blooms within the cement’s cracks.

The two of you trade a few more rounds.

At first, Lady Luck serves you well. Concrete spreads across the dust and soot, trapping the feeble vegetation underground. Ghostly structures emerge, growing in height and complexity until they’re far greater than the greatest dreamers in your world could conceive. A metropolis sprawls beyond your peripheral vision, gilded with iridescent lanterns and aerial walkways, launching rockets and satellites into the green uncertainty of fog.

But, a few rolls later, water knocks down its great walls. Lights flicker out. Walkways crack in half. Limestone columns crumble, metal beams splinter, until all that remains is a trash-strewn ocean. Pieces sink into quicksand, replaced by forests of seaweed. Hypnotically, they sway to the toss and turn of the waves, filtering the green light through their violet darkness.

Volcanoes erupt, silent rage. Landmasses converge, bubbling surfaces hardening to obsidian. Mountain flowers pepper rich soils, tangling around the roots of saplings. You shift in your chair, gritting your teeth as honeysuckle perfumes the air and saplings spread leaf-adorned arms.

You roll dice. Grab napkin. Debate. Lift your cup. And as loss slaps you time and again, as beginner’s luck abandons you and the memory of your metropolis disappears in the foliage, you wonder if it’s Truth’s doing...if it’s calling you unworthy. Though the mushroom reveals no disappointment, his thirty fingers rap incessantly against his cup. You’ve cheated shadows with an

umbrella, water with a stone, death with determination. But you can't cheat Truth.

The last napkin persuades itself from the dispenser. Your heart sinks as you unfold it.

"Truth. And..." your voice trails off.

The mushroom prompts. "And what?"

"Truth. Truth—"

"Is it hard to read, love?"

You swallow the lump in your throat.

"Truth and me."

The mushroom grabs the napkin, but it disintegrates, sweeping into the inverted green paradise. When he settles back into his chair, you shudder at his cold, radiating suspicion. Voice clear and crisp, he states, "It's obvious. Truth is greater."

"I agree." You reach for your cup.

A yank at your wrist shoves you sharply back. Pulling up your sleeve, you notice a vine curling against your forearm. Overhead, foliage thickens, summer chartreuse unfurling into a cloud that obscures the underbrush. You've never seen trees so striking...branches firmer than limestone columns, shadows vast enough to engulf entire towns.

The mushroom's breath hitches. "A lie!"

"No! I—I didn't!" you swear, pressing your palm to your heart. "I...I don't —" Understand.

"I've explained," he snaps, "don't tell lies on your—"

"What lies?" you shout. "I choose Truth! Truth is obviously greater."

At this proclamation, a deafening crash erupts from paradise. Vines unravel from the trunks, succulent grapes prying from their stems and smashing against the tables. Stripped clean, the vines arrow towards your chair, winding around your shoulders and waist. Until now, you've never considered the life within plants...that they're stronger than human ropes.

"Your lies will be your reckoning," the mushroom whispers.

You writhe towards him, vines creeping across your chest. "Help me."

His fragile frame trembles. Then, he jumps onto the chair, drawing himself to full height.

"If you don't believe it, I'll...I'll convince you."

Your head snaps desperately up and down. You're stubborn, but the mushroom's silver tongue has earned your respect. You don't even share a world. Yet, in a few short arguments, he's convinced you that pencils are greater than rulers, that chance matters more than skill, that illusions conquer our lives. So, forcing yourself to relax, you devote your concentration to his words:

"Truth is the greatest power in the Refraction. You're in its realm. You're at its mercy!"

You bite your bottom lip. "But why?"

"The beginning, love," he replies. When you tilt your head, he explains, "In the beginning, Truth showed Wonder and Dream to the first beings. We gave it a place in our minds and hearts. In return, it separated and shackled the mindless, heartless parts festering inside of us."

"Shadows." You grip the armrests.

He nods. "Truth enamored our kind. We chased it for generations. We claimed Wonder and Dream for ourselves and spread them across all corners of our world...just to venture closer."

"Did you find it?"

"...no."

You frown. "Then how could it have abandoned you?"

"Because Wonder turned to Atrocity, and Dream turned to Nightmare. Smoke obscured our vision. Soon, we began chasing falsehood," he sighs bitterly, dropping his stem into his arms. The story is taking a toll on him, yet curiosity burns inside of you. How did Truth react to its misled followers? How did the smoke clear, revealing the current state of the Refraction? He exhales shakily, forcing himself to continue. "Disillusioned, Truth freed our shadows, which had wasted away beneath our feet for eons. But Truth must always shackle a piece of us. That's why—"

"They're thieves." A muscle tightens in your jaw. "They want to trade places!"

"Every life in the Refraction belongs to Truth," he finishes, lifting his cap. Voice sharpening with conviction and passion, he asserts, "You belong to Truth! You will never become greater, love."

His words echo in the cavity of your chest, mingling with the erratic pulse of your heart, traveling through your blood to your skull and fingertips. You



feel them melt into your essence, carving themselves into you just as Truth had the first beings. Tightly-pressed lips tremble. You repeat:

“I belong to Truth. I’ll never become greater.”

The vines slacken. Silence rings in your ears. Exhaling, you reach for the cup—

Crunch.

You process the hollow noise before the stinging needles in your chest. In a trance, your head droops. Your biceps, squeezed against your body, are bent in the center. Blood spills onto the five-pointed leaves. Tendrils of vine claw through flesh, piercing through fabric, muscles, bones. You open your mouth in agony. A strangled wheeze...they’ve stolen your voice too.

Ropes tumble down, no longer grape, but clematis, hydrangea, rattan, woven prisons of wood and ivy, tangling, mangling, strangling. They pull you higher and higher, dragging you towards the forest. The mushroom scrambles onto the table, flapping his arms as if about to take flight. He shouts an unintelligible warning, but you can’t read his lips. He doesn’t have lips.

You’re lying. The green whispers. You betray Truth.

“Lying?” you manage. You’re sick of that accusation. Blinking back black spots, you spit, “Fine. I’m a liar! I believe I’m greater than Truth. Is that enough? Are you satisfied?!”

Why?

Unabashed thoughts spill out. “Because Truth isn’t real.”

The vines squeeze tighter. Your vision triples. If you fall unconscious, if the vines lose their rage...will they drop you into oblivion? You glance down; directly below, the mushroom springs towards you, hissing, “Ridiculous! Blasphemous! They’ve sent a delusional Hope!”

“Have you ever seen Truth?” you challenge.

“We’ve seen its shadow. And if it has a shadow, it must—”

“What if its shadow wasn’t real?”

“It’s influenced the Refraction since the beginning,” he replies coldly. “Its impacts are real.”

“Maybe it’s just a shadow,” you declare. “But you’re afraid to admit it! That’s why you’re bent on guiding Hopes. That’s why you need us...a semblance of proof to keep going!”

“Delusion.”

“You won’t even consider it!”

A derisive laugh. "All right. Then why bother? Why are you looking for a falsehood, love?"

"Adventure?" The vines tighten, prompting you to shake your head, amending, "Not exactly. Maybe because it feels real. This entire journey to save the Refraction. Besides, what else was I supposed to do? Cower from my own shadow? Wait at the bus stop forever?"

"Truth is as real as the bus stop," the mushroom proclaims. "As real as the chasm road. The stone well. The inverted ceiling. It's as real as me. As the entire Refraction!"

The world pulls from beneath you.

You're weightless.

Real, he claims.

Real as a six-armed mushroom, moving without muscle, speaking without mouth. Real as a ceiling that shifts millennia in milliseconds. Real as drowning one second and sitting in a café the next, real as stones that never hit the bottom of a gaping abyss in the street...real as the umbrella that you never bought, dripping with rain from a cloudless day, waiting with you for a bus that never arrives.

Why do you accept it?

You...who watches magic tricks with skepticism, who surfs YouTube to debunk conspiracy theories. You, who cannot fathom any notion that toes the line of your comfort and logic and reason. You, submerged in this novel, foreign, inconceivable Refraction, willing to play its daring Hope...without a moment's hesitation. You, real as the Refraction. Real as Truth.

But that's just the thing.

"Truth isn't real," you whisper, shutting your eyes, "because it's all a dream."

\*\*\*

You wake up at a bus stop.

You touch your throat. Oxygen. You're surprised by it...then surprised that you're surprised. Phantom pain burns from your ribs and arms. You yank your jacket off—no injuries, just a plain T-shirt with the logo of a cousin's college. Exhaling, you lean back against the bench. Your plain, black umbrella

sits beside you. Beneath it, a mushroom springs up between the tangles of weeds.

The roar of traffic. Lights flash red, then green. The bus barrels down the road, sleek white body painted with fuschia and aquamarine stripes. The engine sputters; the odor of smoke blows into your face. Screeching, stuttering tires. Neon words scroll to a stop. You climb up charcoal steps, depositing used quarters into the driver's machine.

The doors shut behind you. The bus lurches forward. Inside, passengers stare vacantly out the tinted windows. Chains hang from wrists and ankles, rattling against polished boots and upside-down watches and cracked iPhones. They snake through the seats, hooking onto the iron rim of a mirror, eased in the slanted shadows over the fire escape.

Discordant. That's the only word for it. Discordant with what...you can't decide. Every minor detail about its structure and design clashes with every preconceived notion you have about a mirror. But, you recognize your reflection. When you wave, it lifts its hand and grins in unison. On the top rim, an ancient engraving in Comic Sans:

### **Congratulations! Truth awaits in the Refraction!**

Confetti shoots out of massive cones in the floor. Though some pieces cling to the ceiling, most drift back down at gravity's pull, masking chains in rosy hues. Natural—a dreadful celebration song—blares over the loudspeakers, drowning the silence in fierce rock. The pitch, lyrics, and rhythm have completely missed the mark. But, you recognize it as well as your victory over Truth.

White-hot emotion floods your veins. With a piercing battle cry, you lift your umbrella over the head, smashing against the mirror. One blow hardly scuffs it, but you bear down again with a tyrant's strength, consumed by the answer hovering tantalizingly before you.

Two. Three. Ten.

A chasm slices down the mirror's center, splintering to the iron edges. Fragments tremble, clinging persistently to their neighbors. You toss your umbrella aside, breathing hard. The world loses balance...bus keels sharply to the right, music blares out of control, shadows flinch from chains.

You stare into your own Refraction.

Truth stares back.

## COUNTING CYCLES

Back in those summers, before seconds slipped like sand, a father and daughter packed two old nets, four stools with Nezha cartoons on the legs, and a fluorescent orange, Home Depot bucket into the back of their rundown Lexus. The father flipped on 90.9, idly listening to the recent right-wing scandals as he turned onto Route 6 to the Cape. The daughter rode shotgun. She liked counting clouds, predicting where the winds would send them.

The pair dipped into the bay, past beaches and tourist towns, until they arrived at the marsh. There, maple trees sloped inwards and light disappeared upon touching the water's surface. Up to their necks, the pair slid their nets through the silt, walking slow circles around each other until the clink of a clam shell reverberated up their poles. One, two, twenty. The Home Depot bucket overflowed. The father steamed their catches with scallions, ate them over rice, and boxed a few up for his drinking buddies, Lao Xu and Lao Li, whose sons were older than his daughter by two and four years respectively.

The summers began ripe. Everywhere, the daughter saw gold. Lining the legs of water striders. Tumbling in pinpricks through the canopy. Catching the rim of her father's cracked glasses as he hoisted her upon his shoulders, her fingers clutched in his black hair bristles. She laughed. For no particular reason. And, though she never said it aloud, traditionalizing visits to the Cape allowed her to feel like her classmates—the ones who visited their grandmothers and great-grandmothers in Provincetown, who'd formed beach volleyball cliques with family friends, who'd one day take their children to walk the endless stretches of sand and sea where their ancestors carved a country. She never blamed her father for arriving by plane rather than by boat. It just stuck in the back of her mind, like the Communist songs the announcers sang at the Lunar New Year Galas on China Central Television.

Yet as years dragged on, something spoiled. At first, it was the clams—they made the daughter's lips swell and her throat burn. After stumbling out of a bad case of COVID, she couldn't smell them without vomiting. Even as symptoms faded, revulsion lingered. She confided in her father, but he'd never believed in 'psychological illness.' Just smell the clams long enough, he'd say, and her fears would go away. She knew it was true, but his lack of empathy

infuriated her, so she began crafting excuses—summer camp or Math Kangaroo prep—to keep herself safe. They never worked. He dragged her along...sometimes carried her to the car. Eventually, as he'd predicted, her fears retreated below the surface and she stepped back into the water. But, the taste of his words soured.

High school arrived. The daughter moved beyond tradition, sentiment, childish adventure. She liked Calculus. She liked rate problems, she liked counting her seconds, and every second spent fishing for clams was a waste of time. Soon, like back-to-school autumn, work-and-work winter, and exam-cram spring, summer had taken an identity...a cyclic routine. Math camp, private tutoring, catching up on the latest C-drama, volunteering at the Microbiology lab, working part-time at Starbucks, scribbling rivers of SAT, typing mountains of Multivariable, flying twelve hours across the Atlantic to visit GuGu before Shanghai hit 40°C. Those flights were the only time she was stuck with her father, but they never talked. He'd cede her the window seat and the pretzels in his sad little dinner, then doze off.

The father disapproved of the daughter's routine. He'd rip open her door, claim that she was in his house, that she had no right keeping it shut. At dinner, he'd chastise her for working all day, tell her it was bad for her health, that she needed to get out more...how about going to the Cape? At first, the daughter listened, swallowing her retorts with her rice. Yet when junior year slapped her on the face, she realized everyone else's father was preparing their college tours, signing them up for therapy, giving them space when they needed and hugs when they didn't. Finally, one dinner in late July, she asked her father what he envisioned for her future. He printed the college list on USDaily, drew a line around thirty-five and thirty-six, and told her he'd be happy if she scored a school above it.

That did it. She snapped. For no particular reason...or too many combined. She asked him if he cared about her. He replied, shocked and confused, that of course, he'd raised her with his own sweat and blood. Why couldn't he show her some empathy then? He did, he always told her to relax, but she never listened. He never listened either. He never tried to understand. That wasn't fair, he cooked her meals and washed her clothes and bought her whatever she needed, but she was too busy counting her seconds, taking the next step, never looking at the scenery, just like her mother. Well maybe her

mother had dreams for the future. Maybe she left because he'd never supported her!

At that, the father burst to his feet, dark eyes unfathomable through his thick lenses. He left his rice half-finished for the first time in his life. His daughter slammed her fists, demanding he come back, face her, face his fears... that was his motto, right?

The next morning, the two apologized stiffly. For what, neither was sure. The daughter poured her Cheerios and chewed in contemplative silence. The father sipped his doujiang, took a bite of youtiao, then set both down with a hopeful look. He asked if she'd take a break to go shellfishing. The daughter replied, with her usual calm and patience, that she was still writing her common app, but she'd water his diaolans and check the mail if he wanted to go alone. He left with one net. She didn't see him off.

Soon, the acceptance letter from CalTech arrived—the father laughed so hard he cried. He bought the daughter a pair of shell earrings from the Cape, which she wore first out of irony, then out of habit. She packed two suitcases for Los Angeles. In the Avery House dorm, she called her father once a week, then once a month...then once a year. The less they spoke, the less they spoke. She dated a fellow Calc major who broke up with her, claiming she was too obsessed with her grades and 'low amplitude' for relationships. She tried a double major in CS. But, as assignments piled, every second choked her, and she found herself wiping out. Couldn't handle the stress or something, her former friends would report.

To make ends meet, she waited tables at LinLin's Little Pork Buns, a Shanghainese restaurant in Pasadena. But, by then, she despised LA, so she hitched a ride to Washington with a coworker's girlfriend. After too many tequilas, they began blasting Led Zeppelin in a motel bar at 1:30 am, causing the owners to kick them out; they stayed the night in a nearby McDonald's parking lot.

In Seattle, the daughter took odd jobs, just like her father when he'd first landed in America. Every night, she crashed in a dingy, South Park apartment with three roommates and mirror-covered walls that made the space look larger. When inflation came back with a sledgehammer, she returned her tuition to her father, but secretly enrolled in college on her own, afraid he'd insist on paying and delay his retirement. Bidding farewell to Calculus, she

scraped together her masters in CS and found a stable position at a firm in Boston. She never stopped counting. Yet somehow, seconds blurred together.

Almost two decades later, the SVP gave her a break, so the daughter drove down to her father's retirement cottage on the Cape. He welcomed her with open arms. They exchanged the pleasantries of two people whose relationship had been strained, but not shattered. He'd prepared an enormous meal from his backyard garden; a chopstick of each dish, and she was full.

Afterwards, while reminiscing their old tradition, they hopped into her rundown Acura. The daughter drove, watching clouds shift overhead; the father rode shotgun, scrolling through the New York Times. Conversation was slow. He'd always needed five minutes to structure English without 'um' and 'na-ge,' and her Chinese had deteriorated to five characters. But soon, the daughter found herself scrolling through the past decade, picking out the greatest hits like a rock album. Like usual, the father observed with eyes so wide and glazed, she questioned he was listening at all.

At the end, the father expressed his wish for grandchildren. The daughter shrugged. The father shrugged back, though his shoulders drooped, and he asked if she'd been to therapy. The daughter nodded reluctantly, and he slid off his glasses and patted her shoulder, claiming it was all that mattered.

Over the years, the wealthy had colonized the marsh. Though the water itself was public, the surrounding streets had become private property; police came rolling in and shipping out any car that didn't belong. So, the pair resigned themselves to a town lot, took their belongings from the trunk, and embarked upon an hour-long trek down asphalt sidewalks. The daughter had finished her life's story in twenty minutes, so the father began talking about the Cape—long, lazy strolls through cranberry fields and baby bok choys springing up in the garden. He wove years into moments and moments into years, and the daughter marveled at how meticulously he described it all.

When, sweating and aching, they arrived in familiar shade, the daughter eagerly dumped her stools and approached the edge. Every step, silt clung to her heels, pulling on sandal straps. But she waded to her waist, her chest, her neck. At last, she stopped. Water slipped beneath her shirt, pressing against her torso. Plastic scraped her legs; sand swallowed her ankles. Light sifted into flecks, dispersing in ripples. The high note of silence rang, punctuated by screeching gulls and whispering leaves. Purple reflections. Tilting maples. Salt, stone, shade. Erosion lay in wait, seconds hung suspended...twenty years

elapsed. Every grain of sand trickled through the hourglass, counted, abandoned, linear, cyclic, turned, overturned. What had changed?

The daughter found her voice. Am I a failure?

Did you fail? The father ran his callused hand through white bristles. I suppose that's your call. But I like to think that everyone ends up back where they began, even if it takes their entire lives.

I'm not that old yet! she protested.

Teasingly, the father poked the crease between her brows. Shi ah. Ni hai nian qin. You've just always moved faster than everyone else, Baobao. So fast I couldn't keep up with you.

At this, the daughter laughed.

Why do you like the Cape, Dad?

The father nodded slowly, considering his response. When I was young, your YeYe would take us to the little lake at the end of the river. He'd show us the areas where the silt was thick and the clams were everywhere. Taught us to grab with our hands instead of our nets. I was never any good though.

Hands?

Yes. His hands were enormous! Each finger was thicker than three of yours, and don't look at me like that, I'm not exaggerating. He'd pull eleven at once—fill a whole crate in a minute. They were delicious. We'd eat and eat until we were full. He paused then, wistfulness crinkling the corners of his eyes. But now, the shellfish isn't nearly as good. Maybe it's because they're not as fresh in America. Maybe inflation makes everything taste bad...or hunger makes it taste better, you know?

The daughter dropped her net. Bending down, she dipped her fingers into the marsh's opacity, sweeping along rocks and debris. For the first time, she could visualize it—the familiar, unfamiliar terrain where she'd chased her childhood.

Clink.

She stroked the rough ridges, the soft innards, the mark she'd left in the sand. Her father's eyes widened as she offered her catch. Lips twitching up, he took her empty hand, and she squeezed his tightly, and the pair stood in the marsh with two old nets and one, fluorescent orange, Home Depot bucket, listening to the rise and fall of each other's breaths for many uncounted seconds.



“Happy Birthday, Yin gu niang!”  
“It’s not my birthday, Xiaoxin,” Yin groaned, yanking Happy Sheep blankets over her head. Light trickled through holes in the fabric, stinging her eyelids. Her temples throbbed. Cheap beer, stomach acid, and leftover Whole Mart mac-and-cheese coated her lips.

Xiaoxin pulled the sheets forcibly. “You’re sixteen minutes behind schedule.”

“Damn it.” Yin glared into her housekeeper robot’s gelatinous face, swiping Xiaoxin’s dial to lower the volume. “Just, call the office...I’ll be late. Make something up!”

“Not today.”

“What?”

“At 12:30 PM, your new CEO will be shaking hands on the 13th floor.”

“What?” Yin scrambled upright.

Fragmented memories punctured through hangover haze. Yesterday, Maria Sanchez mentioned the CEO—fresh out of grad school with plans longer than his three Ph.Ds and a fuse shorter than his attention span. Queasy, Yin called up her friends, and before she knew it, she was at the downtown karaoke bar, taking shots she couldn’t hold down if her life depended on it. Stupid, stupid...

The door creaked open. Xiaoxin rolled out, returning with several wires and a metal helmet. Setting them upon the counter, she hummed, “No drinking on work nights! Remember, Yin gu niang?”

“Yes, but—”

“You broke your vow,” Xiaoxin reminded. “Now, shall we start the Revision?”

Cold resolution seeped through Yin’s veins. But, shaking off her doubts, she slid to the bedside, gravity tugging ankles to the floor. “Hook me up.”

Spotlights flickered beneath Xiaoxin’s nylon hair. Flipping on “Alcohol-Free,” the housekeeper fastened blues to Yin’s ankles, reds to wrists. Yin stared at her disheveled reflection in the helmet’s visor, dropping it over scraggly hair. In the darkness, pale letters surfaced:

Welcome to Galatea 6.8!

The Perfect You Awaits!

Yin skipped the tutorial and clicked history, skimming her list of recent Revisions. Last night, while intoxicated, she'd given herself twelve, ranging from 'no forehead wrinkles' to 'perfect pitch for karaoke.' Rolling her eyes, she entered BEGIN. Wires tensed; helmet tightened. Vision tinted green. Clenching her jaw, Yin focused upon her aching back; the putrid taste in her mouth; panic, frustration, self-reproach, twisting her gut...

No more temptation. No more alcohol.

Her fingertips tingled. In the laundry room, Galatea, a mechanism of 40 trillion cellinium particles, seeped into her body. Faster than the naked eye, nanotech converted between cells and cellinium, fabricating the Revision, replacing Imperfection. After the ping, Yin's rash alcoholism drained down the wire, copysaving to Galatea's form. Calm ringing filled her head.

REVISION COMPLETE

Galatea 6.8 has saved your Imperfection.

CONFIRM REVERSIBILITY?

Yin confirmed, despite never needing to reverse Revisions. Exiting the bedroom, she found a saffron button-up and a pair of pearl earrings waiting on an armchair. Xiaoxin rolled through the kitchen, scrolling through Yin's Comfort Foods list. Mung beans boiled in the Pressure Cooker. Scallion pancakes sizzled on the chopping board. Spotting her mistress, the housekeeper beamed, eyes glowing scarlet.

"Shengri kuaile, Yin gu niang!"

"It's not my birthday," Yin sighed. "Again."

\*\*\*

Susan's desk was empty.

Good riddance, the 13th floor agreed. She'd never been mean, but her face was too gaunt, her curls, unkempt, and the skin beneath her eyes looked bruised. If she was anti-Galatea, that was her business, but couldn't she find the public decency to adjust those unpleasant details?

"O' Suze. Never the clearest window—"

"—tired, unsociable—"

"I saw her at Green Depot yesterday. Guess what she bought?"

"A haircut?"

"Rat poison!"

As murmurs broke across the gathering, Amar Joshi slammed his fist down. Eyes roving across their eager faces, he snapped, “Shouldn’t you be thinking about your own jobs?”

That shut them up. As rumors of the CEO replaced Susan, they pushed their chairs back into their cubicles. Yin bit her lip, eyes boring into the ‘B’ on her keyboard.

Two years ago, she’d been Susan—shackled by silence, cowering from laughter, flinching at her own name. After transferring departments and Revising her Chinese accent, life had gotten easier...but when had she become a bystander? All morning, Yin watched the secretary’s phone—nothing. She couldn’t recall the last time someone skipped work, no call-in. People didn’t get sick anymore; they just Revised their bodies, replacing pulled muscles and failing organs with cellinium. The company also covered productivity Revisions, improving employee diligence, sociability, and enthusiasm.

Only Susan called it ‘unnatural.’ She’d kept her views quiet, but as everyone else became beautiful, charismatic, energetic, motivated, perfect, word of mouth carved a chasm around her and, at one point or another, she was dubbed ‘give-up’ and ‘Losin’ Susan.’

Yin bit into her baozi, eyes downcast. “When she’s back, I’ll buy her dinner.”

“That’s sweet, dear.” Amelia LeBlanc appeared behind her, twirling golden hair. She looked like that old movie star...Scarlet Johanssen? No, Marilyn Monroe. A perfect doppelganger. Yin figured it was cellinium—the last time she’d visited, Amelia’s Galatea had so many saved Imperfections, it even developed a face. Amelia braced her manicured claws on Yin’s armrests. She smelled orangy, not citrus perfume...but a fresh mandarin. “Really, Yinny, you’re too nice. Stop thinking. We’re having a toast!”

“Toast?”

“Maria,” Amelia explained. “Her Galatea just—oh wait.” A knowing smirk. “Tell you later. Anyhow, I hear Galatea 7.0’s out next week! That’s big, no?” She nodded to her mini-TV.

Eddie Pygmalion was on Neo-Bostin News, chin-buttoned collar, slicked-back hair, serrated features, as if his sculptor had carved the volume from his cheeks. Once again, he’d reconstructed Makka Galatea, his tech’s namesake, from a new strain of state-of-the-art cellinium. As the tale of their doomed, reborn love played, Amelia touched her heart.

"Isn't he romantic?"

"For remaking his comatose wife, over and over?" Yin asked blankly.

"He thought she was perfect." Amelia's eyes shimmered. Were they always blue? Well, it didn't matter... "He loved her so much that he's devoted his life to creating her perfection!"

Yin rolled her eyes. "If he loved her, he would've seen her flaws."

"What was that?"

"Nothing."

Maria waved from the lounge. Amelia waved back, calling, "Gimme a sec!" She spun back to Yin, dimples lacerating her doll-like cheeks. "Vodka cocktail. Mixed it myself. Not traditional, but I've gotten good reviews. Please, dear, just loosen up."

Yin searched her desires, yet the thought of alcohol brought yesterday's mac-and-cheese back up her throat. Smacking her lips, she managed, "Don't drink. You girls have fun though."

At 12:30, the CEO entered the 13th floor, flanked by two burly aides. He read his new project plans, took a glass of cocktail, and slapped a pink slip on Susan's wall. The men emptied her cabinet, redistributed her reports, scrapped the photos of her huskies. Cleaning bots swept in, vigorously scrubbing every stain, scuff, sign of life. As Losin' Susan vanished from public consciousness, the CEO flashed his employees an orderly row of white teeth.

"Thank you for your efforts! Have a perfect day."

\*\*\*

At home, Yin kicked off her heels, starting briskly down the hall. Xiaoxin rolled beside her, inquiring what later commitments had her desperate for clean clothes. Yin shook her head. She wasn't doing laundry. Perhaps it was Susan, or Eddie Pygmalion, or the CEO's burly aides that left her on edge, nerves chipping her nails, stomach tied in knots of heavy apprehension.

"I'm checking Galatea," she informed. "Make dinner."

At the laundry, Yin turned, paused, clenched her fist, and placed it upon cracking paint. Sweat gathered in the dips between her fingers. When had she last ventured here? Two months ago? Five? In that time, how many Imperfections had been cut, copied? Would her Galatea have a face too? Exhaling, she twisted the knob, toes skimming dust and darkness.

Her breath hitched.

Light tumbled into the Galatea containment cell, illuminating a woman's naked limbs. Creased brow. Bruised ankles. Bloodshot eyes bored through a veil of inky hair. A memory, Yin felt her rage, rejected, reflected, refracted... trapped in the mirror.

With a silenced scream, she smashed her fists into glass:

COPY FAKE HOW DARE YOU IMPOSTER THIS IS WRONG LET ME  
OUT

Panic seized Yin's heart. Wildly, she grabbed the control tablet from her clothes basket, smashing her heel through the screen. Shards lodged into her foot, bleeding through white socks. Alarms flared to life. Warnings flickered on and off, swiftly preempted by the auto-lock. As the cell depressurized, oxygen hissed, fleeing through wires, fogging transparent walls. The creature paused. Parched lips parted. Fervor reignited, it kicked, howled, smashed against freedom, eyes cornered, vicious, pleading—

WO BU YAO SI QIU NI CAN'T BREATHE WO SHI NI TAKE ME  
BACK PLEASE

Alas, seconds dragged, knees crumpled, blows grew sluggish, and it slumped upon the bloody barrier, a final curse rattling through its emaciated frame. Yin backed away, shutting the door. Her face was wet.

Xiaoxin waited in the kitchen, pan-fried noodles from Yin's Celebratory Foods list steaming in the wok. Spotting blood on the tiles, she reached for her mop and bucket, lips snaking upwards in a perfect smile.

"Happy Birthday, Yin gu niang!"

## FORGIVENESS FOR ROSE AND MIN

### The Bus Tunnel: TENSION

By the bus tunnel on Thayer, a man in a construction vest blows giant bubbles. A looped string, tied between plastic rods, dangles from his palms. He dips it into the bucket by his feet. Pulling out, a film shimmers within negative space. In a breath, it curves into a sphere, drifting into the darkness between Ben 'n Jerry's and Starbucks, twisting away, wind-battered, at the last second, swerving towards Min's head. He freezes. Extends his finger.

Pop!

His sister Rose reaches out, brushing soap suds from his bangs. A ring—green, gold, counterfeit—snakes around her middle finger. Min wonders where she bought it, but can't help feeling he's already asked.

"Anything in your eye?" Rose checks. Min shakes his head. Satisfied, she draws back, nodding to the bubble maker. "I think he's trying to blow one inside another."

"How d'you know?"

She shrugs. "He starts small, but bunches them together. I've seen it done. Festival in London."

"Does it work?"

She wrings her hands. "Eventually, I guess. Does it matter?"

"Just curious."

"Okay."

"How was the festival?" Min manages. Though he only hoped to transition into small talk, uncertainty tugs on his chest. In Rose's year abroad, there were too many art exhibitions in Edinburgh, tulip gardens in Amsterdam, Queen's funerals in London. He can't keep track, but Rose hates talking—she'll cross her arms and scrunch her brow when forced to repeat stories. Which makes him wonder...before her departure, how did they converse for hours?

"I don't like social stuff," Rose replies. Min exhales, realizing he's in the clear. "But, food was good, and we took lots of pictures—remember the ones from March?" He nods without thinking, but she sighs, "Oh, don't lie. They're still unread. Anyhow, we went to a speakeasy."

"What?"

“Prohibition-era bars, built into normal places, like this tunnel”—she juts her thumb—“or in that case, a barber shop. With a password, they’d take you drinking in a secret area.”

Min’s eyes widen. “That’s crazy!”

“If you called, I would’ve said more,” she tuts. Her eyes, translucent lids, wispy lashes, liquid darkness, remind him of spiders—reeling him in, pulling him out, tangling every lapse, doubt, duplicity. Min feigns indifference, knowing she won’t believe it, trusting she’ll take the hint. Sure enough, Rose continues, “It was fun, but Emily got overzealous with the whole ‘UK drinking age is 18’—an Irish coffee knocked her out cold. We practically dragged her to the hostel.”

“Wow,” Min remarks. What now? Does he laugh? Follow up?

Applause saves him. One of the college boys whistles. A lady in florals nudges her companion, urging, Get it on video, quick, Cindy, I forgot my phone! Standing on his toes, Min spies a bubble, entrapping another two, floating towards the 4PM sun. Unlike the others, bound for ground, it lurches higher, above the macadam, Chevrolets, fingertips, light flooding twin hearts, imbuing iridescence.

Min’s heart skips a beat. He envisions it reaching clouds; allied with butterflies, pigeons, stars. They’d stop, stare, wonder how it came to be...and he would know. He would take part in a small miracle. Granted, small, but when was the last time he’d connected to something bigger than himself?

Rose leans back, watching with hazy enjoyment. Teeth snag upon bottom lip. Min’s smile fades. The re-emergence of her old habit brings back years... Rose, shaping Sonatas with bruised mouth, flinching at wrong notes; mutilating her tongue after the SAT when she’d fallen short of 1600; swallowing blood and gum, chewed to rubber, when Princeton deferred her ED application. Her tell, her flaw. But, why now? Here? Exhaustion with Providence? Longing for Oxford? Boredom? Mid-terms? Me?

Bubble explodes. White flecks scatter, melting black as water expands.

A sigh releases from the crowd, and soon, they disperse into Thayer’s shops, comparing videos, swiping right to the next part of their days. Min pauses, feeling he ought to mourn his miracle...and yet, he’s over it. Bubbles don’t defy gravity. Why waste physics on sentiment?

“Min.”

“Mmm?”

Rose ruffles his hair. "Any homework?"

"Chem. Why?"

"Let's go to the parking garage."

Min shrugs. No need for verbal confirmation; Rose's word is law. As she starts towards Angell, his eyes linger on the bubble maker—lifting rods, shedding vest, scrubbing bucket. Relaxed and reset, he preoccupies himself with a new quadruple bubble and gaggle of undergrads.

With Rose's return, Min sees miracles again. Alone, he keeps his head down, ears plugged, mind empty. His sister, in her perfection, forces him awake, snatching his attention with every chewed-lip flaw.

Yet still, something's off. Post-abroad Rose is different—someone who doesn't shut the lights at nine sharp, who laughs when no one's watching, whose lips have healed from blood, bruise, scar tissue. Her miracle's popped; she's fallen from skies. Now, she's more like the tunnel, where Min pauses every day, squinting into darkness for buses that never arrive. His throat knots.

He can't worship his sister anymore.

So, he despises her.

#### The Providence Art Club: CONFLICT

By the Providence Art Club, an elderly couple huddles before an iPhone. The man holds it an arm's length away, backing onto the curb. His wife presses close, gripping his coat. Min offers a polite nod, but Rose catches his arm. Approaching, she asks, "Would you like a picture?"

"Oh!" The woman's eyes crease. "Thank you!"

The man hands over his phone. "Just a few by the church, if you don't mind."

"Sure!"

As Rose kneels, Min eases on the stairwell. A sign points indoors: The Providence Art Club is always open to the public. His gaze penetrates glass—impressionism, neoclassical busts, floral arrangements. It feels colonial, but fresh, too lively for the drab afternoon, and for the first time since moving to Providence, Min wants to go in.

Before she left, Rose walked Min to school—out the door by 7:35, up the hill by 8:00. Oftentimes, Min woke to the frizzle of frying dumplings, Rose rushing through the kitchen. She finished eating before Min started, then disappeared into her room, brushing hair, picking earrings, whatever girls did.



As Min washed the dishes, he pressed his thumbs and pointers together, forming bubbles in the gap.

Outside, they traced the riverbank towards College Hill. Min talked. Details about Mom, who nagged him for slouching and loved him 'despite disappointment'; Ms. Watson, his history teacher, who griped about her toxic politics and mid-life crises; Keith, his best friend, who swore too often and partied too hard, who only shut up for his girlfriend, even while cheating with that brunette barista.

Ditch him, Rose advised.

But we've been friends since kindergarten.

Oh Min. She shook her head. Relationships are symbiotic. Keith, however, is a parasite. Weigh gives and gains. If he's not worth it, cut him off.

Keith wasn't. Alas, cutting him off was too much work. Min preferred talking; it never resolved problems, but it made his backpack lighter. Rose listened, keeping the conversation on him. Yet, at the Art Club she stopped, squinted into vacant room, and cupped her palm over his mouth.

We should go in.

One day, Min shrugged. And that was the end of it.

"Hey." Rose's voice startles him. Flicking Min's forehead, she holds out the phone, scolding, "Pay attention. You take it. Your arms are longer."

Min nods. He squints at the sun, following her instruction to capture the entire church. Bending his wrists, he achieves a somewhat clean angle, zooms in, scrolls out, snaps extras. When Rose hands the phone back, the couple exchange exclamations—Spanish, maybe Portuguese.

The man dips his chin. "Thank you so much!"

"Of course!" Rose beams. "Have a great time in Providence!"

"I just want to say," his wife smiles, "you're a cute pair of twins."

"Actually," Min interjects. "She's older."

The couple departs. Rose's unassuming grin slides off, replaced by disinterest. Min tugs her sleeve, pointing to the Art Club. "Let's have a look."

"Maybe another time."

"Right," he mutters, turning to the path. "Bet you saw lots of art in London."

She arches her brows. "Sure?"

"Did you think of me at all?" The question slips, harsher than intended. Immediately, Min purses his lips. But, Rose's spider-eyes narrow. She hides feelings so well—every day, she walked up that hill, insisting there was nothing

new, nothing fun, nothing wrong when he dared inquire. She left for London in the dead of night without even a warning. Then...there was rage.

“Min,” she whispers. “Mind telling me what I did?”

He looks down.

“You’ve been treating me like a stranger since I got back,” she continues, calm, cold, soft, yet serrated. “And honestly? I don’t blame you! You wouldn’t answer a text for nine months!”

Silence.

“Fine,” she exhales. “Take your time. I’ll wait.”

Rose spins on her heel, forging ahead with brisk strides. Min’s eyes bore through the Art Club window, pulse racing. So many times he could’ve entered...why wait? Now, he considers freedom—seeking his own anecdote within busts, paintings, flowers; abandoning Rose before, in her secrecy and vindictiveness, she abandons him again. Just one step. One rebellious act.

Downhill, the traffic light turns green.

Before Rose glances back, Min’s back at her side.

### The Pedestrian Bridge: CONFESSION

“Rose, look.”

Beneath the pedestrian bridge, geese peck at bottle caps. Black-necked adults lead gray goslings into the depths. Kicking in unison, the little ones keel to the side, flare their wings, and hurry to the rocks.

Rose braces her elbows on the railing. Silence poisons the air. Exhaling, Min lifts his gaze towards buildings—rising, falling, piling by Steeple Street, crisp windows and ninety-degree dips fitted perfectly. Clouds, dappled in sunset, hang low upon the scarlet Biltmore sign.

Min clears his throat, attempting, “I’ve always thought those buildings looked too grand. Like, they’re just there so Providence has something photogenic for tourists.”

Rose nods. Without a word, she starts towards the opposite side. She once found the pedestrian bridge so picturesque...now, it’s nothing. A little place in a little city, upstaged by London, Amsterdam, intrigue, romance, adventure. Now, only fear remains, fear of her departing back, receding shadow, suitcases, airplanes, future.

Bitterness seizes Min. “God, Rose! Do you have to do this?!”

She tilts her head. “You’re shouting.”

“So?”

“So why are you mad?” she asks steadily. “Because I’m petty? Or because I’m right?”

“I’m not—”

“No.” Her gaze trails back, immobilizing. “Because of the UK. Because I left once, and I’m leaving again, and you can’t handle it.”

Min clenches his jaw. “You could’ve told me.”

“Told you?” she laughs derisively. “You’d forget. You wouldn’t care. Why bother?”

“That’s not true!”

“Oh please—”

“Stop looking down on me!” he snaps. The strength of his voice stuns him, but he lifts his chin, pressing forward: “I’m tired of guessing if you’re stressed or you can’t stand me or you’re disappearing for London tomorrow! Guessing, and—and screwing up, and apologizing, and it just repeats!”

“Because you don’t listen.”

“Because you think I’m an idiot!”

She narrows her eyes. “Don’t project Mom onto me.”

“See? You’re denying—”

“Let’s be clear,” Rose says softly, leaning so close he can smell bloody lips, count inky lashes, feel her voice, lacerating: “I never called you idiot. You’re not hopeless, and that’s the problem! You don’t try. You forget your shoes, your lunch, you leave your clothes lying everywhere...whatever. Habits are hard. But Keith? Ms. Watson? AP Econ, All States, Mom?”

“I just talk.”

“You panic!” she snaps. “Sit there and panic. When will you just try to do something?”

Heat rises to Min’s face. Words sting his tongue, yet he swallows, focusing on shaky breaths, vicious eyes, hammering heart. He demanded honesty. So why does it hurt? It’s not fair. But it is. Because Rose is Rose. Always fair, right, reasonable. She defends him from Mom, cleans up his messes, solves every problem before he notices it. She wouldn’t call him a screw-up...just a child. Life in a bubble, head in the clouds, better hold his hand so tightly it snaps. It’s never her fault.

Below, goslings kick further from adults. For them, perfection is learned. They dip below, drift ashore, sink, flail, fail. What about Min? If permitted

mistakes, could he swim like Rose? Hide shortcomings underwater, glide, pristine, immaculate, across the surface?

"I don't want to be like this," Min whispers, sinking into himself. "But...I can't set alarms or write schedules because you do it quicker and better. I can't go to the UK or leave the goddamn house without you there, waiting for me to trip up. So, Rose"—Min meets her stricken gaze—"I'm...I'm so sorry I don't try. But have you given me a chance?"

### The Parking Garage: ACCEPTANCE

Back when Min first moved into his sister's apartment, she took him to the parking garage. It was on Brown's campus, past restaurants and empty lots. Fliers on the door—med-school movie night, support local art, vote Allan Fung. Times changed, but one remained in lamination:

DON'T DO IT. WE CARE ABOUT YOU.

It was heartening, but sometimes, climbing eight flights, Min wondered whose steps he followed; so, he rushed up faster, breathless, eyes searching, though there was no one waiting.

At the top, Rose leaned over the wall, pointing out the Superman building, Rhode Island Hospital, kayaks trailing along Waterfire, blue cars weaving between Route 1's bridges. She described Providence so carefully, intimately, that she forgot she hated talking, and Min forgot he was bad at listening, and night fell, lamplights rising within teasing nudges and shared laughs.

Now, Rose stares into traffic, venturing, "Did you come here alone?"

"A few times," Min sighs. "I...I thought it would help me call you."

Rose smiles, crinkling her eyes before he spots sadness. "I should've told you."

"It's fine."

"No." She takes a breath. "When I left, I...I needed to escape. Grad school apps, Mom nagging, and one morning I just looked in the mirror and"—she relinquishes her lip, licking the blood clean—"I was sick of what I saw. You know?"

Min's heart twists. He scoots closer, elbow brushing hers. "I think so."

"I wanted to tell you," Rose murmurs. "I wanted to, I tried—"

"I'm sorry," he says firmly. For worshipping you. Silencing you. Crushing you.

Rose laughs. She reaches out, straightens his jacket, and ruffles his hair.  
“I’m sorry too.”

Evening mist settles upon Providence, obscuring boats, bridges, blue cars, Biltmore sign. Specks of pedestrians crowd cement streets. Somewhere below, goslings glide over plastic riverbed. Somewhere below, an elderly couple looks into tinted windows, stepping over the Art Club’s threshold. Somewhere below, or perhaps above on College Hill, a bubble floats skywards to butterflies, pigeons, a plane headed for London from T.F. Green. Veiled in autumn light, shaped by every flickering shape, every wavering color, every significant, insignificant memory, it looks miraculous.

“Are you okay?” Rose asks gently.

Min closes his eyes. Reaches towards endless space.

“I’ll be fine.”

## CHERRY

Since the moment you lay eyes on Cherry, you know she's built differently. She's not like those posh office types, or common park benches, or high-maintenance recliners at the barber shop—just a ladder back with four legs, a thick coat of paint, and a sturdier spirit than any chair you've ever known. Entranced by her simple charm, you whisk her away from Carpentry Barn 217, buy a bottle of lacquer and bouquet of lilies, and take her to dinner at the fanciest table-for-two in town. Of course, like a proper gentleman, you don't sit on her immediately.

After entrées, an older woman in Miu Miu rolls up on a Medieval Throne on Swivels 2.0 (half her age, but aren't they all). She pauses, eyes skirting up and down Cherry. At last, she notes, You're a lucky man. You smile back, but pull Cherry close, responding, I certainly hope so. When the old woman departs, Cherry tells you, blushing, that if you don't want to stand, we're at a table-for-two, so I wouldn't mind if you sat...just this once! For appearance's sake, don't get her wrong!

You're in stars, inhibited, in love! The months leading to graduation flit past. You receive a Bachelor's in CS and land a job at Engineuity—the first tech firm to hire three-legged chairs—and buy Cherry a downtown apartment with a whole-wall window facing Rotary 87. You're disappointed you couldn't afford the one overlooking the botanical gardens, but Cherry assures that she enjoys watching pedestrians—back in her Carpentry Barn days, moments of sonder eased the burdens of silence and solitude. She wobbles a bit, and you're touched by her vulnerability.

I'm here now, you promise. She smiles back. I'm glad.

Cherry attends every company event as your seat, inciting the envy of colleagues. John in the next cubicle claims he's dated all sorts of chairs (some wonderful, don't get him wrong), but never one that let him sit at his leisure! You nod, realizing you've forgotten how it feels to eat meals standing. At home, you profess your gratitude, but Cherry dismisses it. She's heard of humans who abandon chairs at home, force them into paints and refinishes, send strangers to pick them up, cart them off. They perform grand gestures because they want something...but your small, everyday actions prove you care.

Years pass. You're Team Leader, then Director, then VP of Web Development and Chairman of Table Equity. Reassigned to the new tower, you're awarded an office, a blonde secretary, Charlene, and a shiny swivel, Charles. Squeaky clean but never squeaky! He declares, and he knows you have a chair, he's not interested in humans...all he wants is stability. With Cherry's consent, you keep him around, but rarely sit on him.

At first, Cherry commutes with you. Alas, you're not a college student anymore; carrying her around the city is a strain. One day, she notices bruises on your wrists and tells you to cart her instead. At first, you protest, but Cherry insists that she trusts you, and really, carts are just practical...not a loss of intimacy. It works for a while, but then, in the crowded subway, a speeder swerves into her, shattering her cross rail. Devastated, you take her to the carpenter's—her legs are scuffed, her seat, dented, so she'll need two months of repairs. At wit's end, you're forced to sit on Charlie. You feel dirty, disloyal. Cherry laughs herself to cracks. You're so sweet! Don't worry so much. I'll compromise.

After a while, you grow accustomed to Charlie; even when Cherry returns, you split work and home between two chairs. Cherry's hesitant, but you buy her a cushion, and she admits that it's easier for everyone. Compromise. Once, you disliked the word, but now you're an expert in business diplomacy. A compromise doesn't sacrifice quality—it simply appeals to...what did she call it? Practicality.

Cherry's sensible. She understands.

Going drinking with colleagues. I know you don't like bars, so I'll take Charlie this time.

Oh my gosh, we're so short on staff, and Version 3.7 needs a diagnostic run! I'll take the late train, I'm so sorry, we'll see the concert on Tuesday! Already changed the tickets!

Sorry, Tuesday's an office check. I bought you lilies though.

The board's on the verge of normalizing table diversity! I know we go out for New Year's, but if this passes, the swivels won't condescend to you in the office! This is for you.

Don't be sad. I bought you new paint.

You don't like it? All right. How about this varnish?

What? I'm not obsessed with work!

Why am I always busy? For you.

It's all for you.

For your twentieth anniversary, you preorder a Queen of Pearls Cushion for 15K. Envisioning Cherry by her window, adorned in silk and satin, fills you with pride. You dash home with a bottle of aged urushi lacquer and a bouquet of peace lilies, gift tucked beneath your arm.

Cherry spins towards the wall on the wheels you bought her. I'm leaving.

Your pillow tumbles to the floor.

What?

You didn't buy that for me, she replies, you bought it for you.

Her words burn, festering indignation, bitterness, white-hot rage. You toil at the office, wake up at the crack of dawn, return long after darkness falls, buy her flowers, build her a palace, treat her like a throne. But, Cherry doesn't laugh anymore. Her quietness stings. She hardly speaks, hardly moves...just stares out the window like a prisoner. Where's her charm? When did she change?

I've changed? she scoffs. You've changed.

At least I still care!

Oh? Because you bought me wheels? A derisive laugh. She rolls forward, faint cracks spidering across her perfect finish. She's a ladder back! Just a ladder back! How many times will you buy her the popular products meant for the new chairs? Really, do you even know what she's made of?

Cherry? you ask blankly.

The cracks climb up her cross rails. Mahogany. And pine!

All right, fine! But, why is it your fault? She never tells you her make and model, or that she doesn't like satin, or if she wants to go out. She just sits there, expecting you to deliver. That's not fair. You don't make space for her worries. You're too busy transforming her into your victory seat. Excuse you! Sorry if she doesn't like being treated well! Oh, you treat her 'well.' Not because she asks. Because she's yours. But, that's how things are. Chairs are objects. Well, maybe they're tired of being objectified. Maybe all she wanted was a nice view from the window with someone who loved her!

Maybe she's just selfish.

Maybe love is selfish. Why disguise it as selfless? If we're happy, isn't it enough?

Happy. Your throat constricts. You're happy! Power, purpose. That's sufficient...but, wait a second. What about before that? Those times in college,



when you'd skip class just to see her? When you'd feel warm inside even after buying nothing, earning nothing, doing nothing, because you were at home in the kitchen and Cherry smiled at you? Where did that feeling go?

Sparks in the air flicker, fade, fail. Overwhelmed by cold, you wrap your arms around yourself, eyes sifting darkness for an afterimage. A sudden push behind your knees knocks you off-kilter, and you find yourself sitting on your ladder back, paint chipped, wood splintered, cushions abandoned on the floor. Your limbs seize, then ease upon familiar rests...little cherries carved into the ends.

Cherry wheels you to the window. Half-numb, half-desperate, you lunge for the curtains, pulling them so wide that fabric rips off the hooks. City lamps pour through glass, intermingled with traffic lights, scarlet signs, psychedelic ads spinning, shifting, faltering with the crowd of carts and cars, chairs and chairpeople, soon-to-be-realized dreams and soon-to-be-forgotten moments, fleeting youths, fragile loves, forsaken lives, illuminated in this ever busy, ever lonely night. Right now, how many people were happy? How many down there still cared for happiness?

You start to apologize. Swallow it back.

Voice hoarse, you find the right words.

I love you.

Cherry doesn't respond. But, her legs wobble, brushing up against yours. A smile tugs on your lips. Closing your eyes, you retrieve a fallen peace lily and lean back into her light.

IVY LINARDOS '25  
EVERYTHING IS LIVING, NOTHING IS COLD

She called me Viscera. It comes from the Latin word “viscus”, she told me, meaning “the inner body”. The core of everything, the ever-twisting machinery that sparks with glowing life, the tendons and muscles and pulleys and wires that make an animal different from the air around it, the ground beneath its feet. You are a wonder—a hundred different cogs and bolts from a hundred different people and animals, and, miraculously, you fit together. You defy the “laws of nature”. You are living, breathing proof that a being like you can live and breathe. If the organs inside me are sparking, you are electrified.

A marvel!

I wasn't stupid. I knew it just meant gore.

It didn't bother me, though. For all her beautiful, glossy, obvious lies and poorly-veiled secrets and the fact that, deep down, I knew I horrified her, she was an enigma. I could leave her makeshift lab any time I wanted. She liked to think that I wasn't strong enough, that nothing could break through the walls, though that notion was based on nothing but hubris. But, still, I never did. With all her tinkering and crazed scribbling in that little notepad, all her cryptic late-night ramblings and disjointed ideas, all of those silent revelations that sent jolts through her body as she rushed to find the nearest writing utensil, I could never shake the underlying feeling that, out of her depth as she was, she was going to achieve something astounding, and she would achieve it soon.

I suppose she did. However different it was than she thought it would be.

I was her debut. Her first success, her first child, her first homemade, locally-sourced, build-it-yourself monster. I was constructed roughly. Muscles and bones, arteries and nerves folded together, stitched and knotted, all twisting in towards the center of my unnatural body—a huge, feverishly-beating cow's heart. I have limbs upon limbs upon limbs, none of them bending quite the way they should, no claw or hand or eye in the place optimal for its specific purpose. Skin stretches only over some parts of me (“difficult to acquire,” she said); arms hang limp against other arms, not connected to any nerves; bones poke through where there shouldn't be bones at all. But what matters is that I move. What mattered to her was that I moved. That I spoke,

albeit through many jagged mouths and aching voice boxes. That I thought. What mattered to her was that I was alive.

I was her masterpiece. Until her second project, I guess.

She didn't want me to know her name, but it was Gloria Darwin. I knew that it was Gloria Darwin within a week of my electrocuted, spasming beginning. It's a bit funny, honestly—for a woman so fixated on secrecy and leaving no trace, she spared little time rushing, ecstatic, out of the room, and leaving her driver's license right in front of me on the workshop floor. With a hand embedded with rabbit ligaments and teeth, I reached out and slid it closer to me, reading over the whole thing.

Gloria said that my brain was human, and, on this, she must've been correct. How else would I be able to read over all that tiny print, understand every word?

I wonder who I used to be, before I became a "what."

A slightly younger version of her smiled back at me from the little fingernail-sized picture, her hair tugged back from her face, an orange cardigan hung over her shoulders. Her cheeks, stretched wide, her eyes, though just a bit wider, glinted with the same wild curiosity that I had come to associate with her so early on. The card said that she was twenty-eight years old. Once my understanding of the world began to harden into something more coherent, I found myself almost impressed with that. Creating artificial life with flesh and corpses and a cleverly constructed broken-wire/water tub electrocution device, and she hadn't even turned thirty.

She was brilliant, and that must've been the reason her own astounding innovation turned on her so quickly. Nobody can be that bright and not find themselves blindsided.

She started talking about her next project about two months after I was formed. Her words were hushed and coded and vague, but she was excited. Oh, she was so very excited.

"Revolutionary!" she said to me one morning before the haze of midnight had even begun to give way to sunrise. "My full expression of genius. Total glory. Transforming everything, Viscera. You can't even begin to imagine."

I didn't reply. I waited for her next words, and, a few minutes later, they arrived.

"You were the first step. With you, manufactured life broke the surface of our world gasping for air and clawing for land. With this..." she trailed off

again. Her eyes, bleary, unfocused, a dreamy miasma floating around her features. She needed sleep. I didn't. "The world will flood, Viscera. All will be submerged."

Gloria slept, and she woke, and she left for three days.

When she came back, her appearance was disheveled, frantic, excited beyond words about something I had received only the vaguest hints about.

"I've discovered it," she said. "The key to everything. The spark." She walked up to my flimsy cage, closer than she'd ever dared to go before, and stared me straight in my eyes, a crazed smile splitting her face.

The last three words she ever spoke to me, or might've ever spoken at all, were, "Tomorrow, everything ignites."

That night, I slept. I slept for the longest time I ever had, though I suppose that was by default, because that night, I slept for the first time in my life.

It was dark. Deep.

She must've done it while I was asleep. At least tried whatever she was trying to do. There is no other explanation.

Because everything is different, now. Everything lives. Everything thinks. Everything bleeds. The oceans boil with blood and marrow. The grass is no longer plant matter, but thick, coiling hair that sways in the sickly hot breeze. Animals look at the night sky and see not stars, but cells, and, if something was to drill through the planet's flesh all the way to the core, I am sure that what was found would not be magma, but a vast, coiling spine.

Everything is like me, now. Everything is moving, nothing is cold.

She is gone. I know she is. Her arms and legs and brain and heart must be circulating, finding homes in creatures that, in the time before, would've filled her with wonder. But Gloria Darwin is gone. Maybe that's for the best.

I don't know what she did. I don't know what she found, or how she found it, but, however at home I feel now, I still think that it was something she never should have touched. Something hands like hers were never supposed to make contact with.

And yet, it's beautiful.

## SOMETHING IN MY CEILING

Dearest Ellen,

I think you should know that there is something in my bedroom ceiling.

Something that writhes and flutters and scratches and searches; searches for a crack in the plaster, searches for a damp spot or a place where light might shine on salmon-colored insulation in a few watery thin rays. Searches for a way through.

A way to reach me.

I do not know how long it's been here. Maybe it arrived too recently to really tell, or maybe it's been too long to remember who came first—it or me. Though, come to think of it, I don't recall you ever mentioning it when you were young. Was it that it wasn't there, or simply that you weren't the one it was calling? It's been so dreadfully long since anyone visited. Just it, and me. You should visit soon. It doesn't want you to, but I think you should.

Have you written lately? I haven't seen any letters bearing your return address, though, then and again, there are holes in all the paper now. The fabric, too. But not in my bedroom ceiling. I'd like it if you wrote. A month, a year, ten—It's a long time to be away from your daughter, you know. It's been lonely, without any company but the fluttering thing above.

I've been sleeping with the lights off. Is that irregular? Please do inform me if that's irregular. It thinks that's irregular. I think I'm starting too, as well.

Writing is difficult. It's always so dim.

I'm not sure how well you remember the landscape around the house, Ellen, but I'm not sure how well I remember it either, so I guess we're in the same boat. There's a river nearby. It ebbs and flows and rises and falls, and the moon always looks so much bigger when it's reflected there. I look at the surface, and I think of the canoe in the backyard. Across from the river, there are two cell phone service towers. Great metal things, with uncountable rungs and bars and bolts and levers, all dark iron and slim wires. At the very top of each one, there is a red light that, in the night, winks and shines and pulses like nothing you've ever seen. They'd always remind me of something, but, for a while, I couldn't place what it was. I sit on the porch often, just looking at

them. Sometimes, I'm even awake when they switch off, in tandem, in the early morning.

I've spent a lot of time on the porch. I don't want to be close to the bedroom.

Did you know that I didn't actually know the meaning of your name when I picked it? Some kind of crazy universal coincidence. Stars aligning, for better or for worse. I just thought Ellen sounded pretty. Graceful. I looked it up a few weeks, months ago. The internet said that it's Greek, and it means sun. Ray. Shining light.

Perhaps it is better that you're away.

I hope you get this letter. To tell you the truth, I'm scared. I miss you very much.

Not to sound like the horror-struck protagonist of a ghost story, but, when I've slept in the bedroom, I've had dreams. Beating sheets of delicate matter, wispy hair. Soft, invisible things that bat against my body, land in my clothes, crawl under my eyelids. Each time, the things and me are a little less different.

How fitting that you're studying to become an entomologist. I'd appreciate your input.

I've set a habit in place of walking along the river bank as it gets dark. Right there, on the glistening wet sand, is the place where I usually don't feel any tug—not from my housemate, and not from the towers.

Usually.

Some time ago, I stepped out of the door at the usual time, and the tug was so strong that I almost...I don't know what I would've done. I would've collapsed to the ground. I would've collided with the sky. But you know me, Ellen. Your old mother is stronger than she looks.

In a way, it helped matters that the tug was only pulling me toward one place. I felt an unrelenting need to reach the tower, but I know, somehow, that it wasn't only the tower that was calling me. It makes sense, now, that the thing in my ceiling was pushing me there too. After all, just that afternoon I'd caved in and swung a bat at the panels. The cracks spread so easily, but I don't know how far they extended. I closed the bedroom door that day, and sealed it as tight as I could. I haven't gone back.

But it's not really there, anymore, is it?

All I know is that the current that night only flowed in one direction. I blinked, stumbled over to some place, blinked again, found that water was lapping at the toes of my shoes and I had dragged the cobwebbed canoe behind me. There was a paddle clenched between one of my hands and the dust-caked rim. I used it to work through the turbulent water.

Out there, disrupting the stars' reflected brilliance, paddle flipping beneath my hands, I felt small. Like a mote of dust caught in a window's shine. Like a single blood cell floating through a vast warren of arteries.

And then...the memory fades for a while...

But the next thing that I know, I am at the base of one of the cell towers, and I am staring up at their synchronized blinks, and I know, now, what they remind me of. They remind me of eyes. And I am struck with something so deep and tremulous that I almost place it as fear before I recognize it as all-consuming passion. I know exactly what I have to do. I know exactly how to do it.

I find the first rungs, and they are broader than they look, searing cold against my hands. Everything's caked with rust.

I've never been afraid of heights.

Beneath my ascending weight, the tower creaks and groans. Nobody's climbed this in a long time. The wind is biting cold around me, pushing me this way and that, and my palms are sweaty. I am shivering.

I am afraid of heights.

My breath quickens, and I begin to fumble, clutching myself as close as possible to the frosted metal lattice. It's not close enough, and I can see right through the other side. My thoughts are swirling, my sense of direction spinning, and surely I can't hold on any longer, and...

It is there. It is with me. It whispers in my ears, embraces me in the space above muscle, below skin. It tells me I am safe. It tells me I am it.

Something is growing in my back. Wrapping between my organs, pushing around my shoulder blades. Something soft. Something welcome.

It strains against my skin, unfolding and bursting, and I am whole! I am only perched on these rungs. I will never fall. Blood is soaking the torn back side of my cardigan, but it doesn't matter, because the wings have broken free. Its wings. My wings. Free to frigid air, swallowing dark. I climb faster. My arms and legs only do half the work.

A whirlwind of sensation and need and movement, and I'm at the top. I'm where I've always been meant to be, and the light is blinding, drowning, glorious. I am submerged. I am in ecstasy.

The light itself is not red—only the plastic cover. It is much bigger than I expected, and I know that it's exactly the right size.

It is also much looser than I expected. I twist it off frantically, hungrily.

And there, at the top of a twisting, two-hundred-foot pyre of oxidized metal and hexagonal bolts, light suffusing my eyes, my face, my entire body, I know how Icarus felt before the fall. And I'm lifting the hollow, translucent red cylinder, which looks more like a helmet now, lowering it over my head, because, somehow, I know that's what I need to do. And the world is brilliant, shining from every pore, completely aflame with fire only I can see, and the other tower stares back at me, my wings beating against the sky, which is alight, bright pinpricks scattered everywhere, and the moon is crimson, swelling full like a mosquito's belly, and I AM ALIVE!

I do not remember the rest of the night.

Dearest Ellen, I think you should know that there is something below the ceiling I make a home in.

Something that ponders and worries and walks and thinks and searches; searches for cracks in the plaster that it patched frantically back together, searches for a weak spot or a place where light, if strong enough, might reach my eyes. Searches for a way through.

A way to reach me.

Write back.

Your mother.



## THE MAN NEXT DOOR

The man next door is here to see me.

I finished moving in just ten minutes ago, but as I began searching for the most important boxes, I heard the doorbell and I walked through the cardboard labyrinth to the place I currently stand. My head was ringing more than the bell had, its echoes ricocheting around my brain, though the door itself drowned them out with a long, cracking groan. I steadied myself on the frame and this is where I am located now.

I smile apologetically, look up, look further up, accept that he is too tall for my eyes to meet his face, and look back down.

The sky is bright blue, the sort of saturated glaze that could sink over you like gauze if you looked long enough. The clouds look painted-on. My head is still ringing. I squeeze my eyes tight, and cough.

"It's nice to meet you," I say. "Would you like to come in?"

He knows I'm too tired to reply if he answers the question.

So he shakes his head, and jovially walks away.

The man next door is here to see me.

Summer has choked out its last muggy gasps, and he rang the doorbell at seven, which meant that by the time the door was fully open, I was really quite cold. He doesn't seem to mind, however, not even now that we've stood here some time. He is wearing the same tweed suit and wide-brimmed hat as always. He's had the decency to bend down a little, though, so that I can see his face.

I've never been good with eye contact, but I'm not entirely sure whether that's what's making it difficult to focus on the upper half of his face.

He's got a face, though. I know that because of the teeth that glimmer forth from beneath the shadow of his hat, though there are too many, and they are too thin. The sky cloaks him in shimmering reds and purples, and, if I squint, I can't tell the difference between his jacket and the deep grey clouds behind him.

We've been standing here quite some time, haven't we?

"Awfully chilly out here," I remark, and it comes out sounding more forced than I'd like. "Would you like to come in?"

He knows I haven't been able to get the heating running since a valve went wrong two weeks ago.

So he waves the question off good-naturedly, and walks away.

The man next door is here to see me.

When the piercing doorbell hit my eardrums, I was in bed, failing falling asleep. As I got up, I had to shrug no small heap of blankets off of my body. The heating has been fixed a number of times by now, but it's never stayed working for more than ten minutes after the people I call leave. I've accepted it. Winter will be over soon. The worst has come and gone (and if I am wrong, the worst can be buried in quilts and soaked in hot tea). Now I am pulling one of the discarded blankets around my shoulders and hurrying towards the door. I don't think he'll want to wait much longer.

It's midnight, and, out here, with hardly any light pollution, midnight means very, very dark. The only reason I can even see where the man is is the neat cutout of pitch black where no stars shine.

Part of me is grateful for the dark; it means that I do not have to look at his face. It means that there is a chance he can't see my own.

A frosty gale sings through the night. I tug the blanket tighter around me.

"It's so very cold outside. The air hurts to breathe." I never know what exactly to say to him. "Would you like to come in?"

He knows that my lungs ache just as much when I'm inside as they do here.

I don't see him turn away, but I find myself releasing a shaky sigh when the stars in front of me once again blink into view.

I am here to see the man next door.

I was walking to my front door before the bell even rang, because I knew that, obscenely early in the morning as it was, this is the time he'd picked, and I'd better be ready. The clock on the wall to my right marks the time as 3:04 in the morning. More grayish light is already infiltrating my curtains than when I awoke.

Everything around me is so quiet, so stationary. But it's March, now, and the warmth is creeping back around the edges of the clouds. The doorknob knocks against the wall with a disproportionately heavy thud.

The man and I stand maybe three feet apart. He's wearing something different today—another tweed suit, the same make and fit, but muted beige-pink has been replaced with a black so deep it's almost blue. I cannot tell where the lapel ends, and the shadow of his hat begins.

He's pleased. His body is relaxed, though, as usual, his face extends above the doorframe and I can't see it.

But now he bends down, and the realization that such a normal hat could not cast such a deep shadow in this half-light comes far too mundanely. He grins widely, though it is not so much a true smile as just a dense speckling of new teeth glinting up from the darkness in the shape of a deep curve.

For the first time, as I realize, in our entire almost-a-year acquaintance, a voice emanates from within him. I can't decide whether it's so high it hurts my ears or so low I can barely make it out.

"I see I am expected," he says. "Would you mind if I came in?"

Nothing will help me now; it's much too late. Much too windy.

"No," I say.

The man next door knows I am lying.

## A BIRD

**A**t 12:01, the children's hospital wakes to a siren, blaring because there has been a breach of security, because there is a long, bright bird stalking the halls.

Marie Parker's body tenses instantaneously, jolted from a half-sleep at the side of her four-year-old son's bed, becoming, once more, consciously aware of his labored breathing, the blipping of many machines, the harsh light outside their sterile little room. She doesn't know it's 12:01. Things like that have been fading from her mind lately—anything trivial. Anything but the state of her little miracle's lungs. She rises jerkily from her plastic chair, scoping around for the source of the monotone wail that reverberates through the floor, shakes the whiteboard on the wall, makes the incorrect discharge date scrawled over it illegible. It's too noisy. It's too hectic. Marie can't think.

-. - - - . . . - - - -

Outside her room, nurses and doctors are rushing about, disregarding protocol, maybe forgetting what the protocol even is. Is there protocol?

Dr. James Selkie, who constantly receives seal-themed gifts from people who think they're being original, should know if there are measures that should be being put in place. But not even he does. He's looking through a dusty manual, right now, flipping the pages with as much urgency as his sore fingers allow. It's arthritis, and he needs to see someone about it soon.

The siren becomes background noise, a ceaseless scream that won't stop until someone finds the off switch, until someone barricades the entrances that need to be blocked, until someone catches it.

Rumors are already spreading like wildfire over the hospital's many floors. The bird sounds like a foghorn and moves like a headache. The bird is incredibly fast. The bird is on the fifth floor. No—it's on the eighth floor. It's giant, and fills up a whole hallway. It's tiny, and has made its way into the vents.

It's someone's pet!

That's nobody's pet.

In the room across from Marie Parker, a nine-year-old named Samantha sleeps peacefully, alone. Her multitude of IVs and monitors have ceased to bother her by now, just another presence in this ever-moving tapestry of colors and sounds and needles and gloves. At first she was scared. Now she's just tired.

On the seventh floor, a traffic jam forms, dozens of staff trying to go dozens of ways, all trying to fit past an empty gurney that's been wedged between two inconveniently-spaced walls. Dr. Hail and Dr. Hazel, two pediatric surgeons, have broken free of the clog of people, and happen to be running in the same direction, talking breathlessly as they go.

"I saw it," wheezes Hail.

"Really?" says Hazel, batting a lock of loose hair out of her eyes.

"Yeah," says Hail. "Fourth floor. Smelled like chemicals, looked—blurry. Couldn't breathe."

"This is insane," Hazel chokes out. "How has nobody..."

Hail has darted into a nearby stairwell, leaving the door to swing shut behind her. Hazel keeps running.

..- - - -

Dr. Selkie lets the manual slam down on the desk, still open. He scrabbles for a key that he knows is here somewhere, and, upon finding it, begins to travel as fast as his 70-year-old legs can take him down to the basement. Please let it not be there. Please let it not catch him.

More rumors about the bird have been spreading, each more crazed and panic-stricken in delivery than the last. The bird is running wild. Someone's got it corralled in a storage closet. No, you idiot! It's in the kitchens, it's roaming free. Its legs are long and fluid. Its beak is shiny, and as dark as a land that has never seen day. Its feathers are the color of drying ground, sinking sun, Bohemian Rhapsody playing from someone's car. It's on this floor.

No, it's not. It's in the vents.

It's loose! It's free!

..- - - -

It's on the third floor. Marie Parker knew it was on the third floor the second the sound around them seemed to muffle, the moment all she could hear was the sudden darkness, the faint click of talons on linoleum. The whoosh of quick feathers through air.

And suddenly, the noise stops altogether, plunging her into a quiet she'll never be able to forget for the rest of her life, but that she'll want to desperately. It has paused outside their door. Marie is intensely grateful that the blinds over the little window are shut.

A most curious sound creeps against her eardrums—a methodic ticking, muffled voices forming sentences that she can hear perfectly but can't decipher

at all. A heavy cold sinks through her veins; the kind of chill that must be something fresh entering her body, something chemical. She can't see. She can't feel.

But soon—very soon, after hardly five seconds, she can hear again—click, whoosh, and the sensation passes. With confusingly desperate relief, she deflates, folding both her hands around her little Jay's, startled to see that he's crying, wide-eyed. Marie pulls him into a shaky embrace, but this moment is shared by no one but them. There's a security camera in their room, but nobody's watching. Nobody's on this floor except for them and Samantha, still asleep, still dreaming of dragons that bleed into doctors that bleed into fluorescent lights that bleed into moons, suns, stars.

Maybe her dreams shift when the bird enters her room. Maybe a strange song echoes around her bed and the equipment that surrounds it. Maybe something spectacular happens the moment the bird flies away.

Maybe it takes her up in its opalescent claws. Maybe it eats her.

- .... - - - -

In any case, her heart monitor's beep- beep- beep fades to a single, high drone. In any case, the siren stops, leaving the rest of the building in jarring silence.

In any case, Dr. Selkie begins to sob with thanks, singing the universe's praises in his mind as he sinks down the morgue door, which he only just locked.

Because this exact thing has happened more times than he can count over the thirty-seven years he's worked at this hospital, and somehow nobody has ever remembered it but him. He feels like he's cheating at a game that he doesn't even know how to play, and what scares him most is that he thinks he's winning.

What scares him still more is that he doesn't know if it's a thought, or a knowledge.

- .... - - - -

Dr. Marina Hazel and Dr. Miranda Hail come to at the same moment, two floors apart, nothing in their minds but half-obsured images of each other's faces, vague remembrance that maybe the person they're picturing is similar to them in name. Dr. Hazel catches her breath, and realizes that she's nowhere near the place she's supposed to be. Dr. Hail finds that she was meaning to go here anyway. She shrugs to nobody but herself, and starts to walk.

Up on the third floor, someone is dialing Samantha's father's number into the phone, preparing to give the news that no one ever wants to. That Samantha has died.

Three people work together to dislodge the gurney on the seventh floor from its unfortunate situation. A nurse finds a half-open manual lying on the ground. It appears to have fallen there. He sighs, and picks it up, returning it to where it's supposed to be.

Once again, the children's hospital settles into its noisy, bustling rhythm. Once again, Marie Parker and her son fall asleep, with no idea why they woke up in the first place. Once again, everything is returned to normal, and nobody looks at the sky.

It is 12:15 A.M.

..-. .-.. -.-

EDAN DAVIS '25

CURIOUS BOY

**C**urious Boy. Born into a world that's cruel to him, but this was no worry of his. He loved smiling, observing, learning.

From two months old, he grew up with just one parent. Dad could barely take care of himself, concerned with more important things. As a grade schooler, the thought of spending hours in front of his mom's computer was more appealing than staying after school for games of Tag, Four Square, and Off the Wall. No one asked why he wasn't at the playground, everyone was more concerned with their game. Mom is incredibly busy of course; there wasn't time to be there for him. Staying home alone quickly becomes normal. He's always struggled with connection. Not to say he doesn't have friends. Making friends has never been an issue, he's always been quite good at that. People are drawn to him. Maybe it's a gift from mother nature—an apology of sorts. Now, his childhood is mostly a blur to him, but the parts that still live on shine bright in his mind. He's used to not talking to people, it's been a way of life longer than he can remember. So many people assume things about him.

He often wonders how his life might have turned out differently if connection was a larger part of growing up. If communication had been normalized, if having the need to hang out with friends was encouraged, if people wanted to learn about him the same way that he did everyone and everything. These days he can't tell what people truly think of him; he likes to think that he connects with many people in the most beautiful ways. He can't tell if they feel the same.

He ponders if people experience emotion as intensely, if they wonder about the world, about people, about life the way he does. Do they feel connection? Do they feel intense disconnection?

Curious Boy. Born into a world that he will never understand. A world that he doesn't feel a part of. A world he loves, and will always love, unconditionally.



## SURRENDER

When he enters the forest, Apollo knows he isn't going to leave. It is one of those visceral feelings, appearing from the furthest, darkest, deepest parts of his being. He doesn't see why he won't be able to leave the woods, and with each step he takes, his stomach knots. His right eyelid won't stop twitching, making him think of his mom. She always thought it was cute. Apollo smiles, although incredibly nervous. He can feel his cheeks flaring, his heart beating like a drum, a pulsing in his ears and in the back of his throat.

He's only just entered the forest. Deep breath, calm down.

Leaves crunch as he continues on his way. Ignoring his profound anxiety, he recognizes how much he loves nature. The quiet birdsong flowing around him is orchestral, and the rustling leaves make excellent percussion. Fall-stricken trees shed leaves in a way that mimics rain. He giggles—trees can't rain! His boots squelch in the mud, hidden by foliage, causing it to splatter across threadbare pants. The pines are jokers and he, the clown. But, he doesn't mind, those pants have lived three lives too many; covered in multicolored patches, sewn with cheap thread, stolen from the local art store. He was not one to steal, but times have been tough. Recently, life has dealt him a terrible hand. Now, Apollo ventures through the wilderness with nothing more than a tattered white shirt—torn and covered in dirt, practically brown—and mud-speckled pants, a weirdly large backpack, and his trusty jacket: a thick brown Carhartt with an extra layer of insulation. Apollo's mom gave it to him for his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday—it's his most prized possession.

She had died only a few weeks after his birthday, an undetected tumor had grown in her spine, causing paralysis. She had drunk too much that night, suffocating in a pool of her own vomit. Apollo found her, motionless, dried food remains crusted onto the corners of her mouth. He knew right away what had happened. He didn't even bother trying to shake her awake, nor try to convince himself it was a mere dream. He wept, sobbing until the sun set and rose again.

Six months later, Apollo still felt hopeless. He never fully processed his mom's sudden death, ignoring it, repressing any thoughts about her. The further he ventured into the dense wood, the more his feelings began to break through. Apollo no longer heard the sound of distant cars on the highway, no

echoing of horns honking, or tires screeching. All he heard were the leaves, the wind, the birds. For a city boy, this was a new experience; his first time out. The long silence was disorienting, and he could not hold it together.

Tears streamed down his cheeks as he walked beneath a canopy of ancient maples. His vision reduced to splotches and streaks. His backpack weighed a thousand pounds, requiring every ounce of Apollo's strength, his knuckles turning pale.

Apollo cried because everywhere he looked radiated life. It was difficult for him to comprehend how any one thing could be so perfect, let alone an entire landscape. As the tears continued and his backpack bore down on him, he found himself in a transformed reality. A reality where he didn't feel sadness any longer, or pain. Apollo lay down on a bed of damp leaves that strangely felt incredibly dry, before surrendering his entire being to the elements.

GUNNAR EGGERTSSON '26  
HOUSE WITH A THOUSAND DOORS

Entry #17 in the memoir and recollections of psychologist Alfred W. Gordon

In all my days of psychoanalyzing the human mind, I have yet to find a person whose conversations proved as memorable as those of Jonas Anderson. He was an awkward fellow, anxious, with darting eyes and the nervous tick of incessantly scratching the back of his neck. He had been referred to me after suffering a breakdown during a company meeting. Apparently, it was either going to therapy or getting booted from his position. The first sessions were nearly as awkward as he was. He wouldn't talk much, aside from giving me simple answers, and more times than not his eyes were glued to his fingers. That was another habit he had, obsessively twiddling his fingers.

He came for a couple of months and finally confronted me, saying that he was having trouble collecting his thoughts. As in, he had felt that he was gaining little out of the therapy because it was impossible to communicate his ideas. It was the most forthcoming he had been and it took me aback. It was not uncommon for people being unable to communicate with a therapist they hardly knew. So, I suggested that he keep a journal, and try to write down his ideas at home where he was comfortable before discussing them with me.

It was on a rainy day when something truly spectacular happened. It had not been more than three months since the inception of his journaling when he came in with a prepared speech. Ever since he started recording his thoughts, our discussions were more bountiful, but still left something to be desired. He did deliver something to behold.

"Sorry for being late," Jonas said, rain glistening off his black trench coat. He hung it on the rack and sat down.

"It's really no problem, it's better you came here safely and with your car free of dents than on a stretcher to the hospital."

He laughed nervously. I worried perhaps my comment had been in poor taste.

He sat on the edge of the gray couch, leaning forward, "I wrote something down..."

“Great,” I replied.

“No...it's something I'd like to read. Like a script,” he said, reaching for the journal in his back pocket. The leather journal seemed slightly damp.

He began, “All my life I've been searching for meaning. It's been hard to find,” he glanced quickly at me for some kind of assurance, “It was only yesterday that I understood why my need for meaning has eluded me...”

I was sitting on the shower floor, letting the water wash over me, feeling sorry for myself—that same pang of regret I've felt so often, but find difficult to characterize. The kind of regret, not over past mistakes, but of a lost future and missed opportunities. It was the same regret I felt the first time I chose to move to Seattle. The regret was about all the other places I could've gone to. But even as I grew to love the West Coast, I never lost that regret. Instead, it haunted me. It morphed into many things, classes I didn't take, people I never talked to, opportunities that I ignored. Soon I became regretful, perhaps paranoid, of all the things I would miss. All the lost potential.

It was the same “regret for the future” that would manifest itself at my workplace. The company was under new leadership and needed input from us about how to improve. It was quite a bitter period. We were told to identify who to fire, and who should stay. Next thing I know I'm throwing up, on the ground, shaking, freaking out, if you know what I mean!”

Jonas stood, moved over toward the window to observe the rain.

“You know how it is. But it took some time for reflection. That reflection did come though, in the shower, that is. I was sitting there regretting everything in my life until I realized something. That my regret would never go away! It was only until I had truly started to put my thoughts to paper when this idea evolved. I realize now that there are two distinct parts of the mind. The part of me, that is myself. The other part is subconscious, a different being within me, with his own wants, desires, and needs. For all my life, my subconscious had been pulling at me from the shadows, pulling at me from where I couldn't know, or see...I guess I was sorta imagining this house, right. This great multi-colored house the size of an apartment building. And the moment we're born, we enter this house, and our subconscious starts tugging at us. This house though, has thousands and thousands of doors and rooms. All spread apart like a maze. And now, sometimes, we go through the wrong door and end up in the wrong room. Sometimes the rooms are scary,

sometimes they're joyful, but regardless, we keep moving to this voice. The voice of the subconscious."

He reached for a cigarette and paused, "can I smoke?"

I waved to him, "go ahead,"

"Anyways, what I realized after that shower, once I started to write, was that it is not the voice of the subconscious we are supposed to follow, remember that is a completely different being. Instead, we are supposed to... to...uh...well I guess suppose you are to talk to your subconscious in some way."

He sat down again, "See it this way...some folks meditate and do yoga, others run and jog. What these folk are doing is bridging that connection, they are not simply listening to the voice, but they are engaging in a dialogue. Still, even this is really just temporary, and not long lasting. At least they do something though, most people live their lives haphazardly opening up doors trying to find that voice. I think though, to truly speak with that subconscious is to write. There is a connection bridged at that moment that you and your subconscious meet on the page. Your ideas mix with it, and all is revealed. It is only then that you are able to understand who you are."

Jonas smiled, reclining on the couch.

I wasn't quite sure what to say, but I thought to myself, I really need to take up writing.

Silhouettes of lonely trees and drifting leaves enveloped every corner of Pluto's midnight-black eyes. The little boy wistfully observed the dying leaves of the great forest just beyond the wild grasses of his grandmother's backyard. He loved Fall for reasons he could not quite discern. He tried to understand it: the texture, taste, color, or, whatever you want to call it. It just resonated deeply within, in a way he could not fully grasp.

The long curling fingers of a maple leaf near death, or the golden sheen of a white-ash announcing Autumn's arrival, captivated him. He once tried to explain it to Josh—a boy in his grade—who didn't quite comprehend what he meant. Pluto felt that Fall was so sad because its job was to replace Summer. Summer was the burgeoning of life after damp Spring. Autumn was in Summer's long shadow and the harbinger of a boastful Winter. So, Fall tried as deeply as it could to be appreciated: bursting with color; sending its leaves wherever it could. That's what Summer—and for that matter Josh—couldn't grasp. Fall just needed to be understood. And that's why, sad as it was, Pluto loved Autumn. He also couldn't dare think of Fall without recognizing its smell: earthy, damp, musty, flavor-ridden. Like apple-smoked bacon, or maybe roasted turkey, or was it cinnamon? Pluto had a name for this effect: Fallification. That deep hearth-like feeling. When he mentioned it to his dad, he said it sounded too much like "falsification".

Either way, he had this vivid dream that could never quite leave him: it was of a great warship, twenty feet wide and three times as long, bellowing cauldrons of fire spewing tendrils of flame. And many tables, between each cauldron, housing loads of food—turkey, ham, bacon, gourds, pumpkins, nuts and other delicacies. Attending were great ghoulish, monster warriors, stuffing their faces and preparing for what was to come. At the helm of the vessel stood Pluto, in bear skin with a sword, peering into a perilous sea. To his back, a setting sun, and to the bow a great storm gathering. Dark clouds swirled in the deep crevices of the sky, capturing a host of stars to be tossed to the ground as heavy, cold snow. Snow had already begun to form a thin eerie layer on the ocean's surface. Pluto looked back at the men under his charge. He knew he would have to guide them—with his great seafaring expertise—through the long cold Winter Seas to the fresh fertile soil of the Spring Isles. Pluto felt

alone, small under the great foreboding clouds above. He turned once more to where the sun was hanging before, just above the ocean's horizon. He gawked wistfully, imagining a summer sun slowly descending into the sea with pink clouds radiating red, purple, and blue. But Pluto knew he could not return to the Summer Plains until he had reached his destination. He sighed deeply, returning to his men, stuffing his face with the bounty of their feast. The turkey was particularly wonderful, tender and flavorful. When all were full, they moved to the lower deck, raising mugs of mead. Pluto held back for a moment to admire the last bit of imagined sun left in the sky. Suddenly, there it was, the real Autumn sun. An auburn light, showing out proud, against the impending Winter sky. Sadly, Pluto looked at it for the last time and said, "It's okay. It can't remain Summer forever and neither will I remain in fifth grade."

## A LETTER IN REGARDS TO ART AND PERHAPS THE NATURE OF LIFE ITSELF

Hey Sam,

I know you're off in Chicago being an actor and all, but since you've always been the artistic one, I figured I'd send this letter to you. So, I have to write this story, right, but I don't know how to finish it. Damn! I hardly knew where to start. Here's where I'm stuck:

*The winds fill out her sails, the water shifts against her hull and occasionally spills onto the deck. The skies are heavy and clouds thick with precipitation and trepidation. Fog builds off the cool water casting the lighthouse's beam in the eerie, nightly glow. The Lighthouse Keeper pulls his oars hard against the violent waves. Lightning flares through billowing, murky clouds. The old man hasn't seen a storm this rabid in thirty years; he pulls against fatigued muscles, hellbent to reach the dreary coastal fishing town of Blackwater. He prays to whatever being abides in those dark skies above him for mercy on the poor souls below. He hopes his prayers are not in vain.*

And that's what I have. You know how Uncle is, I asked him for some form of elderly wisdom and he said something to the effect of, "Remember the great Michelangelo. Free your art from the page as Michelangelo did from stone" Hey, it must've worked for Uncle, or he wouldn't have published all those books way back when. I don't know what to write. What does the Keeper find at Blackwater? What transcendent wisdom does he learn about the nature of life that saves the day? I was thinking of him battling some Eldritch Arch-mage or something or other. It just felt somewhat silly and all. It's hard to be profound when you don't even know what the story is trying to say. I guess I always imagined that when I got older, writing a story would just come to me. Like some damn epiphany would strike me in the back of my head, drowning me with creativity. It's not quite that simple. Here's another crap story:



*An afrixiating haze set over the room. The tension between Sheriff Redfeild and long-hunted bandit Johnny-Six-Shooter was palpable. Every town from Appalachia to the Rockies had been graced by Johnny's presence. Some superstitious types convinced themselves of Johnny being a phantom, the ghost of a long dead settler killed by a group of coyotes—this being on account of a long, jagged, scar down his face—but, to Redfield, Johnny was far too real. Wind whistled through the plentiful holes bored into the saloon's ceiling. Sheriff Redfeild's readied hand met Johnnie's in an anxious standoff. BOOM!*

I don't even know where to start there. I guess I had watched *A Fistful of Dollars*. or something, and felt a profound inclination to produce my own "work of art". I just get so many great ideas! But before I get down in the dumps about things, here's one I kinda like. I was thinking of a gritty monologue. You know, like from one of those pulpy film noir flicks from back in the day, the kind Dad and Uncle used to rave about. But I'm getting ahead of myself...How about something like this...

*The skies overhead are heavy with dread. They are sad, agitated at the current state of affairs. Finally, they burst in torrents of melancholy, soaking the people of Washington state. I watch as precipitation fills the Seattle air mixed with smog and other pollutants. In my leather-clad hands I hold the picture of the too-soon deceased Mr. Rickshaw, his wife deep in a state of angst, and failed by local authorities, who reached out to the only man on the West Coast that could help her, me, Davis McGlocklin. I had once been a man of the law but those days are over. I sit on the hood of my Bronco, enamored by the view of the city. It's funny how when you're completely absorbed in thought, everything seems...well, slips away.*

Shit man, it feels kinda pretentious! Like I'm trying to say something big, you know. I always liked those grainy, hardboiled, black and white films. Don't get me wrong, it just always felt like they were trying to say too much about the

human condition that just never really felt right. I guess though you have to be somewhat vain to be a writer. Like to feel that you have some deep message to share with the world. Perhaps there is nothing wrong with being a little vain, right? Like, I doubt Michelangelo would have made all those statues of naked people if he didn't feel it was really important. Would all of Shakespeare's plays and poems even exist if he felt he was overstepping his boundaries? You're right though, I'm like Dad, always rambling about something or other. Here's one last story though, it's right up your alley—high-fantasy—I think you'll like it:

*The man stood before the king himself. You could hardly call him a man at his age, but all the same he was being given the honor that hundreds of men older, wiser, and perhaps braver had been denied. "The royal guardian" an accolade only bequeathed to the realm's best knights, and all the boy could feel was shame. He felt rather guilty about the matter, to be honest. He stared at the king, plump on his throne, feeling his gaze weighing heavy on him. All the king did was smile, and the boy smiled back.*

Maybe it is fine to be somewhat self-indulgent and all. I'm not sure where that last story really came from; it's not like I've been given some award. It just felt fitting. You did tell me something one time that kinda stuck with me; shame I forgot what it was exactly, but its essence was the idea of enjoying art for the process it provides. Sure, I enjoy what I write, but I would actually like it better, if it were half decent. I guess your point was that art is never finished, the work continually building on what was previously written. That sentence does sound kinda nice. But hey, what do I know! Love to hear back...

(your little brother) Raymond

## ALL THE TIME IN THE WORLD

Jonas Anderson's personal blog

Hey World,

Did you know how pulp fiction got its name? It's a reference to those publications, often printed on cheap, low-grade paper. The internet says that pulp paper was first invented in 1821 by a Canadian, Charles Fenerty. Over time, it has evolved into comic books and graphic novels. That's what I held in my hand, a thirty-two page plastic-coated graphic novel in the dingiest, rank comic book store in all of Oregon. And I had this thought, would Charles Fenerty be proud of his work if he could see where it ended? I wondered how much time he spent carefully crafting, adjusting and modifying his machine to create the brand new invention of pulp paper. And I wondered if he would've done it again, knowing that it resulted in a pastime for lonely souls who weren't too social. I considered, if I hired a statistician—or anyone so compelled by analytics—to follow me from the day I was born and tabulated all of the time I spent in those dingy comic stores and translated it into a raw metric of time—how long would it be in days, months, years? Perhaps from there, I'd seek out a great physicist of much renown and near superhuman intelligence to build me a contraption so I could live out all of those moments in succession. But, what would I do with all that time? I mean, from every minute I end up watching reality TV, to all the time I spend huddled in a dimly-lit basement playing Dungeons and Dragons; with all that time, what could I accomplish? Perhaps even cure cancer! Or, I guess, travel to that one place I always dreamed of visiting. That's the real paradox of time, isn't it? You never quite know what you want to do until the moment is over. And then you proceed to mope about thinking yourself a horse's ass for not using your time more productively. And from there you think of all of the rich and famous, feeling that you could be just like them if you didn't spend so much time sitting on your buttocks. But like, if I had all that wasted time, right now, and I was able to plan out every moment of life, what would I even want to do? Role models—teachers, parents, adults in my life—always said that I wasted too much time, that I lacked drive. Now that I'm nineteen, and far away from that old rickety town where I grew up, what do I have to prove? Perhaps it was always presumptuous to expect that

things would just work out, but I don't know. It wasn't that I did terribly at school. I just never really had that calling. Like how some people from the moment they are born seem to understand who they want to be. I guess I kinda expected to get that realization by going out West. Like someone would walk up to me on the street one day and say, "Hey kid, you'd make a good dentist, or be great at selling real estate." But it never really occurred. I got this whole college thing happening this Fall, as well as other responsibilities, but still, I just feel like I'm missing something. It's weird how these crazy trains of thought spring out unexpectedly, even in a dreary comic book store. I do though truly, and I mean truly wonder, if I had devoted all that "wasted" time into something meaningful, would I even be a happier person? Like are all those people grinding away to achieve their dreams, happier? I may just be trying to rationalize how much time I wasted as some benefit to my soul, but I do wonder. Maybe I need to build a machine. A machine that could calculate happiness. And with that machine put in all people's hopes, aspirations, and dreams, and quantify how content life would be, and decide, once and for all, how to live my life. I guess though that is the paradox of life, isn't it. You never quite know how happy you'll be, or could've been, until your life is over. Or, maybe, I just have to give this whole thing some more thought.

HENRY KREX '24

RANDALL

My memory has faded over the years. Looking back, most of my life is seen in short windows of foggytime as I fall asleep, or travel from Manhattan to Brooklyn on the M train. I've developed this habit of keeping a record, scribbling down random thoughts in a yellow dog-eared notebook, slowly piecing it all together. For a time, I couldn't even recall Randall, Wilson, or Cassie, or any of the other eccentrics, living with me in that madhouse in Garrison. And yes, undoubtedly cigarettes and alcohol haven't helped. I know this. But my notebook works just fine, capturing glimpses of the past, always at the ready in my suit coat. The following is what I have. More or less.

\*\*\*

I spent most of the time in my room, counting, recounting, restoring, dusting and cataloging my collection of archeological wonders. Above my bed, I had eighteen thick leather notebooks; six for continents not including Antarctica, three for primary colors, four for decades, and five miscellaneous, for things like rugs, tapestries, ceramics, fossils, flowers, and unusual works of art.

The day before Randall arrived, I surveyed some of the most recent acquisitions. There were the deep red cartouches, a fragment of a rare Persian carpet, and aged wooden vessels of carved monkeys and turtles. A Japanese screen with two fierce eagles, one black, one white. Above the antique yellow Sienna marble fireplace, rested an early Matisse, a simple sunflower in an orange vase next to an indigo kimono below bluebirds painted on celadon wallpaper. Each book on the leopard-wood shelf, leather-bound, its title stenciled in gold. Masks from India, Japan, Africa, and Greece hung on silver nails beside my thick oak door.

I sank into the heavily quilted silk comforter atop the deep mattress placed on the floor, following the italicizing light, radiating through sheer green curtains. I listened to the Beatles's "Norwegian Wood" playing from an overhead speaker.

Downstairs, Alex threw a one pound ball of porcelain on the gramophone, turning it to 78 rpm. He created a small cylindrical form, then crushed it in his hands to start again. His next shape was a moon jar. In the

adjoining room, Cassie, perched on a barstool, launched the music into the intercom.

Margot watched Wilson and Brindle from a corner chair in the living room. She had recently returned to Garrison after two years in the Peruvian rainforest, studying the marvelous spatuletail. A world-recognized ornithologist, she was dissertating on the miraculous ability of hummingbirds to convey happiness. Wilson had struggled with mental illness his whole life before landing in a state hospital. He was an exceptionally caring and quiet individual, making him perfect for Margot's studies. He worked on his paintings all day, Brindle on his shoulder, conversing with her in between brushstrokes.

Each night, the five of us convened for dinner in the enormous square dining hall, known as  $\pi r$  square, reviewing the day's work.

"I cogitated," I announced.

"I listened," Cassie said, "The Beatles."

"Oh yes, I listened too," I told Cassie

Alex went next. "The gramophone works well for pottery. And the rat traps were empty, so the real wheel's wire must've just been old. I think I'll stick with the gramophone for a while though. It gives my work a certain quality." In reality, Wilson had rigged the traps so they wouldn't go off.

"No more traps," Wilson said. "Anyway, I started a portrait of Brindle. I think I might even finish it this time." The bird heard her name, and looked down at his face from the top of his messy hair. "Hey buddy," Wilson said. His paintings were rarely completed.

Margot was last. "I'm making good progress, don't you think, Wilson?"

"Oh yes. Brindle here is the best thing that's ever happened to me."

We did this every night, a recap of the day's events, then we ate dinner slowly, until 9:00 PM.

"Well everybody," I said. "As you all know, we will have a guest joining us tomorrow. Randall, a playwright," And with that, we dispersed to our rooms.

\*\*\*

Randall arrived an hour ahead of schedule, banging on the front door with his heavy silver skull-and-bone rings. He had a worn alligator briefcase and a small gold pocket watch that dangled from his bright green velvet vest. He wore high waisted pleated trousers, and a dark black leather jacket, cropped at his belly-button.

"I'm Randall," he announced, standing in the doorway. Alex looked him up and down. The newcomer's long cheekbones stretched his pallid skin, producing distinct shadows, straddling a small pointy nose. He had a low hairline, shiny jet black hair jutting out in all directions. He was tall and extremely thin.

Alex peered into his black eyes. "I'm Alex, nice to meet you". He reached out to shake his hand. Randall's skeletal fingers were cold, dry, bony, as expected.

"Nice to meet you too," he said with a tight smile.

"Well, now that we have gotten introductions over with, follow me. I'll show you to your room." Alex said, and started down the wide hallway. "Is that all you brought?" he asked.

"Well, yes, that's all I'll need. I'm very clean."

They arrived at the living room, with Brindle, Wilson, and Margot.

"Meet Randall, everyone." Alex said. Wilson smiled and waved. Brindle tweeted. Margot got up and shook his hand.

\*\*\*

Randall wasn't heard from for four days. But he left evidence that he was there, like all the loose change in the house going missing and the dirty dishes piled in the kitchen sink.

On the fifth night of his arrival, Randall appeared at dinner.

"Hello there!" I said, sitting at the head of the table.

"Hello everyone," Randall bellowed.

"It's nice to see you"

"And you too, Monty"

Alex chimed in, "Nice to see you out of your room!"

"Thank you."

Margot went next, "Feeling ok? Need a bird for company?"

"No, thank you, Maggie."

"Hello," Wilson said quietly with a smile.

"So, tell us something we don't know about you, Randall!" I said.

"Where to start?"

Randall crossed his legs, and rested his chin on his fist.

"Well, where were you born?" asked Alex, trying to spark conversation. Randall put his hand up, shaking his head.

"I assume it was a rhetorical question," he said, "But really, I was born in the passenger seat of a '44 Triumph Roadster. Mom and Dad were on the homestretch of the Cannonball Run, and they were on pace. They couldn't stop; after all, they had gone so far! They couldn't throw the opportunity away! It was somewhere in between Texas and California where they ended up beating the old record, so we enjoyed a brief period of stardom! They called me the 'crazy cackler'; I guess I just couldn't stop laughing. When we were lifted onto the shoulders of our fans, I laughed hysterically, high-fiving everyone in sight! Truly, I found everything hilarious.

When our fame wore off, we toured the country until I finally left school at sixteen to make money. Y'know, odd jobs and other stuff. Mostly just stuff! Then, I moved to Punxsutawny, and lived there for about ten years. I was President of the Punxsutawney Groundhog Club. But, as you may have heard, I ran into some trouble and had to skip town."

"Trouble?"

"No big deal."

"No, tell us!" I insisted.

"See, groundhogs are pretty small. And I, being the leader of the club, was in charge of keeping Phil until the upcoming February. Simultaneously, I was dealing with an infestation of Belgian rats. One thing led to another, and I had to shoot Phil. The locals got real mad, and drove me out of town mob-style. You would have thought I was a witch in seventeenth century Salem."

"Killed Punxsutawney Phil! That was you?" Margot exclaimed.

"Allegedly."

"You just admitted..." Margot started.

"Allegedly admitted,"

"But you just..."

"Nope. Nope. Was anyone recording? I think not. I think it's time we put this conversation to bed. Is anyone going to ask me what I was doing for those four days?"

I obliged. "Has your time been productive?"

"Well, to be honest, no. My plays have come to a grinding halt.

Wilson excused himself to use the bathroom. Randall continued,

"I am afraid that my inspiration has dried up. I don't know what to do."

Alex looked concerned. "Well, writer's block is a normal thing..."



"No!" Randall yelled "This is not just writer's block, this is writer's blockade! I think no more than my fingernails! I have lost it."

"Maybe you can write about that groundhog..." Alex said

"No! Useless! I tried confessing in plays...Doesn't work!"

I gave him a try "Well, be patient. You might find yourself-"

"No, no, no! You don't understand! This is the end!"

\*\*\*

That night, Wilson noticed something in Randall's room when he went to the bathroom. He could no longer see the hardwood floor under all the crumpled paper and ink-stained blotches on the walls. All the loose change that had gone missing was in a Vesuvius on his desk, his bed untouched. Wilson ventured into Randall's cave-like dwelling, tiptoeing onto the small islands between paper. He unfurled a few pieces. One read, "Once there was a..." followed by scribbles. Another read, "Jon ate at the Bernstein Inn that morning," followed by more scribbles. Suddenly, from downstairs he heard Randall's cry of desperation, and rushed to console him.

\*\*\*

Over the next few weeks, Randall joined the community of artists. He attended daily dinners, participated in group activities, but was never seen working.

After three months of this, he announced that he had finished a play. A reading of it was to be held the next week, as he revised it.

"See? We told you!" I said.

"Yes, yes, you did. I rediscovered my inspiration. To take a line from the bard, "So on your patience evermore attending, New joy wait on you."

Wilson clapped.

\*\*\*

"Thank you everyone for being here today," Randall said, adding, "Wilson, you'll be Oscar. Cassie, you'll be Ruth. Monty, you'll be Bruce. I'll narrate."

"We open on a small coffee shop in a dense city. Oscar, the main character, orders his usual: a small drip with room for milk and a blueberry-saffron muffin. He orders it with a crooked look on his face," Wilson awkwardly smiled, looking to Randall for approval. "Good try," Randall said, dripping with sarcasm. "He waits in the back corner of the shop, attempting to keep his overgrown hair out of his eyes, watching Bruce weigh his coffee beans, and after grinding them, pouring them out into the filter. He taps the beans smooth, and pours boiling water atop them, thin wisps of steam rising up from

his cup. Bruce grabs his muffin with a piece of parchment, setting it onto a small, white plate,” Randall looked over to me.

“Oscar! Come here!” I as Bruce read. I lowered my voice and puffed up my chest with my words, mimicking how I thought a Bruce would sound. Randall jumped up.

“You’re doing it wrong. Stop, just stop!” Randall said with a sigh, shaking his head, but continued giving stage direction, “Oscar gets up to get his food.”

“Thank you, Bruce.” Wilson said, in as normal a voice as possible.

“No problem, bud. Howrya doing?” Bruce said.

“I’m doing. Y’know.”

Oscar responded, “I’ll see you tomorrow, same time, same place.”

“Oscar leaves the coffee shop, and walks up the block to his office building,” Randall said. “He steps into the fluorescent-lit elevator.

“Margot, you wanna be the unnamed person? You talk a lot, this role is perfect for you.” Margot reluctantly accepted after such praise.

“Ohheyman.Howryadoin?” Margot said in a quick wrinkly voice. Randall stopped them again.

“No artistic liberty! Just read the script!” he screamed, messing up his hair from shaking his head. He collected himself. “Inca, a woman in her thirties, her shirt is dirty, hair unwashed, jutting up and down, right and left like a sixteen point star. Her forearms are thin, bruised. Read!”

Slowly, Margot began to read:

“ImnotdoinsowellmyselfseeIwokeupreallyearlylyandmybossgotmadatme  
forsleepingattheofficenowImcompletelyfreakinoutyouknowand  
bouncingoffdawalls?”

ButanywayhowsdawifeGoodGood.Mylovelifessortasufferingrightab  
outnow.IjustnevercangettowhereIwannabeyaknow”

Margot’s voice was as flat as she could make it.

Providing additional instruction Randall directed, “On the seventeenth floor, Oscar gets out, without responding to the junkie. He says hello to the security guard.”

“Hey Cheryl,” I said, as Oscar.

Randall added, “Oscar proceeds to walk up to his desk, looking at the picture of his parents under the computer monitor, and the many reminders on scraps of newspaper. He looks at his mailbox, overflowing with useless memos. Oscar doesn’t stop at his desk. He circles his office until 5:00 PM. As the set

changes, actors appear on stage, portraying the lives of Oscars descendants. No dialogue! So everyone, shut up!"

Randall continued in a frenetic voice, "On May 14, 2043, leaving his father's funeral, Owen lights a cigarette as he walks toward his tan '23 Porsche 911. He jumps over the window, through the open convertible, and speeds off. He lives a solitary life in the Hudson Valley fields, reading John Burroughs, and writing his memoir. He naps in the midday sun most days, his head lying in the lamb's ears, while Chickadees come to visit. Their obsidian eyes, with tiny, reflective circles stare admiringly at their human friend. Owen's sister, Angelina, would go on to be a notoriously disgraced ornithologist...She had lived in the Peruvian rainforest since the time she was 15, up until she was attacked by a condor at forty-five. At forty-six, she opened a cheap chain of hotels and destroyed twenty-five percent of virginal Peruvian land."

"I would never do that! What the hell!" Margot objected.

"It's fictional, you mountain goat!" Randall screamed, and started again, unfazed.

"Oscar's four grandchildren are Nemo, Orange, Issac, and Jhonson. Nemo and Orange are the sons of Owen. Orange lived out west, and robbed trains like criminals from the nineteenth century. He rode on horseback, blew up the trains with dynamite, and stole whatever was on board. He once even got his hands on nitroglycerin.

Nemo figured out a way to perfect his axe throwing using slide rule logarithms, making it big in reality TV. Issac and Jhonson were the sons of Angelina the disgraced ornithologist. The last living member of the Nelson family, Oscar's great great great great great grandchild was a race car track builder. He died in a blaze."

Wilson interjected. "Woah."

Cassie added, "Holy crap! This is crazy. Nuts!"

"No more talking. Just shut up. All of you." He cursed them under his breath.

"Okay, listen up! We open back in the same coffee shop, a different day denoted by different customers. Oscar orders his usual. Oscar and Bruce exchange words."

"Hello, howrya doing?" Wilson as Oscar said.

"Doing well, how about yourself?" I, as Bruce, replied.

"Doin' well." Wilson as Oscar said.

“Oscar eats his breakfast slowly. As he leaves, a sock full of quarters and nickels swing around the doorframe, breaking his jaw. Bloody, he falls to the ground, his attackers running from the scene. People jump up from inside the coffee shop, but they can’t provide much help. “Is there a doctor here....” Oscar drifts out of consciousness.

“He wakes up in the hospital a few hours later, a cup of neon Jell-O at his right. He reaches for it, before realizing that his jaw has been wired shut. He laughs.”

“A year later, he returns to the coffee shop with an incendiary device. He watches the shop burn to the ground. He enters his office, taking the elevator up alone this time. Getting to his desk, he throws a match into his overflowing bin of messages. The office, a conflagration, as Oscar leaves. The curtain falls.”

Silence as the play’s last words were spoken. Everyone was stunned, their mouths hanging open.

“Wow,” Cassie said. I laughed, leaning back, thinking. The silence was ended by Randall, abruptly getting up and snatching the scripts.

\*\*\*

The next morning, Randall was gone. I awoke early, surprised to find that I was now in a sleeping bag in an empty room. I raced downstairs only to discover Wilson’s defaced paintings and Margot’s binders of notes, burned, a mountain of ash in the corner of the living room. At the opposite end, Cassie’s records were shattered, and the gramophone’s wire, severed.

Randall left his room in shambles, his plays littering the floor. Out of the mess a document emerged which read:

*This is not the scribbling of a madman. Fifteen years ago, thinking I was about to die, I asked my family for eight things: fifteen thousand dollars, a capuchin monkey, a moon rock, orange shoelaces, fake eyelashes, a tsanta, and an urn decorated with cobalt patterns. All I received was the orange shoelaces, given to me off my nephew’s Nikes. They were filthy, covered in mud and stains of an unknown origin. I honestly didn’t really care, though. It was only a test. They failed miserably. I left them soon after, saying “you’ve all been a horrific disappointment”. Perhaps they thought I had some peaceful death, and my soul quietly slipped out of my body and made its way wherever it was supposed to go. They probably thought I’d go right to hell, but I never bought into that whole religion thing. But, I imagine*

*these idiots all closed their eyes and started praying, even though I knew they hoped in their heart of hearts I'd be loitering around Hades already. I just slipped out of bed while my halfwit relatives were distracted, murmuring some incoherent nonsense. This is when I started writing plays. I changed my name from Cosmo Coranado to just plain Randall, like Picasso, and moved to Punxsutawney. It was there where I crafted my new life and experienced that whole groundhog fiasco. And now, once again, I'm off to speed down life's highway.*

It was signed Dave.

## THE PODIATRIST

The waiting room of the podiatrist's office was notably drab. It seemed everything matched heavily-stained beige. The plush chairs were deceptively uncomfortable, each having an oval section where a yellowing plastic slip-cover had been stretched by portly patients over the years. A ceiling fan within a paint-chipped light fixture vibrated, producing a strobe-like effect, irritating Leslie beyond belief. But it was the cloying smell of hand sanitizer that catapulted him over the edge. Normally, he wouldn't have minded; however, after recent events, the scent of alcohol made him gag.

Leslie sat quietly, averting his gaze to avoid the possibility of any human contact. Recently, he read that psilocybin mushrooms were a life-changer. He bought one, ate it, and by nightfall was locked in the bathroom, staring at rectangular porcelain tiles with not a single thought in his head. Leslie was not proud of himself. But here he was at the podiatrist's, he thought, one step closer to salvation.

About six years back on a drunken binge, he embedded a small fake diamond in the sole of his foot. In his mind, this was the best way of attracting the attention of Maya Potter, the girl who he'd been in love with since middle school; coincidentally, the same one who had caused his subsequent downward spiral. But after sewing his foot shut and sloshing a disinfecting shot of vodka over it, she was already off with someone else. That night, Leslie's friends cared for him as he wept in their arms until sunrise. His foot healed slowly, although now he walks with a slight limp.

Leslie learned nothing from the experience. Three months later, downing a fifth of gin, he leaped from a second story pool hall window aiming for the back of a moving Ford pickup. He missed, and spent three months in Pawtucket City Jail, after a ten-day stay at Middletown Psychiatric Hospital. Again, Leslie learned nothing good from the experience.

From behind, a woman suddenly walked into the claustrophobic waiting room. In her forties, she appeared friendly. Leslie shriveled himself.

"Hey there!" She said with a kind smile. Leslie didn't respond. Remarkably, she saw something appealing in him. "One of those days, huh? I get it. Take your time. It'll all be okay." Leslie's breathing slowed. Drawn to the warm words, he carefully looked up at her, puzzled. "I'm Wanda," she said.

Leslie's gaze remained unchanged. "Y'know, it's rude to stare. Especially if you don't respond! And, hey, weird too!"

"L-Leslie. Leslie H. Jordan. M-my name," he spit out.

"What a grand name you have, Leslie! That was my grandfather's name. I was considering it for this little guy here," pointing to her stomach. Leslie hadn't noticed she was pregnant.

"Oh, thanks!"

"My three others are all named after my grandparents. One's about your age, how old are you, twenty-two?"

"Twenty-three"

"My Maya is your age. Then there's Edith, nineteen, and Walter, he's twelve. But enough about me. Tell me about you, Leslie?"

"Oh um..." he trailed off.

"Hobbies?" she probed. He thought hard. He used to love sports. "Scratch that. I know, some of us just like to live! I'm a big baseball fan myself. GO YANKEES!"

"Baseball?" Leslie perked up, "I used to love..." he spoke fast now, "I was super, I mean really good I was a right fielder—"

"Wanda?" the receptionist called.

"That's me! Gotta go! Nice meeting you, Leslie"

"Oh, um, okay bye Wanda. Good luck with the baby."

"Thanks hun." She took a few steps toward the examining room. Leslie returned to sitting as small as he could, eyes down.

Looking back at him, she said, "Y'know," pointing to her belly, "I may name this kid Leslie!"

"Are you kidding?" he called out in disbelief. Leslie had never had anyone named after him.

\*\*\*

On Saturday morning, Leslie picked up a lion costume at Friendly Felines, Cranston's popular birthday party store. There, he met with Glen Winter, the owner at around nine, so he would be ready for Lenny Funk, a six-year-old, at whose birthday party he would play 'Leslie the Lion'. At least he got paid well, he thought to himself!

The next day, Leslie sat in Washington Square Park, listening to the ska-funk buskers playing under the arch. Browsing the classifieds, he read, 'Wanted, Window-washer. Experience needed.' Another stated, "Highly

motivated and skilled movers needed for exceptionally challenging job.” Although Leslie could handle the acting out of six-year-olds like nobody’s business, he had not been more than a party animal since finishing high school. Leslie fit none of the ads that he read, except for the one that launched his career. “Brighten someone’s day, play a Lion for a child’s birthday party!”

\*\*\*

Leslie looked down at his Timex, a chronograph that he just started regularly wearing. He got up from the park bench and slipped a five dollar bill into the musician’s open case, heading toward breakfast. The girl he was meeting sat in the back corner of the shop, waving at him when he walked in.

“I see your limp is gone,” she said smiling.

“Yeah,” he chuckled, “Just went away about a week and a bit ago. I went to the podiatrist, he was going to have me do all this surgery and stuff. But then it just disappeared.”

“I heard about that. She loved you, by the way”

“Really? I’m embarrassed, I can’t believe I didn’t recognize your mom. I wasn’t exactly colorful.”

“Hey, she didn’t recognize you either,” she paused, “And besides, where have you been for the last five years?”

“I know, that’s why I asked you here today. I just need to apologize...I’m better now.”

Maya smiled, “All better? Just like that?”

“Yup, just like that,” Leslie assured.



## THE LONG-NECKED GUITAR

“**Y**ou, my friend, have a Habsburg jaw,” she called out from the second-floor window. Standing on slate pavers, I heard her bounding down the stairs. The upper section of the Dutch door flung open, a young gap-toothed man in overalls standing behind her. Turning back to him, she said, “That fella has some serious prognathism issues, doesn’t he?” He shook his head so hard it sent waves through his body.

No one had ever commented on the structure of my jaw before. I don’t think I have a Habsburg jaw. Don’t now. Never did!

The elderly woman invited me in. “Like some tea, Habsburg?” a small ginger-haired boy asked, suddenly appearing from nowhere.

“Leave him be, Willy!” she snapped, the child slipping back into the shadows. “Y’know the Habsburgs, Habsburg?”

“Heard of ’em,” I answered.

“They ruled for some eight hundred years! The last one, Charles the Bewitched—why, he was even uglier than Willy! Dumb as a doorknob too! His mother was his cousin. That family was all sorts of messed up. Ain’t nothing new to you though! Your family must be no different, huh?”

“Not that I know,” I responded, adding, “no incest in my family!”

“If you say so. The attic is upstairs. Shall we?” she pointed toward a dilapidated staircase. It had spaces for maybe forty steps, but there were only a handful that appeared stable. Time had not been kind to the place. Sensing my trepidation, she suggested taking the small wood-paneled elevator. I was only a tad bit suicidal, so I told her the stairs would be fine. If I were of sound mind, I never would have entered.

Before leaping to the first step, she flashed a gummy smile. The few teeth I saw were gold. “Step where I step, that’s essential!”

On the ninth step of the perilous climb was the gap-toothed man shoving by, but then falling through on the thirteenth step. He dropped into a small chamber below the steps that followed the shape of the stairs’ footprint, descending a couple feet below the floor line. You could tell where the floor was because of the air vents, which casted shadows like floating bars onto the bottom of the chamber.

“Shouldn’t’ve run.” the old lady said without batting an eye.

I understand now why the man was so eager to get upstairs. On the top floor there were deep piles of dust, so I imagine no one had been up there since before he was born.

There was a diamond-paned window on the far side of the room; below it black leather and silver buckles, a normal guitar case, but for its accommodation for the long neck.

I was told it had last been played by the Beatles during the Revolver era, but since then it had gone missing. Some said it was at least fifty years old; others, five hundred. But here it was in front of me in a ramshackle on the verge of collapse.

“Enjoy,” the woman said unenthusiastically, leaving me to the attic. “No need to open the case. The guitar’s there.”

I nodded. “The hum?”

“Don’t worry about it, it’s the wood. Very resonant.”

Scattered on the floor like toys in a playroom were canopic jars and ornate mirrors, obscure silver utensils and disintegrating rare books. Giuseppe Arcimboldo’s vegetable faces looked out from the short slanted walls. While the doubloons were intriguing, I wasn’t here for them, I was here for the guitar. As I struggled down the stairs, finally making it outside, Willy called out from the living room,

“Watch out for the bees!”

\*\*\*

In order to fit into my Caprice, the neck of the instrument had to jut out from the open convertible top. Luckily, South County’s roads were desolate. I pulled into the parking lot of my decrepit motel. Once in my room, I slid the bronze key into the lock, and undid the case’s buckles. Opening it, I exposed the guitar’s brilliant burl cypress, the low hum which I heard before, now unmistakable. Seconds later, a swarm of bees erupted from the sound hole, buzzing around the motel room. I flung open the door, bees flared into the parking lot, dispersing across the deserted highway. They left me with one sting, and a chunk of petrified honeycomb in the case.

The next day, I ventured back out onto the country roads, taking a left off the highway onto a windy dirt path that ran along a wooded creek. Grant Miller lived in an Airstream on a small island that could be reached by wading through a shallow stream. When I arrived, he was fly fishing.

“Look at that eddy! Gonna be eating well tonight!” he whooped. “Ezra?”

"And you must be Grant! Great to finally meet you!"

"Yeah, I'm so happy you called. Haven't seen that instrument in years! Y'know, I sorta thought it was lost in a house fire or something. Just gone altogether."

"I think we all did."

"It wasn't too far from here, right?"

"Yup, it was in the attic of this crazy house. The owners kept talking about the Habsburgs, and there was all this crazy stuff up there. Millions of dollars of art! And they just handed me the guitar! Glad I read Craigslist!"

"Jeez, Lucky you! People out here get insane about their personal property. If it was the wrong person you'd be outta luck! We'd be outta luck!"

"Well, Shall we?" I asked, motioning to my car.

"Yeah, why not!" he responded, putting his gear away and walking over to me. As he rounded the corner to the driveway, he gasped, falling to his knee, "Sorry, I just never thought I'd see it again." He got up and ran to the neck, "Grab the body, will you?" he asked.

We lay the case down on the gravel path, unlocking it with the key taped to the top.

"Magnificent," Grant said. It really was. "Hey, if it's all right with you, I have some friends who know how to play. Could we strum it for a bit?" he asked.

"Not goin' nowhere!" I answered.

"Great! Let's pack this up for now until they get here. In the meantime, want some tea?"

What was with this weird town and their tea? I first arrived in Omsie, Rhode Island, a town famous for only one thing, or person, really. Frederick Dunst, the inventor of the Onsie. The name of his town played a slight part in his branding. So, this was all I came up with on the internet, after searching the second, third and fourth Google page for information. I understood its allure immediately. This was a secluded East Coast town where long-necked guitars could hide. Blue and pink flowers in early spring, chipmunks and maple trees. Lavender in summer, Sunflowers in the fall. Quiet, functional cars, Chevys and Fords, with slight dents and chipped paint. Cigarettes on stained lips, weathered bodies and brilliant bright sunlight. And I guess everyone loves tea too. But, I must say, the tea was good. Almost made me wish I accepted it back when that redhead offered me some.

"So here's the trick," he said, "Before sinkin' the tea bag, just lightly dunk it in the water. Take a good six or seven heaping spoons of sugar, and spread it out on a plate to coat the tea. Drag the teabag back and forth, yup, there! Now, dunk it in the tea, sink it and let it steep. Ok, now I'm not playing games. This is where your tea rises to an inspirational level. Take the sugar plate, pour it in the tea, and boom! The greatest tea you've ever had.

So, whaddya think?"

"Fantastic," I nodded, slurping down my first cup.

\*\*\*

I spoke with Grant for a long time over tea. Politics, the environment, gravity, the molecular composition of glass, A/C, Treasure Island, and James Dyson. He was very passionate about James Dyson.

"This guy James Dyson, a genius! I mean, think about it, bladeless fan? What kind of gypsy trick is that!"

But then his friends arrived, a portly band of hairy, flannel-wearing men with deep voices that filled rooms.

"Are you the guy who got the guitar?" one of them asked me.

"Well obviously, Jay!" another responded, adding a swift pat on the back of Jay's head.

"Just harmless smalltalk. I did know it was him, I just didn't wanna assume! Ignore my rude friend," he turned to me, "Gotta name?"

"Ezra."

"Well, Ezra, where's the guitar?" I motioned toward the sitting room.

"We gotta be careful. Last time I opened the case—a swarm of bees! Didn't sting, though. Well one did. Didn't hurt. Used to think I was allergic but I guess not! But it didn't happen when I opened it again with Grant, so we should be OK."

"You didn't tell me about no bees! Uh-uh I don't do bees, Ezra"

"Shut up Grant," the three men said in unison.

I knelt down on the wide oak floor, undoing the clasps. When I exposed the guitar, the fretboard startled me. Hundreds, maybe thousands of geese-like creatures not a half-inch tall lined up on the neck, poised to leap into the sound hole. As the little creatures noticed us, they flew up and out the window.

"A miracle!" Grant said.

Bathed in sunlight, the four played Chopin's Nocturne No. 1 in B-flat minor, outside on the lawn. I had never witnessed such skill. We had all

watched the grainy footage of the Beatles, but as they had just been introduced to the instrument, the performance was novel, but definitely not up to their talent. The guitar posed a particular challenge, as it required an intimidating demonstration of teamwork, four men working together to create a single sound. Like a well-oiled machine, Grant and his friends produced a rare, empathetic sound, each one feeling the music more than the next. Empathy cascading from the notes, overtaking me. I was a fan of Chopin, but never felt the music so deeply as when played on the long-necked guitar.

\*\*\*

Change of scene. I'm now in my parents' house, the top floor of a peach triple-decker outside of Providence. Although the sounds of 1-95, motorcycle engines, and loud neighbors could sometimes be too much, the place had a certain charm. Especially during the summer. Not much beats a Rhode Island summer!

As kids, in the sweltering heat, we followed the old factory railroad tracks, discovering a whole network of buildings that, from its boarded up exterior, looked abandoned. Thousands of pounds of steel and old lumber, with a door that was rotting. These buildings were our playgrounds, there was no concern then for looming danger.

But not quite everything is as it seems. One August evening I remember well, could have been one of the scariest, or even the last of my adventures. We had seen homeless people living in these buildings; we left them alone, they left us alone. One day, in our brazen teenage world, a strange guitar case caught our eyes. We saw the owner sound asleep. I had a pretty nice guitar at the time, I had saved up a few years of my birthday and Christmas money to buy it. So it was a fair trade for what I thought it was, really. When I first opened the case, it was filled to the brim with tiny, bright green frogs. For a moment I thought I had just thrown away my wonderful guitar. But then the chaos gave way and I saw the spiraling amber cypress, the delicately crafted copper frets. I immediately realized what I had done, and I rushed back to the building where I found it to pay the man. But in the spot where I took it, there were only scraps of wood, and signs of a hasty exit.

But the long-necked guitar was gone when I got back to my room. My mom had been in the kitchen the whole time I was away, and said that she heard nothing. Since then, I have been obsessed with this instrument, and I tracked it from Providence to Saigon, to Liverpool until it eventually went dark

about a dozen years ago. Then, the unexpected Craigslist ad, from the boonies of southern Rhode Island.

\*\*\*

My life was different after the destruction of the long-necked guitar. After Chopin on the field, a bear crawled out of a nearby bush, bolting towards the guitar, stealing, and smashing it. It then turned to us, but in the time it took to destroy the instrument, Grant had grabbed bear spray. It worked. I cried.

Now the guitar is gone. The stories, the folklore, all in chips mixed into the half-dead grass. The next day was stormy, and the small pieces were all blown away or buried. I returned to my parents' house.

Empty now, they have been gone for seven years. I slept in their bed, and I thought back to when I would sneak under their covers after a bad dream, snuggling up for comfort. That's what this whole thing was—a nightmare! The idea of finding that guitar was something I needed during my tumultuous teenage and early adult years. It was a necessary distraction, but now all that is gone.

The good news is I will leave Butler Hospital in just two days. It's been good for me. In the previous year I have all but gone completely mad, because without the guitar I had to face my worst fears head on. I couldn't handle it then.

But I'm all right now.

## POPPY

Sometimes all one needs in life is a horticulturalist's ten cents on flowers. This may be applicable to you, depending on whether you need advice, or know a horticulturalist. If you don't, I have a great one: the remarkable Marcel Dupont, a real Nobel prize-worthy genius, a judgment not solely based on what happened the last time I saw him.

\*\*\*

After a hard week, I looked at the long dog-eared list tacked to the wall across from my brass bed.

PEOPLE I NEED TO SEE TO SOLVE ALL LIFE'S PROBLEMS:

PSYCHIATRIST

PODIATRIST

OPTOMETRIST

PALEONTOLOGIST

BOTANIST

STRATEGIST

CAPITALIST

HORTICULTURIST

The following week, after our brief meeting, I made one edit to the list, HORTICULTURALIST MAYBE? But all the other -ists were no help at all.

The night immediately following my meeting with Dr. Dupont, I thought about his advice for a long time. From my roof garden, sipping orange juice, I could see the city's cricket rink. The lights transfixed, the sky, purple, with Icarus clouds darting through. But was it more breathtaking than a poppy?

Dr. Dupont's advice, like many of the other ones, was mostly useless, except for this:

"Well, if you want, I can offer my go-to way to cheer myself up. But that's as a friend, not as a doctor. We clear? I just kick back and enjoy nature, y'know. Especially poppies, my favorite. They just make me happy. Just flip on some Joni Mitchell and bask in a poppy field!"

I didn't think Dr. Dupont was crazy, so, I assumed there was something to what he was saying. As a man of science I hypothesized, and carried out an

experiment. I collected volunteers from craigslist, and in my apartment planted hundreds of varieties of poppies in every space possible. Then I brought the participants into my home twice, both times, blindfolded. One was before I got the poppies, one after. The results were conclusive. Fifty-four sensed that the poppies were there, Forty-six thought they weren't. Pretty good!

I was elated to deliver the news to my favorite horticulturist, Dr. Dupont, immediately. I ran to his office with my findings in my hand all the way across town to his office, yelling, "I found it, doc! The poppies! You were right! They do make you happy!"

"Yeah? Just like I said?"

Then I really gave it to him. I slammed my data on his desk.

"Boom."

"What? Ok..? Ok Ah great" Doc said, stumbling all over himself. "Listen, you gotta get outta here you don't have an appointment."

"No prob, Doc. One last thing though. Just between me and you, you are a genius for the flower thing. No one was even studying if flowers can somehow positively interfere with brain chemistry. And it's so rare, only my trained eye could spot it!"

"Ok man. See you later. Bye!"

As I left, I sensed that Dr. Dupont was off in some way. The former me would've blamed myself, but I know after two years of successful therapy that I can't control the emotions of others. So maybe he woke up on the wrong side of the bed. But I was still sad, as I wish he was happy, even if I can't control it. So I took a page out of his playbook and put on some Joni Mitchell, and relaxed surrounded by, what else, poppies. It was really cool. I hoped he was doing the same thing. I'm not sure which Joni Mitchell tracks he listened to, but I imagine the 1976 album 'Hejira'. The two paired together just made sense, so that's what I chose.

\*\*\*

Two weeks later, and curiously, my Alzheimer-riddled parrot, Octavious, predicted the next twist in Doc Dupont's saga. In a broken, tinny voice, he blurted,

"It had skinnish fingers fashioned out of droplet shaped saplings. 'Stop your humming and mumming.' The speak he spoke was just as entertaining as kitty cat on the baseball diamond! You 'member that! But suuuuuuure the skinnish fingers were red as a hood delivering cookies to grandma. Why did it



look like the Tin Man? Wizard of Oz! The next thing was, those skinnish fingers un-did this fantastically tied Gordian-like knot, with twitch speed. Its attach-ee was origami. No! So I look away.”

I have learned the trick of translating the bird’s language into English, as he learned to speak from me. I deciphered that he was telling me that Dr. Dupont was a psycho, and he had been poisoning people all around the neighborhood for decades. But of course, Dr. Dupont was a sweetheart, and some talking turkey was not going to get me changing my mind!

\*\*\*

Oscar looked down at his chewed fingers, turning white and near blue beneath the single lime-hued fluorescent bulb. Skin clung to his bones like burlap on potatoes, it had been five days since he had fallen ill. Since then, his reflection in car windows had withered, turning pale and desolate. He lay on the floor of a public park bathroom, but neither the smell nor the sticky bacteria-laden floor bothered him. His condition had been growing steadily worse ever since the stomach ache that first appeared out of the blue last week. He sought help, but most thought of him as just another dope-sick junkie, which, this time, he was not. He had ruled out that it was something he ate; that day—all he had had was a handful of raspberries that he pilfered from the front yard of a blue house on Sycamore Street. Nevertheless, here he was, crapping his brains out in a public bathroom.

\*\*\*

I can still remember the first time I heard Dr. Dupont’s name, shouted to me through my car window. At the time, Doc was in some hot water, narrowly missing life in prison with a lucky mistrial ruling. I was stopped at a red light, a little kid approaching my window with a “Hang Dupont!” shirt on. I rolled it down, and the kid let his enormous voice loose inside the car, making my ears ring when he said the slogan on his shirt. But the kid said it so loud that I misheard him. All I heard was “Ring Dupont!”. I knew the name Dupont, I had seen it on posters at bus stops. I didn’t know what he had done though, or even if he was convicted. But the kid seemed all right. As soon as I got back home, I looked back to the old list I had put up, to solve my problems. I added a horticulturist.

Perhaps it was a sign! Soon my house was filled with poppies at his recommendation, and I can truthfully say, my life has never been better. I have also been spending more time with Dupont, we have dinner together every

Sunday. He's become a real friend. One thing that annoys me, though, is whenever we are together in public, we get all sorts of dirty looks. Not sure why. But now I must stop writing, as Dupont just arrived with a basket of raspberries from his Victorian blue house on Sycamore Street.

## ALISTER SOOT

Between the banks of the sea and the foot of the mountain is a statue of Alister Soot atop the church spire in the center of town. No, Alister was not a religious figure. He was arrogant, and when he departed, demanded that his likeness be observed from the highest point, cast in bronze, to be the first one seen by travelers climbing the mountain. He left before he realized it was the church, heading off to find the mystery woman who had sent him a barrage of letters years ago. But abruptly, after many months of notes and poems and recounts of her life's adventures, the letters ceased in the middle of a story about two Asian elephants who had fallen in love. At first Alister was awfully flippant about the end of his relationship, but eventually let his facade slip that, in fact, he had become smitten with the writer. However, while he was still receiving them, he made no effort whatsoever to write back. He just left abruptly one day, leaving his poor mother, Joni, weeping below the church steps, underneath the foundation of her son's monument where she remained. It troubled the townspeople to see her this way; before, most Mondays, Thursdays, and Fridays she could be seen handing out homemade empanadas to the less fortunate. Now, patchy gray hairs coil from her scalp while vultures watch her from above her son's statue.

Joni's nephew Humphrey had been taking care of her. He previously worked in the back of his neighbor Etta's diner, a diner so popular it had driven all other businesses out of town. Every now and then a stranger would arrive, making some silly attempt to open a restaurant, leaving not long after as a laughing stock. None beat Humphrey's cooking. But now he spent all his time cooking for his mother, leaving her fresh baked rolls and butter, and canteens of water and coffee at eight AM sharp every day. Lunch and dinner were never later than noon and five, and never the same. He promised the town to return to Etta's when his aunt was back on her feet, but her condition made no improvement.

The patriarch of the family, Fedder, a skinny, lonely man, started to wander around the time of his son's disappearance. It was at first the cobbler, who had repeatedly seen him walking head first into the Corinthian columns of a mausoleum in the cemetery while visiting the grave of Arnita, the cobbler's daughter, who had died of cholera the year before. Fedder and Arnita had been

good friends before she died, and the cobbler was devastated to see Fedder losing his mind. The last time he was seen, he had been eating cactus out in the desert, running along the main road, yelling about sky people and earthquakes. And then he was not seen again. Although there was no body nor confirmation of death, a few months later a funeral was held at the request of the mayor.

“Although maybe not in the physical sense, Fedder Soot is dead from the banks of the sea to the foot of the mountain.”

Joni died the following fall, her body taken by vultures not minutes after taking her last breath. The town alerted Humphrey—but perhaps in some sort of daze, the idea never got through his head—he continued to bring food to the foot of the church three times a day until his death almost forty years later.

In the coming years, the influence of the Soot family grew, the stories around Alister’s departure turning from folklore, to myth, then to legend. Then, on a sunny Saturday honoring the Soots, Alister unexpectedly returned to town.

\*\*\*

It was at first the son of the priest, little Toby, who noticed the man on the church spire crouching behind Mr. Roberts’s wine barrels: stored on their sides, spouts protruding, in anticipation for the celebration that would come when night fell. When Toby first spotted Alister, his first thought was the spire had come to life, leaped off the church for the Soot’s special day. But, with one look upward, he could see the bronze statue still there over the roofs of the colorful houses. Toby ran to his father, alerting him of Alister’s presence.

“I’m sure it was a shadow, Toby” he told him. A discouraged Toby then walked over to the church square, thinking he was seeing double as his gaze met the statue. While the bustle filling the townspeople in preparation for sunset kept their heads low, Toby showed his face to the sky, which Alister noticed. The double, more realistic image of Alister then winked at little Toby, before disappearing. Toby didn’t attempt to warn the town, if a warning was even what they needed.

\*\*\*

Waiting in anticipation, the townspeople gathered as the sun approached the mountain’s peak. All looked up to the statue of Alister, their paper slips between their fingers, ready to be hurled into the air when the last sliver of sun disappeared. This was to symbolize the letters, which had started this whole debacle years ago. Up on the church, Humphrey begrudgingly sat next to the

statue of his cousin as the last living member of the Soot family, eager to get back to his kitchen to cook for Joni, who now was almost forty years past. But as the crowd's hum grew louder, the suspense building, Humphrey growing more impatient, the sun just above the peak, another figure appeared next to Humphrey. The sun was now set, but no papers flew. The town was gripped with silence, clutching their papers even harder, standing like dominos ready to fall in the church square. Alister broke the silence.

"How have you all been?" he asked. Taking the quiet as an answer, he continued. "I never did find that woman after all. Searched far and wide...lost my mind. But I recovered it in Patagonia just a few years ago, fly fishing to pass the time. I suppose I was fishing for my consciousness, looking for it within the white flesh of the trout. But that's where it had been this whole time, I fancy. Shame, because I could've caught it when I was there just after I left this town, could've come back much sooner. But I suppose life would've been different if I'd done that, and I want life no different than it is today. So I'm grateful for her, I really am.

Without her I never would've met poor Madison, god rest his soul. Never would've worked in that opal mine, never would've topped the Soviet underground charts. So I did find my lover, really, but my lover was no woman: it was life itself.

The two Asian elephants that my love was tracking when the letters ended, they are no more, I regret to inform. No mourning must take place, they are long gone. Wherever they'll end up or you hope they end up, I assure you, they have already made it. For now, though, I must catch up with my dear cousin."

\*\*\*

Forty years ago, Humphrey's kitchen was so fragrant, its piquant aromas flavored the meat of the chickens from the coop behind his grill. But as Alister's distant eyes adjusted to the light, flashes of green crowding his vision, where once was unbridled abundance, was meek looking produce, brown, spotted. The smell was more of dust than any food. Cast iron was now so brown it sucked in all the light and turned black. The bread like sandstone; coffee, just muddy water.

"My boy, we must clean! Together, this place will be back in no time!" Alister called out to his cousin, staring far off, lost in dust. He again took silence for an answer.

Meanwhile, the town gathered, free of the Soots, to discuss how to proceed with the recent turn of events. Humphrey was lost. No combination of words could convince him that he only fed rats when he left food out. With no family to support, or take care of him, Humphrey just kept cooking until money ran out, when he took to begging. The town took pity on the lost man, and while the quality of his ingredients fell significantly, his trained hands did most of the work, and they had no need for an active brain.

But how were they to explain this to Alister, a man who they feared didn't have an open mind? Alister worked hard in Humphrey's kitchen, re-cementing the straw walls, filling the gaps in tiles with mud, scraping at the buildup of plaque on the pans. But even with no equipment, Humphrey followed the steps he did every day to a tee, just when he reached for a mixing bowl, or pan or spatula, he came up empty handed. He didn't seem to mind this. Upon returning to the kitchen, arms full with new-looking kitchen tools, Alister was notably shocked when he saw what Humphrey had done.

"Humphrey, Humphrey, stop! What are you doing?!" Humphrey kept his head low, focusing hard on mixing the pile of flour around on the countertop. "Here, cousin. Take this," Alister prompted, handing him the clean cutlery and equipment.

Humphrey didn't acknowledge the gift. Instead, the next day the kitchen was tidy, clean for the first time since Alister left. Now Humphrey cooked on the church steps over an open fire he would keep going for all hours of the day.

But Alister, after devoting so much time to the cleaning of the kitchen, didn't seem to mind the new developments in Humphrey's condition.

Alister continued laboring, helping Humphrey with anything he could, but his mind was so gone, Alister was nothing more than a shape and a sound to him off in the distance somewhere. It was only the stray dog, which hung around Humphrey about the time he moved to the church, that ever got to see him like he was back when he worked in Etta's. The only townspeople who remembered him in his prime were all now long gone. They knew him as only a little boy. But the dog and Humphrey grew very close during his last year. During the day the dog was still only a shape to Humphrey. But they stayed close, locked in solitude together. But at night, as the stray watched the late-night passers-by, he could see Humphrey stir, mumble, and wriggle in his sleep. The dog didn't know for sure, but she sensed Humphrey's joy as he slept. Alister would pass soon, setting the town up as best he could for success.

When he died, he removed his statue from the church, apologizing for everything he had done to the town. Humphrey died beside the dog, mumbling about Asian elephants and letters. At this point, Humphrey was blind. And with his last breath, he turned over to the dog, thanking him for returning after so many years.

Now, for the first time in decades, the small, quiet town in between the foot of the mountain and the banks of the sea, is free of the Soots. A new statue was erected, this time of Humphrey, who gazes valiantly out to sea and to new beginnings. The town flourished, the story of the Soots now cemented in legend, told to children once a year.

## FIVE

There were five of us that day, wind cutting into our tight jackets and wrapped scarves, noses running, combating the frigid dry air. The clear sky, dotted with a murder of crows above the canopy of old oaks. Bird caws echoed down the street. Harland, an older boy, told us how Randall was bombarded by the birds, carried off in the early morning hours to where they reside. This was supposed to be one of the scariest of places on earth.

But to us, the scariest place was the house on the corner of Birch and Hanson. Its rotting green clapboard had had all the life brutally sucked out of it, leaving it pale as a mix of dead lichen and *Amanita Phalloides*, otherwise known as the *death cap*. Decrepit porch and an empty wooden chair, slightly askew. The door had a stained glass window: red, green, blue. Intricate molding all around the roof, an impressive house, but we knew the real truth. Unfortunately, it was across the street from our territory—the playground. Very strictly off-limits.

Alex dropped to his right knee.

“Not it!” he yelled. Everyone else dropped, and in unison yelled the same. Except me. I was *it*, and coincidentally, the slowest. Everyone scattered every which way, and now it was only me and the crows.

*One*

I closed my eyes and started my count to five.

*Two*

I could hear the gate open. “NO HOUSE!” I yelled. I heard a giggle. Then the closing of the fence gate. *Oh no oh no oh no*. See, my idiot friends were not so scared of the house. They were scared via proximity; proximity to me, oozing terror from every pore.

*Three*

These friends could be really horrible. They knew how scared I was. They knew. And even if they weren’t actually going to the house, it was a sick joke. They weren’t too scared of playing sick jokes. Once when I was staying over at William’s house, they poured syrup and feathers on me while I was fast asleep.

*Four*

As five got closer, the possibility of entering the house got more real. What was I supposed to do? They don’t realize the danger. They don’t realize that if they



enter, they won't exit. Would I go in through the front or back? Maybe a window? But I know for sure that the presence will be lying in wait. I would open the door and the smell of death would rush over me. The sun would be shining bright bolts through the dusty air. The grandfather clock in the foyer will chime, and the stairs creek. Appearing before me, they'll grab me by the ear. Drag me past the living room devoid of furniture. The piano in the dining room might start playing with no player. They will drag me into the kitchen, years of dishes piled up. The basement door will be pulsating dim light. They will open the door to spiderwebs, and rodents galore. They will toss me down the stairs, and I will see George, and Frank, and Will and John. The door will slam shut.

*Five*

I opened my eyes, looking toward the house. Where once was the playground and swing set and the dreaded abode across the street, was now vast emptiness speckled with glimmers from afar. I saw my little planet disappear into light. What is one supposed to do when dealt this hand of cards? Well, I sure as hell don't know.

**FREDY NORIN '24**  
**RHODY FROM RHODY**

A large blue-gray floor tile, used as a serving tray weighed me down. On it, apple brie puff pastries, avocado toast, and smoked-mozzarella tomato pesto skewers. Now, you may be wondering, how can anyone deal with all that! Frankly, it didn't bother me. It wasn't as if I were a flocking peacock like the rest of those birds. Truth is, I looked like a drunken retriever! I told myself it could have been worse, then again, all I really needed to do was follow orders and get paid for the night. It was beyond my control that everyone was dressed like a penguin. And nothing I could do about the pesto stains smudged all over my brand new white Brooks Brothers button-down.

At least, the view was noteworthy! Essen!, our kosher catering company, was booked for Colt State Park, the party held on the water. Blue and white striped tents were pitched on the grass; the dance floor, bar, and photo booth adjacent to round numbered tables where guests dined. Beyond the grand illusion, a preparation platform in front of worn, yellowed plastic curtains concealing a greasy dishwasher and open smelly dumpster where discarded olive pits and chicken bones were tossed, also where the food that we served was plated.

It was a humid July evening. I was sweating! And although a couple of giant floor fans helped, I couldn't ignore the fact that I was hefting a bathroom tile and that no one was reaching for the mozzarella tomato basil skewers which the chef kept aggressively piling high on my tray. It also didn't help that we couldn't be seen snacking, or that I was unable to drink from my Contigo water bottle. So, I decided to make a quick run to the bar to quench my thirst.

Luckily, my friends, Max and Mayte, had signed up for the shift, and I knew that they'd never rat me out. Why they assigned seventeen-year olds to man the bar is anyone's guess! The makeshift counter was covered in a blue tablecloth that bore no stains or spills for less than a minute. But the drink orders came a mile a minute. It was impossible to keep up, but despite the gathering chaos, we were instructed to be cheerful, making sure to respond to the guests' every request. This became difficult when the intoxicated bride and groom established a boisterous tone, screeching an unforgettable "Sunrise, Sunset," banging menacingly on the table.

“Who knew you couldn’t wait around as a waiter!” I joked.

“Trust me, I know,” said Mayte. “We had to hear about the groom’s *tremendous* glass-breaking, while everyone was backed up on the drink line.”

“I get the point, but when the DJ started blasting songs from *Fiddler on the Roof*, and the groom, who is already half-gone, belted out ‘If I Were A Rich Man,’ the whole thing got a little out of hand,” Max chuckled, munching on a handful of pigs in a blanket.

“Appetizers are the worst, but don’t worry, ‘cause once entrees arrive and the dance floor opens, it’s all smooth sailing,” I reassured.

“How can you be so clueless!” grouched Max. “This ain’t Cinderella where you can call all your mouse friends to clean up. In reality, it’s the eleventh plague.”

“Fine, but can’t you just be a mensch and clear my tray. I’m not asking for much. And while you’re at it, give me a drink? I’ll pay for Frosties after we clock out.”

“As long as you’re not backing up the line!” Mayte said.

“I’ll have my usual, the Walt Disney!” I ordered with a proud smile.

Max slid the Sprite to Mayte, who poured the dented green can into a wine glass, generous with the blue raspberry syrup. Her finishing touch, a Mickey Mouse shaped crazy straw. I know I could have ordered a Shirley Temple, but sometimes it’s better just to do it *my way*!

Truth be told, I wasn’t there for only a drink, but rather for an opportunity to hang out with my high school crush, Dahlia Starling, who was working the photo booth. To be fair, I don’t know if she was the main reason I was there. After all, crushes can crush you! I guess I just needed to distract myself this summer, whether that came from waitering, hanging out with friends, or risking rejection from Dahlia.

“You’re obsessed with her!” Mayte said, reading my mind.

“Just talk to her!” Max commanded, “Can’t just stand here hogging drinks all night!”

“Okay, Mr. Beach Volleyball, we get you’re Rhody’s wingman, but can’t I be the voice of reason here?” Mayte asked rhetorically.

“Of course you can! But Max has a point, we’re being rude. Technically speaking, we were not even *invited*, but yeah, sure, we still have to live a little!” I said, picking up a floor tile, heading in Dahlia’s direction, hearing Mayte’s voice cautioning, “When you chicken out, you know where to find us!”

With those encouraging words, I mentally rehearsed how to approach Dahlia. Something along the lines of offering her canapés and asking about her job. However, when a stampeding crowd rushed the dance floor, I suddenly felt disoriented.

Dahlia's blonde hair flowed, despite there being no wind. She was a vision in a green silk dress, her sky-blue eyes trained in my direction. I had to say something.

"Hey Dahlia, I didn't know you worked here."

"Really? Weren't you the one talking about Essen! last year?"

"What I meant was the camera. I didn't know you were a photographer,"

"I started during freshman year, it's more like a hobby. Compliments my writing," she replied.

"What genre?"

"Nothing crazy. Mainly feelings about life, symphonies, oil paintings, even astrology. What about you?"

If it were not for the sudden intrusion of Hava Nagila with bubbies and zaydes dancing the Horah, I would have told Dahlia how writing has changed my life! Instead, we both laughed at the drunken crowd which made enough room for the bride and groom to crowd surf off their chairs, while Dahlia and I finished the last couple of skewers.

"Man, they'll regret the photo evidence of this!" Dahlia chuckled.

"You know, at my bar mitzvah the chair arm broke when they lifted me in the air," I said.

"Were you okay?"

"I was fine, not the worst experience that night! The rabbi chest-bumped me, nearly knocking me out and I had to perform a song wearing a beard and holding a cane in front of all my friends and family."

Dahlia hesitated with a response.

"Hey, I'd love to keep chatting, but I'd hate to get fired on my first night!" Dahlia said.

"The chef is probably looking for me right now too!"

There was a chance of exchanging phone numbers, but it didn't happen. I thought to myself, *It could have gone worse*. My friends would want to hear about it, but for the time being I was faced with an obstreperous crowd, blocking my way back to the kitchen. But being the person I am, I headed directly into the eye of the storm.

Luckily, I was skinny enough to pass through. But with the sudden blare of *Dynamite* and *I Got A Feeling*, and the human labyrinth surrounding me, I was dizzy, barely getting my footing, wedged within a swarm of sweaty revelers.

*What an unusual night*, I thought. I wondered if my parents would believe me. Then again, I concluded that they'd probably think I hammed it all up just for the sake of this story. My dad claims that writing isn't real work, that it's just an excuse so I won't play outside. My mom is a bit more accepting, but still lands on the same line.

To be fair, I write a lot in class, instead of doing schoolwork, but how can't I? Since I was young, teachers have encouraged me to develop my powers of observation. So, what did they expect? But, my peers always shrug off my storytelling as a mere hobby.

I love my friends, but I don't think they truly understand me. After all, I'm an introverted logician and I need to express myself through the written word. My extroverted friends lead clubs, win medals for sports or robotics, star in musicals and showcases, and maybe that's why I feel like the oddball. I know that in my sophomore year I wasn't exactly out there socially. I'd skip the school musical to work on a radio play, rarely responding to group texts. Then again, I feel like I carry our little group when it comes to events, but I can't ignore the pit in my stomach when they hang out on Thayer Street and I'm not invited. I spend a lot of time in my head and I write about it, that's just who I am. Maybe this is why I bleed from Cupid's arrow.

In middle school, I thought that finding happiness would be dating your crush. However, now I feel the lines blur, it's hard to tell the difference between crushes and someone I find really interesting. I guess that's why I'm drawn to Dahlia Starling. I mean, how common is it to know an attractive girl with *synesthesia*? Yet, I still think about love at first sight, even though I know it's something only found in fairytales, 'cause nowadays life is just too complicated.

[THE BLANKET KEEPER]

CLEARANCE: POLARIS-LVL5

ID: V3N10

FILE: C453-N3W5.MP4

DOCUMENT: Witch's Forest Park

HITHERTO: LIBRA 23 VENUS 3000

Command//70C4T10N: Researchers working for Polaris, Maxwell Venio and Luke Lux, hike deep in the forest along a skinny dirt path, trees blocking their peripheral vision.

Command//P3R50N: Maxwell Venio has brown hair and eyes. He wears a blue sweatshirt, white T, and black hiking pants.

Command//P3R50N: Luke Lux has brown hair and blue eyes. He wears a green polaris cap, gray sweatshirt, red T, and blue jeans.

7UX: You should have warned me we were going to the Witch's Forest.

V3N10: Polaris's orders, not mine! Sure, Salem stuff happened here, but it's all buried in the ground.

7UX: Says the witches who were burned and hanged...Polaris knows this place is haunted. Why else would we be here?

V3N10: Polaris is already cursed, there's no magic that could prove that.

7UX: What do they want, anyway? For us to carry a pocketful of ashes!

Command//70C4T10N: Venio and Lux enter the site of the abandoned chard house. Lux unzips lunch bags, handing them both bagels with cream cheese. Sitting at the collapsed fireplace, wolfing down their lunch.

V3N10: You know, this house belonged to a witch.

7UX: How's this my concern?

V3N10: Legend says William Rogers burned their cabin, killing Dahlia and her daughter.

7UX: Wait, you're trying to scare me! I get it, witches don't exist, right?

V3N10: No, I'm talking about nobles! Think of the money, if we found something lost to history...

Command//D35CR1PT10N: Underfoot a heartbeat emanating from the ground...its source, leading them to a small half-buried box, covered in ash.

V3N10: Dude, I told you! Open it!

7UX: Not a good idea, Maxwell. Why don't we give it to David? Isn't he a scientist?

V3N10: Are you kidding? He didn't show up, it's his loss.

7UX: Fine, but if there's a frog's toe or newt's eye, it's on you!

Command//D35CR1PT10N: Luke opens the purple wooden, gold trim box, immediately dropping it.

7UX: It's alive!

V3N10: What a baby! You can't trick a trickster!

Command//D35CR1PT10N: A hand reaches out of the box. An old man crawls out from it, slowly creeping toward the men.

Command//P3R50N: He has white hair and black soulless eyes; skin, leathery, as if hiding its true form, wearing a blue sweater with a light blue stripe, and tan pants.

7UX: What is that thing?

V3N10: How would I know? Just shut the damn box!

7UX: No way, I'm not going near that thing!

Command//D35CR1PT10N: As Maxwell turns to face Luke, the creature vanishes, observing them through the trees. The old man reappears behind Luke, snatching him by the hood of his sweatshirt. Maxwell grabs a branch, on the verge of assaulting the attacker.

1R4: Irgamvay Utaspay emay ossepap rohiberepay. Abeohay micosaaay otentiorespay unctay goeay. Uracay tuay lliyaiy onveniamcay?

V3N10: Let him go or I'll kick you back in the box!

Command//D35CR1PT10N: Maxwell swings the branch, fazing right through the old man. The creature lifts Luke with both hands, opening its sewn mouth. Luke emits his soul, leaving its body and into the old man's. Maxwell interferes with his weapon once again, this time grabbed by the arm.

V3N10: What the hell are you? What's happening?

V3N10: Uodqay nfernumiai seay? Uidqay gisaey obisnay...

1R4: For he had not for centuries any movement. Why, you saved me...I see, you don't talk much. I will see you soon.

Command//D35CR1PT10N: The creature vanishes to dust. Luke's stone cold body lies motionless. Maxwell stares at him, in hopes that he would awake. His right arm is sore with little control of his movement. He wasn't concerned about the box, nor could explain what just happened. Maxwell was a smart man, he knew Polaris was watching. With tears in his eyes, he ran as far as he could into the abyss.

...

CLEARANCE: POLARIS-LVL8

ID: 5M1TH

FILE: R-C55.CCTV

DOCUMENT: R&C:SS Dining Hall

HITHERTO: AQUARIUS 28 URANUS 3002

Command//70C4T10N: Dr. David Smith sits in a booth, next to the sushi bar, at Rock and Catch's Sushi Symphony, located in Time Square. He slurps down the remaining miso soup. Waiters pass, going back and forth to the tables and kitchen. Sea Shanties play over loud speakers. Appetizers: sushi rolls, scallops, shrimp, crawdad, calamari, jellyfish chips, mahi munchers, squid ink sauce and white rice, ride on a conveyor belt for guests to take what they please. Entrees: sushi boat, hand rolls, clam chowder, miso, seaweed kelp soup, sea robin tacos, Abisu's thresher shark, lobster, clams, onigiri, and bao dumplings are displayed in cases on the wall. Dessert concoctions: sushi sundae, squid ink shakes,



pufferfish pastries, lobster pies, strawberry crab cake, sea lion cheesecake—giant examples dangle from the ceiling.

Command//P3R50N: Dr. Smith has brown hair and hazel eyes. Black glasses, with a cyan hologram lens. He wears a colorful flannel, black shirt, and cargo pants.

Command//D35CR1PT10N: Stabbing his fork into General Tso's chicken, he is interrupted by his glass's communicator. Will Fixgerald and Amelia Erwin, on the other line.

3RW1N: Would you stop eating! Keep your eyes open!

5M1TH: Sorry, I've been securing the headset all day.

3RW1N: If you needed a break you could've asked, you know Will and I dabble with tech.

F1XG3R47D: Lea, we already have Polaris breathing down our necks.

5M1TH: I'm fine with the mission, I understand my placement won't be suspicious.

F1XG3R47D: Remember the signal?

5M1TH: Third booth. First row. Across the bar!

F1XG3R47D: Correct, your target is someone on the outside, he'll have a message.

5M1TH: Sure we can trust him?

3RW1N: He's just the messenger. She remains anonymous, but I trust her authentication.

F1XG3R47D: We'll be watching!

Command//D35CR1PT10N: Bored, David takes a spicy tuna roll with his chopsticks, waiting for his cue. A couple sits where his signal should be. Checking out the menu, they wait for the waiter.

Command//P3R50N: The messenger has brown hair and blue eyes. He wears an anonymous black suit. Holding a notepad, chopsticks on his belt, and a piece of paper poking out of his pocket.

Command//D35CR1PT10N: Jotting down the couple's order, he accidentally drops the note for David under the table.

5M1TH: Will, are you seeing this? The message is on the floor! How am I going to get it now?

F1XG3R47D: Relax! Don't panic!

3RW1N: Snap out of it, Will...David, you'll have to go undercover for this one.

5M1TH: And how am I supposed to do that?

3RW1N: I don't know! Why don't you serve what they ordered?

5M1TH: [under his breath] I need to get paid more for this.

Command//D35CR1PT10N: David gets up from his seat, grabbing the Kraken Special dish from the sushi bar and serving it to the couple. Although his silence was suspicious and the clumsiness of spilling their water noted, they didn't think anything of it other than he was an underpaid waiter. David makes a dart for the bathroom, despite the stares of guests and waiters.

CLEARANCE: POLARIS-LV8

ID: 5M1TH

FILE: R-C55.CCTV

DOCUMENT: R&C:SS Bathroom

HITHERTO: AQUARIUS 28 URANUS 3002

Command//70C4T10N: Catching his breath, David heads into a stall, the man at the urinal, on high alert. The bathroom, a deep sea theme with coral and seaweed covering parts of the wall. The messenger's note reads: "Turn the paw that gives you fortune."

5M1TH: Will, you know ciphers? Come on, I could use some help here!

3RW1N: He's out cold! You need some deciphering?

5M1TH: What's this about a lucky paw?

3RW1N: Didn't training teach you anything?

5M1TH: I'll admit it! I'm not the best at paying attention.

3RW1N: Listen, as we all know, Polaris sugar coats everything it touches.

5M1TH: Get on with it Lea, you're going to blow my cover!

F1XG3R47D: The two fortune cats in the front! That's what it says!

Command//D35CR1PT10N: The man outside the stall, knocks on the door after hearing all the commotion. David lifts his feet up onto the toilet, trying not to make a sound.

4815U: Hey, no slacking on the job! If Rock catches you, he'll gut me like a fish for not firing you.

5M1TH: Listen, don't get the big guy involved! Just pretend that couple fiasco wasn't my fault, be on your way!

4815U: Don't play coy with me, Smith! You know you can't be back here after the aquarium incident. Open the door now or I'll flatten you like a flounder.

Command//D35CR1PT10N: Abisu looks over the stall, violently trying to unlock the door from the outside. David slams it shut to push him away. Failing to stop the sushi chef, Abisu, David quickly thinks of a plan to escape.

Command//P3R50N: Augustus Abisu has blonde gray hair and blue eyes. He wears a red bandana, dark green shirt, blood stained apron, and orange fish pants.

Command//D35CR1PT10N: David unlocks the door, quickly diving under the doorway. Abisu hanging onto the edge, David pushes him to the other side. Before leaving, he chews a piece of gum, spitting it out and sticking it onto the door before it explodes and sticks to the wall.

CLEARANCE: POLARIS-LVL8

ID: 5M1TH

FILE: R-C55.CCTV

DOCUMENT: R&C:SS Main Entrance

HITHERTO: AQUARIUS 28 URANUS 3002

Command//70C4T10N: David stares at the ground, leading to a large crowd taking pictures with the two giant statues of Fortune Cats. The statue on the right is a black cat with purple patterns and yellow eyes. The other, a mackerel tabby with green patterns and blue eyes. The black cat is slumped over, while the mackerel tabby is leaned over it, waving. The intercoms turn on.

R0CK: Fish on, at Palatinus Plunge! Dive down for your own lobster, boiled ready at the aquarium. Don't like swimming away from your problems? Waterfall Wonders gives you a chance to climb into a world of biology, now experiencing ice caverns for a limited time!

C4TCH: Don't forget Otter Odysseys where we take a deep dive into the ancient world of Atlantis. That doesn't tickle your tuna? In five minutes at the Orca Stra theater, flavor your ears to Sea Sirens! Can't make it to our next show? Stay tuned with Manatee Moves: dancing with purpose with a porpoise, at nine pm.

Command//D35CR1PT10N: The crowd rushes to the ticket booths, leaving the space empty. David sneaks his way to the backside of the statue, climbing the supports of the mackerel tabby.

5M1TH: Okay, I'm in position. Cameras on sight?

3RW1N: Will is shutting them now.

F1XG3R47D: You got five minutes before they reset.

Command//D35CR1PT10N: David uses his weight to push the arm down. Attempting it a few more times, a purple USB falls to the platform. Climbing down the arm, David grabs the USB. Jumping down, he heads to the doorway.

CLEARANCE: POLARIS-LVL8

ID: 5M1TH

FILE: NYC.TEC

DOCUMENT: Times Square

HITHERTO: AQUARIUS 28 URANUS 3002

Command//70C4T10N: A torrential downpour in Time Square. David lifts his umbrella, holding the USB tight in his hand. Skyscrapers overhead, civilians in work attire, surrounding him. Large bright hologram propaganda attached to buildings: A group of cameras with the captions: "Our eyes are on you." Another, with a businessman holding a piece of paper: "Don't get caught; you'll be put away for life!" The giant screen, below the New Year's ball, an eye with text in the pupil: "Wake up, seize your future! Enlist in Project Eden!" The

screen flashes, interrupted by North Star News, the headline: Killer Employee: Polaris to blame?

Command//P3R50N: Justin Case has brown hair and blue eyes. He wears a dark blue suit jacket, white button-up, and red tie.

Command//P3R50N: Joe Rassic has a brown beard and eyes. He wears a dark green suit jacket, white button up, and black tie.

C453: I'm Justin Case with breaking news...

R4551C: And this is Joe Rassic.

C453: This just in, found footage from a two-year murder and missing person investigation.

R4551C: In 3000, Polaris researchers, Luke Lux and Maxwell Vineo, were victims of foul play at Witch's Forest Park.

C453: Lux's body discovered at the crime scene, Venio nowhere to be seen.

R4551C: Footage was corrupted, but recovered today. Take a look!

Command//D35CR1PT10N: Maxwell turns to face Luke, in the midst of an argument. Luke is snatched by the hood of his sweatshirt from a metal rod sticking out of the wall. Maxwell takes a branch, on the verge of attack. Maxwell repeatedly swings the branch, Luke wounding Maxwell's arm. Luke's stone cold body lies motionless. Maxwell stares at him. With no remorse, he makes a quick escape.

C453: Is Polaris responsible for this?

R4551C: Is the monster still at large?

C453: All those questions and more will be answered after the weather with Sunny Chance. This is Justin Case

R4551C: And Joe Rassic

C453: Signing off!

Command//D35CR1PT10N: David stares at the news before talking to Will and Amelia.

5M1TH: I'll get back to you in the morning, something's come up.

F1XG3R47D: But what about the USB?

5M1TH: I'll plug it in as soon as I get home.

3RW1N: Everything all right David?

5M1TH: Tired. Long day!

Command//D35CR1PT10N: David hangs up, soon entering the subway, headed to his apartment.

...

CLEARANCE: POLARIS-LV8

ID: 5M1TH

FILE: 4P4RT.CCTV

DOCUMENT: Icarus Apartments

HITHERTO: AQUARIUS 28 URANUS 3002

Command//70C4T10N: David unlocks his apartment door. The small confined apartment was dimly lit. His kitchen sink, piled with dishes. Clothes were scattered around his sofa and Murphy bed. Newspaper clippings of unexplainable events pinned on the board. Computer and TV screens shattered, with the broken cameras covered in tape. The dining room table covered in computer parts attached to a camera, facing toward a headset hooked up to cables on the ceiling.

5M1TH: Why'd you do it Maxwell. Was all this for nothing?

Command//D35CR1PT10N: David opens the refrigerator, chugging down a maple syrup flavor Grain Shake to calm his nerves.

5M1TH: No, Polaris must be lying, they always lie! I have to do this, I have to fix this. Not just for me but those who I couldn't save.

Command//D35CR1PT10N: Pacing back and forth, David reassures himself, sitting down in the dining room chair.

5M1TH: Stay focused, David. Just need to plug this thing in, give it a go and you'll be back in bed before you know it.

Command//D35CR1PT10N: Placing the purple USB, with golden writing: 870T, into the headset. David starts rolling the camera, to document his discovery.

5M1TH: This is Dr. David Smith, today we received the USB that takes down the firewall for Polaris’s headset. It’s said this contains all the information we need to take down Polaris once and for all. The real truth you are about to see might shock you.

Command//D35CR1PT10N: Dr. David Smith puts on the Polaris headset, viewiiiiinnnngggggg//

/ / / / / / / / / / / / / /  
01110111////////01101000////////01100001////////01110100////  
////////00100000////////01100011////////01100001////////01101110////  
////////00100000////////01101111////////01101110////////01101100////////0111  
1001////////00100000////////01100010////////01100101////////0010  
0000////////01100100////////01100101////////01110011////////01100////////  
///011011101////////01101001////////01100010////////01100101////////0110010  
0////////00100000////////01100001////////01110011////////00100000////////01101000/  
////////01101111////////01110010////////01110010  
01101001////////01100110////////01101001////////01100011////////

3R0R 606...H34D53T-0FF71N3  
...R3PR0C3551NG...  
C&#\$NC#: 01001110 01101111 00100000 01000101 01110011 01100011  
01100001 01110000 01100101 00001010  
!D: 01000010 01101100 01100001 01101110 01101011 01100101 01110100  
00100000 01001011 01100101 01100101 01110000 01100101 01110010  
00001010  
F!&#: 00111000 00110111 00110000 01010100  
D)CUM#NT: 01001001 01110011 01101100 01100101 00100000 01000011  
01100001 01110011 01100001 00100000 01000011 01100001 01110000  
01110100 01101001 01110110 01110101 01110011

C)MM\$ND//(&)C\$T!)N: Dr. David Smith, The Blanket Keeper, wakes up in an uncomfy bed. Towering over him is a giant teddy bear.

C)MM\$ND//P#R%)N: Teddy is an Imaginary, a category of being only usually visible to children. He has white and blue fur and brown buttons for eyes. He wears a blue ribbon and shorts.

T#DDY: You're awake! The Blanket Keeper has returned!

K##P#R: Who...Where...What am I wearing?

C)MM\$ND//D#%CR!PT!)N: The Blanket Keeper looks down at his pants, getting up and away from the bear. He then looks at his sleeves, questioning when he made the costume change.

C0MM4ND//P3R50N: The Blanket Keeper wears red ski goggles, blue shirt, gray and blue stuffed animal robe, red checkered pajama bottoms, and gray slippers.

K33P3R: This can't be happening? You're just dreaming! Just take off the headset and you'll be back at your apartment.

T3DDY: I wouldn't...

C0MM4ND//D35CR1PT10N: Despite the bear's warning, the Blanket Keeper pulls at his ski goggles. Feeling the headset around him, he was sure that he fell asleep while wearing them. Each tug irritated his skin, as if it was permanently attached to him.

T3DDY: Stop that, Keeper, we aren't so bad.

K33P3R: Stop calling me that, that's not my name!

T3DDY: Sounds like your hangry...Wuffles, is breakfast ready yet, Keeper has returned.

Command//D35CR1PT10N: A giant stuffed Red Panda peeks his head out of the kitchen. The Blanket Keeper falls back, onto the couch.



Command//P3R50N: Wuffles is an Imaginary Red Panda holding a spatula. He has red, black, and white fur, brown buttons for eyes. He wears a chef hat with a waffle symbol and an apron that shows a waffle with angel wings and halo, the word heaven below it.

WUFF735: Ready in ten minutes, whisking the eggs now.

K33P3R: How are there more of you?

Command//D35CR1PT10N: Cuddles leans, crushing the Blanket Keeper's shoulder with his soft fur. Waking up from the reality warping panic, the Blanket Keeper is receiving.

Command//P3R50N: Cuddles has light brown fur. A red sleep mask with button sewn design, and blue robe.

CUDD735: Five more minutes. I just need to rest my eyes.

T3DDY: That's no way to treat the Blanket Keeper. Get up! Wuffles made coffee.

CUDD735: Keepers alive?

K33P3R: I died?

WUFF735: Not exactly.

K33P3R: Purgatory?

T3DDY: In a way.

K33P3R: So, that's it then? If only I had more time. I could have saved people from Polaris.

Command//D35CR1PT10N: Cuddles moves closer. Observing the Blanket Keeper, even with his sleep mask partially covering his eyes.

CUDD735: You don't remember us?

K33P3R: Who are you...angels?

T3DDY: Just give it time, everyone. Keeper's been gone for a while.

K33P3R: What do you mean, a while? Why should I remember you? I don't know where I am or who you three are!

CUDD735: Try!

Command//D35CR1PT10N: The Blanket Keeper gets up to stare at them for a moment. Grabbing the farthest memory from his brain, slowly recognizing the three stuffed animals in front of him.

K33P3R: My childhood!

T3DDY: Precisely.

K33P3R: But that's not possible.

WUFF735: Don't ask silly questions! You're the Blanket Keeper!

K33P3R: My mother gave me these three stuffed animals. Stored them away when I left home.

T3DDY: That's right, we're Imaginaries, vessels of Energy!

K33P3R: Energy? Polaris's AI isn't that advanced. Especially, coming from the palm of a fortune cat.

WUFF735: No AI needed.

K33P3R: Then where am I, if not plugged in?

T3DDY: Welcome to Isle Casa Captavis!

Command//70C4T10N: The Blanket Keeper looks around the giant abandoned wooden doll house. An empty interior with signs of former life. The back wall of the house is fully visible from the outside, facing the decomposing island.

K33P3R: Sorry, I'm having a hard time believing all this. How did I get here?

T3DDY: Not easy to explain!

K33P3R: I snuck into a government-run restaurant, locked someone in a bathroom stall, stole a USB, found out my missing friend murdered his coworker, and trapped myself into this mess. I think I can handle it!

CUDD735: Should we tell him?

WUFF735: He's going to find out!

K33P3R: What else are you keeping from me?

T3DDY: Fine, I'll tell him. The seven have escaped...

Command//D35CR1PT10N: Confusion fills the room. Voices heard from inside the walls, leading to a door underneath the stairs

PURR5T3PH4N13: Shhh, don't make a sound. We're toast!

74RY: No way! Quick, hide the children. I'll protect us!

Command//D35CR1PT10N: The three Imaginaries step closer to the door, the Blanket Keeper moving aside. The door slams shut, a man, about to attack, hidden in the shadows.

Command//P3R50N: Lary Finkleheimer has brown hair and eyes. He wears a brown and black checkered print flannel, white shirt, gray overalls, and brown boots.

74RY: Stay off our land! I don't want to hurt you.

T3DDY: We're survivors! We've brought good fortune.

74RY: And who might you be?

WUFF735: Followers of the Blanket Keeper!

74RY: He's returned?

Command//D35CR1PT10N: The Blanket Keeper places his foot on a squeaky floorboard. The disciples stare back at him. Keeper moves forward to meet Mr. Finkleheimer.

74RY: Finkleheimer! At your service!

K33P3R: From the sitcom?

74RY: You're a fan?

K33P3R: I've heard of it...

Command//D35CR1PT10N: The Blanket Keeper glances at Teddy, conveying his awkwardness. Purrstephanie stands in the doorway, concerned.

Command//P3R50N: Purrstephanie has brown hair and blue eyes. She wears a Maine Coon print coat, black pants, and brown shoes.

PURR5T3PH4N13: Everything all right out there?

74RY: We found survivors!

PURR5T3PH4N13: You should have told me we were having guests.

74RY: I'll wake up the kids to tell them the good news!

PURR5T3PH4N13: They're taking a schluff, it would be best not to wake them.

74RY: Well it would be bad to waste an opportunity like this. I'm sure our guests need something to nosh.

WUFF735: I made scrambled eggs and coffee.

PURR5T3PH4N13: Oh that won't do! Who knows how long that's been there!

T3DDY: What other options do we have?

K33P3R: Can Imaginaries even eat food?

Command//D35CR1PT10N: Kidd sneaks around the kitchen to eavesdrop on the conversation. His pet brown gibbon, Ms. Crumpet, leaping on the counter and then onto the couch, waking up Cuddles.

Command//P3R50N: Kidd has brown hair and eyes with a horn headband made out of toilet paper rolls. He wears a gray wool coat, brown pants, and black shoes. Ms. Crumpet sports a purple floral straw hat, holding a tiny teacup.

K1DD: Holy Cow! What's hatchin' here?

74RY: How much did you hear?

K1DD: The whole coop!

PURR5T3PH4N13: Goose, get your brother!

Command//D35CR1PT10N: Goose walks out from under the staircase. Cafe holding their sisters hand with a chocolate milk carton.

Command//P3R50N: Goose has dirty blonde hair and brown eyes with fried egg earrings. She wears a white and brown feathered coat with a black feather collar, orange pants, and boots.

Cafe has half-blonde, half-brown hair and brown eyes. They wear a cow onesie.

G0053: Relax Mom, I was changing Cafe's diaper. I didn't know Kidd woke up!

K1DD: Yolk's on you, I was faking it the whole time!

74RY: All right, calm down, no bullfighting! Look, I'm starving, the kids are starving, why don't we eat up what the raccoon is cooking!

PURRST3PH4N13: No, no, it's too dangerous!

74RY: Come on, salmonella won't kill you!

PURR5T3PH4N13: Compromise! They're already awake. What about mud pies, quick and simple.

K1DD: All right! I'm an expert at making a mess.

74RY: I'll keep an eye on them.

Command//D35CR1PT10N: Going to the Mud Marsh, Kidd sprints out with Ms. Crumpet hanging on from his shoulders. Goose and her father swiftly behind. Purrstephanie holds Cafe, preparing the kitchen for mud pies.

PURR5T3PH4N13: Make yourself at home. The guest bedroom has already been made.

T3DDY: No need for that! With the Blanket Keeper returning, we must be on our feet.

CUDD735: But I hate walking!

T3DDY: Hate's a strong word! Why don't you help Ms. Finkleheimer with the baby.

PURR5T3PH4N13: You would do that?

WUFF735: We're Imaginaries after all...Why don't I help you with cooking.

Command//D35CR1PT10N: Cuddles is with Cafe in the living room, playing peekaboo. Wuffles and Purrstephanie take out strainers from the kitchen drawers. Sitting at the dining room table, the Blanket Keeper has a secret conversation with Teddy.

K33P3R: You know I'm not the real Blanket Keeper, right?

T3DDY: The Followers know who you are, Smith.

K33P3R: Then why does everyone call me Keeper?

T3DDY: Look, the Blanket Keeper isn't a person but rather a spirit within a vessel.

K33P3R: But you're my stuffed animal. You chose me to be here.

T3DDY: Not exactly.

K33P3R: The Finkleheimers, they're a product of Polaris!

T3DDY: That may be true...

K33P3R: But they can't be! You do realize those actors were murdered, they're not understudies.

T3DDY: But they're not actors! They're real just like you and me.

K33P3R: I don't think I understand.

T3DDY: Do you realize where you are?

K33P3R: Isle Casa Captivus, like you said.

T3DDY: But what plane, what universe, what dimension are you inhabiting right now.

K33P3R: That's hypothetical, theories made by crazed Polaris scientists. There's no way to prove they exist.

T3DDY: And yet a giant living teddy bear is sitting next to you.

K33P3R: Fair point! But how does that explain where I am?

T3DDY: Your body is in your universe, your senses are in an astral plane, and your mind is in a pocket dimension.

K33P3R: How is a universe different from a pocket dimension? How does this explain living corpses?

T3DDY: History of the Isle is difficult to explain. Why they chose you as Blanket Keeper is a mystery.

K33P3R: I'm stuck in a headset, clearly that means something.

T3DDY: Whatever happened to you, I know your consciousness is connected to this Isle.

K33P3R: How?

T3DDY: Think of it as an empty house. Your consciousness is like a new owner, moving furniture from a previous home.

K33P3R: So that's why the Finkleheimers are here? You're here because of a memory?

T3DDY: Fragments of the past. Not everything on this Isle will make sense to you. Your consciousness renders this a dream, with many memories warped to its desire.

Command//D35CR1PT10N: Lary, Goose and Kidd return with large buckets of mud, sand, and worms, from the Mud Marsh.

L4RY: What's up people! Who's ready for mud pies?

WUFF735: We certainly are, dump it in the strainer and get this cooking started!

PURR5T3PH4N13: Everyone makes their own! Get up and get your nose in the troff!

K33P3R: How is this breakfast?

K1DD: Don't worry Mr. Keeper, I'll show you!

Command//D35CR1PT10N: The Finkleheimers teach the Blanket Keeper and his Followers to make mud pies. Over the pie tin, Goose swifts sand, making a crust. Next, Kidd dumps the mud into the tin, smoothing it out. Last, Lary grabs a handful of worms to put in the blender, spreading the worm paste. Purrstephanie puts the small pies in the oven, waiting to pull them out. After a while, each person has their own dish, the Blanket Keeper hesitantly taking a bite.

K33P3R: That wasn't as bad as I thought.

T3DDY: Really?

K33P3R: It tastes sweet, if anything.

L4RY: Glad you enjoyed it!

G0053: Speaking of enjoying food. Where is Cafe? Their food is getting cold.

WUFF735: Wasn't Cuddles babysitting them?

T3DDY: They were in the living room last time I heard.

PURR5T3PH4N13: I'll excuse myself and go check on them.

Command//D35CR1PT10N: Purrstephanie walks into the living room. Cuddles and Cafe watching TV, showing the Fluffy Chili Chips Show, she turns it off.

PURR5T3PH4N13: Who told you that you had permission to watch cartoons at this hour. Get up! Food is getting cold.

C4F3: Ca-Cafe?

CUDD735: Just a few more minutes? Chili and Chips were about to save Fluffy from the Munch Monster.

PURR5T3PH4N13: No more TV! It's not worth the risk! Your eyes will pop and your brain will rot if you watch any longer.

Command//D35CR1PT10N: From the commotion, the rest of the family, followers, and Blanket Keeper enter the room.

74RY: Everything all right in here? You're poppin' like corn in a corn popper!

PURR5T3PH4N13: I'm perfectly fine! I just need something to drink.

G0053: Are you sure that's a good idea?

PURR5T3PH4N13: Nothing happened to the TV! Let's go back and finish up our brunch.

Command//D35CR1PT10N: The TV turns to static, everyone was startled except for Purrstephanie who was still ranting. The cable from the TV, unplugged.

K33P3R: Who has the remote?

CUDD735: Don't look at me!

PURR5T3PH4N13: Let's stay calm! It's probably here in the couch cushions.

K1DD: Mom, the TV's not plugged in...

Command//D35CR1PT10N: Something pushes onto the screen, trying to escape. A hoof-like hand reaches out, its body leaving the static prison.

Command//P3R50N: Aunt Equus, eyes missing, only sockets visible, has brown stringy hair, skin, thin as cling wrap. She wears a plaid flannel over a white shirt, brown pants, and white boots.

G0053: Is that Aunt Equus?

PURR5T3PH4N13: Not any more!

74RY: Keep the kids safe! Protect the Blanket Keeper!

Command//D35CR1PT10N: Everyone sprints out of the living room and into the kitchen. Goose holds Cafe but hands them off to her mother. Aunt Equus captures Goose into the darkness.

Command//70C4T10N: They all stop at the staircase, the refrigerator door opens. Trash covering the floor around them. A creature feasting on leftovers, buried in the fridge.

Command//P3R50N: Uncle Hogg has blue eyes and blonde hair, large tusks and leathery skin. He wears a white stained tank top, pink pajama pants, and pig slippers.

K33P3R: What's the plan here, because I didn't sign up for this!



K1DD: Dad, why do they look like that?

74RY: No time for explanations. We need to defend ourselves!

WUFF735: I got a spatula...

PURR5T3PH4N13: Perfect, I know what's cooking!

Command//D35CR1PT10N: Purrstephanie hands Cafe to Lary. She and Wuffles take out pots and pans to throw at Uncle Hogg. Aunt Equus slowly creeps toward them, stopped by a frying pan, hitting her in the face from her sister-in-law. Uncle Hogg wakes up, attacking Purrstephanie from behind, she then morphs into his skin. The remaining survivors exit from the front of the house.

Command//70C4T10N: Outside, a grassy field with mud spots. Lary places Cafe onto Cuddle's arms. Inside, Uncle Hogg and Aunt Equus try to break down the front door. Lary barricades the door with his body.

L4RY: Go, get out of here!

K1DD: What are you doing? They'll escape from the other side!

L4RY: They're a captive audience by now! Find somewhere safe. Don't worry, I'll find you.

Command//D35CR1PT10N: Uncle Hogg's arm breaks through the door's window, snatching Lary. The Blanket Keeper and his Followers get a head start. Kidd, running behind them, looks back at the now vacant house. Ms. Crumpet jumps off of Kidd's shoulders and onto Wuffles. Kidd's foot is trapped in the mud, the Blanket Keeper going back to save him.

K33P3R: It's all right. Grab my hand!

K1DD: I can't do it. Go on without me!

T3DDY: We're not leaving you behind!

Command//D35CR1PT10N: The Followers pull Kidd from the mud, his leg detached with no physical pain. Kidd continues to run away, slowly falling apart, piece by piece. The Followers try to put together the puppet's body parts, before sinking into the mud.

T3DDY: Four more gone...

K33P3R: This happens on a regular basis?

WUFF735: Of course it does! As long as the Seven Creatures of Darkness aren't contained, Darkness will expand.

T3DDY: Don't worry, Keeper. You'll be able to stop them.

K33P3R: I'll try my best. What will we do with Cafe?

Command//D35CR1PT10N: Cafe tries to struggle out of Cuddle's arms, becoming increasingly warmer. They're melting. Cuddles rocks Cafe in hopes to calm them down.

C4F3: Ca-Cafe! Ca-Kafe, Ka-Kafe!

CUDD735: Shhh, It's okay. Close your eyes, it's just a bad dream...

Command//D35CR1PT10N: Cafe melts into clumps of clay, falling off of Cuddles.

WUFF735: And just like that, gone.

K33P3R: They'll come back! Right?

T3DDY: Not if we stand here!

CUDD735: There's no place else to go! Who knows if Fort Blanket is even safe?

T3DDY: What other options do we have?

Command//D35CR1PT10N: Ms. Crumpet snags on Wuffle's chef hat, grabbing his attention. She leaps down pointing in the general direction on where to go.

WUFF735: I think the monkey's telling us something?

K33P3R: Is it dying on us too?

T3DDY: I think she's giving us directions.

Command//D35CR1PT10N: The Blanket Keeper and his Followers look up at the sky. The Growthful Gardens towering over them.

ANNEKA JENKINS '24

HANDYMAN

Credence watched the boy wrestle with his sheets, waking from nightmares that plagued him like fleas on a rat's back. All through the night he observed the sweat render the boy's face slick and slimy, eyes twitching in every which way beneath heavy eyelids. Credence noted his breath hasten and muscles tense, causing his button-down to pull at the seams. He was fearful that one of these days the buttons would snap off, getting lost among the other trinkets that littered the boy's bedroom floor.

Credence stood only a couple millimeters high, not nearly tall enough to pick up even a mote of dust covering the unopened books that lay on the boy's shelves, waiting to be read. *Oh, jiminy*, he thought to himself, adjusting the straps of his blue and white striped, corduroy utility overalls, running his pinky along the deep scar that sat at the bridge of his nose. It was disfigured, broken on the job in his youth. Credence was systematic, careful, thoughtful, precise. Precision was everything in his line of work, and only the most skilled were awarded his position.

Credence reached for the red toolbox behind him, opening its lid, checking to see that all the instruments were there: a place for everything, and everything in its place. Waiting patiently, he stood on the ledge until the digital clock on the boy's cluttered bedside table showed 3:00 am. Then, he shimmied down the metal shelf supports until he reached the multicolored patterned oriental carpet. This took considerable effort given his size, and by the time he reached the boy's pillow, his little legs began to buckle and his brow quivered in the way it usually does when he was exhausted.

Credence wasted no time getting to work, climbing into the boy's ear. Down the vast canal of tissue, and in through the tubes leading to the boy's cranium, the sweet spot for all thought and ideas. When you were a beginner, it was easy to get lost, so, you had to keep track of where you've entered and where you've gone. A recreational cartographer when he wasn't on the job, Credence pulled out the map he had illustrated, displaying intricate instructions that could lead him straight to the boy's dreams, wishes, and fondest memories. A professional, he didn't worry about negotiating the first few layers of the mind: this is where most brains appeared the same.

Credence took a left turn once he emerged on the other side of the boy's eardrum, trudging through sticky earwax sludge until he reached the fleshy door guarding the network of channels he was here to fix. Seizing the smallest key from the ring attached to his thick canvas belt, Credence inserted it into the weathered brass lock. He gave the knob a twist, and shook the resistant door open. Peering into the darkness, it was clear no maintenance had been done here in years.

Credence took pity on the boy, whose mind had been neglected for too long, taking it upon himself to wipe away dashed hopes, cleaning the Corridor of Disappointment as he passed. With each step, the light behind him dimmed to a faint glow, Credence knew this was the time to pop open his case. He squatted with his knees resting over his ankles, unlatching the lid to reveal his treasure trove of appliances. A sly smile appeared on his face as he proudly appreciated his organizational skills.

Credence pulled out his Hammacher Schlemmer micro flashlight and a handheld Swiffer, moving deeper into the auditory canal. Down, down, down he descended, passing the remnants of a once burning ambition for baseball the boy used to harbor. It lingered against the walls, soon to disintegrate into ear soot. Sympathetically, Credence watched ambition crying out for salvation. A merciful creature, he approached with his Swiffer, and gently brushed it over its surface. Ambition perished into a cloud of ash, wafting its way far from the boy's concerns, and back out of the cochlea. Before he continued, Credence whispered a soft prayer for ambition, grieving that it had turned to nothing just as quickly as it had once materialized.

Credence knew that there was more housekeeping to be done. A sudden shift in temperature caused what little hair he had to stand erect on the back of his freckled neck. Prepared for this situation, he wrapped himself in the standard, corporate issued red wool scarf that every HandyMan carried. Standing at the threshold of the Vestibule of the Subconscious, he reviewed his map. For the lucky, this space was tame and amicable, a cozy hall filled with unimaginable promise. For the less fortunate, like the job at hand, a desolate cavern, absent of warmth or shelter, a wasteland of imagination. This sad little fellow was devoid of uplifting spirit, his inner mind so cold that even Credence's trusty scarf could not withstand the frigid climate.

Credence stepped carefully over Dreams turned sour and Memories long forgotten. Stalactites hanging from the cavern's ceiling were home to the rare

Brain Bat, who occasionally swooped down to devour remnants of the past, discarded in an attempt to dispose of all recollection. The Brain Bats didn't disturb Credence as they were doing their part in getting rid of useless debris. A black muck oozed from fissures in the cave's floor, creating a stench that, to an untrained nose, would burn holes in one's nostrils.

Credence tread lightly, careful to avoid the black liquid that seemed to destroy all that it touched, eventually arriving at a thick hatch embedded in the floor. Its rusted handle, warm to the touch, a stark contrast to the ice-cold air. The ground shook along with a reverberating thrum produced from what lay on the other side. No need to check his map, Credence had reached the core. Finding a dry patch for his box, he pulled out red leather gloves, weathered from use, slipping them on before taking hold.

Credence lifted it open in one fell swoop and dropped swiftly into the chamber below. His small feet, encased in heavy work clogs, sank into the soft ground. He worked to the dull beating rhythm of the room. In front of him, a gargantuan motherboard, tangled in a mass of chaotic wiring. The contraption breathed, producing steam with squeaks and creaks, occasionally spitting out dysfunctional parts. Credence lifted the fallen fuses and starters in an effort to fully calculate the weight of the problem. He noticed that a couple of circuit breakers were out of place along with chipped CPU and dented battery backup, also a slow-running cooling fan; calmly, but decidedly, he readjusted these parts with the appropriate tools.

Credence's work was now complete. He hoisted himself from the humid interior onto pillowy pink flesh. Nimbly, he tiptoed across the boy's quilted blanket, lowered himself to the carpet, and rushed to exit out the open window. Looking back, he was certain he saw a tiny smile forming on the boy's lips as he moved on to his next case.



## THE SILVER MAN

On the side of a great forested mountain, an old man built strong like the conifers around him, sat cross-legged upon a large stone by the edge of a silver brook that trickled over a bed of moss. Deep set, kind eyes were half-closed beneath a tangle of graying eyebrows, matching the lustrous, coiled hair spilling over two amply proportioned ears, which allowed him to hear the trills and warbles all around. For him, the otherwise tranquil forest was a constant crescendo of activity filled with the lullabies of orioles, trappings of deer hooves, gnawings of rabbits, and even the silent scritch-scratching of spiders weaving their silken webs. He wore a simple blue tunic, tied at the waist with a single gold string, rumored to have been showered upon by the stars. Beloved by every creature, it was only right they saw him as their guardian.

He had few possessions, among them, a pocket watch, fishing net, and a large wooden bowl, which he carried with him in a green pouch. On most days, he traveled barefoot making observations about new plants and dazzling insects. He also checked on the wellbeing of the pond that sat at the base of the mountain, ensuring that its population of fish didn't change drastically, or that the roots of baby lily pads were not choked by invasive weeds. His favorite pastime was visiting the cave of the giant red bear, called Ove.

Ove, old and wise, had lived on the mountain since its creation. With his thick snout he stacked small rocks on top of one another, building up the land slowly. Over time, the pile became a mound, and the mound a hill, and the hill the mountain, until eventually, it had blossomed into the forest that it was now. The old man loved the bear, for he had created the oasis he called home. In his youth he spent his days trailing behind Ove, closely observing him as he moved about the trees, existing peacefully among the other animals; he knew one day it would be his duty to watch out for them.

As the man sat meditatively, thinking about Ove, he recalled the day of the great meteor shower, visible from a clearing beyond a grove of golden Aspens. This was a rare occurrence, and it was crucial he did not miss it. He couldn't help but have a fascination for the movement of the stars. It all began on an August night, laying in grass warmed by a day of brutal sun:

"You know, everything I know was told to me by the stars," Ove said as they watched the constellations in the dark sky. The young man turned to him, puzzled.

"They've told you everything you know?"

"Precisely."

The young man sat quietly for a few moments before questioning him again.

"How could that be so?"

"On a night quite like this one, I traveled to the summit of the mountain. When I reached the top I saw that there was an unusual constellation that I was not used to seeing in the summer sky. As I watched it, the stars shifted, never forming a familiar configuration. They danced this way until suddenly, it seemed as if they were raining down on me, pushing their way through the atmosphere, dripping like golden pearls through a black sea. They glistened, creating a strange, chiming sound. I lifted my ears up to them, listening closely to hear what they were saying. Softly, they whispered answers to mysterious secrets. With stellar clarity, they conveyed my life's purpose; why it had been I who built this." Ove stopped his story there, gazing up into the night without looking in the young man's direction; his friend was left with many questions.

"What did they say? Will I ever understand the stars, get to know the secrets of the universe? Tell me, I must know!" His kind eyes shone in the dark, eager to possess Ove's knowledge.

"Regrettably, I cannot share that with you. I have sworn to never reveal what the stars told me. However, I will tell you this. If you listen closely, one day you will hear it too." Ove stood, his red fur rustling in the warm breeze as he walked slowly back to his cave.

For each day that has passed, the old man has spent his time listening intently to the world around him in hopes of learning the secret of the stars. He lives to understand. It is because of Ove, and Ove only, that he is able to live in harmony with nature.

The old man opened his eyes, fully taking in the forest around him. He watched as the pale water poured over smooth stone, carrying with it leaves, twigs, and broken branches. Rising, he stretched his long arms into the air, preparing himself for his walk. Slinging his green pouch over his broad shoulders, the wooden bowl and pocket watch banged together. He began down the dirt path, following the stream along the mountain. The sun

disappeared below the horizon, the sky, a deep azure. His long strides allowed him to cover ground quickly, reaching the aspen grove and clearing beyond in no time.

That evening when the woods darkened, the old man came to rest against an old pine on the mountain's summit. Above, a shooting star—whose trajectory he followed in its path across a glistening necklace of sky—revealed Ove's secret that he long searched for. Twilight reflecting in his eyes, it was just as the great bear had said; a celestial shower began far above the low hanging clouds, producing such a sound incomparable to any the old man had ever heard. Taking his final breath, he was at peace.





## MEMOIR

**ROBIN LINDEN '26**

**WATCH AND LEARN**

**M**y mother taught me many things growing up, for she thought it was her job to teach me, and she did very well when given a job. She taught me how stocks work, what a mortgage is, how to hold my pencil, how to bake a pie, how to make a friend, and how to fold my clothes. She taught me how to cook, why we need to pay bills, why we should eat vegetables, why it's important to speak your mind, how to speak your mind, and how to tie shoes, though that came much earlier. She taught me almost everything I know, but the most important lesson I ever learned from her was that I could do or be anything I wanted to. This thought was repeated to me many times over my childhood, and I was always certain that I could love, work, or do anything I wanted. She taught me that there would always be consequences for my actions. I was never told I had to be a doctor or a lawyer, but was assured that anything I wanted to be was mine as long as I worked hard and understood that I should bear final responsibility. I was taught these valuable lessons not only through words, but also through watching my mom.

My mother is the bravest person I know. She played every role in my life, because I grew up without a father. My mother pays the bills, every single part of childcare, she cooks for us, she drives us to school and to anywhere else we want, and she teaches us life's valuable lessons. She also acts like a dad, like how anytime I broke something she knew how to fix it, and how she always yelled at the TV during football games. She also did all of this while working a full-time job, since she owns an animal hospital, and is now in the business of buying, fixing, and then selling houses. She showed up to my field trips, she braided my hair, she cooked my dinner and read me a book every night. And every day, even if I was already asleep, she would come into my room and tell me she loved me to the moon and back. This is where I learned that I could do anything I put my mind to, from watching my mom do everything she put her mind to.

I learned to carry her grace and work ethic like my own, the same way I carry every other part of her. My face is traced with the same smile lines that appear on hers, my eye bags darken the way hers do. And I was never ashamed of my eye bags, because I knew it took a lot to earn them. I carry my mother's

love of clean sheets, my mother's tedious anxiety, her pickiness about art. I carry her ideas, her love of literature, her connection with animals, her sweet but focused demeanor, and her tendency to fall asleep at 9:30 pm. And to carry Jane's gifts was a gift in itself. To be mothered by her is my greatest gift, to learn her ways and carry them like my own has been a great inspiration. And one day, I hope to teach my children that there are no preconceived expectations, nothing they have to be or do, just as my mother taught me.

JACQUELYN SONG '24  
GRANDMA'S THUMBS

Second Grade

“H arvard. MIT. Harvard. MIT.”  
Grandma’s thumbs, warm and callused, climb one-after-the-other up my inner arm. When tendons shift beneath her light pressure, tingling travels to my skull. Unfinished cross-stitch sits in her lap—*fu*, the Chinese character for wealth, rendered in startling scarlet and gold. She smells of washed clothes and lemon cough drops, hinted with an old-lady scent between sweet, sour, tangy.

At the crook of my elbow, she accelerates her ascent: “Harvard. MIT. Harvard.”

“MIT. Harvard.” My bicep now... “MIT.”

She squeezes my shoulder, and anticipation straightens my posture.

“*Harvard!*” A triumphant whoop.

I blink twice, tracing the skin where her touch lingers. Out of all of our leg-swinging, domino-pulling, poetry-reciting games, the climbing thumbs have always been my favorite—so simple, so direct, and there’s just no losing. Whether she ultimately lands on Harvard or MIT, Grandma beams as if I’ve brought honor to the family, dark eyes crinkling in the smile I’ve inherited.

“Victory!” I declare, puffing out my chest.

Grandma laughs. I don’t know what’s funny, but her laughter makes it so; I double over alongside her. Warmth floods my stomach. Pulling me into her lap, she asks in Mandarin: “Lin Lin, how do you say Harvard in English?”

“*Ha-fuo?*” I echo her pronunciation, appreciating how softened consonants fit in my mouth. “It’s like—” I shift accents abruptly. “*HAHR-verd*. Harvard.”

“Her-ver,” she tries. A grin tugs at the corners of my lips. Though the attempt is far off, there’s something inexplicably satisfying about her English. She handles words with the sharp yet deft precision of embroidery, puncturing every syllable with the back of her throat.

“Close,” I offer.

“Ha-va.”

“Closer.”

“Her-var.”

“Just like that!” I exclaim, bouncing in the chair.

Grandma chuckles, wrapping supple arms around my waist. I lean into her hand-knit sweater, loose threads tickling the nape of my neck. Switching back to Mandarin, her voice is just as piercing: “Lin Lin bao, do you want to go to Her-var?”

I nod fiercely. Grandma nods back, adopting a solemn air. “That’s good. Your cousin Eric’s in Duke. Your sister will go to MIT, and you’ll go to Harvard! You’re so smart...what other family’s child could recite poetry at such a young age?” She swivels her head, as if looking for rival granddaughters who’d memorized Li Bai’s “Moonlight.” Satisfied with a lack of competition, she concludes, “Study hard, get good test scores, and you’ll make it for sure.”

“Really?”

She rests her chin on my college-touched shoulder. “No matter what, gold shines.”

We look at each other and nod in unison, this time with resolution. I feel like I’ve sealed a deal, though I haven’t seen the terms. Either way, Grandma spins around to her ancient desktop, restarting her game of Spider. As she reshuffles, pairing black kings and red queens, I spring off of her lap, tottering down the hall. From my closet’s far reaches, I recover my Harvard T-shirt—rough textile, boxy letters, crimson shield. I pull it over my head. Stiff, oversized...but no matter.

The next day, I fasten my jacket around my waist, exposing red-wine elegance to a sea of Justice pinks and Tom Brady blues. During the Silent Reading period, I thrust my chest out purposefully, flaunting my future over a one-on-one meeting with Ms. Connolly. After asking a few questions on *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief*, mint-green nails recoil from her clipboard.

She bends down, surveying my shirt. “You want to go there?”

I debate between the thumb game’s two options, then, rationally, pass my verdict: “Well, my sister’s going to MIT, so I guess...that leaves me Harvard.”

Ms. Connolly stares for a heartbeat. An ironic laugh bubbles out of scarlet lips. I don’t know what’s funny, but her laughter makes it so; I trace the letters, filling my heart with humor as well.

### Seventh Grade

When my sister's college acceptance letter arrives, a flame reignites in the family. Brown PLME! Eight-year package! Less than one hundred people accepted per year—a lower rate than even Harvard. Historic, holistic, prestigious...I don't know the words, but they sound expensive, like how restaurants describe dishes as “caramelized” or “succulent.”

Across the hall, my sister laughs so hard she cries; my father just cries; and the two sink to the floor, hugging tightly as Mom pulls out her phone, posting the Brown coat-of-arms to WeChat. I stand at the door, smile pinned to my face. Every word, English, Mandarin, honey-filled, viscous. *Good job! I knew it! Was there even a question?*

Afterwards, when the honey jar is emptied, I dig out my Harvard shirt, tracing contours of faded block letters. I recall my sister shut in her room, shoulders strained, fingers clattering keys; then, listless in my lap, lips dry from dehydration, dark circles weighing down her eyes; then, asleep at last, tossing and turning, 2AM sighs, every exhale a burden. *Gold shines*, Grandma avowed. But, why is gold so heavy? Why must suffering precede its shining?

I'm only halfway there, yet every hour drags. So many evenings I've abandoned to piano, flute, swimming, Chinese, SAT Prep, Precalc, work, test, work. So many tears I've shed for missed homework, ninety-nine percents, ink blotches where lines should run smooth. So many moments I've despised my parents for telling me to “take a break,” my sister for receiving awards I'll never deserve, myself, most of all, for each transient failure that leaves lips bitten, nights restless, fingers picked to scars.

I'm not sure if I've suffered. If I'm allowed to call it suffering. After all, everyone tells me, keep calm, keep quiet, keep modest, don't overstep bounds, be careful what you say, let effort shine for itself, struggle hard, but keep it down, because struggle is expected, no pain no gain, grit your teeth, just deal with it, your problems, petty, your stress, self-induced, and once you've polished and perfected every aspect of yourself...the reward is just around the corner.

What reward? A ride down the Eastern seaboard has taught me of Princeton, Tufts, Cornell—universities abound! Yet, up until Brown PLME shoved Harvard off its pedestal, had I considered any of them? What made them lesser than “gold”?

Really...what was Harvard? The Chinese-American dream? The reason Mom and Dad left Shandong for cramped apartments and fifty-cent cabbages? Heaven for academic hell?

Realization seizes me. The world is vast, too vast for me, too vast for a thumb on the shoulder to encompass. Shouldn't I feel free? Yet, my heart flies, sinks, plummets. Frustration drowns the night's sweetness, leaving me choking on my future, sketching across the skin that Grandma's thumbs once traced so lovingly. Burning inside, I want to call her, snap, shout, demand why she deceived me.

Midnight drags to morning. Shame trickles through the shutters, dissipating the dark remnants of rage. In the end, I did this to myself. I bound my own wrists, squandered my future, abandoned everything for the chase. Who was I...except what I'd polished and where I shone?

The next morning, I thrust my Harvard shirt to Dad's feet. "It's too small!"

"All right," he chuckles, still high on Brown-PLME pride. "We'll buy a new one."

"No," I scowl. "I hate Harvard."

### Eleventh Grade

Summertime dapples Harvard Square in gold. Emerging from the Red Line, sudden déjà vu strikes. Memories like light italicize park benches, cobblestone streets, rustic bookstores and boutiques. On the green, John Harvard stolidly observes the shifting crowd. When I was five, Dad hoisted me upon his shoulders, pressing my palm against Harvard's shiny foot. Later, in the car, I held my fingertips close to my nose, sniffing the acrid remnants of rust, winter, thens and theres.

Now, I drop my bag, retrieve my laptop, and open a blank Google Doc. A tentative header surfaces in 12-point, double-spaced, Times New Roman:

*Superheroes and Power*

*Create a Superhero*

Lately, when I'm lying awake at 2AM, my thoughts wander to Harvard Summer School. Sitting in the second-to-last row on the third floor of 1 Story Street. Arguing over Killmonger's morality and Doctor Haber's savior complex. Playing 'The Chocolate'—a Lindor-flavored, King-Midas-esque superheroine named after The Thing—during chaotic RPG sessions.



Superheroes. Common, colorful, cartoonish—cheap thrills for a cheap audience. Yet, they’ve transcended fifty-cent strips to billion-dollar blockbusters, evolving into icons, cultures, larger-than-life allegories. They’re the quintessential American protagonists, brave and just. Back in middle school, after my sister’s admission to Brown, I idolized them. Soaring through *The Avengers* and *Justice League*, I swore I’d become just as loud, proud, carefree. I’d reclaim my voice from Harvard.

Now, somehow, I value silence. The deeper I venture into American media, the more ‘brave’ and ‘just’ feel like excuses for reckless and self-righteous. Perhaps I’m regressing; every year, I’m less loud, proud, superheroic. And yet, through trying and failing, I’ve learned some things about myself:

Precalc will always be miserable, but Calculus is more than worth it.

Piano’s best enjoyed off-stage, in an empty room on a rainy day.

And Harvard, the thief of autonomy, the reckoning of childhood, the villain that trapped me in shining, then scolded me, over and over, you’re too stiff, too perfect, too boring, bland, blank...Harvard’s the first place where “smart” doesn’t make me flinch. Where I’ve felt safe to open my mouth, and some people listen, and when I sit back down, victory fills my chest, pulling a smile.

My phone rings. Eagerly, I shut my laptop. The assignment’s due in three days. What’s the shame in pushing it a bit longer? Swiping into WeChat, I answer Grandma’s call, easing back into the plastic chair. As her grainy face flickers to life, I exclaim: “*Qin niang!*”

“*Lin Lin ah!*” she calls back. “Where are you?”

“*Ha-fuo,*” I respond, tilting the camera up. “Hey, do you still remember the thumb game?”

In China, it’s late; Grandma lies in bed, eyelids heavy, glitching in and out. Yet, as we reminisce shared years in America, her voice is swift and piercing, drawing me back to evenings in her lap, playing Spider on the ancient desktop as her thumbs mapped the future onto my arm.

Inevitably, conversation lands back on exams, classes, college apps, but I deflect with small talk about Harvard, and the two of us subside into easy laughter. Admittedly, I’d once considered giving her the old ‘glorifying Ivy Leagues is a pretty toxic mindset’ spiel, but...from Grandma’s vantage point across the Atlantic, *Ha-fuo* is the only future in sight. Why fault her for giving it to me?

Besides, I'm here, aren't I? Red Line and Square. Salty air, tangled roads, pricey left-hand mugs. X-Men and George Orr rushing across the pages. Even if it's not 'the future,' *Ha-fuo's* a real place. And even if I'm too quiet, or modest, or withdrawn to save the world...I'm a real person.

"Work hard," Grandma reminds me, "but don't overwork yourself."

"*Zhi dao le!*" I beam back. *I know.*

As I hang up, my eyes drift to the Coop. Books and hoodies. Merchandise spills from every shelf and rack. On a whim, I jump to my feet, pushing through the crowd until I'm right before the display case, eyes reflected in maroon fabric, white letters, crimson shield.

Second grade tugs on my sleeve, urging me to buy the whole store. Seventh grade shakes her head, scolding me for selling my soul. I unclip my wallet. Heave a sigh. College stores are always just short of unaffordable...and I'm just short of broke. Still, why not wander? Get lost for a while?

Lifting my chin, I step across the threshold.

**SOPHIA BLYTHE '23**

**85 CONGDON**

The car stopped in front of a pale yellow house on top of a hill, overlooking our new home, Providence; a city I had never visited before. We were moving because Mom got a new job, all was fresh and exciting.

I ached to free myself from my car seat and see my new room. Yes, that's right, I was getting my own room. I had hoped that the walls would be painted hot pink, I soon found out they were merely toothpaste white. But even that couldn't dash my enthusiasm. On my best behavior for the entire ride, I made sure not to annoy William, my older brother, or complain too much about how bored I was. The Subaru smelled of coffee, mint chewing gum, and peanut butter M&Ms. My nose crinkled, I detested those smells.

Getting out of the car and entering the house, I was impressed by its size. Reflecting on it now, I realize it was normal-sized, but compared to our minuscule apartment off East End Avenue in Manhattan, the house was a mansion. There was space in the kitchen to dance and cook simultaneously, the living room was enormous, offering endless possibilities for childhood games, and there were stairs! I couldn't believe it. I wasn't sure how they worked, I had to crawl up or be carried, and I couldn't easily get down on my own. It took months until I figured it out.

There is something about 85 Congdon that sparked my imagination, allowing me to grow. Who knows if it was the fresh air or a change of scenery, but the house and the surrounding area became my own, home to games, adventures, and new learning experiences. My competitive side developed in after-dinner contests. My dad instructed my brother and me in the complexity of balancing. Our need to win serving as his entertainment. We worked hard for bragging rights and earning our nightly Tate chocolate chip cookie, which we savored in our cookie corners. Mine was by the pantry. The backyard, which was two stories, became my secret garden. I tended to the weeds, and the rocks on the second level, forming the shape of a key in my mind, unlocking an imaginary world in which I was Queen defending my castle. Across the street, at Prospect Park, I learned to climb an old maple. I sprained a knee and scraped an elbow along the way, but I got back up again. The park provided a panoramic view of Providence, the city, perfectly-sized for me.

Seated at the dining room table, my real education began. I learned to read and write, and scribbled my first stories. The words are engraved on the surface of the table. The first few stories were mimics of Narnia and Nancy Drew. I tried my hand at fantasy stories with Mermaids, but they never turned out how I imagined them. But, I always returned to the table to learn. I expressed my ideas at dinner, asking questions that may have been too broad for my parents to answer. My dad found a video he took of William and me, I didn't know he was recording, but I was talking about reincarnation at the age of six. My nagging question was why did we have to learn things all over again in a new life? I think it still is a valid question!

We soon grew out of the house. It served us well for seven years, but a new family needed to call it home, and a new young girl needed to explore its corners, create imaginary games, and learn within and outside its walls.

I owe my positive experience at 85 Congdon to my parents. They made the transition from New York to Providence smooth, and made our new home a place where we could discover ourselves. They indulged in our imaginary games and fantastical ideas. Consoled us when tears streamed down our cheeks. It wouldn't have felt like home without them. They could have chosen another house in Providence and made it home, but I am glad they chose that pale yellow house on top of College Hill, that looks magical in the winter, covered in snow and stunning in the spring, decorated with lilies of the valley.

I still walk by our old house; we only moved a few streets away. I don't miss that house anymore, but I long for my innocence. If nostalgia were a place, it would be 85 Congdon. When I walk by, I smile, recalling all the good times, but then my heart is heavy because I realize my childhood is over. I miss school days filled with crafts and projects, simple friendships when you just say hello, lunchtime conversations about Disney shows—no academic stress, eating ice cream simply for the sake of it and not worrying about the calories. I miss it all.

We moved out on my eleventh birthday. I greeted a new age and said goodbye to my childhood home on the same day. I left what was familiar and entered a topsy-turvy world, on the cusp of womanhood. School was then filled with drama and boys, I still thought they were gross, but yet I was developing feelings. Suddenly, I felt more pressure to succeed and strived for A's. Friendships weren't easy anymore either. I didn't realize how ruthless teenage girls could be. They'll be nice to your face and then talk viciously about

you behind your back. My body began to change too, and I entered into the world of unhealthy body image issues and twisted relationships with food. I'm still living there; I hope to move out soon. I don't have my nightly Tate chocolate chip cookie anymore or a cookie corner, now I just overthink what I eat and regret eating sweet treats that once brought me joy. Sometimes when I walk by our old house, I want to ring the doorbell and hope little me answers. I want to embrace her, tell her not to worry about what people think, and avoid comparing herself to others. She's great just the way she is. But I know she won't answer the door. She is probably out playing in the backyard, pretending to be Lucy Pevensie from Narnia. Then I think I should leave a note, slide it through the mail slot. But I realize she will be stronger if she figures it out on her own. If I did send it, I would make sure to say "cherish your time in 85 Congdon."

I've now lived at 65 Keene Street for seven years. The same amount of time I lived in 85 Congdon. Congdon was where my childhood lives, but Keene is where I have grown into a young woman. Learned, loved, lost, but also where I have discovered a more mature me. Both homes have shaped who I am, with still room to grow. I go off to college next year, and as I write this, I still don't know where that will be. My younger self would've had difficulty tolerating the uncertainty. Still, even now, a challenge, maybe that will change with my next home. I'm open, ready to go.

SAMANTHA FLUM '23  
UNDER THE SURFACE

I've known how to count to 500 since I first learned how to swim. While most kids demonstrated their age on fingers, I kept track of laps in my mind until I reached the number that Coach Ray shouted out from the deck. I had to memorize terms quickly—a 500 is twenty laps, a 50 two; arms above my head, squeezed behind my ears, in a push off is *streamline*; when the clock shows double zero, that's the *top*. By the time I joined my first competitive swim team at seven, I was already fluent in the language of swimming.

The Adirondack Aquatic Club became the most important thing in my life. The hot, almost un-breathable facility and freezing cold water was where I spent mornings and late nights. Swim practice never happened during the day, it was either before sunrise or after dark. Swimming was something I loved, but also hated. Every time I got into the water, and pushed myself harder than the last, I felt a rush of excitement. But like everything that becomes mandated by routine, going to practice eventually lost its thrall. Still, I quickly learned that swimming was something that I was good at, and it became a large part of my identity.

Swimming, is all about accomplishment. In order to improve, coaches instilled the importance of achieving goals. Sometimes, it was that I needed to do more dolphin-kicks under water, or pass the person in front of me, becoming lane-leader. Often, although I wouldn't admit it to my coach, my immediate objective was just to finish the session, so I could go home and take a nap. But when it came down to it, the truth is that swimming was all about time. I'd never known how long a five second break could be until I held onto the wall, staring at the pace clock, watching the large red hand move in slow motion after sprinting nine out of ten 100s. Five seconds was a lifetime. During races, time often slowed to a crawl. And yet, in every other part of my life, I wanted to speed things up.

I was eager to grow up, to be like the upperclassmen who drove themselves to practice, sharing gossip. I compared myself to other teammates, wishing I could be as fast, or as "cool." I remember the first time my mom dropped me off in the round-about at the front of my practice pool. Hot-pink mesh bag in my left hand, and member scan card in my right, I made my way

through the front desk and into the locker room. I wish I could say I walked in like I owned the place, but in truth, it was one of my first moments of being on my own; I was terrified.

In 2016, when I was twelve, AAC, my first and favorite swim team, shut down. A dispute between the owner of the club and the head coach was the only information we were given. At the time, I didn't realize how much this would affect me. It meant I had to find another club. Over the course of the next five years, I joined three, not staying longer than a year in any, until I finally joined the Wheeler team in freshman year, quitting club swimming once and for all, a choice that no longer kept me up at night.

Depending on how you look at it, swimming could be either the worst, or the best sport for an over-thinker. In truth, 95% of practice time is spent swimming, the other 5% on the wall listening to instructions or talking with friends. When I'm swimming, it's just the water and me. I can't count the times someone's been yelling at me while swimming and I've simply not heard them. When you are in the water, the only person you are connected with is yourself, both body and mind. Swimming gave me the perfect opportunity to communicate with myself, something I already did often. I would rehearse arguments, and go over a pros and cons list. Sometimes, I told myself to study or go over what I should write on a school assignment. Most of the time, those things would be short-lived. I would quickly realize I was doing the wrong stroke or swam one too many laps because I was too much in my head, and I would have to knock it off. Because of that, I often found that even if I went into the pool with a nagging worry, somehow by the end I would have forgotten it, even if my mind planned to rehash it for the entire practice.

In order to train and get better, I had to manage the amount of thinking I was doing. Once you are taught how to swim, it's easy. But in order to improve technique, you have to pay attention to the small things, not letting your arms and legs go based on muscle memory. That all stops in a race—every swimmer knows the only way you are going to do well is to shut your brain down. In a thirty-second event, the last thing you want to do is think about your stroke. Or worse, try and stop just because your body aches. On my third swim team, the highly competitive Bluefish, we had frequent talks about psychology. Coaches believed that swimming was all about attitude. That all of us could physically endure what we put ourselves through in the race, and our biggest obstacle was ourselves. Now, I understand that as much as that was true in

swimming, it could be applied to everything in life. The ability to completely shut down all those voices in my head, and just let myself go, is something I still work on everyday, both in and out of the pool.

Looking back, I try to think about all the reasons why none of those clubs in between AAC and Wheeler worked for me. Maybe if AAC had never shut down, I would still be swimming six days a week, getting recruited for a college team. Although I started to swim because it was something I could do for myself, I quickly realized that it wasn't just about me. People think that because swimming events are individual, that the whole sport is about yourself. And while it's true that I spent two hours of every practice alone, it was that single minute of conversation with my friends that, in the end, made it all worthwhile. The tidbits of information that would be shared and picked-up, each time we touched the wall. And though we were always told to "only swim against ourselves," I'll forever remember the motivation and happiness I felt competing against one of my best friends, no matter who won. And when my teammates weren't swimming next to me, I could count on them to be at the end of the lane, cheering me on, even though I couldn't hear a word. All it took was that one look before the flip when I knew they were with me the whole race. Because of this, it was hard to enjoy the sport when I didn't have a supportive team to spend my time with. I struggled to find myself and my role on any team after AAC. I moved around teams so much that I never had the chance to really bond with other members.

For a while, I had a best friend on Bluefish. Laure, a seventh grader when I was only in sixth, was everything I wanted to be. She was tall and skinny and wore the smallest size swim suit, pulling off all the different styles of Joyln as if they were made for her. She was my biggest competition in and out of the pool. Oftentimes, we swam against each other and once we touched the wall at the exact same time. But Laura didn't value our friendship as much as I did. I learned from her the type of teammate and friend that I didn't want to be. While I was always going above and beyond, giving her gifts for small holidays, and always listening to whatever she had going on, she would ignore me, and talk behind my back. Laura was the type of person who I've met more than once in my life since then, who tells everyone constantly that she loves them, making them feel special. But her actions always prove the opposite. This was the first time I'd made friends with a "mean girl," and because I so desperately wanted her to like me, I became one too. Laura would make fun of the way



people looked, or swam, and in turn I would join in, seeking her approval. We had other friends on the team, but she didn't like them as much as me, I thought, evident by the fact that she was always talking badly about them. And to feel closer to her, I went along with it. One time, another girl wanted to hang out with us, but Laura didn't want her to come. We went to lunch with her, and then had her mom pick her up, while Laura and I continued hanging out and had a sleepover. When our friend asked us about it, we lied, and I still feel badly about it. But I didn't back then. At least not enough to put my foot down, and stand up against her. Once, Laura and I swam against each other in the 500 freestyle. Although I was in lane one and she was four lanes over, I looked every other breath to see where she was. I wouldn't lose sight of her. When we finished the race, my coach, Greg, said to me, "you should have gone faster!" I realized he was right. I hadn't reached my full potential because I was too focused on Laura.

It wouldn't be fair to anyone, including myself, to give Laura all the credit for why Bluefish didn't work. For a while, she was the one reason I stayed, texting her every day before practice, making sure she was going to be there. But when I came home crying because I heard her spreading a rumor about me, I had to reassess what was happening.

I was spending hours on end in an outdated facility that had railings covered in rust (my biggest fear at the time). I anxiously anticipated practice, changing what I ate and what I did, so I wouldn't have a recurring stomach ache, or feel drained of energy. I was doing something I didn't like anymore because I thought that my friends and family would be disappointed if I stopped.

At 13 years-old, I was burnt out. The week that I quit, Laura and I had gotten in a huge fight. Now, I can't even remember why. We stopped changing together in the locker room, or talking in practice at all. She became best friends with the girl she supposedly hated. I had been replaced. So I didn't tell her I was planning on leaving. Instead, I showed up to the Roger Williams meet at 6am and swam my last race for Bluefish. That was the day that Laura finally talked to me again. We didn't really make up, but we broke the silence, shared a laugh. And that was when I told her it was my last meet. She hugged me, asking me to stay, and for a minute, I felt I had made a mistake.

I hadn't. I spent my eighth grade year, hanging out with friends who treated me right, and I had my afternoons free to do whatever I wanted. I

worked on myself, taking time to relax. I tried different things for exercise, like running, joining a yoga class, and working with a trainer. But none of those things made me enjoy sports. Instead they made me hate what I was doing, and miss swimming more.

I missed how naturally swimming came to me. I knew what all the sets meant and when I was going at the right pace. I didn't lose my breath after five minutes like I did when running. I wanted to get back in the pool, only this time I knew the stakes. Freshman year, I joined a YMCA swim team where I went to practice as frequently or infrequently as I choose. I barely went. But it was nice to have that as an option. The thing I was most looking forward to in high school was the Wheeler Swim Team. Every competitive swimmer that I knew raved about it. They said it was low-key and lots of fun.

Wheeler was a commitment, with five out of six practices required, and the pool forty-five minutes from my house. I dedicated a lot of my winter to the sport. And I looked forward to the bus ride to Pods, where we swam. Even though I was only a freshman, I had more experience than many of the upperclassmen, and often got to be in the fastest lanes.

For those three months, swimming became the center of my life again. It was different than the other teams in so many ways. There were people who swam for Wheeler that had never swam before. The range of abilities made the team more welcoming, and less competitive. Before and after practice, we would all squish into the locker room and tell each other about ourselves, offering advice. We were always lending things to one another- an extra cap or a hair brush. When the season came to an end, I remember one of the captains, a senior named Emeline, made us all friendship bracelets in our colors, purple and gold. I couldn't wait to do the same if I became captain.

The pandemic hit right after my first Wheeler season had ended. The entire next season was modified since we were hybrid. We had to wear masks on deck, strategically placing them before we jumped in the pool, so not to confuse them. The lane arrangements had to be moved—now only one person could be at the wall, so others had to tread water in the middle. Through the pandemic, like most people, I lost interacting with others. I missed my friends. So, I felt grateful that I was able to swim.

Some days we would have have morning practices even when school was virtual. I started to go over to my friend Cate's house to do online school. Cate and I had been friends since sixth grade, but towards the end of middle school

we grew apart. I wasn't sure we were going to be friends when we got to high school. But we both joined the swim team.

As soon as swim started, we grew closer. Cate always knew how to brighten a hard practice and it wasn't long before we became best friends. Some days, we had practice that ended an hour before school started. Most people who lived in Providence would go home to get changed. Since I lived in Massachusetts, I would go to Cate's house. After practice, her mother (also the swim coach) would drive us to Starbucks where Cate would get Matcha and I would have a Strawberry Acai Lemonade. Then we would run upstairs, and get ready for school while Cate blasted Taylor Swift from her speakers. Most people would say we were crazy, to do a sport before school that made our hair wet, especially in the winter. But every time Cate and I snuck into assembly late, hair frozen, I thought, *how could anything be better?*

Cate became the one friend my mom routinely let me see during the pandemic. I felt like I was another member of her family. Now, as seniors, Cate and I are the co-captains of the Wheeler Swim team. Over the course of the past four years, I have heard Cate get frustrated, saying she was going to quit. But each year she came back and reminded everyone else to have a positive attitude. Starting next month, Cate and I will go up to the referees before every meet to hear the rules because that is what the captains do. We will lead the "Razzle Dazzle cheer" and make sure everyone is as enthusiastic as we are. We will plan team dinners to Gregg's and I'm sure make a few team Tik Toks. Maybe, even our friendship bracelets will make an appearance.

As I considered colleges, one of the things on my checklist was their swim team. I knew that doing something I enjoy makes a difference. I don't know what the team will be like, but I do know the type of teammate that I'll be: focused, fun-loving, supportive. Swimming continues to be an activity I love. Because I'm a swimmer. It's part of who I am as I dive into the future.

## NOVEL EXCERPTS

## GUNNAR EGGERTSSON '26

BRED BY STEEL

### Tenets of the Lord's Vagabonds

Any person of the realm who failed at the royal task of Lord's Guardian may choose execution or exile along with becoming a Lord's Vagabond.

Lord's Vagabonds will be branded on the right and left cheeks with the RV insignia.

Vagabonds may not enter any royal or capital cities.

Vagabonds must travel from town to town, never remaining for more than seven days, or until a mission is completed.

Vagabonds are required to offer their services as mercenaries and freelancers to any township in need, unless payment is below general practice.

Vagabonds may not abjure their role until death or royal exemption.

\*\*\*

Willis opened the heavy oak doors. Moonlight made the location obvious and the warm air of the inn was a welcome change to the cold beaten roads of the wild north-western realm. Eyes at the sparsely attended tavern glared at the intruding masked figure. Moving deeper into the inn, he passed weary eyes and suspicious stares up to the barkeep.

Seated at the furthest stool, he spoke, "Do you have any work of importance, not exceeding the span of a fortnight, with benefits including housing, and fair compensation?"

The innkeeper, a bald, skinny, middle-aged man with a graying mustache, looked at the vagabond skeptically, "We don't get many of your kind through this stretch of country."

"I said...do you have any work..."

A large man with an unruly red beard made his presence known, "We suffer from bandits, marauders stealing from our peasants."

Another voice chimed in, "They've sacked our supplies, winter will be harsh without the fruits of our harvest."

"Take me to the bandits." said Willis.

"They are off the main road, below a small clearing of underbrush."

“All right,” Willis rose from the stool, “ I need assistance, someone to guide me through these unfamiliar lands. Volunteers?”

He looked about the tavern’s sad faces. Most, averted their gaze or just stared blankly into their dark brown beer. He observed Big Red, fidgeting awkwardly with his fingers. Willis sighed, realizing who he was dealing with: peasants of the backwater. I’m not in the Capital Cities anymore, he thought to himself.

The northern lands, under the control of King Ragnar, had fallen into disarray. The lords and nobles who previously provided protection—meager as it was—had all but fled to the south-lands like the cowards that they were. What Willis learned in his wayfaring was significant: periods of strife produced few heroes. When famine, blight and bandits ravaged fields, all people really cared about were the mouths they had to feed.

Alas, a dark-haired adolescent in the back, nay older than seventeen years with the markings of inconsistent teenage facial hair, raised an arm, “My father’s barn was stolen of our horses. The good ones, the ones you need to pull plows well,” the boy scratched the nape of his neck, “my father pestered the town’s watch to no avail.”

Willis groaned through his floral decorated blue mask, “Fine. Boy! You shall suffice! As for the rest of you, I expect payment ready by morn’ as well as housing for the following night.”

The vagabond strode through the door letting in a violent gust of air. The boy followed suit making sure to grab his hooded over-garment.

Willis prepared his horse, a middle-aged mare, but hardy as ever, “Boy, what’s your name?”

“ James Alford.”

“Ok. James. Saddle up your horse.”

“One moment,” James went around back to fetch his steed. He couldn’t tell if the vagabond’s tone was condescending, after all vagabonds had a reputation for being cruel bastards.

“Ready?”

“Ready,” James answered atop his pitifully meek, gray horse.

“Lead the way, boy!”

James sent his horse into a trot, leading the vagabond through the town’s streets. This time of year all were trying to build stock for the winter. Recent winters had been colder than previous ones, with weaker Summers and frostier

Autumns and Springs. Not to mention the bandits had grown hungry, and bolder. All of the aristocrats—lords and what not—hadn't spared to leave any guards for the cities and towns they were once taxing. The high-north and eastern kingdoms had been pushing more and more into the region the lords had fled, meeting up with their allies to the south.

James turned slightly, "What's your name, vagabond?"

"Willis Warborne."

James shifted uncomfortably in his worn saddle, "Is it true what they say about vagabonds?"

"Is what true?"

"That you're magic. That your lot deals with devils."

Willis chuckled, "It's good to see you haven't lost your boyhood ignorance. There are many more things to fear in this world, boy, than imagined devils and witches. For one thing bandits, and another, the inept nobility that have fled from your lands."

They continued riding through the main street of the town. A light snow fell upon the thatched houses.

"Tell me boy, what were you doing in a tavern?"

"Work, and it is you who call me ignorant."

Willis gave James a sly look, "When I was your age, I was in taverns for very different reasons."

They came off the highway leaving behind the farms that dotted their path. The forest was dense, a canopy of twisted and overlapping branches obscuring the sky, leaving little room for the moonlight to peek through. The trees here were ancient chestnuts and elms, with trunks as wide as the height of men.

"Boy, do your people believe in magic? Elves, trolls, goblins, and whatnot," Willis asked, smirking.

"No more than any other people. We did believe in Snow Devils."

"Snow Devils? Go on..."

James obliged, "White beasts, the size of a hound with the hindlegs of a hare, the face of a wolf and the hands of a hairy human. They are said to drink the blood of men like ale. Attacking those who venture into the snow for long durations."

"Umph...Well boy, I'm going to teach you how to use vagabond magic!" Willis dismounted, grabbing something from his side. It was long, cylindrical,

with a curved handle at its rear and a hole at its front. Near where the handle connected to the cylinder were multiple intricate pieces. Willis took out a small bag and emptied fine black powder into the cylinder. He then pushed a small metal ball down with a rod.

“What is that?” James inquired.

“What you northers call magic,” Willis remarked with a thin fiendish grin, “When we approach these bandits, I pray no blood is spilt. Vagabonds must use their strength sparingly after all. But my prayers have been in vain before, so we must prepare. If I ever say ‘BOOM’ during the confrontation, you must, without hesitation, point this at the thieves and pull here,” he motioned to a trigger that looked similar to that of a crossbow. “However, if I say ‘magic,’ you must point the device toward the heavens above and shoot.”

“Will it injure them?”

“Only if the moment calls for it. Now off from your horse. We wouldn’t want to give these thieves the advantage of knowing our presence.”

They tied their horses to trees and continued on foot. The path slowly grew more overgrown, clear with the markings of uncommon commence and apathetic maintenance. A hard snow fell through the trees. In the distance, they spied the glow of fire. Intuitively, Willis extinguished his torch. He handed James the pistol, patting the boy reassuringly on the shoulder.

You’re all right, his nod seemed to express.

They both peered inquisitively, nine silhouettes illuminated by the roar of a bonfire. Smells emitted, horse flesh Willis thought. Only truly starving bandits would dine on the meat of a horse. Then again, it was starved individuals who became bandits. To the outlaws’ right was a mass of grain, maize, and barley all clumped in a pile on a withered cart. Four were drunk, three bickering with one another, and a fourth asleep. On the other side, a bard played a simple tune on an old harp. Willis noted the leader in the center, a figure commanding a strong presence, aided by an intimidating great sword across her back. Willis took a deep breath, making sure to have his sword at his side and shield ready. He stepped into the clearing. Sharply, the music stopped. The five thieves who were conscious backed away. Snow landed on Willis’s brow, ice biting and stinging his skin.

Reaching for his mask, Willis let it drop to his neck. The bard gasped when he saw the branded vagabond. On one cheek there was an R, and on the other a V, cut deep into his skin, both red and irritated, having never fully



healed. James bit his tongue, *Regum Valorum*, he thought, *The King's Honor*. Previously, there had been vagabonds in these parts, but never one of the royal guard. Most thought them dead, hunted and killed. The Reign of Ragnar and the nine years since the coup d'état had not been kind to them.

"A vagabond, you are?" the bard asked.

"The very same," Willis grumbled.

"Was it the townsfolk? The bastards! I told you Mandla, it was a dangerous choice to agitate them," the bard said firmly, his harp now on the snow-covered ground.

The other bandits looked worriedly towards the central figure. Three of them, the ones free of booze and wielding more than a harp, grasped their blades. Their leader, clad in cloaks of the night, resting under interlocking leather armor, looked up from her hood.

She asked, "What business do you have here, vagabond?"

"I think your jester knows it well enough."

"So," she said, "You come here to do the bidding of townsfolk and peasants. You, the once great warrior of King Haydon, now serving the countrymen of the western valley...Oh, how the great have fallen." She reached behind her to grab her great-sword.

"I come here today in the name of King Ragnar, in the spirit of King Haydon to strike vengeance and seek justice to all who violate the sacred code of the realm."

"'Justice!' you say. Choice word for one who now serves as vagabond to King Ragnar the usurper!"

"I come here for the harvest you've stolen, the sustenance of mothers and babes. I offer you a choice: peace for the grain or blood for your resistance."

All six sword wielders began to rise, before their leader motioned for them to restrain.

"I'll fight this bastard myself. He who is responsible for Haydon's fall!" she thundered, not taking her eyes off the vagabond.

"Then so be it!" Willis declared, releasing his sword and shield.

They locked eyes, circling each other. The warriors' dance—just as Willis had been taught by the king's swordsman, Alden.

"You must never let yourself forget that," Alden had remarked, "A game of repetition, of strikes and repose, blocks and parries. The arrogant forget this, emboldened by pride."

She swung wildly, cutting only air. Willis sliced through the opening she had left, up through her—admittedly—well-crafted armor. Blood trickled from her torso, her wounds, vicious, red, deep, fatal. James gawked, astonished; he had always heard of the great battles of old, warriors fighting for hours, never backing down. But here, his first real witnessing of a fight—all it consisted of was the battle of a bitter, experienced warrior and an arrogant amateur. She fell to her knees, grasping at her injury, trying to slow the blood loss. Fear, anguish kidnapped the muscles of her face. It always surprised Willis how the transformation of a few facial muscles turned someone from fierce to meek.

Willis turned to the bandits, blood-splatter across his garments. Removing his hood, his olive skin shown in the light, the loose curls of his hair free-flowing in the wind.

He trumpeted, “The Magic of King Haydon’s forces still rings true.”

BOOM!

The explosion sounded through the forest, sending birds to the air and the bandits scrambling. A couple screaming and whining at the sight of their fallen leader. Before, she had never lost a fight. But it was clear also, she had never fought a vagabond. Still in shock, the band of thieves took to the trees, leaving their commander on the ground, dying.

“Come here boy,” Willis said, turning his head slightly towards the trees.

James walked over to him. He passed the dying warrior, observing fear in her eyes, life extinguishing.

“Ready the wagon, take it to the path!”

Willis stared at the dying woman. He picked up her blade and put it across her.

“You fought well.”

He closed her eyes and met the boy. James struggled to keep it upright.

“Let’s go!” Willis commanded.

“You said you wouldn’t hurt them.”

“I did not, not to all eight of them at least.”

They made their way back in silence. When they came to their horses, Willis fastened the horse to the cart. The snow fell heavily. They rode past the farms, their horses trudging through the deep frost. The night was pitch black, all that could be seen came from the fading light of the torch. Then a sound was heard. Moans and wails of pain. James looked at the vagabond nervously. Willis put his hand up, motioning for the boy to be still.

Willis left the torch for the boy and lit a new one. He trudged through the snow, one hand on the torch the other on his sword. The wails got louder, enveloping the landscape. Willis looked down: wild, misplaced, frantic footsteps covered in blood. Willis readied his sword and approached. It was not more than ten feet before he came upon one of the most grizzly sights he had ever seen. A man's mutilated abdomen being consumed, his flesh ripped apart, arms flailing to the beat of sharp screams. The beast: a hairy creature the size of a dog with the hind legs of a hare, and the hands of a man. Its fur was white. Confronting what appeared to be the muzzle of a wolf, Willis trembled in a way he hadn't since he was a small boy. The demon—if that's what it was—slowly turned, its pupil-less eyes glaring, mouth snarling. It lunged, Willis cut at it.

The slice, right across the chest, it landed. The creature backed up five feet, no blood spilt. Willis raised his blade again, never taking his eyes off the fiend. It paused, its long fingers digging into the snow, its face now grinning. Willis moved closer to the horses. But not close enough; the beast launched once more. This time Willis bashed it with the torch. The creature ignited, its howls more closely resembling that of a man than a wolf. It sprung around attempting to put itself out, finally turning over in the snow, the flame dying. But, Willis was already on the creature, trusting his blade through its heart. He did this repeatedly until he was sure it was slain.

Returning to the horses, Willis's face was frozen, the fiend hung across his shoulder.

The boy, terrified, couldn't help but stare at what the vagabond was carrying, shouting, "A Snow Devil!"

Willis gave him a confused look.

**FREDY NORIN '24**  
**THE INBETWEEN**

Chapter 1: Attic Window

In a small dimly-lit room, James Doe lies on an orange sofa, using his blue coat as a head rest. Across from him, his therapist, Dr. Pete Tharoh, sits in a large red chair, taking notes on his clipboard, a wooden toy box separating them. Shelves line the walls with snow globes from around the world. The standing lamp next to Dr. Tharoh casts a long shadow.

James Doe has brown hair and eyes. He wears brown glasses, black and white flannel, purple shirt, and gray pants. Dr. Tharoh has white hair and blue eyes. He wears dark glasses, a button-down, and tan pants.

“What’s the plan for today?” Dr. Tharoh asked.

“I don’t know, I haven’t been out of the house in a while.”

“You contacted me in a panic, James, clearly there is something.”

“I’ve told you everything, but you’re still not convinced!”

“Remind me of what you think happened that night?”

“Why should I tell you? I’ve provided enough evidence, and Polaris still doesn’t believe me.”

“I’m not Polaris. I’m worried! You’re a talented student—having a traumatic experience at such a critical age breaks you apart.”

“If it breaks me apart...I’m entitled to an answer.”

“Don’t you understand, James—You’re the answer!”

“Fine, this is the last time I’m telling this story.”

Six years ago, I was a freshman at Blue Bug High in Providence. And believe me, I was no stranger to abuse, having impossible crushes, being mistreated by popular kids. For my entire life, I’d been bullied, pushed around, made fun of, blamed for crimes, never committed; manipulated. My crushes felt like illusions, Sirens drowning me in sadness. I wished somebody could understand me.

My unrealistic expectations usually took the form of the popular kids, the ones I hated for making me feel different: causing me to question how I

dressed, what I ate, how I smelled, and why I fidgeted so much because of my ADHD. Ironically, I was jealous, often trying to imitate *them*.

It was only with my expanding group of friends where I felt at peace with the world. My grades weren't the best—meeting with countless tutors and teachers. And my family life also wasn't perfect, my home a raging storm each time I would emerge from the solitude of the basement. Even so, I tried making it work.

Oftentimes in high school, growing up quickly caught up with me. It was during this period of madness where I spent the end of the summer at Easton's Beach in Newport. The same beach where my parents met and were married, where I went fishing with my father, took school trips on the last day of school, and asked out one of my crushes.

Along the shoreline, searching the sand with my metal detector, I miraculously found a message in a bottle. And that's when it happened: I met the inscrutable and lovely Sarah Fredricks.

"You contacted a complete stranger?" asked Dr. Tharoh

"I was only fifteen, I needed something to do."

"Did you tell your parents?"

"They wouldn't believe me! It would just lead to a rabbit hole. I've learned to keep things close to my flannel."

"Interesting. And you're quite a funny fellow! I'm writing that down."

Sarah Fredricks lived in River Run, a mansion, on a cliff off Ocean Drive. Her mother died from an unknown disease when Sarah was young. Hoping to keep her safe, her father, Fredd Fredricks, kept her within the walls of their home. It was the death of his wife that set him off. He desperately yearned to make contact with her from the beyond.

Sarah watched her father slowly losing his mind. He hired fortune tellers, mediums, psychics, anyone or anything to achieve his goal. He had people on the inside, people that would be off Polaris's radar. He had researched books from ancient times about the paranormal. But the word displeased him as other writings more accurately mentioned a sense of Darkness or the Abyss.

“What’s the difference between the three?” Dr. Tharoh asked.

“Paranormal is the connection between death, like ghosts, phantoms, or wraiths.”

“Is Darkness a type of spirit?”

“If you mean, spirit in the mind of negative energy within a vessel, then yes. Darkness is more powerful the more it’s dormant. It takes a negative moment in time and repeats this incident until it conjures something unworldly.”

“And that’s the Abyss?”

“Yes and no. The Abyss is a form of dark matter, unleashed long ago. It’s speculated that this abyss moves within space, creating black holes.”

“Wow, that’s a lot to process! How do you keep these distinctions in your head?”

“Sarah wrote about them. There are volumes of letters that she gave me, and I read them.”

These stories had crucial information about what her father was creating and his collection of haunted objects and memorabilia which contained negative energy, taking hold of the people within the mansion.

It was the beginning of the school year when Sarah asked me to free her. Having no experience with this, we both opted for an escape route. On October 30, 2030, at 11:59 PM, I carried pillows and mattresses to the bottom of the attic window of River Run. Moments later, Sarah would leap to safety from the clutches of her father. But unexpectedly, her father had finished his studies for the night early, and checked in on her.

He watched as his daughter was about to jump out the attic window, swiftly grabbing her ankle, unaware of the protection and trust I had given to her. As he pulled her up, Sarah was twisting and turning, violently scratching his arms until he let go of the only semblance of cheer left in the house. I watched Sarah’s limp body slowly falling down. Her neck landing on solid ground.

“Are *you* okay?” Dr. Tharoh asked

"I'm fine, why cry if it already happened."

"Your best friend died and your not batting an eye"

"That wasn't the last time my friends had left me."

"And you're good with that?"

"Inertia...When an object is in motion, it stays in motion. When an object is at rest, it stays at rest. I just couldn't keep up."

"I hear your struggle, James. It's not easy being in between child and adulthood"

"But do you really understand, Dr. Tharoh? I've been writing my life away and everything is slowly being taken from me. I've been working my ass off and no one gives me an answer!"

"The grass isn't always greener on the other side, dear boy!"

"You think I don't know that by now? How many times can my parents keep on arguing? How many times can I lift myself up to finish my schoolwork? How many times will I get punched in the face, whispered about, and heart-broken? I've been deceived my entire life that there is a happy ending, but the only ones who get it are the others."

"So, why all the effort? You saw her die, why don't you move on?"

"I've tried! But from all the waking nights, from all the nightmares, from all the torment...I know I might sound crazy, but there's a force that leads me to believe that the Fredricks' Mansion is in a state of purgatory."

"Are you saying that the darkness within the artifacts is still there?"

After that night, in my dreams, I would be outside the house, watching, over and over again. It could have been the lack of sleep, but my brain was telling me something.

"That sounds..." Dr. Tharoh began

"Like purgatory? It is."

"But it's just a dream, right?"

"Not always"

When I was still living with my parents, I stayed up longer than I should, I had no sleep schedule. I closed the door, turned off the light and covered myself in blankets. Before I turned off the lamp, my eyes were drawn to the sliding closet door. Most nights I would be anxious if someone was on the other side, but on this night it was the main door. A shadow figure had conjured itself into the room, comfortably situated in the corner. As strange as it was, I thought it was my mom, but no one was awake.

“Were they awake?” Dr. Tharoh asked

“Mom passed out, my dad was going squid fishing.”

“So, someone could have broken in.”

“Doors were locked. Besides, the husband of the woman who had previously lived there died in that room.”

“Creepy! What other stories do you need to get off your chest?”

I would walk downstairs to the basement, but it felt like I was caught in a time loop. As I went further down, each detail along the staircase would disappear: Pictures, sculptures, books, cat food. Fearing that I wouldn't escape, I turned around and I was back at the top of the landing, the loop ending as I went back down.

“So, it was an infinite staircase, like in one of those Surrealist paintings?” Dr. Tharoh asked.

“I guess so.”

“Did you tell your friends?”

“When I went missing for a couple of hours, they thought it was for my upcoming Halloween parties, or they brushed it off.”

“Hold on, you went missing?”

It was at school on my way to history class in the hall, where I felt more awake about these strange occurrences. I wasn't tired like I usually was on a Monday morning. I might have not finished my homework, but I managed to get out of



it. As I opened the door, I entered the teacher's library on the third floor, not the second floor History classroom in another building, that I was now late to. I opened the door that I think I entered, but unlike previous attempts, I would go in that room each time I exited. I decided to not waste my time and return to studying. Before I delved into note taking, I checked the time, it was 2:15, an abnormal amount of time, since History began at 9:05. I thought that maybe the clocks were wrong, but as I checked my Latin teacher, Mr. Melior's office, he was gone. Like me, he spends any free time alone, so I knew I had to rush to Latin class.

"Time flies when you've entered a portal!" Dr. Tharoh jokes

"That wasn't even the strange part! I was hungry, even though, supposedly, I already had lunch."

"Weird, and no one saw you during that time?"

"Nope, it was like I walked off the Earth and never existed."

"You said you were in the teacher's library?"

"Every time I got the chance."

"How'd you pull that off?"

I was given access by Ms. Fortuna, my English teacher. During one of her classes, she observed my interest in studying about the Abyss. To not distract anyone in class, she allowed me to study in the library, where the ancient texts are stored.

"You got away with that?" Dr. Tharoh asked.

"Teachers didn't mind, I helped them if anything."

"And after all that, you couldn't find an answer?"

"I was busy, people caught on, and Polaris tried to stop me"

"How so?"

"Submissions of my work were sent to them. Their research team met with me every week to manage the stories that Polaris was trying to suppress in the first place.

"But, Polaris doesn't do entertainment."

"They have eyes all over. They could make someone famous, just so an incident doesn't surface."

"But isn't this a good thing? The stories being out in the public?"

"Of course, it gave meaning to my life. I tried so hard to believe that, but the public sees this as fiction."

"And that's how you ended up in Bennington."

"Yep, writing my life away, once again."

"Have you returned to the mansion?"

"I've thought about it, but never pushed myself to go."

"Is it the sense of mystery? If you find out you'll have to move on, or the expectation never lives up to your satisfaction."

"I've spent most of my life like this. Trapped in this loop. If it's over, you think I'll recover?"

"Of course you will, you're James Doe! There's not a lot of patients that I stick to for this long, but it's worth it, to see them grow."

"You're telling me to go back, aren't you?"

"Better to spend your Christmas on the old stomping grounds than to be alone, eating Chinese food. I'm sure some of your friends still live there."

"I doubt it. Last time the group chat was active, they were successful: writers, artists, chefs, scientists, doctors, the list goes on."

"Well it's just an idea, you know you can call me if you ever are backing out."

"Thanks Dr. Tharoh, I'll try my best."

I grabbed my coat, getting up from the couch. I was hesitant about leaving, I had so much more to say, but my time was up. Dr. Tharoh was still in the chair, jotting down his impressions. There was also a note about his purchase of *The Darkness, the Abyss, and Everything Inbetween*. Seeing this inspired hope. I knew I had to push myself. I had to push myself

\*\*\*

The next morning, I packed my suitcase. I had just ended a call with Dr. Tharoh to make sure that I was doing the right thing. Now, it was three hours driving in my mom's old brown BW Conquest to Rhode Island. The car wasn't the cleanest, I had stopped at Dip and Plunge Cafe's drive-thru for a breakfast sandwich and a coffee. My suitcases were shoved in the trunk, the two cat cages in the back, next to blankets, cat food, water, and a makeshift litter box. I played the band Lessev, with a couple of their albums on repeat.

I pulled into an abandoned parking lot, the broken neon sign reading: Cavern Calamity. Back when it was open, I would spend most weekends there,

while my father took care of his business in order to supply Polaris's requirements. It was here where I spent most of my time outside of school, taking notes and storing the messages Sarah wrote to me, in my dad's office. It was shut down by Polaris around the time I took my gap year. My dad, now retired, fishing somewhere on his boat, still owns the building. It seemed that Polaris would be using the Cavern Calamity IP for an orchestral sushi place in a few years.

The building didn't look up to code, even if it was only two years since it had closed. Bricks were on the ground, windows were broken, fire escape stairs with unstable supports. The building itself wasn't in a populated area, its neighboring buildings also abandoned by Polaris. I pulled the cat cages onto the passenger side, ready to get out the car. I stopped and began trying to convince myself to drive back. But, I quickly dismissed the idea. I got out of the car, carrying the two cages in hand, putting them down as soon as I got to the door, fumbling for my keys.

The place looked well-preserved, even with the cobwebs and water damage. I went behind the front desk and into the back, behind the wall. Luckily, a past employee had built a large cat tower inside a cage for *her* cats. It seemed safer to put them in there rather than letting them roam freely in the dilapidated building. I went back out to grab the rest of my bags, and locked the door behind me. I checked the store and the cafe area next to the front desk in hopes of finding anything salvageable, but it seemed the rats got to it first.

I spent that week in the office, reminding myself of the letters and notes to refresh my memory for when I would eventually make it out to Newport. The room was just how I remembered: most of my things scattered around, piles of paper on the desk and floor, bottles of Small Spring iced tea covering half the desk—my computer still working, the same tab open from the last time I used it!

On those sleepless nights, when those stories filled my mind, I would use a climbing mat as a mattress, using a sleeping bag as a blanket, when it was cold and it prevented me from moving. There was a hammock stored in back, but as I settled in, I felt something grabbing me from below, possibly rats except they don't have long fingers.

My father always told me to go for a walk when something was stuck in my mind. His advice only stayed with me when I got older, but in this

situation, I didn't want to be injured by stepping on a nail, I already felt like that everyday. Instead, I would do the unthinkable, I would go rock climbing.

I was never really a fan, which is ironic considering my father owned a business devoted to towering heights and illusions. I don't know where the fear came from. Maybe Dr. Tharoh was right, I never wanted to explore the unknown, I never wanted to climb to the top of the mountain, taking the bird's eye view of humanity. No matter how long or far my fear reached, I pushed myself each day to top out on the climbing wall.

By the end of the week, I had done it. I had grabbed dusty chalk from the front desk, covering the palms of my hands, leaving an indelible print on the wall. I put on a harness and tied a hangman's knot. It was a slow climb, but I made my way up, barely within reach of the bell. But it rang before I made it there, at least, so I thought. The ringing was constant, the more I heard it the more it projected its sound. It warped to a low ambient humming, similar to a faulty fluorescent light at an office or school. I tried climbing more to possibly stop it, but as I looked at my hands, the wall started tilting toward me. I lost my footing, letting go of the holds. I clung to the rope, slipping ever so slightly until I went down, causing a minor rope burn, letting go, hitting the ground on my backside.

Slowly getting up, I wiped myself off, tending to my wounds. I went behind the front desk to retrieve a first aid kit, but something caught my eye. Mind you, the door had been locked, and right on the desk, a flier for a fortune teller on Bellevue Avenue in Newport. Someone is telling me to go there and I don't know if there's malicious intent. What I do know is, Mr. Fredricks believed in his work, the only one to give me an answer now was the fortune teller herself.

\*\*\*

Curiosity had killed the cat. I had surprisingly made my way to the mysterious address. As I arrived, I wasn't sure the place was open.

A small, cramped old building. A washed yellow paint covering the sides, the roof a dark brown. Boarded up windows and faint red cloth poking out from its side. Boxes of mail littered the sidewalk. A large door on the side, nailed above it, a carved wooden sign reading: Madame Futch's Observatory. No lights seemed to be on inside. I tried looking through the window. There were shelves containing taxidermied animals, and trinkets and an unsettling display. Seven large wooden puppets stared down at me.

It was a diorama, a miniature clay woman presented the scale of these creatures. She was sitting up in an open box, maybe as a sacrifice or a way to control them. A story was revealed, connected to the origin of the Abyss. It made sense that she would display this material, a likely explanation of why she was favored by Mr. Fredricks and the only fortune teller to have lived in the mansion. The sign on the door read, "CLOSED," but I thought that if someone wanted to meet me, I shouldn't keep her waiting.

\*\*\*

In an empty waiting room, the dimensions of the room shifted, not matching the size of its exterior. The walls were a grape purple, the floor a dark oak, and a sharp popcorn ceiling.

A red curtain on the left corner, leading to a different room. Furniture against the wall, a coffee table in the center of the room, coasters and unrecognizable magazines on top of the table. Psychedelic paintings hung on the walls. In the left corner, a table for children with a magnetic road, train track, and bead maze.

The red curtain rustled with a sudden breeze with no sign of an open window. Beckoning, it was inviting me to discover what mystery lurked on the other side.

\*\*\*

I entered a dome shaped room. There was a round table with seven chairs. On the table, a crystal ball atop a Lazy Susan. Surrounding it, the walls covered in mirrors.

I made eye contact with myself. I looked miserable. My clothes, wrinkled, armpits soaked in sweat, glasses smudged, hair unkempt. I was hypnotized by my own image; suddenly startled, not realizing a stranger was sitting behind me.

I thought it was Madame Futch. She had brown hair and eyes, wearing a long red coat, green shirt, black pants and boots. Most notably, she wore a large reflective necklace, holding a crystal-like mirror.

"Mors Mihi Lucrum, James," she said.

"How do you know my name?"

"How could I forget! You've made quite an impression with all your radio plays and novels."

"You've listened to that? I'd hate to bring a bad omen to your name."

“Oh, you think I’m Madame Futcha? Where are my manners, the name’s Terrah Futcha.”

“So, you’re her daughter?”

“One of her many followers. Unfortunately, she’s off universe, so you’ll have to deal with me.”

“Off-Universe?”

“Did you really think the Abyss is the only thing humans don’t know about?”

“Well, I couldn’t comprehend the Multiverse, I thought darkness would be easier to understand.”

“Good reason I brought you here then...Welcome to the Iris, a Multiversal tether.”

“How does it work?”

“Stare in the eyes of your reflection, and I will do the rest.”

I locked eyes with my reflection, this time looking past obvious imperfections. In front of me, the image appeared to be me, but something was different, as if the two of us didn’t share the same experience. The figure in front of me wore hologram glasses, dressed in a yellow sherpa wool lining coat, white shirt, and tan pants. It split off again to a similar looking reflection, except instead of the yellow coat it was a purple-red flannel. Then splitting off once more to someone with round glasses with bandages covering his shoulder and knee, holding a dagger. Then, out of the blue, there was a character in a multi-colored flannel and behind him, an attached presence wearing pajamas. Similar figures were there, but it was difficult to fully make out: a hiker, soldier, scientist, detective, even a superhero.

“Terrah, who are these people?” I asked

“They’re your Tethers, different versions of your being.”

“So, they’re all James Doe?”

“There could be slightly different versions of you, but the ones you’re looking at go by different identities.

“They look so much cooler than me...Although, I’m now noticing I wear a lot of flannels and I’d never be seen wearing tan pants.”

“That’s what makes Tethers so interesting, you could be anywhere: different places, timelines, centuries, energy levels, appearance, voice, infinite possibilities!”

I take my focus off of my reflection and on to Terrah. My Tethers surround the mirrored walls. This time making room for a single reflection of Terrah Futch.

"Why don't you have any Tethers?" I asked

"They cut the links to me...When you're a follower traveling the Multiverse, you see things you can't forget. Humanity, history repeating itself, it's an endless state of suffering. The more you look at the Multiverse's timelines, the more you're staring at spirits.

"That's the curse and the gift of being a writer, seeing every small detail on this floating ball. You're *writing* your life, while others are *living* theirs. It feels like your ears are blocked out, your eyes are open, but it feels like a dream, your body in a room, but you're not in that space."

"That's why I'm showing you this. I know about the time loops you've been experiencing.

Terrah Futch collapses the Tethers into James Doe's reflection. In front of him, a glitched-out version of himself.

"What are you trying to show me here?" I asked.

"You're suffering from Liminality, fractured between Energy and Darkness."

"How does this have to do with time manipulation?"

"I don't know why, but your Tethers are jumbled up, stretching out time. I thought it was just a case of Deja Vu or the Dragonfly effect."

"Do you have a cure for it?"

"Not exactly, but I found the source. I figured your apprehension to visit the mansion was the start of this, considering you had multiple dreams about Sarah's death."

"You knew about my dreams?"

"It's another pocket dimension, James. It's not rocket science."

"So, you're saying Sarah had something to do with it?"

"Yes, she was the eternal light of the mansion, and after her death, she passed the torch to you."

"Impossible! I never stepped foot in there."

"But you have connections to it. Why else keep the letters? Over time you were consumed by darkness, immune from the symptoms because of the light. Your wounds haven't fully healed yet."

"Great, I step one foot in, then I head back to Vermont!"

"I'm afraid it's not that simple! Mr. Fredericks' collection has stayed quite dormant, leading this plane and the Purgatory-like Inbetween to share the space. If we contact him, maybe we can contain the darkness."

"We can't! Mr. Fredricks hung himself a few days after Sarah's death. That's how Polaris found the crime scene. I don't think they even cleared out the bodies, never giving her a proper funeral."

"I know about his death, and countless others. We need to free all those spirits, including Mr. Fredricks, as they have unfinished futures."

"And Sarah?"

"We'll do our best. Unfortunately, with all the misery she had experienced, it consumed her, being the new host of the mansion and all the spirits that are trapped there."

"She trapped her father as well?"

"He provides the most torment...Don't worry James, we will save them, besides I brought an unexpected backup."

\*\*\*

Three figures enter from the waiting room. I remembered them from high school, but it was a similar recognition that I had with my Tethers. Their reflection was singular, I speculated that they were also followers of Madame Futchu or something along those lines.

The first one, and seemingly the one in charge had purple hair and blue eyes. He had a type of armor, not one made out of metal, but rather a hunter or gatherer type. It was blue cloth-padded with white fur on its edges. Reddish-brown leather wrapped around his wrist, boots, and waist. He wielded a mossy stone spear and sword with leather, wood, and gold used for handles.

The second—bleached dirty-blond hair and brown eyes. She wore black overalls, a purple shirt, leather belt, and boots. Her fingertips sparked a purple glow.

The third, which caught me most by surprise, had brown hair and eyes, wearing a full-on clown outfit utilizing the three primary colors as rainbow vomit. Her right hand held a tiny jester puppet which she talked to, referring to it as Thalia.

Emerging from behind the curtains, a Tardigrade the size of a Maine Coon Cat, defying gravity, floated around the three. As surprised as I was to see the clown, I was quite calm seeing a Tardigrade as they are the only creatures to inhabit the Abyss. Although normally we see them as



microorganisms, they can take the size of a blue whale in the Abyss. The one in front of me was clearly an infant.

"Greetings and salutations, Mr. Doe. The name's Knight Core. Your reputation precedes you," he said.

"And how do you know me?" I asked.

"They're from the Multiverse. I brought them up to speed, with your situation," Terrah claimed,

"It was like fireworks! My ears were ringing but it was colorful to watch. You should have seen it, the Abyss was bleeding through and there was this shadow figure..." The clown frantically blurted.

"Melpomene, quit making James' head explode. All he needs to know is that we're from The Beyond," the one in purple informed.

"Right, that's in another story! I'm sorry James but you'll have to be patient, Mori here is a buzzkill.

"What do you mean *another story*...Terrah, why'd you bring them? You know I'm not a people person."

"Trust me they weren't my first choice. Just so happened that their skill set was needed. Their universe was The Beyond, a society that existed before Polaris. Think of it as Atlantis—but before the pirate ambush. You know, the one that caused the island to sink."

"So you live in a universe where Polaris never existed? What's that like?"

"Pretty boring actually, we're some of the lucky ones. The people in charge collect and document everything in their designated timeline. You wouldn't call us followers, but rather Multiversal Hoppers. Mori explained.

"We mainly run errands. It's not that boring! I mean one time a spaceship crash landed through a black hole...Knight Core rambled...

"Look, as much as I love talking about the Multiverse, we should get going," Terrah interrupted.

"And how are we going to do that? I know it's not far, but I'm not going to be seen in public with these three," I made clear.

"Just say you're cosplaying for The King of Gorgon tabletop game. Besides, this observatory has a back passage to the mansion," Terrah reassured. We returned to the waiting room and opened the front door. A partially cloudy blue sky, no solid ground in sight. Terrah and the others had wide grins, as if they had done this before. I backed up, Terrah jumped in. Mori pushed me, the others followed.

I fell horizontally, looking back, the front door detached from the house and onto overgrown grass. I took in my surroundings, somehow teleporting past the bordering Polaris gate. In front of us, the abandoned Fredricks' mansion. The attic window, still ajar, leading down to the dried up blood splatter on the lawn.

"Did we just break in?" I asked

"We're not breaking in if Polaris doesn't use it. It's one of their research sites, they couldn't handle going into this place, even if they tried," Terrah claimed.

"Can *we* handle this?" Melpomene panicked.

"I can break down the door! I'll take out any ghost that blocks our way!" Knight Core stated.

"My advice: It won't be effective. A room without books is like a body without a soul. We can't agitate what we can't comprehend. The best we can do is to contain it." Mori brought them down to earth.

Terrah turned the glass knob, the mansion's front door swung open, beckoning us to come in. A purple fog flowed from the inside, revealing a grand staircase and an open ballroom. A cold chill ran up our spines. Paranoia in the air as we entered the room.

The exterior was reminiscent of the observatory, its design pure genius. Purple wallpaper, dark oak floor, red carpet that stretched out up the stairs, gas-lit lanterns swinging from the ceiling.

The mansion's dimensions were fluid, unstable compared to the observatory. The walls contracted as if breathing with the hallway doors banging, the sound of spiders rustling in the rusted chandelier.

The front door slammed shut, locking us in. Candles relit from the breeze. Lights flickered, casting shadow creatures who danced to the chords of an organ. We heard Sarah humming a melody in the distance.

For a moment, time slowed, all went silent. I thought this was from the Liminality, but one thing was clear: darkness was leaking through and I was its first victim.

A shadow moved up the stairs from the walls. Its silhouette, an elongated Mr. Fredricks, tethered by the same rope that killed him. Screams of blood-curdling grief echoed through the mansion.

We ran into the hallway, opening the closest room to hide. *But you never know what could be on the other side, watching you from the darkness.* With that thought words began to float in the air around us. They read:

Sarah A. Fredricks  
Daughter of  
Fredd J. and Anastasia C.  
Fredrick  
Died Oct. 30, 2030  
Age 15

Fredd J. Fredricks  
Son of  
Lawrence K. and Elaine S.  
Fredrick  
Died Nov. 2, 2030  
Age 47

SOPHIA BLYTHE '23  
YOUR RHODE ISLAND PAGE SIX

Chapter 1

Just another day in Providence, a city more like a village, where everyone knows everyone. You can't even go to Whole Foods without running into a familiar face.

It was the start of a new school year—the city always felt different when college students returned. Ambitious and excited, they had been arriving all weekend, climbing up College Hill to RISD or Brown, at least they chose to be here. But for Katherine Verlice, Kat to her friends, it was different. She was stuck at Oak Ridge Prep with Vineyard Vines and Lululemon-wearing teens. Sure, there were a few nonconformists who stuck out in the crowd, but to Kat, it felt like more of the same. Going into her senior year, she had repeatedly informed her parents that she wanted to be a part of something larger.

On the first day, Kat woke up and put on a navy maxi skirt, cropped white Tee, and high-top Chuck Taylors. She walked to school that morning, “Come On Eileen” sounding from her headphones, assuming it would be a normal year. Upon her arrival, she was met with smiles from teachers and exuberant hellos from classmates. The effusive greetings on the first day of school are always a funny thing, everyone is overly friendly and happy to see one another, but we all know that doesn't last long. Kat spotted Opal McGuire, her best friend, in the courtyard tucked away on a bench, observing the social scene. Opal wants to be a writer and uses her classmates as material.

“Any good content?” Kat asked.

“Not so far.”

“Just more of the same?”

“Besides new clothes and such, beneath the surface, nothing has changed.” A bell rang, sounding the start of the school day. For a moment the courtyard was empty, a cool summer breeze danced through the trees, suggesting that fall was near, cirrus clouds painted on the bright blue sky, sweet smell of Morning Glory, and the exchange of information between two birdies high up in a tree. For a moment, Kat enjoyed the silence but was suddenly brought back to reality.

Kat and Opal headed to their first-period class: English. As usual, it started with perfunctory introductions, followed by an in-depth run-through of the syllabus. The next period was Art History, and as Kat headed to her next class, she was caught in the mix of hallway traffic. All too full of themselves, seniors preened through the halls, already feeling too cool for school; stressed juniors discussing colleges; optimistic sophomores enjoying their last stress-free year, and at the bottom of the food chain, freshmen, clueless and lost. Kat's morning continued like this, the constant switching from class to class, from a quiet classroom to the bustling hallway. Until lunch.

Lunch may seem like an easy time of day, you simply eat your food with your friends. But at Oak Ridge, the glass cafeteria is separated by cliques and tribes, and you can't easily stray from one group to another. The lunchroom itself is so loud that you can't hear yourself think, and you wonder why the conversations are so dull. There are various groups that divide the cafeteria into hierarchies. But first, you have the kids who don't dare eat in the cafeteria, they generally hide away from everyone else and do homework during lunch. Next, you've got your gamers, they are glued to their phones, twiddling their thumbs at this week's new video game. Next, you've got your artsy kids, not theater kids, but AP art students, they are nice enough, but you can't be taking just a standard art class to sit with them. Their conversations are mostly critiques of one another's drawings or projects. Then there *are* the theater kids, talking about Broadway's newest hits, and trying to figure out what this year's musical will be. Kind of mixed in with different groups are the Ivys, you can only sit with them if you are Ivy League-worthy.

Next, of course, are the jocks, Kat's school didn't have a football team, so the jocks consisted of the soccer and lacrosse players. She didn't dislike them, because she was one herself (captain of the soccer team), but some of them, for lack of a better word, were just plain dull. Last but not least, was the group known as Daddy's Money, this group was the richest of the rich, you needed to at least own golden goose sneakers, Cartier rings, and BMW to even be considered a member of this group.

Kat and Opal didn't bother eating in the cafeteria, there was no space to breathe or think. They took their lunch outside, soaking up the last bits of New England summer that they could. The sun hung in a perfect blue sky. Kat and Opal sat in silence for a while, they were the type of friends that were comfortable in their own silence. A lively conversation wasn't always needed.

“Do you ever feel stuck?” Kat asked.

“Stuck how? Like writer’s block?”

“Stuck here.”

“I don’t know. But if nothing ever happens, can’t you just be in the moment?” Opal always knew what to say, she had a way with words, on paper, and in her speech.

“Easier said than done.”

“But it’s a lesson you should learn.”

Opal’s words lingered, and they sat in silence for a short while. Kat wondered “Why do things have to be so difficult?” Her self-reflection was interrupted by the end of lunch, a swarm of students flowed back into the courtyard, heading to afternoon classes.

Kat’s next class was AP Chemistry, she liked to joke and call herself a “Woman in STEM”. Kat trekked up to the chemistry lab, out of breath when she reached the top of the stairs. Entering the classroom, she found herself to be one of three girls. “Ah, the sexist expectations that control society have once again presented themselves in my life,” Kat thought to herself. She took a seat towards the front of the room just as Mr. Fritz walked in. He was a short old man, who wore a lab coat all-day over a button-down shirt and tasteful bow-ties. He had been at the school longer than anyone could remember.

“Our first test will be next week,” he began, “be prepared for worse grades than you have previously received...”

“Great,” Kat thought to herself.

“Can anyone tell me the different types of chemical reactions?”

Kat replied, “Redox, Oxi—.” She was rudely interrupted by Ben, a stuck-up, misogynistic jerk. He was one of the rich kids, who wasn’t good at any sports but certainly had enough money that people wanted to be his friend.

“Redox, oxidation, synthesis, decomposition, combustion, single replacement, double replacement, and acid-base,” Ben continued.

“Thank you,” said Mr. Fritz

“Ass-hole,” Kat mumbled.

“What was that?”

“Ben rudely interrupted me, so I called him an...” The whole class now looked at Kat, some astonished and some envious of her ability to speak up.

“Do not use that language in my class.”

"I am not offended, Mr. Fritz," Ben jumped in. Kat turned to him, no longer able to stay composed, she said, "I guess being such a big man makes your words more valuable than mine." Murmurs spread across the room, a small vein began throbbing in Ben's neck, his pale skin turning crimson.

"Detention."

"I don't see how that's fair."

"Out of my class, and don't come back until you have learned how to behave yourself." And with those words, Kat left. She felt her face turn red and imagined, like a cartoon character, steam emanating from her ears.

"Geez," She said quietly. She wasn't concerned that her Moms would be upset, on the contrary, they would be as outraged as she. Kat was just angry that there was nothing to be done. Resigned, she accepted her punishment.

## Chapter 2

Kat replayed the incident in her head, awaiting the impending doom of detention. When the bell rang, signifying the end of school, Opal spied Kat in the courtyard.

"Want a ride home?"

"I got detention."

"What?"

"Fritz!"

"Why?"

"Because I called Ben an ass-hole."

"Valid."

"Annoying!"

"Want company?"

"Why would you want to go to detention?"

"Opportunity to scope out new material."

"True friend!"

The two headed to detention, which was held in the library. That was a plus if you tried to find a silver lining. Kat barely knew the other detainees. There was Luna, an artist; Toby, the lacrosse player; and, Luca, Ivy league bound. Kat was surprised to see this many people in detention, and she wondered what brought them here.

Kat and Opal took a seat at the far end of the oak table with a banker's lamp on it. Silence filled the room, only the steady tick of a clock and the anxious tapping of pencils could be heard.

In walked Ms. Headstrong, the school psychiatrist, kind of ironic that her last name was Headstrong. She was a kind person, and of course, her inclination was to fix problems, even ones that didn't need fixing.

"Hello," she said in a soft voice to the group, "Why don't we start by introducing ourselves, and say what brought you here today. Luna, start us off." Luna looked up from her sketchbook and removed her headphones.

"Hi, I'm Luna, and I was drawing in class," she said quietly. Kat was appalled that drawing in class was a reason to earn detention. She peered over at Luna's sketchbook and saw a caricature of Mr. Oswald, a history teacher. "That makes sense," Kat thought to herself.

"Toby?" Ms. Headstrong asked.

"Hey, I'm Toby, and I was playing lax in the hallway."

"Typical," Kat mumbled.

"Luca?"

"Luca here, I was conjugating Latin verbs out loud in Math."

"Kat?"

"I'm just gonna say it. I called Ben Abbot an asshole!"

"Heard about it! Right in Fritz's chem class, right?" Toby said.

"Opal?"

"Oh, I'm Opal. I don't have detention."

"Then why are you here?" Luna asked.

"Keep Kat company."

"Whatever!"

Opal turned to Kat, "She was the one who asked the question..."

"That is very nice of you, Opal. Instead of spending time doing homework, you guys are going to do a group activity, to find common ground. You have to come up with a list of similarities that you all possess," Headstrong explained.

"Do we have to do this for the whole time?" Toby asked.

"Yes. And if someone could be the scribe?"

Opal raised her hand.

"Thanks!"



The group of five gathered quietly at one of the tables, waiting for someone to get the ball rolling. Pairs of eyes drifted from one person to another, occasionally making contact awkwardly. Breaking the silence, Opal prodded, "Any ideas?"

"We have nothing in common," Toby replied.

"There has to be something we all like."

"What about a dislike?" Luna chimed in, "It's easier to find something we hate!"

"Oak Ridge Prep," Kat said confidently.

"Agreed," Toby said, Luca nodded.

"People's expectations," Luca added. Kat was surprised to hear this coming from him, she had never heard him open up before.

"Stuck up teens," Kat added, and everyone nodded in agreement. Luna was right, and unfortunately, so was Ms. Headstrong.

"This is frustrating, you guys shouldn't have to be here," Opal complained.

"For real," Toby added.

"I wish there was a way to voice our complaints without going to a teacher," Kat said.

"What do you mean?" Luca asked.

"Like a way for us to do exactly what we are doing now, but on a bigger scale for the whole school to see."

"Then we would definitely get detention," said Luca.

"Not if it was anonymous," Kat explained.

"Like one of those Instagram accounts?" Luna asked.

"Too easy to trace back," Luca replied.

"No, something that *everyone* would have to see," Kat added.

"A newspaper!" Opal exclaimed.

"That's not a bad idea," agreed Luca.

"We would write about our concerns, dramas, and people. Like Page Six," Opal explained.

"We're going to get in trouble."

"Not necessarily, Toby. If we did, that would be a violation of the First Amendment. And just because the school won't like it, doesn't mean it's wrong," Luca replied.

"What are we? Muckrakers?" Toby asked.

Everyone looked at him for a moment, confused and amused.

"What? I like history," He added.

"We need a name. One that's catchy," Kat said.

"Nothing with Oak Ridge," Opal added.

"What was that thing you said? 'Page Six?'" Luna asked.

"The High School Page Six?" Toby suggested.

"Not good enough," Kat retorted.

"Rhode Island Page Six," Opal suggested.

"That's the one," Kat said.

"Are we doing this?" Luna asked.

"All in favor say 'Aye,'" Kat demanded.

"Aye!" The five of them said.

"We should all try and write something by the end of the week," Opal suggested, everyone nodded.

"We need roles," Luca stated, "I think Opal should be editor in chief, she *is* the writer."

"Kat should be the manager, like CEO," Opal added.

"The rest of us are reporters," Luca added.

Mrs. Headstrong came back in, and they all hushed.

"How did that go?" She asked.

"Good," Opal replied.

"I don't need to see the paper, this exercise is for you. Free to go."

They left, and Kat and Opal walked to Kat's house. It was a warm summer night, the sun had begun to set, its rays kissed each house with golden light, a cool breeze blew through the trees. Something was different, Kat felt that this year was no longer going to be ordinary.

### Chapter 3

That night, Opal and Kat sat on the floor of Kat's bedroom, joined by Kat's dog, Appa, who was a sheepadoodle. They often spent evenings like this, and that night they were working on the few homework assignments they received. Pots and pans collided downstairs in the kitchen, and vegetables were cut with the steady beat of a knife hitting a cutting board. One of Kat's moms, Liz, was a chef at Chez Babette. Her other mom, Elise, was a civil rights lawyer.

She yelled "Opal! Would you like to stay for dinner?"

"Yes, please!" She turned to Kat and said, "You guys always have such good food."

"Perks of Mom being a chef."

"What are you going to write?" Opal asked.

"I don't know," Kat replied, "Maybe something about sexism in school. You?"

"Nice, not sure. I'm gonna wait for inspiration to strike."

Kat chuckled, "Spoken like a true writer. Do you think this will work?"

"I hope so, we just have to wait and see."

"What if no one reads it?"

"You don't write for people just to read it, you write to put your ideas and feelings onto paper."

"What if we get into trouble?"

"These are a lot of what-ifs. Don't let the unknown scare you, Kat."

"Dinner!" Liz yelled.

The two-headed downstairs, and as they got closer to the kitchen the aroma of food became more distinct, Kat's mouth watered. On the table, a platter of veggie gyoza and California rolls, along with dipping sauces and edamame.

"I made your favorite," Liz said, "for first day of senior year."

"Thanks, Mom."

"It's my favorite too," Opal added.

Liz chuckled. The four sat down, and the first few minutes of dinner were spent in silence. That's when you know the food is good when there is an absence of words in between bites.

"So, tell me about Ben," Elise said.

"He thinks he is better than everyone else, and he interrupted me in class."

"And what did you say?"

Kat paused for a moment, "I guess being a 'big man' makes your words more valuable than mine." She watched her Moms smile, they looked proud.

"Well done," Elise said.

The rest of dinner was spent savoring the food and talking about one another's day. At the end of the meal, Opal left and Kat returned to her room. She stared at a blank google doc, waiting for ideas to form. Her fingers grazed the cool computer keys, and then slowly with each click, she began to write, words emerging from her fingertips.

It wasn't until she was done with her article that she checked the time, 11:37 PM, she shut her computer, got ready for bed, and then fell asleep.

Her alarm sounded at 6:30 AM, the sun began to dribble through her curtains, like golden honey. For the first time in a while, Kat was excited to go to school, she had an unlikely group of friends and a new task, managing a newspaper. It was another warm day, and Kat put on denim overalls with a t-shirt underneath and her forest green Chucks. She headed downstairs for breakfast, her moms already up. Elsie was doing yoga in the living room and Liz was going over some recipes.

"Good morning kitty kat," Liz said.

"Mornin'," she replied, smiling.

"Someone's in a good mood."

Kat shrugged.

"Nice outfit Kat," Elsie said.

"Thanks," she replied. Kat had a feeling that today was going to be a good day. She made herself some avocado toast for breakfast on Seven Stars bread, pouring herself iced coffee. She ate quietly while trying to do the day's wordle, the sun rising high into a pure blue sky, birds chirped, catching each other up on the latest news.

"Kat, there are some leftovers from last night. I packed it up for you if you want to take it for lunch."

"Yes, please."

"And there is enough for Opal too."

Kat chuckled. She put in her AirPods and then left for school. Opal met her at the front gates, two cold brews in hand from the Heated Cup, their favorite cafe in Providence.

"I wrote last night," Kat told Opal.

"And?"

"I think it's ok."

"Share, I'll read it."

They parted ways and headed to first period. Unfortunately, Kat had AP Chem. "There goes my fantasy of having a great morning," she thought to herself. After climbing up the three flights of stairs to the lab, she put on a brave face. She took a seat, hoping no one would bring up past events.

"Welcome back, Katherine," Mr. Fritz said.

"Thank you. Sorry about yesterday," She said, somewhat genuinely.

"Hope it was a learning experience."

"Yes."

"Good. Then let's begin. Everyone come grab today's notes. We have one more section to cover and then we will review for the test."

"So far, so good," Kat thought to herself. At that moment, she got a text from Opal. Discreetly looking at it, she read *There's a development! Could be good*. "Now what," Kat thought to herself. After chem, they had a ten-minute passing period, and Kat found Opal anxiously waiting in the courtyard.

"What happened?" Kat inquired.

"I was reading your piece in class, it's really good by the way, and Margaret Hartley was sitting next to me, and the snoop that she is looked over and asked, 'what's up!' You know me, I can't lie, so I told her it was for a newspaper thing, and she wants to be a part of it. But, the good thing is is that her grandfather used to run a newspaper, and has a printing press..." Opal rambled.

"Opal! Breathe! If she can help us print then it's fine. We just need to ask the others. No one else can find out, can you tell Margaret that? I'll text the group."

"Ok. Everyone wrote something last night, we can print it soon. Unless Margaret is a pain."

"Are you serious?"

"Yeah."

"I'll send the text."

"We have a new member, Margaret Hartley," Kat sent.

"Done," she told Opal.

"Ok, I'll see you après class."

While walking to class, she heard someone yelling her name from down the hall. It was Luca. She turned around, and he came up to her. She couldn't tell if he was mad or not, his face was often hard to read.

"What?" She said.

"Margaret Hartly?"

"She caught Opal reading my article. But, she has a printing press."

"Of course she does. Her grandfather was John Hartley...Hartley News!"

"Oh, right. What do you have against her?"

"Nothing, she's just a shoo-in for Columbia, and they only take a few from Oak Ridge."

“Oh, it will be fine. She is just going to help us print, probably this weekend.”

“Ok, I’ll see you later. You look cute today,” he said nonchalantly and walked away. Kat’s cheeks turned crimson, “What the hell was that?” she thought to herself. But she couldn’t help smiling a bit.

## Chapter 4

The rest of the school week passed uneventfully, and on Saturday morning Kat awakened bright and early. “Today is printing day,” she reminded herself. Surprised that the newspaper was coming together so easily, she hoped nothing would go wrong. Kat got out of bed, putting on washed-out mom jeans, a cropped tank top, and an oversized cable-knit cardigan. “It’s sweater weather,” she quoted the SNL skit, chuckling as she brushed her teeth. She went downstairs, and her moms were sipping their coffee at the kitchen island.

“Where are you off to?” Elise asked

“Breakfast with Opal, then homework.”

“Have fun!”

“Can I take the car?”

“Go ahead,” Liz replied tossing her the car keys to the Audi Q5.

Kat drove to Opal’s house and then the two headed to the Heated Cup for breakfast. It had become a weekly tradition, pancakes and waffles on the weekends. After ordering, they began planning for the printing.

“What’s the game plan?” Kat asked.

“We’re meeting at Margaret’s at twelve. I don’t know how long it will take. We need a lot of copies.”

“We can always photocopy...”

“True. Hopefully, we will put them out on Monday.”

“Oh yeah, how are we gonna do that?”

“What do you mean?”

“We can’t just hand them out.”

“I don’t know. We will figure it out. We need to print first.”

Their food arrived, and while they ate they forgot about the paper and just enjoyed each other’s company. When the plates were scraped clean, and only maple syrup stained them, Opal and Kat left.

Margaret lived off of Blackstone Boulevard, where many of the houses were big and gated. She was rich, but not part of Daddy’s Money. Come to

think of it, Kat wasn't sure if Margaret had any friends. Kat parked and Margaret was waiting for them at the door.

"Hey!" Margaret said enthusiastically, "Everyone else is already here. So exciting!"

Kat chuckled, and Opal, the polite one, said "Thanks for inviting us!"

Margaret's house was modern, the type of house that you see and you know that they have good air conditioning and smells clean. She took Kat and Opal to the library where the printing press was, gathered in the room were Luca, Luna, and Toby.

"Let's get started," Toby said.

"How does this work?" Kat asked. She hadn't thought about what Luca said to her the other day, but seeing him now, her face felt hot and she had a strange feeling in her stomach.

"This part here pushes the paper against inked movable type materials to transfer text and images from the type onto the paper. I already made the stamp part with everyone's articles."

"How?" Luca asked.

"3D printed." All were impressed.

"Okay, let's get to it."

The group of six printed all day, cranking the machine until they got it right. It wasn't until seven-thirty that they were finished, hands covered in ink. The Newspaper was laid out on the floor, draped over furniture to dry. Tired, the group sat on the floor of Margaret's living room, wolfing pizza.

"How should we give them out? We can't just hand them to people, it would blow our cover," Kat said.

"We can leave them in the entrance," Luna suggested.

"No one will bother picking them up," Luca replied, "They need to be everywhere before first period."

"It's not like we can just get into school before it opens," Toby said.

"Actually we might. I have a key, so I can use the computer lab before school starts," Margaret said. Yet again, surprising everyone. She was proving to be more useful than Kat imagined.

"Well there we go, Margaret can let us in on Monday morning and we can spread them across the school."

They all held up their glasses and toasted, "To the *Rhode Island Page 6!*" For the remainder of the evening, they ate pizza and chatted, anxiously waiting

for Monday morning. Who would have thought that a group of seniors would look forward to the start of the school week?

At around nine, the group dispersed. Opal was thanking Margaret and helping her clean up, so Luca walked Kat to her car. There was an awkward silence between the two, and Kat sensed that he wanted to say something.

“Do you think this will work?” He finally asked.

“I hope so. There is no harm in trying.”

“It’s a really cool idea. You’re smart, Kat.”

She blushed, but Opal interrupted them with her presence.

“Bye Luca,” Opal said, and the two drove off. After a few minutes, Opal asked “What was that all about?”

“Nothing.”

“Sure.”

\*\*\*

Monday morning finally came, and Kat woke up an hour earlier to get to school by 6:30. The plan was that they would scatter the newspaper across the school, and then leave campus and return when school officially started. She rolled out of bed quickly, it was cooler that morning, and she put on black jeans, a striped T-shirt, a jean jacket, and of course her beloved Chucks. She left the house quietly, leaving a note to her Moms saying she had to get to school early for a meeting. It was a meeting of sorts. She left without having any breakfast or coffee, she hoped to get a bagel or something after they dispersed the papers.

They met at the front gate and Margaret led them into the building, unlocking the door to the Upper School. The sky was still dark, not even the birds were gossiping. Each member took a stack of papers and ran around the high school placing papers in classrooms, hallways, and bathrooms. When there were no more papers remaining, they left the building, Margaret locking the door behind them and returning to the front gate.

“Did we actually just do that?” Toby asked.

“We did!” Margaret exclaimed.

“Now what?” Luna asked.

“We wait,” Kat replied.

“Breakfast anyone?” Luca asked, everyone nodded and they walked away from campus.



## Chapter 5

The group of six went to get bagels from The Everything Bagel near school. They walked in silence, thinking about what they accomplished. Kat couldn't wrap her head around it, she wondered what people were going to think. She was filled with adrenaline, but her muscles felt heavy, a bagel was sounding pretty good to her. The sun began to rise, and it was another clear day, the wispy clouds painted pink and the birds began to deliver their daily news.

They arrived at the Everything Bagel, they had just opened, and Kat had never seen it so empty before. Usually, there was a line out the door made up of hungry college students and a handful of kids from Oak Ridge. Kat ordered a poppy seed bagel with cream cheese, tomatoes, cucumbers, and of course, an iced coffee. When they all got their food, they sat down at a table near a window. They ate in silence for a few minutes, not only because their food was good, but because their minds were racing.

"We need to stay calm when we get back," Opal said when only smears of cream cheese and bagel crumbs remained on their plates, "We don't want to give anything away. Act surprised, even pick up a copy." Everyone nodded, and for the remainder of breakfast, they chatted quietly, frequently checking the time, wanting to get back to school. At around 7:30 AM, they left The Everything Bagel and walked back to campus. Kat's stomach turned and she could feel her heart beating, in sync with her step.

When they walked through the gates everything seemed normal. But, when they entered the upper school building, students were huddled together looking at the newspaper. Some called to their friends down the hall "Hey, check this out!" Everyone looked and was reading it. Their plan worked. Kat was doing her best to conceal her excitement and act surprised like Opal advised. There was a buzz about The Rhode Island Page 6, spreading like, well, gossip at a high school, often faster than a wildfire. The bell rang and everyone headed to their first-period class, Opal and Kat had English. It was hard for them or anyone at the school for that matter to focus. Just as class was about to start, a school-wide email was sent out, calling for an emergency assembly. "Here it comes," Kat thought to herself. Opal looked nervous. "It can't be a coincidence," she said. "It's probably about that paper," Kat heard someone say in the hallway. "I wonder who did it?" another asked. "I liked how they told the truth," someone commented, that one stuck. Kat's worries about whether or

not it would be read were washed away. Now the consequences of her bravery loomed.

Once seated in the auditorium, Kat looked around at the teachers, they didn't seem happy. Mrs. Halifax, the principal, stepped up to the podium and looked out into the audience.

"As you have seen, there was a newspaper dispersed around the school this morning, called the *Rhode Island Page 6*. This is not school-sanctioned, and its contents are not appropriate."

"Since when is the truth not appropriate," Kat thought to herself.

The principal continued, "If anyone knows who is responsible for this paper, please see me. It reflects badly, and I will make sure that this does not happen again. Whoever wrote these articles is sitting in this room, and whoever you are, know that there will be consequences. All copies will be confiscated and recycled. Assembly dismissed."

Kat knew this was going to happen, but the principal's words only made her want to continue. They did nothing wrong, and the articles didn't hurt anyone's feelings. She returned to English, and sent a text to the group chat: Can't stop now.

Kat anxiously waited for a reply. Finally, Margaret said, "*Printing on Saturday?*" This was all Kat needed to know that the suppressive words of their principal had no effect on their paper. Kat was filled with excitement for the next issue, but in the back of her mind, she feared the consequences. Throughout the rest of the day, she stole glances with the rest of the group. Like never before, Kat was in the know, and she was in charge of the conversation. "*But with great power comes great responsibility,*" she said to herself, quoting *Spider-Man*, and making herself chuckle.

That night Kat sped through her homework, anxious to begin writing. Opal would be so proud. She opened a blank google doc, the curser awaiting her move. Kat was about to type when Luca texted her: "*What are you going to write?*" She waited a few moments before replying, she didn't want to seem too eager. "*Something about the paper as a whole, and why it is important. You?*" She replied. She watched the three dots, signifying a response was being conjured. "*Nice! Something about expectations for college.*" Kat liked his message, and then shut off her phone, returning her attention to the doc. Kat began typing:

*Dear readers of the Rhode Island Page 6,*

*Welcome. This paper was formed so you could read what needs to be known. A student-run paper, with only students behind it. And no, we will not tell you who we are, for it is not our names that matter, but what we have to say. It is like no other, here you will find the ins and outs of Oak Ridge. Not gossip, about who is dating who, and what so and so wore yesterday. You will find what is bothering students, things that teachers and the administration like to cover up. We don't plan to tattle-tale on people and cause any issues. We are simply telling the truth, and if someone has an issue with the truth, then maybe something needs to be changed. In our pages, you will find personal accounts of Oak Ridge's issues: unrealistic expectations, micro-aggressions, and anything that we believe needs to be covered. Reader, you may have been worried that after the announcement at assembly that we would simply slip into the shadows. Fear not. We are not going anywhere.*

*Until next time,  
The Rhode Island Page 6*

Kat sat back in her desk chair, shaking out her wrists from the fierce typing, smiling at her accomplishment. Although she was concerned about whatever the consequences might be, she took some joy in knowing that this would get under people's skin. She sent the doc to Opal and then got ready for bed. Kat fell asleep that night feeling triumphant.

SAMANTHA FLUM '23  
ANNIE IN THE HERE AND NOW

Prologue

Annie pictured herself belonging to a different world, one where she spent her days on the front porch of a large Victorian, reading Emily Dickinson, painting clear blue skies. Her wardrobe consisted of puffy-sleeved pastel dresses made of silk which she wore with a straw bonnet. On weekends, she attended lavish parties where a parade of admirers longed for her, only to find her unobtainable. She and Jane Bennet, her best friend, were determined to conquer the world.

\*\*\*

Ever since she could remember, Annie felt she was born at the wrong time. In reality, she came only a week “late,” which her mom said was an infinity. Sometimes, Annie believed, it was a century too late.

Annabelle Anderson lived in a huge house in Monowi, Nebraska, America’s smallest city, which was exactly the right size for Annie. Her sister, Avalon, was born only a year earlier, yet acted years younger. She was a gorgeous girl (if we are describing looks) who went to bed wearing makeup, and woke up with even more on (somehow), ruling the world of instagram and all other things that just didn’t matter in the grand scheme of things. To her, Monowi was far too small. She dreamed of living in large cities: Chicago, Los Angeles, New York. Bustling centers of commerce and culture with endless wifi at her disposal.

At fifteen, Annie felt herself a complete anachronism the week after her heart was broken by a guy she never met in person. That week, her grandmother told the story of how she’d fallen in love. Tom had invited Sondra to go canoeing on Valentine Lake. Like every cliché love story, they capsized. Flailing about in the water, they eventually reached shore, where Papa pulled out a heart-shaped pendant necklace, saved in a small box in his pocket and asked Nana to be his girlfriend. Fast forward...they’ve been married for fifty years.

Annie can’t imagine something like that ever happening to her. Not that true love doesn’t exist, it’s just that today, love is more likely to occur in social media or dating apps. And Annie knew first hand how that worked out!

Annie's body may have lived in the twenty-first century, but that didn't stop her from imagining a different time, finding out where she really belonged. Isn't that what teenagers are supposed to do? Discover who they are and where they fit in?

But for the past two years, Annie was subjected to state lockdowns, quarantines, and lots of uncertainty. COVID-19 was killing people all around her and didn't spare some of the ones Annie loved. It was hard to see the big picture when she couldn't leave her house and school took place in a messy bedroom.

When the first day of in-person classes began, Annie rushed out the door, mask in hand, because the virus wasn't completely gone. Avalon slowly rolled out of bed, arriving two hours late, forgetting her face covering.

#### Two Years Earlier: 2020

Everyone remembers their first *Friday the Thirteenth*. It's hyped up in movies and it's hard not to be superstitious. No one got shot or stabbed that day (at least not that Annie knew of), but it marked the beginning of Annie's nightmare.

Annie's a control freak. She has to know things. Back when she was younger, she believed her parents could answer all the questions she had about the world. As if somehow they weren't just like her. When the pandemic hit, and not even a CDC virologist could predict how long it would last, much less her parents, Annie struggled to be stuck with them in the same house.

Annie always thought of her parents as smart people. They attended elite colleges and could help with her homework up until the eighth grade (by then the math got too hard, they said). For the life of her she couldn't understand why they couldn't answer a simple question: *how long will the pandemic last?*

\*\*\*

Annie stormed into her bedroom for the third time that day. Avalon, also in her room, hadn't bothered to come out since the day before. Although sisters, the girls were not friends. They blocked each other online and pretty much in real life too. "Enough with all the stupid selfies." Annie had said to Avalon last year in which Avalon retaliated, "then un-add me." Annie couldn't have been happier to have received her permission. Now, on the other side of a much too thin wall, Annie could practically hear the clicks of the camera, mixed with fake sobs, realizing she'd never been more grateful to not have Avalon show up

on her feed. Maybe closer sisters would turn to each other in moments like these, but Avalon would rather type her feelings for the world to see, and Annie had her journal. Maybe it wasn't that Annie was born in the wrong generation. Maybe just the wrong family.

One month without seeing her friends or leaving the house put Annie over the edge. She could do what everyone else was doing, drive by her friends' houses to say hi, but she was too paranoid about getting sick. Her best friend, Evelyn, turned sixteen the week before and even then all Annie did was send a text and a virtual birthday card. Many of her classmates still went out, especially if they were dating and couldn't last a week without seeing their boyfriends. Avalon and Evelyn fell into both of those categories. Annie liked to think she wouldn't do that even if she was dating someone. Rules were rules, and Nebraska had made its position very clear: stay home.

Evelyn and Annie had been friends since they entered Monowi Middle School in sixth grade. Even though they didn't have classes together they hung out with the same crowd. They were the type of friends who included each other in group plans but never socialized by themselves. In eighth grade, they had their first math class together. Evelyn liked to gossip with all the other girls in the class, and Annie often felt left out. Considering herself an empath, Annie thought she understood Evelyn, but the truth was that no one really knew what was going on with her. She became mean and Annie wanted nothing more to do with her.

It wasn't until they both joined the jazz band in freshman year that Evelyn and Annie become friends again. It turned out there were things in Evelyn's life that Annie had no idea about. Evelyn didn't get along with her parents, and felt unsafe in her own home. As much as Annie claimed to despise Avalon, she was grateful to have a family she knew she was safe around. That's when Annie realized that when bad things happen to people, it can transform them. Annie hoped that would never happen to her. By the end of freshman year, Evelyn and Annie concealed no secrets from each other. They had never been so close.

It was Evelyn who helped Annie love the violin again. She'd been playing it for a while but often felt it was something that she did solely to pass time. There was no real passion. With Evelyn, it was more than that. Music made her feel alive. When it was just the girls and their instruments, Annie could forget all of her anxiety, blocking it out.

Annie hadn't always been insecure. At least not until high school revealed that in her. But at this point in the story, she was only a freshman. A freshman who felt utterly and completely isolated. Fortunately, (or perhaps unfortunately) the whole world was experiencing the same thing.

The first half of freshman year was as expected. Not the time of her life, but not horrible either. A taste of a little more freedom than middle school while still longing for more. Annie enjoyed school and generally did well. She liked to think of herself as having depth. What exactly that meant, she was unsure.

But by spring, things had unraveled. What once was a news story of another country's emerging disease became the only thing anyone could talk about. News of the Corona virus spread at gossip-speed at Warren Buffet High. The disease itself picked up too. What infuriated Annie was there were still people who responded more to their favorite social media influencer than what was happening in the world. But you can't blame the internet for everything. Still, Annie tried.

When all else failed in the world, books were the one thing Annie always had, *Pride and Prejudice* being her favorite. When she was in a world of handwritten letters and horse carriages, Annie was no longer out of place. It was hard for Annie to be reminded that she wasn't the only person who got to live life alongside the Bennet sisters. They weren't just for her. She wanted something that was only hers. But that was all an afterthought. She didn't think about all that when she read, instead, the pages practically turned themselves, even on the fifth reading.

Emma, her mother, shared her love of books. In another life Annie would be the daughter of a small bookstore owner. In another life, people would do things because they loved it, not just for money. But for that, Annie needed to create a whole other universe. Monowi didn't have many things, but it did have a bookstore. And to Annie and her mother that made up for everything.

When they were little, Annie read to Avalon every night before bed. Avalon listened but never read herself. Annie was in many ways the big sister, despite being the younger one. For a while that was ok, if not even better for Annie who liked to be in charge. But in high school she needed her big sister back. She had needed her the first day of ninth grade when she couldn't find the right outfit, because Annie had never cared about having a style until all her friends suddenly did. Or when the boys made fun of her for not having her

first kiss when she attended her first real party later that year. The first few times things happened, Annie had called Avalon. She just never picked up.

Annie always answered when Avalon called.

\*\*\*

After three months of trying to learn over Zoom, the app that made online school possible, summer arrived. To Annie, this brought a wave of optimism. Truthfully, the virus was not getting better, but people liked to tell themselves it was to justify their actions. Like sleeping over with ten strangers, which is what Avalon was in the habit of doing. Avalon told her mother she was going away for the weekend with Jake, her boyfriend. On Sunday morning at about 1 am, Avalon collapsed.

Annie didn't need evidence to know that Avalon was not where she said she was that weekend. But it wasn't her problem, and caring would only upset her. So she turned off her notifications and watched her second favorite movie (and book), *The Notebook*, and when Avalon called her, she didn't answer, because she didn't see it.

It wasn't Avalon who called Annie that night, it was a stranger who was the first to find Avalon's phone when she collapsed. Kate punched in 911 and then went into Avalon's contacts and called the number listed for emergency. The phone went to voicemail and before Kate could decide who to call next, the ambulance was taking Avalon away in a stretcher.

Annie's parents didn't wake her up when they heard from the hospital. Instead they left a sticky note on her pillow, a frantic scribble resembling: *call when you wake up*. In the most stressful moments her parents choose to not use convenient technology to let Annie know what was going on. Ironic. But it wasn't needed because by the time Annie woke up at ten she could hear her mother crying downstairs. She hadn't even found the sticky note. It didn't take Annie long to figure out something bad had happened to her sister.

"What's going on?" Annie said, eyes still barely open. Her mother was unresponsive.

"Mom?" Annie said three times.

"Avalon has COVID. There wasn't enough space in the hospitals around here. They sent her to Omaha."

Annie had heard of people their age getting the virus, but they never ended up in the hospital. Usually it was just like a bad cold, or sometimes a minor flu. Avalon was young, and in good health.



"Is she ok?"

"They say she will be fine. Dad went with her, but they won't let him stay in the hospital. You and I have to wait here because getting on a plane is risky. And you wouldn't be allowed in the hospital anyways."

"How'd she end up there? I didn't even know she was sick."

"She fainted last night at a party, Jake wasn't there, some girl named Kate...but it doesn't matter, as long as she's okay. She's having trouble breathing. The virus is especially bad for people with asthma..."

"Does she have her phone?" Annie said, because honestly she couldn't think of anything else to say. She was in some sort of shock.

Mom laughed. "She does. Not sure how much she is on it right now though."

"Probably more than ever." Annie smiled back. For once she hoped that was true. She pulled out her phone to text her. Annie hadn't even checked her phone that morning. When she unlocked it, she found three missed calls. *Shoot*. Annie knew things wouldn't have been different if she'd answered. She felt guilty. Why couldn't her phone have rung since it was clearly an emergency? But then again, how badly could Avalon have needed her little sister anyways?

Rewriting what to say over and over again in her mind as if this was an email to a teacher, Annie didn't know what she was supposed to say. Or what she wanted to do.

"I hope you feel better soon Sis, I'm sorry." And then another text, "we love you." Because they never said *I* love you to each other. Because it wasn't in their vocabulary. Even so, Annie felt Avalon should know that she was loved.

Annie didn't think her sister was going to die. That didn't mean it hadn't crossed her mind. It was easy for Annie to jump to conclusions even when she had any idea of the situation. But what was going on now was completely bewildering to everyone.

The next five days were for Annie the same as the hundred days before, except this time with raised anxiety. Avalon had texted her back, but not until two days after the text was sent. "Thanks Ann," is all she wrote. Avalon hadn't called her that since she was six. Somehow it felt like progress.

Annie and her mother spent their time reading, or rereading their comfort books on the couch but Annie could sense her mother wasn't

absorbing most of the words. Annie knew she felt guilty that she couldn't be there with Avalon. Guilt shows up in the worst places.

Annie wondered if her mom was going to say anything to Avalon about the party. About lying, and rule breaking. Or had the whole getting sick thing meant she was off the hook? When Avalon returned it was clear she was not getting punished. At least not yet. Annie hated the small part of herself that hoped she would at least get yelled at. But six days in the hospital had to be enough of a warning not to sneak off like that again.

The whole situation made Annie even more nervous than she was before. But it was summer, remember, and Annie's mother had convinced her to get her first job.

The job was as a lifeguard at a small beach that overlooked a lake down the street from where Annie lived. Usually the beach attracted a handful of people, but this year with not much else open, more people showed up everyday. Annie got the job only one week before opening because she emailed last-minute after a long debate with her mother about whether she should or shouldn't be working that summer. Her mother's argument was that she needed to get out of the house, and lifeguarding meant she would be in the open air, far away from people. Annie said that in reality it was one of the worst jobs for her to have now, or ever, because she would be responsible for people's lives. Annie's mother won the debate, like she did with most. Annie had emailed only one place, Monowi Lakefront, and told her mom if she didn't get this job, the hunt was over. But she did.

The rest of the staff was all teenagers and Annie was the youngest. The majority were going off to college in the fall. She knew of her coworkers because she followed them on instagram. They all went to her school, but with being online most of the year she hadn't seen a lot of them in the halls. Arthur Stanely, the grumpy old man who was probably only in his early fifties had hired Annie but she only met him once. He essentially handed over his job to a twenty-year-old who didn't bother to do her job either, even though all she had to do was make sure the lifeguards had everything they needed. Annie's first day at work was a complete disaster. She sat on the lifeguard chair without the proper red shirt or a whistle. If someone drowned that day, she likely wouldn't have been able to find the AED.

None of the other girls talked to her all that much as they were already friends, or at least, had worked together before. Annie introduced herself to

one of the girls who she assumed had been there for a while so she could ask questions about the rotations. Her name was Lindsay and she had just finished high school. She didn't seem like she wanted to help Annie, but Annie had learned she had to advocate for herself.

If Annie had wanted somewhere with structure, she was at the wrong place. There were practically no rules, and the rules they did have were never stated. She once told a mother that her thirteen-year-old son could be on his own, only for him later to misbehave and for Annie to find out kids had to be fifteen to be alone on the beach. Annie was also the only one to wear a mask, which didn't bother her that much because she knew the disease was less likely to travel outside. But still, she would have preferred not to be the odd one out.

On rainy days, Monowi Lakefront usually remains open. That meant Annie along with the three or four other people working would have to hang out and do nothing. Sometimes her coworkers would ask questions but it was always small talk, Annie could never keep the conversation going. Other times, she would listen to gossip. She never realized how easy it was to hear things when you were seen as the *quiet* one. People say things around you because they just assume you aren't listening. Annie was usually outgoing, and although a bit lonely, it felt nice to be this new person. Eventually, she became so comfortable with being out of the group that she brought in her books to read on rainy days or breaks without feeling embarrassed.

As she reread *Pride and Prejudice*, she overheard bits of the latest in the coworker's lives. One day she worked with a group of only junior girls. They had all gone to a party the week before with the entire grade. She heard one of the girls, Jasmine, talking about the guy she was snapping online but never talked to in person. He had supposedly asked her to hang at the party and although she didn't like him she felt obligated. It turned out Jasmine wasn't the only one who felt she owed the boys something. Nowadays, it seemed people just wanted a relationship or a hookup to be able to say they had someone. Or they wanted to look good, or popular. It wasn't all that different from what was happening in the book. People craved status, money and acceptance. She had always admired Jane Bennet for standing up for herself and for love, and not settling for someone just because society thought it was appropriate.

Annie was a hopeless romantic, who read many books, but not one that talked about what she was hearing around her. Is this what her high school experience was going to be about? One time in Annie's English class her

teacher had proposed a question that everyone had to write a response to. The prompt was, what has more power: love or hate? Every single person in the class had answered hate. They said hate is what this country was built on. Annie wanted to think the answer was love. But she couldn't deny the way people acted and the terrible things they did to each other. So she wrote down "hate," and didn't have a hard time presenting evidence. That's when she realized that this was about more than high school. This is what it meant for her to grow up. To realize sometimes love isn't the only thing in relationships, or the world for that matter.

Interrupting her from her thoughts, Jasmine tapped her on the shoulder.

"Annie. The rain stopped. People are starting to line up for tickets."

It was sunny out, Annie hadn't felt the warmth. Instead she was chilly, standing, putting her book in her backpack.

"Oh, yeah, sorry," she said.

"Great book!" Jasmine smiled.

Maybe the girls here weren't so bad.

\*\*\*

Busier than she had been any summer before, Annie had to admit it was great to have somewhere to spend her time. But she made sure to only work five days so that she had weekends to be with her family, and Evelyn. Avalon stayed home for a couple days after leaving the hospital, but then she was back to her usual. Ryan broke up with her because he didn't like her going to parties without him. Even though Annie would admit, she was the most loyal girlfriend. Avalon was sad for a while, but this was something she couldn't show on social media. So she went out and posted pictures in outfits she only bought for instagram, and somehow Annie thought it was healing her.

Evelyn and Annie went to the beach as much as possible and made sure to bring their violins. Music sounded better by the ocean. Together, they were the best type of beach goers. Annie, the practical one, made sure they had enough towels, snacks, sunscreen, and even an umbrella for shade; Evelyn brought only her bikini and violin, making sure they were in the ocean at least half the day. By sunset, the two were covered in salt water and sand, but rarely sunburnt.

The nearest beach was an hour away, and since they couldn't drive, one of their parents would have to drop them off. This usually meant they were stranded till their parents came back at night. Sometimes, Avalon would drive them, but that was only if she already had plans to go with friends.

A week earlier, Avalon, along with her friend Lacy, had offered to drive Annie and Evelyn. Ok the truth: her mother had told Avalon if she was going to go, she had to bring her sister. By the end of the day, Avalon and Lacy were gone. Annie and Evelyn walked the shore as far as they could and found them almost a mile away from anyone, surrounded by empty beer cans. This was one week after Avalon's breakup. Annie called her mother to pick them up, but Avalon and Lacy stayed on the beach until they sobered up, refusing to tell their mothers what happened. Annie made up a story about how Evelyn was sunburnt and needed to leave earlier than Avalon was willing to take them.

Annie hated not knowing how to help people. Especially her own sister. Sometimes she felt her sole purpose on this earth was to take care of those she loved. Her mom dropped Evelyn off at her house, because they weren't yet allowed to have sleepovers. Annie silently cried all the way home, looking out the window so her mother wouldn't see.

\*\*\*

On Monday morning, Annie was ready to go back to work. Alone on the lifeguard stand, isolation was just what she needed after being up till midnight waiting for Avalon. But unexpectedly, Jasmine acted like she really wanted to get to know Annie, starting conversations with her during breaks and when they were switching stations.

Annie hadn't made a new friend in a long time, and was rusty at it. She used to be the best at these things. In middle school she had many friends, before they all went their separate ways. Things were simpler back then, friendships less complicated. Before people got caught up in themselves.

To her surprise, Annie was invited to go out to dinner with Jasmine and two of the other workers, Alexi and Jordan, that night. She texted her mother, begging to let her go, but her mom didn't need convincing. She was going to give permission, because she wanted her to make more friends.

The four of them went to the Applebee's right down the street. Jasmine drove, and Annie even got a shotgun. She felt like the coolest person in the world. Making friends with upperclassmen was something she had always wanted.

Annie hoped the other girls didn't mind she was there. Maybe she shouldn't have come, she thought but had to tell herself to calm down. Alexi and Jordan seemed sweet. Annie hadn't noticed much about them at work because they were always off somewhere. All three of them were on the soccer

team, and that's how they'd become close friends. They hadn't known each other before freshman year. They told her about college tours and senior year coming up, and Annie hated herself for wishing she was one of *them*. About to go off on her own new adventure. "Don't wish your life away," Alexi told her.

\*\*\*

Annie was dropped off at home around eight and joined her dad on the couch. She was in such a good mood, that she didn't feel like going straight up to her room. Her dad was watching the news, something that hadn't stopped since the pandemic started. It seemed like the whole world was just watching, and waiting for all of this to pass, maybe wishing their life away as Alexi had said.

It was surprising to her, as she sat with the voices of reporters infiltrating her thoughts, the amount of attention to what was going on in the world. Her parents followed the news before 2020, but it seemed more of a ritual now. Annie had to admit she got most of her information from Snapchat or Instagram, but she had an understanding that this type of coverage fell short. Her Dad flipped between Fox News and CNN trying to get the most accurate sources about the pandemic; the president; and the growing political polarization of social change movements like the #Blacklivesmatter. The fact that her dad did this, proved to her how there were many opinions. That wasn't what she wanted to hear, but it was what she would have to understand if she wanted to piece things together. The reporters spoke about the death toll of the the virus or victims of police brutality, like the murder of George Floyd, that had taken over the country's attention. Annie felt selfish to have been so happy just a few minutes before.

What made everything worse was that the leader she hoped she could turn to for hope wasn't providing any. Annie remembered the night Donald Trump was elected. She was only in seventh grade so her mother made her go to bed by ten, but she silently stayed up with her computer, following to see what was happening. Her mother was concerned about the election, and that scared Annie. Once he was in office, he didn't hesitate to tear this country apart even more. When the virus came, he blamed it on Chinese people, encouraging the world to hate Asian-Americans because of rumors. At fifteen, Annie could understand what most politicians were talking about, but never Trump. None of it made sense. He wanted to play off the virus as nothing, and Annie couldn't respect that, especially when she saw people like her sister,

clearly suffering from it. But, when he talked about opening back up the schools, she hated herself for almost agreeing, and wishing he would do it.

Annie knew she had to be a leader, and stand up for justice, but she was unsure how she could combat hate. She wondered how things had become this way, or why she was just starting to realize it. She began the inner struggle of trying to figure out who she was as a person amidst everything else.

Of course, it was all too much to resolve in just one night, so Annie went to sleep, replaying the events of the day over and over again in her mind, hoping for the best.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Heartfelt thanks to Mark Harris for his continuing support and encouragement for the Aerie writing program and for making Literary Voices 2023 possible. Much appreciation also goes to the Wheeler School administration and to the English Department for inspiring young writers to write! Thanks to Jonathan Migliori for his expertise, and to our fine illustrators: Xiao Maddock-Mark, Ivy Linardos, and Anneka Jenkins. Recognition must also be accorded to Co-Editors-in-Chief Sophia Blythe and Samantha Flum for an unwavering commitment to this publication.