

The Carson McCullers Literary  
Awards  
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Anthology



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# Poetry

## Columbus State University Selections

### eclipse

by Emma Silverstein

I am fascinated with Apollo's opinion on the American sonnet.

I wonder - does he sing it praises for reinventing an antiquated form,  
Just as he reinvents lyrics to the lyre's same eleven strings;  
Or does he detest my lazy, asinine excuse at writing,  
Fingers loosing an arrow of plague veering directly at me

Upon both of my houses, laurel and lily  
As his foolish kin doubts his wife deep in Hades' trench, wailing in the abyss,  
And yet as the bastion of his achievements brings wellness to diseased, pockmarked and praying

Often I find myself torn between two,  
Just as he is one half of a whole.  
My body bears the mark of his twin's moon  
But I find my eyes pleading with his sun  
For Delphi's prophecy  
To questions that, I already know, will not be answered.



# Kill the Sublime Stranger

by Ivory Alexander

The Stranger finds 'me' waiting in the blood-ripe cornfields of Eden.

The Stranger inspects 'me' under the violet day-star.

The Stranger is not mistaken.

The Stranger flies 'me' closer.

The Stranger ignores the furies.

The Stranger made love to a useless firmament once.

The Stranger regrets it.

The Stranger watches me slumber like the doting Cupid.

The Stranger shares with 'me' a marrow-burning bliss.

The Stranger retires underneath 'me.'

The Stranger offers 'me' a heap of baby beef.

I whisper a prayer to the cursed Stranger.

I see the pillar of gloom behind his eyes of madness.

'I' taste his nectared blood.

'We' separate in the light.

## Rancid Reminiscence

by Cynthia Short

We ride out to my old stomping grounds Craving junk and good Chinese food.

We know it's my part of town

When the road gets bumpy,

When we can read

"The city don't love us on this side"

Like braille against the car's fingerprints.

It's the second time I've been to that Piggly Wiggly since my grandma died

Does she haunt this place,

This gilded grocery store?

Does her spirit sneer at my sweet tooth

Tell God how fat I'm getting,

Wish she could bend

My fingers back for old times sake?

I can almost hear her calling

"Don't touch nothing!"

But like the candy by the cash register,

The memory floats into my hand

Settles in my stomach

Like sugar before dinner - spoiling.

# High School Selections

## Orange Picking

by Allen Moore

In January, the wind awoke while I picked oranges.

Ladders' heights exposed me to those gusts,

And my grandpa gave me his gloves when my hands tightened up.

I begged him not to. But he lied, saying he was content and that they encumbered his job.

He and a neighbor stood beside the ladder, suspending a blanket

That caught fruits with coal-dust patinas after I relieved the branches,

Pushing as I clipped so the spheres wouldn't split open on the bricks.

When I scaled the ladder from a new position, diagonally opposite legs lifted an inch.

My grandfather's anxiety lifted more than proportionally.

Don't be a hero and don't lean.

Sure, I conceded begrudgingly.

The adults below shuffled around depending on where the next orange was.

A few slid off the edge of the blanket, but most nestled into the blanket,

Adding a third dimension to the formerly flat sheet.

The aroma of fallen oranges' innards punctuated the air,

But I wouldn't have been able to smell it strongly unless I pulled one to my face.

The air around me felt liquid, and my sneezes yielded clear beads.

i couldn't go further. sorry.

by Arin Joshi

The last time I ever saw her, she was  
hunched over a plastic folding chair,  
helplessly fiddling with her prosody,

christening herself a nomad and  
immigrance a suicide. We snuffed  
turpentine together, bleeding our

hides translucent, and crackled a  
binding cough of heat into water. No  
apologies left for anyone, she danced

on the patio. Her tears trickled down  
into the creek across the temple. The  
glaucous looks shamed cries of

irritation, like some plaster tongue  
of butter caked onto a palate—or  
at least that's what I imagined. Every

bite filling an opaque, steam-like  
murkiness, her bones rotting in  
the same way. Even grinning when  
emaciated, it was almost grotesque.  
Would she really have been happy,  
living alone but like a military family,

yet still being buried alongside her mother?

The terrace blinds me when I walk past; it  
lays down its prayers and melts into pavement.

Will she ever come back or just fade away?

## An Ounce of Filial Piety

by Emily Nguyen

Sometimes

I take walks around my neighborhood  
alone.

My parents never knew;  
they would have stopped me if they did. I  
made sure they didn't,  
because I could then breathe  
fresh air  
outside the bubble they shielded me in. It  
suffocated me, I suppose,  
but I truly stopped thinking.

A few minutes were enough,  
and I return to the bubble, pick  
up my pencil,  
and continue studying  
the textbook we asked to borrow from school.

My mom enters and watches me, hopeful  
that I can fulfill the dream  
she threw away for us. Theoretically,  
I can pop the bubble. But I cannot. I  
stay,  
and hope  
that I have enough time  
before it finally cements  
and I cannot take another

walk.

# Fiction

## Columbus State University Selections

### The Hunter Next Door

by Evie Smith

Yes, my children, I did watch Nolan Patroski turn Jacob Orville Oakland Junior into thick red paste. I was a teenager with a very good memory after all, and that's not the kind of thing you forget.

As I'm sure your relatives have told you, Oakland raised me for a time, despite not even being my father. Sure, I never called him Dad, and he certainly never introduced me to others as his daughter, but he was there in my life, and he filled the void that my biological father left.

While Oakland wasn't famous, those in town that knew him even in passing seemed to have a favorable view of him. When we walked together, those that knew him went out of their way to greet us, and some even shook his hand. Those who initially were strangers would soon light up when chatting, laughing like he was the funniest man in the whole wide world.

And every weekend, when my mom was so busy with work, he'd take me to the ice cream parlor around the corner, and he'd wrap his arm around me like clockwork. The girls working there would always look at us and smile, like they thought he was an angel in the flesh-- an adoring father, and a handsome one at that. I suppose they didn't notice the way he held me, the possessive dig of his nails into my shoulder. I barely realized it either, until I could no longer deny what was happening, so I cannot blame them for this oversight.

Back then, the idea of a well respected man doing that to a little girl, well, it was unthinkable, and therefore better left unexamined. My mother died not knowing, and my aunt took me in without even daring to acknowledge my weak accusations. Nowadays, they arm you from age six with pamphlets upon pamphlets about how to tackle a monster living in your house. This was a different time though. Somehow, we had not learned that the most brutal monsters are those that efficiently don camouflage.

When I moved from my old town with my aunt, I could still feel his presence even past the city limits sign.

Then, there was Nolan Patroski, the mysterious next door neighbor in my aunt's sketchy apartment complex—my new home. He was a total juxtaposition to the handsome Oakland. He was a looming monument of a man, one that had been desecrated by time. His fading gray hair



matched his withered beard, with a nearly constant bloodshot look in his eyes. There was a slight tear in his mouth that rendered him permanently sneering, leaving him with no hope to hide his tobacco stained teeth. I remember once, before introducing myself to him, hearing two women in the lobby murmur to themselves about what his problem was.

He was a well worn veteran, fought on the shores of Normandy, one woman said. She knew his mother, and maybe once upon a time he was happy, but the war had changed him. It never went farther than that, but they spoke of him less like a person and more of a spirit, something there and somehow not. I watched the women's gabbing mouths snap shut the second they noticed him marching down the stairwell. He passed through the lobby like a ghost, not speaking to anyone, eyes always ahead of him. For a moment, I entertained the idea that we might all be ghosts, and he was the only one of us still alive. It felt like that, back during those dark days.

My peers in the complex didn't share my view of him. They'd come to his door, chortling like they had gunk perpetually stuck in their noses, and then leave a stinking bag of putrid items by his doormat, right where his foot would be when he walked through.

As his next door neighbor, I felt a strange sort of kinship with him. At first, I would simply take whatever they left on the doormat and throw it away. But then, given that the walls in this apartment were paper-thin, I would listen to Mr. Patroski scream obscenities in his room alone. I recall Oakland saying similar things to me, mostly when he was alone with me. Mr. Patroski said it differently, though, less filled with regret, more vitriolic and with righteous anger. I had been reading about the old gods, Thor and Athena, Zeus and Odin, and imagined Mr. Patroski in their places. He'd wield his mighty hammer and lightning bolts, and leave these pitiful jerkwads a pile of ass under his feet, all while he sang those words like a battle cry.

I practiced the way he said them under my breath, feeling the hatred I forced in them flick off my tongue like hot brimstone. I liked it. I really, really did. It felt powerful, and by virtue of association, made me feel that way too.

Whenever those snot nosed brats came along to his door, I'd open the door and yell the words at them. The more creative I got with them, the less likely they were to come back. This parody of a friendship didn't sate my curiosity about my neighbor, however. If anything, it stoked it. So one day, I decided to introduce myself.

"Hi, I'm Beth, from next door," I said in as perky a voice as I could muster. "I have a school assignment to talk to our neighbors about...current events." It was a total lie, of course, but it sounded dumb enough to pass for junior high homework.

I expected some semblance of a reaction, but he just stood there, wide-eyed and silent. He reminded me a bit of a dog with its hackles raised, not knowing whether to attack or hide.

“Any thoughts on Nixon's scandals? Vietnam? Anything?” He didn’t react. I blinked, letting my shoulders fall. “I have twenty dollars and there’s a diner nearby. I’ll pay.”

The man stiffened once more. “It is for school?”

“Yessir.”

He moved, coughed awkwardly, then responded. “I can pay, but can I bring my dog?”

“We can eat it outside.”

That was enough. He went back inside and produced a ragged leash and a giant mutt. Like I was the adult in this situation, I fitted my tiny hand into his scarred one and we went to the diner. We went up to the window to order, paid for our meals (he firmly kept attempting to swat my hand away to let him pay, I was undeterred) and ate at a table outside. When he bought his hounddog food as well, I had a feeling I was going to like him.

My aunt was hardly ever at home, and that left me in between the hell of middle school and the lonely rooms in our apartment. I decided to remedy that by building a relationship with Mr. Patroski. I think, deep down, even though I was never exposed to healthy relationships, I hoped to prove to myself that not all men were phantoms or lecherous creatures. Mr. Patroski looked so different from the other men in my life, and so I must’ve subconsciously figured he had to be different internally as well. Every day, we talked. Sometimes we went to go get the mail together, or go walk his dog together. It was a cool kind of comradery between us. We never did say how much the other meant to us, but I think the sheer fact that we, as the bruised people we were, allowed the other into our orbit spoke for ourselves. If we didn’t like each other, we could have just as easily slammed the door on them. We had done it with others after all.

One day, months and months after hanging out with him after school, Mr. Patroski patted me on the shoulder and smiled at me, and the truth of what Oakland did to me burned so bright that I couldn’t help but tell him. I don’t know what triggered my confession to him—perhaps we had reached that point in our friendship, or maybe it was that he touched me in such an intimate, yet explicitly platonic way. I hadn’t had that kind of reassurance from anyone in a long time, let alone a man. In his kitchen overflowing with unwashed dishes, I told him about the worst thing that has ever happened to me.

He looked at me—truly and wholly—and became unmoving, pale. While I spoke, he didn’t say anything. Didn’t ask questions, or ask why I never said anything.

After I finished, he only said, “If he ever comes back to hurt you again, I will kill him dead.” I hugged him, but he froze with the motion. After a moment, he smoothed my hair back, and laid his chin on my hair as he embraced me back.

Mr. Patroski seemed more alert after that when it came to me. I should’ve been smarter, and realized to trust the instinct of a well trained hunter like him. He knew that Oakland was likely to come back after I told him how obsessed he became with me, how he’d interrogate me about the neighborhood boys I was friends with like I was twenty-five and not ten, how he’d kiss my mother while looking straight at me. Mr. Patroski never said he knew, but everyday after our visits, I’d hear him check the door handle, to make sure I had locked it. If I had forgotten, he’d scold me harshly through the door to always make sure it was locked securely. I shouldn’t have been surprised when I saw Oakland at midnight, stark against the rain, staring straight into my window.

My aunt was out late again, and I knew Patroski wasn’t next door that day. He had something with a veterans association to do. It was just me and Oakland, and I knew it’d be a matter of time before he’d come to me. I wondered if my fear led him back to me, like rotting carrion to a hungry scavenger. I grabbed the revolver my aunt kept under her bed, and lugged it down the stairs to me. I met him outside the door to the lobby.

I don’t remember much of the conversation with him. It was an idiotic thing, period, to think I—a fourteen year old girl—could somehow win a fight against a man decades my senior, even if I did have the gun. He had the gall to try and act friendly, but when he saw the gun, it turned for the worse. He yelled things at me, but those don’t matter. What really mattered was that he threw me against the wall of the stairwell, and his worm-like hands wriggled against my clothes. I could feel his putrid breath curl against my ear as he hit my head once again. All I could see were stars when Mr. Patroski appeared from behind him.

Mr. Patroski had almost a foot over Oakland, and half his body weight in muscle. The fight between them was not long, but it was brutal. Oakland’s face was barely more than a pulpy mass, and Mr. Patroski knuckles were soaked in the remnants. Make no mistake, the piece of shit was still alive, but that wasn’t enough for either one of us. Mr. Patroski grabbed him by his collar, took him to the car, and shoved him in the trunk. Before he could object, I ripped the passenger door open and told him to drive.

We drove for over an hour. The only thing Patroski said to me on that drive was to explain that this was his brother’s land, and no one ever came this deep out into it. I looked out the window and thought it might have been beautiful, if this wasn’t happening in tandem with my introduction to it. I’ve been there before since, and it is forever hideous to me.

Deep within the woods' clutches, Mr. Patroski stopped the car and pulled Oakland out of the back. Sadly, I realized he was still breathing after I stepped out. Mr. Patroski threw him down and reached back in for a heavy shovel. Oakland tried to squirm away, but Mr. Patroski pinned him down with a hard step to the neck. He twisted his heel when Oakland tried to fight back.

While he held Oakland under his boot, shovel in hand, he gave me a final look. I knew what he silently asked. I could leave, or I could watch. I think Mr. Patroski thought it'd be a way for me to finally live in peace, to know without the lingering poison of maybes infecting me that the monster was finally put to bed. But, no, that's not why I stood there, and watched him die. I watched because he was the last thing I saw as an innocent little girl, so I wanted to be the last thing he saw, period.

Mr. Patroski raised that shovel over his head, then slammed it hard down into the middle of the dying man's head, over and over again, crushing his skull far past the point of recognition. The monster that lived in my bed all those years ago was finally soundly dead.

Mr. Patroski nodded his head towards me, then motioned for me to wait in the car. Instead, I ripped the shovel from his hands and shoved it deep within the dirt. Then, turning towards Oakland, I cosigned my involvement by spitting into what remained of his mouth. I dug the first part of his grave, and Mr. Patroski dug the second.

Patroski and I talked nearly everyday afterwards, till his own passing, but we never spoke about what happened that night.

Luckily, the police never came sniffing around anyway. I'm not certain, but I think Oakland came to kill me that night. In his effort to commit the perfect crime, where I'd likely be forgotten as another faceless young girl, raped and murdered in some field she had no right being in, he perfected his own murder. It helped, of course, that the weather had cooperated—by the time Mr. Patroski and I came back, the rain had washed away any signs of altercations.

No one had any reason to place Oakland in the next town over, not when his car was still in his driveway, especially not when he hadn't been seen with me for over three years. I was already seen as volatile and prone to fits, so why bring up my alleged father figure's disappearance? And why would they even think to question Mr. Patroski? After all, he never showed any form of remorse or guilt. At least, not for that kill.

So yes, my children, forty seven years ago, I watched a man kill another, and never said a word otherwise. I loved the killer much more than I ever loved the victim. While I am nowhere near death, I pen this to answer questions should something happen, and I never get the chance to tell you myself. Perhaps this will provide you all with answers you had while I raised you. Mr.

Patroski is the grave I always keep well tended and stocked with flowers. He is the man I have always described when you ask about your grandfather. He is the one you are named after, Nolan. We murdered a man together and we got away with it, too. And you cannot blame me for it, if you really understand.

## That Which Is Only Living

by Nadia Jacobs

As they crossed the New Hampshire border, Harold Mouse unbuckled his seatbelt. His wife, Heidi, shot him an outrageous look from the passenger seat. He shrugged loosely. “You could, too.”

A small click from the backseat wafted into Mrs. Mouse’s ears, and she whirled around. “Mason, buckle up.”

“Dad isn’t buckled!”

Beside him, Mathilda leaned forward, craning her head to see the driver’s seat. “Oh, he’s not!” she squealed, and she rapidly unclicked her seatbelt. From Mason’s other side, Macy watched with building interest.

“Mathilda!” Mrs. Mouse admonished. A laugh escaped Mr. Mouse’s throat, and as Mrs. Mouse demanded, “Harold, stop,” he caught his chuckle and sent it back inside.

“Kids, this is a matter of grave importance,” he said with as much sobriety as he could muster. His whiskers twitched as he fought to keep his teeth inside his mouth.

“That’s right,” Mrs. Mouse insisted. Macy, one paw on the belt release, slowly moved away. Begrudgingly, Mathilda buckled herself back in.

Mr. Mouse began to whistle airily. He rolled down his window, was blasted by an oppressive rush of Northern wind, and rolled it back up again. His whistle dried up, and he cleared his throat a few times to revive it before surrendering. “Now, I’m very excited to be here,” he remarked. “Look at those trees. Look at all these leaves—wow. Feels like a real autumn, doesn’t it?”

“Mason,” Mrs. Mouse warned. His large black eyes stared defiantly back at her.

“Oh, *Scheiße*, did you see that?” Mr. Mouse continued, leaning his snout to the windshield. “I think that was a bear—a real, wild bear.”

“Buckle up, Mason.”

“I will when Dad does.”

“Did anyone see the email I sent the other day? I found this article on bears, on black bears—that’s the kind they have here. This really interesting article. They kill people sometimes—rarely, of course, but it’s happened.”

“Your father is a bad example,” Mrs. Mouse seethed.

Mason met her gaze evenly. “My father is my role model. He inspires me every day.”

“I hear the weather here is gorgeous. I, for one, am excited about that. I’m tired of it being hot until December. Not anymore, though. The winters are properly cold here. Everyone has a coat, right?” His head swiveled to the passenger seat inquisitively. “All the kids have coats, is that right?”

“Harold,” Mrs. Mouse said, with composition, “please buckle your seatbelt.”

“Oh, that’s the best part about this state, darling—that’s the best part—is they don’t require all that buckling-up nonsense—”

“Harold,” she interrupted sharply.

“—not nonsense, not at all—what I mean to say is that they do things a bit differently here, and of course I want to blend in with the local culture—we’re becoming locals, after all—”

“Dad, you’re making Mom mad,” Mathilda interjected.

“I—” Mr. Mouse sighed, turning to peer back at the children, turning then to his wife, whom he loved dearly—the car swiveled violently, and he returned his focus to the road as Mrs. Mouse clutched his arm with one desperate paw. He buckled. Mason did, too.

Mrs. Mouse released a grateful sigh. Mr. Mouse glanced at her and smiled a little, and as he slipped his paw into hers, she couldn’t prevent herself from reciprocating the expression.

In the backseat, the kids played a game of chopsticks. Macy lost. Mathilda won.

“Boy, this rain is thick,” Mr. Mouse observed. The windshield wipers flailed across the streaming glass as the car was graced with a pensive kind of hiatus. He clicked on his hazards.

“We should’ve waited it out,” Mrs. Mouse said finally. Mr. Mouse waved dismissively.

“Oh, I’m sure it’ll be fine. Nothing we haven’t seen before.”

“How much farther is it?” Mrs. Mouse inquired, shifting stiffly.

“Oh, just a ways up the road. Just a ways.” He leaned over the steering wheel, so far forward that his breath fogged the windshield. “Twenty miles. Maybe. Maybe twenty miles.”

Mrs. Mouse crossed her arms and settled back into her seat.

“It sure is exciting, though, isn’t it?” Mr. Mouse added brightly. “This house is big, too. A nice big house.”

“That is nice,” Mrs. Mouse acquiesced, glancing over her shoulder. “Mathilda, you get your own room.”

“Oh, good.”

“I like to share, though!” Macy protested.

“I don’t want to share anymore, Macy!” Mathilda retorted. “I’m old!”

“This job is great, too,” Mr. Mouse continued. “I’m very happy about this job. Did I ever explain it, exactly?”

—“You did, Harold,” said Mrs. Mouse—

“Sales manager. It’s great. It’s really great—a lot of what I’ve been doing, but I’ll get to do a bit more. I’ll have my own people to manage—well, manager, yes—it’s really just what I’ve been looking to do. Do you remember what I did in Oregon? That was similar. I loved it.”

A white flash split the road in front of them, followed closely by a shaking boom of thunder. Everyone jumped. Mr. Mouse began to laugh. “Just a little bit of lightning—little—maybe not so little—a lot of lightning, maybe.”

“I’m scared,” Macy whimpered.

“That’s because you’re a baby,” Mason responded.

“Shut up, Mason, don’t be a jerk,” Mathilda spat. There was a small scuffle. “Hey!”

Mrs. Mouse didn’t want to turn around, but she did anyway. “Mason stomped on my foot!” Mathilda shrieked.

“I did not!” Mason insisted, stomping on her foot.

“Ow! You brat!”

“Let’s use kind words, Mathilda,” Mrs. Mouse advised through a thick pretense of level-headedness. “Mason, keep your feet to yourself.” Mason scowled, shouldering Mathilda into the window; she shoved him back into Macy, who pushed him into Mathilda.

Mr. Mouse glanced into the rearview. “Mason, don’t be a dickhead.”

Mrs. Mouse whirled furiously on Mr. Mouse, who threw up his paws in protest. “What, we don’t want our son to be a prick, do we?”

“Harold, please use child-appropriate language,” she said lowly.

The car veered off the edge of the road. Mr. Mouse regained command of the steering wheel in time to reroute the vehicle. “I’m just saying it how it is,” he responded.

She spoke quieter. “Harold, let’s not say those things to the children.”

“We can all hear you,” Macy blurted gleefully. Mrs. Mouse beamed joylessly at her.

“Okay, sweetie, Dad and I are talking.”

Mr. Mouse adjusted the rearview mirror. “You’ve heard that word in school, right, Mason? Surely all the kids say that in school—kids say stuff like that all the time.”

Mrs. Mouse shook her head. “We don’t need to ask him, Harold—”

“Well, I’m just asking—no harm in asking—”

“Harold—”

“It’s really not so bad; surely he knows it already—”

Mason stared blankly into the reflection of Mr. Mouse’s eyes.

“Let’s move on. Harold, let’s move on.”

The ensuing silence was filled with rain. There was another flash of lightning. The thunder grumbled hungrily.

“Can we turn on the radio?” Macy asked meekly.

“No,” Mr. Mouse said. Mrs. Mouse stared straight ahead.

Mr. Mouse rolled the steering wheel around beneath his palms. The road was empty.

“Exciting, isn’t it?” Mrs. Mouse said emotionlessly. She tried to mean it.

Nobody responded.

“Kids?” She turned. Three pairs of black eyes stared at her. After a moment, Mathilda nodded in support.

“Yeah.”

“I, for one, am excited,” Mr. Mouse stated. “Georgia’s very nice.”

Macy stared down at the clipboard in her paws. The paper was blank. “Are the schools good?”

Mr. Mouse squinted. “Well, not all of them—some of them are awful—lots of awful kids at some of these schools, yeah. There are some very nice ones, though—some great schools in Georgia—we’ve got a good one, of course. Our district is nice.”

Macy nodded. Mathilda looked out the window. Mason turned another page in his book.

“I’m tired of changing schools,” he said.

“What’s that?” Mr. Mouse remarked, tilting the rearview mirror.



Mason looked up. "I don't want to keep switching schools."

"Oh—well—" Mr. Mouse paused. "It's for my work, you know—it's what's best for our family. We go where the work is."

"I quit my job," Mathilda interjected.

"Working at Wendy's doesn't pay the bills, Mathilda," Mrs. Mouse explained.

"I left my internship with the dance company."

Mr. Mouse cleared his throat dryly. Mrs. Mouse said, "There will always be more."

Mathilda looked back out the window.

Mrs. Mouse glanced behind her. "What's that you're reading, Mason?"

He didn't look up. "*L'Étranger*."

"Oh, *parles-tu français*?" Mr. Mouse said jovially.

"No."

"Neither do I," Mr. Mouse said, and he laughed.

"What's it about, Mason?" Mrs. Mouse asked. The car was oddly silent, and she needed desperately to drown out the sound of it.

"It's about a man."

"And what does he do?" Mrs. Mouse prompted.

Mason shook his head. "It's just about a man."

"This is why I never got into literature, I think," Mr. Mouse said. "All these books that are just words—just words about words—books that are just books—I never did like them in school; I always end up thinking to myself, 'What's the point?'—you know—"

"The point of what?" Mason said.

For a splintering second, Mr. Mouse was lost.

"Of the book," he answered.

Mason said, "The point of the book is to be written."

"Well—the point of having written the book—the meaning of the book, I suppose—the theme or whatnot..." Mr. Mouse trailed off.

Mason returned to his reading.

Macy held her pencil motionlessly above the blank piece of paper. "Can someone tell me what to draw?" she said.

"A dance company," said Mathilda.

"I don't know how to draw that."

"An outsider," said Mason.

"A future," said Mr. Mouse.

"A dream," said Mrs. Mouse.

"How can I draw a dream?" Macy implored.

"I don't know," answered Mrs. Mouse. "I don't know what that is."

—"But a shadow," responded Mathilda—

"To dream is to die, isn't it?" Mason contended.

Said Mr. Mouse, "I don't know. I've only done one."

“Which one?” asked Mason, and Mr. Mouse’s mouth snapped shut with numbing celerity. “I don’t know how to draw,” Macy sobbed. There were no tears. Mice couldn’t cry.

The wind ruffled through his smooth grey fur, blowing his round ears flat against his head. He revved the engine, and the car lurched faster; she whooped, and he laughed, blinking sharp air from his eyes. She said something, and he said something back, and neither of them could hear the other, but it didn’t really matter.

As their speed finally receded, she cranked her window up to a sliver. He did his about halfway. “It’s nice, isn’t it?” he said, grinning. “To just go and keep going?”

“I never would’ve thought to enjoy it,” she admitted, and she laughed. “But with you, yeah, it is.”

“Oh, I love it,” he murmured, almost to himself. He made a turn to the left. The exhaust poured through his window, and he coughed, quickly rolling it shut. “Shit. Sorry.” She giggled; he feigned insult.

“So,” she remarked, “where are you taking me?”

He shrugged, glancing over, smiling at her. “Just for a drive, really. The second I have someplace to be, things start going wrong—you don’t mind a drive, do you?”

“Not at all,” she said.

“Good.” He spun the wheel again, crossing down a narrow two-lane that sliced through the deciduous trees. He sped up, and the oaks blurred into warm, fresh smudges of paint.

“I think it’s better.”

“Hm?” He looked over. The wind tousled his fur into his eyes.

“To drive without a destination. It’s better.” She beamed. “This way, we can’t get lost.”

The car was too small.

Macy could barely fit between Mason and Mathilda in the backseat. The two at the windows stayed as close to the glass as they could, as far from each other as possible. In the front, Mrs. Mouse did the same. Mr. Mouse, though he was aware of this, refrained from commenting. Everyone was utterly silent.

“Mom, turn on the radio,” Mathilda said.

“That’s not how you speak to your mother,” said Mr. Mouse.

“I’d like the radio on, please,” Mathilda reiterated.

“Do you have something to ask?” suggested Mrs. Mouse.

“Could someone turn on the radio?”

“No.”

“I’d also like the radio on,” said Mason.

“The radio will stay off,” Mr. Mouse insisted.

There was a  
lengthy  
moment of stillness.

“It’s a nice place—the house and all—not huge, but enough room for everyone. It’s nice.”  
 Nobody spoke.

“New Jersey is a lovely state. I used to live here, years ago. It’s lovely.”

“Dad?” Macy said.

“Yes?”

“Where are we going?”

“New Brunswick,” he answered curtly.

The car groaned and creaked as it stumbled over a patch of uneven pavement.

“We’ll be there soon,” he added.

A minute later, Macy said quietly, “Is that really where we’re going?”

Mathilda glanced at her. Mason made no response.

“Yes,” Mr. Mouse said softly.

“Really?” She was desperate.

“Yes, Macy. It is.”

She quivered in her seat. “How long have we been driving?”

Mr. Mouse stared through the glass. “I don’t know.”

“How much longer?” she begged.

“Stop asking questions,” Mathilda urged. “Please, stop.”

“I want to get out,” Mason said.

“We’re almost there,” Mrs. Mouse insisted.

“I want to get out!” Mason shouted.

Mrs. Mouse twisted over the back of her seat. “Stop yelling!”

“There will be no yelling in this car!” Mr. Mouse snapped.

“Please, turn on the radio.”

Mason began to mutter: “*“Un homme était parti d'un village tchèque pour faire fortune.”*”

“Please, can we be there now?” Macy pleaded.

Mathilda’s whiskers began to twitch. “Stop the car.”

“*“Un homme était parti d'un village tchèque pour faire fortune.”*”

“Mason, what are you saying?” demanded Mrs. Mouse.

“*“Un homme était parti d'un village tchèque pour faire fortune.”*”

“I want to get out!” Macy cried.

“We all want to get out,” insisted Mrs. Mouse, “but we’re not there yet.”

“Where?” Macy burst out. “Where are we going?”

“We’re going to New Brunswick!” Mr. Mouse exploded.

“*“Un homme était parti d'un village tchèque pour faire fortune.”*”

“Why do we need to go to New Brunswick?” Macy persisted through sobbing breaths.

“We need to go to New Brunswick,” Mr. Mouse said, through bared teeth, as he watched the road with wide, glossy, black eyes, “so that we will have been going there.”

Mathilda said, “We are going there.”

“That’s your father’s point,” Mrs. Mouse said shakily. “We are going there.”

“Why?” wailed Macy.

“Stop asking questions,” Mr. Mouse instructed fervently.

“*“Je n'avais pas compris à quel point les jours pouvaient être à la fois longs et courts,”*”

Mason insisted.

“What does that mean, Mason?” Mrs. Mouse persisted.

“Stop the car!” Mathilda said again, but the car didn’t stop and Mason kept on muttering and Mr. Mouse kept on staring through the glass.

“We’re never going to get there,” Macy whispered, sniveling.

Mathilda opened the door and jumped.

## Cavity

by Emma Silverstein

Candy hated seeing me at grief counseling. And rightfully so.

She was a girl whose kindness could rot your teeth. Always having something nice to say, something fitting the situation, something to uselessly pat on the back of the person next to her instead of providing some direction on where to go next. What made everything about Candy worse was that none of it was fake. She was nice simply for the sake of being nice, with no ulterior motives to speak of. A saint among grief-stricken teens and young adults who had no one else to turn to. By comparison, I was like an Americano. Cold, bitter. I always had a cigarette between my teeth despite the rules forbidding them, since the older denizens of the retirement home we rented out could have lung sensitivities. Did I care? Not really. I wouldn't even be in this grief counseling in the first place if it wasn't strongly advised by my therapist (Shouldn't *he* be able to provide me grief counseling? What is his degree even for?). He and my parole officer told me it was either group grief counseling or going back to the slammer for underage drug possession, so group counseling it was.

I was a charity case to Candy - someone who lost everything but was still kicking around. If mom and dad were here instead of in that car crash they would laugh at Candy for thinking she could do anything to move me. Maybe she thought it was for my devout love for God and the holy spirit, as she liked to say while clutching her silver cross necklace; maybe she thought I could somehow be fixed, molded into what she perceived as a better version of myself. Someone who wouldn't smoke in an old folk's home, someone who wouldn't be on parole after a year of being in juvie for having said smokes and getting caught with them at school in the girl's bathroom.

"I don't remember the last time I *didn't* see someone die," some nobody says at the far end of the room, eyes cast down at his fidgety hands. Typically I don't pay attention to most of their ramblings unless I'm called upon to answer, but the topic of death is a philosophically motivated

interest of mine. So this time, when the conversation shifts from how we can recover after a loss to the loss itself, I find myself listening closely.

“I mean,” he continues, “Every piece of media I consume involves death - the hero, well, heroically, perishes, the villain is defeated. There’s nothing out there now where someone doesn’t die.”

“That’s not what death is actually like,” I say as I suck on my cigarette, wolfing down the smoke like it’s my last meal. He’s stunned into silence - I don’t think he’s ever heard my voice outside of one-word responses.

“What do you mean by that, Reese?” Candy cocks her head, hiding her mild agitation behind confusion.

“It isn’t something that slowly creeps up on you like in a book or movie. It just comes, randomly, like a door-to-door salesman trying to sell you a vacuum. It just-” I snap for emphasis, “- happens, like that.”

“I always wonder what it’s like to die, but I’ll never know,” he - I learned by his name sticker his name was Cadbury, what a dumb name - said, head still hung low.

“Geniuses kill themselves over that answer. But I have the answer, and it’s simple: to die is to just...stop existing. Everything you had, everything you were, gone.” The cigarette is gone by now too, and I stub it out on the wall, in the same spot as I have for all of these other meetings.

“I don’t think that’s true,” Candy replies, a small frown on her freckled face. I cock an eyebrow.

“Oh? Do you know the answer, then, genius? An answer worth killing yourself over?” Cadbury shrinks into himself hearing those words. I think he’s here because his girlfriend hung herself. Whoops.

“No,” Candy shakes her head, surprising me. I expected her to come up with some half-baked answer about how we live to serve God or others or our community. “I don’t know the answer. And I don’t think you know the right answer either, Reese.”

My name leaves her lips and thuds onto the floor like a block of lead. I scrunch my face up, and reach for another cigarette, but before I can fish one out of my bag her giant man-hand is on mine, stilling it.

“I think that you don’t cease to exist when you die-”

“Yeah, yeah,” I snatch my hand away from hers. “Heaven and all that. Retribution. But that isn’t gonna bring my parents back from the dead, Candy, and it isn’t gonna take away that time I spent alone in juvie.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

I open my mouth, expecting an answer, but nothing forms. Candy continues.

“While the physical you may cease to exist, your *soul* doesn’t. The imprint you leave on the people in your life doesn’t leave when you die, and even when they die, having passed it on to their children. No matter how lonely you think you are, Reese, the impact you’ve had on someone’s life, however small, stays. And the people who you’ve lost have made an impact on you that you can share with others.”

That’s...

There’s a silence as my gaze drops to my knees. Candy retreats back to her seat, just as the clock strikes 4. She claps her hands, thanks everyone for another productive meeting, and watches everyone file out.

It was ten minutes later when she spoke to me again.

“...Reese? Aren’t you leaving?”

“Agh! Uh, yeah. Yes. I’m going.” I snatch up my stuff, hide my face, and run out of the room like my ass is on fire.

## High School Selections

### Do Not Take the Train

by A. James

#### PROLOGUE

The Narrator

A good story is like a good train. It whisks you away on a wonderful journey. Of course, if your destination is Narnia, a library card is more useful than a train ticket. Some journeys are quick and exciting, over in the blink of an eye. Others are so long and winding that you find yourself dozing off. As your benevolent conductor, I want to caution you about this journey. This train is not a pleasant one. It has twists and turns. The tracks are uneven, and there is very rarely light at the end of each dark tunnel. So, if you are prone to motion sickness or afraid of the dark, this story is not for you.

It ironically, well perhaps intentionally, all starts with a train. Not the strange metaphorical train I rambled about before, but a literal train. The exterior was a shiny charcoal gray. It was brand new, having been unveiled the previous weekend. The locomotive let out one shrill whistle and barreled out of the station, each moment bringing three of its passengers closer to death.

By the second stop, Mr. James Aiye, Mrs. Aiye, and their daughter Rory had all perished. But this story is not about the three Aiyes that died on that train. It's about the three who, nestled safely at home, lived. The newly and forever orphaned Elise, Rose, and Henry Aiye.



## CHAPTER ONE

### The Visitor

It was a normal day until the strange woman rang the doorbell. The noise was not loud enough to startle the children's great-aunt Victoria from her midday nap on the sofa, but it did cause Henry Aiye to look up from his book.

"Elise," he called, knowing better than to attempt to wake his aunt. He frowned. Who would be ringing their door at this time on a Tuesday? He silently prayed it wasn't another reporter. For the full year following the death of his parents and sister, reporters had bombarded him and his siblings. The mysterious nature of the deaths (three charred bodies and no explanation) coupled with his father's fame made for a good story. For that reason, reporters waited at the Aiye's front door and followed them around the grocery store. They hung around the children like buzzing insects, refusing to fly away no matter how many times they were swatted at. In one memorable instance, a reporter sat through the hour-long kindergarten production of *The Wizard of Oz*. Henry's sister, Rose, had played a tree. All of that, just to ask the children a few questions, and of course mispronounce the children's last name.

The man at least had the self-awareness to look sheepish, which was to say, very, very, embarrassed, when Henry corrected him. "It's pronounced 'A', like the letter."

Gradually the flood of reporters slowed to a trickle. The articles became shorter, and no longer occupied the front page. Still, Henry remembered the first article as if it were yesterday. The headline had glared up at the children from the breakfast table: "Distinguished Inventor James Aiye, Wife, and Daughter Die In Tragic Train Accident." Beneath was a large snapshot of

his father and mother side by side. Their smiling faces contrasted with the solemn gray of the newspaper. They were nearly unrecognizable in the black and white ink. The photograph failed to convey the warmth of his father's eyes and the glow of his mother's olive skin. They had as much life in the photo as they did in reality.

Henry had felt his heart pang at the sight. The article itself held more questions than information. What had started the fire? Why had it not spread further? Why were there only three people in that train car, despite the train being packed with passengers? Why didn't the Aiyes have a will? What would happen to their three remaining children?

He broke away from his thoughts as his older sister came bounding down the stairs—after the fourth time he had called for her, he might add.

The Aiye children's one unifying feature was their ability to fixate so entirely on one thing that everything else faded away, ignored. This intense focus could be a gift, allowing them to do complex things like read a book about the Byzantine Empire on a packed bus, or in Elise's case, puzzle through a math problem so intently that she failed to hear both the doorbell and her brother. I, for one, am glad that they have this ability. For if they were not so intensely focused, they might have noticed I was following them.

Elise opened the door and was greeted by the sight of a tall wiry woman. The stranger had eyes the color of charcoal and dark hair slicked back into a severe bun. There was an imposing quality about this woman that was further exacerbated by her dark clothing. Elise (slightly short for fifteen years old) peered up at her, tucking a stray lock of nut-brown hair behind her ear. It was one of the few nervous habits she had yet to grow out of.

“You must be Elise,” the woman said slowly, her thin lips twisting into something that resembled a smile. “It would probably be best if you woke your Aunt Victoria. We have much to discuss.”

Elise crinkled her brow and wasted no time shouting at Henry to wake their elderly aunt. Elise was always very good at telling people what to do. After shaking off her dazed confusion, Aunt Victoria ambled her way to the front door. She made no move to smooth down the wild strands of silver hair that gave the impression she had been recently electrocuted. She set her jaw at the sight of the strange woman and then waved her hand, inviting her in. All the while, the two children stared at her. Did Aunt Victoria know this woman? It seemed the answer was yes, despite how unlikely. Their great-aunt was, and continued to be, a hermit. She rarely ventured outside of her house, even after she was awarded (she preferred the term “saddled with”) guardianship of the children. To this day, it was Elise, Henry, and Rose who braved the produce aisle of the grocery store while their aunt stayed in her home crocheting gloves that never seemed to have the accurate number of fingers. Aunt Victoria wasn’t a hermit due to irrational fears or an overwhelming love of cats. Their aunt simply didn’t like people. That included children.

The strange woman strode into Aunt Victoria’s house as if she had been there a million times before. Her boots thumped against the ground despite the plush patterned carpets that covered every square inch of the floor. She settled herself carefully on an overstuffed armchair on the far side of the room, as their aunt perched on the couch. Any vestige of sleepiness was long gone.

“Where’s the other child?” the woman asked Henry and Elise. “There are supposed to be three of you.” The children took a second before answering, but the woman had as much

patience as she had colorful attire, which is to say none. “The little one,” she snapped, gesturing with her hand to indicate the short height of their younger sister. “Where is she?”

“Upstairs,” Henry said, swallowing, his throat was beginning to feel as dry as sandpaper. “Rose, come downstairs!” he called, his voice ringing with the authority only older siblings could muster even if they were only twelve years old. The echo of his shout was swallowed up by the thick carpeting and the house was silent for a moment. Then a small girl burst down the stairs, pigtails flying as she leapt two steps at a time. She entered the living room with a flourish and a bow, although, her speed made it less of a bow and more of a toppling over.

Rose did a quick survey of the room, her eyes narrowing as she noticed the stranger. Before she could say anything, the unknown woman spoke. “Wonderful. Now let’s begin. Would you like to introduce me or should I do it myself?” the woman asked, her eyes flicking to their Aunt Victoria. The small old woman met the stranger’s relaxed glance with a piercing stare and pursed lips. Still, she opened her mouth to speak.

“Children, this is Ms. Crowe. She is a friend of your parents.”

Having laid bare the fact that his aunt knew her, Henry was trying to decipher whether his aunt liked this woman, and as of now, the answer was no. His aunt sat so close to the edge of the sofa that Henry was afraid she might fall off. Her precarious perch, brown clothing, and large tortoiseshell glasses reminded Henry vaguely of an owl.

“I am here for that reason...” Ms. Crowe drawled, unconcerned with Aunt Victoria’s tense posture. “We have uncovered evidence that has confirmed our suspicions. Your parents’ deaths were no accident.”

The children's large round eyes grew larger and rounder. Henry's gaze snapped away from Ms. Crowe's face to study his aunt. Her paper-white features were blank as ever, neither confirming nor denying anything. But that said enough.

Henry could admit the train accident was suspicious. Journalists thought it was suspicious, family-friends, neighbors. But not Aunt Victoria, no. As each newspaper with a new, flashy headline found its way to the door, it quickly found its way to the trash can. But not before Aunt Victoria stormed through the house (as well as a woman of her age could), tossed the newspaper down on the breakfast table, and declared its contents "foolishness." She would spend the rest of the day muttering under her breath about how the newspapers were "looking for a story where there isn't one." It was only once Henry checked that the coast was clear that Elise would fish the newspaper out of the bin, and read its contents aloud. If his aunt was not denying this, it was because it was true. His parents and sister were murdered.

"Why?" Elise asked. She was calm. This was the same careful, calculating Elise who sat at the kitchen table putting together a 1000-piece puzzle. This was the Elise who spent hours poring over Rory's latest design and correcting her math. "Why would someone kill our parents and sister?"

There it was. The slight tremor in her voice that only Henry could hear. The one that showed her anger and sadness. That was the Elise who had spent hours sobbing in her bedroom after they heard the news. That was the Elise who, for weeks after, came up with an excuse to leave the room so her brother and sister wouldn't see her in tears.

News of the train accident had changed each of the Aiye children. The weight of responsibility on Elise's shoulders had grown heavier—a weight no 15-year-old should have to bear.

Henry had grown distant. Books became his main companion, and he was distant from them, too. His favorite history books began to gather dust, as reading them only served as a reminder of when he would read with his father.

Rose was both old enough to feel the loss of their parents and too young to realize the extent of its gravity. She knew that death meant they were gone forever. But she had no idea how long forever really was. Rose had grown quieter. When she sang it was softer, and she rarely did that anymore. It reminded her too much of their mother, who shared her love for musicals. So, they all wanted to know the answer to Elise's question.

While Ms. Crowe certainly didn't care about their aunt's discomfort, she seemed to care about the children. Well, at least care about the children not bursting into tears. When she spoke to answer, her voice was gentler.

"I'm sure you knew about your father's career as an inventor. He's made a lot of important things," she started. The children only nodded in response. Henry played with the cuff of his sleeve, as Ms. Crowe continued speaking.

"Before his death, we got word that an Aiye, James, had created something very important, revolutionary even. There are people with malicious intent, that means bad, that want to get their hands on whatever it is. We believe that your parents' murders were these people's—this organization's—attempt to stop your father from informing us about his discovery and buy time

for them to find his research. Your mother and sister's deaths were an unfortunate byproduct.” Ms. Crowe said this slowly, as if they were wild animals she was afraid of scaring.

Henry's fingers continued to toy with the button on his cuff as he spoke. “Who is ‘we’?” he asked. “You said ‘we have uncovered,’ ‘we got word.’ Who is ‘we’?”

The woman gave him a half-smile. There was something unnatural about it, as if she was slightly pained by the action. Her terrible smile dropped as she answered, “We call ourselves Red Vector. We are an...organization. Your parents were former members.” She paused for a second.

“You know, your great-aunt used to be one of our best agents,” she said with another twisted smile. “I can see it has been *quite* a long time.” Ms. Crowe's voice lingered on the word ‘quite.’ Her lips curled in a sneer, as she surveyed the room. Her eyes flicked over the dreary floral curtains and dull brown walls. She drew her face into an expression of obvious distaste.

“I’ve never heard of the Red Vector,” Elise remarked, more of a statement than a question. Her voice cut through the thick silence like a Swiss army knife. Unlike Henry, her hands rested firmly at her sides. Elise Aiye did not fidget when she spoke, she never did. It was one of the nervous habits she *had* grown out of (the list of which included loudly chewing gum, biting her nails, and oddly enough, tap dancing).

“Well...” the woman began, her eyes sharp and her smile sharper. “A large part of our job is not being heard of.”

“Like spies?” Rose piped up. She had been uncharacteristically silent during this entire exchange.

“Yes, sort of like that,” Ms. Crowe said, her eyes crinkling at the pig-tailed little girl. As if unaware of the tone of the room, Rose beamed back, happy that she had both added to the conversation and had been told she was right.

“So why are you here?” Elise asked.

Ms. Crowe cocked one angular eyebrow at her as if to say “Excuse me?”

Elise scrunched her nose slightly and then continued her line of questioning. “It seems you have this whole murder thing figured out. Why would you come here and tell us? Your secret organization can’t be that secret if you do stuff like this.”

Like usual, Elise had a point.

“They need your help to find your father’s research,” a voice rasped. Henry had forgotten about his aunt, who still sat on the sofa. “My nephew and his games,” she mused, giving out a wheezing laugh.

“Yes,” Ms. Crowe said. Her tone was as bitter as the incredibly strong coffee Aunt Victoria made daily. “We believe your father hid his research in a puzzle. The organization that killed your parents likely knows that, too. It’s not too far-fetched considering your father was famous for his riddles and games. We’ve had our own investigators take a crack at it, but to no avail. We believe you might have some insight that they lack. What better way for a father to hide his knowledge for only a trusted few to find, than in the form of the puzzles they have been solving their whole lives?”

“Family game night,” Elise muttered.



Having witnessed an Aiye family game night, I must say there was nothing like it. The children's father was as eccentric as he was brilliant. While most families played board games, the Aiye family played detective. They tried to unravel each of the riddles that made up the whole puzzle Mr. Aiye had designed. Whoever found the hidden object, or solved the last riddle, whatever the end objective of the puzzle was, won. The winner was generally rewarded with copious amounts of candy.

"Exactly," Ms. Crowe replied, having heard Elise. "And the sooner you solve it, the better. We need to know what it is before the other organization does. And our intel suggests they have already gotten further than us. Who knows how long they have known about it? After all, they had enough time to orchestrate three murders."

The children had more questions, but it seemed Ms. Crowe had no more patience to answer them.

"You should go pack," she said. "You too," she added with a sniff as she looked at Aunt Victoria.

"Pack?" Their aunt rasped this out in a voice of outrage. She was evidently horrified by the idea of having to leave the comfort of her own home.

"Yes, pack," Ms. Crowe snapped back. "You all must go to headquarters now."

Their aunt was silent at that but nodded her head. The packing went quickly, with Elise rattling off all of the items and quantities that they needed. Rose was surprisingly helpful, although Henry thought he saw her sneaking in a few unapproved items. He wasn't sure if they would need two containers of saltwater taffy, six types of tea, or hair ribbons, but Rose was

adamant. She eventually wandered off into one of the other rooms as Elise and Henry finished up.

“Do you really think our father was killed because of something he discovered?” Henry asked, keeping his voice quiet, so as not to alarm Rose.

“Whatever happened, we’re about to find out,” Elise said. Henry could see from the calculating look in her eyes that she was thinking deeply about something. But he knew she wouldn’t tell him, not yet.

Just as Elise Aiye did not tap dance, she did not like to speak without thinking carefully first. If Elise was anything, she was careful. It was the reason her clothing and hair were always immaculate. Her skirts and dresses were always free of wrinkles, and each morning she curled her hair into painstakingly perfect ringlets. This was quite the task, as her thick, straight hair did not curl easily. Elise’s curls flew into the air as she turned away and snapped the suitcase shut.

“Rose!” she called.

Their little sister entered the room, some shiny knickknack clutched in her hand. “Do we have to leave?” Rose whined.

“Yeah,” Henry replied, with a sigh.

So they left, following Ms. Crowe out the door in a line, like ducklings swimming across a pond. Their aunt shuffled behind them, glaring at the outside world as if it had personally attacked her. Ms. Crowe loaded the luggage and the children into the dilapidated cab. She gave instructions to the driver, waving them off.

“This is as far as I take you,” she stated. The cab drove away. Huffing and puffing in its old age, the car trundled down the paved road as if it were made of uneven gravel.

Despite the bumpy ride, Henry felt himself being lulled into a sleepy state. He turned his relaxed gaze out the cab window. It was hard to see through it, smudges of dirt obscured a clear view. But he could see the outline of the trees and buildings grow smaller and eventually disappear altogether. Then, there was nothing but barren desert and clouds of dust.

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Skyscraper

The world is full of unexpected things. One of the worst mistakes you could make is to think that it isn't. The cab pulled to a screeching and stuttering halt. "Ouch!" Henry winced as Rose elbowed him in the ribs. Rose made no response. She had fallen asleep only a few minutes into the long and bumpy ride.

Upon stopping, the cab driver said nothing. He had not spoken the entire drive. Nor smiled, or so they thought. They couldn't see his mouth as most of the man's face was obscured by a bushy red beard. He unlocked the doors and with a gruff clearing of his throat indicated that this was the end of the journey. Henry swung the door open with a creak. He was met with a strange sight.

In front of him stood a towering skyscraper. It wasn't the building that was strange but rather the context. Context is immensely important. It is why a clown in a circus is expected but a clown in a suburban neighborhood is the beginning of a horror film. This view was similarly unsettling. The building was surrounded by nothing but empty land stretching as far as the eye could see. Rippling blue windows were stacked stories high. The ones close to the ground were coated in a fine layer of dust from the surrounding desert. The glass reflected beams of brilliant light. Not a single wisp of cloud could be found in the blue sky and the sun bore down, hot and unrelenting. Altogether, this gave the scene an unreal quality. "Where's the rest of the city?" Rose questioned, still rubbing the sleep from her eyes as she stumbled out of the cab.

The man who had built that skyscraper asked that same question: “Where is the rest of the city?” Many years ago, before I was even born, that man lived nearby, in the same city the Aiye children grew up in. The place was growing quickly, so every year, the land just outside of the city shot up in value as the people built more buildings. The man predicted that this trend would continue. In a stroke of spectacular stupidity, he bought land far outside the city and built a massive skyscraper. He expected to become rich. The city stopped growing. Safe to say, that man learned a lesson about unexpected things.

So, that monolithic building stood tall and empty for years. Of course, until the very secret (a bit less now that I am writing about it) organization took up residence.

“I guess this is headquarters,” Elise said, shielding her eyes from the blindingly white sun. Their aunt meandered out, a carpet bag clutched in her gnarled hand. Her nose was upturned in obvious distaste for the sight before her.

“Secret headquarters,” she said with a snort. “You could see the building from miles away. Secret.” She spat. “Giant building in the middle of nowhere doesn’t look suspicious at all. I always said their arrogance would get them into trouble one day.”

The children had long ago become accustomed to their Aunt Victoria’s bitterness, so they were unfazed by her remarks. With a loud roar, a thudding noise, and a bang, the car sped away. The old cab left in its wake a fog of dust, three coughing children, a frowning old woman, and their luggage. As the vehicle became more and more distant a strange silence overtook the expanse of desert. The quiet lasted only for a second.

“CLANG!” The glass door of the skyscraper swung open, and a figure emerged from the entrance. The stranger, who approached them simultaneously running and stumbling, was soon

revealed to be a small woman. She reminded Henry of a bird. The woman was pale, her skin a paper white that matched their aunt's, and her hair was just as light, a pale blonde. She looked as if all of the color had been leached out of her, save the red splotches on her cheeks. The woman finally stopped in front of them, mopping sweat from her brow. From far away Henry had thought the woman to be rather young, but on closer examination, he wasn't sure. Children are notoriously terrible at determining adults' ages. To them, twenty is middle-aged, and forty is just a hop and a skip away from a coffin. This woman was either in her mid-twenties or late forties. Henry had no clue.

None of the children spoke as the woman stood in front of them wheezing and panting. The Aiye parents had done a good job teaching their children about "Stranger Danger." However, the lesson never included what to do if a mysterious cab drops you in the middle of nowhere and a stranger approaches you from a random skyscraper.

The woman looked at the children. Her eyes were round and prominent, like a bug. "Please, follow me," she said with a feeble wave of her hand. Her voice was squeaky. Henry couldn't tell if that was due to her obvious distress or if it was naturally like that. While Henry was pondering, the small woman had already turned on her heels and begun her shuffle back to the entrance. She was halfway through the long trek before she realized that none of them were following.

"Come on," the woman waved impatiently. "We're already late."

The children exchanged looks, hesitant to follow the weird woman into the weird building. Should they follow her or not?

In the end, they didn't have to make the decision. "Pah," their aunt spat—"Stop dilly-dallying and follow the little chicken lady into the building." She swung her small carpet bag

forward and strode toward the skyscraper. Henry and his sisters shuffled afterward, carrying the rest of the luggage. Little Rose balanced one bag on her head while tugging a small but heavy trunk behind her.

Eventually, they made it to the building. The doors were rather fancy for a secret organization that likely did not receive visitors on regular occasion. They were large and made of smooth polished glass with silver handles that must have been cleaned recently as they were pristine, not a speck of dust on them. The strange woman was either not very strong, or the doors were very heavy because she had to leverage her weight to pull them open. As the doors swung wide, they revealed the brilliant scene inside.

The first thing that caught Henry's eye was the giant ornate chandelier. It appeared to break the laws of physics just by hanging. His eyes drew upwards, tracing the line of the chandelier to the high ceiling above which was gilded with swirls of gold. The walls were covered with some shiny fabric, maybe silk, that was the color of the champagne he had seen his parents drink on special occasions. Even the floors spoke of luxury. The marble, perfectly smooth, formed a complex pattern that drew towards a sprawling staircase with an elegant golden railing. Rose dropped her luggage in awe. The trunk made a thump against the polished floor that echoed across the lobby. It was only then that Henry realized exactly how quiet it was.

Another quick survey of the room confirmed that the place was empty. The concierge desks were all vacant of people. They were now lined with the strange eye-catching knickknacks, a dismantled telephone, a birdcage, and what appeared to be a giant statue of a peacock.

"Ahem," a woman cleared her voice, breaking Henry out of his thoughts. He whirled around to face the noise. This new stranger was dressed in a pinstriped dress suit and what Rose

would describe as a “hideously loud scarf.” Rose was quite particular when it came to fashion, despite being six.

This woman looked younger than Ms. Crow, but Henry could not determine much beyond that. Her heels clacked loudly against the marble floor as she walked towards them. “Welcome to your new home!” she exclaimed with a bright smile and her arms extended in greeting. Henry glanced around uneasily. The place was nice, but he had no interest in this being his new home. “I’m sure you have some questions.”

This woman reminded Henry of the dolls Elise used to play with, at least when they were first given to her. Elise and Rory made sure they didn’t stay that way for long, often utilizing them for various scientific experiments. One of which involved a stove and was the last time the two girls were ever given dolls. His heart tightened in his chest as he thought about his deceased sister, and he quickly turned his mind to the point at hand.

Questions? Of course, Henry had questions. He had so many questions he could fill a book with them. And if questions took the form of yellow rubber ducks, he could fill a bathtub with them as well. What exactly was the purpose of the organization? How were his parents involved? Why was this headquarters? Did his parents really know these people? Trust these people? Did his aunt? What groundbreaking thing had his father discovered? And why, in the face of all this, the deaths, the mystery, the seeming gravity of the whole situation, was this woman so chipper? Henry wanted to throw a book at her.

Now, I don’t normally support book throwing, as it could result in the damage of said book, or people. However, as someone who has met the woman, and thrown a book at her, I must say it is very satisfying. I would recommend it.



Sadly, Henry's brain jumped from this thought to the next. His mind was so jumbled that it struggled to formulate a question to ask, though, you could hardly blame him. Lately, it seemed like the more questions he asked, the more he had. At this point, he wasn't sure he would ever be satisfied with the answers. Elise didn't seem to have this problem.

"Who are you?" Elise asked the woman, her tone controlled.

The woman gave her a broad smile, one of those ones that showed all of a person's teeth and either made them look like a movie star or a great white shark. This woman was an odd blend of both.

Her voice sang like a bell in response. "I am Noreen Astrid Sergeant. But you may call me Ms. S." She punctuated this statement with a lazy wave of her hand. She paused, sensing that this question was not just about her identity, but the organization as a whole. She continued, "You are at what was formerly, well at least meant to be, the North-Bridge Hotel. It is now headquarters." She let her eyes linger on the chandelier that hung overhead. Her gaze then snapped back to the children. "As the agent that came to your house told you, we are Red Vector, and we were friends of your parents. We have been unable to solve the puzzle your father left. We are hoping that you will be able to provide more insight." Her voice sped up. "You must work quickly. As it is paramount that we find your father's discovery. The sooner, the better. We have everything that you will need here." She gave another wave of her hand at their surroundings. "Now I am sure that today has been very stimulating and exhausting. For all of you." Her eyes flicked over to the couch in the corner of the lobby.

The children's Aunt Victoria had shuffled over there upon entry. She now lay on the couch, stretched out with audible snores.

Ms. S momentarily wrinkled her nose in distaste. She refocused her gaze. “So . . . we will begin work tomorrow, once you have all gotten your rest. You children and your aunt have rooms upstairs that Patricia will take you to.” Ms. S looked to her left, as if expecting to see a person standing there. When she realized there wasn’t anyone, she snapped her fingers. After three snaps, she grew even more irritated and began tapping her foot. The small woman who had greeted them at the cab scurried forward. She looked petrified. Henry assessed that Ms. S was her boss and not an easy one at that. Ms. S shot her a glare and pursed her magenta lips. “Yes. This is Patricia.” She gestured again with a flick of her wrist, nearly smacking the small woman in the face. Patricia dodged expertly as if she had experienced this a thousand times before.

“Before you go, are there any more questions?” Ms. S crooned. Rose’s small hand shot into the air. “Yes, dear?” Ms. S said, nodding at her with a smile.

Rose lowered her hand, and loudly asked, “Do you have snacks?”

## CHAPTER THREE

### The Task

Henry Aiye lay awake in bed, tossing and turning. It wasn't from discomfort. The bed was like a giant fluffy marshmallow that had merged with a cloud. It was far better than the one in his aunt's house. No, his mind couldn't seem to wind down. Instead, it was at hyper-speed, flipping through the events of today and all that had led up to it. His thoughts swirled like a whirlpool, drawing him in and drowning him simultaneously.

His mind caught on something, one thing that stood bright and vivid in contrast to all that followed. It was the day of his parents' departure. The trip was sudden. It was for his father's work. He was going to attend a conference a few cities away. Henry had thought it to be particularly important since his mother and father seemed nervous. Did they know what was in store for them on that train? Was that why they were so anxious? It was odd for his mother to accompany his father on trips like this one, leaving behind her patients and all of her duties as a doctor. Rory was going because there was some science museum she had been wanting to see there for years.

They had all packed methodically. But even with careful packing, they had managed to forget things. Rory had left the over-sized pocket watch she was always tinkering with. However, she was probably so distracted reordering her bookshelf at the last minute that it slipped her mind. That was accidental.

What was not accidental was his mother leaving her wedding ring. Neither Henry nor his sisters had realized until they had heard the news of the accident. This led them to gather teary-

eyed in their parents' bedroom. There it sat on the nightstand. Elise now wore the ring on a chain clasped around her neck.

There was so much about that day that didn't make sense. The more strange things he noticed, the more strange things he found.

By the time morning came Henry felt less rested than before. The only people who had slept well were Aunt Victoria and Rose, not surprising, since both had fallen asleep on the world's bumpiest cab ride the day before. They were gathered in Elise and Rose's room. Henry felt like the birds on the silk wallpaper were staring menacingly at him. Rose was initially scared of the creatures on the walls but now cooed at them, proclaiming that they were adorable. She had requested permission from Aunt Victoria to paint birds on her walls at home. His little sister seemed to view the recent events as the beginning of a hastily planned vacation.

Elise flitted around the room as if she were a hummingbird herself. Her pale blue skirt swished as she paced. His aunt crocheted fussily in the corner, while Rose transitioned to chattering at Henry. She mostly went about how yummy the pancakes were. Breakfast was delivered to their rooms at 6 o'clock sharp, which still felt shockingly early to Henry even though he had gone to bed before the sun had even begun to set. Rose did not seem to have this issue. She confessed to being up an entire hour before the pancakes arrived. His little sister had always been a morning person.

At 8 o'clock, a soft knock sounded at the door. It opened to reveal Ms. S. She wore another immaculate dress suit, her scarf only marginally brighter than her smile. The woman looked as if she was auditioning for a toothpaste commercial and was a shoo-in for the role. In a voice too

sweet for the early hour, she announced, “I hope you are well rested. We have a lot of work to do.” And with that, she spun around.

Her gracefulness was shocking considering her towering stiletto heels. She walked down the hallway with purpose. Her heels clacked against the smooth marble. Unlike Patricia, who had obviously learned the maneuver from her, Ms. S didn’t look back to check if they were following. Noreen Astrid Sergeant had the confidence, fashion, and blinding white teeth of someone who knew they were worth walking behind.

Aunt Victoria let out an unapproving “Hmph!” and gathered up her crocheted nightmare. It was either a very lumpy scarf or a very wide hat.

The children rushed down the hallway to catch up with Ms. S. Aunt Victoria appeared content at her slow, tortoise-like pace, likely because of the distance it provided between her and the children. She made no effort to speed up.

That march down the hallway must have been quite the scene. One fashionably dressed woman with vermilion lipstick, trailed by three children, two of whom had brushed their hair this morning, and Henry whose black hair stood up in various directions. Rose Aiye was of course skipping. She liked the way the skirt of her dress flounced when she did. Behind them, one grumpy old woman carrying a tangle of puke orange yarn. I am sad to say I didn’t get to see it and must rely on this second-hand account. You see, I was very busy waiting for a very important bus.

Ms. S led them to a conference room. The space housed a large oval mahogany table and exactly five chairs. They were nice chairs, the kind that you could spin around in and make yourself dizzy.

Patricia, looking nervous as ever, stood in the corner clutching a folder and a crystal pitcher of water. The woman was obviously attempting to blend into the wallpaper. Perhaps in a less ornate room, her beige ensemble would have been helpful in this task, sadly this room was a robin egg blue that made her stick out like a very khaki sore thumb.

Ms. S strode to the far side and gestured for the children to sit down. They waited in uncomfortable silence for Aunt Victoria to shuffle into the room and settle in her chair. Ms. S let the quiet linger a little longer and then opened her mouth to speak. “Now, I understand the lawyers failed to find your parents’ will,” she said.

Henry wrinkled his brow as she paused. It was a statement, not a question. Did she want them to respond?

Evidently, the pause was for dramatic purposes as she continued. “That was because we took it.” She held out her hand.

Patrica scurried forward to deposit the pitcher of water in her outstretched palm.

“Not the water,” Ms. S said through gritted teeth. “The folder.” She pasted on another smile as the correct item was handed to her. “That will be all, Patricia,” she said, not even looking back to face the woman.

Patricia hesitated.

“That will be all,” Ms. S reiterated, harsher this time.

Patricia looked as if she was going to burst into tears as she fled the room. Henry felt bad for her. He saw his sister Elise wince at the exchange. Aunt Victoria was far less empathetic. Her face displayed an amused smirk.

There is a word in German, *schadenfreude*, which means to take pleasure from others' misfortune. Henry doubted his aunt knew this mouthful of a word, but it definitely applied to her. Aunt Victoria was always happiest when everyone else was miserable.

Ms. S flipped the folder open with a dramatic flair. "We had to check for clues," Ms. S said matter-of-factly.

Elise frowned, narrowing her eyes. "You took our parents' will," she echoed.

"That's rude! And it's stealing!" Rose added.

Ms. S tried to pacify both girls with a smile. "If there was ever a starting place, your father would likely have left it here, and we didn't want your parent's killers to get their hands on that."

Henry nodded softly at that statement. The beginning of each family game night concealed a clue in either a note or opening speech their father delivered.

"There was only one thing besides the sealed will, dated to years ago, so it likely doesn't contain any clues." She slid the will across the table to the children.

Elise snatched it up and began examining it.

It was simply a dry play-by-play of what was left to whom. Although there was one interesting entry. Henry's mother had left the very large and very ugly painting of a clown, which had been stored in their basement likely for this very moment, to her cousin Gertrude (whom she despised) in a final act of brilliant pettiness. To be fair, as children 14-year-old Gertrude had shoved his mother's face into the cake at her ninth birthday party. His mother was always the type to hold a grudge.

Ms. S continued, “The other thing was this letter, from your father addressed to Henry. It was left with the will.” She slid a single piece of paper across the table.

Henry picked it up gingerly, with trembling fingers. He missed his father desperately. These were his last words to Henry. The letter was written on nice expensive paper, the kind that had a smoothness and weight to it. The words were in neat cursive, inked blue across the page. It was indeed his father’s handwriting, his signature loops and swirls, written in his favorite pen. He studied the letter carefully and looked up at Ms. S.

“Just for me?” he questioned. Ms. S nodded. He stared at the paper. Ms. S and the children sat in awkward silence for fifteen minutes as Henry examined the letter.

“That’s a clue, right?” she asked. “Our previous investigators thought so. They looked for anagrams or hidden meanings in the words, but couldn’t find anything. They thought maybe it had to do with some of the spelling errors or grammar mistakes. They are littered throughout the letter. Strange for final words. But they couldn’t find any pattern. Do you see anything?”

He did. But he certainly wasn’t going to tell her after what he had deciphered. The message his father had left wasn’t one that inspired him to trust this woman.

“Not sure,” he responded softly. “I have to keep looking at it.”

Elise shot him a confused look. She knew there was something he wasn’t saying. He looked back at her with an expression that told her to leave it alone. She did.

Ms. S didn’t seem to notice this exchange between the siblings. She was busy standing up and brushing invisible wrinkles out of her skirt. Henry guessed that they were leaving this



conference room. He was right. Ms. S led them down a hall and then another one and another one. His aunt grumbled the whole way, which made the journey all the more delightful.

They walked and weaved through an endless maze of hallways. Some were filled with passersby, and others were completely empty. When there were people, they ignored the children, and Ms. S ignored them. They all had very important secret organization business to attend to, as shown by their brisk paces. Despite the walking speed that bordered on running, Ms. S never got out of breath or faltered in step. Then she stopped at what appeared to be a dead end.

Ms. S tapped on part of the wall and a hidden door revealed itself. She yanked it open with the restraint of a child opening a present on Hanukkah. Her casual approach to the whole hidden door thing was rather disconcerting. Henry's mind went momentarily blank as he took in the sight before him. The room was big, large, cavernous, gargantuan, and all the other words in the dictionary that were synonyms of huge. Inside this room were familiar items—familiar in fact, because he had been surrounded by most of them his whole life. Everything from the Aiye children's childhood home, save what they had brought to their Aunt Victoria's, resided here.

"We brought it to headquarters. Everything from your house. Needed our investigators to go through it. Though, that hardly did any good. Plus, we couldn't risk any of it falling into the wrong hands." Ms. S spoke as if she was talking about weapons or dangerous chemicals, not the Aiye's dining room chairs and Elise's pink bedroom curtains.

There are moments when something is so surreal or the gravity of a situation is so great, that you forget yourself. For that moment, you are a feather floating in the breeze. But that moment doesn't last forever. Your mind resets. You remember that humans are a lot heavier than feathers, and you come crashing back down to reality.

Henry felt this as he stared at the remnants of his life before. As he snapped out of his thoughts, he realized that Ms. S was still speaking. “We made sure everything was preserved just as it was. The items are organized just as they would be in the respective rooms. Each room is arranged in the same layout as your house. They are grouped by floor. The basement is over there.” She pointed to the right side of the room. “And everything from the attic is there.” She pointed to the right side of the room.

“What happens when we solve it?” Elise spoke softly. She didn’t look at Ms. S, but stared intently at the scene in front of her.

Henry was taken aback at the certainty of her statement. When. When they solved it. Henry was still trying to wrap his head around there being a puzzle, and Elise was already sure they would solve it.

But she was right, wasn’t she? They always solved their father’s puzzles. Even when game night became game week, and on one particularly painful and memorable occasion, game month. Their father had always told them that the only type of problem they were allowed to give up on was one where there was not a solution. Two things always had answers: math homework and their father’s puzzles. They were going to solve this one.

“Well,” she said in a soft and sweet tone. “You’ll have stopped your parents’ killers from getting access to your father’s work. We will keep his research safe here. Then our organization will destroy the puzzle so no one else can discover it. And you’ll go back to your quiet, normal lives with your guardian.”

“Can we have a pizza party?” Rose piped up. Henry felt a smile tug at his lips.

Ms. S gave the girl a beaming smile. “Yes. I suppose that would be alright.”

“But no pizza with pineapple on it, because that’s gross,” Rose added.

The woman nodded, her elegant eyebrows furrowed and her lips pursed. She cleared her throat and spoke again. “Lunch will be brought at noon.”

Henry had no clue what time it was now.

“And we’ll all have dinner at six. You can tell me all about what you’ve discovered then. If you need anything, go to the lobby. Patricia is there to help you.”

Henry lacked confidence that he would be able to find the lobby. He could hardly remember all of the turns they took down each of the brightly papered hallways. But Ms. S seemed to think they could navigate just fine.

“Have fun,” she called over her shoulder as she strode out the door.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### The Puzzle

Henry and Elise sat on the cold concrete floor of the giant room. Sitting on the ground was uncomfortable, but Henry hardly cared at this point. The puzzle-solving was not going well. Even that was sugar-coating it. There was no puzzle-solving. There was just a lot of searching, a lot of complaining, and a lot of staring at the ceiling, but none of that had been helpful. Henry laid down against the frigid floor as if hoping he would sink into it. In his boredom and thoughts, he could hear the beating of his heart as well as the faint sounds of Aunt Victoria's crocheting. She had spent the day alternating between staring at the children as they failed to discover anything and continuing to crochet a knotted monstrosity. It was now the size of a blanket and the texture of a bird's nest.

Out of the corner of his eye, Henry could see Rose asleep on a couch. Her investigation had been as exhausting as it was brief. Rose had accidentally shattered two vases, upturned a file cabinet, and tripped over an uneven carpet. Whatever the opposite of Sherlock Holmes was, that was Rose.

Henry sat up as he heard footsteps. Someone he didn't recognize entered carrying a platter of sandwiches. The food looked delicious. His stomach grumbled as the stranger set the platter down on the table and left. Elise grumbled as she rose from the floor, then threw herself down into one of the dining room chairs, and began devouring a sandwich. Henry joined her after shaking Rose awake. His little sister would be furious if she missed a meal.

"What?" Rose whined rubbing sleep from her eyes.

“Food’s here,” Henry responded.

She perked up at that and bounded towards the table. She frowned at the sandwiches before grabbing multiple. “What...happened...?” Rose mumbled in between bites.

Elise methodically listed all of the places they had searched. “The attic, our parents’ things, and the things in the basement,” she said with a hint of frustration.

“That’s not a lot,” Rose remarked, raising her eyebrows.

“It would be more if you had helped,” Elise shot back.

Rose let out a sniff and pouted.

“Was there anything else in the letter that might help?” Elise questioned Henry, her voice exhausted.

Henry shook his head.

The letter... From the second he saw it, he knew it was a code. To anyone else, the note was just the last words of a father to his son in a looping script, except for the postscript, which was hastily printed in that same blue ink. That was the only part Henry paid attention to. The rest was a distraction.

When he was little, it had taken Henry longer to learn how to read than his sisters. It was like the letters squiggled on the page, transforming and swapping places. Like a magic trick, the word “wizard” turned into “lizard.” Trying to read cursive was even harder. The loops and squiggles were difficult to decipher. This struggle wasn’t his alone. Henry’s grandfather had trouble with reading as well. Still, it hadn’t stopped him from becoming a renowned author of well-known mystery novels including, *Watch the Door* and *The Mysterious Knock in the Middle*

*of the Night*. Grandpa B's books were some of Henry's favorites. Henry didn't give up. He found that when something didn't make sense, the best thing to do was take it apart, piece by piece, and see how it worked. It was the same thing Elise did to math problems, Rory did to machines, and Rose did to plays. He knew grammar rules like the back of his hand, and his father knew that. Henry's father also knew how hard it was for Henry to decipher cursive. If he wanted him to read that part of the letter easily, he wouldn't have written it that way. He had shown the first half of the letter to Elise to confirm his suspicions. His father had spent the entire page writing about the culinary history of the sweet potato.

There were numerous grammatical and spelling errors in the postscript. According to Ms. S and Elise, they were littered throughout the rest of the letter as well. The ones not in the postscript were likely a distraction his father had put in place to make it harder for people other than Henry to decode the message. They could have also been clues, but he could find no discernible pattern. So he focused on the postscript. Henry picked through the sentences.

Dear Henry,

*This letter is of the vry most impertince. I am sure your fend of manee foodss. I know Rose liek myself holds a special spot for potatces. Although- she is knot fecn of the sweet potato. There is muc I have to tell yu. The sweet potatoe was furst cultivated in South America. However, et would eventually become a staple crop in Asia. These potatces helpt prevent famine when the rice hrvests were no goood. Thus it the impertant story of the sw eat potato. I have many more important words to impart. Frst, sackadaisical. That word is one of amy absolutely favorites. Here are some more. They are alphabetized of ccourse. Incomprehensible, insightful, axiom, impudent, sublime, demure, and off ccourse Potato.*

*Thet is all,*

*James Aiye*

You no that I trust, u so much. No doo knot be worryed. The one-who aught is me. But—I stil hope see Victoria left the house. Shee spends far to muc time at home. Do knot bother her to much. Pleez bee nice too your sisters. Also, eet yur vegeatables.

The mistakes in the spelling and grammar were overwhelming. He then thought to categorize each type of mistake. That was when he noticed it. While the spelling and word choice errors were random, each grammatical error occurred every five words for a total of five errors.

The first error was an unnecessary comma after the word TRUST. The second mistake was a missing comma after the word NO. The third was an unneeded hyphen after the word ONE. For, his father had incorrectly used a dash after the word BUT. Lastly, his father had improperly switched tenses right after the word VICTORIA.

Altogether the hidden message spelled out: TRUST NO ONE BUT VICTORIA.

Knowing what that meant was easy enough. They couldn't trust anyone but their aunt, not even Ms. S. He had informed Elise about the hidden message once Ms. S had left. In her own strange Elise manner, she had found the cryptic warning energizing rather than outright terrifying. But that energy soon seeped out of her as the hours dragged on. It seemed like they wouldn't need to hide any discoveries from Ms. S after all because they didn't have any discoveries. Desperate for more clues regarding the puzzle, Henry checked, and rechecked the letter, but it didn't contain anything.

He looked back up at Elise who watched him pensively. Rose had wandered off at some point while he was thinking. He glanced around to see where she was. Elise grabbed his arm as if to get him to focus.

"This whole thing is strange, isn't it?" Elise asked, her voice barely more than a whisper.

"That's kind of an understatement," Henry said. "We are currently in a giant warehouse filled with our belongings." The entire situation was rather absurd.



“No, not just that,” Elise amended. “Ms. S, what they are asking us to do.” Henry looked over at her, and she continued. “If our father had found something groundbreaking, and had trusted Red Vector, why wouldn’t he just give it to them?”

It was a good question and one that didn’t have a clear answer.

“You think that they are lying to us?” Henry questioned.

“They are certainly not telling the truth,” Elise shot back.

“Well, if Dad’s message confirms that he doesn’t trust them, if what he discovered is truly that important, we can’t give it to them,” Henry surmised, making sure to keep his voice at the same light whisper Elise was using.

For the remaining hour and a half in the puzzle room, Henry sat at the old dining table and mulled over his father’s message. The words swam before his eyes: TRUST NO ONE BUT VICTORIA.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### The Note

Trying not to fail is a lot like trying to balance a watermelon on your head while ice skating. It's not going to work. But the important thing is that you persevere, you pick yourself back up once you have fallen, even if it hurts.

At dinner the children sat quietly, picking at their food. The meal was an appetizing combination of spaghetti, garlic bread, and salad, but Henry wasn't hungry. He frowned at his plate, tearing his garlic bread into increasingly small pieces.

Ms. S had tried to mask her disappointment and annoyance when Henry informed her of their lack of discoveries. She gave them a reassuring smile and told them that it was alright and that she was confident they would find something the next day. But when the woman looked away from Henry, a frown gripped her face.

Elise didn't talk. She was taking the absence of the puzzle-solving success pretty hard. She was never one for failure. The only people not in a foul mood were his aunt and Rose, who both slurped down spaghetti noodles noisily. Ms. S's frown had deepened at the sight.

But as Henry lay in his bed that night he was unable to mope properly about their disappointing day. Instead, his mind raced, turning over the same phrase: TRUST NO ONE BUT VICTORIA.

He trusted his aunt, right? She was his guardian and therefore was trusted with his safety and well-being. Henry could trust her to cackle at others' misfortune or make snide comments at anyone and everyone. But he doubted that was what his father meant.

Was it Aunt Victoria his father wanted him to trust? Was there a different Victoria? He sighed. Knowing he would not be able to sleep with his thoughts swirling like this, he switched on his light. This would be another night of poor sleep. Henry meandered over to his bag and grabbed the history book he had started shortly before this whirlwind adventure.

It is what Elise would call "a dry old history book with a title that was much longer than necessary." She had in fact said those exact words. I must say she is right. The book is entitled: *A Comprehensive Historical Account of the Triumph of Constantine to the Fall of Constantinople*.

As he flipped through to find where he was last (he for some strange reason never used bookmarks) a scrap of paper fell out and fluttered down to the ground. He bent down and plucked it off the carpet. Unfolding the little rectangle, he was greeted with the words that would further ensure his lack of sleep: Do Not Trust Her.

He didn't recognize the handwriting. Who could it be? It was written in that familiar pale blue of his father's favorite pens. But his father was dead which just made the thing all the more unsettling. His stomach churned. Who was *her*? Ms. Crowe? Ms. S? Perhaps it even meant Patricia, though the woman resembled a trembling pet guinea pig all too much to be malicious. If it meant his aunt, then this was in direct conflict with his father's advice.

Should he trust this message at all? Who had left it? The last time he had read this book was the day Ms. Crowe showed up on the children's doorstep. Was it someone in this skyscraper that had left this note, or before that? The book had sat at the bottom of his bag undisturbed since

he had packed it at Aunt Victoria's house. It was as if the note had just spontaneously materialized.

He rifled through the book, searching carefully for any other messages or even marks. It was empty and spotless. Book abandoned, Henry flopped back down on his bed and stared at the note. Perhaps if he looked at it long enough, it would yield some answers.

That was foolish, and he knew it. Secret messages do not just yield answers because you have stared hard at them, just as secret messages do not spontaneously choose to appear. They are placed there.

It is quite easy to break into someone's house. It's generally because they steal things that people get caught. To rob someone's house is hard and risky. But to break into someone's house to *leave* something, well, I must say that's not very hard at all. There are many ways to go about it. I personally believe that you should not underestimate people's tendency to leave doors and windows unlocked. Say, if someone paid attention and knew that Elise walked Rose to ballet class on Tuesdays, and Henry would go to the library at the same time, and that Victoria Aiye spent more time in deep slumber than she did awake, it would be very easy to sneak in and leave a slip of paper in a certain book. Of course, that paper could fall out at any time, too early or very much too late.

## CHAPTER SIX

### The Riddle

The next morning, it wasn't Ms. S that knocked on their door but Patricia. "I am meant to collect you, and take you to the puzzle room." She pointed in the vague direction of the cavernous room.

"Where is Ms. S?" Rose asked in a volume that would have been better suited for the opera stage. Patricia teetered back and forth, shifting from her heels to the balls of her feet.

"Um, the boss is very busy, so I am here. Um, yeah," the woman rambled, out of breath by the end. The children were silent in response. "Um, follow me, I guess," she muttered.

They followed her, but only after shaking their aunt awake from her nap in the armchair. Patricia led at a slower, more hesitant pace than Ms. S. It gave Henry more time to examine the route. Each of the hallways was papered a different pattern.

The first was floral.

The second was striped.

The third was a checkered.

The fourth was polka-dotted.

The fifth was paisley.

The sixth was geometric.

The seventh was Henry's favorite, with swirling leaves.

The eighth and final was a dull cream.

It was here that Henry noticed a difference. There was a door ajar. It was another one of those concealed doors. Henry supposed the hallways were littered with lots of secret entrances to secret rooms.

“What’s that?” he asked, pointing at the door. Patricia pulled to a halt. The soles of her practical shoes scuffed against the marble with an unpleasant sound.

“Oh, that’s the parking garage. The higher-ups like Ms. Seargent park their vehicles there.”

Rose already had her head poked into the doorway. “It just looks like a boring garage. Which car is Ms. S’s? Ooh, is it the pink one?”

Henry peeked through to see what Rose was talking about. There was indeed a pink car. How strange. It seemed that this secret organization had no problem standing out. The cars were all different colors.

“No.” Patricia spoke softly. “That one is hers.” She pointed at a more unassuming, navy automobile. “I don’t think I am supposed to be letting you see this,” she said squeakily. “That door’s supposed to be closed.” Patricia swung it shut, and they completed the rest of the short walk.

“Oh! Can I open the secret door?” Rose exclaimed, jumping up and down.

“I guess,” Patricia squeaked, shrugging her slouched shoulders.

This turned out to be a bad idea. Rose proceeded to high-five, slap, and once even hug every part of the wall, trying in vain to open the door. At last, she head-butted the wall, and the door swung open.

“I did it!” she bragged to her siblings. Elise only raised her eyebrows in return.

“I worry about that child sometimes,” Aunt Victoria muttered, lips drawn tight. Her statement was meant for Patricia but was loud enough for everyone to hear. The children and their aunt spilled into the room as Patricia delivered a nervous goodbye. Then their aunt reclined on the sofa and quickly fell asleep. The children stood, taking in the room once more.

“Split up and look for clues,” Elise said, breaking the silence. The other two nodded in agreement and went off. Rose made a determined beeline for the back of the cavernous hanger.

Henry looked at Elise, a frown on his face. “Remember that time Dad’s puzzle took a whole month to solve?”

She released a breath of laughter. “Yeah, Mom got so mad.”

“Well. this place,” he gestured to the space around them, “reminds me of that.”

She raised a blonde eyebrow at him. “You mean like... the apple?”

He nodded. To anyone else, her words would have sounded bizarre. That was the point. They were always good at conveying things without having to say them. This made them fantastic at charades.

The reason that one puzzle took so long to solve was that their father had given them a false clue in the form of an apple. “The letter made you think that?” Elise said.

He nodded once more. He wouldn’t tell her about the note. He still wasn’t sure if it meant something or not. He would tell her when he decided, just not yet.

They stood there in silence for a moment. Henry then ventured over to the dining room furniture.

“Hey, I call dibs,” Elise called, tossing ringlets of hair over her shoulder, and sprinting towards the table and chair set. As she passed, Henry could see the ghost of a smile on her face. Something about this puzzle made everything hurt less. It made them feel as if their father was still here, or at the very least guiding them from beyond the grave. His own smile began forming as he grumbled something under his breath about how Elise only called dibs on the dining room because he wanted to search it.

Elise let out a huff of a laugh. “I’m the oldest so I get dibs. Go search a couch cushion or something.”

Henry quickly feigned anger and then let out a laugh. It was just like game night. Elise’s strategy was always to claim the largest search area first, so she would be more likely to find a clue. The system forced the younger children to adapt their own smarter ways to work to have a chance at winning.

So, instead of rushing to the first object he saw, Henry took a lap around the room, looking for anything that seemed different or suspicious. He let his mind wander as he walked.

If his father had laid the groundwork for a puzzle, he had to have done it before that train trip. Was there anything that stood out before his departure? Henry returned to his thoughts from the previous night. He skipped over the cryptic messages and focused on reminiscing about the events before his father’s departure.

Leaving the wedding ring...

More luggage than seemed necessary...

The reorganized bookshelf...



The nervous looks...

Wait, the bookshelf. There was only one bookshelf in the whole house and it belonged to his now deceased sister. It wasn't that the Aiye family didn't read. It was quite the opposite. But their books were organized in a system of bins and less organized stacks on tables. Henry was told this system was his fault.

He was too young to remember, but apparently, as a toddler, he'd thought it would be a good idea to scale the bookshelf to get something from the top. He hadn't been hurt, but it made a mess, and the bookshelf was beyond repair. The event terrified his parents and resulted in a near-total ban on bookshelves. The only exception was Rory's bookshelf—the one he stood in front of right now.

Despite his witnessing that Rory had reorganized the bookshelf, it looked the same way it always did. On closer examination, it was exactly the same. Rory had a unique style of organizing her books. While each shelf was organized alphabetically by author, the higher the shelf the more she liked the books. The books relegated to the lowest shelves were still adored, but they had failed to capture her undying love. They weren't lined up neatly either. Some were turned on their sides in stacks, others placed neatly in a row. Sequels could be next to the initial book, or on a completely different shelf. Some series were split between four or five shelves. The almost 500 books were subject to a very subjective style of organization.

So...what if she wasn't reorganizing it with a new system, but fixing it because someone had messed it up?

With that many books, if a person removed a few, it would be hard to remember where to put them back. So if his father placed the clues in the books, he would likely have messed up the

actual order. Though that may have been his plan, intentionally messing up the books to indicate the presence of clues. Rory could have noticed this right before the trip which was why Henry saw her reorganizing the shelves.

He suddenly hoped that his father's clue did not have to do with the order of the books. If so, Rory would have destroyed the first part of the puzzle. Fighting the urge to start pulling the books from the shelves, Henry began scanning the titles for any that stood out. Their father had gotten her a set of classic novels for her birthday. She loved every single one, except for one book. Rory hated *Wuthering Heights*. Henry vividly remembered how she ranted about how it was a terrible book about terrible people who do terrible things and for that reason she refused to finish the book. Her jaw set, she declared that she was going to donate it to the library the next day.

So, if Rory had indeed hated the book and had gotten rid of it, why was there a copy slipped into a stack on the top shelf? It was high enough that she may not have seen it during her reorganizing.

Henry retrieved the mysterious book and flipped open the cover. There, printed in Rory's looping script were the words: Property of Aurora James Aiye.

These words were not special. She wrote them in every book she received before she placed them on her bookshelf, even if she hadn't read them yet. What was special were the words underneath those. Scratched in pen in messy handwriting was: If found, please return to 1220 Avonlea Rd.

The previous investigators must have been truly terrible. They either hadn't looked at the books or hadn't cared. Because, while the Aiyes did live at 1220, they lived on Astoria Rd, not Avonlea.

Henry rushed over to his sister to show his discovery.

Elise peered at the page before exclaiming, "Green Gables!" Henry furrowed his brow at her outburst. "Anne of Green Gables," Elise explained with a huff of laughter. "Mom read the books to me and Rory when we were little."

"Avonlea," Henry echoed as Elise dashed over to search the bookshelf. She glanced quickly through all of the book spines. Her hand shot out when she found what she was looking for, pulling a small green book from the middle of a stack.

"Here it is," she announced, laying it in front of Henry. On the cover, a girl in a straw hat with hair the color of a carrot smiled up at him. Elise flipped to the first page and pointed. It took him a second to realize she was gesturing at the word Avonlea on the first page. He rifled through the book quickly looking for anything handwritten like in *Wuthering Heights*. There was no more of that looping script, but two things had been circled in pen. It was not uncommon for Rory to write or even draw in her books. The book dedication had been circled in royal blue ink, reading: To the memory of my father and mother.

"I guess this confirms this is a part of Dad's puzzle," Elise mused. The only other thing circled was in the table of contents: "Chapter XXIX, An Epoch in Anne's Life." The word "Epoch" was circled in that same blue.

Henry searched through that chapter of the book and found...nothing.

“Well,” he sighed. “I guess that’s our only clue.”

Elise’s eyes glazed over in thought. “What if it is referencing another book?” Henry quickly searched the shelf and found no books with “Epoch” or “Anne” in the title. Perhaps *Anna Karenina* was close enough to Anne. However, a quick flip through the book revealed no new clues.

“What if it is not about the word itself, but what it means?” Elise suggested. “Epoch has stuff to do with time right?”

Henry shrugged. He had no idea.

“The book *The Time Machine* might work then,” he suggested, his voice trailing off. Whenever he was solving one of his dad’s puzzles, there was a feeling that let him know he was on the right track. That feeling left him as soon as he made the suggestion. A quick look through *The Time Machine* confirmed his thoughts. There was nothing. Only Rory’s standard “Property of Aurora James Aiye.”

“I need a break.” Elise sighed before stretching her arms out above her head with a yawn. She began to wander around the hangar to look for their little sister as Henry continued studying the books.

She walked past their ancient aunt who was sprawled out, snoring on their old sofa. Carefully navigating around their old kitchen chairs, she called out for her sister. Elise knew from experience that no amount of noise was going to rouse their aunt from her hibernation.

She found Rose going through the contents of her old room. The objects were piled around Rose in a half-moon. The toys, children’s books, and knickknacks towered so high that they

nearly obscured the small girl from view. She peered up at Elise. Before her sister could ask what she was doing, in that standard Elise tone, Rose held up a stuffed rabbit.

“I found Purple,” she announced. Her face lit up with a smile. They had left behind nearly all of their belongings when they moved to Aunt Victoria’s house. They were told that the rest of the items would be moved to temporary storage and would be sorted through later. Which, in a way, was true. These objects included Rose Aiye’s beloved pink stuffed rabbit, which she had oddly named Purple.

“Did you find any clues?” Rose asked, looking down at her pile of things, as if this task was the most important thing in the world.

“Yeah...” Elise drawled, still staring at the sight in front of her. She shook herself from her confusion and continued. “It was a bookshelf,” she said. “But we got stuck on the second clue. Come on, we should go back and help Henry. He’s probably driving himself crazy looking through all of those books.”

Rose gave a sigh of exasperation. Gathering Purple in her arms, she stood up and brushed off her polka-dotted dress.

“So the clues are in the books,” Rose piped up as she trailed after Elise.

“Yep, the first one pointed to a different book. We think this one is going to do the same, but we don’t know which book to look in,” Elise replied.

“Why don’t we just go through all of them for clues?” Rose suggested. “Takes a lot less thinking.” Rose wasn’t a big fan of thinking.

“Yeah, but don’t forget Dad’s love of red herrings and false clues,” Elise remarked.

“Yuck, fish,” Rose said, shuddering.

Elise laughed. Her sister had no clue what a red herring was. “A red herring is a piece of information that is purposefully meant to be distracting, Rosie. I didn’t actually mean fish.”

“Oh, that makes more sense,” Rose said. “So how did Dad make the clues? Did he do that anagram thing with the titles? Or did he put little pieces of paper inside the books? Oh! Remember that time he did the glow-in-the-dark ink on the kitchen tiles? I hope this puzzle has that,” Rose rambled.

“No, he just wrote in pen on a page of the first book. Which led to the second book and in that one, stuff was circled.”

Rose asked, “What stuff?”

“The dedication and the word—” Elise started.

“Epoch,” Henry finished, looking up from the book he was studying. “Which according to the dictionary means a period of time in which important things happen. But that still doesn’t help.”

Rose began spouting off words in a warbled excuse for a British accent.

“It was the best of times,

It was the worst of times,

It was the age of wisdom,

It was the age of foolishness,

It was the epoch of belief,

It was the epoch of incredulity,

It was the season... of something I can't remember." Rose broke off towards the end.

"What's that from?" Henry's brow was crinkled in confusion. Rose glared at him.

"It's from the play," she said with a look that said "duh."

"The play?" Henry echoed. "What play?"

"You know," Rose said.

Henry did not in fact know.

"The one with the British people and the weird clothes. Mom took me to it," she said.

Henry was still lost. In fact, he was even more lost than before Rose started "explaining."

Seeing that he still didn't understand, Rose began waving her hand as she spoke. It was like she was conducting an orchestra or playing a poor game of charades. "It was one by the old guy." She looked at him to see if that cleared anything up. It hadn't. "The old guy who had the play where the kid goes 'please sir can I have some more,'" Rose resumed her frankly horrendous British accent. "It was really sad because they didn't give him any more food," she said in a voice filled with genuine sorrow.

"She means Charles Dickens. I think that theater near our house tried to put on all of the Dickens play adaptations a few years ago." Elise said laughing. "That's from *Oliver Twist*. The clue is from..." She scanned the bookshelf and removed the only book by Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*.

“Ooh. What’s in it?” Rose ran forward, snatching the book out of her older sister’s hand. She shook the book, clearly expecting something to fall out. When nothing did, she flipped the book open and began turning pages at breakneck speed.

“Careful!” Elise admonished as Rose nearly ripped a page. She looked up sheepishly, but Rose’s guilt vanished the moment she spotted it, it being a small rectangle of green taped to the page. Elise grabbed it and examined it.

“Circles,” she said, frowning. The rectangle of the paper was covered in non-overlapping circles. They were various sizes of green and orange. They were close together, but none of them touched. The arrangement made Elise’s eyes ache. She turned it around. Frowning, Elise then flipped the paper over. She held the scrap up to the light. She stared at it with her eyes squinted. She then consulted the page in the book carefully, running her finger down each row of words. With a sigh, she handed the paper to Henry. “I have no idea!”

He examined it, holding the paper as if it might spontaneously catch fire. “It’s numbers,” he said looking up.

“What numbers,” she asked, snatching the paper back and taking a closer look. “I don’t see anything”. She lifted an eyebrow in doubt at Henry.

Henry pointed at a certain part of the rectangular page. “See, that’s a 2 and then a 7, 1, 8, and then another 2. Different color dots make the numbers, so they stand out.”

“I still don’t see anything,” Elise said, “It’s just a bunch of orange and green dots. Kinda makes my eyes hurt.”



“Let me see it again,” Rose whined and grabbed the paper. “I don’t see any numbers either. Elise is right. Plus, Henry, you’re bad at colors.” Rose always had a strange way with words. Henry wasn’t so much bad at colors, as he was colorblind. He once attempted to leave the house dressed in what he thought was a brown shirt and dark green pants. The shirt was fire-engine-red. Elise had to break it to him that he was dressed in the same colors as a Christmas tree. From there on he stuck with the colors he could see well, like blue.

“He’s colorblind,” Elise corrected. Rose gave her a look as if to say “Same difference.” “Wait! He’s colorblind, which Dad knew,” Elise exclaimed. “This puzzle must have been designed for him.”

Henry frowned at the paper and then spoke. “He must have picked specific shades of orange and green. To me, they blended together, but to anyone else, they would have looked distinctly different. They wouldn’t have been able to see the hidden message. It couldn’t have been that difficult since Dad is, was, colorblind too.” He looked up at his sisters.

“What were the numbers again?” Elise asked. She grabbed a piece of paper and a pen off of a nearby desk.

“2-7-1-8-2,” Henry read. “Mean anything to you?” he asked. Elise shook her head. “Rose?” he asked. He doubted his little sister knew, but she was full of surprise, and random monologues apparently.

“We should search everything with numbers,” Rose suggested. Rose’s solutions were always brute-force ones. Sometimes quite literally. One game night, fed up with attempting to find a combination to a box, five-year-old Rose Aiye dropped it from the second-floor staircase. The box shattered. But then again, so did its contents. So, Rose’s solutions were not always the

best. But this suggestion didn't seem half bad. They searched bike locks, math books, and clocks, but found nothing. Their dad was never a fan of brute-force solutions.

Resigned, the children ate their lunch of turkey sandwiches in silence, save for Rose complaining about how loud Elise was chewing. Henry thought she was actually grinding her teeth in focus and frustration. Suddenly, she stopped chewing (and teeth grinding) and spoke, her mouth still full of food. "It's e!"

"E?" Rose echoed, confused. Making a discovery caused Elise to lose patience for silly things, like chewing and effectively conveying her ideas.

"The number," she answered triumphantly. Her siblings looked at her and waited for an actual explanation. "The numbers are from e."

"Finally, a sentence," Henry remarked. Elise shot him a quick glare. Rose, still confused, and not one to be left out, stamped her foot against the ground.

"Can you actually say something that makes sense!" Rose shouted. She was rather impatient and was now fuming like a confused little dragon who simply wanted answers.

"Say something that makes sense," Rose ordered.

Elise, now fed up with Rose, announced, "e is roughly 2.7182. It's an important number for calculus. I didn't recognize the sequence without the decimal. But that has to be it."

"e!" Rose exclaimed. Her overwhelming anger and annoyance had faded as soon as she got a clear answer like she wanted. In true Rose fashion, she declared that they should search everything with an E. Elise shrugged. Following Rose's idea couldn't hurt. They searched the bookshelf, encyclopedias, dictionaries, and their mother's monogrammed throw pillows.

“Found something,” Rose exclaimed. She then cried, “Dad ruined my letter blocks!” Being the youngest child, Rose had inherited all of the old toys from her siblings, and she had kept all of them. This included the alphabet blocks they had played with as toddlers.

Henry examined one of the blocks as Rose once again frowned. It was carved with the letter E and covered in stickers. It shouldn’t be, he thought, covered with stickers, that is. Despite her temper and affinity for destruction, Rose took very good care of her belongings. She would never put stickers on her toys unless they were intended for that express purpose.

That block wasn’t the only one with stickers on it. They were all covered in them: A through Z. Though assorted styles, colors, and sizes, all of the stickers were star-shaped. Rose opened her mouth to speak.

“Don’t say it.” Henry groaned.

She shot him a glare and declared in a sing-song tone, “We should search everything star-related.”

Henry groaned. When had the six-year-old been put in charge? Elise glared at Henry, too. She had joined Team Rose after the first success. But before they could start, Patricia came to collect them for dinner. All three children were hungry, so they did not protest.

Dinner was spaghetti and garlic bread, again. It seemed that the Red Vector had a limited knowledge of kid-friendly food, and decided to stick with what they knew. So far that had consisted of pasta, pancakes, and turkey sandwiches. There was no salad at dinner this time. They had apparently realized that this was not a winning dish with the children. Rose didn’t care. She was very soon covered in pasta sauce and noisily eating noodles.

Ms. S, of course, asked how the day had gone. Henry and Elise had agreed that telling Ms. S everything was unwise. They also realized that telling her nothing would simply raise her suspicions. The more they seemed to trust Ms. S, the more Ms. S would trust them. A complicated lie would be their best bet. The convoluted one they came up with involved the Dewey Decimal system, transposition ciphers, various Calculus concepts, a reference to Edgar Allen Poe's poem, *The Raven*, and cushions on the dining room chairs. When Rose tried to express her confusion, Elise kicked her leg under the table.

"Fantastic!" Ms. S declared at the end of their story. "I am so sorry I wasn't there to escort you this morning." Henry didn't think she sounded all that sorry. Adults have a strange habit of apologizing when they don't quite mean it. "I had business to attend to. I only just got back. There were some automotive issues," Ms. S continued. That explained her hair, which was by no means messy, but it was a little less neat than normal. Henry thought he saw a few pieces that were singed, and he smelled a faint whiff of smoke each time she moved her head.

"Speaking of which..." Ms. S drawled. "Patricia!" Ms. S dangled a pair of keys in the air as she yelled for her nervous employee.

Patricia scurried forward, meek as a mouse, but not nearly as quick. So, Ms. S threw the car keys at her. It was likely intended to be a gentle toss, at least Henry hoped, but instead, the keys flew over Patricia's head and landed with a clink on the floor. Patricia fumbled after them. All the while the children looked upon the strange scene.

Ms. S gave an apologetic look and explained that Patricia was in charge of keeping track of her car keys, as if that explained anything. They resumed eating. It was mostly silent, except for Rose slurping up noodles. Once they were finished, Elise looked around.

“Where is Aunt Victoria?” she asked, eyebrows furrowed.

Henry and Rose looked around blankly, as did Ms. S. In all of their searching they had forgotten about their aunt.

“Patricia!” Ms. S snapped. The poor woman, having only just recovered from the car key debacle, looked close to a heart attack. “Did you leave the children’s aunt in the puzzle room?”

The woman only let out a terrified squeak in response.

“GO. GET. HER!” Ms. S gritted out, pointing at the door. Patricia fled as fast as she could. Ms. S gave the children another apologetic smile. Patricia returned, slightly later than expected, with their great aunt trailing behind her. Henry supposed she had just been napping on that couch the entire time. Patricia looked like she too needed a nap. She seemed more frazzled than when she left. Henry was certain that his aunt had been insulting the poor woman for the extent of the walk if his aunt’s smirk was anything to go by.

Aunt Victoria had a gift when it came to tearing down a person’s self-confidence. Henry still vividly remembered how a few of her remarks had sent the mailman bursting into tears. She had shrugged off the children’s concern and horror. He had delivered the package to the wrong address after all.

“Vicky! How nice of you to join us,” Ms. S declared, arms outstretched in welcome and her voice sweet as the ice cream they were eating for dessert. His aunt wrinkled her nose and gave the chipper woman a look of disgust. His aunt hated nicknames. On the rare occasions when she addressed Rose, she still called her Rosemary. Rose hated it.

“Where’s my ice cream?” she questioned Patricia. Henry suspected that she didn’t even want ice cream and only wanted to make the woman cry. Weakly, Patricia handed her a bowl, no tears in sight. Their aunt sat down, digging into the bowl, but not after a bitter remark about how strawberry ice cream was for idiots and children. Ms. S didn’t respond, only eating another scoop of her own pink ice cream.

“I love strawberry!” Rose said.

“I said children, didn’t I, Rosemary,” their aunt fired back. This appeased Rose who went back to trying to lick the remaining ice cream out of the bowl. Elise was clearly trying not to laugh at their aunt’s brutal remarks.

“I believe it is bedtime,” Ms. S declared after a few more biting comments from Aunt Victoria. She walked them back to their rooms and waved them goodbye. “Sleep well, and see you tomorrow!” Her smile dropped when her eyes reached Aunt Victoria.

Henry got ready for bed, excited for the discoveries the next day would bring. He and Elise were careful not to be too specific when telling Ms. S about their advancements. They once again came up with an elaborate story to send her on a wild goose chase. Their father’s message had been clear, if not a little heavy-handed. They would not trust Ms. S, her assistant, or anyone else in this skyscraper. He still wasn’t sure about that other note, but he made sure to stay suspicious of all of the people around him. In that way, the strange message and his father’s code agreed.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### The Bird

Sleep has a unique ability to clarify things. Whenever I struggle to understand something or make a decision, I find it is best to sleep on it, metaphorically of course.

Henry awoke refreshed. A good night's sleep was welcome after two nights of tossing and turning. It is shockingly easier to sleep when your mind isn't occupied with the mysteriously menacing message you found in a book minutes ago. Well, perhaps menacing wasn't the right word. The message itself wasn't threatening. It was more confusing and suspenseful. Enigmatic. That's the right word. An enigma is a difficult puzzle, and this whole thing is just a giant one of those.

Henry had decided that it was a good morning. The sun was shining. The bluebirds were chirping. At least that was true in his head. A quick look out the window revealed that it was overcast and there were no bluebirds, only two ragged-looking vultures. In fact, the only birds other than vultures that could be found near or within the old North-Bridge hotel were the stuffed peacock in the lobby and the painted birds on the wallpaper in Room 201, where Rose and Elise currently resided. Henry threw on his clothes and made his way to his sisters' room for breakfast as he had done the previous day. There was a spring in his step that would gradually fade.

Henry arrived to find Rose bemoaning the lack of pancakes. Breakfast today was oatmeal, which to her was a tragedy. She flicked the food around the bowl with a frown. Rose then seized the dish containing the brown sugar and dumped it on top. Elise winced audibly at the sight. She

reached a hand out to stop Rose. Hesitating, she retracted her hand and watched as Rose shoveled down her bowl of sugary oatmeal. Elise wrinkled her nose in distaste.

It seemed that Elise had not slept well. She had noticeable circles under her eyes. She looked down blankly at her bowl of food, not saying a word. Despite how tired she looked, Elise beat him to the door at the sound of the knock. Opening it revealed Patricia.

Upon seeing the woman, Aunt Vitoria spat out something under her breath that was too quick for Henry to decipher. Patricia looked at their aunt with a mixture of confusion and fear before apologizing that Ms. S had been held up by work again. This was followed by an awkward silence in which Patricia stared at the children. They stared back. Her throat bobbed nervously as she waited. The woman then shuffled around and gestured for them to follow her.

Patricia hurried them down the hallways. In the rush, she tripped over her own feet. The poor woman toppled forward onto the ground, the contents of her beige sweater pockets spilling out. The children rushed forward to help the woman while their aunt looked on, this moment clearly having made her day.

As Elise helped Patricia up, Henry focused on gathering the various dropped items. He scooped up a pair of car keys, a single glass marble, and a small metal figurine of a cat. He handed the assortment of odd items to Patricia as she brushed off her clothes.

“Thank you,” she exhaled, snatching up the car keys. “Ms. Seargent would kill me if I lost these. I keep everything in my pockets because otherwise, I will forget things. But even then I forget things. And as you can see, accidents still happen. I am so clumsy and stupid. Gosh, thank you,” she rambled at the children as they handed her the rest of the knickknacks. She stuffed these back into her pocket as she trailed off. With a sigh, she clutched the car keys to her chest in



a silent prayer. Aunt Victoria let out a snort which seemed to break her out of her trance. Patricia rushed to continue their walk.

As they entered the puzzle room, Henry felt a smile tug at his lips. The children began their vague, star-related search, as their aunt busied herself with knitting a monstrosity. This search went faster. Star-related was still a lot more specific than math-related or related to the letter E.

They searched Rory's books on astronomy, her second-grade art-class imitation of *Starry Night*, Rose's star sticker collection, Elise's poster of the constellations, and Henry's book on the history of telescopes. There was only one item left that fit the bill: their father's telescope. It was nothing too fancy, a small telescope and an even smaller stand. It was only a step up from a spyglass, and two steps up from a magnifying glass. Still, it was one of the Aiyes' most treasured possessions. Their father used to take all of them stargazing in the backyard, showing the distant planets and stars that had lived their full lives before the children were even born. Elise lifted the telescope out of its case carefully, as if their parents' memories were contained inside. Henry was right. This was it. The smooth shiny surface of the scope had been marred. Someone had scratched something into it. It must have taken time and likely resulted in a dull Swiss army knife. Elise had an audible intake of breath as she recognized the messy, carved illustration.

"What is it?" Rose asked. She tried to snatch the telescope but was stopped by her sister.

"It's Jane," Elise replied with a voice of awe like she was remembering something wonderful from long ago. "Jane was my favorite character from my favorite children's book, *The Adventures of Lima-bean the Whale*. Dad used to read it to me." Her voice broke off and despair filled the room. It rushed in like the ocean at high tide, drowning them for a minute, and then leaving them struggling for breath the next.

She blinked away the tears welling in her eyes and continued. The talking would stop her from crying. So her words poured forth as fast as tears.

“I don’t really know why she was my favorite. She wasn’t even the main character. She literally only had one page.” She sniffed and quickly cleared her throat. She then seemed to remember that her siblings were, in fact, still watching her. “The next clue must be hidden on that page of that book,” she finished. The children quickly broke apart, scouring the book bins and stacks. The click-clacking of their aunt’s knitting needles set the fast pace of their increasingly frantic search.

It was a small picture book. It could be anywhere. Then, “Aha!” Elise declared. She raised the small book triumphantly in the air. “I knew we still had it. It was on Rory’s shelf,” Elise explained, flipping to find the right page. There it was. The glossy picture of that same blocky, cartoonish girl that was carved on the telescope, although this one was a lot less messy. Under the picture and the light simple text, was scrawled a single word. Pigeon.

“Pig...Eon,” Rose read, puzzled. Her brows scrunched like two little caterpillars.

“It’s pigeon,” Henry corrected.

Rose replied with a look that said “Whatever.” She wandered off, her attention span was that of a gerbil.

“I have no clue what Dad means by pigeon. What about you?” Elise asked Henry.

He shrugged. “Nope.”

“What about you, Rose?” She asked, calling over to where Rose was now building a couch cushion fort.

“I hate birds!” Rose shouted back, not an actual answer to Elise’s question, but close enough.

With no idea what the clue meant, Henry spent the rest of the time in the puzzle room wandering and desperately trying to figure out what pigeon was supposed to mean. Elise seemed to do the same. If ideas were like water, his brain was a bucket poked full of holes. As soon as he had the inkling of a thought, it rushed away.

Rose announced that they should “Search everything bird related even though birds are terrible.” The investigation was feather-filled and fruitless. In typical Rose style, his sister cut open a bunch of pillows with a pair of scissors. She suggested that feathers were bird-related and thus gutting the pillows was appropriate, but Henry thought that she simply wanted to do it. His clothes now covered with bits of feathers, he went back to moping and failing to think.

Lunch arrived as Henry was searching the bookshelf once again for any bird-related books. He hadn’t found anything, but he did discover an interesting Sci-Fi book that he put away to read later. The meal was a welcome break. He chewed his sandwich deep in thought. There was something he was missing, something he was forgetting. It was as if his mind was trying to assemble some piece of furniture with no instruction and no screws.

Elise sat across from him picking at her food. She assembled and reassembled her sandwich with a slight frown. Elise then tore the pieces of bread into smaller and smaller pieces. She was puzzled by something. He could tell. Likely just another one of her math problems. She just needed time.

What had started as a marvelous morning, at least in Henry's opinion, was dimmed by frustration. Henry spent the last of their time in the puzzle room staring at a wall. It was not the most entertaining nor rewarding pastime but it was the only thing he could think to do.

I do not blame him. Hitting a roadblock is never easy. My afternoon was similarly frustrating. If only it had been as boring as the Aiye children's. Sadly, I found my bus ride to end only in tragedy, and the cab ride I took afterward ended similarly. I am beginning to think that vehicles are not for me.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### The Cake

I was seven years old when I baked my first cake. That initial bite taught me a very important lesson: looks can be deceiving. You see, salt can look just like sugar if one does not bother to investigate closer. Consequently, that first bite of the cake ended up being my last.

The cake the Aiye children are eating is far more edible. When they vaguely told Ms. S that they had made progress with the puzzle, she rejoiced. In a tone that failed to match the children's frustration, and caused his aunt to wince she declared that they would have dessert before dinner to celebrate their success. Henry observed that Ms. S's hair was no longer singed and her smile seemed more genuine than yesterday. So, the children sat digging into thick slabs of chocolate cake with frowns on their faces. It was like attending the world's unhappiest birthday party. Even Rose seemed to comprehend the storm cloud that hung over her siblings' heads.

Ms. S either didn't notice or didn't care. She rambled happily to the children about how smart they were and how they were so great. Henry would have appreciated her sentiments if he trusted her. But he didn't, so every comment she made was simply a thin veneer that concealed her true intentions. Henry looked at his older sister, who hadn't eaten a single bite of cake. She gripped the silver fork tightly in her hand, as if to stab something.

"Elise darling, why aren't you eating your cake?" Ms. S crooned. It was one of those false questions adults use when they want you to do something. She wasn't asking why Elise wasn't eating, but rather commanding her to eat.

Henry's sister didn't respond. Elise didn't like being ordered around.

"All of you children are far too grumpy," Ms. S declared. Her tone was joking, but soon grew serious, and then angry as the children's moods continued. "Now you are just ruining dinner." She stabbed at her cake, fork scraping against her plate with a screech, then pursed her lips and glared at the children. "Your father and mother were very pleasant people. I am certain that they would not approve of your attitudes," she sniffed.

And suddenly it happened. It started with a giggle escaping from Elise's lips. That giggle turned into a chuckle, and then a full-blown laugh. His sister who was frustrated and focused one moment was laughing her heart out the next.

Elise placed her palms flat against the mahogany table to steady herself. Her laughing grew even louder. Henry was confused, and evidently so was Ms. S. She tensed her arms and gritted her teeth as she stared at Elise's outburst. But, her glare didn't stop Elise. Her peals of laughter continued until she was red-faced and out of breath. Henry could see tears in her eyes.

"WHAT are you laughing at?" Ms. S gritted her teeth. When Elise continued laughing and didn't respond she grew even more furious. "What!" She slammed her palm against the mahogany table in fury, causing little Rose to jump in her seat.

Gasping for breath, Elise replied, "Nothing... I just ... remembered... something..." She laughed again. "...funny," she finished.

This did not satisfy Ms. S.

Elise mumbled something under her breath and then kept laughing. Henry heard what it was. "You got it all wrong."

As Elise's laughing wound down, she looked up and around the room before her gaze settled on Ms. S. There was something behind Elise's eyes that Henry could not quite place. Then he got it. It was the same look their father got when he knew that the lamp in the living room didn't knock itself over.

"How did you know that our father had invented something?" Elise questioned. Her voice was calm and directed at Ms. S.

"I'm...uh, I'm sure we've covered this," Ms. S stuttered, taken aback. She regained her composure and continued, "We got intel that an Aiye, James, had invented something."

"How did you hear it?" Elise pushed.

"What do you mean? Sweetheart, I am not quite sure I understand what you are asking," Ms. S said as if Elise had suddenly lost all brain function.

"What I mean is how did you hear it? I assume from some agent, right? Was it by telephone or did they send you a letter?" Elise lifted one eyebrow in a way that showed she had the upper hand in the conversation.

"Well... we are a very large organization," Ms. S stated, trying to reason with her.

"You're not answering my question," Elise replied coolly. She looked Ms. S in the eye. They stared off for a minute before Ms. S backed down.

"I'm pretty sure it was a phone call. That is how we tend to do things. An agent calls from the field, somewhere discreet like a telephone booth. Then we have agents who receive their messages and pass them along, in the form of reports."

"How do you know there aren't any mistakes?" Elise pressed. What was she after?

Ms. S paused, gathering her thoughts. “Well, we have people that look over the reports after they are filed. Secretaries fix things that don’t make sense, typos, and whatnot. Agents also tend to abbreviate what they hear, into shorthand. The secretaries make sense of these and type them out. That way nothing can get misinterpreted. Then they are passed on.” She set her hands primly on the table, rolling her shoulders back until her spine was as straight as a ruler. “Is that all?” she asked Elise sweetly.

“Not quite,” Elise replied just as sweetly. “What if that secretary mistook something for an abbreviation, and made sense of it in a different way than intended?”

“That doesn’t happen,” Ms. S replied sharply. Elise nodded in understanding and moved on. It was like watching an elaborate game of tennis, each person taking turns launching the ball onto the other person’s side of the net.

Henry turned his gaze back on his older sister, studying her face as she responded. Her eyes were narrowed in focus.

“And you knew that the person who left the puzzle was the person that made the revolutionary discovery, right?” Elise asked, her tone soft but words sharp as knives.

“Yes, your father made the discovery and then hid it in a puzzle. You know all of this already,” Ms. S gritted out no longer having the patience for this interrogation.

Elise looked back at her with wide innocent eyes, as if to remind her that she was simply a child, not an adversary. This seemed to work, and Ms. S softened.



“So, let me make sure I understand all of this. You got a message on the telephone that told you that an Aiye *comma* James created something revolutionary and then that same Aiye *comma* James hid said discovery in a puzzle.”

“Yes, just as I have said multiple times before,” Ms. S replied. She was clearly at her wit’s end.

Elise smiled and giggled once more.

Then silence overtook the room. Henry looked at his older sister, eyes silently asking, “Are you okay?”

“You know,” Elise said, smiling at the room, “I think I am coming down with a fever or something. I’m going to go to bed.” She sighed and stood up.

Ms. S examined the girl with a sharp gaze. “Yes, I think that would be for the best.” She waved her hand at Patricia. Henry stood up mumbling about also not feeling well. Ms. S seemed eager to be rid of the children’s company and did not put up a fuss.

The kids followed the small woman out the door. Their aunt trailed behind with her plate of cake.

“So...?” Henry said once they reached their rooms.

Elise gave a small smile in response, and said triumphantly, “I know what pigeon means.”

## CHAPTER NINE

### The Discovery

There is an expression: “Some things are better left unsaid.” It means that not all thoughts should be spoken. The same could be said of discoveries. Some things are better left undiscovered. As they say, “Ignorance is bliss.” It is a phrase that deeply upsets the scientist in me. But, at the same time, there is some truth to it. You see, the problem with discoveries is that once they are discovered, you have to do something with them. You might choose to publish a book about it or tell a friend. You might write it on a scrap of paper, put that paper in a glass bottle, and then throw it into the ocean. You might bury it in your backyard. Or, if you are Elise Aiye, you might inform your siblings of your discovery thus changing their perception of all recent events.

The three Aiye children had gathered in Elise and Rose’s room. Henry sat on the plush, blush-pink carpet, leaning against the foot of Rose’s bed. Rose had settled herself on her bed, her pillows piled around her like a fortress. Elise paced back and forth trying to determine the best way to begin.

“Did you know that Thomas Edison didn’t invent the lightbulb?”

Henry did, in fact, know this.

“Yes,” Henry replied. “Edison just improved the idea that already existed,” he continued. Henry thought it was best to indulge Elise’s odd explanation.

“It wasn’t Dad,” Elise started. She stared at her siblings as if they should know exactly what she was thinking. She had stopped her pacing only for the brief moment and then resumed.

“It wasn’t Dad...that invented the lightbulb?” Henry echoed. His forehead was scrunched in confusion. Honestly, sometimes Elise voicing her discoveries was playing a game of charades, and not a fun one.

She stopped her walking once again. “It wasn’t Dad that left the puzzle,” Elise filled in. Her hands were spread in the air as if to say, “Tada!” She then spun on her heels and resumed her brisk pacing around the room. Silence hung in the air as Henry tried to make sense of Elise’s comments. Then as if she had finally gotten her thoughts aligned, Elise’s gaze sharpened, and she stopped pacing.

“Pigeon,” she said. “We couldn’t figure out what Dad meant by it, right? Well, that’s because the clue wasn’t from him. None of the clues were.” She paused again to let her words sink in. “The puzzle all started with *Wuthering Heights*, the book that Rory hated. The rest of the clues were on her bookshelf. *Anne of Green Gables*. Mom read that book to both of us when we were little. And it wasn’t just Rose that went to the production of *A Tale of Two Cities*. Mom dragged Rory along each time they went to the theater. It’s clear enough that she knew you were colorblind, that I knew math terminology, that Rose never stuck stickers on her toys, and that we all went stargazing with the telescope. It was the drawing on the telescope that made me first suspect that something was off. I didn’t think that Dad would remember my favorite character. I actually wasn’t even sure if I had told him. But I had told Rory. She would have remembered because Jane was her favorite character too. Finding the book on her shelf almost made everything fall into place. But ‘pigeon’...‘pigeon’ confirmed it.”

Elise had spoken quickly, but Henry picked up every word. She took a breath, a smile widening on her face.

“There is only one pigeon-related memory I have. It was a conversation with Rory. ‘Pigeon’ is Rory’s way of telling me it’s her. It was her this whole time.” She took another breath and pressed forward. “Rory and I were staying up late one night. We were the only ones still up. I was reading some book I wanted to finish, and she... she was tinkering with that pocket watch she had gotten just a few days before. I tried talking to her but she didn’t respond, she was too focused on whatever she was working on. I was annoyed so I snatched the watch away from her and held it out of her reach. She got annoyed. I joked that if she was so in love with the watch she should marry it.” Elise took another breath. Henry had no idea where she was going with this.

“She joked back and told me that a watch wouldn’t be the worst thing to fall in love with and that the inventor Nikola Tesla, her favorite inventor who was much better than Edison, had gone crazy and fallen in love with, wait for it... a pigeon.” Elise stopped, out of breath and waited for some sort of response. All she received was a snore. Henry looked back. Rose had fallen asleep in her pillow fort at some point during this explanation and was now snoring. Rose frowned and then continued softly so she wouldn’t wake their sister. “It became a running inside joke between the two of us. You know how she wanted to be an inventor like Dad. I would always tell her not to push herself too hard or she might fall in love with a pigeon.”

“That’s what made it all fall into place. But it goes further than that. Ms. S confirmed my suspicions. They made a mistake when writing that report. What if it wasn’t an AIYE, JAMES that they were talking about but A. James? Rory. Aurora James Aiye. She always signed anything important, blueprints, all of her paintings A. James.”

A. James. Was this puzzle truly left not by his father but by his older sister?

Fourteen-year-old Rory Aiye was an inventor in her own right. She had been their father's apprentice since she was six years old, once it became evident that Elise preferred focusing on the numbers versus applying them. She liked physics but had no patience for things like chemistry, biology, and mechanical engineering, things Rory loved.

Henry's mind spun. This whole situation was like a spider's web, it was difficult to see, and delicate. Yet, it was intricately woven and could be unraveled only if a person was patient and skilled enough to try. Tug on it too hard and the fine thread snaps leaving you worse off than before.

A. James

James Aiye

A dry laugh began to build in Henry's chest. It had been there all along. He had all the pieces but he had put them together wrong. To be fair, he wasn't the first. Red Vector had made the same mistake.

"So, what does the clue mean?" he asked.

Elise faltered. She had evidently been expecting him to express his disbelief. His sister had been bracing herself for the defense of her theory. A smile tugged at the corner of her lips.

"You believe me." She stated this with a look of grateful surprise.

"It makes sense, enough. The theory is a bit far-fetched, but when has any of this been simple." He waved his hand at the room around them. "Plus, only Rory would leave a dramatic and yet vague note in a book. I honestly don't know how I didn't see it sooner."

“Note, what note?” Elise was not smiling any longer. Her tone became serious. Like Henry, she hated not knowing things. He had forgotten that he hadn’t told her yet, which was probably a sign that he should have.

“I found a note in one of my history books. I think it was placed there before we met Ms. Crowe. It said: DO NOT TRUST HER.” He slipped the note out of his pocket and showed it to his sister.

After studying the paper for a second, she nodded her head. “That’s very Rory,” she said, eyes crinkling. “But how can you be sure when it was placed there?”

“Well, I can’t be 100 percent sure,” Henry admitted. He fidgeted, rubbing his nose.

“So it could be talking about anybody,” Elise pressed.

“Which is why we can’t trust anybody,” Henry retorted.

Elise nodded, then set her jaw and spoke, tone serious. “The clue didn’t just tell me that it was Rory. I know where she hid it, whatever groundbreaking thing Red Vector is after.”

Henry gathered his thoughts quickly, and it all fell into place. His gaze met his sister’s.

“It’s in the pocket watch.”

## CHAPTER TEN

### The Plan

One of my favorite bedtime stories was a fable about a group of mice. The mice were always constantly terrorized by the cat that lived nearby. One day they held a meeting and devised a plan to attach a bell to the cat's collar so they would have a warning when the cat is approaching. The group of rodents applauded the brilliant plan. But when asked who will complete the dangerous task of attaching the bell to the cat's collar, they all made excuses. From that story comes the phrase "Who's going to bell the cat?" Meaning: who will take up the dangerous task that no one wants to do for that very reason? The story taught me an important lesson: the value of a plan lies in the ability to complete it. A good plan is not a good plan if it does not have the possibility of working, even if the reason is that nobody wants to do it.

Elise and Henry Aiye had a good plan—well a potentially good plan because in order to work, it was going to require them to bell the cat.

"We can't wait. We have to get that watch now. It should be in the puzzle room with Rory's things. And then we have to leave." Elise whispered.

"Leave? How? We're kind of stranded in the middle of nowhere," Henry replied.

"Ms. S's car. It's in the garage near the puzzle room. Patricia has her keys. We have Rose distract her when she takes us to the room. We grab the keys, find the watch, go next door to the garage, and drive away."

"We don't know how to drive," Henry said.

“I can figure it out,” Elise said. “It’s not like it’s rocket science.”

“What if we are wrong, and Red Vector has good intentions? There is still a chance of that,” he said softly. Upon seeing the look on his sister’s face, he amended his statement. “As unlikely as that is,” he added.

“If we’re wrong, which we are not, and they are actually good, then, they shouldn’t be too upset about our escape attempt,” Elise responded.

Henry supposed they didn’t have any other option. They relayed a simplified version of the plan to Rose. Just telling her that she would have to distract Patricia tomorrow and be ready to follow them when they told her to, and to pack her essentials. Telling her anything too specific would lead her to panic. Keeping it simple made it more likely to be executed correctly.

“What about Auntie Victoria?” Rose asked sweetly.

“What?” Elise was confused.

“Does she need to pack?”

“No,” Elise spoke quickly. “Aunt Victoria is going to stay here.”

Henry frowned. “But the letter said ...”

Elise shot him a sharp look. “That letter could be outdated. She seems fine with this whole thing. Didn’t you hear Ms. Crowe? Aunt Victoria worked for Red Vector.” She gestured to their surroundings. “Adding her to the plan could compromise the entire escape. And it would complicate it anyhow. Plus, they want us, not our elderly aunt.”

Henry gave a resigned breath. “Fine.”



The morning did not feel real. They gathered in Elise and Rose's room as they had the previous mornings, albeit a little early so their aunt was not present. Rose strapped on her pale pink canvas bag. It took ten minutes of rationalizing, to convince her that bringing a backpack was incredibly suspicious and a surefire way to get themselves caught. She pouted for a while, which they ignored. She eventually slipped a few items from her bag into the pockets of her pink pinafore dress (Which she had previously explained matched her backpack).

Elise couldn't help but tap her fingers nervously against the table as they waited. Their aunt finally joined them, grumbling about children waking up too early. At long last the dreaded and yet welcomed knock at the door arrived. Henry had made sure to knock Aunt Victoria's morning pot of coffee onto the ground. She was fast asleep when Patricia knocked on the door.

Patricia wordlessly and nervously led them to the puzzle room. As she turned to leave. Rose began a solo performance that she aptly entitled "Dramatic Temper Tantrum: I Want to Go Back to Bed edition." She deserved an Oscar. It was as if she had been prepping for this role her whole life. Every time their parents denied her ice cream or someone reorganized her toys was just a stepping stone for this performance.

It started with a tremble of her lower lip, and then the tears followed. These were not small delicate tears, the kind you dabbed away with a handkerchief. No, it was a downpour. She spoke in between hiccuping sobs. As Patricia tried to console her, she latched onto her arms and began pulling her in the direction of the door as she wailed. Rose dragged her feet against the ground as she wailed, scuffing her patent leather Mary Janes.

“I... WANT ... TO ... GO ... BACK ... TO ... BED! I... TIRED...I ... WANT ... HOME!... I HATE... OATMEAL...WANTED ... PANCAKES...I WANT ... SLEEP... TIRED”

Gradually, the subject of Rose’s tantrum grew more confusing and convoluted, which only added to the effect. The poor woman was terrified. She looked at the child clutching onto her arm as if she was possessed by a demon. Rose yanked harder on her arm, almost sending her toppling over. It gave Henry just the right amount of time to snatch the keys from the pocket of her baggy beige cardigan. Elise ran forward, scooping a wriggling Rose into her arms. She was too big to be carried, but Elise sort of dragged her away. Rose’s Mary Janes scuffed against the floor making an unpleasant sound. All the while, Elise offered Patricia seemingly sincere but ultimately empty apologies for her little sister’s behavior. The woman nodded at her and then made a beeline for the door. Henry gave Elise a thumbs up and Rose looked incredibly pleased with herself. As Rose wiped the tears from her face, Elise and Henry began searching.

“It’s in the stuff from Rory’s room. It has to be.”

They dug through everything, not bothering to be tidy, tossing everything onto the floor. The mess would have given the children’s mother a heart attack. Henry’s hand trembled from adrenaline. Each second that passed felt like a minute. It was taking too long. Where was it? Where could it...

Click, Clack, Click, Clack. Footsteps echoed around the room. Not just any footsteps. That was the sound only the most impractical shoes made. And those patent leather high heels could only belong to one person.

“Now where do you think you are going?” Ms. S beamed down at Henry and Elise from her towering height. Her smile chilled Henry to the bone. She knew exactly what they were doing.

“We’re just doing p...p...puzzle stuff,” Henry stuttered nervously. Henry Aiye was good at many things, but lying was not one of them.

“Didn’t your parents tell you it’s bad to lie,” Ms. S crowed. She grabbed Elise’s upper arm and yanked her until she was standing upright. “It doesn’t matter. I already know what you are doing. Really,” she scoffed. “Stealing car keys. You know Patricia is dim-witted, but I am smart enough to think for both of us. But really it was your performance at dinner that tipped me off.” She said nodding at Elise. “So, when pathetic Patricia comes crying to me about a certain child’s temper tantrum. I thought I might do a little puzzle-solving of my own.”

Rose was tugged into view by some unfamiliar lackey, looking as if she was going to burst into tears for real this time. Ms. S gave her an icy smile as well.

“So tell me,” she snapped. “What did you find? I *know* you’ve been solving it.”

Henry felt his blood beginning to boil. “We’ll never tell you!” he shouted. Silence would have conveyed the same message, but Henry was so enraged that shouting seemed the only option.

Elise echoed his anger. “And you’ll never figure it out yourself. You’ve been wrong about everything,” she spat.

“Never...” Mrs. S sneered. “Never...” she repeated, rising in pitch. “Are you sure about that? We wouldn’t want your little sister to get hurt, now would we?” On cue, the stranger

holding onto Rose tightened his grip. Rose burst into tears. They streamed down her face as she trembled. Ms. S then made a gesture indicating that the man should take Rose away. He followed his orders and began hauling the little girl in the direction of the exit. The children looked at the woman in horror.

“Fine,” Elise gritted out. Ms. S gestured for the man to stop. Henry let out a sigh of relief as Rose returned. Elise trembled as she continued. “It’s Rory. She’s the one who left the puzzle and discovery. Not our dad. Aurora James Aiye. A. James. She hid the next clue or whatever it was in her watch.”

“Her watch?” Ms. S echoed, smile widening.

“A pocket watch.” Elise elaborated.

“Where is it?” Ms. S spat, grabbing Elise’s arm even tighter. Elise winced. His sister tried to wrench herself free from the woman’s grasp but failed.

“I don’t know,” she growled. “We couldn’t find it. We searched all of Rory’s stuff.”

“That’s not going to do.” Ms. S shoved Elise hard, sending her toppling to the stone floor. Henry tried to move forward to help her up but was quickly reminded that he was restrained.

“It’s at home!” Rose piped up. Her voice trembled with fear. Ms. Seargent whirled to face her. “Aunt Victoria’s house. I took it there. I wanted to keep it. It reminded me of Rory.” She elaborated, visibly shaking. “It should be in my room there. I left it in the dresser drawer so I wouldn’t lose it.”

“Excellent!” Ms. S exclaimed, clapping her hands together in delight. “You have all been so very helpful. I believe it is time for you to go back to your rooms.” She snapped her fingers

and two other strangers approached. They grabbed Elise and Henry and began shoving them toward the hallway.

As they drew closer to their rooms Henry felt his heart sink. They shoved all three children into the single room, Henry's room, and shut the door. The click of a lock followed. Elise ran to the door desperately trying to open it, but to no avail. They were trapped.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### The Predicament

I am no stranger to imprisonment. I currently am in a similar predicament as those three children, albeit one with a lot less light. I mean this both literally, as I am trapped in a dark closet, and metaphorically, as that has me feeling very gloomy.

The first thing you do when you are trapped is think about where it went wrong, where you went wrong. Ending up in this place had to start somewhere, right? So you trace back the events in your mind until you can't go any further. Which of my mistakes led to this grim fate? Perhaps it was that harrowing cab ride. But no, that was preceded by that horrific bus ride. And before all of that was a dreadful walk. But then again, it really did all start on that train, on that sleek charcoal train.

I didn't know it as I stood on that train platform that cold winter morning, but my life would change forever. Many lives would. But nobody wants to think that. So even as I built the puzzle and left the house that day with my parents, a part of me convinced myself that everything was going to be the same. But it wasn't. There was no work conference, no science museum, only a one-way ticket to somewhere where we and my discovery would be safe. But there was no safety to be found. I never made to where we were meant to go, neither did my parents nor the woman who met us on the platform to escort us there. All because of me. All because of my discovery. Just like I said before, some things are better left undiscovered. A certain discovery may lead to the imprisonment of yourself and your siblings who have presumed you dead. But,

some things can't stay undiscovered forever, the same way some people cannot stay trapped forever.

There was a clicking noise of the lock on the door. Henry whirled around. His mind, previously filled with thoughts of despair, was now sharply concentrated on the present moment. The door swung open.

"Children these days," a familiar voice rasped. "They have to do everything for themselves, and they never think before acting."

Henry didn't know if he should be pleased or not at the sight of Aunt Victoria. Rose evidently thought she was their savior and rushed to hug their wizened aunt around the legs. The old woman stiffened at the contact but didn't push the little girl away.

"You just couldn't take a few minutes to inform me of your escape plan could you." Their aunt stared down at the children, lips pursed. "Your father said he left you some message or something that would make sure you would trust me in the event of something like this. But my nephew has always been overly optimistic. If you children had been smart enough to ask, I would have told you I already have an escape plan in place."

Aunt Victoria tossed something into the air. Whatever the object was, it shimmered with a metallic gleam before Elise deftly caught it. His sister opened her hands revealing a pair of familiar-looking car keys.

"We thought you were working with Red Vector," Elise said, meeting their aunt's gaze.

"I used to, as you know. But I saw the error in my ways. I decided I was done and chose to stay at home and crochet instead," the woman admitted. "I was done with all of this," their aunt

gestured with her hand. “Until my nephew informed me of all of the trouble your sister Aurora managed to get herself into and asked for my help.” She spoke Rory’s name with a tinge of sadness.

“What about Rory?” Rose asked. Henry had forgotten that they hadn’t clued her into the discoveries. To be fair, it was her fault that she failed to stay awake.

“You can figure out where a secret organization failed and solve a little puzzle. But you can’t steal a pair of car keys without getting caught. Honestly, it’s like your parents didn’t teach you any life skills,” their aunt continued in an exasperated manner. “Now go gather your things. The window of opportunity is closing fast.”

They followed their aunt out the door. It was the fastest they had ever seen her walk. They wound through hallways they had never seen before. All the while, Henry’s heart pounded in his chest like a drum. Their destination was familiar: the cream hallway that housed the hidden door to the garage. Their aunt pushed it open with a lot less fussing than Rose had taken. She gestured with her arm for them to file through the doorway. She led them to an unknown silver car. The car had large round headlights, reminiscent of the eyes of a fruit fly, and a dome-shaped roof, which reminded him of a ladybug. The interior was entirely beige, including the leather seats.

“You,” she pointed at Elise, “drive.”

“You,” she pointed at Henry, “direct her.” She handed him a wrinkled piece of paper, on which a list of hastily scrawled directions was written. “You,” she pointed at Rose, “try not to be too much of a nuisance.” It was the nicest sentence she had ever spoken, not in wording, but in tone.

“Wait, you’re not coming?” Elise asked.



Their aunt gave a small smile in return. It was the kindest smile Henry had ever seen her give.

“No, I have one more mess I have to clean up here,” she said. “You seemed pretty confident that you could drive when making your stupid plan. Follow those directions to the dot, and do not stop for anything. You might have to drive through a barricade or two to get out of this parking garage.” Seeing the look of horror on Elise’s face she hastily added, “It shouldn’t be too bad.”

“Where is this taking us?” Henry asked, looking down at the crumpled sheet of paper. He thought he saw a few coffee stains on it. That didn’t inspire confidence.

“To where your parents actually wanted you to go.” With a wave of her hand and a cutting gaze, their aunt retreated back through the door.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### The Drive

There is a phrase: “stealing candy from a baby.” If something is like stealing candy from a baby, it is not very difficult and requires minimal effort. Anyone who has *actually* taken anything from a baby knows better. Babies cry *loudly*. They kick and scream. Some, like little Rosemary Aiye, even bite. Morals aside, taking candy from a baby is not as easy as one would think. Like many things in this world, this phrase was probably the idea of some misguided adult.

I suppose Ms. S thought that getting the Aiye children to solve and surrender the puzzle would be like stealing candy from a baby. She thought imprisoning those children would be simple. She thought wrong.

“Achoo!” Rose sneezed theatrically, hunching as if her body was being tugged at like a puppet on strings. The girl then slumped further against the leather seat of the car and resumed coughing loudly. The windows of the silver automobile had been accidentally lowered during their escape. The children had yet to figure out how to raise them again. Elise was far too busy trying to keep them alive.

Thus, Rose had been complaining about the dust from the surrounding desert for close to an hour, never mind that they had left that dry expanse a while ago. The car now drove through greenery. The little road was bordered by tall trees and short, fat shrubs.

“Alright, I think I’ve got it,” Elise announced. Henry’s sister finally loosened her painfully tight grip on the steering wheel. Henry let out a sigh of relief. Elise was a good driver

considering she was entirely self-taught and had only a few hours of experience under her belt. If you didn't factor that in, then she was a bad driver. A *very* bad driver.

"How long do you think it will take them to notice we are gone?" Henry asked. The children had largely been driving in silence, save the occasional coughing, so that Elise could concentrate. That excluded the instance when they had all screamed as Elise almost drove into a wall when exiting the parking garage. Henry thought silence might be better for their safety after that.

"Another hour, I guess..." Elise responded. She shot a look over her shoulder as if to assure herself that no one was following.

"I bet two," Rose piped up. She stared lazily out the open car window as the trees flashed by.

Henry supposed Ms. S would discover their disappearance whenever she came to retrieve them, although, she would likely send Patricia who would then be blamed for their escape. He winced at the thought. Despite her affiliation with an evil organization, Henry felt bad for the poor woman.

"Ms. S will probably be too busy getting Rory's pocket watch and planning evil monologues to notice," Elise snarled, glaring at the road as if it were the woman in question.

*The pocket watch.* In all of the recent commotion, focus on the watch had slipped Henry's mind. It was the next piece of Rory's puzzle, and Red Vector had their hands on it, or would soon. What clue could his sister have hidden in a watch anyway? Henry came tumbling down from his tower of thoughts as Rose spoke.

“It’s not at Aunt Victoria’s.”

Elise nearly drove the car off the road in surprise. Luckily, a sharp turn off the wheel righted the car’s trajectory with a screech.

“What?” Rose said shrugging at her siblings’ reactions. “I lied.” Rose began to pout as if insulted by Henry and Elise’s disbelief.

Rosemary Aiye was an aspiring actress. So far, she had been in a children’s production of *The Wizard of Oz*, played a cloud in the school play, and starred in a radio commercial about soap. A lot of emphasis ought to have been placed on the word *aspiring*. But that wasn’t for lack of talent. Rose was drawn from a young age to all things dramatic. Acting is pretending to be someone else. Pretending to be someone else requires lying. Rose was a fan of lying. When it came to revealing her secrets, Rosemary Miriam Aiye was nothing short of theatrical.

With a toss of her chestnut hair and a grin that rivaled the Cheshire Cat from Wonderland, she announced in a sing-song voice, “I had it the whole time!” She then slipped something out of the pocket of her pinafore dress. She chunked this item at Henry, who thankfully caught it before any damage could be done. The watch nearly slipped out of his grasp as he examined it.

“I could have told you before you went crazy looking for it, but you never tell me anything,” Rose whined. She had a point.

Henry and Elise did conceal things from her. In their defense, she was six. Still, she was a smart six-year-old—smart enough to know not to give the watch to Ms. S when asked. Henry wasn’t sure if she had realized how important the watch was or if she simply didn’t want to give it up.

In a monologue that was far too long, Rose admitted to taking the watch shortly after the accident. She said it reminded her of Rory, but Henry could remember the various instances over the years when she had tried to steal it.

He could see why Rose wanted it. The watch was nice, a shiny silver. The smooth metal casing had been blank when Rory found it at an antique shop and began tinkering with it. The case now bore a simple engraving, A. James.

I must admit I am proud of the work I put into that watch, though I messed up the loop of the J.

Henry ran his fingers over the carved letters. The metal felt refreshingly cool. He flipped the watch open with a satisfying click. Strangely, he was not greeted with the familiar ticking sound that once filled rooms of the Aiye's house. The watch was silent. It took him a moment to realize that the watch was not broken. It was simply no longer a watch.

Rather than a clock face, the inside of the watch housed a compass. The needle spun quickly as if it was unsure where North was. Henry wondered if it had been damaged during the events of the past few days. Rose was not known for being gentle. How did you even fix a compass?

"This says left, doesn't it?" Elise asked, waving a paper in Henry's face. She had taken over reading their aunt's instructions while Henry was lost in thought. He snatched the paper from her. Reading and driving is a terrible idea.

"Yeah, it says left," Henry confirmed, squinting at the paper. It could have also said cell. Left seemed more likely, but Aunt Victoria's handwriting didn't make things easy.

Elise slammed her hands against the steering wheel in anger like a monster from a bad horror film. Henry frowned. He could understand why Elise was frustrated. They were almost finished with Aunt Victoria's list of directions. There was no left turn in sight and they had been driving for a while. He squinted back at the crumpled paper.

"Let me see," Rose exclaimed, clamoring from the backseat to snatch the paper. Henry deftly dodged her attempt. She fell back into her seat with a dramatic sigh and opened her mouth to protest.

"Quiet," Elise and Henry called in unison. They were both busy peering into the distance, hoping a left turn would materialize. Rose pouted and crossed her arms. Her rapid mood changes had been a constant throughout this car ride. It seemed she would now be entering a grumpy phase. *Wonderful*. They drove further, still unable to find the desired left turn. Rose's complaining resumed as the clouds started to tinge pink with the arriving sunset. Elise began fretfully tapping the steering wheel with her fingertips.

"There is no left!" she proclaimed in anguish. "Do you know why there is no left?" she continued. Henry did not know. "Because there never *was* a left and there never will *be* a left," Elise howled in a rare fit of unrestrained rage. She glared angrily at the path in front of them. Henry thought the bushes might catch fire from the heat of her gaze.

"Wait...isn't that," Henry started pointing at the side of the road where there was a small dirt path to the left.

"Darn it!" Elise cried and then forcefully turned the wheel. The car veered onto the narrow path with the speed of a stampeding buffalo. Henry felt his stomach lurch for what must have been the hundredth time that day.

“I have to pee,” Rose announced from the back.

“Not now, Rose. We’re almost there,” Henry replied, holding on for dear life as the car careened down the path at top speed. “Aunt Victoria said to drive 400 feet and then stop.” He would have laughed at the strange specificity of the instructions had he not been shouting at Elise to slow down. She thankfully followed his demand, and the car slowed to a reasonable pace. Elise drove past a rickety old sign. Henry suspected that it had once been painted with cheery, bright colors. Those had long since worn away, along with most of the sign’s words. It took him a minute, but he could just make out the worn outline of words that declared this place the Sunny Oaks Retirement Community. At least he thought that was what it said.

The car pulled to a sharp stop. Henry could see a series of houses in front of them. The one closest was lit brightly from within. The golden glow was alluring when compared to the darkness outside. The houses were surprisingly charming. Henry had been expecting a haunted house. These on the other hand were bright white, cookie-cutter houses with small porches.

“Great, more buildings in the middle of nowhere,” Elise snipped.

Rose nodded her head in agreement. “If they don’t have pancakes, I’m leaving.”

Henry suppressed a snort at his younger sister’s absurdity.

“I think it’ll be alright though,” Rose continued. “It looks like the house in the *Little Red Riding Hood*. I’m pretty sure they had pancakes in that.” Her voice had a hint of awe in it as she spoke. Suddenly, she wrenched open the car door and bolted up the path to the nearest house, squealing something about having to go to the bathroom.

Elise shouted at her to come back. She threw open the car door to follow. By the time Henry and Elise had caught up to Rose, she was standing on the front porch looking up at the figure who had opened the door. The only thought rattling through Henry's head was that the house in *Little Red Riding Hood* ends up housing a wolf. Though the stranger in front of them didn't look like a wolf, Henry was still wary. He had met enough tall strangers in the last few weeks to last a lifetime.

This man was elderly, but he was not wizened in his age like their Aunt Victoria. Instead, this man bore his many years as if they were a tolerable inconvenience. He was strikingly familiar, but perhaps that was just the warm blue of his eyes which were capped with thick grey eyebrows. Henry was certain he had never met this man before. The steep slope of this man's nose and his bright eyes gave off the sense that this wasn't the kind of man you could forget meeting. His gaze was now fixed on Rose, who rubbed the tip of her nose uneasily at the sight of the stranger.

The man smiled, and then Henry finally placed why he seemed so familiar. He had not met him, but he had seen that bright smile on the inside of so many book jackets in a black and white photo. This man was Henry's favorite author, the creator of *Watch the Door* and other mystery novels. More importantly, this was Henry's grandfather.

The man opened the door wide and spoke. "I am glad to see you all made it in one piece. Not all of Vicky's plans are so successful. Why don't you all come in? I am sure you have quite the story, and we have a lot to discuss."



## EPILOGUE

### The Window

Life is odd, as soon as you feel you have hit a dead end, a door opens. Sometimes that door is opened by a kind, mysterious grandfather who welcomes you into some long-awaited safety. Other times, you are not so lucky.

As I was hauled into the room outside. I winced as my eyes adjusted to the sunlight streaming in through the glass-paneled walls. The view from one of the many unfinished floors of the repurposed North Bridge Hotel does not disappoint. It was as grand and bright as it was boring. The world outside was devoid of any trees or houses. It was an expanse of brown dust save a small speck in the distance. A speck that was a little silver car driving away.

## Color in the Form of Suffering

by Adi L. Wright

There's a flower blooming inside of me. When it's grown, and it leaves the confines of my ribcage, it will bring color to my otherwise black-and-white world. That's what the flowers do for everyone; it brings beauty from their pointless suffering. So why am I not excited for my turn? The grayscale values around me are all I've ever known. It does not bother me that I can't tell others my favorite color. I haven't yet seen the colors they have. I do not care.

"It will add depth to your world," they tell me. There is already depth. I just have to pay closer attention to find it. The flower in my chest twists in displeasure—I can feel it. It's like a second voice inside my brain, scolding me for being ungrateful. But why should I be grateful because I got something valuable out of my suffering? I would rather have not suffered at all.

The flower rises in my chest. I can feel the petals clogging my throat. They taunt me as I cough them out, sanguine red petals disrupting my monotone vision. Sanguine, to be positive in a bad situation. It feels insulting.

I push the petals away, out of my view. I stare upwards instead, towards the trees. My gaze scrutinizes every leaf, every branch, trying to memorize the underwhelming values and hexes of each one. I will come back to these images in my head at night, when the colors around me will be muted under the guise of night. The flower twists again, causing a cough to escape me in discomfort. I ignore it. If I ignore it long enough, it will give up its attempt for attention. It always does. For something so intent on causing my suffering, it's not very persistent. Though, I suppose I would give up, too. To try and garner the attention of someone who does not wish to give it is nothing but a humiliating waste of time.

I sit in that same spot for hours, yet it feels like no time at all. It feels like too little time before the petals fill my throat again. A few of them rise high enough to rest behind my lips before I spit them out once again. The flower has risen from my chest to rest right below my throat. I feel sick, almost. How am I expected to accept this? I cannot make this something it's not. I cannot make this "okay". Even when the flower is gone, I will remember it. Even when the flower is old and withered, I will think of it. I will think of the pain it's caused me. I will not think of the color it's given me. I did not ask for color and yet it's been forced upon me. I did not ask for anything and even so it's making me suffer for something I did not want in the first place.

The thorns of the flower dig at my throat. I assume it's a rose, though I don't care enough to guess what kind. I try to clear my throat, yet all that results in is more petals landing on my tongue. It tastes bitter, almost. I spit them out, shoving the nearby fallen leaves over it. My throat itches, and I bite

my lip to stop myself from aggravating the flower. Just a little longer and I'll be free of this wretched thing. But isn't that what it always is?

"Just a little longer. Make it to Friday." I tell myself in school.

"Make it until Christmas." I say, dreading all the people I'll have to see when it arrives. It's always just a little longer. But how much longer until this dreadful cycle ends? The definition of insanity is to repeat the same procedure and expect a different result. Maybe that's where I've ended up.

The flower rudely interrupts my thoughts by making the final push up my throat and into my mouth. I cough, but the action is futile. I grasp the bud of the flower resting directly behind my teeth and pull, ignoring the hesitant squirming of the dying flower and the sting of the thorns. Once it's out, I swallow thickly in an attempt to eradicate the horrid aftertaste of the roots. I blink impatiently when I stare down at the still rose in my hands.

The red color of the folded petals is a stark contrast to the gray world around me, but only for a few moments. I feel my expression pinch in discomfort as the values of the trees and around me and the sky overhead shifts drastically. I hate it. I knew I would. It's painfully bright, so overwhelming. It's nothing like what I'm used to. Every shape is a different shade, every item a different color entirely. The objects around me, which I used to let fade into the background, now stare and taunt me. There's no sound, and yet the world around me is so loud.

The flower wiggles in my grip again, begging to be planted into the Earth. Its shriveling roots reach and grasp blindly in the air in an attempt to find soil. I almost want to let it suffocate. I want to let it suffer like I did. But my anger is not justified in the eyes of my peers. I have enough scorn already directed at me, there is no need to commit to more.

I don't bother to give it a pot. I've never been able to keep plants alive anyways, so I don't have a container for it anyways. I simply push the dirt away with my cold hands, just deep enough for the flower to survive. I place it upright in the hole and watch as the roots bury into the ground as deep as they can. I kick the dirt back over the base of the stem and stare for just a little while longer. It will survive. As will I. Though my survival does not discount the years of torment.

Maybe I'm harsh. Maybe I'm slightly irrational, or dramatic. But I don't think that anyone else should be able to dictate how I feel about the events in my life. Maybe my suffering was a result of the things around me, and not the thing inside me, but the flower never helped either way. I did not ask for its "blessing", nor for its presence. So I will leave the flower here. I will drown out the color around me with other thoughts. Because in the end, no matter how much time has passed, I will not let my suffering be drowned out by the voices of others. I am allowed to think differently of my life compared to others. In the end, they are not me.

## *Pentobarbital*

by Kai M. McMichael

After hours of contemplation, I finally did it.

*Knock...*

*Knock...*

*Knock...*

I immediately noticed how my knocks on my childhood front door were met with silence.

Whenever I lived here, if someone knocked at the door, they were met with my dad's gravelly smoker's voice shouting from his recliner.

*"Hold your horses, I'm coming!"*

That was then followed by a stream of curses muttered under his breath that never failed to put me on edge.

Now it was just silence. Eerie silence. It almost convinced me no one was there.

With no warning, the door swung open, and I sucked in a deep gasp as I looked into an unfamiliar face.

It was a mature woman--couldn't be younger than sixty years old. Thin slivers of limp silver hair clung to her sun-spot riddled scalp. Wrinkles hung low from her hollowed cheekbones and her pale, gray eyes bore into my face. A lustrous pearl necklace glowed against her dull skin. The sight of that signature pearl necklace confirmed what I feared to find true.

"Mom?"

Her mouth slowly curled to a pressed smile. "Sweet Maribelle," she breathed out, "after all this time." I couldn't tell if it was a whisper or her actual voice. The mother I grew up with had a voice that wasn't even capable of producing a whisper. She brought her arms up for a hug, but

my uncomfortable step back was signal enough for her to lower them, and she awkwardly smiled again.

“Well, don’t act like a stranger, come in!” she shifted slightly to let me in.

One of the moments I was dreading the most. I stared uneasily at the threshold that separated me from my past. Do I dare take the step?

Thoughts in my head swiveled all around, either begging me to go or pleading for me to stay. I glanced at my mom. Behind her meek appearance, I could see the joy. Who wouldn’t be joyous to be reunited with their estranged daughter after twenty years? After everything, she was still my mother and if she—at her advanced age—was moved to find me, reach out to me multiple times, and beg me to come back, there must be some sincerity to her.

I crossed into the house with mom following behind. The smell was uncomfortably familiar—it was the smell of a place I never wanted to smell again, but one thing I noticed was how *clean* it was. Throughout my childhood, the house was in a constant state of disarray--beer cans on every surface, filth piling in corners, and dirty ashtrays. We never had guests, as we had to maintain the appearance of an idyllic Southern family, and our house would have been the downfall of that charade.

But *this--this* was the type of house you’d have weekly Bible studies in. White doilies on each polished table, with pots of flowers and colorful knick-knacks taking over the surface of them. There were family pictures on every wall. I was still in all of them.

As we entered the living room where Mom already had coffee mugs laid out for us, my natural instinct kept me guarded. *Where is dad?*

“So what are you doing now?” Mom settled in the armchair across from me.

“I’m a vet tech,” I responded. She nods with a slight hum. I never imagined I’d have to make meaningless small talk with my own mother. The air was tense, but as mom took a casual sip from her mug, I realized I was the only one feeling it.

“Why did you want me to come back so badly?” I broke the silence with my burning question. Part of me wished I had more pleasantries to share with my estranged mother, but I couldn’t contain myself. “And where’s Dad?”

Mom’s body went stiff and her pupils dilated as she slowly set her mug down and cleared her throat. “It’s actually about your father.”

“So you didn’t miss me?”

“Oh, Maribelle,” she placed her hand on my knee, “I missed you every waking day. But you deserved your peace, and I wasn’t one to disrespect that.”

“So why did you?” The question came off rudier than intended, and Mom hesitantly removed her hand. I felt bad for a moment, but once I remembered how she allowed Dad to treat me, I blocked the feeling out.

“Your father is sick.”

I didn’t have much response--I couldn’t bring myself to feel much ache for him, and I couldn’t understand what the issue had to do with me. But I wouldn’t voice that.

“What do you mean *sick*?”

She shook her head regretfully. “Lung cancer. All that smoking finally caught up to him.”

“Was he just diagnosed?” I asked.

“Diagnosed three years ago, but it’s real bad now. Doctor’s saying he doesn’t have much longer.” She was so monotonous, as if she was explaining a boring day at work rather than her husband’s looming demise.

“Where is he now?”

“Upstairs. I can take you to him, if you’d like.”

My leg began bouncing furiously. Seeing *him*. After everything he did. I felt my breath get shallow, but Mom still watched me. I looked at her, and despite all the nerves coursing through my veins like little electric currents, I reluctantly nodded my head.

She led me up the stairs. At the end of the hall where their room was, the door was closed. My throat began to dry as my hands clammed up. What was he going to be like? Would he be happy to see me, or would he meet me with anger the same way he did so often throughout my childhood? Mom went ahead of me and opened the door.

But that's when it sounded. The sound that stilled my racing heart.

My parent's bedroom door creaked. That door creak was so old that it echoed when it sang. It shook the whole house and if you listened closely, you could hear it all the way from the front door. Mom always nagged Dad about fixing it, but I prayed that the creak would never go away, because it was the only warning I had before Dad came downstairs. The sound of that creak told me to run and hide. Under a table, in the cupboard, just hide. All of the anxiety I'd been suppressing since I arrived came up, and I wanted to run. Run and hide.

My frozen state melted when mom turned back to me, and I could tell she recognized my panic. Without words, she hooked my arm with hers, and led me through the door, as my knees felt like they would buckle beneath me.

But when I looked in, I couldn't believe what I saw.

If I hadn't known otherwise, I would've mistaken it for a hospital room. My father was motionless in his bed, with tubes upon tubes connecting him to all sorts of medical equipment--I could recognize an IV Bag and vital sign monitor. On the nightstand sat enough pill bottles to restock a pharmacy.

It took me a few moments to get words out to escape my gaped mouth. "What—what *happened* to him?"

"He was comatose in the hospital for a while." Her face was stone. I couldn't read any emotions from it. "But last month, they said there's nothing they could do, so I brought him home."

“So that’s why you wanted me back here?” I asked, unable to pull my eyes away from my father in this state. The man I once saw as so large and terrifying looked so small and defeated.

“Well, I’d been one to assume you would want to see your father before he passed,” she looked at me, almost offended. “Perhaps I was wrong.”

“Are you being serious?” I couldn’t take it anymore. How *dare* she, especially after she knew and *saw* everything he’d done to me, and did *nothing*? Tears pricked in my eyes as all the frustration about my upbringing reared its hideous head, and there was absolutely no stopping it. “You saw how he was with me! What he *did* to me? Does that mean *nothing* to you?” She was silent, accepting every pain-fueled word I shot into her like flaming arrows. “I knew this was a mistake. This is *exactly* how it’s always been. You just ignored *everything*. I was your *child*, and you let him do all those things to me!” I was screaming through sobs, as pools of tears streamed down my face. Mom looked straight ahead at my dad, with a single tear rolling down her emotionless face. Her lack of response drove me mad.

“Say something!” I shouted at her. Without a word, she walked towards Dad’s bed. She stroked his head and kissed his forehead. I stopped crying, as now I was seething with more rage--after all this, she went to sympathize with the one who didn’t deserve it. Suddenly, she broke down into violent sobs, right there.

“Do you think *I* don’t know all this?” She looked down at my father. “That man--he *ruined* me.”

“He never did anything to you.” I stated coldly.

“He did everything!” she snapped to me. “I protected you from *so* much. I took *so much*, for *you*.” My crying had stopped by then, but the sobs poured from her like water from a well of heartache. “It wasn’t just you, but I could never let you see that.”

“I *needed* you. Why didn’t you leave?” my voice cracked.

“I was *protecting* us. That *man*”, she took a pause and took a deep breath, “he was capable of *murder*. He’d kill me—us—before he’d let us go.”



She grabbed a large syringe and used it to pull a translucent liquid from a nearby vial. Carefully, she injected one of many medicines from the nightstand into his neck vein, and turned back to me with her eyes squeezed shut.

Suddenly, it all made sense. It didn't stop once I left. It was all put onto her. He did it all to her too, and once I left, she took the brunt of what I left. *I'm the one that left her with him.*

She walked towards me and cupped my face in her hands. Through the tears, she smiled at me. "I'm so *glad* you got out. You are so much stronger than I could *ever* be." she whispered and planted a soft kiss on my forehead. She wrapped her arms around me and wept into my shoulder. I didn't hug her back, but I didn't push her away.

The unspoken forgiveness was interrupted by the sudden sound of blaring monitors. The type of siren you would hear in a hospital.

Dad's vital sign monitor wasn't going off the chart, though. It was *below*.

I went to rush over to him, but as I took a step, Mom gripped my arm, pulling me back to her. I looked at her, panicked for what the next move was.

But as Mom looked to me solemnly with a soft headshake, I realized there *wasn't* a next move. These were my last moments with the man that terrorized my entire childhood.

We walked over to the edge of the bed, and watched my abuser silently let go of his life. The heart monitor had three seconds between each beep.

*Beep...*

*Beep...*

*Beeeeeeeeeeeeee.....*

I've heard stories about the final breath out, but I'll never forget hearing it for myself. Mom embraced me again, and this time I returned the hug. She wasn't crying anymore, she was just paused—she knew she was free. *We were free.*

Over Mom's shoulder, I glanced at the medication-covered dresser. On the edge sat the vial and syringe mom used to give Dad the final injection. *Pentobarbital*.

A pit dropped in my stomach and the air was sucked from my lungs. Suddenly, my mom's hug felt a lot colder. The veterinary technician in me knows *exactly* what that drug is. In veterinary school, we called it *the death drug*. And in the dosage she gave--it was enough to kill a horse three times over.

"Mom?" is all I'm able to squeak out. She pulls away to face me.

"Yes, Belle?" *My old nickname*. Dad made her stop calling me that.

Dad made her stand by while her daughter was torturously abused.

Dad abused her so badly, she feared for her and her daughter's life if she did anything about it.

Dad made her stay with him, after everything he did.

Dad made her *miserable*.

"I love you."

I pulled her back in tighter.

# Creative Nonfiction

## Columbus State University Selections

### Institutionalized

by Sal Woessner

Being a mentally ill thirteen-year-old is difficult for many reasons, but I didn't expect one of them to be my therapist caring more about getting sued than giving me treatment.

I had been seeing her for weeks; our sessions spent with me awkwardly talking around my issues. I finally managed to mumble out those six words: "I've been thinking about killing myself." She looked at me with watery eyes, said she'd hug me if it wasn't against the rules, and immediately sent me to an inpatient treatment facility.

Liability—you know how it goes.

It was a jarring change, going from her cozy office to a sterile white room, being asked probing questions about the thing I didn't want to talk about to anyone. But no, there was an entire procession of professionals I had to describe my suicidal tendencies to. The faces blended together; everyone had the same flat tone and tired eyes. Eventually, I was transported to the actual facility, which didn't look much different from any other medical office—besides the eight-foot-tall fence surrounding it.

My personal belongings were confiscated, along with anything they thought a motivated whacko could make dangerous: shoes, earrings, the drawstring of my pants. Then two nurses escorted me to a private room; they were both middle-aged and adorned in light green scrubs.

One of them had a clipboard, it almost felt like a normal doctor's appointment. Then the one with the clipboard told me to take my clothes off.

The search probably lasted thirty seconds, but it felt unbearably long. The number of people who had seen me naked had doubled in the worst way imaginable. The clipboard nurse stopped me from putting my bra back on—*the only one I owned that fit*—they had to cut the underwire out.

After I was fully dressed (including my massacred bra), the clipboard nurse explained the rules to me. She talked quickly, like she was running behind on something. There was nothing unexpected in her words, though the part about “being restrained if you do not comply” made my stomach churn. She flipped the page over, clicked her pen, and asked, “how are you feeling?”

I must have looked confused because she explained, “It’s for your chart. You have to answer.”

Everything had proceeded so chaotically; this was the first time I had actually considered my feelings. Ironical, considering they were what got me into this trouble. I turned thoughts over in my mind—they came in waves that collided against each other. I had some hope from being where I was; they were supposed to be able to help me, after all. But I couldn't ignore the suffocating embarrassment, nor the sinking fear. I also couldn't think about the things outside of the facility, what had brought me there—that was too much.

The nurse asked me the question again.

I answered as best as I could, “I guess I’m feeling ambivalent?”

She looked annoyed. For a moment, I wondered if she knew the word (but then I felt bad for thinking that.)

“Why do you feel that way?” she asked.

My mind once more went into the whirlpool, and words evaded me. “I don’t know.”

Now she was truly annoyed. “If you can’t explain why you feel that way, you need to pick a different feeling.”

I looked at her in confusion.

“Go to the poster,” she pointed to the back wall, “and pick a feeling that you can explain.”

I followed her instructions. Just as she said, there was a poster lined with bright yellow faces, each showing some exaggerated emotion named in blocky text underneath: “**HAPPY**,” “**SAD**,” “**ANGRY**,” “**SLEEPY**,” and so on. I walked back to the nurse.

She asked me how I felt.

I sucked a breath in and answered, “Frustrated.”

“Why do you feel that way?”

“I’m feeling frustrated because you won’t let me say I’m feeling ambivalent.”

She wasn’t amused, but at least we were able to move on from emotions. Unfortunately, we weren’t done.

“The shirt you’re wearing is not appropriate attire,” she said.

It was summer in the South, so I came in wearing a tank top. They gave me a hospital gown to wear over it, white, but the edges were stained rust-brown. I put it on; the material felt greasy against my skin. Then intake was over.

The nurses took me to the large and well-lit sitting room. The floors were sludge-grey, the walls a color reaching toward blue. The room was split into two sections by a curtain that ran on a metal track. The left side had two black tables nailed to the floor, the seats surrounding them weighed down with sand. The right side had more couches and plush chairs that surrounded a small television mounted at the very top of the wall. The end of the room had the nurses' office, a small alcove made out of glass that let them see both sides of the room. There were no windows or clocks.

I thought about the stories of gambling halls that used similar tactics to get people to stay longer, and I realized I had no idea what time it was. The thought was interrupted by noise from the television; a movie was playing when I walked in, one of those stupid children's films where they put voices over real animals. Every seat was taken, so a male nurse hauled one of the weighted chairs into a corner.

I sat there, scared and guilty. I felt like I had done something wrong, and I wished I'd never told my therapist anything. More than that, though, I was embarrassed. Some of the other patients, all youth around my age, turned around to stare at me. Red shame burned my face. I wanted to cry, but that would have been even more embarrassing, so I forced the tears to stay in.

Then one of the boys made a gun with his fingers. Slowly, he raised his hand and mimed shooting me; he even included the recoil. I looked over at the nurse with the clipboard. I knew she saw it happen, and I knew what he was doing was against the rules. She didn't say anything.

He pretended to shoot me three more times, and some of the other kids around him started to laugh.

I couldn't believe what was happening. There I sat, in the corner of the psych ward, nurse upset with me because I used the wrong emotion-word, dressed in a dirty hospital gown because my shoulders weren't appropriate—but a guy pretending to shoot me in the face was just fine. I felt tears coming for real, but before I totally lost it, I saw a blinking light in the corner. It was a security camera. I imagined being the person watching the feed, an unattached viewer, divorced from any emotion, only witnessing the absurdity of the situation.

*"Oh," I thought, "this is funny."*

END

## Military Wife

by Evie Fletcher

### Military Wife

He was only twenty and I twenty-five when we met. We met online two years ago when Yahoo had chatrooms where people would hang out and talk. He messaged me and told me he was on deployment in Iraq. It was a statement you hear often when in these chatrooms. I was sitting at my desk, a little apprehensive, wondering if he was being truthful. "Can you prove it?" I asked as I chuckled to myself. "Of course, I can prove it; give me a second," he replied. There were a lot of people pretending to be overseas during this time. Stolen Valor wasn't a crime yet; these people just wanted attention. He then sent me a picture, and he was in a grayish camouflage uniform, ACU (Army Combat Uniform) as they call them, which was the uniform style that came out in 2005 and distinguished the branch of the military you are with. He was down on one knee with his right hand on his face, one finger across his lip, and his elbow rested on his upper bent knee. That was also the first time I saw what he looked like. With his clean-shaven face and military crew cut, I remember thinking, "Wow! He's cute!"

Before I knew it, two years had passed, and he had contacted me to meet in person. We had talked on and off for the past two years. When he returned to the States, we made plans to meet, and soon after, we were inseparable. A year later, we were married. His name is Adam. Adam was different from any other guy I had met. He was mature for his age, so I never considered the age difference. I guess we both had life experiences that made us grow up fast. By the time he was twenty-four, he had adopted my three children. He accepted a responsibility that



most men don't consider doing at his age. That was far more admirable than anything I had experienced before him. The love and respect I have for him are immeasurable.

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"Here we go again," I thought to myself. Three days ago, I had just found out that I was pregnant with my fourth child. I'm not ready to say goodbye to him before he loads the bus to the airport. Later, I learned he was traveling to Baghdad, where the *Battle of Basra* had been going since 2006. We were prohibited from knowing their exact destination until he could call us, which happened about a month later. We have been together for a year but were just married in June. It is now October, and it's six o'clock in the morning. This deployment is Adam's second but my first with him. However, I went through these three other times with my first husband. It doesn't get easier saying goodbye. As I embraced him, not wanting to let go, I whispered, "This is going to be rough, but we will make it." Adam whispered back, "We've got this." Tears now filled my eyes as I hugged him so tight. I didn't want to let him go.

As I look around, I see all the soldiers in uniform with their families. We're all here for the same reason. White buses park against the curb, with duffle bags piled beside them. It's a chilly fall morning in Kansas. I'm wearing a hoodie, and the smell of early morning dew fills my senses. The soldiers begin to line up in front of the bags for accountability. Then they turn and start loading the buses. Standing there in the early morning chill with tears streaming down our faces, we watched as they disappeared onto the bus one by one. When everyone was loaded, the buses roared as they ignited, and you could smell the diesel fumes filling the space between you and the bus, along with the sound of the hiss of the breaks and a grind of the gears.

As I drove home, all the dangers he was about to face filled my thoughts. "When will he land? Will he be able to call me soon? Will he be somewhere safe for a bit?" I arrived home where our neighbors had been watching our children. Everything didn't feel real. Of course, they asked the question that everyone asks without thinking, "How are you doing?" I hate that phrase. You answer with, "I'm doing alright," when, in fact, you feel like you're dying inside because a massive part of your existence just left, and you don't know how they will return or even if they will return at all.

That night, I put the children to bed. I went to the living room, dreading going to bed. I was already experiencing loneliness, but going to bed without him, having that feeling of closeness with someone you love making you feel safe, was ripped away from me. Not because he wanted to but because he had to.

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Three months had passed, and it is now January. I received an email from Adam telling me when he wanted to chat online. There was a seven-hour difference, which usually meant one of us would be up late at night or early in the morning. Around six o'clock that morning, I got online. I excitedly greeted him as his somber face came into view of the webcam. "Babe, don't freak out," he proceeded to say. "What do you mean don't freak out? What's going on?" I was starting to worry. "Last night, we were hit with a mortar." My stunned silence was deafening. As I gasped for air, trying to articulate some type of English language, I proceeded to speak, "Are, are... you, okay? Are you hurt? Is anyone else hurt?" He tilted the screen up and down so I could see his standing. A brief sigh escaped my lips. He then turned the camera to the barrier between the road and his building. There was a *T-Wall* (a sturdy concrete wall shaped like an upside-down

T) with a large hole in the center. You could see the rebar between the concrete still holding together.

He proceeded to explain the ordeal in detail. First, he let me know that he was okay. He seemed to have a bit of a slurred speech, but I thought that was probably just the shock of everything that just happened. As I listened intently, I felt a bit of uneasiness. While he was explaining how he felt so ill, I remembered back to when I had worked in an institution where I had some simple nurse training, and they explained what to look for with a concussion. I thought those seemed to be many of the same signs, but I didn't say anything; I just listened.

A few days after I learned that Adam's camp had been bombed, I began to experience complications with my pregnancy. I had gone into labor at twenty-two weeks, which means if we can't get things under control, the baby may not survive. The doctor put me on bed rest. I was ordered to stay in bed and couldn't leave it without using the restroom. Here I am with three rambunctious children; my husband is in another country. How am I going to get help with this? I called my mother-in-law. "Mom, here's the situation ..." I began to explain. I heard my father-in-law mumbling in the background but couldn't make out what was said, and Mom proceeded to say, "Pops says you need to come home." She stated it so matter of fact that I felt like a child who just got told to go sit down in that stern mom voice that you know you don't dare ask questions.

Mom flew in on February 26<sup>th</sup> to help me pack and get the kids ready to go. Let me just say traveling on an airplane with a five-year-old, a two-year-old, and a one-year-old was quite a challenge, even with two adults. We would arrive at the Atlanta airport late at night on March 3<sup>rd</sup>. It had snowed that year, but being in Georgia, it was more like wet dirt with a few specs of white

by this time. Cold and exhausted, Mom and I lugged the children to where Pops had parked the van to continue our trip two more hours south to Columbus.

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May had rolled around quicker than expected. After months of being in and out of the hospital trying to get my labor to stop so that my little guy could grow a bit more, it came time to say enough is enough. The doctor decided it was a safe time for him to come out. I, on the other hand, was not ready. Adam had been deployed for seven months now, and I wanted him to be here at least for part of the pregnancy and birth. The army won the tug-of-war game. His return home was scheduled for mid-May, around the time our child was due to be born, but there were some delays. The military was pushing around his leave dates for R&R (Rest and Relaxation, which is two weeks home to reunite with your family), and this baby wasn't waiting any longer. Because he was born early, we could send out a Red Cross message, but it would take a minimum of 72 hours for his commanding officers to receive it. On May 6<sup>th</sup>, our little guy was born. He came out healthy but tiny. He was going to have to spend a few more days in the hospital. Adam finally got the chance to get to a phone and called to say he was on his way. On Mother's Day, I brought home our baby, and Adam arrived at the Columbus airport a day later.

Mom and I patiently waited in the terminal as the plane unloaded passengers. As I bobbed and weaved my head around people looking for Adam, I spotted a camouflage uniform. I could feel my eyes beginning to well up as he got closer and more into focus. He went straight for Mom, hugged her, and then looked up. With a surprised look on his face, he finally saw me. He let go of his mom and came rushing towards me and grabbed me so tight I couldn't breathe. I wasn't supposed to be there; he thought I was still in the hospital. As we stood there embraced, I felt momentarily like we were the only ones in the airport.

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During his time home, we tried to count every minute. Our oldest was in Cub Scouts, so he attended several meetings and helped him build a CO<sub>2</sub> Rocket Race Car. Then, we took the baby to his first checkup. There was something wrong. He wasn't gaining the required amount of weight, so the doctor gave us some things to do and told us if they didn't work, he would be back in the hospital. Adam called his superiors and let them know what was going on. They allowed him to stay an extra week because of the circumstances. Towards the end of the week the little guy started to get better, and we were in the clear. But it was nearing the time for Adam's return to continue his deployment. The night before he was scheduled to fly out, we watched TV, and I held our one-year-old daughter. She wasn't feeling well, and I was doing the motherly thing and keeping an eye on her. Suddenly, she started seizing. I laid her on the floor, and we called the paramedics. They arrived, looked her over, and gave us the okay. I knew how to handle this situation because my oldest had the same type of seizure when he was ill. However, it was Adam's first one. That night, he laid down in the living room next to her, not wanting to leave her side. I couldn't help but think about how this would affect him returning overseas. I tried to reassure him that she was going to be alright.

The next day, he grabbed his bags and kissed us goodbye. I couldn't see him off at the airport because it was too hard, so we said our goodbyes at the house, and Pops took him. Saying goodbye to him the first time was hard enough, and now we have to do it all over again.

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October has finally come around again. The children and I have been back home since June, and I cleaned the house and prepared for Adam's big homecoming. I couldn't wait; I was so

excited. I received a call the day before that he would come in around two in the morning and where we needed to meet. The families arrived an hour early to sit in the bleachers arranged in an airplane hangar. There was a hold-up with the plane they were flying in on, and we were patiently waiting but getting antsy. Children there started dancing and running around, trying to burn off some excitement as we waited for more news.

Finally, a man in uniform grabbed a microphone and asked us to be seated. He stated that the buses had arrived and they would let the soldiers in soon. A few minutes later, the theme music for the *Star-Spangled Banner* played loudly over some quickly hung speakers. The soldiers started filing in the door on our right. They marched into the hangar, arranging themselves in four lines.

I was getting fidgety as tears streamed down my face. I couldn't wait to touch him and know that this was Adam's last time away from me. After they all filed in, the man spoke again. He started his speech, and I remember thinking, "Hurry up already and release them to their family." With every word he said and every second that ticked by, I became more hyper and thought about how I wanted to jump off the bleachers and tackle this man if it didn't end this soon. Then we heard the words we had been waiting a year to hear, "You are released! Welcome home!" There was chaos everywhere. Soldiers are trying to get to their families, and families are swarming to get to their soldiers. I lost sight of him, but for only a second. I saw him looking for me, and I started reaching through the crowd, pushing people aside like I was swimming in a green sea. I shouted out his name, "ADAM!" That got his attention. He turned, and our eyes met as we rushed to each other. "Welcome back," I told him as I gripped my arms around his neck. "Let's get outta here," he replied as we disappeared into the sunset.

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The days went by and then turned into years. As I stated before, you never know how they will return after the war; I was grateful Adam came home, but some scars are unseen. Things were different after he came home. It began with little things. He would forget where he put his keys or where he left his cell phone. These are simple things that I have done before. After a while, these things seemed to progress. He started to repeat stories, which wouldn't seem like a big deal until you realized he just told the story to you five minutes prior. It progressed into him having these nightmares that would cause him to fight, which meant that he was reacting in the real world, and I was in the way, so to speak. I was once confused as an attacker, and while I was still half asleep, I felt a tightness around my neck and couldn't breathe. His arm was wrapped around me in a headlock, and I was struggling to get free. We sat down for a discussion before he headed to work that morning. It was a hard thing to talk about. How do you bring up that something is wrong to someone who doesn't think anything is wrong? "Adam, I think we need to talk with your doctor." I continued to explain what I was noticing. "It's not that bad," he would reply.

Later that month, we set up an appointment with his doctor to see if the things happening were something to be concerned about. The doctor scheduled some tests, which was a long process. In the meantime, when something comes up, we discuss it together and decide how to handle it from there. We later found out he had a TBI (Traumatic Brain Injury) and PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder). That diagnosis would be part of our new day-to-day, and from that day forward, things were different.

## The Silver Lining

by Gianna Cabrera

I have a silver tongue. It shapes my words and builds my reality with little thought on my part. It constructs walls and takes them down with ease. It whispers the trick of lies in my ears. Lies should never be wholly untrue; mine hold ill-fitted truths meant to hide hideous falsehoods. I will lay with those lies in my grave, along with regret for the lies I could not tell. Very few times has my silver tongue been caught off guard, and even fewer has it betrayed me. In fact, only once was it betrayed by someone I trusted. You will have to forgive my choice to embellish this story; it is the only way I know how to tell it.

My grandparents' house was quiet that day. It always was. That house, my home, was not a lively place, but I think it died that day. She knocked so confidently as if she knew that it was the only hour we were all home. She asked for me by name. I remember the upturn of my lips, a genuine smile before I met my pyre. I knew her. Not directly, but she was someone who I had not even thought of distrusting. A well-played game on her part, but she was not there for me. Not really, at least. She wanted to unravel the silver that laced my life. There is probably some fitting and clever comparison to what happened next in *The Crucible*, but I find myself unclever, so I will be transparent. I am more of an Abigail Williams than a Goody Proctor.

I nearly laughed as she spoke. I felt shocked, almost in awe. If I had not been crying, perhaps I would have applauded. She said a lot in so little time, and in those moments, I was deaf to the world as my deepest secret shattered. So, instead of telling you what she said, I will tell you the truth as I know it. As I said, my house was quiet, and as such, my questions were often hushed, but that never stopped my curious mind. I answered my questions. Let me tell you



another secret. I thought at the time that if you don't tell someone your answers to those big universal questions they could not be upset when theirs are different. I was wrong.

A lot of things are sin to the god-fearing Christian. I do not fear any God. I fear only what people are willing to do in their name. I fear the restraint that comes with the cross and much prefer the freedom I found in secret rituals. I do not mean to scare you. It is not scary. There was beauty and power in sitting under the full moon, in lighting incense before I slept, and in finding a way for all my actions to be purposeful. They did not care for beauty. I knew this, and the evidence was damning. My silver tongue could not save me. I was not burned, nor was I stoned, but it felt as though I had been cut open to be examined. They poked and pried, and I tried my best to keep some of it just for me. I told them the truth in the shape of lies. I cried as they prayed, and I let them believe they freed me as I was locked in my cage again. I stayed in that cage for a long time, but I never forgot that taste of freedom.

## High School Selections

### My Experience with a Flawed Treatment System

by Chloe Bullard

I had always romanticized the idea of being hospitalized for my eating disorder. It would validate my suffering; become proof that I was truly sick. It would mean that I had done everything right, and people could finally tell something was wrong with me. Little did I know, I would be going sooner than I imagined. Last January, when my friend noticed me skipping lunch and told my sister, everything I was hiding had been revealed: I was anorexic.

It explained so much--how I was always cold, always wanted to be alone, always moody, and appeared unhealthy. After a much dreaded doctor visit that led to an emergency room trip for an EKG, my mom knew I needed intensive care.

“I know this is scary but she is so malnourished she meets criteria for inpatient treatment,” my doctor wrote to my mother.

When I read these words, I felt nothing. Of course, all my emotions were muffled by my depression and inability to focus, both of which resulted from malnutrition. But also, I did not really believe it. I was not “so malnourished”. There were many people smaller than me. I was not sick enough, not yet.

But it didn’t matter what I thought. After about a month of strenuously searching for a place that our insurance would accept, we found Veritas Collaborative, an organization based on eating disorder recovery. It sounded perfect to my mom and doctor, with the only catch being its distance from home. Yet there is no specialized treatment here in Columbus, an issue we often wrestled with. After much resistance from my father and I (I did not want to get better, he did not want me to miss school), I was finally scheduled to go on February 22 and receive the most intense level of treatment.

The day arrived. I packed all my belongings according to the list provided on their website, and my mother and I departed early that morning. The ride was long and dark; my mom took the

scenic route. In a strange contrast to my usual numbness, I felt an ounce of anxiety. I did not know what to expect. I had barely been to the doctor before then, let alone an inpatient facility. I also wondered what the people I had to basically live with would think of me. Yet I knew how my mother felt—her sadness intensified as we came closer to our destination. She knew she had to leave her child to be taken care of by complete strangers.

Finally, we pulled into the parking lot. The building was very unassuming, a tall rectangular building surrounded by windows, identical to those surrounding it. We walked in, took the elevator, and entered the doors. We were greeted, and then I had to give them all my belongings—including my phone and wallet. My mom and I had one last talk before she left me.

“Visitations are on Saturday,” she was told. I don’t believe they ever mentioned that these visitations only last 30 minutes.

Then it was just me. A doctor took my weight and vitals. I was sent to my assigned therapist. I walked down the hallway, full of sticky notes with encouraging messages.

“You can do this!”

“You are beautiful!”

“You are more than your weight!”

The entire facility looked like a daycare—a basic building decorated with colorful accents, patients’ drawings, and comfortable furniture.

Then I visited my dietician. Then my psychiatrist. Each visit I was asked the exact same questions.

“Why do you think you are here?”

“Describe your previous eating habits.”

“Describe your exercise habits.”

“In the last 24 hours, what have you eaten?”

I couldn't help but think to myself that these specialists see so many people every day just like me--did I mean anything to them? Or was I just another patient, that may or may not get better?

Finally, I was brought to my unit. Fernbank. Ages 16 and 17. They were in the computer lab when I entered, having school time. The facility's teacher asked me about which classes I am taking. When I listed off seven, four of which being Advanced Placement courses, she made a concerned sound. My heart sank.

"Which classes would you like to keep?" she asked. What did she mean? I have seven classes, just like I said. But I knew her question required a genuine answer.

"Maybe just the AP courses," I responded.

"We can work with that."

Looking back, I do not know why she even asked me that, because I still remained connected with all my classes. Some of my teachers made great efforts to keep me updated, while some did not.

After a few minutes, it was lunchtime. I was not told any rules or expectations, so I simply had to rely on my peers. I saw everyone put their belongings in a locker, so I did too. As we walked to the cafeteria, a girl spoke to me.

"What's your name?"

"Chloe," I responded. She then told me her name, and that she was the newest here before me. She then looked down at me.

"You can't wear that in there." What? I did not see anything wrong with my outfit. Noticing my confusion, she explained, "the pockets."

"Oh," I took my jacket off and put it in the locker. I was embarrassed by my newly revealed outfit; the two shirts I had on under my jacket did not match, they were just for layering in an attempt to ameliorate my perpetual coldness. Finally, we entered the cafeteria, a spacious room full of round tables, surrounded by windows. We were the only ones there.

"You can sit with us," someone else told me.

“Thank you.”

We sat there, music playing quietly in the background. I got to know the people at my table a little better. The boy in front of me was quiet, playing with a fidget toy. Finally, we all received our food. Everyone had the same thing. Then mine came: a sandwich, carrots, and ranch.

“Oh, the new admission meal,” someone said. I looked puzzled. “Yeah, on everyone’s first day they have set meals, since they haven’t made your meal plan yet.”

I had the carrots with a little ranch. The sandwich had mayonnaise on it. I hate mayonnaise. I left it untouched. We were also given water. I drank just a little. As time passed, I was congratulated by my table mates on what I finished. Then they mentioned the water.

“I have to drink the water too?” I asked. I hated drinking water.

“Yeah.”

I drank it quickly. After 30 minutes, our food was taken. That is all the time we were allowed. 4 fl oz of thick, tan liquid was placed in front of me.

“If you don’t finish all your food, you get supplement,” someone explained.

“Great.”

It did not matter if you did not like the food. You either ate it or you drank the supplement. If you did neither, you would not be able to go on trips outside of the facility on Saturdays. It felt like cruel and unusual punishment.

The days went by and I began to understand the routine. Three meals, three snacks, group therapies, sometimes art or “music” (in which we just did two karaoke songs), 30-minute phone time, medication time. There were no clocks so I never knew what time it was. I brought a journal, but it was taken away because the spirals could be used as a weapon, apparently. So I sat in silence during free periods. We moved as a unit, always supervised by at least two “Therapeutic Assistants”, or TAs. Some TAs were great, some were not. Some acted like they hated their job. It didn’t take long for me to miss home.

Almost every moment I was filled with anxiety. Everything was new, I didn’t have my family or my dogs, my friends or school. Every session, every group therapy, was about food and eating

disorders. I was constantly surrounded by the thing that brought me the most suffering and brought me there in the first place.

Every morning I woke up to the beeping of a blood pressure machine. Since my bed was against the wall, I had time to wake up before it was my turn, while my roommate went first. Every other morning, for the first two weeks, I was sent to get my blood taken. Then we were weighed, wearing nothing but a hospital gown.

I began finding secret ways to contact my mom and sister. During “school time”, I messaged them. My messages quickly went from “I miss you,” to “Please come get me. I can't stand it here anymore.”

My one hour of school time five days a week meant I got behind, fast. My grades slipped—two F’s, which did eventually get fixed when I came home, thankfully.

But it was not just my grades that slipped. I also began to pick up on some of the other patient’s disordered habits. I began to eat slowly like one girl. Stop drinking the supplement, they don’t. Don’t eat more than her. Don’t finish your food before anyone else.

I saw people there who were very sick. I wanted to look like them.

“You are doing a lot better than most of us when we first got here.” One girl told me. My heart dropped. With a disease that thrives on competition, and being sick enough, that was the last thing I wanted to hear. It stuck with me.

Thoughts of my weight and calories did not leave. During the 30-minute phone time, I would log everything I ate. My mom told me that my dietician updates her on my weight pretty often. I begged her to tell me what it was, but she would not.

I suffered, but there were good moments. I learned some coping mechanisms. I loved the people in my unit. We almost felt like a family. Even though I was quiet, I listened to the fun conversations they had.

Yet my begging to my mom continued. “Tell your therapist about it,” she recommended. Yes, tell my therapist whom I met with once, or, if I am lucky, twice a week, for 30 minutes each time, in which she would ask the same questions every single time.

“Rate your desire to restrict.”

“Four,” sometimes, “five.”

“Rate your desire to exercise.”

“Nine.”

After two monotonous weeks, disaster struck. I didn’t even know about it until I called my mom that evening.

“I got an email saying you're moving to the Woodruff unit.”

I had only seen the Woodruff unit a few times, when they were lagging behind during meal time, or loudly walking down the hallways, but I had heard much about them. Ages 13-15. The largest unit. The loudest unit. Just when I had gotten used to my small, quiet unit, I was being moved to the biggest unit, without any prior notice. I abandoned the 1,000-piece puzzle I had been working on.

The next morning, the rumor was confirmed. “I’m sure you already know,” my therapist started. I nodded, not hiding my dread. “It will be okay. Woodruff is a lot of fun.” Fun. Just what I wanted. She said they moved me to make more room in Fernbank, even though Fernbank was the smallest unit and still had seven empty beds. She told my mom she thought I might have been being bullied. I was not.

I was led to the unit. Everyone was sitting on the couch. There was no room, so I sat at a table nearby.

Meal time came. I just had a carrot and celery. I stopped finishing the meals. Less people in that unit did. No one motivated me to complete them like they did in Fernbank.

Phone time came. I called my mom right away.

“Either make them move me back or take me home,” I struggled to say, tears falling.

“Okay.” She hung up and called the office. After a few minutes she called back, “They said they’ll try to move you back.”

I felt so relieved, I even laughed a little. I just had to endure a little more time in this unit.

The day moved on, with a boy constantly throwing his shoe at another, and a girl breaking the patient elevator by forcing the doors open.

The next day, my mom informed me that they could not move me back. My therapist coldly told her, “Chloe is here to get better, not to make friends.”

I could not stand it anymore. I contacted my dad. He was opposed to me going there in the first place, so it was no surprise to me that he said I was coming home the next day.

I actually felt a little bad for leaving. It definitely was not time for me to leave yet. But I was so ready to get out.

I do not regret going to Veritas. I learned some new coping mechanisms, made some friends, and experienced inpatient. My health improved, at least somewhat, and I now have made something of an oath to myself to never get that low again, so I never have to return.

Yet it taught me many flaws regarding eating disorder treatment. Firstly the cost, which I am sure prevents many people from receiving help. Even with insurance, it cost \$1,000 a week for me to be there. Also, the way treatment makes us feel so misunderstood. I heard of a girl who asked for seconds at Veritas and was accused of binging, a comment that could severely trigger someone with anorexia. There was a girl in Fernbank who had an allergy to red meat, yet on multiple occasions was given meals with it anyways, as if they did not care.

It often felt like we were not treated as humans. Forced to stay inside a cold, lonely building all day. After a while, you could earn patio access and go outside a few times a week for 30 minutes. If we needed to use the bathroom 30 minutes after mealtime, we were forced to count while we went, to ensure no one was vomiting. You had to earn the ability to choose your own snacks by completing meals. Also, the way sick, vulnerable people were surrounded by other sick people was, in my opinion, a terrible idea. It was easy to pick up others’ disordered habits and compare yourself to others, a major issue I had while I was there.

My story is just one of many that reflects the flawed healthcare system that misunderstands the intricate psychology of eating disorders. A system that treats us like patients, not humans, asking us the same, scripted questions, with little to no individuality. According to a study by [beateatingdisorders.org.uk](http://beateatingdisorders.org.uk) (2021), 69% of patients with eating disorders felt that their general



practitioner did not know how to help them with their eating disorder. Perhaps my story is biased since I did not stay the full length I should have, and while I was there, I spent every moment thinking about going home, but I believe the first couple of weeks should have made me feel like I would benefit from staying. They did not.

Statistic: ([https://beat.contentfiles.net/media/documents/Hit\\_and\\_Miss\\_EDAW\\_Report.pdf](https://beat.contentfiles.net/media/documents/Hit_and_Miss_EDAW_Report.pdf))

## My Grandmother

by Charlsie Evans

I knew it was gonna happen. I don't know why I reacted the way I did. It was prophesied, but it still somehow stung. It stung like I went swimming in the ocean with a bunch of bloody cuts covering my body. But I should've seen it coming, I should've been more mindful of the time I had. The news ringed in my ears. I wanted to sob, to beg my dad that it wasn't true; but instead I just sat there silently as I bawled in the news I knew I should've seen coming, but I still didn't want to face. He tells me to pack a bag, to make sure to bring something nice to wear, and some comforting words that didn't mean anything to me at that moment. The phone call disconnects, then I go to pack a bag.

I arrive at the home that used to be my asylum but now is bare of all its character and charm. I see my grandmother's living room filled with board games by my grandfather's desk no one's dared touched since 1994, a million sets of bed sheets piled in the white chair my stocking would sit in every year, picture frames that had three or four pictures behind the glass by the gun cabinet we had to turn the house upside down to find the key for, and my only safe space destroyed. I see my mom and her sisters already discussing who gets what, my younger cousins looking through the board games, and my older cousins looking at my grandmother's extensive coat and shoe closets. My eyes go to the untouched bookshelf. I look at the book spines that haven't been touched since 2021 that made up my childhood and I notice the amount of history in them. My grandma owned 3 reader's digest from the year she married my grandpa, 2 from the year my dad was born, 4 from the year my mom was born, and her collection abruptly stopped the year my mom started attending high school. I noticed her other books as well. I found a

typewriter manual from the 1860s, a look book of all different kinds of weight loss pills, alcohol, and articles claiming coca cola is good for you from 1906 that was made in Chicago, and even a gay love story that was written in 1971. This made me think differently of my grandma; this made me realize there was more to her than the woman who's only activities were crosswords, crocheting washcloths, and watching wheel of fortune.

The next few days were the hardest but also the easiest. I continued to go through my grandmother's stuff with my cousins, aunts, and my mom but my older cousin brought me and my little cousin to lunch at our grandmother's favorite market. We shared curly fries, green tea, and stories about my grandma every day for 3 days until the day that I didn't want to come the most.

I walked into the long wooden hallway full of pews that smelled of chemicals you'd only smell in a morgue, science lab, or the seventies. I feel the cold air on my shoulders as my mother's warm touch on my hand contradicts my freezing arms. I stand in front of the wooden box as I try not to focus on what's inside it while faces and names I don't recognize hug me, shake my hand, or just pay their respects to what's in the wooden box. More and more people gather in the room, so many people who seem to know everything about me but I know nothing about them gather in the long wooden hallway that's filled with flowers that attempt to override the weird chemical smell; that's clearly not working. Eventually, my grandmother's best friend gets in the long hallway and as I hear her sobs from her reaction to what's in the wooden box, it takes everything in me to contain the tears from falling out of my eyes as my dry throat scratches my teeth.

After a while, two men in their black suits get everyone to sit down and one of them begins to talk about my grandmother and her best friend: how long they've known each other

and how close they were. Then two relatives my mom swears I know sing a song on the piano about loss and then one of the few faces I remember by heart stands up and tells about how strong willed my grandmother was even in her 90s. Another face I could easily pick from the crowd stood up and in between his tears, he talked about how funny my grandmother was and how much she supported him. As more and more people tell stories about her, I feel a dagger in my heart; it kills me to hear so many people have so many stories about a woman I barely knew. I silently cursed myself for not wanting to get to know her better during the long visits I took to see her as we drove from the long hallway to the church. We get to the church and my dad guides my mom and me to a wide dining room filled with tables full of food. I get some food on a plate and sit down at a table with the few faces I recognize. My cousin and I start to talk about food but the topic drives to the woman we're gathered here for. I go quiet at the topic change and as I silently eat, I couldn't help but feel my heart throb while my stomach knotted. As I finish eating, I go outside to the swing set in the large yard in front of the white chapel. I swing silently like I'm a little kid who just got told to go outside and do something productive until my parents finally finish their food and head outside. I go back to the bare house and lay in the one thing that hasn't changed in the house; the beautiful brass bed I've loved since I was a kid.

The next few weeks I go back and forth between my grandma's house and my home. My mom, Aunts, and I packed stuff 'til my arms felt like they were gonna fall off. After two weeks, I had to go to summer camp and it was one of the best weeks of my life, but I couldn't stop worrying - worrying about my mom still packing my grandma's stuff. Worried about what they're planning to do with the house. Worried because out of the few people I didn't consider my friends in my troop, only one of them knew about my situation; I knew I shouldn't worry about that but I was worried people would baby me, try to not bring up the topic of grandparents

or grief *just* because of *me*. After I returned from summer camp my dad, brother, and I joined my mom at my grandma's **and** we helped bring some of the stuff home, like my grandma's books, some of my mom's old stuff that never left my grandma's house, and the gorgeous brass bed. It felt wrong of me to rip the bed out of the green walled room **but** now I go to bed every night remembering who it belonged to.

The few weeks after we stopped helping pack up my grandma's stuff were the strangest. We went back up and got more stuff like both of my grandparents' desks, a couple sewing machines, and cooking ware. One of the strangest things about those weeks was that we all still referred to that small town in the mountains of Virginia as "*Grandma's*" just like we always did, but it was no longer "*Grandma's*,**"** it was just that small town, a small town that my mom grew up in, a small town *I* practically grew up in. But it wasn't the same. "*Grandma's*" didn't exist anymore. "*Grandma's*" was now just a small, 2 story, 3 bedroom, 1 and a half bath house that sat on that hill I remember rolling down as my mom told me not to get my clothes dirty. That house on the hill that I had every **C**hristmas, every **T**hanksgiving in; the place that felt more like home than anywhere else. The small home I dream of owning one day but I know I can never have. The small house nobody in my family could actually legally own in this year that nobody wants. The small house all of those memories hold, the small house that holds my heart. I'm going to miss that little house on its little hill, but the house and its owners will never be small in my memories.

## Rumination of Self

by Rachel Davis

The concept of the self is something that has struggled to be understood throughout history. In *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell talks about how people's circumstances affect their success in life. I am no exception. In my life, I have had ups and downs, but I also have things I was born with that both hinder and help me. Most of these are things that I cannot control.

### Privileges/Advantages

I was born at a time when my parents had just gotten on their feet financially. My father was climbing the ladder of Aflac's hierarchy. As of now, he's been a part of the company for 27 years; he makes a good amount of money. To be precise, he makes over \$200,000 a year. With that being said, I live very comfortably compared to my peers. A prime instance of this was my experience at Springer Theatre Academy.

The Springer Theatre Academy is a day summer camp that is for learning how to be an actor. It has classes like improv, musical theater, vocal techniques, history of theater, and more. I did the two week summer classes, and my last year was in a troupe known as Troupe B, so we called ourselves the "Bees". We choreographed dances together, performed scenes together, and sang musicals together. We even decorated our homeroom together; it was bee themed. It was a wonderful, creative experience that helped me grow as an entertainer but also as a person. The catch is that it is very expensive. The 2-week session I did, 9AM-4PM, Monday-Friday, was \$395. The more time you do (3-week, 4-week sessions) costs even more—up to \$595. This kind of money is just not available to everyone to not spend on groceries, let alone a summer program.

*Outliers* talks about the Matthew Effect, which was a study that concluded that Canadian hockey players were almost all born in the first 3 months of the year because of the ~12 months of physical maturity they have above everyone else. My situation relates to this because I was born in a circumstance that helped me out similar to the Canadian pro hockey players. I was able to live contently throughout my childhood with luxuries many other people, including my own parents when they were growing up, did not have.

Another advantage I had growing up was that my parents were very adamant about giving me opportunities regarding my interests and hobbies. While the Springer Theatre Academy is also an example of this, a greater and more recent example is the fact I go to an art school where I study my major of choice.

In *Outliers* chapter 2, Gladwell interviewed Bill Gates, the founder of Microsoft. He discovered that Gates had started real-time coding when he was in the eighth grade because of a club in his school that he decided to join. He became invested, and as a result, got more hours of practice into coding, giving him an advantage over his peers in terms of experience in his chosen field.

I started attending Rainey-McCullers School of the Arts when I was in the 6th grade. From the very beginning, I was a creative writing major. My portfolio to get in was full of short stories and a couple poems. I was accepted, and I learned a lot in those 3 years of middle school. I learned how to properly format a plot, how to act out characters and scenes that I would be writing, and I practiced the clarinet. I also learned how to interact with the people around me, how to take on responsibility, and how to time-manage myself. I ended up continuing to attend Rainey for my high school career primarily for the environment it holds. I wouldn't change that decision even if I could. I would not want to go to my zone school of Northside, and I definitely would not want to go to Columbus High School even despite its prestige. When signing up for high school and auditioning for magnets, I did not even take the test for Columbus. There are a couple reasons for this, but the big one was because I felt comfortable in Rainey's community and did not see any reason to leave. My advantage is that my parents supported and endorsed this decision.

### Disadvantages/Oppressions

When I was two years old, my parents noticed some problems. I was attached to them like a leech, I refused to eat food I did not trust, and I had visions. Not hallucinations, but vivid ideas and stories that would terrify me to the point I could not sleep. I was scared I would morph and mangle into a beast, that something would come into my room at night and suck my blood out of my veins, that there was someone in the closet waiting for the optimal time to strike. I was diagnosed with General Anxiety Disorder (GAD) that year. They immediately put me into therapy.

Eventually, the anxiety I had transformed. It was no longer monsters lurking in the shadows, but instead the thought of being perfect. It was more than perfectionism: it was a threat. If I did not make a 100, I would die. If anyone ever scolded me, I would cry. If I had any indication of a crack in my path to “success”, I would break down into itty bitty pieces. This success was mainly focused on school and how well I did in it. When I was 10, I was put on anxiety medication. I was still going to therapy biweekly. As I grew older, I slowly started to realize that there was simply more to life. I made closer relationships with friends and started to gain more hobbies. I picked up drawing and focused on my writing more. My anxiety still haunts me to this day, and although more manageable now, it is still something that stalls me. It follows me now and will follow me into the future when I get a job. It is something my employers will eventually have to learn about—whether I want them to or not.

*Outliers* talks about the nature of one’s birth as advantages, but those same situations are disadvantages for other people. In the introduction of *Outliers*, Gladwell talks about the phenomena of the people of Roseto and how they mysteriously, unlike everyone else in America, had a lack of any causes of death other than old age. While my situation was not about physical health but mental health, it hindered me in similar ways to the majority of people in America back then. The people of Roseto were more successful in life compared to the rest because of the simple reason that they had to live longer. Like the average American person back then, I was hindered because of health issues that plagued me for years.

The conditions someone was born into affects them for years to come. This stretches from what culture to how much money to what month someone was born in. I have a disadvantage in this society that was not covered in the parts of *Outliers* we read, but it is a disadvantage of my birth regardless: I am a woman. I always have been, and it is something that I find attached to me at my side when I least expect it. There is no doubt in my mind that I am proud to be a woman and that I am comfortable with my gender identity, but I have also always questioned why being a woman (especially a cisgender one) came with so many strings attached regarding physical image.

Early into puberty, I jumped onto the pipeline of becoming a hormone teenager, starting with being a tween. I was self-conscious about all of my body hair, mainly on my arms and legs. At first, my mother advised against shaving my legs, but when I insisted, she gave in and helped



me. It was nice, and I appreciated being able to feel the fabrics of my covers on my bare legs. I never was able to make shaving my legs a weekly habit. It happened whenever I wanted it to or whenever shaving made me feel comfortable in my skin. However, as I grew, shaving became an expectation from the adults around me. My mother started to poke at me with comments like, “You need to shave your legs”, and “Are you growing socks?”. None of my peers ever cared nearly as much; I’d even go as far as to say they did not notice. This was my introduction to the view of a woman: it’s less about fashion or hygiene compared to men and more about how you present yourself as a feminine figure. When I was 14, I found out that I had PCOS, or Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome. A common side effect of PCOS was excessive hair growth; it made a lot of things in my brain click. Not only is being a woman a disadvantage in itself due to the common idea of male superiority and the requirement of feminine beauty to be acknowledged as a woman by society, but I also had an additional hindrance that only strengthened their prejudice.

### Mindset

Overall, the book *Outliers* has changed the way I see things. It brought up things that I had never thought of, but it also clarified ideas that I had also seen in the past that I did not know how to put into words. The idea that cultures affect speech which affects how different cultures can communicate was something that I wondered about for a long time, but I thought it was taboo. Seeing Gladwell talk about this in a scientific fashion was not only refreshing but also very insightful for me. However, the theory about 10,000 hours was new for me, and it made a lot of sense once I thought about it. *Outliers* gave me insight into things I both knew and things that were new to me

Growing up, I made the observation that one talks in different ways to different people. On a surface level, this makes sense. You do not talk to your parents or your teachers the same way you communicate with your friends. I never felt comfortable talking or asking about it, though, for the foolish reason that I thought I would offend somebody. Obviously, this was ignorance, but it was my reason nonetheless. When Gladwell, in chapter 7 of *Outliers*, spoke about the ethnic theory of plane crashes, it not only confirmed my theory of cultural speech, but it also put it in a perspective that made sense as an example.

When reading Gladwell’s idea that, to be a true expert, 10,000 hours of practice was needed, I was hesitant at first. I thought that, surely, 10,000 was a stretch. However, after

reading, the thought process became much clearer. The story about the Beatles really spoke to me in this section because I had always wondered why they were so popular. As it turned out, they were good artists, but a major piece of the puzzle was that they rose above everybody else due to the conditions they were put through over the course of their 10,000 hours of practice. Obviously, Hamburg was a huge part of their development and journey to fame.

However, there is one criticism I have with the 10,000 hours rule in reference to the road to success. A common theme I saw throughout the examples in this chapter was that there was always a third party helping them; it was not just the 10,000 hours. If anything, it seemed that the 10,000 hours of practice was only an extra bonus compared to the opportunities themselves. For example, for the Beatles, it was the fact that they had just so happened to be heard by a manager who was impressed by them. For Bill Gates, it was the fact that he just so happened to go to the specific school that he did. This makes it seem that the 10,000 hours of work only boosted them instead of being the direct reason they became professionals.

### Concept

The concept that most affects a person's success is their ability to understand people cohesively and tolerably. This is mentioned specifically in chapter 7 with the ethnic theory of plane crashes. In this chapter, Gladwell talks about various plane crashes around the world and how the way people's speech is structured affects how they speak to authoritative figures. He talks about how many cultures, such as Korean or Columbian, use mitigated speech in order to show respect and obedience. This, however, is not what is needed in a situation where a plane is on the verge of being in a crash. Instead, clear communication and thoughts are required to make sure the plane is directed in a way that is safe and secure to land.

This theory does not only apply to airplanes. Success is built upon connections and your ability to make/keep them. If you have a job and your boss favors you, you are more likely to earn a promotion compared to someone who is not acknowledged like you are. This also holds true to peers instead of only authority figures. If you are able to work with your peers in a straight-forward and cooperative manner, you are more likely to get a task done. Arguing or clarification takes valuable time that is not always available. Therefore, your ability to communicate and work with people who may be unlike you is one of the most valuable aspects you can use to earn success.

## Quotable Quotes

At the end of chapter 7 of *Outliers* on page 97<sup>1</sup>, Gladwell says this about what it means to be a good pilot:

*When we understand what it really means to be a good pilot—when we understand how much culture and history and the world outside of the individual matter to professional success—then we don’t have to throw up our hands in despair at an airline where pilots crash into the sides of mountains.*

This quote is valuable because it refers to how we have to understand each other in order to work well together. An intolerable person has no place in a group effort, especially when they are working with people unlike themselves. This quote also realizes that culture and our history, whether of ourselves or the place we came from, affects who we are and how we react. Because of this realization, we can work with those experiences accordingly to create solutions for problems that seem unfixable.

When talking about the culture of honor and why such culture usually is drawn back to mountainous regions, Gladwell ties it back to shepherds of the past, saying, “It’s a world where a man’s reputation is at the center of his livelihood and self-worth” (71). I find this to still be true—at least in the place I live in. The south very much does have a culture of honor; the constant shootings everywhere make that clear. People die over the stupidest disputes. Now, reputation does not protect your sheep from being stolen, but it protects your ego and self-worth from the wrath of your ancestors.

In the introduction, Gladwell spoke about the Roseto Mystery: the people living in the town of Roseto seemed to be an outlier in that they almost never had anyone die of anything else other than old age. Medical experts came to the conclusion that it had something to do with the community of Roseto and how people treated each other. In reference to how the medical experts found out what they did, Gladwell said, “They had to appreciate the idea that the values of the world we inhabit and the people we surround ourselves with have a profound effect on who we are” (5). This quote does not only have relevance in making sense of medical miracles. This is

<sup>1</sup> Of my copy. I have this handy for proof.

general knowledge about how the world works, yet many people have not fully grasped this concept. Where we came from and what we did affects how we see the world now. It affects the body through psychosomatic means. This is exactly what the Roseto Mystery has proven, and it is what should be held true.

### Missed Opportunities

One of the biggest opportunities I have missed would be my seat in St. Elmo. While I can't quite say that I regret the loss, I often wonder where I would be now had I committed. When I was in elementary school, my anxiety disorder was not nearly as reigned in as it is now. Even so, I was considered a "gifted student". Because of this, I was sent to St. Elmo each Wednesday. St. Elmo was meant to be a school for those who were gifted, like me, to help foster minds that would soar among the clouds and move onto greater heights than ever seen before. For me, this did not happen. All of my memories of St. Elmo are covered by tear curtains and the melancholic melody of cries. The principal of my elementary school talked to my mother about it. I ended up dropping out before the year was over. Had I stayed at St. Elmo, it is very possible that it would have opened more doors for me regarding opportunities or privileges. If I could go back, would I stay at St. Elmo? The answer is no. I wasn't ready for it at the time; I simply wish, in hindsight, that I was.

### Work Cited

Gladwell, Malcolm. *Outliers: The Story of Success*. Little, Brown, 2011.

# Expository Essay

## Columbus State University Selections

### To Be Poisoned by A Book: Oscar Wilde and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as a Lens for Censorship

by Ransom May

Late 1889 would see a thirty-five-year-old Oscar Wilde begin his then short story *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, publishing the next year to a mostly middle-class audience in the magazine *Lippincott's* (Wilde 8). This version of the novel would be distinctly shorter with a few hundred words removed or replaced, most due to their sexually explicit nature. Then-recent events had the city of London, Wilde's home at the time, and the wider Western world on edge concerning sexual deviancies. As such, both Oscar Wilde and his publishers would make efforts to obfuscate any damningly overt challenge to societal senses of the day. Even further than the edits for the magazine run of Wilde's story, he would add a substantial amount of commentary on art and alternative character motivations in an attempt to dilute and lighten some of the inflammatory content within the revision. *The Uncensored Picture of Dorian Gray* is the version of the narrative before the edits made for the magazine run, and the version of the story used for this essay.

Haunting similarities to his factual life and fictional novel, and the persecution thereof, can be drawn to the present moment. Unfortunately, in the last couple of years, LGBTQIA+ (in this essay referring to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, indigenous, asexual, and other terms for sexual identity) literature has been seeing its greatest challenges in decades.

Activist groups of both political and religious allegiances (often not mutually exclusive) have pressured legislators and other pertinent government institutions to enact policy and law that outright bans LGBTQIA+ and BIPOC (in this essay referring to black, indigenous, or people of color) in state funded settings such as public schools and libraries. The reception to this has had mixed results, and in the U.S. the efficacy of these movements largely differs at the state level of governance. This vitriol for LGBTQIA+ material echoes much of the Victorian Era reaction to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, but is far from a facsimile, with few of the same motivations behind the censorship and persecution as well as demonstrably different methods of action. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* provides a hauntingly poetic framework to capture the parallels and divergencies of Victorian and current era challenges to LGBTQIA+ literature.

Victorian era readers were not entirely hostile to the story, but the consensus on expected sexual relations was one of privacy at a minimum, and the original typescript for *The Picture of Dorian Gray* seemed to tread the tightrope of this perception. Scrupulous publications had illuminated an extensive sex trafficking scheme occurring in the shadows, and perhaps even more foreboding would have been the Labouchère Amendment, which gave a dangerously broad sword to the courts for prosecuting homosexuality and other nonnormative sexual behaviors under “gross indecency” (Wilde). Discussion of sex, especially alternative sexual behaviors, was newly occurring in public forum due to the outrage enthralled by publication of “The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon,” in which W. T. Stead gives commentary following the uncovering of a human trafficking ring sending young women and girls from Britain to Belgium for illicit sex trade (Wilde 7). These emotions were strong enough to reach political ears and proclivities as well, resulting in the aforementioned legislation providing a legal tool to prosecute sex crimes under loose margins. A further scandal would prove equally as infamous, with the Cleveland

Street Affair happening concurrently with Oscar Wilde's creation of his novel. The Affair was the uncovering of a male prostitution ring involving young men and boys operating under guise as messengers in sunlight and male prostitutes by moonlight, and the crackdown led to several noble men and military officers being implicated and even prosecuted (Wilde 8). Many of the themes of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* were topical and familiar to an average Victorian Londoner, or any urbanite of the age. The middle class – those that would have had best access to *Lippincott's* and later publications – were avid readers, and well-practiced in many of the literary devices in play at the time. Oscar Wilde was a major force in the Aestheticism and Decadence movements, and by definition these movements contributed heavily to perceptions of popular tastes and artistic critique. Readers were engaged enough with the literature they consumed that there was outrage from public and critics alike. An average Victorian reader would have interpreted much of the imagery used in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as it was intended at the time; a coded messaging system built upon Aesthetic ideals, which themselves were understood as homosexual messaging. One reviewer would relate concern for “a gloating study of the mental and physical corruption of a fresh, fair and golden youth, which might be fascinating but for its effeminate frivol- ity,” (Wilde pg. 5). Ultimately, the novel as well as other works of his would be used in court to prosecute Wilde under the new sexual exploitation laws, and *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was removed from many shelves for some time.

*The Picture of Dorian Gray* still sees challenges in the current age, though over the years this has been a case of bycatch in an ever-widening net. Comstockery, a practice in which the mailing of materials decided to be ‘pornographic’ was outlawed, loosely applied the definition, effectively banning all of Oscar Wilde's works as well as many other works such as anatomy textbooks and even long existing classic literature over the years (Brady par. 8). Most loosening

of the net would come slowly and semantically, with a couple of federal court cases doing little more than redefining what was considered inappropriate material to which the laws would apply. Most direct challenges to art through censorship would come with Reagan era politics and in response would see groups such as the American Library Association begin movements and public messaging campaigns to protect banned books, and many of these have persisted to today. As of 2023, the ALA finds 4,240 unique books under threat of censorship from over a thousand demanding parties, an increase of 65% from 2022, a number that was itself up 38% from 2021 (“American Library Association Reports”; “Censorship by the Numbers” par. 2). Of the over four thousand currently debated titles, those “representing the voices and lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ and BIPOC individuals made up 47 percent of those targeted in censorship attempts” (“American Library Association Reports”). While Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* is amongst the works covered in these surveys, it is amongst thousands of other titles that are in jeopardy, not the singularly targeted novel it was in its early years.

Victorian and modern motivations about the censorship of LGBTQIA+ literature both belonged to public perceptions of homosexual and other sensitive sexual content. The Victorians, in London especially, were fearful of sex crimes in particular, with news cycles and public forum dominated with the major scandals. The fears were rooted in secular beliefs, however. Censorship was enacted at a governmental level, and political structures in the age could at times be nominally associated with religious beliefs, but functionally more separate than historical norms preceding the age. Even Oscar Wilde’s first legal foe, the Marquess of Queensberry, was an antagonistic force that was set on disparaging Wilde’s image by claim of the latter’s homosexuality, but Queensberry was a noted agnostic. He forfeited title and government position



by refusing to swear an oath on the bible on grounds of religious rights and was much more likely to have been inspired by his grievances with his own sons' relationships with Wilde.

Modern book banning movements are largely motivated by religions, however this rarely means apolitical. The current divisive political landscape has become schismatic in many respects, with much of the messaging of conservative policy being shaped by believed Christian fundamentals. This year the Georgia state legislature Senate committees passed a package of bills targeting sex education and sexual content in public schools and libraries, as well as encouraging display of the "Protestant King James Ten Commandments" (Amy, Ten Commandments). The Cleveland Street Affair, the "White Slave Trade Affair" and ensuing journalism from W.T. Stead and peers were catalysts for Victorian censorship of homosexual contents, but even as public opinion began to be willing to express displeasure with this, there was little push back. At best, an author may 'escape' to France, particularly Paris, as did Wilde, but this did not necessarily remove his stigma after leaving imprisonment. A vetted user and historian on *AskHistorians* under the username u/gerardmenfin would summarize in a response to a question of Wilde's public perception at the time of his death:

"People in France did not really grieve Oscar Wilde except for a few men who had been faithful to him. Wilde had been celebrated for a few years, and then, in France like in England, "cancelled", to use a modern term, once his "deviance" had been made not only public but officially criminalized." (u/brunettedude sec. "Continued and Sources")

In the novel, Lord Henry even implies this idea of French social differences in speaking about Sybil Vane's suicide, stating that "things like that make a man fashionable in Paris. But in London people are so prejudiced" (Wilde 128) This has parallels with the modern landscape of

American literature persecution, as only some states have been advocating for these changes, and even less have been successful. Some states have taken measures as far as legal protections against literary bans, such as California, where shortly following the passing of such a bill Governor Newsom gave his voice to the issue, stating its “remarkable that we're living in a country right now in this banning binge, this cultural purge that we're experiencing... where we have school districts large and small banning books, banning free speech, criminalizing librarians and teachers” (Franklin par. 5). Geographical, demographical, and socioeconomic factors contribute to where and what is being persecuted in the Victorian and modern eras, and there is some available mobility to those affected, though that is usually limited by those same factors.

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the painter of the eponymous portrait Basil Hallward meets his end due to his work, murdered by its very subject. The irony is not lost on modern literary experts with the gift of hindsight, that Oscar Wilde's own demise would come from his own word. The novel is flooded with self-insertion, but perhaps most interesting given today's arguments are those self-insertions of guilt, as they reflect not only Wilde's views in the age, but the public's as well. There is this same certain satire in attempts at censoring literature, because oftentimes they encourage readers to seek out that which has been prohibited. The ALA and Banned Books Weeks have employed this approach since the latter's inception, with varying methods of using censorship as a guerilla marketing tool in a ‘reverse psychology’ tactic, which the ALA says has been most effective (Brady par. 13). Wilde's inadvertently prophetic metaphor then deepens, as Dorian himself finally succumbs to life's pressures and ultimately loses his life upon his destruction of his image in the art “tainted with the monstrous maladies” (Wilde 174).

By magnifying in on this one novel from a gifted poetic mind of an early martyr as a model, the plight of the today's censored LGBTQIA+ communities as well as the potential value of their works can be better appreciated and understood. Its lessons must not go unlearned, but successfully protecting sensitive creative works against modern challenges is a much larger and more difficult problem than any Victorian analogues. After listing several unique techniques and technologies used in history to poison people, Wilde intimates that "Dorian Gray had been poisoned by a book," and perhaps this is the same toxin being debated to this day.

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## Tell My Story: Defending Ophelia's Suffering in *Hamlet*

by L'Anita Heiss

The disturbing circumstances we encounter at the beginning of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*—the king's unexpected death followed swiftly by Claudius's claim both to his brother's throne and wife—arouse our instant sympathy for Hamlet the son. When we learn the secret of foul play in the king's death and see Hamlet tasked with the burden of exacting revenge, our pity is intensified. While the play spotlights his complicated psychology, Ophelia stands at the sidelines, likewise a victim, but whose trials and emotional turmoil are suffered silently. And while we, as modern readers, find ourselves sympathizing with and admiring the complexity of Hamlet's mind and motives, Ophelia's character can appear weak and simple in comparison. For a play that is so committed to exploring the psyche of one who feels isolated from society, it focuses almost exclusively on Hamlet's voice, although Ophelia is living parallel experiences in her sphere. In the absence of a Horatio to tell her story, I will contend in this paper that Ophelia's suffering from the stifling constraints of her society is as great as and sometimes greater than Hamlet's but not given equal weight in the play.

Before considering the many parallels between Hamlet and Ophelia, I will discuss some important differences in the education and social expectations for men and women at the time. During the Renaissance period, one of the primary aims of a girl's education was to “discipline her character to docility” (Gibson 18). “She would read exhortations to chastity, silence, and obedience from the best and most persuasive authors with the greatest authority...The fruit of her efforts would be an intense awareness of decorum and virtue.” It is hard to imagine a character who could be more docile than Ophelia. We see ample evidence in her language throughout the play that she has successfully imbibed the female virtues of her society. A study of her lines

reveals a hyper-awareness of decorum and automatic compliance with the expectations of those around her. This is evident in her first scene of the play where she submits unquestioningly when her father demands an abrupt end to her relationship with Hamlet. She offers the briefest possible defense of their love—which Polonius instantly brushes aside—before responding “I shall obey, my lord” (1.3). And when, shortly thereafter, Polonius retracts his too-swiftly-given mandate and uses Ophelia as a pawn to spy on Hamlet, she once again complies without argument. Her response to Gertrude in this scene (“Madam, I wish it may”) implies both a desire to satisfy the king and queen’s request as well as a genuine desire to help Hamlet. While she is certainly not the only character in the play to suffer from conflicting loyalties, she is perhaps the only one who acts solely out of loyalty to others and not herself. Such a disposition is noble when it flows from willful self-sacrifice, but in Ophelia’s case, the behavior feels like imposed self-effacement.

During the Renaissance period, the study of rhetoric was also a dividing point for men and women. Education for both over the centuries had been centered on the trivium—the study of grammar, dialectic (or logic), and rhetoric. At different times, one of the three would be emphasized over the others, depending on the particular focus of the educational reform at the time (Gibson 11). For Renaissance humanists, rhetoric was most important. It encompassed two facets: (1) composition and oral expression and (2) the art of persuasion and argumentation (Gibson 11). This was where men and women’s education was different during the Renaissance. While both men and women were exposed to the three branches of the trivium through literature, education for women was more strictly tied to grammar, and only men were trained in the persuasive aspects of logic and rhetoric, “which aimed at discovering broad principles of argumentation...and at guiding clear thinking in ordinary situations” (Gibson 11). Ophelia seems like a classic example of what this kind of education produced: a woman overly concerned with

meeting social and familial expectations and underprepared in the skills needed to engage independently in real-life conflicts and problems.

The reason women were excluded from these studies was that they were not permitted to speak in public forums or serve in occupations where such training would be employed. Thus, it was seen as unnecessary, even dangerous, for them to study those arts. “These matters belong to men,” one leading humanist wrote, “as war, or battles, and also contests and public controversies...A woman will not...devote her attention to dilemmatic questions or to cunning answers” (qtd. in Gibson 12). The king and queen certainly seem to hold such an opinion when it comes to the dilemma on their hands. We could take their commission of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as a demonstration of trust in their powers of persuasion and discernment. They demonstrate trust by confiding their concerns regarding Hamlet and by letting Rosencrantz and Guildenstern go about their business on their own and report back. We don’t see them hiding behind mirrors to eavesdrop on their conversations with Hamlet. They do not take Ophelia into their confidence, however, or consider soliciting her brainpower to help work out the mystery of Hamlet’s behavior; they merely use her as a pawn, putting a book in her hand and strategically placing her where she will attract Hamlet’s attention so they themselves can observe his speech and behavior and assess his motives.

Despite this disparity between their educational backgrounds, Hamlet and Ophelia share many of the same experiences. They are both victims of manipulation by the people in authority over them. In Hamlet’s case, Claudius and Gertrude try to make him feel guilty for continuing to mourn his father’s death after a few months have passed. Claudius accuses him of “impious stubbornness” and “unmanly grief” (1.2). They press him, against his wishes, to stay in Denmark after his father’s funeral so they can keep a close eye on him. Although for the queen’s part this



seems to stem out of motherly love, we know Claudius's claim to "the nobility of [fatherly] love" is far from his real intent (1.2). Although Hamlet is not aware yet of his father's murder, it is obvious to him that his uncle is manipulative and self-serving. This awareness, enhanced after he meets his father's ghost, allows him to be wary of the king's actions and guarded in his speech and interactions. For example, he is immediately suspicious of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's arrival and, thus, prevents himself from ever disclosing his true motives in their presence.

Ophelia, on the other hand, lacks Hamlet's advantage of clearly discerning those who do not have her best interest at heart. While Hamlet knows his uncle to be his enemy, Ophelia, understandably, is not disposed to see her father and brother as controlling or manipulative. When Laertes tells her not to take Hamlet's affection seriously, she receives his counsel "as a watchman to [her] heart" (1.3) and submits easily. Her brother's advice may have been given with good intent, but it is still presumptuous and controlling, "squelching any effort on [Ophelia's] part for mutual perspective and adult interchange" (Fischer 4). Even worse, his parting admonition of "[be] wary, then. Best safety lies in fear" is intended to engender doubt and trepidation (his idea of the protective older brother's role), reinforcing a relationship of dependence. His warning, though premature when he gives it, likely contributes to Ophelia's distress and confusion later in the play when Hamlet's behavior toward her becomes harsh and accusatory. She likewise submits without any apparent suspicion or resentment when Polonius first commands her to stay away from Hamlet and then, later, to attract his attention and engage him in conversation. Her unquestioning obedience to his contradictory instructions leads Hamlet to distrust her motives and consider her yet another manipulator who wears the "painted" face of friend. This is the sense we get from the harsh accusations in his "get thee to a nunnery" tirade.

What is most destructive in Polonius's treatment of Ophelia, however, is not his assertion of control alone but his deliberate effort to retain it by inducing fear of autonomy and sexuality (Smith, B 97). When she speaks of her romance, he mocks her for thinking Hamlet's feelings are genuine and reduces her to an ignorant child: "You speak like a green girl / Unsifted in such perilous circumstance" (1.3). Equating romance with peril sounds like the language of a parent who is focused on the short-term gain of control rather than the long-term benefits of growth and independence for his child. Polonius's belittling and condescending language has a gradual crippling effect on Ophelia. Her next line—"I do not know, my lord, what I should think"—reflects her growing self-doubt, and Polonius's response, "Think yourself a baby," reinforces the unhealthy notion that she is completely dependent on him (1.3). This subtly debilitating exchange with Ophelia comes, ironically, right after Polonius imparts this final empowering counsel to his son: "This above all: to thine own self be true."

Although written more than a century after this play, Immanuel Kant's ideas about enlightenment feel relevant as we consider Polonius and Ophelia's relationship. Kant defines enlightenment as a kind of breakthrough, when we make the decision to rely on our own minds to think and act without the prescriptions of others. It is much easier to be "minors" who depend on others for guidance, and some set themselves up as "guardians" who do the thinking and prescribing. These guardians, Kant explains, want people to think of maturity and independence as difficult and dangerous so they lack the confidence and courage to venture out on their own. This is the kind of stifling relationship that exists between Ophelia and her father. Polonius seems to have "kindly taken supervision upon [himself]" (to use Kant's words), and Ophelia could well be described as one of the "docile creatures" Kant is talking about who is prevented from "taking a single step without the leading-strings" which her father controls. Ophelia's case

is an extreme example of the crippling effects this kind of relationship can have on the “minor.” When her father’s leading strings are suddenly and permanently withdrawn, Ophelia does not have the skills or confidence to navigate her own way, and she starts to fall apart.

Another significant difference in Hamlet and Ophelia’s parallel experience is their opportunity for self-expression in their trials. Hamlet has the blessing of a devoted confidant in Horatio, one person he can trust, confide in, and seek counsel from. Furthermore, he has multiple opportunities throughout the play to engage with other characters in a way that shapes his identity and guides his actions (Fischer 5). For example, his interactions with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern alert him to the king’s suspicion and watchfulness, and his encounter with the Players provides him the chance to “catch the conscience of the King” (2.2). Ophelia, on the other hand, has no one. She has no mother or sister or friend that we know of—only a brother and father who dismiss her feelings and try to control her relationship, and a former lover who treats her with cold indifference or in a harsh, mocking manner or bewilders her with inaccessibly intellectual speeches. This seems especially unfair given how much the play considers the impact of one’s sense of isolation from society. Although the play deals with the weight of this isolation in Hamlet’s case, it does not consider Ophelia’s. Indeed, the extent to which we’re exposed to Hamlet’s thoughts and feelings in the play is almost comical when compared to the paucity of discourse we get from Ophelia. The dramatic apostrophe that concludes Hamlet’s first soliloquy—“But break, my heart, for I must hold my tongue” (1.2)—seems a bit much coming from the most loquacious character in all of Shakespeare. Other writers have commented on this imbalance as well. Sandra Fischer notes that “articulation, communication, and self-presentation are fundamental to the world of Renaissance drama, yet Hamlet’s deafening vocal posturing desensitizes us to quieter and less powerful voices” (2).

It is not the volume of discourse we get from Hamlet alone, however, that creates the gross imbalance but also the quality of speech Ophelia is permitted. Fischer aptly observes Ophelia's "continual psycholinguistic frustration" and "linguistic isolation" (3). While Hamlet bemoans his inability to speak freely, Ophelia is the one whose speech is so often truncated and uncertain or sounds more like an echo of the male voices directed at her (Fischer 3). Fischer goes so far as to argue that Ophelia's character exists merely to "[reinforce] the centrality of Hamlet" (1). Hamlet, as central hero, has the privilege of revealing and explaining his innermost thoughts and motives, but Ophelia "finds *herself* explained, faulted, and struggled over by rival authorities outside herself" (Fischer 4, emphasis added).

Hamlet and Ophelia both suffer the loss of their fathers, and as a result, both go insane. Hamlet's madness, though feigned, is taken much more seriously by the king and queen, who task Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to spy on him and later use Ophelia to attempt to gain insight into his behavior. Ophelia's madness, on the other hand, is merely accepted as a tragic consequence of her father's death and not examined with any scrutiny. This seems to be the case not only within the play but also within the larger community of literary critics. A.C. Bradley, a well-respected Shakespeare scholar of his day, summarized two centuries' worth of views on Ophelia's madness in five words: "beautiful, sweet, lovable, pathetic, and dismissible" (qtd. in Neely 8). Not surprisingly, "Bradley did not give Ophelia's madness scenes the detailed analysis that he [was] elsewhere known for."

Since then, many have offered opposing perspectives, granting greater significance to Ophelia's madness as "liberation from silence, obedience, and constraint" or as evidence of "absolute victimization by patriarchal oppression" (Neely). I see both liberation and victimization reflected in these scenes. Consider the implicit frustration when she refutes

Claudius's assumption that her dead father is the subject and cause of her mad speeches. "Pray you, let's have no words of this," she corrects him, "but when they ask you what it means, say you this" (4.5). She then sings a song about a maiden who is lured to her lover's bedroom on the premise of impending marriage only to discover that the loss of her chastity "preempts and precludes a marriage ritual" (Camden 10). One critic observes that Ophelia's madness "functions...to disenchant domestic values: she 'marks' the falsehood of love, the emptiness of religious formulas, the betrayal of men" (Neely 21). If her audience listened more intently, as she repeatedly implores them to do in this scene, they might detect in her madness the repressed frustration of someone who has consistently had to stifle her own thoughts and desires to please others and who feels ultimately abandoned. Perhaps they would listen better if her speeches carried the "witty, savage" (Neely 11) edge to them that Hamlet's do, but she does not seem to enjoy the comfortable freedom from restraint in her insanity that Hamlet does. Rather, her "liberated" speech must be delivered more subtly, encoded into fragments of poetry and folklore. The result, of course, is that her madness is often dismissed or misunderstood. Consider Laertes' response when he witnesses Ophelia in this scene: "Thought and affliction, passion, hell itself, / She turns to favor and to prettiness." He's focused on the gentleness of the delivery and misses the substance entirely.

Perhaps because Ophelia is not deemed a threat to anyone, she is clearly not guarded as carefully. Claudius commands Horatio to "Follow her close" and "Give her good watch" (4.5), but this responsibility does not seem to be taken very seriously by Horatio or followed up on by Claudius since it is only a short time later that Ophelia drowns. This moment in scene 5 seems strangely forced and anticlimactic. Gertrude relays the news of Ophelia's death in a sing-song iambic pentameter, with excessively flowery language that would sound more fitting in a lullaby

or fairytale than the account of someone drowning. Shakespeare's intentional meter and highly poetic language here are certainly memorable and beautiful, but I think they detract from the poignancy of the event and rather reinforce Bradley's sentiment that Ophelia's character is "beautiful, sweet, lovable, pathetic, and dismissible." Ophelia somehow manages to turn even her own death "to favor and to prettiness." Perhaps we can extend some grace to Laertes, who has now been dealt three significant, consecutive blows and seems incapable of summoning a more passionate response than the embarrassingly obvious "Alas, then she is drowned" (4.7). Claudius, for his part, seems hardly distracted from his urgent two-fold mission to placate Laertes and plot his nephew's homicide. The only lines we get from him in response to Ophelia's death reveal an entirely self-absorbed state of mind, focused on the inconvenient timing of this interruption. "How much I had to do to calm his [Laertes'] rage!" he complains to Gertrude, as though he is the victim here. "Now I fear this will give it start again" (4.7). The king's response to Ophelia's death points to the same sad truth we see illustrated throughout the play: she is a useful but ultimately disposable tool whose emotional needs, even when she is most desperate, are dismissed or unnoticed.

Ophelia's suffering is not only overlooked or dismissed by her brother and Claudius, but by Hamlet himself, perhaps the one character we might expect to empathize with her. Here again, they respond very differently to their circumstances, and I would argue that Ophelia's suffering is greater than Hamlet's. Hamlet understandably feels betrayed during his encounter with Ophelia in Act 3 as she returns his love tokens, but we sense he is more upset by the fact that she has allowed herself to be used by Polonius and Claudius than by her rejection of his love. I would expect the ever-thoughtful Hamlet to be more discerning of Ophelia's innocence, to consider the likelihood that she is being wielded against her will by a contriving court. Even if he

presumes more complicity on her part, it feels harsh that he unloads all his pent-up frustration and bitterness on her. In contrast, Ophelia's responses throughout his get-thee-to-a-nunnery tirade feel compassionate and concerned: "O, help him, sweet heavens" and "Heavenly powers restore him!" (3.1). Even her final lines in that scene after Hamlet is gone (the closest thing we get to a soliloquy for Ophelia) convey more a tone of pity for what Hamlet has lost than of self-pity for his ill treatment of her. Some might point to Hamlet's reaction during Ophelia's burial scene in Act 5 as evidence of Hamlet's true feelings, but I find them hard to believe after the disdainful accusations of the nunnery scene and his crude, distracted attention at the play. He touts a greater love than "forty thousand brothers" and insists he would do anything—weep, fight, fast, tear himself, eat a crocodile—to prove his love (5.1). Although I do not doubt Hamlet loves Ophelia, that love feels like a distant thing from the beginning of the play, overshadowed by more pressing matters like his father's revenge and his own existential crisis (we never hear about Ophelia in any of his musings), and his avowals here feel not quite insincere but definitely melodramatic (Wagner 96). What adds to this is Hamlet's attempt to make his grief a matter of competition with Laertes. Thus, even at her graveside service, spartan as it is, Ophelia is not quite the focal point.

The chaos of the final act culminates in a dying Hamlet pleading with Horatio to "tell my story" (5.2). The play certainly does that, and Hamlet's "soul-wrenching soliloquys" (Fischer 3) have reverberated through the centuries. Fischer observes that "The world of Hamlet is to a great extent the self of Hamlet, and the self of Hamlet is to a great extent the language of Hamlet" (1). I think her observation touches on the essence of the play. Hamlet is overwhelmingly central, and we are meant to appreciate the wondrous complexity of his reasoning and sympathize with his frustration, misery, and self-loathing as reflections of his brilliant mind and keen self-awareness.

But when we tell Hamlet's story as the single story, we miss valuable insights we can only perceive through other perspectives. Although it requires greater effort to hear them, the quiet and repressed voices can help us see, with greater clarity, the fuller picture. We need to tell Ophelia's story too.



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## You're Going in the Camps Too: Blaire White and The Futility of Being "One of the Good Ones"

by Zagreus Rivers

When I realized that I was not a girl, I did what any young trans person with internet access did: I googled it. What came up were various videos about being transgender, YouTubers documenting their transition, and throwing their hats in the proverbial ring of fledgling gender discourse. Much of that discourse was on the topic of transmedicalism, the idea that being transgender is a medical diagnosis and those who do not have that diagnosis, typically called gender dysphoria, are not "valid" trans people. These "non-valid" trans people, called "trans-trenders" were accused of making a mockery of and undermining the movement for "real trans people". As a young queer transman growing up in the South, I was subject to many insecurities about my gender identity. I did not pass or have accepting parents who would let me start hormones. I was subject to ridicule for the way I looked and acted and dressed, and told "That's not real" when I tried to explain myself. My own grandmother even asked if I "wanted" to be trans because being a fat boy was easier than being a fat girl. I felt I needed to prove that I was trans because no one believed me when I said as much and unfortunately, I fell victim to these transmedicalist ideologies. I experienced gender dysphoria, therefore I was valid, a good transgender, not like those trenders, those *degenerates* who were spoiling it for the rest of us. It was not until I saw a video by a YouTuber named Calvin Garrah in which he mocked and misgendered another community member, nonbinary Brennan Beckwith, for "attention seeking" and accusing them of "playing dress-up" that I realized my mistake. The bullying of someone simply trying to live a happy life did not sit right with me, and I was able to reevaluate my opinions on the othering of members of my own community. Was it really worth touting for a

group that would chew me up and spit me out the moment I stepped out of line, the moment I wasn't "trans enough" for them? There are others like me, in the trans community and in others, with their own insecurities who faced the same question and came to very different conclusions. Blaire White, a popular self-described "transsexual", is one of those people. Popular for her cringe compilations of people she deems "not trans enough" and debates with members of the far right, she relies heavily on respectability politics, "the process by which privileged members of marginalized groups comply with dominant social norms to advance their group's condition" (Dazey 4). She differentiates herself from "degenerate" trans people by conforming to conservative ideas of "transgenderism" being a mental illness and thus confirming the Right's negative bias against the broader trans community. Blaire White is playing the "model minority". In an attempt to save herself from the inherent othering and condemnation from the Right, she spends her days trying to prove she is "one of the good ones". Through this, she becomes a tool for conservatives, "proof" that the far-right is not transphobic because a member of that group "agrees" with them. The weaponizing of her minority status does nothing but harm the community of which she is a member, making her a gullible puppet or greedy grifter of the far Right and a "pick me" traitor to the Left.

As previously mentioned, Blaire White is a semi-famous YouTuber whose content mainly focuses on reaction videos from a Right-wing perspective and political debates hosted on her channel (Charvát, Fikejzová 10). It is in these videos that she paints herself as the "token Republican transsexual" and is, for all intents and purposes, a feather in the cap of the Republican party. In one debate with Ben Shapiro, another grifter in the Right-wing political space, the topic of pronouns comes up. Shapiro makes the argument that sex and gender are "objective truths", thus the correct way to refer to someone, regardless of their gender identity, is

by the pronouns associated with their biological sex, even going as far as claiming that because White does not fill “the role of a biological woman” she is not one (Blaire White, 2018). White agrees and nods politely at being blatantly disrespected, though she tries in vain to offer sound arguments at the expediency and social reasons to refer to one as the gender they present themselves as through the lens of adoptive parents. White then claims she is always “damage controlling for the trans community”, taking up the mantle as the republican mouthpiece for transgender people (Blaire White, 2018). In essence, she is the ideal, she is what we should strive to be, she, the good and proper transsexual, the *right* kind of trans person, fixes the messes we make as only she can. Through this interview, White gets to be the “reasonable” transsexual, lauding herself for her correctness and “acceptance” in conservative spaces. Shapiro, on the other hand, now has ammunition against the trans community for future debates: a transwoman who agrees with his position on misgendering. Not only is White not truly accepted in the spaces she associates herself with (nor will she ever be) by incorrectly assuming that assimilation will afford her respect among those who consider her subhuman, but she willingly harms her community by reinforcing the idea that some trans people are more valid than others.

In addition to the overt disregard from Shapiro, in another debate on ConservaTMZ White meekly stutters through her claims of being “the most vocal anti-children transitioning person on the internet”, and is promptly shut down by Republican Senate candidate, Lauren Witzken, who tells her “the best you can do for us is grow out your mustache and tell people not to live like you” (New World News Network, 2021). Nowhere is it clearer the right’s disdain for all trans people than in debates like these. White’s reward for conforming to the Republican agenda is being told to detransition and having it insinuated that she is propping up a community of pedophiles. It is a claim that she herself had a hand in perpetuating by exclusively drawing

attention to non-passing, predatory transwoman, the conservative Boogey(wo)man in girls' restrooms while refusing to offer the same treatment to passing trans women, transmen, and nonbinary individuals (McNamarah, 849). Almost as if to imply a correlation between non-passing trans women and predatory behavior while making a distinction that passing trans women, such as herself, do not share the same proclivities, i.e. she is valid, they are not. This is shown clearly in one of her more recent videos about another trans female internet persona, Ava Tyson who has garnered backlash for allegations of inappropriately messaging a minor (Asarch, 2024). White repeatedly refers to Tyson as a man and even uses her deadname in the title of the video which seems to be a clear attempt to distance the stereotype of passing trans women as sexual predators (The Blaire White Project, 2024). Furthermore, it has been heavily speculated that despite her seeming dedication to towing the conservative line (often to her own detriment), she is not as Right-wing as she claims. In a now-deleted video titled “Blaire White Takes the Political Compass Quiz”, she does just that.

Problems arose when viewers noticed that while the image of the political compass she showed placed her in the right-libertarian square, the identifying values of her results, found near the end of the website's URL, placed her in the libertarian-left quadrant. Additionally, when she shares the images of her results, eagle-eyed viewers noticed she had a tab opened where she had googled center-right political compass results. In short, she googled an image of the results she wanted to claim were her own and presented them instead. This is further evidenced by videos of people recreating her results and being placed center of the left libertarian quadrant. Not only is she a liar, she is also a grifter.

Blaire White is a conservative political grifter, building her platform on excluding community members and making disparaging remarks about those who do not fit her vision of

what a trans person should be. In addition to doing her community a great disservice by being a pawn for the conservative media, she also harms herself by associating with a party that believes she should not exist and that her personal happiness is unimportant. She perpetuates harmful stereotypes about non-passing trans women being predators so she can claim she “is not like them” because she passes which also reinforces the notion that one must pass to be respected. Even when a member of her own party says she should detransition, that even in her “perfect”, “model minority” state she is not good enough, she still espouses their talking points and upholds views that are actively damaging to her. She weaponizes her identity as a trans woman to assuage her own insecurities by seeking validation from those who will never respect her due to the nature of their own beliefs or personal grifting efforts. Because she was subject to extreme scrutiny when she did not pass as a woman, she projects those feelings of self-doubt onto others to distance herself from a painful past (ContraPoints, 2020). By going down this path she not only excludes herself from her own community, she also ensures she will never be allowed back into the fold as some wounds can never be healed. In addition, she has lied about her beliefs to disingenuously entrench herself in a culture that demonizes minorities and uses her as a source of entertainment to reaffirm their opinions of the trans community. Conservatives want trans people dead and there is no way around that. Her insistence on associating with the party gives it undue credibility as she is now and for the foreseeable future a point of reference that there are trans people who agree with Right-wing ideology. Despite her best efforts, she will never reach the innermost circle of the Republican party, nor will she ever truly earn their respect. She can claim all she wants that “non-valid” trans people are masquerading as something they are not, but the real pretender is her. Being a “model minority” won’t spare you from the slaughter. You are a

tool in the conservative toolbelt for the further subjugation and discrimination of your community. Throwing us under the bus won't stop the driver from hitting you too.

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# High School Selections

## Why You Should Boycott Shein: An Essay

by Lily Choy

### I. Introduction

The target demographic for Shein is people who cannot afford more expensive clothing, so they turn to the cheapest and most convenient option in order to save money. The most common people that fall under the umbrella with low disposable income are: college students, high school students, people who cannot find good options locally, and people in their 20s. This is a rough estimation, and it's not to shame those without the means to shop anywhere better. Shein is a popular fashion brand known for its low prices, which attract those on a budget, such as students and people in their 20s. However, despite its affordability, Shein should be boycotted due to its unethical labor practices, environmental harm, and unsustainable business model.

### II. Shein's Audience

While I mentioned this earlier, it's worth diving into. Shein's ads target their main demographic, primarily women, and their site shows this as well. Over half of their shoppers are female (roughly 62.71%), with almost 30% between 25 to 34 years of age (Similarweb). Their low prices draw in the working class who don't have the luxury to spend more on sustainable clothing. While they can be a good option for those who buy and rewear the clothes, giving them a long life, Shein's influencers market the products as if they're to be worn a few times and thrown away. BBC identifies the source of their company's website design, Inditex, who also owns H&M and Zara; both companies which used to top Shein on the charts, but during the pandemic it saw an exponential increase in business. Their demographic connects to both the

well-known working conditions that allow Shein to produce and sell their items at such low prices, as well as promote unsustainable levels of consumerism. In the very same BBC article, they quote a shopper, Heather McCurry, stating “While she admits she has seen comments online questioning the environmental impact of ultra-fast fashion and how much Shein's workers are paid, she would buy from the company again in future.”

Shein’s reliance on influencers and social media marketing plays a significant role in promoting its unsustainable fashion model. Influencers often glamorize the low prices and constant new arrivals, which leads to consumers perceiving Shein as a convenient, disposable option rather than a harmful contributor to the global waste crisis. Shein’s demographic means that their sales won’t ever decrease.

It takes more than one person, more than a class, more than a college of shoppers to boycott. But it always starts with one individual who cares enough to make a difference.

### III. The Numbers

While Shien’s catalog is expansive, their product turnover rate is unlike any other. Not only that, but they have an estimated “88.8 million active shoppers, 17.3 million are based in the US” with revenue that, by app, is double Nike’s \$13.4 billion (Curry). The more people that download Shein, the more popular they become. As of 2023 Shein was the second most-downloaded shopping app, totaling around 261.94 million new users and this is part of the reason it has so many sales. Year-to-date, their downloads are a staggering 217 million! Their focus on influencers and using social media as a form of advertisement isn’t new, but for clothing companies it’s a different way to make the products appealing. Brands like American Eagle and Gap use the typical forms of advertisement, adapting their old print ads to a more modern form of online marketing. The main difference between older brands that people are more likely to

recognize, such as ones that would be featured in a shopping mall, Shein remains online— with a few odd pop-up stores, there’s nothing permanent that they’ve opened. This is a negative for a multitude of reasons, but largely because it means people become lazier when they shop. The more convenience they have, the less they’ll go to in-person stores to browse unless it’s to try things on.

#### IV. Black Friday

With the Black Friday sales I noticed that while prices were much higher than before, the sales differed greatly from my childhood. Despite that, I went shopping anyway with my aunt and uncle. I noticed a lack of the usual foot traffic, even at Bath and Body Works; I recall the year before there was a line out the door! With the rise in technology and lack of stock in-person, people are much more likely to shop online where they’ll be able to get their desired items for lower prices. As well as that, it’s easier to track your spending online.

I agree that the stock of items in Columbus isn’t the best, especially around the holiday season or for shopping in general. Your options are either “expensive and new” or “slightly-less-expensive and secondhand”, and it’s something that’s damaging shopping as a whole. I urge you to look at all of your options before Shein, because, for example, Walmart is a good source for clothing on the cheaper side that lasts! Target has sales for their clothing every so often, and I’d definitely check those out as well! The economy as a whole is at a very discouraging level— it seems like living only becomes more and more costly over time.

I mention this because it reflects the broader trends for consumption in America, and spending in general. If me, the average consumer in the target age demographic, feel this way— how do the rest of American spenders feel? How many people are shopping in-person but not

finding any satisfaction in the deals, not finding anything they're willing to purchase and fight for?

## V. The Working Conditions

Part of the brutal realities of shopping is facing the fact that almost every company uses the same form of labor to manufacture their products, and I agree. It's an unfortunate truth. However Shein just so happens to be the worst offender, and a Public Eye interview shows the most thorough investigation anyone's done thus far. It describes a "Shein Village", a place where Shein's parent company Zoetop owns several smaller-scale production buildings where a total of "1.2 million articles" are produced each day (Kollbrunner). Imagine the harsh reality faced by workers who are forced to work excessive hours in conditions that violate both company and legal standards.

Shein employees work around 75 hours a week, which is both above Shein's Supplier Code of Conduct but also Chinese Labor Law; 'a working week can compromise a maximum of 40 hours, overtime cannot exceed 36 hours per month, and workers must have at least one day off per week' (Kollbrunner). The blatant ignorance of these regulations and continuous money paid to deal with lobbying in the US (a little over \$2 in just three quarters) shows their refusal to ever truly change (Deppen). I have several problems with Shein, but their refusal to: pay their workers more, better working conditions, or hire more employees. Despite having amassed a workforce of about 16,000 people, Shein still pays employees cents per garment made (Statista Research Department). Unsurprisingly, they've skirted expectations for a typical retail store by becoming one of the most profitable and well-known places to shop for clothes. With daily updates to the store and constant promotional messages, it's no wonder they've seen such a rise in business.

But it comes at the cost of so much more that matters. The environment, the health of the employees, even at the behest of legal obligation as a corporation Shein refuses to change. It's heartbreaking.

## VI. Environmental Effects

I don't blame anyone who shops at Shein because they lack the means to shop at in-person stores, or because the options online are better. I'd just like to remind you of the environmental devastation Shein and other companies like it have caused. The most common thought when people discuss sustainability in fashion is the shipping process, the factory production, or otherwise. But one of the main offenders when it comes to Shein is a mix of their textile waste, exploitative labor, microplastic pollution, and business model. It's defensible by Shein, because the usage of AI to instantly analyze the shoppers viewed items and purchases is normal, but the stock of new items and rapid rinse-and-repeat cycle is extremely energy inefficient. Microplastics from Shein's fast-fashion garments contribute to ocean pollution. As consumers purchase and discard these cheaply made clothes, the environmental impact accumulates through the continuous production of synthetic fibers like polyester. It was reported by Yale Climate Connections that Shein's carbon emissions had risen to almost double their revenue in 2023 than the year previous, "more than what four coal power plants spew out in a year" (Mulkey). If you ever wonder why the seasons have more extreme temperatures, or why the sea level is rising, you can thank corporate giants like Shein, Amazon, and any American billionaire. It's not that these wealthy companies (backed by equally wealthy people) don't have the means to make things better or improve their conditions, it's merely that they refuse to! In order to make a stand, the only real solution is boycotting and getting people to stop shopping on Shein when they could feasibly go to any other store with slightly-less-cheap clothing.

The average amount of clothing styles in fast fashion that are put out, each year, is 25,000; Shein has achieved the unthinkable by actively producing over a million (Willows). The staggering difference is enough to prove how much more effective Shein's business model, labor choices, and focus is. Their social media popularity grants them countless more sales than they would normally have—relying on influencer marketing and branded hashtags online only spreading their influence further. It won't stop, and it seems inevitable that Shein will only keep rising as the economy worsens.

## VII. Conclusion

Columbus has always been a great center for art, design, and all things creative. Downtown (Uptown?) Columbus is full of art pieces from Columbus State, murals, and various graffiti that make this town home. It's not difficult to learn how to sew, or to save up money and get a cheap sewing machine for upcycling clothing. I strongly encourage you to not only get a few new skills, but to find a new passion for recycling! It doesn't just have to be cans, glass bottles, paper, and the like. Rather than supporting unethical brands like Shein, consider alternatives such as supporting local artisans or learning to upcycle clothing. Small, mindful actions can make a significant difference in reducing our reliance on fast fashion and its damaging consequences. Use your voice and your time for a better cause!

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## Banned

by Trinity Williams

### Does Banning Happen?

When I was in a Chicago elementary school, I was allowed to read “*The Giver*” by Lois Lowry as an alternate assignment. I sat in my rainbowed, highly lit, lively 4th-grade classroom horrified at the idea of a world where children didn’t have bright blocks or a Barbie that looked like them. It wasn’t the takeaway Mr. Muller expected but it did start a discussion about foster children and their lack of toys. He watched with his round-framed glasses as his students did what we did best; show off.

The boys went back and forth about whose hot wheel’s truck was the fastest, and we girls one-upped each other with how many floors our dollhouses had. (My Barbie Double Decker Glamper was second to my best friend who had the dollhouse model with an elevator. I still don’t understand why even 6 years later.) Then he laughed, (probably because our biggest care in the world was toy politics) and offered an idea:

“Seems like you have a lot of extra. Why don’t you give some away?”

That sparked our impromptu toy drive to our local foster care branch. In hindsight, it wasn’t much, we only donated about 100 toys. But god did we feel satisfied. I was thrilled to be rid of some Christmas presents I didn’t particularly care for and my mom could say

nothing. Later, we decided to teach the sequel “*Giving Blue*” in our class next year since Mr.Muller taught 5th grade as well then decide what we would do next. Unfortunately, I moved to Georgia the following year so I never got to be a part of the next service project.

But the project never happened in the first place. That year, the book series was finally banned in my district and Mr.Muller got in a bit of trouble for teaching it to us. To the district, it didn’t matter what good came about from reading the book, the book itself was morally condemnable. So the lesson that we took away from the book is now forever lost to the 3rd graders that would’ve come after us.

## **What is Banning?**

### The Mission

Book banning is used to filter material that’s shown to children in their curriculums based on the content within them. This is how highly inappropriate books like “*50 Shades of Grey*” by E.L. James and “*Mein Kampf*” by Adolf Hitler are kept off library shelves. According to the Office of Intellectual Freedom (OIF), a book can be banned based on any of these three criteria:

- The material is considered to be "sexually explicit"
- The material contains "offensive language"
- The material is "unsuited to any age group"

This sounds great in theory. Children are protected from certain material and what is placed in front of them is rich in lessons and morals. But an issue arises when books that could potentially have these lessons are shot down when these criteria become muddy, specifically the last one. Which has some ground, children don't need to be exposed to certain themes.

But who determines what children should be exposed to? The children or the adults?

And how do we make sure it's an unbiased view? In theory, banning books can keep children from developing diverse points of view by limiting what they know. Think of it this way, if you're only fed apples and apple variants, would you know that oranges exist? And more importantly, would you want to try them?

## **Why to Ban?**

### **Keeping the Kiddos Kool**

The main argument for book banning is keeping minors safe from damaging media. It's been scientifically proven that exposure to graphic violence, language, and imagery at an early age can halt development. "Children are particularly fragile and vulnerable to the impact of traumatic events ...because they lack the skills and experience in the management of difficult information," (European Paediatric Association Pages 2023, 285). This is why schools are very selective about what media they allow on their shelves and school-issued computers. This keeps children focused on their education and prevents teachers from having difficult conversations

with their students. By keeping classrooms (for lack of a better word) clean, keeps schools from getting sued and parents happy.

However, at a certain age, children develop the mental maturity to protect themselves from trauma. At what age and how much protection they've developed has largely been up for debate. Many believe that children above the age of 15 are largely able to vet what they do and do not consume. Their brains are starting to transition to full development and are able to handle stressors that would've otherwise traumatized them. As teens begin to drive a

### **Parenting for Parents**

Parents can decide what their children are exposed to and when for the above reasons. That is an inalienable right. Children are supposed to look for their caregivers when they are faced with stressful situations or are unsure on how to handle new experiences. This is especially true regarding exposure to graphic or inappropriate media. Quote again from the European Paediatric Association Pages: "Children usually count on caregivers to deal with stressors... Thus, it is important for caregivers to be trained in anticipating the proper response," (Pg 285). But as children venture out into the world via their classrooms, a parent's reach is only so far. PTO, newsletters, and volunteering only show what their children are being exposed to. And with the world constantly changing its standards for the newer generation, it's understandable that parents want more guarantee on what their kids are seeing.

Banning was created as a concrete plan to assure parents of what their kids weren't being shown. It was the education system's alibi if a child learned something they weren't supposed to. "If they learned it, it wasn't at school" basically. It also served as another way to encourage parents to...parent. If they wanted their children to understand the themes in "*The Communist Manifesto*" and why they were bad, they'd have to sit down and show it themselves. And for the most part, banning has worked. It's kept young minds from being exposed to erotica, hate speech, and triggering themes found in many adult/young adult books. But now parents can directly dictate what the entire class can and cannot learn. Suddenly the issue is now when a certain type of people can push their agenda or shove another agenda to the side, and the children are none the wiser.

## **How to Ban?**

### **The process**

As with most things, there's a process for book banning. School district members every year come together to review the next year's material. Occasionally, a book will meet the banning criteria, and it is put to a vote after a thorough analysis and evaluation of the material. These books can be flagged for any OIF guidelines, or they simply fall irrelevant to the English teachers. Of course, every situation is different but the process is typically the same. Until it isn't. One book ban that warranted the most resistance wasn't necessarily the content itself but the actions taken to ban it.

## A Guide to Banning: “*Dear Martin*” by Nic Stone

Nic Stone’s “*Dear Martin*” is a teen epistolary novel that outlines the struggles of black male teen Justyce as he attempts to graduate after his life is turned upside down by police brutality and racial profiling. I’ve personally read the book and one thing I love about the novel is how realistic it is. It doesn’t sugarcoat the reality of big-city police and black teenagers. It’s honest and straight to the point. It was originally part of Haywood County School District’s Black History unit in 2022. But after a phone call from 10th-grade parent; Tim Reeves to Superintendent Bill Nolte, the book was pulled from the 10th-grade reading list within 24 hours. But there’s one giant difference between Reeves and Nolte:

“Nolte said he did not read the book — or even obtain a copy — before making the decision.” (Legum)

On the other hand, Reeves did. Nor did Nolte consult with the English teacher herself like Reeves had. The decision to remove the book was completely and utterly Nolte’s alone. Yes, Reeves was offered an alternative assignment for his student before the banning yet insisted the banning take place. But again, this is the actions of one individual. It doesn’t make sense that they can decide for the whole. Reeves and Nolte say that their issue with the book was its graphic language and how it took away from the “meaning” of the book. And put into context with Nolte’s iffy opinions on race, one can guess how the banning was taken by the black community. However, this isn’t the only reason the banning was controversial. That wasn’t even the first banning with a similar context.

“ The information that was provided was just unacceptable,” - Sandra Carraway (2019).

“...the content was extreme” - Sandra Carraway (2019).

The first banning was by Colombia County’s Superintendent Sandra Carraway on October 8, 2019’s board of directors meeting. When asked what part of the county’s book-banning criteria “*Dear Martin*” flagged, the following quotes above were all that she offered. However, Colombia County did release later that the official reason was the explicit language. Ms. Carraway did state that the language took away from the lesson the book was trying to teach, but Colombia County also teaches Shakespeare which many argue is just as bad. Many of Shakespeare’s texts are required books with assignments and book reports. Hell, I’ve read *Romeo and Juliet* twice in high school and had mandatory assignments attached to them each time. In fact, I sat down with my English teacher and consulted her about her opinion.

Something many book banners don’t do.

## **How to Talk to Teachers**

### **Asking Hill Nicely**

As a returning student of Rainey McCullers, I’ve had the privilege of keeping the same rotation of teachers throughout my school years. Many of my English teachers currently have taught me throughout my middle school years as well. And each time, they’ve introduced me to a new world of books and taught me to love literature as much as they do. Needless to say, I consider them to be well-read (pun intended) when it comes to books in general.



I met with my current English teacher; Tonya Hill during one of her classes. And if you've ever met her, her love for books radiates off of her in waves. In her 24 years of teaching, she's managed to infect most of her students with this endearment as well. I'm one of those lucky students. So once you get through with all eighty thousand of her assignments and odd love for Halloween, you'll find a sweet southern lady who just wants to talk about her books. And don't get her started on Shakespeare. When I asked her about her favorite of his works, she offered this:

"Romeo and Juliet was the first Shakespeare play I read. And so it opened my eyes and opened me to a whole wonderful world" (Hill).

The woman can quote that play backward, forwards, standing on her head, you name it. It's no surprise that we're doing that blasted play again thanks to her. I find it overrated, however, Hill has always believed that every book has some sort of value.

"You can travel everywhere in the world...You can experience things that you are not capable of experiencing in today's world or in your own lives. [Maybe] You don't have money to travel to Greece [this] weekend..."(Hill).

"But you can with books" (Hill).

This is a sentiment I agree with wholeheartedly. No matter what we were reading, Hill always made sure that we took something away from it or related to it in our everyday lives as teenagers. That's *why* we're doing "*Romeo and Juliet*". Quote again:

"It really opens their eyes they're [9th graders] like 'she's our age. She's 13.' You know you are 14 and 15 and he's 16 or 17, so that's why I like that play for 9th graders" (Hill)

She's teaching it because even though we may laugh at the over-dramatic Juliet and her lover, there might be a time when we might feel like her. Like our world is ending because we don't have that person. And there, at the end of the play, we learn where that rabbit hole may lead us if we dive in heart first. "Every moment is the most important moment of their[9th graders] entire lives. And so it helps them to see the big picture" (Hill). When it comes to the banning of said text, she's conflicted.

According to the New York Post's Jack Hobbs, "*Romeo and Juliet*" by William Shakespeare is banned in Hillsborough County, Florida alongside "*Macbeth*" and "*Hamlet*" due to their sexual content and swearing. Specifically in the case of "*Romeo and Juliet*", it was also challenged for "romanticizing" teen suicide and disobeying one's parents. And while Hill agrees with the concerns, especially after being a teacher for 20-something years, she believes that banning isn't the way to go about it. Instead, it all comes down to how you teach. If you teach the play correctly, then you aren't promoting suicide; you're condemning it.

I brought her my findings of the 2022 banning of “*Dear Martin*” where it hit closer to home. Not only had she taught the book before but also taught along side Sandra Carraway’s sister. Again, she understood the concern of police brutality and racial hate being something many parents shield their children from. But her perspective is it's all about developmental stages and talking it out. Would parents rather their children read and talk about the topic with their peers and a trusted adult by their side rather than the alternative which is letting them witness it firsthand, or even worse of all:

Experience it for themselves?

This brought on the topic of comfort. Hill and many others believe that we cannot push forward as a society if we’re comfortable. There can be no learning, inventing, or teaching if people are always comfortable. I always thought that babies were a good example of that. Everyone dreads teething time with their newborns, but if babies didn’t go through that period of discomfort, they’d never speak correctly, they’d never eat solid food, and they’d never have the fun of discovering the tooth fairy’s existence. But Hill offered a more practical anecdote:

“ Advances are made when you're uncomfortable. If it had not been hot outside and people were hot. There would be no air conditioning because they were comfortable. Discomfort is good.” (Hill).

Having lived in Georgia for so long AC is a necessity, so imagining a life without it is impossible. This proves in most cases, discomfort is good in moderation. It makes you get up and do something about it. When you're hot, you get up and turn on the AC. If you're hurting, you take Tylenol. And here's the kicker; if you're horrified by the actions of police, you get up and complain about it.

### Respecting Brock's Turn to Talk

It just so happens that I was able to read "*The Giver*" again when I dropped into middle school so who better to ask than my sixth-grade teacher herself; Mrs. April Brock? She's taught English for a total of 16 years (my school is full of English Nerds I know) as well as some social sciences here and there. Brock is a textbook laid-back English teacher who cannot go a day without coffee. Ironically for an English teacher, she's not a big fan of fiction. Much preferring non-fiction reports or essays instead. She's very no-nonsense so her opinion on book banning was very obvious:

"...it's absolutely silly," (Brock).

To Brock, book banning is rather pointless seeing as the "banned" book is still available in public libraries, online, and in bookstores. "If they[students] want to find [something], They're gonna find it... You know the Internet. It's been free for a while,"(Brock). Book banning isn't doing much other than annoying teachers and students alike. And in many cases, what a book is banned for is typically something that students might encounter daily. In the case of "*Dear Martin*" 's challenge by Tim Reeves, Reeves admitted that his child is exposed to swearing and mature content by just hanging out with his peers or in his books. However, it's different when

it's a textbook. (Legum). But is it? Is vulgarity allowed when it isn't meant for educational purposes? In a way wouldn't it be better to grin and bear a few swears if it helped teach a point? Of course, the answer is no, schools are protected places where everything has to be kept PG, but these are questions that have to be asked.

So the topic of "*The Giver*" and its banning came up and Brock dropped a bombshell. "...one of the scenes that bothers people is where the subject of masturbation comes up," (Brock). And it was a bombshell for two main reasons. One, Lowry was as slick as butter with the euphemism. And two, I read it *twice* and didn't notice it *twice*. So we had a laugh but it sparked a new discussion.

"But see as a 6th grader you don't even remember that part. And I think if you know about it, you already know about it and you would catch on. But it's so subtle it's not even on the Realm for kids that don't know it, it doesn't," (Brock).

And she's right. That mention was so subtle and immersed in the plot that I glazed over it as another concept in the dystopia. It didn't stand out, it wasn't a big deal, and for years I didn't (and I now know, my previous classmates as well) pay any mind to it. What bugged me most about the scene in question (Jonah takes a pill to "suppress his urges") was that there were pills and tablets for just about anything. Pain wasn't a concept anymore, depression only existed in the senile, and struggle was a thing of the past. The main point of the scene wasn't the "urges", it was the fact the pill itself existed.

So it got me thinking of a possible alternative to banning: restricting books to certain grades rather than banning them altogether. That would solve the problem of age-appropriateness while still allowing books to teach their respective lessons.

### Working Through Opinions with Ms. Willy

My interviews primarily focused on the opinions of English teachers directly affected by book banning. But there is still a legal aspect to it. A muddy and gray one yes, but still a legal aspect. It has to be approved by school boards according to a standard set by the district. So again, I looked internally and found my previous civics and government teacher; Ms. Tamiko Williams (personally referred to as Ms. Willy). Ms. Williams is probably one of the greatest history teachers I've ever had. She's been teaching specifically civics and government for two decades while also teaching other social sciences here and there. One thing I've always appreciated about Ms. Willy is her bluntness. She's never hesitated to correct the idea in our teenage minds that there's always a clear "good and evil" in politics. The real world has no hero and villain, correct or incorrect, there's only right or left. Her class didn't immediately clear the smoke, but at least we were made aware that our views were heavily clouded. That's why the main reason I realized I needed an opposing viewpoint for book banning. And who better than dear ole Willy to drop the book (pun intended) on the government's role in book banning? Her stance:

“Well, if you want to pay for education...I kind of need the government to get involved to cut those checks,” (Williams).

You can’t have your cake and eat it too. Do you want the government to fund education? They get to have a say in it as well. Think about it as a big business, the school districts are various employees and the schools are large projects. The boss at any time can drop in a new set of regulations or instructions to the projects because it's their money keeping everything going. They have the biggest say on what books and content are taught in classrooms because, at the end of the day, any lawsuits will end up on their desks and being paid out of their pockets. They reserve the right to avoid things that could then be sued which in this case, includes books with challenged material. Also, the secondary purpose of schools is to protect children in the most extreme way. You can’t get mad at the government for doing their job, can you?

According to Ms. Williams, the government is attempting to make every classroom experience universal nationwide. They did this through what many may remember as “Common Core” which set the standards for what content kids learn in school throughout the core classes. However, they only outline what must be taught by graduation at the 12th-grade level. This gives state education systems a bit of wiggle room when it comes to how they teach certain material. “For example, I teach civics and that's ninth grade... [in] some places it's 10th grade, some places it's 11th grade.” (Williams). At different districts and states, mainly history and civics courses have varying grades at which their taught. Again, this rolls back to the idea of emotional maturity or whether or not the students can handle the material. And teachers have room in what order they present new information to their students. This ambiguity makes sense. The Federal government says this needs to be learned, then states and districts decide based on context and

funding what is taught when. And at the end of the chain of command, teachers. Ms. Williams has always been very big on the idea that high schoolers are adults on a free trial of life. They should be making their own decisions about how they handle information.

“...by the time you're in high school, I don't really think it's about maturity. It's just about where it fits in the schedule,” (Williams).

This supports the idea that the average teenager has a strong enough mental shield and is emotionally mature enough to handle certain stressors. But even then, she's not necessarily against book banning. Ms. Willy believes that drama with book banning is largely stupid. To summarize her point, sometimes it's not about banning a book, it's about being decisive about what needs to be on library shelves (Williams). “...what does the school need to spend its resources and its limited space on...space is at a premium now,” (Williams) It's not about pushing an agenda, it's about keeping everything educationally rich. Does a book actually need to be on the shelves or is it there for diversity's sake?

And again, no book is truly banned so is it that big of a deal if it isn't on school shelves? Many people want to compare book banning to the Nazi Book Burnings, but there is a world of difference between them. The Nazis wanted to rid the world completely of Jewish/pro-Jewish books and teachings, book banners want to keep certain material off shelves. In one case, the books are forever lost to time, in the other, there's more personal responsibility involved. Someone can pick up a book banned in their school at their local library, its more of a matter of if they want to or not.



This ties back to individual responsibility. If the lessons can't be found in schools, it's up to parents or students themselves to go out and find them. Not all information can have the easy route of being available on school grounds, yes, but at the same time, schools are where morals are supposed to be introduced. We read Little Red Riding Hood to learn not to trust strangers, we read Pinocchio to discourage lying, and we read The Three Little Pigs to learn the value of hard work and dedication. Those are irrefutable lessons. Now when we start to cross into the territory of banned material, the lessons are valuable but the content? Not so much. In *"To Kill a Mocking Bird"* by Harper Lee, the novel is dripping in moral teachings that are more relevant than ever. But is the price of excessive violence and harmful language worth what it could teach? Or in other words, is it worth possibly traumatizing young minds in the name of education?

Sometimes, the answer is yes.

### Will Banning End?

Everyone remembers the ironic cold war between violent video games and parents. According to the National Coalition Against Censorship (NCAC); in 1997 the first argument was brought up in a court case against the manufacturer's classic 90's games like Doom, Resident Evil, and Castle Wolfenstein by the parents of victims of the Heath High School shooting. They claimed that the shooter's consumption of violence in the games desensitized him to real-life violence. They called for the games to either be removed from shelves or at least restricted to those 18 and older.

The case was dismissed and the games were found not at fault but that still didn't stop parents from trying. For years, propaganda was plastered all over mommy blogs and social media advocating for banning or heavy censorship of video games. And their fears weren't unfounded. It would make sense that constant exposure to violent media would numb one's view of the world. However in 2001, four years after this concept was brought up, Surgeon General David Satcher did a study that proves violent video games have little effect on aggressive behavior. In fact, he proved that there was more correlation between home life, upbringing and aggressive behavior than between video games.

The point being, that censoring video games wouldn't do anything to curve the rates of aggression in teenagers. In some cases, violent video games tend to teach a lesson. In RPGs (Role Playing Games) such as Skyrim, there are in game consequences to being needlessly violent such as NPCs (Non Player Characters) no longer wanting to trade with you causing isolation in game. In Bloodborne, a game about nothing about the horrors of unnecessary violence and the effects it has on even monstrous creatures, the player is rewarded for showing mercy or kindness. In the end, the main objective of these video games is showing the effects of good versus evil in a more straightforward way.

This is similar to banning books. It is fair to restrict material because it serves no purpose other than mindless entertainment as in erotica or violent books. And if the medium is feeding hateful rhetoric then keeping it away from children is the goal. But banning books because of swearing, and slight mentions of violence, defeats the purpose of education and personal growth

in students. To understand why something should be the way it is, you have to show all the sides of the wrong. In some cases, the violence *is* the medium for getting the message across like in the video games. Making students uncomfortable isn't ideal but sometimes its a necessary evil to encourage the good in the world. Without being uncomfortable, there'd be no change in the world. Everyone would only keep to their comfort zones, never venturing out, never caring about one's neighbor, never speaking up when something isn't right. So while discomfort is the root of all problems, it's also the mother of all solutions.

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## Swallowed Tears

by Abigail Heiss

*How to Read Literature Like a Professor* offers the perfect tool to better understand the story of An-mei's mother, Wu Tsing, and Second Wife told in the chapter "Magpies" of Amy Tan's cross-cultural novel *The Joy Luck Club*. This story illuminates the reason behind her mother's supposed abandonment of An-mei and the family's long-held resentment and disdain toward An-mei's mother. The third chapter of *How to Read Literature Like a Professor*, "Nice to Eat You: Acts of Vampires" sheds light on the nature of the antagonists in An-mei's mother's life story and why they are both repulsive and enraging to readers. While Wu Tsing literally assaulted and raped An-mei's mother, readers can utilize Foster's knowledge to comprehend Second Wife's figurative vampirism and why her treachery is more disturbing and revolting.

From the start of her life in Wu Tsing's household, An-mei perceives that her mother "did not love Wu Tsing" at any point in their marriage (Tan 256), but she cannot understand her mother until Yan Chang explains with the mournful words, "Your mother is too good for this family." As the story goes, Wu Tsing creeps into her mother's bed and sexually assaults her. Because of restrictive customs, An-mei's mother marries him to maintain a shred of dignity in Chinese society. This marriage degrades her according to Chinese tradition, which decrees that she "dishonored her widowhood by becoming the third concubine to a rich man" (Tan 242). Unable to communicate to her mother why she must marry Wu Tsing, An-mei's mother receives disownment and disgrace in return for her swallowed tears. Wu Tsing's assault ravaged her life.

Foster identifies the key characteristic of a figurative vampire as one who “grows in strength by weakening someone else” (pg 22). When he picks apart the story of Count Dracula, his synopsis paints a vivid picture of vampires, “A nasty old man, attractive but evil, violates young women, leaves his mark on them, steals their innocence... and leaves them helpless followers in his sin.” The story of An-mei’s mother follows the pattern of victimization and violation that Foster identifies as vampiric. Wu Tsing wanted “the prestige of owning what so many other men wanted”, the temptress Second Wife. Later, Second Wife became “anxious to quiet Wu Tsing’s outside appetite” and “conspired with Wu Tsing to lure your mother to his bed” (Tan 267). As Foster illustrates with the story of Count Dracula, the act of raping someone is an obvious example of parasitic, or vampiric, behavior.

Vampires derive their horror and repulsiveness from “selfishness, exploitation, a refusal to respect the autonomy of other people” - all of which involve placing one’s appetites above the rights of other people. Second Wife appears at least as vampiric as her husband because she befriended and betrayed An-mei’s mother. An-mei learns from Yan Chang, her mother’s servant, that Second Wife was a cunning woman who, “after she had seen his enormous wealth and his feeble-minded first wife, consented to become his concubine” (Tan 264). She cares solely for status, money, power. Yan Chang confides in An-mei that Second Wife always “knew how to control Wu Tsing’s money” (Tan 264). She manipulates him by faking suicides, playing off of his fear of vengeful ghosts, but she becomes jealous of her power over him upon realizing that she cannot have children. In order to maintain her hold over Wu Tsing, she procures him another concubine, but Third Wife has only daughters. She encounters An-mei’s mother, a widow, but that is no hindrance to Second Wife’s predation. A few chats allow her to gain the widow’s trust, and when she finally comes to dinner, Second Wife springs her trap.



The wanton cruelty with which Second Wife manipulates her husband and An-mei's mother and obtains the security she desires, a son, is the most hideous aspect of the scandal she entangled them in; that deliberate disregard for others' emotions, rights, and lives is what constitutes a vampire.

Unfortunately, vampires have never existed only in myths. Vampiric individuals have been ravaging the lives of innocent others since the world began, and often the law cannot or does not intercede on behalf of those wronged behind closed doors and outside of the reach of possible witnesses. Such is the tragedy that befalls An-mei's mother in "Magpies". In her case, culture and customs were used as weapons to bring about her downfall from respectable society to the dregs of humanity, from hopefulness to despair, from serenity to suicide.

# Screenwriting

## Columbus State University Selections

### OXYMORON

by Nadia Jacobs

OXYMORON

INT. HOUSE - EVENING

A well-furnished dining room; laid out on the table is a myriad of steaming dishes, a feast about to begin. ROBERT (40s) sets a final tray of bread in front of MARIA (the same) and takes a seat beside her. Opposite him are the two boys, JEREMIAH (8) and LEVI (5).

MARIA

Thank you.

She smiles at Robert.

MARIA (CONT'D)

I'm so happy you could join us. It feels like forever since we all sat down for dinner as a family.

LEVI

(interrupting)

Dad. Dad. It's been fifty thousand million years since you ate with us.

Jeremiah smothers him.

JEREMIAH

Shut up, Levi, they're talking!

Maria taps the table in front of him.

MARIA

Jeremiah, hands off your brother.

ROBERT

(to Maria)

They're still trying to fill Davidson's spot. I've been doing double the work I usually do.

He begins serving himself-- his movements are stiff, tense; Maria gets some food for the boys.

ROBERT (CONT'D)

I'd love if that was reflected in my paycheck.

Maria serves herself and briskly brushes the wrinkled edge of the tablecloth flat. She adjusts her plate, busying herself.

MARIA

Well, I'm glad you're getting a chance to prove yourself.

When he won't look at her, she leans over and catches his hand, holding it for a moment. He glances up.

MARIA (CONT'D)  
Isn't that right?

ROBERT  
I know, Maria. Okay.

Maria smiles.

MARIA  
Shall we say grace?

Levi, mid-bite, spits his half-chewed food onto his fork and sets it down.

MARIA (CONT'D)  
Don't do that, baby.

Robert extends his hand to Jeremiah, who grabs Levi's wrist rather than his hand. Levi slaps him, Jeremiah almost says something, and Maria takes Levi's other hand before any more disruption can ensue. She looks to Robert. He sighs, grimacing, and closes his eyes.

ROBERT  
Gracious Heavenly Father, we ask  
for your blessing--

The DOORBELL RINGS. The boys look up. Robert doesn't.

JEREMIAH  
(whispering)  
Who's that?

LEVI  
Shhhhh!

Maria glances at them and shakes her head slightly in chastisement.

ROBERT  
We ask for your blessing over this--

The DOORBELL RINGS again. Robert raises his head, his jaw clenching.

MARIA  
Are you expecting anybody?

ROBERT  
During dinnertime?

The DOORBELL RINGS twice in rapid succession. Robert stands abruptly, pulling away from Jeremiah and Maria, and adjusts his sleeves.

ROBERT (CONT'D)  
Don't wait for me. Go ahead.

INT. FOYER - EVENING

Across the house, the faint VOICES of Maria and the other boys are barely audible. Robert unlocks the door and pulls it open. SIMON (30s) stands on the porch.

ROBERT  
Get the fuck off my property.

He swings the door shut, but Simon steps onto the threshold before it can close.

SIMON  
I need to have a conversation with you.

ROBERT  
I don't think you do.

He slams the door against Simon's leg; Simon pries it open, slipping inside.

SIMON  
Yeah, I do.

Simon leans against the door, letting the latch click shut behind him. Beat. Robert stares at him incredulously.

MARIA LAUGHS from the dining room.

Robert glances in her direction, briefly, just briefly.

SIMON (CONT'D)  
(quietly)  
You really want to keep hiding?

Robert stiffens, his fingers twitching by his sides.

ROBERT  
Did you have plans to stop?

Shifting, Simon lets out a breathy chuckle of disbelief.

SIMON  
We can't cover it up forever.

ROBERT  
I don't see why not.

SIMON  
It's not right.

The wrong words. Simon realizes the second he says it.

ROBERT  
It's not right? Is that what you  
just said to me?

SIMON  
Don't you feel dishonest? I do.

Robert steps closer.

ROBERT  
Let me tell you what's not right,  
Simon, if you want to talk about  
morals. What's not right is killing  
a man and hiding his body in  
somebody else's backyard. That's  
not right.

SIMON  
You agreed to it.

ROBERT  
My wife and children didn't.

SIMON  
No, you did.

ROBERT  
I didn't have much of a choice.

SIMON  
Then tell them. Tell her.

Somewhat neurotically, Robert wipes a hand across his mouth.

ROBERT  
Are you out of your mind?

SIMON  
This is what I'm talking about.

ROBERT  
I'm so close-- I'm so fucking close  
to calling 911 right now and  
letting them know that their own  
deranged detective hid a corpse in  
my yard. Okay? So watch your mouth.

SIMON

You're trying to get me arrested?

Silence falls. The BOYS BICKER from the other room.

ROBERT

I'm trying to have dinner with my family.

Slowly, Simon eases away from the door.

SIMON

Let's take a walk.

EXT. NEIGHBORHOOD - DUSK

An overcast autumn night, too cool to be comfortable. The street is empty. Simon and Robert walk a few feet apart at the road's shoulder.

SIMON

You knew we had to do it.

He puts his hand in his pockets, squinting as he observes the houses around him with nonchalance.

SIMON (CONT'D)

That's why you agreed, Robert. You knew.

Robert scoffs.

ROBERT

I agreed because he deserved it.  
Not because you were right.

SIMON

That's why I asked you, see? You understand this. You understand justice.

ROBERT

That's bullshit.

SIMON

Don't give me that.

ROBERT

Look, you better keep this brief.  
My dinner's getting cold.



SIMON  
Sure.  
(beat)  
I'm stepping down.

ROBERT  
(laughing)  
You can't.

Neither speaks; GRAVEL CRUNCHES underfoot in the wavering air. Simon fishes a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket. He holds one in his mouth, digs around for his lighter, and spends a few moments flicking it uselessly-- the wind keeps the flame away. Finally, he withdraws the cigarette to speak.

SIMON  
Cops are supposed to uphold the law, not break it. I can't do both.

ROBERT  
Plenty of cops do.

SIMON  
I have morals.

ROBERT  
You took a life.

SIMON  
Plenty of cops do.

Robert wipes his hand against his mouth, his eyes flickering.

ROBERT  
You can't fucking "step down."

SIMON  
I sure can.

ROBERT  
No. I've got an issue with that.

SIMON  
I didn't come here to get a second opinion.

ROBERT  
I don't fucking care.

A car rolls past; the two men stop at the curb in front of an empty playground, waiting for the ENGINE ROAR to recede into the distance. Robert's jaw clenches.

SIMON  
I understand that--

ROBERT  
(interrupting)  
You're really trying to tell me  
that we killed a man for nothing.

SIMON  
I didn't kill him for nothing.

He flicks the lighter again, without success, and inhales deeply.

SIMON (CONT'D)  
I killed him because it was the  
right thing to do.

ROBERT  
Is that it?

Simon shields his cigarette, and the lighter clicks repeatedly, flashing a small flame.

ROBERT (CONT'D)  
Because my understanding was that  
there was a plan. That his death  
would draw out the guys he works  
with.

SIMON  
That was the plan.

He glances up, then breaks his gaze, hunching as he paces to the side of the playset. At last, the lighter takes. Robert watches from afar, drawing closer with slow steps.

ROBERT  
But you can't do anything about  
them if you're not on the force.

Simon coughs slightly, smoke curling from his mouth.

SIMON  
Maybe not.

ROBERT  
You lose your resources.

SIMON  
If I stay on the force, I lose what  
I stand for.

ROBERT  
And what's that.

Simon takes a long drag from the cigarette. The heat of the smoke clouds the air with deep white.

SIMON  
Justice.

ROBERT  
If that's what you're playing for,  
you've already lost.

Simon bristles.

SIMON  
Your neighborhood is safer because  
he's gone. I know you see it.

ROBERT  
My neighborhood would be safer with  
you gone, I think, yet here you  
are, still breathing...

He pauses, the words weighing on him. His face twitches, his eyes dragging across Simon's figure with disgust.

ROBERT (CONT'D)  
...and I let it happen.

Beat. Simon shifts the conversation.

SIMON  
You regret it?

ROBERT  
No. I fucking hated him.

SIMON  
Is that how you think of it? Is  
that how you justify what you did?

ROBERT  
I don't justify it, Simon. I don't  
want to justify it. I couldn't if I  
tried.

There is a pause. Simon offers him the cigarette. Robert sips it briefly and passes it back. Hostility lingers.

SIMON  
Well, I guess that's where you and  
I are different.

ROBERT  
I don't make excuses.

SIMON  
(countering)  
You don't understand.

He puts the cigarette in his mouth.

ROBERT  
I understand why I did it. I don't  
understand why you did.

Simon laughs, choking on smoke, flicks ash onto the ground.

SIMON  
I did it to keep your family safe.

A permeating silence rises as the words simmer. Suddenly,  
Robert whirls on him, punching him in the face, grabbing his  
coat as he loses balance.

SIMON (CONT'D)  
Shit!

ROBERT  
Listen to me and don't miss a  
single fucking word. You do not  
keep my family safe. I keep my  
family safe. Don't ever try to tell  
me anything else-- got that?

Simon rights himself, jerking away. He shifts his shoulders,  
his expression terse but composed.

SIMON  
I'm trying to do what's best for  
this community. For everyone.

Robert takes his time regaining his composure.

ROBERT  
(dryly)  
What an admirable man you are.

SIMON  
I was hoping you'd understand.

He rubs the side of his face subtly, not to draw attention,  
and moves his hands into his pockets. He presses his boot  
into the mulch, where the glint of the cigarette dissipates.

ROBERT  
I thought this was behind us.

SIMON  
It never will be.

ROBERT  
(disagreeably)  
Why is that?

SIMON  
You can't just move on from these things.

ROBERT  
Maybe you can't.

SIMON  
I'm trying to.

ROBERT  
You're trying to forget.

SIMON  
(indignantly)  
I'm trying to move on.

ROBERT  
If that were true, there would be no reason for you to sacrifice your job.

SIMON  
(snapping)  
Morals, Robert. I have morals. That's the reason.

ROBERT  
The fuck you do, Simon!

Beat. Simon steps away.

SIMON  
I wanted you to be informed of the changes to our original course of action.  
(beat)  
I thought it was only fair.

Robert parts equally.

ROBERT  
You're lucky I won't call your boss down at the station.

Simon bows his head. An acknowledgement.

ROBERT (CONT'D)  
But if you ever come to my house  
again, know that you won't be so  
fortunate.

SIMON  
I wish you all the best.

Robert nods, recedes, walking across the park's damp grass to the road. Simon shifts in his coat, pulling a gun from his waistband, and aims it carefully.

BANG

INT. ROBERT'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Simon enters through the front door, closing and locking it behind him. He navigates to the dining room, where Maria, Jeremiah, and Levi are seated. Everyone is silent. He takes the chair behind Robert's untouched plate and holds out his arms to Maria and Jeremiah, who take his hands in theirs. He clears his throat.

SIMON  
Shall we say grace?

END

## Eclipsed Survival

by Evie Fletcher

## ECLIPSED SURVIVAL



FADE IN:

Alarm beeps. Pots and pans clinking in the kitchen.

INT. KITCHEN - MORNING

The kitchen has yellow tile halfway up the wall, and the remaining wall is painted yellow; there is a 1970s yellow refrigerator to the left of the sink and a yellow stove to the right of the sink. There is a vase in the middle of a wooden table with a bouquet of yellow daffodils and baby's breath. There are light yellow ruffled curtains hung on the window but tied to the sides with a yellow ribbon to let light in.

KATE (42), dressed in jeans and a blouse with large hoop earrings, is at the stove cooking eggs, and SEAN (45), a man with a gut and dressed in black slacks, white button-up, and a red tie flipped over his shoulder is sitting at the table looking at a newspaper and drinking a cup coffee from a mug that says "#1 DAD". BETH (17), dressed in BOSTON COLLEGE hoodie and sweatpants, walks into the room. Beth blinks her eyes hard and rubs them, trying to adjust to the light coming in the kitchen window.

KATE

Good morning, dear. I'm glad to see you've decided to join the living.

SEAN

How did your presentation on electricity go yesterday?

BETH

I got an "A". It seemed to excite the teachers.

Kate walks to the table and scrapes eggs onto a plate in front of Beth as she sits down. Kate then adds bacon to a plate and sets it in front of Sean. Sean puts down the paper and his coffee cup and begins eating the food. Beth notices a JEEP WRANGLER pulling up to the curb just beyond the luscious green grass out the front picture window in the living room.

BETH

Well, shit. I'm late. Trevor just showed up, and I haven't dressed yet.

Beth leaps up from the table and heads to her room. She starts grabbing clothes and tossing them out her closet door in search of that favorite grey "REMONES" band t-shirt. She finds it and, throws on the T-shirt, and grabs a pair of blue jeans from her chair at the desk. She then grabs her black and white checkered converses and heads back down the stairs.

BETH (CONT'D)

See ya.

Right as Beth passes to the kitchen, she stops in the living room by the big bay window. The sky has gone dark. The sound of a siren blaring in the distance with the noise reaching a crescendo and then decrescendo repetitively. TREVOR gets out of his jeep and stands in the street, looking at the sky. There is a voice over the loudspeaker from the siren.

SIREN VOICE

Seek shelter immediately. This is not a drill.

The siren crescendos and decrescendos again.

SIREN VOICE (CONT'D)

Seek shelter immediately. This is not a drill.

BETH

Um, Dad, what do we do?

SEAN

Just stay calm. I'm going to step outside and see if anyone knows anything. Beth turned on the news to see if there was anything on there.

Sean steps outside and catches PETER, his neighbor who is quickly stuffing suitcases in the back of his suburban.

SEAN (CONT'D)

Hey Peter. Do you know what's going on?

PETER

All I know is that Susan's parents called and said to get to their farm right away.

SEAN

They didn't say why?

PETER

Nope. I'll try to contact you once we get there if we know more.

SEAN

Alright. Thanks.

Peter runs around to the front of the car to grab the suitcases from his two sons, who are 10 and 12 years old. And hustles them into the car.

SEAN (CONT'D)

Trevor, you should head home, too. I'll have Beth get ahold of you later.

TREVOR

Alright, Mr. Keaton.

Sean heads back into the house.

SEAN

Beth, I sent Trevor home and told him you would call him later.

BETH

Does anyone know what's going on?

SEAN

Not yet. Was there anything on the news?

BETH

Not a thing. It just keeps saying that we need to find shelter immediately.

KATE

I'm going to call my parents and  
make sure they're taking  
precautions.

Kate picks up the phone but there isn't a dial tone.

KATE (CONT'D)

Sean! The phone's dead.

SEAN

It's going to be alright, Kate.  
Just take a deep breath. I'm sure  
they'll send someone to fix it  
later.

BETH

Is it a storm, Dad?

SEAN

I don't think so. The sky looks  
too black for that.

BETH

Too black?

SEAN

Yeah. I don't see any clouds, but  
it's like there is this big black  
sheet across the sky.

KATE

Sean, I'm really starting to  
worry.

SEAN

It's fine, Kate. We'll just wait  
it out.

Meanwhile, outside chaos continues as people frantically  
flee for safety from their CUL-DES-AC.

SEAN (CONT'D)

Come on. Let's just finish  
breakfast and wait to hear  
something.

The TV turns to static.

SEAN (CONT'D)

Well, that's great. Kate, grab the storm radio from the back porch.

Kate walks to the back porch to grab the small portable radio and turns it on. She fumbles through the stations to find someone talking.

ANNOUNCER ON RADIO

Everyone stay calm and seek shelter immediately. We still don't have a lot of information, but we'll give it to you as we receive it. For now, stay calm and get to somewhere safe.

Kate turns the volume down just enough to hear it if something important is said.

KATE

Sean, what do we do?

SEAN

We finish our food and wait. It can't be that serious. I'm sure people are just scared, and they're making a big deal out of nothing.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

The windows are boarded up with large sheets of plywood. Some smaller windows have catty wompus boards covering them. The living room is dark, with only one light that is powered by a small fan outside, which Beth put together for a little electricity. The sofa is overturned and against the front door. Papers are scattered about, and three sleeping bags are on the floor with empty plates next to them. Beth and Sean are packing their bags to go look for supplies. The sun is just about to peek through the darkness.

BETH

Dad, we have to get going.

SEAN  
I'm coming.

KATE  
Please be safe. I'll see you when  
you get back.

Kate kisses Sean and then hugs Beth. She stands by the door as they walk out, and they close it behind them and pushed the sofa against it again. Beth goes upstairs to check the traps to make sure they are armed while Sean and Beth continue down the street.

EXT. DOWN THE CUL-DE-SAC - SUNRISE

Sean and Beth walk out of the neighborhood.

BETH  
Dad.

SEAN  
Yeah.

BETH  
I'm starting to get worried that  
we won't find any more supplies.

SEAN  
I know, kiddo. That's why we have  
to go out further. We have to pick  
up our pace now because we want to  
be back to the house by dark.

BETH  
What happens if we don't?

SEAN  
Well, we're going to have to find  
somewhere safe to hunker down till  
it's light again.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Kate is sitting on the floor listening to the radio.

ANNOUNCER ON RADIO  
If you can hear this message, you  
are not alone. We have food, cots,

and a safe place to stay. We can offer you hope.

Kate sits and ponders what the person on the radio is saying.

ANNOUNCER ON RADIO

We are in a bunker near the Charles River, 112 Storrow Drive. Watch out for the traps. There is a string attached to a wooden plank by the mailbox. Pull that, and a bell will ring in our bunker.

Kate grabs a pen and notebook and writes down the address and instructions.

EXT. HIGHWAY - DAY

Sean and Beth reach a house that seems promising. The windows are boarded, similar to theirs. They approach the house.

SEAN

Hello? Anyone here?

BETH

I'll go around back and check there.

SEAN

Alright. Be careful and keep your eyes open for traps.

Sean peers through a window crack. He sees a man lying in a recliner, and he looks dead.

SEAN (CONT'D)

Sir. Can you hear me?

He proceeds to pound on the door, but there is still no movement. Beth comes around from the back of the house.

BETH

I don't see any sign of life. There is a door open in the back that leads to a porch, and I'm

sure I can get into the back door from there.

SEAN

Ok. Let's try that. I saw a man lying in his chair, but I think he's dead.

BETH

Man. That sucks for him, but good for us. I hope he has food. I'm starving.

INT. BACK PORCH - NIGHTFALL

Beth and Sean are able to break into the house through the back door. They start rummaging through cabinets.

BETH (CONT'D)

Eww, more beans. I see why this is all we can find lately. I don't imagine anyone really likes these, but food is food.

SEAN

The sun is starting to go down. We need to hurry.

They find a few more cans of food, put it in their packs, and head outside.

BETH

Dad! He has a garden!

SEAN

How fast can you pull?

They start pulling carrots and green onions from the garden, then notice squash in the distance. Again, they fill their packs with as much as they can carry.

BETH

Mom's going to love this!

They start heading down the road and notice the sky getting darker.

BETH (CONT'D)

Uh, dad...



SEAN

Yeah, I see it. I guess we're just going to have to stay here.

They go back into the house. They put a blanket over the dead guy.

BETH

It smells.  
(Plugging her nose)

SEAN

We're just going to have to live with it for tonight.

Sean walks to the back of the house and notices two bedrooms next to each other.

SEAN (CONT'D)

How about this? The windows are already boarded, and things look pretty secure. You sleep in that room, and I'll take this one.

BETH

Sounds good. It feels like ages since I slept in a bed.

That night, Beth tossed and turned, thinking about her mother.

EXT. STREET - SUNRISE

Sean and Beth prepare to head home. They make sure they have all their supplies and head out the door.

SEAN

You ready to go?

BETH

Yeah, I'm good.

SEAN

How did you sleep?

BETH

Not the greatest. I kept thinking about Mom and if she would be ok without us.

SEAN

I get that. I'm positive she's  
fine and anticipating our return.

BETH

I can't wait to show her all the  
food we got. Maybe she can  
actually cook us something.

SEAN

That sounds nice, doesn't it?

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

They make it back to the house, where they notice a lot of  
the furniture is out of place. The boards on the windows  
were ripped down, and there wasn't any sign of Kate  
anywhere.

BETH

Where the fuck is mom? You said  
she would be alright.  
(Crying uncontrollably)

SEAN

I don't know Beth.  
(Angrily)

Beth finds the paper her mom wrote on.

BETH

Dad look.

SEAN

She must have found out something  
while we were gone. It says "safe  
place" above the address.

BETH

Should we go there?

SEAN

We might as well. We can't stay  
here.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

There is a loud, constant wailing sound and a bright light. They cover their ears from the deafening sound while squinting their eyes to see what's going on around them.

BETH

Dad! What's happening?

There is pounding coming from all over. Against the windows, the roof, the walls. Boards start to rattle and fall.

SEAN

BETH! RUN!

Sean grabs his shotgun from against the wall and loads it. He aims it at the window. Beth runs out the front door and down the CUL-DE-SAC; when she notices they aren't chasing her, she turns around to look. She hears the shotgun blast.

BETH

DAD!

There is a beam of light on the house, but she can't see where it's coming from. Whatever is in the sky is camouflaged or hiding in the clouds. Another shotgun blast can be heard. Then Beth sees the creatures dropping on the roof from the beam of light. Then she notices one is holding a limp body; it's Sean. He then travels the beam up to whatever is in the sky.

BETH (CONT'D)

NO!

A creature hears her scream and turns to run towards her. She begins to run into a house and down into a cellar. She finds a pipe on the floor that she places between the handles of the cellar doors and looks around for a weapon when she notices a high-powered flashlight. She then constructs a battery out of random debris lying on a workbench. The creatures fight to get in, and the cellar door bounces up and down as they try to break in.

BETH

Come get it mother fuckers.

Beth prepares herself with the flashlight, aiming it at the cellar doors. They fling open, and there are three creatures looking down on her, ready to attack. Beth turns on the light and puts on the sunglasses she found earlier that she had hanging from her shirt.

BETH  
That's right mother fuckers.

The creatures try to block the light with their hands over their face, but it burns their skin. They start to flee, running like dogs on hands and feet. Beth starts to make a bed on the floor, then she reaches into her pocket and pulls out the address that Kate wrote down.

FADE TO BLACK.

DESOLVE TO:

INT. HOUSE BASEMENT - SUNRISE

Beth is waking up. She rubs her eyes and yawns while looking around to get a bearing of where she is. She looks at the workbench and sees the high-powered light. She gets up and tucks it into her pack. She pulls out the paper with the address. She sees an old map on the wall behind the workbench and, takes it down, folds it, and places it in her back pocket. She opens the basement doors and heads towards the river.

EXT. DAY

Beth is now standing in front of the house, seeing the pole with the string attached and pulling it twice. Two people -- JANE and DOUG -- come from around the back of the house and approach Beth.

JANE  
Well, hello there. You must of heard our broadcast.

BETH  
Yes, ma'am.

DOUG  
That's a pretty heavy-looking pack  
you have there.

BETH  
It's lighter than it looks.  
(Apprehensively)

JANE  
Doug, leave the poor girl be.  
Com'on, we'll show you around.

DOUG  
So, it's just you, then?

BETH  
Yeah.

JANE  
Awe, that's too bad. Well, you've  
come to the right place. We have  
plenty of room.

Jane takes Beth into the bunker. They pass a table with  
radio gear, a kitchen area, a living room area, a room with  
a bunch of supplies, and then to a long hallway with rooms  
lining it on both sides.

JANE  
The second door on the left will  
be your room. The fourth door on  
the right is the bathroom. We  
don't have hot water, but it'll  
get you clean.

BETH  
Thanks.

JANE  
I'll start fixing us something to  
eat around five or so.

BETH  
Ok.

Beth puts her things in her room and then walks back  
towards the living area. She notices Doug locking the door  
hatch. Doug turns around to see Beth looking at him.

DOUG  
Don't worry. It's secure. I  
promise.  
(Smiling)

BETH  
What do you guys do around here to  
pass the time?

DOUG  
Jane has her puzzle books. I  
tinker a little and watch TV.  
There is a whole bunch of DVDs  
over there.

Doug points to a tall wooden cabinet with two long doors.

DOUG (CONT'D)  
I built that.

Beth nods and heads to the bedroom to lie down.

INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT

Beth is woken up by something sliding up her leg and onto  
her inner thigh.

BETH  
What are you doing?!

DOUG  
Uh... nothing. I was a...

BETH  
Get off me, freak! Don't touch me.

Beth kicks at his hand as she sits up and scrambles to get  
away from Doug.

DOUG  
Awe com'on. What's your issue?

BETH  
My issue? You are my issue!

DOUG

So, we let you stay with us and  
eat our food, and this is how you  
treat us.

BETH

Yes!

DOUG

Fine! Then leave!

BETH

It's the middle of the night. You  
know what happens out there.

DOUG

Not my problem.

Beth gets up off the bed and grabs her things.

BETH

Fine! I hope those creatures  
harvest your insides.

DOUG

(Chuckles)

They can't get in here. I'm not  
worried.

Doug walks out, and Beth follows. Doug goes over to the  
hatch and pushes Beth out into the dark.

DOUG (CONT'D)

Good luck.

Doug slams the door behind Beth. Beth now stands in the  
cold, dark outside nervously, looking around for somewhere  
to go. The creatures aren't in sight. She carries the high-  
powered light out of her bag, aiming it in preparation for  
an attack. She notices a barn across the bridge and heads  
towards it.

INT. BARN

Beth places her bag just inside the door. She looks around  
for something to fortify the barn for safety while she  
sleeps till sunrise. After finding nails and boards and

securing a safe place to rest, Beth makes a bed on some hay and falls asleep.

INT. BARN - SUNRISE

Beth wakes to the sun peering in through a sliver between the boards. She takes out her portable radio and tunes it in.

RADIO VOICE

If you can hear this announcement,  
we have made a settlement in  
Boston around the Boston City Hall  
on Congress Street.

(Message repeats)

Beth clicks off the radio and places it back in her bag. She walks the 5 miles towards Boston City Hall. When she arrives, there is a large gate with barbed wire and guards --GATE GUARD 1 and GATE GUARD 2-- on either side of the gate wall.

GATE GUARD 1

Stop right there!

GATE GUARD 2

How did you hear about us?

BETH

I heard an announcement on the  
radio that you have created a  
settlement.

GATE GUARD 1

I'll go get the mayor.

GATE GUARD 2

Yes, but you will have to wait  
there.

Moments later, Gate Guard 1 comes back with --MAYOR KATE JOHNSON--.

MAYOR KATE

Hello, I am Mayor Kate Johnson.  
You can refer to me as Mayor Kate.



BETH

Nice to meet you, ma'am. My mom's name was Kate.

MAYOR KATE

Oh. Was? I'm sorry, dear.

BETH

I heard the announcement, and I'm looking for somewhere to settle.

MAYOR KATE

Then you've come to the right place, dear.

Mayor Kate places her hand on Beth's back and guides her to the gate.

MAYOR KATE (CONT'D)

Everyone works for their right to stay here. We help one another make this a home. Can you handle that?

BETH

Yes ma'am.

MAYOR KATE

Over there is our garden. Are you a gardener?

BETH

No ma'am. But I was accepted to MIT so I can help in other ways.

MAYOR KATE

Perfect! We don't have anyone with your type of skills yet, so you will be the perfect asset.

BETH

I'm sorry to ask, but ... I'm starving. Do you have anything I could eat?

MAYOR KATE

Oh yes, of course, dear. Let's walk over to the diner. That's

where we gather for all our meals.  
I'm sure Susie can whip you up  
something.

BETH  
I would really appreciate it.

MAYOR KATE  
After you eat, I can show you  
where you'll be staying.

Sometime later, after the meal, Mayor Kate and Beth walk  
towards a house at the end of a CUL-DE-SAC.

MAYOR KATE  
Ah, yes, here we are. This is  
where you'll be staying.

BETH  
Oh man, this reminds me so much of  
home.

MAYOR KATE  
I'm glad to hear that. You will  
find everything inside that you  
need. Don't be afraid to ask for  
something. If you need me, I live  
right over there.  
(Pointing down the road)

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

Days go by, and there is no creature in sight. Everything  
has been calm. Beth is sitting at the kitchen table with a  
plate of eggs and bacon, looking out the big picture window  
in the living room behind the sofa. She smiles as two  
children play with a soccer ball in the grass. A jeep pulls  
up along the curb, and Beth stands up abruptly and runs out  
the door. A guy is getting out of the jeep and comes around  
to the sidewalk just as Beth reaches the porch.

BETH  
Trevor?!

TREVOR  
Beth!

Beth leaps into his arms, and they hug tight as he swings her around.

FADE TO BLACK.

## Set in Motion

by Madeline Ginter

SET IN MOTION

FADE IN

INT. PENNY'S BEDROOM -- EARLY MORNING

We see PENNY EDWARDS (23) asleep on her bed. Her room is a mess, there are clothes strewn about and a black cat (PUFFIN) sleeps at the foot of her bed.

PENNY (V.O)

I never thought it would happen to me. Twenty-three years old and not a single date, much less a soul mate. They say that love comes when you least expect it, that it has the power to make you feel like your life has been set into motion. I don't think they meant it quite so literally..

Her phone rings on her nightstand. We see it is a call from JOY HANSON (24) and her contact photo is of the two of them together. The phone rings for a while, before PENNY grabs it, clearly flustered, and picks up.

PENNY

(Grumbling)

Hello?

JOY

Hey, I'm on my way. I'll be there in ten. Are you up?

PENNY hesitates, looking at the time, and sees it is 6AM.

JOY

(Frustrated)

Hello?

PENNY

Yeah. I'm ready. I'll be waiting outside.

The call ends and PENNY throws herself back on the bed and groans. JUST LIKE HEAVEN by THE CURE begins to play as she gets up hastily, pets PUFFIN, gets dressed, and puts a hat that says "Sunup Coffee" into her purse.

INT. PENNY'S KITCHEN - EARLY MORNING, SUNRISE

PENNY speedily enters the kitchen, grabbing a pop tart from the cabinet and rushes out of the front door.

EXT. OUTSIDE OF PENNY'S APARTMENT - EARLY MORNING

PENNY runs her fingers through her hair to brush it and smooths out her shirt, trying to get rid of the wrinkles. JOY pulls up to the curb, and PENNY walks to the car and opens the door. JOY turns down the radio and JUST LIKE HEAVEN by THE CURE stops playing. Joy looks Penny up and down.

JOY

(Dryly)

You just woke up, didn't you?

PENNY gets into the car and closes the door.

INT. JOY'S car - EARLY MORNING

The car is silent, JOY peers over at PENNY repeatedly, looking discontent and worried. PENNY pretends not to notice, looking out of the window until she turns abruptly towards JOY who quickly looks back at the road.

PENNY

Whatever it is that you're thinking, Joy, don't say it. I am really not in the mood for another pep talk.

JOY

Oh, I'm gonna say it.

PENNY

Here we go again.

JOY

I can't help it if I'm worried about you. You haven't been the same since we graduated last year. I haven't seen you pick up a paintbrush in six months. You just sit at home watching reruns of the Real Housewives. You're only social outlets are me, your cat, and work.

PENNY

(Sarcastically joking)

Hey, you leave Puffin out of this.

JOY

And there is that world famous sarcasm. Why is it that everytime I try to talk seriously with you, you deflect? I just want to help.

JOY pauses and PENNY sighs

JOY

And what about grad school? You've been saying that you're going to apply for months now. With your paintings, I think you really could get a good financial aid offer but you insist on selling yourself short by not even giving it a chance.

PENNY pulls the poptart out of her bag, unwraps it and takes a bite.

PENNY

(With a mouthful)

I really don't want to talk about this right now.

JOY turns abruptly to look at PENNY.

JOY

You never do. (Pauses) Give me a bite of that, I didn't have breakfast.

PENNY begrudgingly hands the poptart to JOY, she takes a bite, and hands it back to PENNY. PENNY sighs and looks out of the window.



PENNY

Everyday is the same.

JOY

What?

PENNY

I said, everyday is the same. I feel like I am stuck living the same day on repeat and that there is absolutely nothing that I can do about it. (Pauses) I can't bring myself to apply to grad school. I can't tell you how many times I have tried, but I just can't.

JOY

I thought you didn't want to talk about it.

PENNY

I changed my mind. I know you're just trying to help, and I love you for it but you don't understand. Everyone else is heading into the next chapter of their lives and believe me, this is not how I thought I would spend the first year after graduating college but after I was rejected from RISD, I'm afraid to put myself out there again. What if I get rejected again and again and just end up right right back here?

JOY

Do you think I don't know how rejection feels? I got rejected from my dream school too but I picked myself up and applied somewhere else and guess what? I am actually glad I got rejected because now I can't imagine going anywhere else.

JOY pauses

JOY

All I am saying is that I want my friend back. I believe in you, and I think you would benefit from having a little more faith in yourself.

They reach their destination, a brick building with a sign on the front that reads Sunup Coffee in big blue letters. JOY puts the car into park. They get out and we watch from inside of the car as PENNY unlocks the door and they head inside.

INT. SUNUP COFFEE - MORNING

The inside of the coffee shop is bright, there are paintings all over the walls for sale, all signed with two initials, P.E. The store has circular restaurant tables as well as comfy chairs and a couch. There are danishes, muffins, and cookies in a glass case and two large drip coffee machines with spouts in front of the counter. After they enter, they both put on their hats. PENNY locks the door again behind them.

JOY turns on the lights and a lightbulb explodes, the pieces of glass scatter on the floor. They cover their heads and duck. JOY turns to go to the supply closet.

PENNY

I got it.

PENNY goes into the supply closet and grabs the broom. She sweeps it up then goes back into the closet for a lightbulb and a ladder. She changes the lightbulb while JOY turns on the machines and straightens the baked goods in the display case.

JOY

Thanks.

PENNY nods her head and goes back into the supply closet, and then joins JOY in setting up for the day. JOY walks over to the speaker and connects her phone. REAL HOUSE by ADRIANNE LENKER begins playing softly in the background as JOY and PENNY continue to get the store ready for opening.

PENNY

What song is this?

JOY

"Real House," it's off of Adrienne Lenker's new album. It just came out today.

PENNY

I like it.

JOY

I thought you would.

PENNY grabs a large glass jar that reads "TIPS FOR SONG REQUESTS," and places it next to the register before walking to the front door, unlocking it and switching the sign from closed to open.

INT. SUNUP COFFEE - MID MORNING

The tables are half full, CHIP LEWIS (24) comes in with a backpack and sits down at a two seater small table before heading to the counter. JOY is pouring batter into muffin tins as Penny takes orders. A couple gets up, throws away their trash, and opens the door to leave. JOY turns to PENNY and motions for her to smile with her fingers.

PENNY

Have a nice day!

The couple turns, smiles back, and waves as they exit. Chip walks up to the counter. Penny looks from the exiting couple to CHIP.

PENNY

(Cheery)

Hi, how can I help you?

CHIP

Can I just do seven shots of espresso please?

PENNY

(amazed)

Wow. That is a lot of caffeine.

CHIP

I'll need it. I've got a lot of studying to do. My property law exam is in two days and I am not prepared.

PENNY punches the shots of espresso in on the register as he speaks.

PENNY

(smiles but genuine)

That'll be \$3.76. I hope it helps.

CHIP reaches into his pocket and pulls out a crumpled five dollar bill.

PENNY makes his change, hands it back to him, and he drops it all into the tip jar. CHIP begins to turn to walk away but PENNY stops him.

PENNY

Wait, you forgot your song request!

CHIP

My song request?

PENNY

Yeah. Whoever tips a dollar or more gets to put a song in the queue.

PENNY points to the song request sign on the tip jar.

PENNY

Only if you want to though.

CHIP

(Laughs)

I'm not very good under pressure.

CHIP stands and thinks for a moment.

CHIP

How about "Maps" by Yeah Yeah Yeahs?

PENNY

Good choice.

CHIP

Yeah, that has been in my top songs on Spotify for like two years straight. I don't think I could ever get tired of listening to it.

CHIP turns to walk away again.

PENNY

Good luck with your studying.

CHIP smiles back at her

CHIP

Thanks.

CHIP walks to his table and sits down, pulling out his laptop and puts his earbuds in. PENNY turns towards JOY who is smirking at her as she makes the Espresso.

PENNY

What?

JOY

You know what.

PENNY

I know that you should stop trying to set me up with our customers.

JOY

OK but I am serious this time. I feel like you guys could be good together.

PENNY

You know absolutely nothing about him. How could you possibly have any inclination that we would make a good couple? I don't even know his name.

As PENNY is speaking with her back turned, CHIP comes back up to the counter. JOY's eyes grow wide and PENNY slowly turns around.

PENNY

(Embarrassed)

Hi, again.

CHIP

Hi. Could I add a cherry danish to my order?

PENNY

Sure. That'll be \$4.25. Do you want it heated up?

CHIP

That'd be great.

PENNY turns towards the microwave and puts the danish inside.

CHIP

My name's Chip by the way.

PENNY turns her head over her shoulder and introduces herself.

PENNY

Penny.

CHIP

Nice to meet you Penny.

PENNY grabs the danish out of the microwave and grabs the espresso from JOY and hands it to CHIP who hands her another five dollar bill.

PENNY

Nice to meet you too.

CHIP

Keep the change.

CHIP smiles at her before turning and walking back to his table.

PENNY turns to JOY who is grinning and shakes her head at her. She goes to the fridge to pull out a pitcher of cold brew. She begins to pour it into a cup with ice, the lid falls off and it spills down her clothes. PENNY gasps in shock then looks extremely annoyed.

PENNY

Great.

JOY sees what happened.

JOY

Oh god.

She rushes and grabs paper towels to try and clean up the mess while PENNY blots the coffee out of her clothes. The coffee shop begins filling up and a line forms at the register.

PENNY

We'll be with you in just a second!

PENNY bends down on the floor with JOY and tries to clean up the coffee.

PENNY

Of course this happens when the lunch rush starts.

JOY peeks over the counter at the line.

JOY  
Just our luck.

PENNY  
Thanks for helping, but I can take it from here if you can manage the counter.

JOY stands up and throws the paper towel away before making her way back to the register.

JOY  
Hi! Sorry about that, what can I get you?

CUSTOMER  
Yeah, I'll take a chicken panini and an iced americano to go.

INT. SUNUP COFFEE - AFTERNOON

One woman that was in the lunch crowd throws away her trash and exits. The coffee shop is not crowded anymore. Only three tables are in use, CHIP remains in the same spot, typing on his computer. JOY is standing behind the counter and PENNY is sweeping. MAPS by THE YEAH YEAH YEAHS begins playing as she sweeps near his table. PENNY begins humming to herself and CHIP looks towards her.

PENNY  
Oh, sorry, am I bothering you?

CHIP  
No, not at all. I think I'm going to take a break for a bit anyway.

PENNY  
How's the studying going?



CHIP

(Laughs)

It's going. I think I've been re-reading the same paragraph for about ten minutes now but it just won't stick. (Pause)  
How about you though, how has your day been going so far?

PENNY stands to face him fully, showing him the spilled coffee down her shirt, now dried. She smiles.

PENNY

It's going.

She turns to continue sweeping but he stops her.

CHIP

Hey, I was wondering, who did all of these paintings?

PENNY

(surprised)

I did.

CHIP

They're really good. I think that one's my favorite.

CHIP points to a scene of the ocean, the waves are high, and there is a tiny boat, struggling against them.

PENNY

Thank you.

CHIP nods

CHIP

Did you study art or is it more of something you do for fun?

PENNY

Just for fun. I was actually an English major in nder-grad, but I'm trying to save up for grad school now to study painting. It's been pretty slow going.

CHIP

Yeah I know how that feels.

PENNY sees trash on his table.

PENNY

Do you want me to get that for you?

CHIP

Yeah, that'd be great. I should probably get back to studying anyways but it was nice talking to you.

PENNY

Yeah. It was.

PENNY throws the trash away and continues sweeping.

INT. SUNUP COFFEE - EVENING

The sun is setting, CHIP is the last customer and he is packing up. He puts on his backpack and walks towards the door.

CHIP

Bye Penny, it was nice to meet you.

PENNY

Bye. Good luck on your exam.

CHIP leaves. PENNY goes over to his table to clear the last of the trash and finds a napkin that reads "for grad school," on top of \$20. PENNY brings it over to where JOY is cleaning countertops and sets it in front of her.

PENNY

I should have gotten his number, shouldn't I?

JOY

I tried to tell you. I knew you liked him.

PENNY

Yeah, yeah, yeah, I know. It's too late now though. Who knows if I'll get another chance.

JOY

You never know.

The girls close down the shop, turning off the machines, turning off the lights, shutting down the speaker, and setting the alarm. PENNY sets the sign to closed before opening the door and they walk outside.

EXT. OUTSIDE OF SUNUP COFFEE - SUNSET

JOY stands at the door waiting as PENNY fumbles for her key in her purse. She puts the key into the door and locks it. Suddenly it is morning again.

JOY

Uh, what are you doing?

PENNY freezes, looking around at the sunrise in shock. She looks at her watch and sees that it is 6:37 AM.

PENNY

I..

JOY

Are you feeling ok?

PENNY continues to look around confused.

JOY takes out her key, opens the door and reaches for the lights.

PENNY

No! Don't! The lightbulb!

JOY flips on the lights and the lightbulb explodes. She ducks but PENNY stands still, staring at the glass on the floor.

JOY  
What is up with you?

PENNY  
You wouldn't believe me if I told you.

JOY  
Try me.

PENNY  
I.. I think I'm living the same day over again.

JOY  
I know. You told me in the car.

PENNY  
I did?

JOY  
Yeah, you told me you feel stuck, like you are living in a loop where everyday is the same and how-

PENNY interrupts JOY

PENNY  
-No, I mean I think I am physically living the same day over again.

JOY  
Uh. OK. There is a lot to unpack here.

JOY grabs PENNY's arm and brings her inside.

INT. SUNUP COFFEE - MORNING

PENNY is sitting in a chair while JOY stands over her,  
PENNY is drinking water slowly.

PENNY

I told you, you wouldn't believe me.

JOY

I never said I didn't believe you. I believe that you  
believe you're living the same day over again.

PENNY

What does that even mean?

JOY

Do you need to see a doctor?

PENNY

No. I am not going to a doctor. I am telling you, I have  
lived this day before. How else would I have known about  
the lightbulb?

JOY stares at PENNY blankly.

PENNY

And, on Adrienne Lenker's new album, the first song is  
called "Real House," and it goes like this.

PENNY begins to frantically hum the song out of key. JOY  
walks over to her phone and sees that the album just  
dropped. She looks at PENNY skeptically and clicks on the  
song. She realizes that PENNY is right.

JOY

Ok, calm down. Tell me something else you remember.

PENNY thinks for a moment.

PENNY

The lid is loose on the cold brew pitcher.

JOY walks to the fridge and pulls out the pitcher. She sees that it is not on properly, and tightens it.

JOY

I don't know what to say.

PENNY

Say that you believe me.

JOY

I think I'm beginning to.

INT. SUNUP COFFEE - MID MORNING

The tables are half full again, with the same customers and PENNY and JOY are talking quietly.

JOY

What is the last thing you remember before you started the day over?

PENNY

We were talking about CHIP, and how I should have gotten his number, and then we left. I think it happened when I put my key into the lock.

JOY

Who is Chip?

The same couple gets up, throws away their trash, and opens the door to leave. CHIP walks in the front door, looking confused and sits down at the same table. He is wearing his backpack but he doesn't pull out his computer. PENNY nods towards him.

PENNY

That's Chip.

PENNY and CHIP's eyes meet and he gets up and walks towards the counter.

JOY

Do you think it happened to him too?

PENNY

(slowly)

I don't know.

CHIP comes up to the register.

PENNY

(hesitant)

Hi, what can I get you today?

CHIP

I'll take seven shots of espresso please. (Pause) I know, that's a lot of caffeine but-

PENNY

-You've got a property law exam tomorrow?

They both go silent, looking at each other in shock.

JOY watches in amazement, her eyes shifting from PENNY to CHIP as the conversation flows.

CHIP

It happened to you too..

PENNY

If you're talking about what I think you're talking about, then yes.

CHIP looks around before speaking.

CHIP

It's the strangest thing, I was driving home. I was almost there but I got lost in thought, and suddenly I wasn't driving home but I was driving back here, and it was this morning again.

PENNY

What were you thinking about?

CHIP

(Embarrassed)

To tell you the truth, I was kicking myself for not asking you for your number.

PENNY

That's the last thing I remember about yesterday too. After I found your note, I told Joy I should have asked for yours and when I went to lock the door it was morning again..

They stand in silence. JOY looks exasperated.

JOY

Oh, just get his number already! Clearly there is a reason you are both here, again. You don't see me stuck in this weird time warp.

PENNY

You really think that's why?

CHIP

I guess it is weird that that is the last thing both of us remember. I just don't understand how this could be happening. I really thought I was going crazy or that I dreamed it all up. I don't know, it's too strange for words.

CHIP pulls out his phone and PENNY puts her number in.

PENNY

It really is.



PENNY

Did you still want the espresso?

CHIP

Yeah, I might as well use this as an opportunity for some extra studying. Maybe I will have more luck this time around.

PENNY

And the cherry danish?

CHIP

Actually, I think I'll do a bagel this time.

PENNY laughs and JOY makes his order.

PENNY

Sure, that'll be \$6.91.

CHIP hands her eight dollars and puts the change in the tip jar.

CHIP

How about Tonight, Tonight by The Smashing Pumpkins?

PENNY

Another good choice.

JOY walks over to the counter and hands chip his order.

CHIP goes and sits down, pulling out his computer.

INT. SUNUP COFFEE - AFTERNOON

PENNY is wiping the windows down near CHIP's table. He turns to face her. TONIGHT, TONIGHT by THE SMASHING PUMPKINS plays softly, it is about halfway over.

CHIP

So you like The Smashing Pumpkins?

PENNY

Yeah, I love them. I used to listen to them all of the time when I was painting.

CHIP

When you were painting? Do you not paint anymore?

PENNY

That painting you liked, that was the last one that I did. It's been about a year now.

CHIP

What happened?

PENNY

I got rejected from RISD, and I think it just made me doubt everything. For as long as I can remember, that was my plan. I was going to go to RISD and become an artist. Now, it's like everytime I try to paint, I wonder if what I do will be good enough. There's no joy in painting anymore.

(Pause)

It feels weird to talk to someone who is practically a stranger about this.

CHIP

Maybe it makes it easier?

PENNY

Oddly enough, I think it does.

CHIP

Can I offer an opinion, as someone who knows almost nothing about you?

PENNY

Shoot.

CHIP

It seems to me that you already are an artist, you don't need RISD to tell you that, or any grad school for that matter.

PENNY contemplates what he says, but they are interrupted when JOY calls PENNY over.

PENNY  
Thanks.

PENNY walks behind the counter.

JOY  
Hey, sorry. I've got to take this call. Can you watch the register for a minute?

PENNY  
Sure.

JOY exits, PENNY takes the orders of a few customers. JOY re-enters and begins prepping for the next day. She takes inventory of the baked goods while PENNY continues making orders and ringing people out.

INT. SUNUP - LATE AFTERNOON

CHIP is packing up, he throws away his trash and walks towards the counter. All of the other customers are gone.

CHIP  
Same time tomorrow?

PENNY laughs.

PENNY  
Let's hope not.

CHIP  
I'll see you later.

PENNY

See you.

CHIP exits. PENNY walks over to his table and finds \$20, and a note that says, "Let's try this again..."

PENNY smiles before returning to behind the counter to start shutting down machines and closing up. They walk to the door, PENNY turns off the lights and they exit, closing the door behind them.

EXT: OUTSIDE OF SUNUP COFFEE - SUNSET

PENNY reaches into her purse for her key, her phone vibrates and she takes it out. We see that she has gotten a text from an unknown number that says "Hey it's Chip." She smiles, and puts the phone back into her purse and finds her key. She successfully locks the door and she and JOY look at each other relieved.

JOY

I told you.

PENNY smiles back at her.

MAPS by THE YEAH YEAH YEAHS plays.

FADE TO BLACK

## High School Selections

### Your First Breath Took Mine Away

by Phaedra Temmis

## YOUR FIRST BREATH TOOK MINE AWAY

### INT. LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

The living room is very simple with a couch, coffee table, and baby monitor. The room is dimly lit. There are scattered toys, bottles, a few beer cans and an overall sense of disarray. An adult woman, OLIVIA, is sitting on a couch. She looks distressed with visible bags under her eyes. Her hair is in a messy ponytail to project her discomfort. She is biting her nails anxiously as a baby's crying is constant through the monitor and chatter from the TV is heard in the background.

The camera steadily zooms in on Olivia as she stares blankly at the wall. The sound of the TV gets louder, the nail biting becomes more intense, and the baby's cries grow noisier as well, creating a chaotic atmosphere.

Olivia's husband, ARNOLD, who is very rugged looking, enters from down the stairs, looking annoyed.

ARNOLD  
Olivia!

The camera pans quickly over to Arnold.

ARNOLD  
(sighing, rubbing his temples)  
Olivia, the baby's been crying for the past half-hour now. Can't you do something? I'm swamped in work from the office, and you know I can't focus with all of this noise.

The camera cuts back to Olivia and Arnold is faintly visible in the background.

OLIVIA  
(softly)  
I-I've tried everything. She won't stop.

ARNOLD  
(frustrated)  
Well, obviously not if she's still going. Try harder. I have to get these papers done.

OLIVIA  
(struggling to hold back tears)  
I'm doing the best I can, Arnold.

ARNOLD  
(muttering)  
Your best isn't cutting it. Just get her to quiet down. (pause) And would you turn that TV down? There's enough racket as it is.

Arnold exits the living room and SLAMS the door of the next room he enters. Olivia covers her face and silently cries into her hands.

CUT TO:

**INT. BATHROOM - NIGHT**

Olivia, dressed in pajamas, stands in front of the bathroom mirror which duals as a medicine cabinet. During this scene, she is very tense and uneasy. She opens it and reaches for a pill bottle. She opens the bottle and takes a deep breath. She pours one pill into her hand and swallows it dry. She places her hands on the rim of the sinks and holds her head down for a few seconds. She closes the cap and places the bottle back in the cabinet. She stares in the mirror for a bit analyzing her features. Olivia exits the frame and we hear the door open and shut. The camera lingers on the mirror after she exits the bathroom.

**INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT**

The bedroom is a master bedroom with a decent amount space and a separate bathroom inside. There is a king sized bed in the middle of the room and nightstands on both sides. One has a framed picture of Olivia's family. Olivia lies on this side, fully under the blanket, but still awake. Arnold walks in and begins undressing into his underwear.

ARNOLD

Olivia, you awake? The ham tasted a little weird. I think it's time you clean the fridge out again.

There's a pause before Olivia responds.

OLIVIA

...Yeah...okay. I'll get to it tomorrow.

Arnold gets into the other side of the bed.

ARNOLD

(scoffs)

Yeah, I hope so. You don't do anything else I ask you.

OLIVIA

I try, Arnold. I try. Everything is just so stressful. I-I don't mean to disappoint you, y'know.

ARNOLD

(groans)

I'm tired of the excuses. You're at home all day. You can at least do something. I go to work and provide for us, you cook, clean, and take care of Ellie. I don't see what's too difficult about that.

OLIVIA

(tears forming in her eyes)

I-I've just been feeling so drained. I'm tired all the time, and it's becoming harder and harder to take care of myself, let alone Ellie.

Arnold closes his eyes in frustration and sighs heavily.

ARNOLD

If you would just put more effort in, it wouldn't be so hard.

Olivia starts crying and Arnold groans.

ARNOLD

(annoyed)

Is all you do cry?

Arnold sighs and pulls up the blanket, trying to ignore Olivia's sobs.

FADE TO BLACK.

**INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY**

There is natural lighting illuminating the room and Olivia is holding ELLIE, gently rocking her. She looks very exhausted but tries to calm her. Arnold enters from down the stairs, dressed for work.

The camera focuses on Olivia with Arnold faintly visible in the background.

ARNOLD

(fixing his tie)

I'm heading out. Don't forget to call Dr. Davis about Ellie's rash, okay?

OLIVIA

(weakly)

I won't.

ARNOLD

(looking at his watch)

And, please, clean up a bit. The house looks a mess.

OLIVIA

I'll try.

ARNOLD

(annoyed)

You always say that, Olivia. Just get it done.

Arnold does not leave Olivia anytime to respond and walks out the door. He SLAMS it. Olivia sighs heavily, trying her hardest not to cry. The door slam



causes Ellie to start crying. Oliva drapes her head back over the couch and bursts into tears.

OLIVIA

(looking down at ELLIE)

Please...please. Will you just stop crying for one second?

Olivia is sad but angry as well.

OLIVIA (CONT'D)

(through tears)

I don't understand what you want! (pause, she is softer and sounds defeated) I never understand what you want.

Ellie cries louder due to the yelling. Olivia pauses and wipes away her tears. She continues rocking Ellie again to stop her cries.

OLIVIA

I'm sorry, baby. I'm sorry. I don't mean to yell, but mommy is so tired and just...frustrated. You don't get it, but it's hard being a mom. Sometimes I wish- sometimes I wish I just didn't have to do any of this. You don't know it, but you're a handful. A-And sometimes you just make mommy-

Ellie has stopped crying now and Olivia looks down at her.

OLIVIA (CONT'D)

God, I sound like a crazy person. (softer) I'm sorry baby, I'm sorry.

Olivia gets up from the couch and takes Ellie upstairs.

#### **INT. NURSERY - DAY**

The nursery is fairly simple consisting of a crib, dresser, baby monitor, and TV. The room is in a state of disarray due to clutter from baby supplies and toys. Olivia props Ellie in an infant floor seat and turns on the TV in the room. Olivia turns on the baby monitor and exits the room.

#### **INT. KITCHEN - DAY**

Olivia opens the refrigerator and takes out a TV dinner. She puts it in the microwave and sets the timer. She exits the kitchen and walks to the living room to sit on the couch. Once she gets on the couch, her eyes get heavy and she falls asleep, forgetting about her food.

#### **INT. LIVING ROOM - EVENING**

The camera focuses on a clock that is hung on the kitchen walls. As time elapses, the clock shows the passage of time through a time lapse. The clock finally shows a time of 5:32. At this time, Olivia is still asleep when keys

jingle and Arnold enters through the front door. Ellie's crying is heard on the baby monitor, but it is quiet.

ARNOLD  
Olivia! I'm home.

He puts his coat on the coat rack and continues walking in the house.

ARNOLD (CONT'D)  
Are those mashed potatoes I smell?

Arnold walks up to Olivia from behind, not realizing she is asleep. He hears Ellie crying in the baby monitor and taps Olivia on her shoulder, she wakes.

ARNOLD  
(irritated)  
Olivia, what are you doing? Have you just been sitting here all day? Did you even call the doctor?

Olivia is a little anxious and alarmed.

OLIVIA  
(whispering)  
N-No, I...I couldn't.

ARNOLD  
For God's sake, Olivia. What is wrong with you?

Arnold walks a few steps away from the couch, hanging his head low and placing his hands on his hips.

OLIVIA  
(voice breaking)  
I'm so exhausted, Arnold. I feel like- like I'm suffocating.

Arnold turns his head as if he's alarmed. He storms over to Olivia and gets close to her.

ARNOLD  
(angrily)  
And you think I'm not? I work all day and I can't even come home to a clean house. I come home to this. You need to pull yourself together.

Olivia can't look Arnold in the eyes so she hangs her head down and fiddles with her fingers anxiously.

OLIVIA  
(softly)  
I can't do this anymore, Arnold. I- (looking up at Arnold) I need help.

Arnold rolls his eyes along with his entire head to show his annoyance.

ARNOLD  
(dismissively)

You're being so dramatic. Take a shower, get some rest. Then you'll feel better.

Olivia is too frightened to say anything so she just nods, tears streaming down her face. She gets up from the couch and walks past Arnold up to their bedroom.

**INT. BATHROOM - NIGHT**

Olivia is standing in front of the bathroom mirror, but it is fogged up by steam. She glides her hand across it to reveal her stringy and messy hair across her face. She closes her eyes and breathes in through her nose and out through her mouth. She runs her fingers through her hair and takes another deep breath. She opens the medicine cabinet.

**CLOSE UP**

The camera centers on the previous pill bottle. The atmosphere is very tense. Her hand enters the frame and she reaches for the bottle, opening the cap and pouring one pill into her hand. She swallows it dry and takes a minute to breathe. Olivia eyes the bottle. The camera very slowly zooms in on the bottle, alternating from it and Olivia. Olivia steadily shakes a few pills into her hand, adding them more heavily as the pills build up. She eyes the pills for a moment.

ARNOLD  
(shouting through the door)

What's taking so damn long? Ellie's crying, she needs a diaper change.

Olivia is surprised by Arnold's sudden shouts and shoves the pills back into the bottle.

OLIVIA  
I-I'm sorry. I decided to wash my hair. I'll be right there.

Olivia puts the bottle back in the cabinet and closes the mirror. The camera focuses on Olivia's face in the mirror.

CUT TO:

**INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT**

The bedroom is dimly lit and Arnold is already in bed. Olivia is dressed casually and standing at the entrance of the door.

ARNOLD

Where the hell are you going?

OLIVIA

Formula. We're out of it. I'll be back.

ARNOLD

At this time of night?

OLIVIA

Yeah, I want to get some before the morning.

ARNOLD

If you say so. Hurry back.

Olivia nods and closes the door.

CUT TO:

**EXT. SUBURBAN HOME, SABRINA'S HOUSE - NIGHT**

Olivia knocks on the door. She waits, not too long, and her friend SABRINA opens the door. Olivia instantly starts sobbing and Sabrina reaches out to her.

SABRINA

Let's get you in the house.

**INT. LIVING ROOM, SABRINA'S HOUSE - NIGHT.**

Sabrina's house is more organized and tidy. Her furniture is visibly more expensive than that of Olivia's. Olivia and Sabrina are sitting on the couch, in the middle of their conversation.

OLIVIA

I find it hard to eat hardly anything, and- and it's such a chore trying to do anything for the baby. I have barely any excitement or energy nowadays.

SABRINA

Does Arnold contribute at all? What does he do when you tell him this?

OLIVIA

He doesn't listen to me...it's useless talking to him.

Olivia begins to get angry.

OLIVIA (CONT'D)

And when I'm in the thick of it, Arnold is at work, or needing sleep for work, or- or doing overtime at work! Work, work, work! That's all he "contributes." (pause) A-And I appreciate it, but, I have these episodes where

sometimes it's hard to even look at Ellie. It becomes so hard to take care of things around the house when that happens. Arnold just- he doesn't understand.

SABRINA

(sad)

I'm so sorry, Olivia. That's awful of Arnold. I wish I could understand, I really do. but I know I can't. (pause) Have you tried therapy or-?

OLIVIA

Yeah, actually. I was planning on going tomorrow.

SABRINA

That's really good, Olivia. I'm glad you're getting help despite what Arnold says. (laughing) I guess that means Arnold is going to have a rude awakening tomorrow morning.

OLIVIA

(laughing dryly)

Yeah, I guess Arnold will get the honor of raising a baby alone. (pause) B- But, seriously, thank you for letting me stay here this late notice.

SABRINA

Oh, of course! I hate it had to be under these circumstances, but it's always good to see you.

Olivia looks sweetly at Sabrina and gives her a hug.

OLIVIA

(while embracing Sabrina)

Thank you.

SABRINA

(playfully rolling her eyes)

Ugh, enough with the thanks. It's really no big deal. (rubbing Olivia's back)  
Let me go get you a blanket and some pillows.

Sabrina releases from the hug and gets up from the couch, heading down the hallway.

OLIVIA

Thanks.

SABRINA

(shouting distantly)

What did I just say?

Olivia dryly laughs.

**INT. DR. THATCHER'S OFFICE - DAY**

Olivia is sitting in an office lobby fidgeting with her surroundings when a door is opened and DR. THATCHER, an older, cheerful female, enters.

DR. THATCHER

Olivia, you can follow me.

Olivia gets up from her seat and follows Dr. Thatcher into her office. They both sit across from each other. Olivia looks nervous and continues fidgeting with her hands and fingers.

DR. THATCHER

Olivia, I'm glad you came in today. How have you been feeling?

OLIVIA

(exhaling deeply)

Not good, doctor. I feel...empty. That's the best way I can describe it. Like-like I'm failing as a mother.

DR. THATCHER

It's important to remember that postpartum depression is a serious condition. You're not alone in what you're feeling, and it's not at all your fault. (pause) Have you been able to talk to Arnold at all about how you've been feeling?

OLIVIA

(sighing)

I've tried...countless times, but he doesn't understand. Every time I try to explain he just- he thinks I'm being dramatic.

DR. THATCHER

That's very unfortunate, Olivia. I'm sorry to hear that. During times like these, it's important to have support. Have you considered any support groups?

OLIVIA

(looking down)

I-I don't know. I'm just so tired. I don't think I have the energy for it. I saw one of my old friends recently and even that took a lot out of me.

DR. THATCHER

(writing in notebook)

I see. Sometimes talking to others who are going through the same things as you can help. I can give you some info about local groups in the area. It's up to you if you'll check them out but, Olivia, you really should.

Olivia nods her head.

DR. THATCHER

And if needed, we can discuss adjusting your treatment plan.

OLIVIA

Alright, thank you.

Olivia gets up from the chair and exits the room.

**INT. LIVING ROOM - AFTERNOON**

Arnold is sitting on the couch and Ellie is in the infant floor seat crying with spilled milk on her clothing and area. A children's channel is on the TV and Arnold tries to feed Ellie the bottle. He hears the sound of a car entering the driveway and he jolts with anticipation. The car turns off and after a few seconds keys jingle in the door. Arnold gets up from the couch and meets Olivia at the door.

ARNOLD  
(shouting)

And where the hell have you been!? "Formula" my ass! I had to miss work today because you were out doing God knows what!

Olivia tries to move past Arnold as he is blocking the entrance of the door making it hard to pass. She gets to the living room before she turns to talk to him. He follows closer to her.

OLIVIA  
(tears welling up)

I-I'm sorry. But I went to see Dr. Thatcher today. S-She suggested I join a support group.

ARNOLD  
(scoffs)

Oh, that's rich! A support group? Seriously? For what? So you can sit around some more and complain with other lousy moms?

Arnold laughs in disbelief.

ARNOLD (CONT'D)  
(muttering)  
This is absolutely ridiculous.

OLIVIA  
(hurt)

N-No, Arnold it's not like that. I need help. I can't keep doing this alone.

ARNOLD  
(irritated)  
You're not alone. I'm here, aren't I? But I can't do everything for you.

OLIVIA  
(crying)  
You don't understand, Arnold.

Arnold takes a deep breath and rolls his eyes. He stomps off.

OLIVIA (CONT'D)  
(grabbing Arnold's arm)

You're not listening to me! You never listen! You always disregard me. (pause, she lets go) I- I feel like I'm drowning. I'm drowning and you're just pushing me further into the deep end, watching me sink.

ARNOLD  
(rubbing his temples)

I can't believe what I'm hearing right now. Did- Did that therapist put all of this nonsense in your head? Dr. Thatcher, was it? This is exactly why I didn't want you going there anymore!

OLIVIA  
No, Arnold! N-no one put anything into my head. I've been feeling this way for a long time. I-

ARNOLD  
Well maybe if you tried a little harder, you wouldn't feel that way. Months. Months, I've been telling you to get your act together! Had you just put in more effort you wouldn't have these idiotic thoughts!

Olivia completely breaks down and Arnold storms off, going up the stairs.

ARNOLD (CONT'D)  
And don't you ever pull a stunt like that again!

Once he reaches the bedroom, he SLAMS the door.

WIDE SHOT

Olivia stands defeated, a messy living room, a crying baby, and happy, high pitch music from the TV that contrasts with the situation. Olivia stands there with her hands covering her face and then crouches to the ground, holding herself and continuing to sob. The camera lingers on this for a few seconds.

CUT TO:

**INT. BEDROOM - NIGHT**

The camera utilizes a top-down angle which captures Olivia and Arnold from the ceiling. Arnold is sleeping on his side and snoring and Olivia sleeps on her back staring at the ceiling. The house is silent excluding Arnold's snores.

CLOSE UP

We focus on Olivia and we can see her puffy eyes and red face. She turns her head to her nightstand where she inspects a photograph of her, Arnold, and Ellie. Olivia stares blankly at the photo. She reaches out for it and caresses the photo before placing it face down on the nightstand. She sighs and resumes



staring at the ceiling. The camera pulls back from the close up of Olivia until it reaches the first shot of the scene.

CROSSFADE TO:

**INT. BEDROOM - DAY**

Arnold has left and his side of the bed is left undone. Olivia starts to wake and she rubs her eyes. She sits up and runs her fingers through her hair. She sighs heavily.

CUT TO:

**INT. BATHROOM - DAY**

Olivia brushes her teeth. When she's done she opens the medicine cabinet.

**CLOSE UP**

The camera centers on the pill bottle, lingering for a couple of seconds as it slowly zooms in. She closes the mirror and scratches her face anxiously. She exits the bathroom. The camera stays on the mirror for just a few seconds.

CUT TO:

The clock shows the hands landing at 10:15.

**BEGIN MONTAGE:**

**HARD CUTS**

- **INT. KITCHEN - DAY** - Olivia making bottles of formula.
- The clock shows the hands landing at 12:34.
- **INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY** - Olivia is picking up dirty bottles and dishes that have been sitting in the living room. Ellie is in the infant floor seat watching the TV.
- The clock shows the hands landing at 1:47.
- **INT. KITCHEN - AFTERNOON** - Ellie is in her high chair and Olivia is trying to feed her. Ellie throws her food and cries. Olivia throws her head back and blinks fast to avoid tears.
- The clock shows the hands landing at 3:22
- **INT. LIVING ROOM - AFTERNOON** - Ellie's crying is heard on the baby monitor while Olivia sits downstairs in the living room, staring blankly at the wall. Olivia hangs her head down in her lap and fiddles with her hair. She looks defeated and unkempt.
- The clock shows the hands landing at 4:17

**END MONTAGE**

CUT TO:

**INT. NURSERY - AFTERNOON**

Ellie is asleep in her crib and Olivia watches above her, blankly. Olivia stares at her for a bit. After a while, Olivia laughs briefly in mania.

OLIVIA

(placing her hands on the crib, monotonous)

Y'know some part of me blames you- think it's your fault my life is like this.  
I know it's not fair... I know it, but I can't help it.

She pauses and bites her lip.

OLIVIA (CONT'D)

I'm sorry, baby.

Olivia walks towards the entrance of the room and flips the light switch off. She exits the room and makes her way down the stairs into the kitchen.

**INT. KITCHEN - AFTERNOON**

We see Olivia writing a note. When she finishes, she finds a roll of tape and tapes the note onto the refrigerator. When placed on the refrigerator, the camera reveals the note that reads "I tried cleaning a bit. The bottles in the fridge should last for the next two days." After taping it to the fridge, Olivia looks up at the clock. The camera cuts to the clock showing a time of 5:06. Olivia starts to make her way up the stairs.

MUSIC CUE: "Please Send Me Someone to Love" by Fiona Apple

The camera follows Olivia as she slowly mopes up the stairs and through the hallway to her bedroom.

**INT. BEDROOM - AFTERNOON**

Olivia walks in and pauses at the door. She surveys the room and notices the flipped down picture frame. Olivia walks over to it and picks it up, admiring the photo. The camera takes time to focus on each person in the photo. The camera cuts back to Olivia and a tear rolls down her cheek. Her nose is running and she messily wipes it with her hand. She lets out a deep breath and places the photo back down. Olivia exits the frame.

CUT TO:

**INT. BATHROOM - AFTERNOON**

The camera focuses on the mirror. The door opens and the light switches on, illuminating the room. We hear her lock the door. Olivia enters the frame and stares at herself in the mirror, faint tears still streaming down her face as

she tries to blink them away. She stares for a few more seconds before she opens the cabinet.

CLOSE UP

The camera centers on the pill bottle. The camera alternates between the bottle and Olivia, zooming in slowly everytime Olivia is in the shot. Whenever the camera focuses on her, she appears very anxious, wiping her nose and tears frantically.

The atmosphere is tense. Olivia reaches for the bottle and immediately opens it. She takes a couple pills and swallows them, almost gagging. She repeats this a few more times, but as she goes to shake out more her eyes begin to get heavy and drowsy. She stumbles on the sink, but catches herself. Her breathing begins to slow and her legs buckle, making her fall on the floor, directly in front of the bathroom door. She lays on her side, her limbs immobilized. Her fingers just barely twitch before they come to a halt. Her breathing slows even further and she closes her eyes.

The camera cuts to a top down angle and pulls out as we see Olivia sprawled out on the bathroom floor and pills scattered on the floor. Ultimately, the camera reaches the height of the ceiling.

CUT TO:

The clock shows the hands landing at 5:32

As we focus on the clock, we hear the engine of a car pull into the driveway, the car turning off, and keys jingling in the door. We hear the door swing open and the camera shifts to Arnold entering the house.

From Arnold's point of view, we see him surveying the living room, realizing it's cleaner than usual, but still a bit messy.

ARNOLD

(putting his coat on the coat rack)

I see you finally cleaned up. Or attempted to at least. See what happens when you actually listen to your husband. (muttering) Crazy how those things work.

Arnold walks further into the house to realize Olivia is not in the living room. He walks into the kitchen searching for her.

ARNOLD

Olivia!

The camera focuses on the refrigerator with the note on it. Arnold enters the frame and looks at the note.

ARNOLD (CONT'D)

(to himself)

The hell...?

He tries not to show it, but a feeling of worriedness sinks in. Arnold searches the downstairs area, calling out Olivia's name before he makes his way upstairs. First he checks the nursery and other rooms on the floor, but then he enters their bedroom. He notices the bathroom door is shut and tries to open it, but it is locked. Panic starts to set in.

ARNOLD  
(beating on the door)  
Olivia! O-Olivia!

CUT TO:

Olivia's body takes the repercussions of the pounding door and Arnold continues shouting for Olivia. From this point, we only hear Arnold's shouts and Olivia's numb body against the door.

CLOSE UP

We see from Olivia's torso and up. Finally, Arnold is able to beat the door in and enters the bathroom. The camera, however, does not move from Olivia's focus. When Arnold enters the frame, we never see his face or the upper half of his body.

ARNOLD  
(terrified)  
N-No! No, no, no! Oliva!

Arnold rushes to Olivia's side and begins shaking her, but she doesn't respond.

ARNOLD (CONT'D)  
(through tears)  
O-Olivia! Olivia, no!

The camera steadily zooms out to capture both Olivia and Arnold. Arnold has Olivia's head in his lap with his head hunched down over his deceased wife, the camera still not revealing his face. Arnold continues to sob profusely as the camera pulls back.

CUT TO BLACK.

END.

## Delivery 1

by Rachel Davis

## ACT 1

### TITLE SCENE

*DIME's faceless voice gives a short soliloquy as we see parts, places, people, and the environment of Aalipe.*

DIME

I've lived here all my life. Aalipe: the country known for its ingenuity and competence in anything mechanical or scientific. We pride ourselves in our ability to fix any problem, whether it be natural or man-made. With brass and whistles and gears and pipes, we harness the power of steam to work tremendously in our favor. By harnessing the power of steam, our country has managed to take to the skies. Selling these engines and machinery to other countries, we allowed them access to that same flight. With these flying islands, our world was split into two parts. The Ground Level has stood for generations, before invention was at its peak or even beginning, where the roots and humble beginnings of Aalipe lie. Right above the Ground Level is the much newer Upper Level, full of savvy craftsmen and intelligent, modern technicians. Outside of Aalipe borders, on these Upper Level islands, a war broke out between two of our neighboring countries: Zenbaq and Weldi. Throughout history, we remained a neutral country in order to focus on our explorations and industrialization, but this time, we were the start of the war. We remained a neutral country because we had nothing to do with any war or land: until now.

More images flash until there's a shot of Belladonna's eyes opening and then EPIC TITLE SCENE PUHHHSHSHSHSHHHSHSHSHSH BAH BAAAAAH

SCENE 1 - MORNING VALLEY SLUMS

In DIME's house in the slums. There are people just waking up and stretching as the sun rises in the dump. DIME stretches out of bed in her bedroom. She gets up out of bed, puts on her clothes, brushes her hair, puts in it a pony tail, grabs her stuff, and runs to the kitchen. She grabs an apple from the basket on the counter, sees it's rotten, throws it, and grabs another one.

DIME

Bye mom!

DIME'S MOM

(A faceless voice from  
the other room)

Where are you going?!

DIME

To the job interview!

DIME'S MOM

What job interview?

DIME

At Dufort Enterprises?

DIME'S MOM

Why didn't you tell me?

DIME

I did tell you! At dinner last  
week! And the night before last!  
And last night!

DIME'S MOM

Isn't D.E. where your sister  
works?

DIME

Orabella?

DIME'S MOM

What other sister do you have?

DIME

Yeah, it's where she works.

Silence for a second.

DIME'S MOM  
Okay. Be careful. Have fun. Get  
the job.

SCENE 2 - DAY EXT. DUFORT ENTERPRISES

DIME walks up to the big, tall building. It has a sign labeled "DUFORT ENTERPRISES" on it. In front of her, an Infrastrinata boy is already walking up, and is a good distance on the steps ahead of her. She smiles and runs to catch up to him.

DIME  
Heya!

ZAVIEAR looks at her, then looks forward as he continues to walk forward.

ZAVIEAR  
Hello.

DIME  
What's your name?

ZAVIEAR  
..Zaviear.

DIME  
Oh, cool! People call me Dime. Do  
you work here?

ZAVIEAR  
I'm trying to.

DIME  
Oh, that's cool! Are you an  
intern, or are you here for the  
interview too?

ZAVIEAR  
"Too"?

DIME  
Yeah! I'm an engineer! Are you?

ZAVIEAR  
...Yes.



DIME

(Over the next  
monologue, ZAVIEAR  
becomes increasingly  
annoyed.)

Dang, that's really cool! I bet  
you're a great engineer! Probably  
have more education than I do,  
considering the fact you're  
wearing a suit and everything!  
Gee, I hope they're hiring more  
than one person. If they didn't,  
we might be kinda screwed.  
Otherwise, I might end up really  
lonely, or maybe you, if you end  
up getting the job. I hope we get  
to work together.

ZAVIEAR gets on all fours and starts crawling VERY QUICKLY  
up the stairs.

DIME

Hey, wait up!

DIME runs after ZAVIEAR, but can't catch up. Behind them,  
QUINN is at the bottom of the staircase. He is relaxed. He  
shrugs and begins his trek up the stairs.

### SCENE 3 - DAY INT. BELLADONNA'S OFFICE

BELLADONNA is sitting at her desk, writing stuff down on  
paper with a rather fancy quill. She has her reading  
glasses on. The desk is full, yet it is still organized  
with everything in corresponding stacks and piles. She is  
taking papers from a pile and reading them over, writing,  
perhaps signing, puts it in a stack at her other side, then  
she takes the next paper. On her desk lies a nameplate with  
metallic writing: *Ms. Belladonna Dufort*.

There is a knock at the door.

BELLADONNA DUFORT

Come in.

In comes three teenagers, all squeezing through the doorway  
at the same time: ZAVIEAR, QUINN, and DIME. They all look  
relatively different, but they all have one thing in

common: they're scrawny, awkward teenagers. The four stare at each other for a couple minutes.

BELLADONNA DUFORT

...Hello?

DIME

Oh! Yes, hello! Hi there! Um-

ZAVIEAR

(He steps forward, holding a folder with many papers).  
Hello, my name is Zaviear of the Gorge District in Hypogean. I came to apply for the open position in your company: the one regarding flight technology being used as a way to deliver items and goods.

DIME

Me too! People tend to call me "Dime".

QUINN

Yeah, I-uh- I'm Quinn. I'm gonna be honest, I'm not really sure what's goin' on with these two. I saw a help wanted poster for Dufort Enterprises, and then a not-really friend of a friend of a cousin of a friend said I would be a good fit for this kind of job, so here I am.

BELLADONNA looks over the group with concern before finally blinking herself back to reality.

BELLADONNA DUFORT

...You're children.

ZAVIEAR

...Sorry?

BELLADONNA DUFORT

This is a job for adults; you could get seriously hurt doing this kind of work. I believe I

asked for only available ages 20  
up to be put on the flyer.

QUINN takes the flyer out of their pocket and looks over  
the dirty, crinkled paper very quickly.

QUINN  
Yeah, it's right here. In bold,  
red letters.

They point to the text that says "THIS JOB IS ONLY SUITABLE  
FOR 20+ YEARS OF AGE!"

DIME  
But right above that it says "No  
experience required!"

BELLADONNA DUFORT  
Yes, because you don't need  
experience.

ZAVIEAR  
I think you'll find I have no  
shortage of that. As you can see  
here-

BELLADONNA DUFORT  
You don't need *experience*, you  
need to be able to sign a waiver  
without your parents. I know the  
three of you must have been  
excited to see the skies, but  
that's not what this job would  
include.

DIME  
We wouldn't be able to see the sky  
while flying?

BELLADONNA DUFORT  
No- I mean that's not *all* that  
this job would include. There's  
real danger in it. You have to be  
able to learn the systems and be  
okay with the danger that comes  
with becoming a pilot, let alone  
being a major technician-!

DIME, ZAVIEAR, QUINN  
I'm already a good technician!

After saying this, the three look around at each other and scowl.

BELLADONNA DUFORT  
It's not that I doubt that, but-

DIME  
Aye, look here-  
(She looks at the name plate)  
Ms. Belladonna! I think that's just the problem, that you *do* doubt that, and you think just because we're a bunch of kids that we can't do complicated work. But that's not true, we can do some pretty cool stuff! I'm a very competent worker. So competent, in fact, that I always keep my tool belt on me, no matter what. Heck, I sleep with this thing on! I learned how to use a wrench when I was two, and I've been workin' with technology ever since I could remember. It's my family's business, for life's sake. You gotta give me a chance.

ZAVIEAR  
Oh, you think you're so special? I've only ever had my brains to show. I broke a clock down and put it back together with nothing but my hands. I've been put into every class I could get into, every opportunity that's been put in front of me, all just to find a hope of getting hired. You and your rusted tools have nothing on me.

DIME is about to open her mouth, but QUINN starts talking before she can.

QUINN

I-uh- I kinda just liked to tinker with things until I figured out how they worked. One time I made a gun out of a toaster because my brother ate my leftovers and I got mad at him.

The room goes quiet as everyone stares at QUINN.

QUINN

He had to get stitches. Still has the scar, actually.

DIME

Whatever, point is it is unfair to turn us away just because you think we're immature!

BELLADONNA DUFORT

"Think" you're immature? Why, I know it! If anything your little spiel just proved that. You think the world, this *job* is about tightening a few screws, and it's not. This is life-threatening, it's dangerous, and not a job for a bunch of teenagers. It'd be better if you all just went back to putting clocks back together.

ZAVIEAR

Please, ma'am, just give us a chance. Give us a chance to prove ourselves.

BELLADONNA DUFORT

Absolutely not! What could I call myself if I ever let this slide?

ORABELLA

*Wait!*

ORABELLA rushes into the room, throwing the door open as she comes in. She is breathing heavily and sweating.

BELLADONNA DUFORT

Orabella?

DIME

Ora?

ORABELLA

Sorry I couldn't meet you at the door, Dime, but I'm glad I came in when I did. Belladonna, you have to give them a chance!

DIME

Nah, it's my fault for sleeping in.

BELLADONNA DUFORT

(She sighs, and gestures to DIME.)

Just because this young girl is your little sister does not mean I am willing to risk her safety-

ORABELLA

Dime can do it, I promise you.

BELLADONNA DUFORT

That's a bold statement by itself, but an extremely bold statement for someone who is beyond the manic of puberty.

ORABELLA

I'll sign her waiver, if I have to. They can work! You're all at least fifteen, right?

DIME, ZAVIEAR, QUINN

Yes.

ORABELLA

There you go!

BELLADONNA DUFORT

You can't be serious. The flyer said-

ORABELLA

The flyer isn't their contract! They can, legally, work. And we, legally, need more workers before

we are, legally, in debt because  
we, legally, didn't fulfill the  
contract with General Pem!

BELLADONNA lifts her eyebrow before sighing as her resolve  
dissipates.

BELLADONNA DUFORT

Fine.

She opens a drawer and throws something on the desk. It  
looks like a whistle with a propeller attached, but it's  
unfinished and has parts everywhere.

BELLADONNA DUFORT

Just because Orabella is vouching  
for you does not mean I'll let  
this slide so easily. This is a  
contraption that some of my  
engineers were working on before  
they realized it would be too  
difficult for a small task. The  
idea is the whistle can get steam  
from the motor, which would also  
turn the propeller, in order to be  
a mobile alarm. Make it work, and  
the job's yours. You have an hour.  
Go.

ORABELLA

Good luck! Hey, Belladonna, can I  
talk to you real quick?

BELLADONNA DUFORT

Sure.

ORABELLA flashes a thumbs up to DIME, to which she responds  
with another thumbs up, and leaves the room, closing the  
door behind her with BELLADONNA following right behind her.  
The team scrambles for the bits and begins to work on it  
right on the carpet.

EXT. DAY BELLADONNA'S OFFICE

ORABELLA

So.

BELLADONNA DUFORT

Yes?

ORABELLA

You have no intention of giving  
them the job do you?

BELLADONNA DUFORT

Of course not.

ORABELLA sighs.

BELLADONNA DUFORT

Ora, you know this job is just too  
dangerous for these children, let  
alone one of them being your  
sister.

ORABELLA

That's my point, Belle! We don't  
have the time or resources to obey  
these morals.

BELLADONNA DUFORT

We have in the past. Why can't we  
now?

ORABELLA

We weren't in the middle of an  
active war.

BELLADONNA DUFORT

Are those grounds for putting  
these children in danger?

ORABELLA

Are they grounds for putting you  
in danger? Are they grounds for  
putting me in danger? Are they  
grounds for putting this company  
in danger? Are they grounds for  
putting our people in danger? Are  
they grounds for putting the  
people of these other nations in  
danger??

BELLADONNA DUFORT

No!



ORABELLA  
Nobody's safe here, Belle. Not  
them, not us, not anyone else.

BELLADONNA DUFORT  
(Sigh, a moment of  
silence.)  
Fine, you may be right. But why  
are you so adamant about this?

ORABELLA  
Because I know that they can do  
it. What, do you trust the people  
we have now more, who can hardly  
move their limbs from the  
arthritis?

BELLADONNA DUFORT  
What about personality wise?

ORABELLA  
This is my sister we're talking  
about.

BELLADONNA DUFORT

A montage comes on screen of their faces, the environment,  
the sounds, and the machine itself being made. We can see a  
clock ticking every once in a while to show how much time  
passes. They finish in no more than 10 minutes their time.

DIME, ZAVIEAR, QUINN  
Done!

BELLADONNA looks up, obviously surprised, so much so her  
reading glasses slide down a bit. DIME immediately looks up  
at her and gets up, and the other two follow suit, ZAVIEAR  
holding their little creation.

THE MACHINE ITSELF SEEMS STURDY AND DURABLE. QUINN TURNS  
THE ON SWITCH, WELL, ON- AND THE MACHINE BEGINS TO FLY.  
WITH ITS PROPELLER TWISTING, THE LITTLE BALL OF METAL  
BEGINS TO LEVITATE FROM ZAVIEAR'S CUPPED HANDS AND ABOUT 7  
FEET OFF THE GROUND, EVERYONE'S EYES GLUED TO IT. QUINN  
THEN USES THE REMOTE THAT THEY MADE AND TURNS A SWITCH, AND  
STEAM BEGINS TO RISE INTO THE WHISTLES AND IT MAKES A LOUD

SQUEAL. WITH THE REMOTE, THEY DEMONSTRATE HOW IT CAN FLY AROUND QUICKLY AS WELL. DIME PUTS A SCREWDRIVER BACK INTO HER TOOL BELT POUCH AND, ONCE AGAIN, LOOKS AT BELLADONNA.

DIME

How about now, Ms. Belladonna?

BELLADONNA is in shock. She is silent for a good couple seconds before she's able to speak again. In the background, QUINN lands the contraption back into ZAVIEAR's hands.

BELLADONNA DUFORT

...Very well. You three are extremely competent, I'll give you that. To be honest, I did not expect you to do it. My greatest technicians spend longer tightening a screw than you did creating an elaborate contraption; even Orabella. Just...

She makes a point to look all of them over.

BELLADONNA DUFORT

..How?

QUINN shrugs.

QUINN

Talent. Determination. Good wits.

At that, DIME busts out laughing. It starts slow, with her just letting out air from her mouth, but it grows to a roaring fit of laughter. Slowly, ZAVIEAR follows in her lead. BELLADONNA only grows more concerned.

BELLADONNA DUFORT

Okay, okay. I just- I just need to clarify one thing.

The laughter dies down, and the three stare at her in anticipation.

BELLADONNA DUFORT

Are you sure?

ZAVIEAR

Yes.

DIME

Hell yeah!

QUINN

Why not?

BELLADONNA DUFORT

(Sighs) Go pack up your stuff. Come back to my office at 11:00 hours tomorrow. I'll have a waiver for you to sign. I'll sign myself as a liable guardian.

The three cheer, high five each other, do small things to celebrate.

DIME

Thank you, Ma'am! We won't let you down.

The group walks to the door, talking as they go.

They are slowly starting to get to know each other more and even start establishing friendships/rivalries, but it should be noted that there is still a noticeable physical gap between them.

### SCENE 3 - CONTINUOUS AALIPE

WE SEE MULTIPLE SHOTS OF THE THREE IN THEIR SEPARATE ENVIRONMENTS AS THEY GET READY TO GO. THE ENVIRONMENTS SHOULD BE WELL COVERED WITH DIFFERENT ANGLES AS THIS IS PART OF THE WORLDBUILDING; WE SEE WHERE THE THREE ARE FROM AND HOW DIFFERENT THESE PLACES ARE DESPITE BEING WITHIN THE SAME COUNTRY BORDERS. THIS SHOULD TAKE A GOOD MINUTE OR TWO. WE WANT TO STUFF AS MUCH ABOUT THEIR INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERS IN HERE AS POSSIBLE. I'LL DESCRIBE WHAT THE SCENES LOOK LIKE IN MY HEAD AND WHAT EACH INDIVIDUAL CHARACTER WOULD PACK IN THIS SITUATION. TAKE INSPIRATION FROM IT, OR IT IS ALSO POSSIBLE TO DO IT EXACTLY AS WRITTEN.

In a house that just *looks* expensive, pearly white covers the grand pillars and columns the house is built with, even going so far as to have gold rimming on the windows, lavish fabric for the curtains, and baroque decorations for each

and every wall in the mansion, we come to a door that is as fancy as the rest, and going in it is cluttered with junk, pieces and parts, and it 100% has remnants of food that has past been eaten, yet the room has expensive and pristine adornments that juxtapose the overall feel of the room. Into a duffel bag, QUINN throws in their tools, some extra bits and bobs, a toaster(?), some clothes, gloves, and a book with a quill/some other writing device that they very well could have created. The book has very clear writing on it: "QUINN's JOURNAL". It looks kind of busted up, but it is obviously something that they care for as they place this carefully into the bag. They zip it up, blow out the candles, and shut the door with a lock.

ZAVIEAR's house is not actually a house, but instead an apartment. The camera stays on a black and white picture in a frame that shows only ZAVIEAR and another woman, who can safely be assumed as his mother. We then go to look at ZAVIEAR packing in his room, which is MUCH more organized, putting folders, a pencil pouch, a pouch that he packs some tools and screws and bolts into, clothes, and a comb, all into a messenger bag. He picks up the bag and balances it on his side, holding up the handle to help with the weight on his shoulder (because I know how it feels to wear one of these things), and begins to walk towards the front door. He sees the picture as he's walking and he stops in his tracks, hand on the doorknob. He stares at the picture for a minute, obviously conflicted, before he leaves and closes the door behind him.

DIME's house looks very puny in comparison to the other two, especially QUINN's house, but even ZAVIEAR's house as well. It's a humble little cottage that looks like it's built next to, possibly even on the edges of, a scrapyard. There's a tall stream of smoke that comes from the brick chimney, and there are visible pipes and infrastructure throughout the house. There may even be a loose wooden beam in the roof that's starting to show signs of rot. In the area, there seems to be a little community of tents and other houses in a similar condition to DIME's. Birds chirp quietly in the lot somewhere. In DIME's room, there's a bed, a chest (like a drawer), some more cabinets/shelves that are mounted onto the wall, and a work bench; all of this is crammed into something that would be better described as a storage closet rather than a bedroom. In her backpack, she puts in her tools, some changes of clothes, some hairbands, manuals and encyclopedic-like books of all

things technology, some sketchbooks/notebooks with writing utensils akin to that of a carpenter's pencil, her googles, and a pilot's hat. Her locket falls out of her shirt, and she pauses. DIME opens the locket-a practiced movement- and inside is a little piece of notebook paper that has been cut out with the words written in pencil, "Talent. Determination. Good wits". The writing is obviously cut out from some bigger work as there are pencil strokes on lines above and below, indicating the presence of more words that cannot be read. DIME smiles to herself and she closes the locket. She grabs the backpack, puts it on, and heads out, closing the door behind her.

THE CAMERA MOVES THROUGH THE KEYHOLE IN THE DOOR THAT SHOWS DIME WALKING UP TO THE DUFORT ENTERPRISES BUILDING.

SCENE 4 - DAY INT. BELLADONNA'S OFFICE

DIME walks into the room, ZAVIEAR and QUINN already seated. BELLADONNA is not in her office yet. DIME looks at the clock. It reads 10:47.

DIME

How did you guys get here so quickly?

QUINN

Well, I was going to get breakfast first, but he caught me as I left the house.

ZAVIEAR

I'm sorry your ginormous mansion is right in my path to get here, Quinn, and you happened to walk out as I was walking past. Breakfast is not necessary, and it wastes precious time that could be dedicated to your future. Plus, you were going to be late if I didn't intervene.

QUINN

How would you know, Zaviear?

ZAVIEAR

With how you acted yesterday  
during our entrance test? I can  
tell you slack off and take  
shortcuts wherever you can.

QUINN  
Okay? Chill, man.

DIME sucks in her cheeks as the room goes silent. She takes  
a seat. BELLADONNA rushes in, holding a folder and a hot  
drink cup. Despite her fast pace, she walks elegantly.

BELLADONNA DUFORT  
Hello, you three. I apologize for  
my tardiness. I had to grab these  
papers from the printing press  
downtown.  
(Quietly)  
Also, I needed coffee.

As BELLADONNA puts her stuff down and gets seated, QUINN  
turns to ZAVIEAR.

QUINN  
(Whispering)  
See?!

ZAVIEAR gives QUINN a side eye. DIME is holding in her  
laugh as best as she can.

ZAVIEAR  
Missus Dufort-

BELLADONNA DUFORT  
(Organizing papers, not  
looking up)  
Miss.

ZAVIEAR  
Sorry?

BELLADONNA DUFORT  
I'm not married. Miss.

QUINN MAKES A WEIRD FACE THAT ESSENTIALLY SAYS "HOW IS THAT  
RELEVANT?"

ZAVIEAR

Oh. Well, Ms. Dufort, when do we start?

BELLADONNA DUFORT  
That is the question.

She opens the folder on her desk and starts looking through the files.

BELLADONNA DUFORT  
Let's start from the beginning.  
I'm sure you realize, if nothing else than from the rations, that war is going on around us.

DIME  
I like where this is going!

ZAVIEAR  
I'm not sure I like where this is going...

BELLADONNA DUFORT  
Well, we're going to try to get involved this time.

QUINN  
What???

BELLADONNA DUFORT  
(She sighs)  
I'm about to say a lot of truths that you aren't going to want to hear. Are you all okay with that?

Silence fills the room as DIME puts both thumbs up and the other two don't disagree.

BELLADONNA DUFORT  
Alright then. Walk with me.

The four of them walk out of BELLADONNA's office and start going around Dufort Enterprises. Big pipes and the sound of steam squealing fills the industrial areas.

BELLADONNA DUFORT  
Dufort Enterprises, as a company, has been going through some rough times financially. We aren't

getting enough business with other corporations in Aalipe to run the company at a comfortable rate. Because of this, we started to sell machinery outside of the country.

DIME

You mean like the engines that make the Upper Level?

BELLADONNA DUFORT

Exactly. We sold some of those engines to other countries, as well as some other countries, but the country has decided to put a tariff on these exports.

QUINN

That sucks.

BELLADONNA DUFORT

Truly. Our business has run down the graphs like a kid sledding down a mountain. Which is why, a few months ago, we wrote a contract Zenbaq. It was essentially a decree of our alliance; they would pay a good price that could keep us afloat, and we would deliver quality products to them.

ZAVIEAR

Right.

BELLADONNA DUFORT

Well, our neighboring country Weldi did not enjoy that so much. They attempted to propose a business deal that would leave us without profit. Of course, we declined, and the government of Weldi got hurt in their feelings about it. So, as any "logical" group of people running an entire country would, they started a petty war on Zenbaq in order to



get rid of them, therefore their contract, and make Weldi the only available business partner.

DIME exhales a loooooooooong breath.

BELLADONNA DUFORT  
Which brings us to your job.

The group comes to a slowing stop into a large, dome-shaped room with a ship. This ship has sails, large wheels at the bottom, and dragon-like wings that are stiff. Once again, it is decorated with pipes and whistles and things of the sort. On the bow is the insignia of Dufort Enterprises: a nightshade flower.

BELLADONNA DUFORT  
This is your ship: The Sprout.

They all gawk at it for a minute whilst BELLADONNA continues her explanation.

BELLADONNA DUFORT  
You all, along with your ship, will attempt to cross the borders into Zenbaq to deliver goods, news about our situation, and reassurance regarding the continuation of our contract. You, as a group, will be known as "Delivery 1". You're the first group to do this, and you're delivering stuff, so... yeah.

QUINN  
What are the ship's features?

ZAVIEAR  
If needed, is it able to land in water?

DIME  
Does it have a manual of some sort???

BELLADONNA DUFORT  
(She lightly chuckles).

A curious group indeed. Yes, yes,  
I will tell you everything I know  
about it. Orabella, the lead  
technician for this project, will  
also give you information.

ORABELLA walks up next to BELLADONNA at the sound of her  
name. She waves at the group. Only DIME waves back.

BELLADONNA DUFORT  
Alright, so first, the ship has  
wheels for takeoff. They have a  
mechanism that makes them come in  
once the ship is in the air.

QUINN  
Does-

ORABELLA  
Yes, the wheels can eject if  
needed in an emergency.

QUINN goes quiet. They smile.

ORABELLA  
I'm sorry that there isn't exactly  
a "*manual*", persay, but I do have  
these notes that Bell- I mean, Ms.  
Dufort had me make a copy.

She hands the stapled-together sheets of paper to DIME.  
DIME excitedly takes them and starts flipping through with  
wide, sparkling eyes.

ORABELLA  
To answer your question...?

ZAVIEAR  
Zaviear- of Gorge.

ORABELLA  
Right. To answer your question,  
Zaviear, I'm not too sure if the  
whole thing could be in water, let  
alone stay buoyant.

DIME

Well, it's not supposed to go into  
the water, so it should be fine.  
Let's go!

DIME excitedly runs onto the \*temporary\* steps that hold the ship to the dock. QUINN follows right behind her, and ZAVIEAR follows behind both of them with a gasp. They explore the ship with "oohs" and "ahhs" at every little thing, from the pipes to the sails to the room they'll sleep in. They find that they cannot open the door labeled "CARGO" as it is behind a lock, and they don't really care to open it. All shrug simultaneously. Finally, DIME gets to the steering wheel. There are a couple shots of her in front of the big window that is the gate, soon to open tomorrow, looking at the EVENING sky and the clouds above the Ground Level of Aaliye, before looking to the Upper Level.

The final shot is DIME's face, in the evening, sparkling with both determination and wonder. It fades into her face the next morning, with her hat and goggles.

BELLADONNA DUFORT  
(On the side of the  
ship)  
Good luck. Remember to be careful.

ORABELLA  
Go get 'em, you rascals!

DIME shoots them a thumbs-up and a smile from behind the wheel. QUINN is literally climbing up to the sails to get a better view, and ZAVIEAR is on the quarterdeck with book and quill.

DIME  
Let's go, Delivery 1!

The glass opens up and the ship begins to take off. Pipes squealing, the wings flapping, and the sails. It takes off, and the screen fades to black. The End of the episode.

## A Mother's Lament

by Tamay Yarwaye

## **A Mother's Lament**

FADE IN:

INT. DINING ROOM - AFTERNOON

TOM (32, blonde hair) is making a serious decision with his wife, JESSICA (30, long brown hair), as she pleads with him. They are sitting at a round dining room table made of mahogany wood.

TOM

Jess, she can't stay here, ok, she's sick. We have to put her in a home.

JESS

Tom, that's my mother, I can't abandon her to strangers.

TOM

They're not strangers, they're professionals who can take care of her.

Jess stands up and gestures her right hand to her mother's bedroom upstairs.

JESS

(Teary)

We can take care of her! We can figure something out. I-I'll stay with her in the morning and, and, and you can—

Tom stands up and slams his hands on the dining room table, raising his voice.

TOM

(Shouts)

We have kids, Jessie! We have kids to take care of, okay? We have two four-year-olds who need attention and care.

Jess lowers her hand and head.

TOM

We can't take care of your mother alone. You... can't take care of your mother alone. Baby, please, let's just... let's focus on our kids okay?

JESS

(Looks up)

Tom, she's my mother.

TOM

(In Defeat)

My God, Jess! I can't do this if you're only going to think about you. What don't you get? Your mother is sick! And I can't keep giving up my life for her.

Jess stands up and moves around the table reaching to cup Tom's face.

JESS

Tommy, please-

Tom moves her hands away and shakes his head.

TOM

I can't, Jess. I need to get out of the house for a little bit. Okay? Please, don't leave the kids alone with your mom.

JESS

Tom-

TOM

Jess. I'm serious.

Tom gently grabs Jess' head and kisses her forehead before tucking her hair behind her ears.

TOM (CONT'D)

I'll be back. Okay?

JESS

Okay.

Tom walks towards the front door through the foyer, grabs his coat from the coat hanger, and leaves the house.

Jess watches him leave and slumps into a chair, burying her face into her hands.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

INT. BAR - EVENING

Tom is sitting at a bar countertop with his head hanging down when a bartender, SEAN (33), approaches him.

SEAN

(Prolonged)

Tom!

TOM

(Flat)

Hey, Sean.

SEAN

Where have you been? C'mon man, we've been missing you on Thursday game nights.

TOM

Yeah, I know, I just... you know I've been busy with Jess' mother, man. It's driving me insane.

Sean pours a drink from behind the bar.

SEAN

Here. Have a beer.

Sean slides the beer to Tom.

TOM

(Catches beer)

Thanks, Sean. Hey, turn on the game for me. I have my bets for tonight. New York Jets.

TOM drinks his beer, places it down, and stares at it.

JUMP CUT TO: TOM PICKING UP HIS 4TH GLASS.

INT. BAR - CONTINUOUS

Sean approaches Tom while wiping his hand with a rag.

SEAN

(Sets down rag)

Hey, buddy, why don't you go home, okay? It's been 2 hours and it's 8 pm. I'm sure Jess is worried.

TOM

(Rubs forehead)

Yeah... yeah, I'll see you next week.

Tom takes one last sip and heads out of the bar. He gets in his car and starts driving away.

JUMP CUT TO: TOM IS PULLING INTO HIS NEIGHBORHOOD STREET

EXT. NEIGHBORHOOD STREET - NIGHT

TOM sees police down his street and motions to call his wife when he sees 6 missed calls from her on his car screen. He calls her back and she doesn't answer. TOM pulls up to his driveway when he realizes the police are outside his house and quickly gets out.

TOM

(Panicked)

Sir. S-

An EMT pushes Tom back and he reaches out for another police officer.

TOM

Sir, what's going on? This is my house.

POLICE OFFICER 1

Sir, we need you to stay back, there's been a causality on the scene.

TOM

(Stutters)

W-What?

POLICE OFFICER 1

I said-

TOM

What causality? Who died?

POLICE OFFICER 1

Are you the father? Mr. Davis?

TOM

(Horrified)

No... no no no.

Tom pushes the police officer and heads toward his house.



POLICE OFFICER 1

(Shouts)

You can't go in there!

Tom takes off running and enters his house.

INT. FOYER - CONTINUOUS

TOM

(Shouts)

Jess! Jess, where are you?

Tom hears wailing from the back screen door in the dining room and walks towards it.

I/E. DINING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Jess is holding their bloodied son SAM (4, Blonde hair), and rocking back and forth while the EMTS try to separate them.

TOM

(Voice Cracks)

Tom steps back holding back tears with his hands running through his hair. Jess looks up and reaches for Tom.

JESS

(Crying, in shock)

Tom? Tommy, please. Tell them to go away.

Tom sees Sam's twin brother, MIKE (4, brown hair), and goes to hug him.

MIKEY

(Reaching for Tom) What's happening?

TOM

(Hugs Mikey)

It's ok, It's ok.

MIKEY

(Crying)

Daddy, I'm scared.

TOM

(Rocking)

It's going to be ok.

CUT TO: SAM'S FUNERAL WAKE

INT. CHURCH HALL - SEVERAL DAYS LATER

The church hall is packed for Sam's wake as people are leaving. Tom approaches Jess who is sitting down within the seats.

TOM

(Sternly)

C'mon. Jess. Come on. We need to go.

JESS

(Dazed, Shocked)

I can't leave him.

TOM

The funeral procession is waiting for us. We have to go.

Tom takes Jess' hand and helps her up.

TOM

Mikey is already waiting for us in the car.

JESS

(Nods)

Okay.

Tom rests his hands on Jess' shoulders and guides her to the exit.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN: JESS IS GETTING IN BED

INT. MASTER BEDROOM - EVENING

Tom is leaving while putting on his jacket.

JESS

Where are you going?

TOM

To the bar.

JESS

We just came from a funeral, and you're going to the bar?

TOM

Do you have a problem with that?

JESS

(Pauses)

No.

Tom leaves the room and Jess is left staring at the door.

BEGIN MONTAGE:

-TOM leaves a second time while JESS watches him.

-TOM leaves while JESS is making dinner.

-JESS watches TOM leave while tucking MIKEY into bed.

-TOM leaves while JESS is entering the house.

-TOM leaves while JESS is making breakfast.

-TOM leaves while JESS is taking a shower.

END MONTAGE.

CUT TO:

INT. DINING ROOM - NIGHT

Tom enters the dining room and meets Jess at the dining room table.

TOM

(Slightly drunk)

What are you doing up so late?

JESS

(Tapping toe)

What are you doing coming back so late?

TOM

What does that have to do with you?

JESS

(Raising voice)

It has everything to do with me. With me and your son. Did you forget that?  
That you have a son?

TOM

(Bitterly)

Well, I used to have two so... I don't know, maybe the second one died while I  
was out again.

JESS

(Sternly)

You cannot keep blaming me for this.

TOM

But I can, Jess. I can.

JESS

(In disbelief)

How about you move on from your petty bitterness and focus on caring for the  
son you still have left? How do you think he's going to feel when he grows up  
and has to say his father was a filthy alcoholic who drank and came home after  
9 pm every night?

TOM

And how do you think he's going to feel when he grows up and has to tell  
everyone that his mother is the reason why his twin brother is dead?

JESS

That's not fair-

TOM

(Shouts)

No. What's not fair is that you get to act like a saint in all this when I  
begged you for months to put your mother in a home, Jessica! I begged, and  
begged, and pleaded for you to get her some professional help! Why did it take  
the death of our child for you to see that? Why did it take losing my son for  
you to accept that she's sick? Huh, Jessica? Huh!

JESS

It's not fair for you to-

TOM

I want a divorce.

JESS

(In shock) You don't mean that.

TOM

I want a divorce... and I want custody.

JESS

(Angry)

You can't do that!

TOM

I can't be with you anymore. Every day, I wake up and think about what if we had just put her in a home, what if I had stayed, what if you had done what I asked, just... what if?

Tom sighs and starts rubbing his temples while Jess sinks her head in her hands. Moments pass in silence as Tom paces.

JESS

(Raises her head, teary)

I'm begging you, Tom, please. He's my son too.

TOM

(Stops pacing)

Did you know that your son cries himself to sleep every night? I'm not a drunk Jess, and our son knows that. He knows that because every night I go to his room and stay with him until he falls asleep. He knows that because I'm the one who makes sure he's fed every morning before going to school. I'm sorry that you don't, I'm sorry, that you're too busy mourning what you caused to see what's happening in your home.

JESS

(Stern)

I see our son.

TOM

Do you?

Tom walks to a dresser in the foyer, pulls a stack of papers from one of the drawers, and walks to the dining room table.

TOM

(Sets papers down)

Ask him who he wants to stay with.

JESS

(Looks at papers then back at Tom) What are those?

TOM

They're divorce papers, Jess. I said I wanted a divorce and I meant it.

JESS

You can't do this Tom, please.

TOM

Just ask him, Jess. If he says you then you'll get full-time custody and I'll get visitation rights.

JESS

And if he says you?

TOM

Then it's the other way around.

JESS

(Pause)

I'll ask him tomorrow, but please just... reconsider this.

Jess stands up and cups Tom's hands in hers.

JESS

Please.

TOM

(Strokes her hair)

Let's go to bed, Jess. I'll sleep on the couch.

Tom leads Jess through the foyer and up the stairs. The camera lingers on the empty stairs and focuses on the multiple family pictures on the staircase wall.

CUT TO:

INT. MASTER BEDROOM - LATER

The camera is on Jess as she lies in the dark. After moments pass she turns to face the wall. The angle switches to behind her. An alarm goes off and the time has changed from night to day. She's gotten no sleep.

INT. MASTER BEDROOM - THE NEXT DAY

Jess turns off the alarm and gets out of bed. She brushes her teeth and puts on a robe before going to her son's room.

INT. UPSTAIRS HALLWAY

Jess knocks on the door of Mikey's room.

JESS

(Raises voice slightly)

Mikey! Honey! Are you up for school? Your dad is going to be here in 15 minutes!

MIKEY

(Opens door)

I'm ready!

JESS

Ok, that's great, baby.

Jess gently turns Mikey and guides him from behind down the stairs to the kitchen.

JESS

Let's eat breakfast.

CUT TO:

INT. KITCHEN - MOMENTS LATER

Jess grabs the milk out of the refrigerator and pours it into a bowl of cereal. She then turns around and slides the bowl to Mikey and hands him a spoon.

JESS

Hurry up and eat, okay? You don't want to be late.

MIKEY

(Stirs cereal, dejected)

Ok.

JESS

(Stares)

What's wrong honey?

MIKEY

It's just that Dad usually gives me cinnamon toast crunch... honey nut cheerios were Sammy's favorite.

JESS

(Stutters)

I'm sorry baby, I can make you a new bowl of cereal.

MIKEY

No, it's ok. I'll eat this one.

Moments of awkward silence pass before Jess walks around the kitchen island and sits with Mikey on a high stool. Jess begins to rub Mikey's hair.

JESS

(Breath hitches)

Mikey?

MIKEY

Yes, mom?

JESS

If you had to stay with one of us... who would you stay with?

MIKEY stares at Jess unsure of what to say.

JESS

You can be honest, baby.

MIKEY

I... want to stay with Dad.

Jess bites her lip and looks up blinking back tears.

MIKEY

I'm sorry, Mommy-



JESS

(Pulls Mikey in for a hug)

Don't apologize, baby. It's ok, I'm happy you were honest.

Jess releases Mikey from the hug and steps off the stool. As she grabs Mikey and sets him down, Tom's car is heard pulling into the driveway. Jess crouches down and brushes back Mikey's hair with her fingers.

JESS

(Kisses forehead)

Be good at school, ok? Say hi to your dad for me.

MIKEY

(Smiling)

Ok! Bye Mommy!

Jess turns her head as she watches Mikey leave through the front door and follows him to lock it. She then goes to the dresser in the foyer, pulls out a stack of papers, and grabs a pen. She walks to the dining room table and sits down as she begins to sign multiple documents. After several moments, Jess abruptly gets up and walks to the front door while grabbing her keys and bags. She exits through the door and the camera lingers at the closed door.

EXT. NURSING HOME PARKING LOT - DAY

Jess pulls into a parking space and steps out after parking. She stands dejectedly as she stares up at the name of the nursing home before she begins walking in.

INT. NURSING HOME LOBBY - MOMENTS LATER

Jess walks to the front desk and sets her hands on the countertop.

JESS

(Faltering smile)

Hi! I'm here for Debra Williams.

NURSE 1

Are you a family member?

JESS

Yes, I'm her daughter.

NURSE 1

If you could sign these papers for me, I'll give you a visitation badge and you visit her in room 307.

JESS

(Taking papers)

Thank you.

Jess signs the papers, receives her badge, and goes to room 307.

INT. NURSING HOME HALLWAY

Jess knocks on the door and slightly creaks it open.

JESS

Mom?

INT. NURSING HOME ROOM 307 - CONTINUOUS

Jess steps inside the room and closes the door behind her. She sees her mom, DEBRA (71, blonde-gray hair), sleeping and pulls a chair to her bedside.

JESS

Hey, mom. I know it's been a while. I just... I just needed some time to myself.

Jess looks down and twiddles her fingers.

JESS

Me and Tom are getting a divorce... and he's taking Mikey. I can't lose my family, Mom. I keep losing people and I... I can't lose anymore.

Jess takes a deep breath and wipes a tear from her cheeks, sitting back against the chair. Moments pass as she watches her mom sleep when her monitor starts to flatline. Jess jolts up and begins to panic.

JESS

Mom? Mom? Mom, get up!

Jess jumps out of her seat and opens the room door.

JESS

NURSE! I NEED A NURSE! OR A DOCTOR! MY MOM IS FLATLINING!

Moments pass before some nurses come into the room and some start to usher Jess out of the room.

JESS

(Stuttering)

Wait, no. No, please, please, I need to see my mom.

NURSE 2

Ms. Please step out of the room, we'll update you when we're done.

The nurse gently pushes Jess out of the room and shuts the door. Minutes pass of Jess pacing back and forth in front of the door while medical professionals enter and exit. Finally, a nurse walks out of the room.

NURSE 3

Are you Jessica Davis?

JESS

Yes. Please, how's my mom?

NURSE 3

And are you the daughter of Debra Williams?

JESS

(Frantic)

Yes, Yes. Please, now how's my mom?

NURSE 3

(Pauses)

Your mother passed away at 11:24 AM.

JESS

(Breaks down in tears)

No, no no no no no.

Jess collapses on the floor holding her head in her hands.

NURSE 3

(Hesitant)

If you would, please sign these forms before you leave. I'll leave them here for you. I'm sorry for your loss.

Jess is left wailing on the ground, her breath hitching in between.

INT. FOYER - AFTERNOON

Jess opens the door and walks into the house stopping at the bottom of the staircase when she sees Tom sitting at the dining room table.

TOM

You signed the papers.

JESS

I did.

Tom notices that Jess seems off-put.

TOM

Is everything okay? Jess, what's wrong?

JESS

(Starts crying)

My mom just died.

Tom's face falls as he gets up and walks over to Jess, hugging her.

TOM

(Pulling away)

I'm so sorry. Go to sleep. I'll bring you some medicine and water, it looks like you've been crying too much.

JESS

(Weakly)

Ok.

Jess retreats upstairs to their room while Tom stands and watches her ascend.

INT. MASTER BEDROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Jess lies in bed and begins to sit upright as Tom enters the room with the medicine and water. Tom goes to sit next to her and gives her the medicine and water.

TOM

(Extending hands)

Here. Make sure you drink enough water.

JESS

Thank you.

Jess swallows the medicine proceeding to take extra gulps of water. She holds the water in her hands and they sit for a few seconds.

TOM

I'm going to take a shower. Are you ok?

Jess slowly nods. Tom proceeds to go into the bathroom and the shower starts. The camera refocuses on Jess spaced out on the bed.

FADE OUT.

FADE IN:

TITLE CARD: "3 MONTHS LATER"

INT. FOYER

Tom gently pushes Mikey out the front door with his bags and turns around at the sound of stairs creaking.

TOM

Jess?

JESS

Why didn't you wake me up?

TOM

I thought it'd be easier.

Jess continues walking down the stairs until she reaches the bottom.

JESS

Not saying goodbye is easier?

TOM

No, leaving so that you can move on faster is easier.

JESS

(Starts crying)

What if I'm not ready to move on?

TOM

Jess, it's too late. Please, just close the door behind us.

JESS

(Quietly)

Tom...

Tom steps towards Jess and brushes her hair back with his fingers. He kisses her forehead for a long second before letting go and walking out the door.

JESS

(Reaching for Tom, voice breaks)

Tom. Tommy, please stay. You can't leave me like this. Tommy, please!

TOM

Goodbye, Jessica.

Without turning around Tom closes the front door and Jess falls to the ground crying. She crawls to the front door and rests her back on it.

INT. MASTER BEDROOM - NIGHT

Jess is lying on her back unmoving. She starts to cry and turns to the right side of the bed which is now unfamiliarly empty. She picks up the phone to call Tom. The call clicks off and she calls back 3 times with no answer. Jess throws the phone at the wall, proceeds to the bathroom, and slams the door behind her.

EXT. CEMETERY - SEVERAL DAYS LATER

Jess is walking along the gravesites with 2 bouquets and stops in front of 2 similar-looking headstones. She crouches down between the 2 and places a bouquet on each one of the gravesites.

JESS

(Crying)

I'm so sorry. I failed you both. This is all my fault.

The camera reveals the headstones to belong to Debra and Sam as Jess stands up. She deeply inhales and exhales before walking back to her car.

INT. CAR - MOMENTS LATER

Jess calls Tom and the call rings before being sent to voicemail. Jess hangs up and calls back 2 more times. She finally leaves a voicemail on the 4th call. The dial tone beeps and Jess begins pulling off. Jess isn't seen saying the voicemail.

JESS (V.O.)

Hi, Tom. I know you're not answering to help me move on... to help me adjust,  
but I can't do it anymore.

Jess is driving down multiple streets.

JESS (V.O.)

(Chuckles)

I tried... I tried to help my mom and God knows how that ended. I tried to be there for Mikey, but... I wasn't. I don't even know something as simple as his favorite cereal.

EXT. BRIDGE - CONTINUOUS

Jess arrives at a bridge and gets out of her car.

JESS (V.O.)

I left letters on the table for each birthday, each graduation, and... I left multiple CDs in case he wanted to see me again... in case you wanted to see me again.

Jess steps on the wall of the bridge swaying with a dead expression.

JESS (V.O.)

Tell Mikey that I love him and that I'll always love him.

Tears start to stream down Jess' face.

JESS (V.O.)

I love you, Tom.

Jess leans off the wall of the bridge, falling, unable to be seen past the wall's view.

JESS (V.O.)

Bye.

CUT TO: BLACK

# Playwriting

## Columbus State University Selections

Let them be Sea Captains

by Katelyn McCormick & Emma Gaines



LET THEM BE SEA CAPTAINS

A One-Act Play

## Cast of Characters

### Margaret Fuller:

A bright, witty, highly intellectual woman in her 20-30s. She is a skilled writer. She is independent, intimidating, and blunt, but this is balanced by her openness and playfulness.

### Mrs. Emerson:

The well-read wife of Emerson. She is attentive and observant. She reflects the role of the traditional 1800s woman. 20s-30s

### Ralph Waldo Emerson:

An intelligent, romantic writer. The leader of the Transcendentalist movement and founder of the Dial. Though he was progressive for his time, he moves through life cautiously, careful not to rock the boat too much. 20s-30s

### Scene

The Emerson Household. On stage right is Emerson's study, the ship wheel and the garden are center stage, and the Emerson dining room is stage left.

### Time

1800's New England.

## SCENE 1

(Dark blue LEDs slowly become brighter. Lights come up to reveal FULLER lying center stage, surrounded by scattered papers. A sea captain's hat rests next to the wheel of a ship. There are noises of rushing water and a creaking noise. FULLER bolts upright like she's woken up from an intense dream. She pats her head and gasps, where did her hat go?)

(A newspaper headline: "**MARGARET FULLER DEAD AT 40. AMERICA'S FIRST FEMINIST LOST AT SEA.**" is projected.)

("FEMINIST" CHANGES TO EVERY TITLE SHE OWNS UNTIL THE EMERSON QUOTE appears on screen:

- America's first female editor
- First female war correspondent
- Writer
- Journalist
- Translator
- Critic)

**FULLER**

No...

(She looks around at all of the scattered papers surrounding her. She frantically attempts to gather them, but of course, cannot collect them all. As she gathers the papers, she begins to read.)

(A quote projects: "**THE ONLY PERSON YOU ARE DESTINED TO BECOME IS THE PERSON YOU DECIDE TO BE.**")

**FULLER**

(As if the wind was struck out of her lungs.)

These aren't my words.

(Rage begins to shake her body and voice.)

Who did this?

(Underneath the quote, an attribution to **-RALPH WALDO EMERSON** should appear.)

**FULLER**

(Shaking her papers and yelling up at the ocean's surface.) WHO DID THIS?!

(Another headline flashes:  
**"FULLER'S MEMOIRS EDITED &**

**PUBLISHED BY EMERSON")**

**FULLER**

*(Still towards the surface.)*

This is not my voice!

What...is this?

What did they make of me?

Who does he think he is?

WHO DOES HE THINK HE IS?

*(Blackout, but the LEDs stay on. FULLER storms off stage right, grabbing the sea captain's hat. While backstage, she grabs her bag.)*

*(A "spotlight"/very direct light illuminates Emerson's study as FULLER storms in. EMERSON sits at his desk, writing.)*

**FULLER**

WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?

*(He stands up calmly to greet her. Kill the blue LEDs. EMERSON extends his hand.)*

**EMERSON**

I'm Ralph Waldo Emerson

*(The lights come up fully.)*

*(FULLER is stammering a bit.)*

**FULLER**

It's a pleasure to meet you-

*(EMERSON lifts her hand up to his lips, but FULLER grips his hand and continues the handshake.)*

Mr. Emerson.

*(An awkward pause.)*

**EMERSON**

You know my wife of course.

*(FULLER quickly shoves the memoir papers in her bag & shuffles the hat to her off-hand.)*

Of course.

*(He motions for her to sit down in the sitting chair on the front side of the desk. They look at each other. FULLER twitches.)*

**FULLER**

The two of you have a lovely garden.

**EMERSON**

Oh thank you. I've been tending to the irises lately...

**FULLER**

I was admiring them on my walk this morning.

**EMERSON**

There aren't as many gardeners, or women, as accomplished as Lidian is.

*(Awkward pause.)*

She mentioned that you tutored your brothers when they were young.

**FULLER**

That I did. They've both attended Harvard; very prestigious...

*(EMERSON is impressed. FULLER says the next lines with some humor. She's very aware of the way things are in the world for women. She's come to terms with it, but she's far from content.)*

**FULLER**

Or so I've heard. I wasn't able to attend Harvard or any college. As you know, they don't accept women into college...

*(EMERSON is visibly uncomfortable.)*

**FULLER**

Yet.

*(EMERSON is practically squirming now.)*

**FULLER**

So now I just write. Extremely thoughtful, critical essays and poems.

**EMERSON**

Oh yes, you were published in the *North American Review*.

*(FULLER is getting tired of small talk. Her wit and intelligence are becoming apparent as she becomes more comfortable around EMERSON. FULLER is playful, and proud that he's aware of her accomplishments. This interaction between them moves very quickly; it's banter.)*

**FULLER**

Correct. Mrs. Emerson mentioned it to you?

**EMERSON**

Correct.

*(They've made a connection; this scares EMERSON. EMERSON stands up abruptly. As he says his next line, he's turning away from her to make himself less vulnerable.)*

**EMERSON**

Since you'll be with us in Concord for the next few weeks, you might come listen in on one of our club meetings.

*(FULLER is getting cocky. She is demure but sarcastic at the same time. Almost condescending.)*

**FULLER**

Ooh, the club?

*(He turns to look at her. EMERSON isn't picking up what she's putting down.)*

**EMERSON**

The club.. surely you've heard of the Transcendentalists..by now?

**FULLER**

*(She's trying to impress EMERSON here.)*

This may come as a shock to you, but I do keep abreast of current trends, movements, societal, political, and religious issues, and I am aware of the group comprised of yourself, Thoreau, Alcott, Parker, Brownson, Ripley, and Clarke. I agree with your belief in the inalienable integrity of man, and I consider myself something of a transcendentalist. I think you're making wonderful progress, but I think I'll need to do more than "listen in" at the next meeting.

*(EMERSON is slightly taken aback. He's now aware of where FULLER stands. FULLER should look smug now. Show a definite shift in body language from when she initially sat down.)*

*(EMERSON doesn't know how to level with a woman who can level with him. He wants to talk about this but doesn't know how, or even if he should.)*

**EMERSON**

You..have a firm handshake.

*(FULLER nods. Blackout.)*

SCENE 2

*(Lights up on FULLER in the garden standing center stage, facing stage right, towards Emerson's study. EMERSON is sitting in his chair in the study, reading or writing.)*

**FULLER**

Dear Mr. Emerson, a thousand thanks to you and Mrs. Emerson for welcoming me so generously into your home; It was the most rejuvenating three weeks of my life.

*(The following interaction is silently pantomimed as FULLER says her lines: MRS. EMERSON enters the study with a letter in her hand. EMERSON greets her. She hands him the letter, which he begins to open. As he opens the letter, MRS. EMERSON kneels by the side of his chair, resting her head on his arm as he reads. EMERSON pauses, says something to MRS. EMERSON. They stand up and exit the study. They enter stage right with their arms linked; they're taking one of their famous strolls in the garden. As they enter, green, yellow, and pink LEDs come on. MRS. EMERSON is holding the letter "reading" it aloud to EMERSON.)*

Though I am embarrassed to write it, I must make a confession: I find you fascinating. I have a question that I couldn't bring myself to ask you while I was visiting. Formality and, dare I say it, a sense of awe for your renown as a speaker and writer prohibited me from questioning you. I fear that breathing in the Transcendentalist air of Concord has gone to my head; I am invigorated, but quite disoriented. If I may, I would ask that you lend me your ear before I go stark-raving mad.

*(EMERSON leaves MRS. EMERSON and meets FULLER where she stands. Kill the LEDs. They are facing each other, but in the eye contact and body language it should feel like there is a great distance between them.)*

Sincerely, Margaret Fuller.



**EMERSON**

Dear Ms. Fuller, I was pleased to get to know you personally. You've fit right in, but you've also caused quite here among us.

I've spoken to Mrs. Emerson about it-

*(He pauses here and realizes that he hasn't actually spoken to Mrs. Emerson. Bring the garden LEDs back up as he runs over to MRS. EMERSON.)*

Would you like Ms. Fuller to visit again?

**MRS. EMERSON**

*(Cheerfully)*

I have no qualms with the proposition.

**EMERSON**

Thank you, darling.

*(He gives her a quick little hug and runs back to join FULLER.)*

I have spoken to Mrs. Emerson, and we would be more than happy for you to pay us another visit when your schedule permits it. You-your question has piqued my interest. Lord willing, if I am as diligent in caring for them as I should be, the roses will be in bloom for your inspection and appreciation. God bless you,  
Ralph Waldo Emerson.

*(Blackout)*

SCENE 3

*(There's a soft knock at Emerson's office door. EMERSON should be seated at his desk writing or reading. He is wearing spectacles.)*

**EMERSON**

Yes, my love?

*(MRS. EMERSON cracks the door open & pokes her head in.)*

**MRS. EMERSON**

*(She smiles.)*

How did you know it was me and not one of the children?

**EMERSON**

I know my wife well enough to know her knock.

*(MRS. EMERSON completely opens the door, revealing an eager FULLER. She briskly walks in.)*

*(EMERSON stands from his desk to greet her.)*

**EMERSON**

Ah! Ms. Fuller! What a pleasure to see you again-

*(She forcefully grabs EMERSON'S hand & shakes it firmly, stunning him again. FULLER sits down. MRS. EMERSON is amused.)*

*(FULLER snaps out of her thoughts.  
More so, one particular, heavy thought.)*

**FULLER**

Oh! Mrs. Emerson, I almost forgot to thank-

**MRS. EMERSON**

*(Understanding. No slight in her voice.)*

That's quite all right.

*(EMERSON gives MRS. EMERSON a concerned look. She gives a nod of reassurance.)*

*(FULLER is twitching in her seat: anxious to talk to EMERSON.)*

**MRS. EMERSON**

I'll leave you to it.

*(She exits, leaving a worried EMERSON & antsy FULLER.)*

**EMERSON**

Ms. Fuller, I am so glad you were able to make it. However, I can't help but notice that you seem a bit..troubled. I assume this is about what you mentioned in your letter.

*(FULLER'S head is propped on her hand. She stares off into nothing.)*

**FULLER**

Yes, and I am afraid you, and only you can douse this fire of a

thought that has been burning me up lately. I feel feverish.

**EMERSON**

I don't understand.

**FULLER**

Nobody else but you, I believe, matches my level of intellect.

*(FULLER now stares at him. He shifts. He is still not quite accustomed to her boldness.)*

*(Awkward silence.)*

**FULLER**

I need to pick your brain.

*(Still awkward.)*

**FULLER**

I need counsel. Answers.

**EMERSON**

*(His demeanor softens. He chuckles.)*

Well, Lord willing, I can help snuff these flames of yours.  
Tell me, what burdens you?

*(EMERSON is still standing but now leans on his desk. FULLER looks up at him.)*

*(This line of questioning should be quick-paced.)*

**FULLER**

Your wife is beautiful.

**EMERSON**

Indeed.

**FULLER**

And you're in love with her?

**EMERSON**

Completely. Utterly.

**FULLER**

I've noticed.

**EMERSON**

That comes as no surprise to me.

**FULLER**

And she is your muse?

**EMERSON**

Absolutely. Why this interrogation?

**FULLER**

Is that why you love her?

**EMERSON**

*(Confused. Not following.)*

I suggest you ask your burning question before your head turns  
to ash.

**FULLER**

Is that her purpose?

**EMERSON**

*(Taken aback.)*

Ms.Fuller ...I'm... I'm not God. Can I determine her purpose?

**FULLER**

I believe that you can.

*(He sits. He fiddles with a fountain pen. They  
stare.)*

*(Pause.)*

**EMERSON**

Lidian determines that for herself, much like the rest of us.

**FULLER**

As much as the rest of us are able. As much as the world allows  
us.

**EMERSON**

Indeed.

**FULLER**

Then we are in agreement.

**EMERSON**

Are we?

**FULLER**

*(Nods.)*

Things must change.

**EMERSON**

*(Almost offended. Lost.)*

I..like my wife the way she is.

*(FULLER laughs.)*

**FULLER**

I'm not speaking of your wife, though she is  
included.

*(He remains quiet.)*

*(After a moment of this quiet, FULLER stands. She plucks the fountain pen from EMERSON'S hands & tosses it to the floor. She immediately blows out a candle. There should be a total blackout.)*

**FULLER**

*(Heard, but not seen.)*

Find your pen.

**EMERSON**

It's dark.

**FULLER**

Find your pen.

**EMERSON**

I can't see.

**FULLER**

Mr. Emerson.

*(He sighs loudly & leaves his desk in an attempt to find his pen.  
He should be crawling on his hands & knees. This should only be  
heard, not seen.*

*A moment of rustling goes by.)*

**FULLER**

Can you find it?

**EMERSON**

Not quite.

*(FULLER strikes a match & lights the candle she extinguished.  
Lights come up from the blackout, revealing EMERSON still on  
his hands & knees on the ground.)*

*(He quickly gets up, clears his throat, & brushes his clothes.  
He sees the pen next to his feet & picks it up.)*

**FULLER**

You found your pen.

*(EMERSON goes back & sits at his desk.)*

**EMERSON**

*(Still feeling a bit silly.)  
And?*

**FULLER**

Something had to change.

*(She remains standing.)*

**FULLER**

Without these matches, without this light, you couldn't have found your pen.

**EMERSON**

Yes, I suppose you're correct.

**FULLER**

If you have knowledge, let others light their candles in it. Let women light their candles so they can find their pens.

*(Let this hang in the air. EMERSON stares at FULLER in awe.)*

**EMERSON**

Have you..found your pen?

**FULLER**

I think I have. I had sort of an early start, finding my pen. I'm grateful that I was raised in a home where my brothers and I were raised as equals.

*(EMERSON stands from his desk, thinking.)*

**FULLER**

A house is no home unless it contains food and fire for the mind as well as for the body. Today, the progress of the world hinges upon our belief in the capability of women. But Waldo, how can a woman find her purpose in such a dark room? How shall she do it?

*(A pause. Fuller is being extremely vulnerable here)*

I feel lost...sometimes I can't sense the brightness of progression and... I feel suffocated. Very early on, I knew the only object in my life was to grow, to become brighter. I realized that if I were to become so bright, to become a beacon for women, I could fan the flames which all women do indeed carry.

**EMERSON**

*(Astonished, smiling. He doesn't know how to respond.)*

Margaret, I've never met a woman so uncommon as you.

**FULLER**

I will not be common, because it is my right to be uncommon. I must be myself. I cannot change myself any longer. Not for you.

**EMERSON**

Then remain.

*(EMERSON walks to FULLER. She turns to face him when he gets close. They pause to look at one another. He finally takes her hand & shakes it. They smile.)*

**FULLER**

I am not just a muse.

**EMERSON**

A fact that you have so clearly articulated.

*(Their hands are frozen in the handshake, just no longer shaking. The eye contact should be unbreakable.)*

**FULLER**

*(FULLER removes her hand)*

A fact that I shall continue to articulate.

*(Blackout.)*



*(Lights up on FULLER and EMERSON sitting in the study. This scene is meant to show the passing of time and the sense of camaraderie they've developed from working and talking together. This is a late night in the study, they're punchy, delusional, and everything is funny. This scene should move very quickly.)*

**FULLER**

And he was perfectly congenial to me in person, but what he wrote about me in Godey's?

**EMERSON**

What did he write??

**FULLER**

OH. It was scathing.

**EMERSON**

Truly?

**FULLER**

It was truly scathing. Now, I know my ego-

**EMERSON**

Oh spare me, if we begin discussing the magnitude of your ego- *(FULLER feigns offense.)*

-we would be here all night.

**FULLER**

We have been here all night.

*(This sends them into fits of laughter. Eventually, they pull it together enough for Fuller to resume her story.)*

**FULLER**

My ego-

*(She breaks off into giggles, regains her composure, and stands up from her chair. She says the next line with humor, almost like she's reciting a dramatic monologue.)*

-My ego and my vanity have utterly convinced me that I am some sought-after queen of renowned resplendence, some unforgettable,

magnificent muse..

**EMERSON**

One more!

**FULLER**

..some picturesque pinnacle of beauty!

*(She sits back down.)*

**FULLER**

But on days when I feel rational, I consider myself merely above average.

**EMERSON**

A noble concession.

**FULLER**

Thank you, I thought so. Anyway, I had no premonition that my appearance would be a matter of such great importance, so imagine my shock when Poe writes "Nothing remarkable about the figure, an upper lip that involuntarily-

**EMERSON**

Habitually!

**FULLER**

Thanks. Involuntarily, habitually, "conveys the impression of a sneer."

**EMERSON**

Is that all?

**FULLER**

NAY, I also, allegedly, possess a CAPACIOUS FOREHEAD.

*(They're back to laughing. Through her laughter FULLER manages to say her next line.)*

**FULLER**

Forgive me, but Edgar Allan Poe isn't exactly the Greek ideal.

**EMERSON**

He's no Helen of Troy

*(As they laugh, MRS. EMERSON walks in.)*

**FULLER**

Not even a Henry of Troy!

**MRS. EMERSON**

Waldo?

*(They both turn to look at her, struggling to get serious.)*

**EMERSON**

Yes, Lidian?

**MRS. EMERSON**

The children are asleep. You said we would go on a walk.  
I've just been reading, waiting on you. But if the two of  
you are discussing something important...

**EMERSON**

*(Apologetically)*

Oh Lidian-

**FULLER**

OH! What are you reading??

**MRS. EMERSON**

*The Inspector General*

*(They look at her blankly.)*

**MRS. EMERSON**

The play...by Nikolai Gogol?

**FULLER**

I haven't gotten around to reading it yet.

**EMERSON**

Yes, you've been much too busy.

*(MRS. EMERSON and FULLER look at him.)*

**EMERSON**

Fretting about your capacious forehead.

*(Hilarious to EMERSON and FULLER, but MRS. EMERSON is left out of the joke. She begins to say something but thinks better of it, walks over to EMERSON'S chair, and kisses the top of his head. He only half notices this and absently grabs her hand, eyes never leaving FULLER. MRS. EMERSON exits the study.)*

**FULLER**

I'm glad I have a capacious forehead.

**EMERSON**

Oh, really? Why?

**FULLER**

Hmmm..I think it makes me look smarter than you.

*(Laugh laugh laugh, blackout.)*

SCENE 5

*(Garden lighting and nighttime garden ambiance. Lights up on  
EMERSON AND FULLER walking in the garden.)*

**EMERSON**

Last month, when you asked me your burning question, I spent time reflecting. I realized that I possessed a blind spot.

**FULLER**

Oh, did you? What about my question made you realize this?

**EMERSON**

You were so distraught. So determined to discover what a woman's purpose was...your intense belief made me bring my predispositions into question. I understand your desire to be more than a muse;  
But, Margaret, is there anything so wrong with being an inspiration to others?

**FULLER**

If a man were to consider me muse-worthy I wouldn't protest. I just want more than that. I think that you, and many others, Waldo forget that the intercourse of the mind and heart may be fully enjoyed without entering a partnership of daily life; it can be experienced individually.

**EMERSON**

I suppose you're right, partnership takes many forms.

**FULLER**

Like ours?

**EMERSON**

Exactly. You encourage me to write, and I encourage you,  
but I have no doubt that your intellect and boldness in writing  
will far eclipse my own.

**FULLER**

If I should eclipse you, your encouragement, and our friendship  
will be a part of the cause.

**EMERSON**

You are a mountainous me.

**FULLER**

What?

**EMERSON**

I may not understand your burning desire to prove yourself  
through your writing, but even I can see that your skill, your  
magnificent courage, and your tenacity, will make you great.  
They already have. When you spoke to the club, I could see the  
look in their eyes;

**FULLER**

What look? How did they look?

**EMERSON**

They looked conflicted; they looked enamored but somewhat  
scared. They looked shocked but touched. That's when I realized;  
you are a mountainous me.

## SCENE 6

*(Set in the dining room. EMERSON stands behind the table with his back to the audience, hands linked behind him. He is listening intently while FULLER stands in front of the table, facing the audience. She's holding and reading aloud her most recent work to EMERSON.)*

### **FULLER**

*(As soon as lights come up, FULLER "continues" to read her work, as if the audience has just walked into the room.)*

"...and plants with great vigor will almost always struggle into blossom, despite impediments. But there should be encouragement, and a free genial atmosphere for those of more timid sort, fair play for each in its own kind..."

*(MRS. EMERSON walks in with a coffee pot in hand. She hangs back a little bit, listening to the reading. The pair don't notice her entrance.)*

### **FULLER**

*(Continuing. There should be no break in her reading upon Mrs. EMERSON'S entrance.)*

"...some are like the little, delicate flowers which love to hide in the dripping mosses, by the sides of mountain torrents, or in the shade of tall trees. But others require an open field, a rich and loosened soil, or they never show their proper hues..."

*(MRS. EMERSON approaches EMERSON with her coffee pot. He doesn't turn to face her.)*

### **MRS. EMERSON**

Coffee, dear?

*(He waves her away dismissively. FULLER notices this interaction and stops reading. She begins collecting her papers.)*

### **FULLER**

Oh, Mrs. Emerson, I would love some. It would serve me well after all this reading.

**MRS. EMERSON**

I forgot you took coffee, Ms. Fuller.

*(A pause. This is some kind of attempt to challenge FULLER.)*

I much prefer tea. I find that coffee leaves a bitter taste in my mouth...even with a mountain of cream and sugar...

*(EMERSON glances at MRS. EMERSON, finally acknowledging her presence.)*

**EMERSON**

Lidian, darling, I think we've established where you stand on the matter of coffee. Would you mind pouring Margaret her cup of the beverage that she personally enjoys?

*(MRS. EMERSON is a little bit embarrassed by this interaction, and a little frustrated at the pair. She is taken aback by the use of Fuller's first name by EMERSON. She pours coffee into FULLER'S cup while maintaining eye contact with EMERSON.)*

**MRS. EMERSON**

Will that be all?

*(This is said with some sarcasm; FULLER picks up on it but EMERSON is too focused on getting back to FULLER'S reading. He says this next line absently, without making eye contact with his wife.)*

**EMERSON**

How is dinner coming along?

**MRS. EMERSON**

Oh, I'd best retrieve the supper.

*(She exits stiffly. FULLER watches her leave.)*

**EMERSON**

I apologize.



**FULLER**

Oh, that's quite alright.

**EMERSON**

Margaret...

*(Awkward.)*

Please, continue.

**FULLER**

*(She begins shuffling her papers around, almost putting them in her bag.)*

I'm afraid you might not be too pleased with the rest-

**EMERSON**

Margaret.

*(She sighs and picks up where she left off.)*

**FULLER**

"...it may be that Man does not have his fair play either; his energies are repressed and distorted by the interposition of artificial obstacles. Ay, but he himself has put them there; they have grown out of his own imperfections.

*(EMERSON'S posture becomes rigid.)*

If there is a misfortune in Woman's lot, it is in obstacles being interposed by men, which do not mark her state;

*(EMERSON begins pacing. As FULLER reads these next lines, she should become more passionate, to the point that she stands up; she's so engrossed in her beliefs and writing.)*

And, if they express her past ignorance, do not her present needs? As every Man is of Woman born, she has slow but sure means of redress; yet the sooner a general justness of thought makes smooth the path, the better."

*(Let the words hang in the air after FULLER finishes this line. EMERSON slowly unclasps his hands and lets them fall at his sides. FULLER also lets her hands fall to her sides, one hand still clutching her papers.)*

*(Silence, EMERSON remains facing the back wall.)*

**FULLER**

Well...

*(He still doesn't respond. FULLER isn't the kind of woman who is intimidated by silence or people's opinions of her, but this matter is EXTREMELY important to her, and she's trying to make EMERSON realize why this issue matters. She hasn't had great success in the past, and is wary of what his reaction may be.)*

I... didn't know what you'd think. What do you think?

*(EMERSON finally turns around as FULLER stands facing the audience. He walks up behind her and puts his hand on her shoulder. She twitches/reacts slightly, but otherwise does not acknowledge his hand.)*

*(MRS. EMERSON enters stage left. She pauses, witnessing this tender moment, then backs out.)*

**EMERSON**

I think that you're the new editor of the Dial.

*(FULLER finally turns her head, making eye contact with EMERSON, whose hand is still on her shoulder.)*

**FULLER**

Truthfully? Honestly, Waldo? I have been told it is too much.  
That I am much..too..

**EMERSON**

Masculine?

**FULLER**

Yes. And I abhor it. Wherever there is energy or creative genius, people say "She has a masculine mind." Oh! I just abhor it! I am 'too fiery' for some, yet I wish to be seen as I am and would lose all rather than soften away anything.

*(Again, MRS. EMERSON enters stage left. She goes unnoticed by the pair.)*

**EMERSON**

You ought not be changed, Margaret. To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you into something else is the greatest accomplishment. It'd be nothing less of an honor to have you as our editor.

*(MRS. EMERSON slams the dinner tray down on the table. The pair jump at the sound. EMERSON quickly removes his hand from FULLER'S shoulder and walks away from her, retreating to the dinner table.)*

**FULLER**

*(Still a bit shaken)*

Mrs. Emerson! Oh! This smells divine. You've outdone yourself-

**MRS. EMERSON**

*(Cutting FULLER off)*

Thank you.

*(EMERSON'S back is facing his wife. His posture is stiff. MRS. EMERSON approaches and tries to put her hand on his shoulder.)*

**MRS. EMERSON**

Shall we...?

*(She touches EMERSON'S shoulder.)*

*(He jumps & spins around to face her. He quickly grabs both of her hands. She is still his wife, this is gentle. They stare at each other for a moment. She examines the distress on his face.)*

**EMERSON**

*(Almost breathlessly.)*

...Yes. Yes, we shall.

*(He places a kiss on her hands. FULLER averts her gaze.)*

**MRS. EMERSON**

*(She looks at FULLER.)*

Wonderful.

*(FULLER and EMERSON share a look. He pulls out MRS. EMERSON'S*

*chair and she sits down. FULLER pulls out her chair on her own and sits. EMERSON sits. They begin to eat.)*

*(Awkward silence until MRS. EMERSON breaks it.)*

**MRS. EMERSON**

So, Margaret, editor for the Dial! I...wasn't aware that your philosophies were completely transcendentalistic. But the two of you have been in deep conversation for some time now, so I suppose I should have expected something like this.

*(EMERSON, who has been chowing down on the dinner looks up all of a sudden and tries to speak but FULLER speaks first.)*

**FULLER**

Oh, yes. Your husband and I may not completely share the same views..

**EMERSON**

What do you mean by "Something like this?"

**FULLER**

But yes, mostly transcendentalistic.

**MRS. EMERSON**

*(Ignoring FULLER'S comment)*

"Something like this.." like the Dial is the culmination of years of your work, of your blood, sweat, and tears, and the hiring of an editor is quite monumental.

*(EMERSON feels a little guilty for being so defensive. He returns to eating.)*

**EMERSON**

Would you please pass the salt, Margaret?

*(FULLER wants to pass him the salt but doesn't want to imply that MRS. EMERSON'S food needs salt. She is about to grab the salt but MRS. EMERSON stands up, takes the salt, walks to EMERSON'S side of the table, and sets it down forcefully. She says her next line as she returns to her seat).*

**MRS. EMERSON**

Was that your writing that I overheard, Margaret?

*(EMERSON coughs)*

**FULLER**

Yes indeed, it's my most recent writing, *The Great Lawsuit*.

**MRS. EMERSON**

It sounded...enthralling. I understand why Waldo is always so eager to meet with you. I was captivated, and I only overheard bits and pieces.

**FULLER**

Oh, you are too kind, Mrs. Emerson. Why, I could read you the rest of the essay.

**MRS. EMERSON**

I would be honored to hear the piece in its entirety.

**EMERSON**

Darling, we have been working all day.

**MRS. EMERSON**

Of that, I am painfully...  
completely aware.

*(This offends EMERSON. Silence. The silence doesn't bother FULLER, who is enjoying her food, but she wants to help relieve the tension. She begins to get her papers out of the satchel.)*

**FULLER**

Shall I begin reading?

**EMERSON**

*(Abruptly)*

Not now, Lidian. Can't you see we're enjoying your dinner?

**MRS. EMERSON**

*(To FULLER)*

Any other writings in the works for you?

**FULLER**

My memoirs, actually.

**MRS. EMERSON**

Astonishing. I can't wait to read them. You know, it's mainly revolutionaries who write memoirs.

*(No response from the two.)*

**MRS. EMERSON**

I'm sorry, I'm just awfully curious. What you were reading to Waldo earlier-about women-I was taken with what I was hearing, I wondered...

**EMERSON**

Lidian, please.

**FULLER**

Waldo, it's quite alright. I'd be happy to discuss...

**MRS. EMERSON**

(To EMERSON)

Waldo, I just want to understand-

**EMERSON**

*(Sharply cutting her off.)*

Mrs. Emerson, I believe Margaret was talking.

*(Thick, thick, thick, tense silence.)*

**MRS. EMERSON**

*Mrs. Emerson??*

*(FULLER stands.)*

**FULLER**

*(Now she's uncomfortable, and makes an attempt to escape the bickering.)*

Excuse me, I must use your washroom.

**EMERSON**

No, please, stay.

**MRS. EMERSON**

I suggest otherwise. Waldo, I must speak with you in private.

**EMERSON**

You can stay, Margaret. And please, not now, the two of us still have more to discuss this evening.

*(Motioning broadly to FULLER and himself. He says the next line to FULLER.)*

We need to finish dinner soon if we want to go on one of our walks.

**MRS. EMERSON**

Then when?

*(Yet another pause. She presses.)*

When Waldo, when?

**EMERSON**

*(EMERSON realizes he's in hot water.)*

When...When you learn how to salt a plate properly.

*(FULLER lets out a tiny gasp. EMERSON is surprised by his own comment. MRS. EMERSON stands up from the table, tears welling in her eyes.)*

**EMERSON**

Oh, darling, I didn't-

*(MRS. EMERSON exits, furiously wiping tears from her face. EMERSON looks regretful. FULLER stares at him in disbelief. He looks up at her, and then quickly looks away.)*

*(Blackout)*

## SCENE 7

*(Greenish yellow and pink LEDs. Lights up on EMERSON and FULLER in the forest. Forest sounds are playing (a lot of crickets for awkward effect). They're not interacting like they typically do because they're decompressing from MRS. EMERSON'S breakdown. FULLER opens her mouth to say something but decides against it. EMERSON looks at her. This happens a few more times. There's more silence, until Fuller says her next line, abruptly, startling EMERSON)*

**FULLER**

Do-

**EMERSON**

What?? What is it?

**FULLER**

Do you think you should... do you think she's alright?

**EMERSON**

I-she gets upset sometimes-and she's alright. She's alright.  
She's...

*(He trails off and starts drifting offstage.)*

**EMERSON**

I need to go check. Pardon me.

*(He exits stage right. At the same time, MRS. EMERSON enters stage left, looking for EMERSON. She sees FULLER. FULLER looks at her and looks away quickly. Uncomfortably awkward; more awkward than the last two scenes. This conversation has been a long time coming, at least for MRS. EMERSON.)*

**MRS. EMERSON**

Have you seen Mr. Emerson?



**FULLER**

He just went looking for you...to check on you.

**MRS. EMERSON**

Oh, I should go-pardon me.

**FULLER**

No wait, may I ask you something?

(Mrs. Emerson starts crying again)

**MRS. EMERSON**

That depends.

(She breaks off into a sob. FULLER rushes over to comfort her.)  
He's never talked to me that way before. I don't know why things  
changed.

**FULLER**

Things must change.

**MRS. EMERSON**

No, not my husband.

**FULLER**

No, especially your husband.

**MRS. EMERSON**

Do you never grow tired of your role as a critic?

**FULLER**

I'm not speaking as a critic, I'm speaking as a  
friend.

(Silence)

**FULLER**

"Man is the will, and Woman is the sentiment. In this ship of

humanity, Will is the rudder and Sentiment the sail: when woman effects to steer, the rudder is a masked sail."

**MRS. EMERSON**

That's quite the riddle, Margaret.

**FULLER**

I'll rephrase,

"Women don't need to write because they inspire men to write".

**MRS. EMERSON**

And yet *you* write.

**FULLER**

But I didn't write that.

**MRS. EMERSON**

Who would have written...

Sometimes I don't know what he thinks about me.

**FULLER**

He said you're his muse.

**MRS. EMERSON**

*Just* his muse?

When I heard you read earlier, I wondered how he would respond.

**FULLER**

He never responded. He never responds. One moment I think I know where he stands; He loves my work, and he makes me the editor, but he fails to understand *why* I write...

*I* still don't know what he thinks of me.

**MRS. EMERSON**

I suppose we're in the same boat.

**EMERSON**

*(Offstage)*

Lidian?

**MRS. EMERSON**

Just his muse??

*(EMERSON enters from stage left)*

**EMERSON**

Lidian?

Lidian I must talk to you.

*(EMERSON and FULLER share a look as he walks offstage with  
MRS.EMERSON.)*

## SCENE 8

**FULLER**

Do you see the way he *looks* at me? I suppose I am familiar with this; The look he gives for a flashing moment...for one fraction of a second...for a singular pump of the heart. It's fleeting, but sometimes he forgets to hide it and it rolls over me like a cold wave. *(Pause)* No, no! Not in the way that you all may be thinking! No, ever since I could *form* a coherent thought, I've known this gaze. It used to bother me, though now I've grown accustomed to it, you have all borne witness to this: Now I let thoughts roll off my tongue & fall where they may...

But look! Their pupils turn to moons, going through every lunar phase in the matter of a blink...and then they blink! "What do we make of her?" Their eyes control the tides, yet they want to stand at the helm of *my* ship as well? The course they have charted is fine for some, but I would have every course laid open. I would have every course laid open to women as freely as to men. If you ask me what offices they may fill, I reply: any. I do not care what case you put; let them be sea captains, if they will!

*(She walks to take the sea captain's hat off the hook. She walks over to Emerson's chair, looks down, and rests her hand on the back.)*

## SCENE 9

*(FULLER, wearing her sea captain's hat, returns to the center of the stage, facing stage right. EMERSON is sitting in his study.)*

### **FULLER**

Dear Waldo, Angelo and I depart from Italy in two weeks' time.

We will be sailing on the *Elizabeth*, a noble freight ship. I think I would have traveled to write about the situation in Italy of my own accord, but to be sent with the authority and fiscal support of the Tribune is a blessing I haven't taken for granted.

I'm pleased to hear all the updates on your good work in Concord and am eager to meet the unfortunate editor you found to fill my shoes; the poor soul didn't know what they were in for when they agreed to edit all your scrawling. Send my love to Mrs. Emerson and the children. Affectionately, Margaret Fuller Ossoli.

*(EMERSON stands up, walks over to FULLER, and faces the audience.)*

### **EMERSON**

Dear Margaret,

Those shoes you mentioned are of a size unfathomable, and they're yet to be filled; The Dial and its staff have felt your absence greatly. I do wonder about this freight ship, Margaret: wouldn't you much prefer to take the journey on a ship with a more attentive crew and more suitable accommodations? It would certainly be more comfortable for little Angelo and yourself.

Sincerely, Waldo

### **FULLER**

Waldo,

It's kind of you to consider us in this way. The *Elizabeth* may lack the comforts offered by the modern passenger ship, but it does offer a far more economical passage. Anyway, I'm certainly not above passage on a freighter.

### **EMERSON**

Margaret,

I would hate to think that budgetary restrictions hindered you from experiencing the comforts of a more suitable ship. I feel obligated to secure tickets on a passenger ship for you and your family.

**FULLER**

Waldo,

The source of this obligation is a mystery to me, but I do appreciate your generous offer. However, I must refuse.

*(EMERSON turns to face FULLER. This scene is fully conversational now. The tension should increase with each line.)*

**EMERSON**

Margaret, please don't let your pride stand in the way. I want to buy this ticket for you.

**FULLER**

*(FULLER turns to face EMERSON.)*

My pride has nothing to do with the matter, Waldo. I simply wish for you to respect my agency.

**EMERSON**

I have nothing but the utmost respect for your agency, but I cannot let you travel on this freighter.

*(FULLER turns away and doesn't respond.)*

**EMERSON**

You can't...Margaret, please.

*(The two lock eyes.)*

**FULLER**

You can't stop me.

*(Red and blue LEDs. They pause for a second. Abruptly and*

*aggressively, they race to the helm of the ship and begin fighting over control of the wheel. This is a dramatic power struggle; it should almost feel like a choreographed dance. In the scuffle, the captain's hat is knocked off FULLER'S head. The lights flicker. They pause and stare at the hat, lock eyes, and*  
*DIVE FOR THE HAT.)*

*(Blackout)*

*(A newspaper headline: "MARGARET FULLER DEAD AT 40. AMERICA'S FIRST FEMINIST LOST AT SEA." is projected.)*

## SCENE 10

*(Lights up. EMERSON is sitting at the dining room table, writing and looking over a pile of letters from FULLER. The sea captain's hat hangs on the hat rack next to him. MRS. EMERSON enters from stage left)*

### **EMERSON**

Oh, I'm sorry, I should be doing this in my study.

*(He starts fumbling with his papers. MRS. EMERSON sits down.)*

### **MRS. EMERSON**

No no no, it's... good to see you writing again,  
Even if it is just editing...her memoirs.

### **EMERSON**

You say "her" like it's a dirty word. Do you not understand what she accomplished?? What she meant to me, to my movement, what she means to history?

### **MRS. EMERSON**

You don't want me to understand!

### **EMERSON**

I do want you to-

**MRS. EMERSON**

No! Not *you*, YOU, all of you!

**EMERSON**

What are you going on about?

*(MRS. EMERSON stands up abruptly.)*

**MRS. EMERSON**

Going on about- I don't believe this. I'm "going on". I'm fussing. She's thinking out loud, she's debating, she's "championing women's rights." Even in her death, her voice is louder than mine.

**EMERSON**

Even in her death you still hate her!

**MRS. EMERSON**

I don't hate her! I wish I could be...

Could be like her. My father didn't take the time to teach me like hers did. He didn't teach his *daughter* Latin and I didn't know the first thing about Gothe until I picked up a book of his that Margaret translated-

*(EMERSON stands up as he interrupts her. He begins pacing throughout his next lines. By the end of his lines, he should walk around the table towards her.)*

**EMERSON**

You didn't want to! People decide for themselves if they want to learn. When Margaret's father passed, she struck out on her own. She didn't become the best-read person in New England because her father taught her to be, she did it because it was her prerogative as an individual.

**MRS. EMERSON**

An individual?

**EMERSON**

What are you trying to get at?

**MRS. EMERSON**

She's an individual. I'm a woman.

**EMERSON**

What are you...She is a woman!

**MRS. EMERSON**

A woman who had to educate herself, who had to be the best, better than you, even; Her writing and intellect had to eclipse the best of her time to even be considered an equal among you!

She taught, gave lectures to women, fought for access to the Harvard College Library, She was the editor for the Dial, a foreign correspondent for the Tribune: She was a woman who had a mind like yours, "like a man's"; Like only a man has the education and freedom to possess, and she scared you. You were afraid of her!

**EMERSON**

Lidian!

I was not afraid of her. She was like any other woman.

**MRS. EMERSON**

But you treated her differently. You *talked* to her.

**EMERSON**

I talked to you. Surely you haven't forgotten our walks in the garden. We talked about love and beauty and the divine...

**MRS. EMERSON**

But you talked to her about everything. You knew each other's minds.

*(EMERSON is worn out. He doesn't know what to say because she's exactly right. He puts his elbows on the table and covers his head. MRS. EMERSON kneels beside his chair and takes both his hands into her own.)*

**MRS. EMERSON**



Darling, I love you so. I love being with you, and I love your mind.

**EMERSON**

You love me...still? Even though I treated you differently than I treated...I've treated you poorly...I-

*(She kisses his hands.)*

**MRS. EMERSON**

Waldo. Yes.

**MRS. EMERSON**

I love you for all of your intellect.

**MRS. EMERSON**

*(She stands.)*

But,

But imagine how much greater our love would be if we were equals?

*(EMERSON starts weeping. From the grief of FULLER'S death, from the weight of his wife's forgiveness, from the realization that he's been wrong, and he can't avoid this issue no matter how hard he tries. He collapses to his knees and is supported by holding on to MRS. EMERSON'S waist. She tries to comfort him, but he's inconsolable. Lights out. MRS. EMERSON exits stage left.)*

SCENE 11

*(Set after her death during the editing of her memoirs.)*

*(FULLER'S spirit conjured up by EMERSON'S guilty conscience sits behind his desk with her feet propped up. She is dressed in a white blouse, brown trousers, boots, & a sailor's cap. (A complete turnaround from her normal dress.) She is also smoking a pipe.)*

*(EMERSON enters his office, holding the memoirs (they are bound together so they won't fall out) looking frazzled from his earlier breakdown.)*

**FULLER**

Emerson.

*(EMERSON stops dead in his tracks & instantly drops the memoirs on the floor. Being an intelligent man, he immediately goes for the door only to discover he cannot open it.)*

**FULLER**

Peculiar seeing me behind the desk, isn't it? I do believe it's a refreshing change.

*(EMERSON stands by the door silently. He is paralyzed.  
FULLER smiles at him.)*

**FULLER**

You'll notice I've made it impossible for you to open the door. Whether or not your conscience is the cause of this, I cannot say. Nonetheless, I am the reason.

**EMERSON**

*(With some difficulty.)  
Let me go.*

**FULLER**

Not just yet.

**EMERSON**

Margaret, let me go. Now.

**FULLER**

*(She shushes him & stands up.)  
Bite your tongue. You will listen to me.  
Truly listen.*

**EMERSON**

You're dead.

**FULLER**

*(She examines her hands while holding them to the light. She checks her nonexistent pulse. She gasps dramatically.)*

Really? An astute observation, Mr. Emerson! How did you figure? Can you still hear the water sloshing in my lungs? It's rather embarrassing.

**EMERSON**

*(Dumbfounded.)*

..reports.

**FULLER**

*(She laughs to herself.)*

Goodness...how brainless do you believe me to be?

**EMERSON**

I don't...I don't believe you to be...

**FULLER**

*(She quickly cuts him off by hushing him. A  
pause.)*

Then, why?

*(She picks up the memoirs and is now beyond the desk.)*

**EMERSON**

Margaret...

**FULLER**

I've read them.

**EMERSON**

Allow me an explanation...

**FULLER**

I no longer exist.

**EMERSON**

I was...doing you a favor...

**FULLER**

I no longer exist.

**EMERSON**

Readers would have hated it, hated you just like *The Great  
Lawsuit*. I had to soften its blow.

**FULLER**

*(Turns to face EMERSON.)*

Not even Death itself can create sympathy for a woman.

*(EMERSON advances slowly, like someone attempting to pet some  
sort of carnivore. Weary.)*

**EMERSON**

Margaret...

**FULLER**

To think! I insisted you were an honorable man. I worked  
so hard.

*(EMERSON continues to advance.)*

**EMERSON**

No one would have been able to stomach the first few pages. I  
wanted you to be remembered..

*(He is now close enough to touch her shoulder. Before he can,  
she spins around & shouts her next line. EMERSON yells & falls  
on his butt, now looking up at FULLER.)*

**FULLER**

'A MOUNTANEOUS ME!"

*(EMERSON remains on the ground staring up at FULLER, stunned.)*

**FULLER**

That's what you said regarding me, correct? I am a  
mountainous..you.

**EMERSON**

I...

**FULLER**

Does no one heed your words?

*(EMERSON attempts to stand up. FULLER stomps & startles EMERSON  
back onto the ground.)*

**FULLER**

*(Shakily with rage.)*

MY words...MY mind...MY sweat...MY tears...MY blood...MY ink...MY  
SOUL.

*(She darkens.)*

My voice...

**EMERSON**

It was for your good.

**FULLER**

You murdered me. You cut my throat & my voice spilled into your  
hands.

**EMERSON**

It was inappropriate. It was inappropriate for a...

**FULLER**

My body hasn't been found yet, Emerson. I thought, at least, I  
could be found...

*(She tosses her book of memoirs at his feet.)*  
here.

Once they do find me, I will be unrecognizable.

*(Choking on a lump in her throat.)*

Unrecognizable.

**EMERSON**

Your ideas remain.

**FULLER**

Who's to say?

*(They stare at each other. After a moment steeped with tension, FULLER alleviates it by offering her hand to EMERSON. EMERSON ignores it, stands up on his own, & straightens himself.)*

*(FULLER defeatedly drops her hand.)*

**FULLER**

You've always been afraid of me.

**EMERSON**

Don't be ridiculous.

*(He staggers over behind his desk.)*

**FULLER**

Are you ill?

**EMERSON**

I believe I must be.

*(He gestures to FULLER'S ghostly presence.)*

*(Distressed, he leans on his desk with his head hanging low.)*

**FULLER**

Alright.

**EMERSON**

Alright.

*(A pregnant pause.)*

**EMERSON**

I am not afraid of you.

*(FULLER pauses and then suddenly scares him on purpose by lunging forward & shouting at him. He yelps & jumps back.)*

*(FULLER can't help but chuckle. She is dim once again.)*

*(She then takes off her sailor's cap & tenderly turns it over in her hands.)*

**FULLER**

*(With a sigh.)*

Oh, Emerson..how I wish I were surprised by this.

**EMERSON**

I am your friend, Margaret.

*(She looks at the cap in her hands.)*

**EMERSON**

Margaret...

*(FULLER slowly puts on the cap & grabs her memoirs.)*

**FULLER**

Please, call me Fuller.

*(Lights flicker. FULLER exits.)*

*(Blackout.)*

## SCENE 12

*(Lights up in Emerson's study. EMERSON sits up in his chair, still shaken from the ghost encounter. He immediately puts his hands on his head to ensure that his sea captain's hat is still on, it's gone! He looks at the desk and realizes that the memoirs are also gone. He looks around frantically.)*

**EMERSON**

Margaret?

*(He's panicking. FULLER walks onto stage and begins steering the ship nonchalantly with one hand, holding the memoirs with the other hand, maybe fanning herself; with some sassy, ghosty, artistic liberty.)*

**EMERSON**

MARGARET!

(EMERSON exits through the study door and runs out stage right. As he enters, the lights immediately turn dark blue. He stops in his tracks abruptly when he sees her at the wheel. FULLER whips her head around to look at him as he enters. They pause, staring at each other. FULLER floats down to center stage and clutches the memoirs towards her chest. EMERSON waits a second and then runs down after her. He goes up to her, but she ignores him, almost like she's in a trance.)

**EMERSON**

Margaret.

(She ignores him still. He says the next line with desperation.)

Fuller!

(FULLER turns to look at him warmly. She extends her right hand to EMERSON. He takes her hand and acts as if he is going to shake her hand, but instead pulls her in, kisses her on the cheek and then GRABS THE MEMOIRS. He grabs the memoirs with his unoccupied left hand. FULLER is still gripping the memoirs in her left hand; this motion swings them around. EMERSON yanks the memoirs out of Fuller's hands, causing the memoirs to be dropped and scattered. A clap of thunder sounds. FULLER stumbles backward, her hands fly up to her throat as if she's choking. EMERSON looks at her, shocked.)

(Storm sounds begin to play, he fearfully looks off into the audience into the storm. He looks back at FULLER, who falls to the ground, dead. EMERSON begins panicking and frantically attempts to pick up the memoirs, but to no avail. The intensity of the storm increases, and he runs to the wheel of the ship and steers valiantly. The sound of ship creaking and breaking; EMERSON is terrified; he has wrecked the ship. A final crash and the lights go out.)

**END**

## An Exploration of Time

by Nadia Jacobs



An Exploration of Time

*A One-Act Experiment*

*(A functioning grandfather clock, ticking softly, is the stage's only ornamentation. The NARRATOR, well-dressed, presentational, stands down center.)*

NARRATOR

It's one o'clock.

*(The clock chimes once.)*

Time is a human invention. The future is now, and the future is passed, but in our oblivion we find that the future surprises us anyway.

People seem to think that things happen in an order. We arrange them that way, because with order comes direction, and without direction, we have no purpose.

*(A weary TRAVELER enters. He balances a weathervane in his hand and glances at it frequently, as though it were a compass.)*

A Traveler walks down the road.

*(The TRAVELER stops walking and mimes it instead.)*

The Traveler goes nowhere, unless we were to say ...

The Traveler walks North.

*(The TRAVELER adjusts his weathervane, jumps out of his pantomime, and eagerly follows the point of the N. He exits stage left.)*

The Traveler is now convinced that he is going somewhere, when, in reality, if he walks long enough in the direction he is said to be going in, he will eventually end up at the same location from whence he began. The direction, in fact, doesn't matter at all.

*(The TRAVELER meanders back onstage from stage right. He is still following his weathervane.)*

Even if I were to say ...

The Traveler walks South.

*(The TRAVELER stops, turns his weathervane so that the S is pointing forward, and continues in the direction he has been going. He exits.)*

...he would eventually end up in the exact location from whence he began. And so, the Traveler needn't walk at all, nor should he feel compelled to pick a direction.

Time operates in a similar manner. Time is existence with direction, but existence has no need for direction, otherwise existence wouldn't exist without it. The truth is, because existence has no direction, it needs no order and therefore needn't time.

Let us consider the following story.

*(A WOMAN enters, looking around marvelously, followed by a MAN, who, in his own motives, does not yet see her.)*

A Woman moves to the city from her small town. The Woman gets a job at an office building. The Woman meets a Man.

*(As he speaks, the WOMAN and MAN encounter each other, acting out his words.)*

The Man treats the Woman very well. The Man proposes. The Man and the Woman are wed.

*(The MAN, smiling, dips the WOMAN, who kisses him. They right themselves and freeze in tableaux.)*

The story is simple. You understand it.

But what if I were to say...

*(The MAN and WOMAN act out the following "story," each phrase with a simple tableaux.)*

The Man and the Woman are wed. The Woman gets a job at an office building. The Man proposes. The Woman moves to the city from her small town. The Man treats the Woman very well. The Woman meets a Man.

*(They freeze again.)*

What has changed?

Only what your ears heard.

You are inclined to disagree with me, because you think that there is a separation between the words themselves and the truthful actions which they are describing.

In reality, just as you have led yourself to believe that I am wrong, you have fallen prey to the illusion that the story I am telling is real. I should remind you that I am on a stage, and the Man and Woman are but actors.

*(The MAN and WOMAN unfreeze, drop character, and bow solemnly. They exit.)*

The fallacy of this is that the words you've heard are the force which dictates the actions that take place, so, because theatre is not reality, you are unable to separate the two. In this way, it makes no difference by which sense you are made aware of these actions occurring and in what order, because the same things have happened regardless. You interpret this all as happening presently, but you must consider that the writer has made these words and actions outside of what you see, and the actors have rehearsed outside of what you see, and so what you see is not what is. Yet it is impossible that the writer has written this before you have heard it, because these words do not exist until they hit your ears. Likewise, the actors rehearse only to perform, and without performance, there is no rehearsal; thus, there is no reason that rehearsal should come first. All of these events are occurring at once in an infinite and negatable existence. They have no inherent sequence, but we arrange them the way we like to make sense of things. As performance only exists as a reflection of something established, this is also true of reality. In this way, you cannot interpret reality as a depiction of anything genuine.

Many people accept time as fact because they consider that it explains the linearity of life, in which one is born, one lives, most often for many perceivable years, and one dies, only after, one has decided, birth and life.

How do you know you were born before you will die?

Birth is in the past, one has determined. Before today, I was a bit younger, and before yesterday, even younger, and with enough days I become younger and younger until I am not yet born. You know this because you have many memories of things that have happened and no memories of things that haven't.

But you do not remember being born,  
just as you do not remember dying.

Let us consider that life is linear. If one's life can be represented by a segment of a line, then at both ends there is a disruption of memory. If you were to travel along the one-dimensional path of a life, upon reaching either end, you would run out of life to travel upon. Be aware that linearity equates to neither direction nor continuity. The direction you choose to perceive yourself as traveling in does not change your ultimate destination.

In the same way that one traces his life backwards to birth in order to determine that this is the past and his future has not yet happened, he is capable of tracing his life forward to his death, which is not actually forward but simply in opposition to the direction of one's birth. We prefer to think of birth as the "backwards" direction, because it unsettles us that we have so few memories of the "forward" direction. In our unease, we ignore these memories, which we do not recall as a result of our aversion to them. If we simply allowed ourselves to know the things which we are capable of knowing, these principles would be much better understood.

The truth unsettles us. We avoid learning too much about the nature of our existence, because once we have been enlightened to everything that is sensible and sequitur, we have nothing left to discover, and we find ourselves suffering in a purposeless world. Thus, we pursue understanding but do not allow ourselves to completely unlock it, because once every question has been answered, there is no longer a need to ask.

For this reason, we distract ourselves with far-fetched constructs, such as time and direction, which logically explain nothing but provide a sense of uniform delusion upon which we can all agree. This unity is comforting. As our lives only exist in relation to each other, any widely-accepted falsehood is inseparable from reality. Although, incidentally, reality happens to be another one of such constructs, since reality exists only in subjectivity.

*(The NARRATOR pauses.)*

It's one o'clock.

*(The clock chimes once.)*

Midnight approaches.

*(He adjusts his jacket, looking around--  
looking too closely, perhaps. He's looking at  
you. Beat. He exits.)*

BLACKOUT.

## Everything Will Be Better Tomorrow

by Gianna Cabrera

## Everything Will Be Better Tomorrow

*LIZ enters her childhood bedroom. She moves robotically. It should feel to the audience that she is only going through the motions of life rather than living. There is a large clock on the wall showing that there is an hour to midnight. LIZ gets ready for bed. She takes her sleeping medication and heads for her bed, but before she gets in, she spots an old photo album. She sits at her desk and flips through it before pulling out an old birthday card. LIZ opens it to a bad rendition of the birthday song. The song begins to make her emotional. A child, ELLIE, crawls from under her bed and stands over LIZ'S shoulder.*

[ELLIE]        Is granny poor now?

*(LIZ yelps and turns in her desk. She sees the child and continues screaming while shutting the card. All sounds stop as the card closes. ELLIE continues unbothered.)*

[ELLIE cont.] It's okay if she is. I know it's not nice to be mean to poor people, it's just sad you know. Because it is your birthday.

[LIZ]        Do you know that it is rude to sneak up on people?

[ELLIE]        You're the one who sneaked into my room.

[LIZ]        I didn't sneak into your room. This is my room.

[ELLIE]        Umm... I'm pretty sure that's my name on the door.

[LIZ]        This can't be your room, Ellie. You don't exist.

[ELLIE]        I'm just as real as you are. In fact, a week from tomorrow, I'm going to get that birthday card from granny, but with twenty bucks too.

*(LIZ reaches out and hand pushes ELLIE. ELLIE falls. LIZ starts to pace the room. LIZ is trying to confirm reality. The actor should move around the set touching things and pinching themselves, trying to ground themselves.)*

[ELLIE cont.] I'm going to tell mom you pushed me.

[LIZ] Great! She can be a part of my delusions too. I have lots of questions.

[ELLIE] Then why do you never ask anything.

[LIZ] What answers could six-year-old have for me.

[ELLIE] I'm eight, nearly nine, and I'm just saying this routine is getting boring, Liz. I mean the first time I was here you had a real cow when I showed up. Now, you just walk around the room waiting to pass out so you can lie and tell the doctors you're sleeping well.

[LIZ] I sleep just fine when you are not here.

[ELLIE] I'm always here.

*(LIZ looks at the clock which now reads thirty minutes to midnight.)*

[LIZ] You will be gone soon enough.

[ELLIE] Only to be back tomorrow.

[LIZ] Why can't you just leave me alone?

[ELLIE] That's your question? You can ask me anything, and that is what you want to know?

[LIZ] Yes, tell me. Let me give you what you want and then you can leave me alone.



[ELLIE] I can't leave, Liz; besides, you are already alone.

[LIZ] Why not? I don't want you here. You don't want to be here. Why can't you just leave me alone so I can sleep?

[ELLIE] You think I don't want to be here?

[LIZ] If you are as much a part of me as you claim Ellie, I know you don't want to be here because if I was given a choice I'd leave. That's not how life works though so I guess that means we are both stuck with me.

[ELLIE] I like being with you. It's the only time you ever pay attention to me. The truth is that I'm always with you Liz.

*(LIZ has a long moment of silence. She is hyperventilating and trying not to cry. The same bad rendition of the birthday song starts playing distantly. LIZ starts looking around the room for the card. She is tearing the room apart in her frantic search. She finally turns to the bed where ELLIE is sitting holding the birthday card.)*

[LIZ] Give that to me.

*(ELLIE holds the card close and sings-along.)*

[LIZ cont.] Ellie please. The singing has got to stop. Drug induced hallucinations are one thing, but I think hearing phantom singing on my birthday will actually make them put me in a facility.

[ELLIE] People are supposed to sing to you on your birthday Liz.

*(LIZ moves closer to the bed. She is standing at the foot of the bed ready to make a leap for the card. ELLIE moves it behind her. LIZ jumps on to the bed. ELLIE rolls off before they make*

*contact. ELLIE moves to stand at the foot of the bed. LIZ sits up. Their roles reversed. LIZ starts sobbing.)*

[LIZ]           Please.

*(ELLIE shuts the birthday card and for a moment all that can be heard is LIZ crying.)*

[ELLIE]        I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make you cry.

[LIZ]           It's okay. I was never good at stopping when things go too far. We are always giving too much, or taking too much, wanting too much, being too much. So, it's not your fault it's mine for never learning how to fix us.

[ELLIE]        I think referring to yourself in the plural is why they are going to put you in a facility.

*(LIZ cracks a smile and wipes her tears.)*

[LIZ]           We both know I'm not going anywhere. I'm too good at lying to my doctors.

*(LIZ takes in the ruined room.)*

[LIZ cont.]    At least there are some messes I can fix.

*(LIZ starts picking up the room. ELLIE looks at the clock that now reads midnight. ELLIE takes the birthday card and the photo album and puts them under the bed. ELLIE then sits on the bed and waits for LIZ to finish. LIZ gets into bed as if she is going to sleep.)*

[ELLIE]        It's going to be okay LIZ it's just like mom always says, "Everything will be better tomorrow."

[LIZ]           "And if it's, not tomorrow always has its tomorrow."

*(LIZ falls asleep and ELLIE crawls under the bed as the lights dim.)*

THE END.

## High School Selections

### Pointing Fingers

by Trinity Williams

Pointing Fingers

## CAST OF CHARACTERS

DANIELLA WISBRO- Early 30's, Prodigy detective.

ALASTOR LEWIS- Early 30's, Promising detective, known for his blunders unfortunately

CHIEF JASIAH JOHNSON- Late 60's, prideful chief of Hollow-grove police department parental figure of both Daniella and Alastor.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Chief Johnson is a gender neutral role for either male or female, however a very key part of the role is they are black. Take the dialogue options and adjust as needed for the actor's gender. They are always called sir regardless of gender.

INT. (1970's) HOLLOW-GROVE POLICE DEPARTMENT: CHIEF'S  
OFFICE- DAY

Chief Johnson sits at their desk filling out papers. All is  
quiet and still.

(Beat)

Enter DANI and AL rushing in and swarming his desk.

DANI:

(Out of breath) Chief, we've got a problem.

AL:

(Out of breath) We've got more than a problem, we've got an  
emergency.

DANI:

You gotta help us.

CHIEF JOHNSON:

You better have an emergency barging into my office like this.  
Spit it out.

Dani and Al look at each other deciding among themselves.

DANI:

We were downtown patrolling- I didn't even get to look at him.  
I should've double checked the profile.

AL: (Said at the same time as Dani's line above)

I got a tip the suspect was downtown- the next thing I knew my  
gun was out. Dani swore he was the right guy.

Chief Johnson raises their hand, silencing the two  
immediately.

CHIEF JOHNSON:

Whatever this emergency is ain't gon' get solved if you're  
throwing words at me with no net. Daniella, speak.

DANI:

Of course sir. Al and I were investigating a lead downtown.  
Y'know, the Sutter case? Two girls dead in a week. I want this  
guy off the streets as soon as possible so when someone tipped us

off about the suspect, I jumped the gun. We did all the protocol, tried to bring him in peacefully. Still he ran.

CHIEF JOHNSON:(Sifting through papers) They always run.

DANI:

Chased him down for two blocks. Finally cornered him when he lunged at Al and-

AL:

(Cutting her off)

-I shot him chief. Two casings to the chest. I don't even know when the gun got in my hand but it was. That trigger was burning and when I tried to get my hand off I squeezed and didn't stop squeezing.

CHIEF JOHNSON:

Al you get too trigger happy I've told you. This isn't going to fly well with the DA, you'll be suspended. (Realizing) What color was he?

AL:

You gotta understand Chief. This sickos gotten two victims this week alone. I got two little girls at home sir. When I think about- God forbid- my Sara coming face to face with that monster it was like something burst. You're a father/mother chief, you have to understand me.

CHIEF JOHNSON:

(Sternly)

What color was he?

AL:

Colored, sir. A colored boy`. Skin like fresh coffee on a Sunday morning.

Silence. One that is only broken by Chief Johnson slamming their hands on the desk.

CHIEF JOHNSON:

Dammit you two. You just had to go and shoot a black man. And now of all times? We already got white folks pulling their children out of mixed schools and library's getting trashed. Now we got white cops shooting black men- my white cops. You think its easy being the only black chief? And having a department full of the other color? My own people won't speak to me and now I gotta figure how to clean this up.



DANI:

If we say something now, they won't take it that way right? He fit the description perfectly, they can't blame us for doing our job.

CHIEF JOHNSON:

Of course they'll take it that way. Everything's racist now and rightfully so.

AL:

(Annoyed)

Oh c'mon. Everyone knows I couldn't care less if the guy was red or yellow.

CHIEF JOHNSON:

No Al, everyone don't know. Not him, not his family, and sure as hell not the papers. You already got a reputation.

AL:

Don't make this about that.

CHIEF JOHNSON:

I have to. Because those prints will spin every aspect of you Al, to create a racist pig or a "morally right" white. I gotta think for you boy.

DANI:

Just say I shot him. Nobody was there and there's no cameras.

CHIEF JOHNSON:

Your hands ain't so squeaky either. How could you identify a suspect like that? The profile didn't even mention his race.

DANI:

But it said he had a distinct scar above his left eye. I was right on the money sir.

CHIEF JOHNSON:

We still can't put the gun in your hand.

AL:

So you're protecting her now?

CHIEF JOHNSON:

I'm protecting both of you. The gun wasn't in either of your hands. We'll stay quiet, you're both on desk work, we wait until this blows over.

More silence- uncomfortable silence. Dani and Al fidget nervously as they hand in their weapons.

KNOCKING AT THE WINDOWS, CHATTERING CROWD OF REPORTERS  
OUTSIDE, CHAOS ALL AROUND.

CHIEF JOHNSON:

Dammit. Those cameras already smelled a story. It won't be long before the commissioners calling and demanding answers.

AL:

Look, if the guy wasn't guilty he wouldn't have ran. Let's just focus on nailing this guy to the case, then it won't matter if he's colored or not.

DANI:

Al that's not-

AL:

That's how it's about to be. I'm not like you Dani so sorry if my reputation isn't that of a picture perfect detective. This is my last strike. I'll never work in the field again and that's if I'm lucky enough to get another job in a station. Have you heard the things they say about me- When you're not around. They call me Sure Enough Screw-up, Always Wrong Al, Blunder Boy, Hound Dog. And how do I face my wife after I tell her I'm good as done? Maria was so happy to become a housewife and now I have to tell her to go back to work? What kind of man am I? Dani, my life rests in the grave with that boy.

CHIEF JOHNSON:

Al, quit it.

AL:

No! (Beat) This isn't on me.

CHIEF JOHNSON:

What are you going on about now?

AL:

It was all Dani's fault that we were chasing him in the first place. She told me it was the guy, swear it. Why should I be punished for her mistake?

CHIEF JOHNSON:

You're losing your marbles Al, sit down.

Al opens the window to the crowd outside.

AL:

(Yelling) Hey! All of you out there! Daniella Wisbro killed an innocent man!

Chief Johnson yanks Al back from the window and slams it shut.

CHIEF JOHNSON:

Why would you say that?! What the hell is wrong with you.

AL:

You're always protecting her sir! And Dani you knew just as well as I did that he was trouble. Isn't it better that he's off the streets for good?

DANI:

You can't be saying those things Al, it makes you sound-

AL:

(Cutting her off) What? Racist? God I am not racist, those people just love using that word. Everyone knows colored people are more likely to cause violence and do crimes. That's why their neighborhoods are so dangerous. All they do is just run around killing each other. He wouldn't have lasted long in a place like that anyway.

CHIEF JOHNSON:

Al that's enough.

Chief Johnson and Al argue for awhile when they're finally interrupted by a woman wailing outside. Dani is first to look out the window.

DANI:

I know that cry anywhere, it's his ma'. (Beat) That was somebody's baby.

CHIEF JOHNSON:

I'll go out and speak to her in a minute. You both stay here.

DANI:

Sir, I've seen too many mothers cry at their baby's side as the light fades from their eyes. I've held plenty of them as their world crumbles beneath them. There's only one thing that'll give them footing again, justice. To know that their child's life wasn't worth less than anyone elses. And in cases like this, we need to show that a colored life isn't less valuable than a white one.

Al shifts uncomfortably.

AL:

Why are you always right? (Beat) I'll go talk to her chief. Tell her his blood is on my hands.

DANI:

No. It's on mine.

AL:

What? Dani you know I wasn't thinking when I blamed you. Don't say something stupid like this.

DANI:

What do you mean? I shot him Al, two casings to the chest. The trigger was burning and I kept squeezing until you pulled me off.

CHIEF JOHNSON:

Daniella stop this.

DANI:

I got scared when he lunged at me. Everyone knows I'm jumpy.

AL:

You can't be serious. It was me. I see it now, I just need to own up to my mistake. I'll take it all, Blunder Boy, Triggery Tim, I'll take it so just stop this.

Dani places her badge on the desk and starts heading towards the door. Al grabs her wrist.

AL:

Why are you doing this?

DANI:

Because nothing is going to soothe her pain than knowing her son's killer isn't getting away scot free. You have a good heart Al, just one hell of a temper. You have so much good left to give the world Al, I'm just fresh out. Being a prodigy is draining y'know.

CHIEF JOHNSON:

You know there's no going back if you do this. I can't protect you from what happens next.

DANI:

I don't need you to sir, this is my choice.

AL:

Why would you do this for me? You know better than anyone I'm the biggest screw up in the precinct.

DANI:

Guess it's cause I love you. So much that I've been happy sitting from the sidelines watching you with your wife. And so much that I want you to keep doing what you love. So keep doing it alright Al?

DANI leaves. Silence

CHIEF JOHNSON:

So what are you going to do now?

AL:

Pardon?

CHIEF JOHNSON:

If you run, you might be able to catch her before she reaches the front door. (Beat) or are you not going to stop her?

AL:

It's her choice sir. All I can do is make the most of it. I'll do better, for her.

CHIEF JOHNSON:

You never change do you?

AL:

I can't lose my job sir. Or my reputation. I'm sorry.

CHIEF JOHNSON:

Well I hope whatever you decide to do is worth it. (Beat) But I won't be there to witness.

AL:

What?

CHIEF JOHNSON:

I'm giving you a new start, out of town. The district an hour away has been looking to hire.

AL:

Sir are you sending me away?

CHIEF JOHNSON:

I'm giving you an opportunity to grow without someone being your safety net.

AL:

You- I understand sir.

CHIEF JOHNSON:

Good. I hope what you did today was worth it.

AL:

Yes sir.

CHIEF JOHNSON shakes his head and exits. Al is left alone,  
staring at his hands.

END

## Piano Man

by Hunter Richardson

# PIANO MAN: the play

Based on a song written by Billy Joel

## CAST:

BILLY, man in his early 20s struggling to find himself and wishing for greatness but settling for the local bar, has a fear of rejection.

JOHN, early 30's, Billy's close friend and the manager of the bar, is funny but wise.

DAVY, navy man, old and gruff, laughs a lot.

PAUL, a real estate novelist, loves and fears women.

MIKE, simply an incredibly drunken old man

TIME: early 2000's

SETTING: In a bar

ACT 1: Scene 1



*The stage is completely dark, a single spotlight turns on revealing a piano and a man standing there behind it, he plays the opening riff to "Piano Man" by Billy Joel. The man looks up, almost like he's staring at the audience.*

BILLY: *(in a bored tone)* Another day.

*The rest of the instruments come in and the other lights on the stage come on revealing a bar, the song continues while patrons file through the door. They sit down in various seats and start talking. All instruments beside the piano fade out and John emerges from a door behind the bar*

JOHN: Bill! You been holdin' out on me?

*Billy stops playing and looks up too John who's pouring a drink*

BILLY: *(chuckles)* nothing John, I promise, just messing around a bit!

JOHN: *(in a cheerful tone)* Yeah, just like how Mike here, *(places the drink in front of mike)* is "messing around" at being an alcoholic.

*Mikes springs up and shoots both hands in the air.*

MIKE: Awwlcahaaaooollll!

*Mike crashes back down and starts sleeping.*

JOHN: *(to Mike)* How you drunkin' bastard? You walked in 10 minutes ago – *(looks a BILLY and says in a sarcastic tone)* it's almost impressive.

*Billy chuckles and starts playing a little on the piano.*

JOHN: *(John's smiling a little)* Hey no I'm serious, when am I gonna see you walk out of this bar?

BILLY: Stop givin me free drinks and we'll see what happens *(Billy sarcastically smiles at John)*

*John makes a face at Billy and the door opens at the bar, in walking Paul.*

THE ENTIRE BAR: Paul!!!

JOHN: *(turns to audience in a rushed fashion)* no, no, no, we do NOT have a copy right license for that.

*Paul walks over and takes a seat next to Davy.*

JOHN: *(in a cheerful tone)* And what will you be havin' Paul.

PAUL: *(in a defeated tone)* Ehhh, two Latinas would be nice.

BILLY: Things didn't work out with Sarah?

PAUL: Nope.

*Next to him Davy starts laughing hysterically*

PAUL: What, the thought that I'm going to die ALONE is-is funny to you?

DAVY: Yes, yes, it is *(Davy wipes a joyful tear).*

PAUL: Just drop dead already.

DAVY: That's what the rums for! *(starts laughing hysterically again)*

*Theres a slight pause.*

BILLY: Sorry I asked.

PAUL: You did nothing Billy, it's this drunk ass sitting next to me!

*Paul looks down and gets in a more somber mood.*

PAUL (CONT'D): I don't know, the longer you live the more you realize what matters, you work your ass off to go to a good school and you work your ass off to get to a nice job where you work your ass off just to climb the ranks and be successful, you make all this money and have everything you dreamed about having and then you come home at night to an empty house and no one to share it with. *(there's a pause)* What was the point.

*John slides over a drink to Paul and Paul gives him a small smile.*

DAVY: I love my wife *(he's staring off into space when he says this, and everyone goes quite).*

*Everyone turns to Davy.*

PAUL: didn't really need to rub it in but, alright then.

JOHN: Davy, *(in a pleasantly surprised tone)* I never knew you were such a sweetheart.

DAVY: *(Laughs)* I wasn't, but then I met her. We met when we were both real young and I was real stupid, but she saw something in me, and she stuck with me, and somehow, she loved me. I went all the way to war and back and there she was, waiting for me. *(Davy's smiling)*

*They all stare at him for a moment*

DAVY (CONT'D): *(Excitedly)* Can you just imagine! Can you? Having someone in your life that just loves you, so purely and unconditionally, in ways you didn't even love yourself, but she does, she loves me! *(He's smiling huge and turns to Billy), It's a hell of a thing kid.*

PAUL: *(in a halfjoking tone)* If you love her so much, why are you wasting away here you drunk.

*Davy takes a sip of his drink while he looks off into the distance, he lowers the glass but not his gaze.*

DAVY: She died in childbirth along with my daughter.

*The room is silent.*

DAVY (CONT'D): I love my wife.

PAUL: Oh, im-I'm sorry, I didn't know.

*Davy pats Paul on the back and again turns to Billy.*

DAVY: Hey kid, play me something, would you?

*Billy nods and starts playing a melody, it's gentle and hesitant at first but it starts speeding up and getting more triumphant, Billy seems to get sucked into the music itself completely lost in it, he slows down and gently plays the last major chord. Billy opens his eyes to everyone looking at him before they all start clapping, Davy is smiling at Billy. Billy looks a little embarrassed.*

PAUL: Damn kid, why are you even still in this shit hole?

JOHN: Exactly! Well, except for the shit hole part. But Billy come on, don't you want to do more?

BILLY: not really, this place pays the bills so...

*Billy starts playing the piano again, John starts talking but Billy continues to play.*

JOHN: Bill, you have a gift, and you're literally and metaphorically sitting on it.

*Billy continues to play pretending he didn't hear him.*

Davy: He's the right kid, you have the ability to take away people's pains and sorrows for a little while, and with yours we don't have to wake up the next day with headaches and regret.

Paul: Plus, you sound good too!

*Mike out of nowhere comes back to life and points a drunken finger at Billy,*

MIKE: Madam! YOU surrrreeee know how to play that geeeitarrrrr!

JOHN: *(points at Mike)* Look! Even drunk Mike agrees, *(mike collapses)* oop, and he fell back asleep, I really need to cut him off. That's not the point! Bill!

*John still pretends not to hear and keeps playing.*

JOHN: You have too much potential to not use!

DAVY: Listen to the man Billy.

PAUL: What are you scared of?

*The other people in the bar start agreeing and they all start pressuring Billy, The chords get louder and more complex, Billy start speeding up the tempo as everyone at the bar shouts at him all at once, each one saying different things. The melody keeps speeding up until Billy slams the keys making a discord tone shutting all the sound off from everyone and leaving the room completely silent and still.*

JOHN: *(in a calm voice)* Billy.

BILLY: No ok, no!

JOHN: Bill.

BILLY: I'm happy with my life John! This is my JOB, how I make my living. The pay is decent and its SIMPLE. So why the hell does it matter.

*John looks at him for a moment, not saying anything.*

BILLY: What!

JOHN: Fine. I'm sorry, it's not my place.

*John starts cleaning a glass.*

BILLY: You're right, it's not!

*Billy starts to put his fingers back on the keys and then stops.*

BILLY (CONT'D): an-and what gives you the right, what gives any of you the right! *(He's addressing all the patrons)*. You all come in here with your problems, your crap, that instead of dealing with, like ADULTS, you just sit there and drink so you can forget them. But no, you choose to judge me. To walk in at eight in the morning, sit down, and drink for 5 hours and then question my happiness! That might be your best joke yet John. Really, what makes me worse than all of you? *(gestures to the patrons)* No seriously, please tell me what makes me such a horrible person, that out of all the shit in this room, I'm who it gets directed at.

*The room is quite for a second before Davy turns.*

DAVY: Kid, *(Davy chuckles a little)* it's the other way around.

BILLY: what?

JOHN: Bill, it's because you have something, actual talent that you choose to just let rot on the stool in this room.

BILLY: Don't give me that crap John, I already tried to do something with this "talent" *(he mocks John)*. It didn't work. Yeah, it sucks but that's life, I already failed and you're asking me to leave this bar just to fail again. That's insanity! All you can do is try your hardest and see where you end up, and I did that, and here I am, just like all of you. A Saturday night, in a bar just trying to forget about the world for a little while. I should count myself lucky, most musicians don't even have this. It might not be my dream, but it's my reality and I shouldn't complain, I have a secure job that provides for me and allows me to still play. It's all I have, and I can't lose it! So please just let me play, and I'll let you all drink, and we can do it all next Saturday night.

JOHN: And you're fine with that?

BILLY: Yes!

JOHN: And you're happy with that?

BILLY: I already TOLD you!

JOHN: No, you didn't!

BILLY: Its fine John, I'm FINE!

JOHN: Are, you, happy?

BILLY: Yes John, I'm hap—*(he cuts off and looks at John)*

*(There's a pause and Billy looks at the audience)*

BILLY (CONT'D): *(Billy seems almost distracted)* I'm...I'm not happy.

*John pours a drink and walks over to Billy, Billy takes the drink, nods at John and takes the shot. John gets up, places the glass upside down on the piano, picks up his Jacket and walks out of the bar, the door closes, and the stage goes black. "Piano man" by Billy Joel starts playing.*

END

## Rationale

Billy, an incredibly talented pianist, dreams of playing with the big jazz ensemble but settles for the local bar due to his self-confliction and fear of rejection. He would rather live in a world of content than the possibilities of the ups and downs of the real world. His characterization is a simple content man with who's happy with who and where he is in life. His true character is the exact opposite, Billy wanted so much more out of his life, but his crushing fear of rejection stops him from leaving the bar. The only thing that gets him to really come face with himself is John and the patrons in the bar that constantly encourage and confront Billy. Whether it's Paul with his mid-life crisis and lack of emotional bonds or Davy still dealing with lock and loss. The setting is the local bar, a place that allows for a menagerie of people with individual problems and sadness, this sets up the social dynamics of everyday issues ranging from mild to serious. The duration is a single night that takes place in the early 2000's due to that time frames simpler nature without social media and simply relying on human interaction. The theme is staying in a constant state of contentment and numbness robs you of the joys and sorrows that make life worth living, no amount of fear is worth that. The plot is simple, in the beginning we establish the characters, and we see there dynamic, but more importantly we see a glimpse of Billy's talent. In the middle we start unpacking the issues of the patrons and again are shown Billy's talent which segwayed into the end when Billy is forced to face himself and accept his talent and his true feelings which leads to him finally deciding to leave the bar. The character monologue was active because the entire speech was him trying to convince everyone, especially John, that he is ok and happy with where he is in life. Even if it wasn't successful the point of his monologue was to try and get everyone to leave him alone thus making it an active monologue. The dialogue is very similar to that of a sitcom that is very playful and full of banter but it's also serious when it counts.

## Smoke and Mirrors

by Jay Magee

## **Smoke and Mirrors**



**Smoke** – A young, reserved person with low self-esteem who is currently dealing with the aftermath of a breakup. The baby of the friend group

**Dust** – Smoke's and Ash's friend. He's very kind and a bit of a goofball, but very emotionally aware

**Ash** – Smoke's and Dust's friend, who is scathing and sharp, but cares deeply about her friends

**Ember** – A, to put it politely, a very rude person. She is the new lover of Smoke's Ex and is very mean to a lot of people. Like a shark.

## Scene i

*SMOKE, DUST, and ASH all walk on stage as a group, smiling and laughing and generally having a good time. They are in a café of some kind, but it's not clear (or important), as there are no to minimal props signifying this. The lights are bright and warm. SMOKE is somewhat quieter than the rest but remains mostly upbeat. DUST is the most upbeat of the trio, and ASH is the most critical of the three.*

**DUST:** *(In the middle of acting out a story, as they're all coming onstage)* So that's when I decided enough was enough! That day was weird enough as it is! So I was walking out when someone cried out my name- "DUSTTT!" So, of course I halted in my tracks. I turned around and it was my nemesis! With a rose??? Like what are you even supposed to do in that situation??

**ASH:** Remind me what this story was about in the first place? I stopped paying after the first sentence.

**DUST:** *(Faux offense)* What!! Ash!! I cannot *believe* you! This is ridiculous! Blasphemy! Lies and Slander and Lechery of the Highest Degree!

*(EMBER enters the scene. None of the other characters notice her entrance, as they're all caught up in their own antics. She is disgustingly sizing them up and waiting for the perfect moment to enter, while trying to act nonchalant)*

**ASH:** I'm pretty sure you used all of those words incorrectly.

**DUST:** C'mon Smoke, back me up here!

**SMOKE:** Sorry, I'm on Ash's side for this one. *(To ASH:)* Dust was talking about a dream he had last night.

**ASH:** Ohhh. Yeah makes sense why I stopped paying attention.

**SMOKE:** I mean- I thought it was interesting

**DUST:** Oh thank you! Thank you! No need to throw roses!

**SMOKE:** I mean it was!

**DUST:** Oh no, no I don't have the time for pictures!

**ASH:** Ughhh.

**DUST:** What's that? You're my biggest fan?

**SMOKE:** You know what- *(Putting on a wacky voice)* Yes I am! I'm your number one fan!

**ASH:** *(fondly)* Don't encourage him.

**DUST:** Oh well I might be able to make an exception for my biggest fan! One photo, coming right up!

**SMOKE:** Oh, you don't have to go out of your way! Don't do it if it's a big deal!

(EMBER starts laughing in the most pretentious, asshole, stuck up way possible, and saunters closer to the trio)

**DUST:** Ugh. What do you want, Ember.

**ASH:** What're you laughing at?

**EMBER:** Oh, well I just thought about how *ironic* it was for Smoke to say that!

**SMOKE:** ..What??

**EMBER:** Say (in a bad mockery of SMOKE's voice:) "OooOoooh Don't make a big deal out of it!!"

**SMOKE:** That's not what-

**ASH:** Care to explain why you think that's *ironic*?

**EMBER:** You know. How they *ruined* their relationship with Soot? How they made a big deal out of nothing! Just to what? Ruin his reputation? Hurt him?

**SMOKE:** ...What?

**EMBER:** Its just so ironic, right? We all know that it was their fault, despite their claim that it wasn't!

**SMOKE:** That [was my fault?]

**ASH:** [No it was not!] How *dare* you make the claim that *Soot cheating on them* was their fault!?

**DUST:** That's so messed up! Just because you have a not-so-secret crush on him now doesn't make him any less at fault for what he did to Smoke!

**SMOKE:** It- It's fine guys! It's not worth it.

**ASH:** Of course it's worth it! He was the one who *cheated* on you, and this- this *bitch* has the *gall* to claim it was-

**SMOKE:** No- no its fine! You don't have to make a big deal out of it!

**EMBER:** *(To SMOKE)* Again with the irony! *(To ASH)* Of course it was their fault! *(To SMOKE)* How couldn't it have been your fault!? Soot's a great guy, and of course he cheated for a *reason* *(She gestures at SMOKE's entirety)* And then Smoke got all huffy and made a big deal out of nothing!

**SMOKE:** I- uh-

**EMBER:** If Smoke had just been [more understanding-]

**DUST:** [You want them to] be more "understanding" to someone who [*cheated-*]  
*(SMOKE tries to speak)*

**EMBER:** [It wasn't] his fault! Look at them! He's way out of [their league-]  
*(SMOKE tries to speak, more frantically)*

**ASH:** [How dare] you- just because you're *jealous* [doesn't mean-]

*(EMBER, DUST, and ASH break out into loud, righteous argument, with ASH and DUST in defense of SMOKE, and EMBER in defense of Soot and herself. SMOKE visibly panics and hyperventilates as the lights pulse, gradually dimming. SMOKE ends up fleeing the situation by exiting through Upstage Center, as the lights dim to a close. There is possibly a sound effect to make the panic that SMOKE has more tangible)*

## Scene ii

*A single spotlight shines down on Centerstage, where there are four mirrors. Three are freestanding, forming a tight arc around a spot big enough for a person. There is one small, handheld mirror laying on the ground in front of one of the side mirrors. Everything else about the setting is the exact same as the previous scene. SMOKE enters from either Stage Left or Right, panicked, but less so from the last scene- they just went to the bathroom to hide out until EMBER left. The current setting is just the previous one, but with a layer of SMOKE's brain on top of it. SMOKE looks around, as if lost, to see the four mirrors. They sit down on the ground and pick up the handheld mirror as they slowly calm down. They look small, insignificant,*

*and kind of pathetic. SMOKE takes a deep breath, forces a smile, and looks up, mirror still in hand.*

**SMOKE:** Really guys! I'm fine!! You don't need to worry about me!

*(SMOKE slowly stands up. Enter DUST)*

**DUST:** Are you sure?

*(Enter ASH, from the other side of the stage)*

**ASH:** You don't have to lie to us! We're your friends!

*(SMOKE smiles a little, grimaces, and then forces their face into a smile again)*

**SMOKE:** No really! I'm fine- there's no need to preoccupy yourself with me!

*(DUST and ASH share a look. ASH gestures for DUST to say what they're both thinking)*

**DUST:** Smoke... like Ash said, you don't need to pretend that you're fine. We know that what Ember said back there really hurt you.

**ASH:** We just want to make sure you're okay.

*(SMOKE grimaces, shakes their head as if to clear it, and then looks confused)*

**SMOKE:** What are you talking about? I- I don't care about what Ember said.

**DUST:** Are you sure?

**SMOKE:** Yeah- I'm sure. *(Now, with a little more pep in their step)* In fact, I don't even remember what she said- that's how little it matters to me.

**ASH:** *(In a louder, commanding tone)* Smoke.

*(SMOKE startles at the sudden change in volume)*

**SMOKE:** A- Ash...?

**ASH:** Maybe you actually feel fine. Maybe what she said has no effect on you. If that's the case, then you are underreacting. Sure, I don't want you to feel bad, but if her saying that stuff didn't register at all? Her saying that *Soot cheating was your fault*??? You have no reaction to that!? That's unhealthy.

**DUST:** Ash... *(He shakes his head- Now, to SMOKE)* What she means to say is- well, pretending to not be upset doesn't get rid of the feeling. It'll find its way out eventually... It hurts us to see you bottling up your feelings...

**ASH:** Its like you don't trust us...

*(A pause)*

*(SMOKE shakes their head again, to reset it)*

**SMOKE:** I mean- what she said may have had just a little bit of a sting-

*(ASH rolls her eyes and sighs, DUST gives SMOKE and unimpressed look)*

**SMOKE:** Okay okay!! Maybeee just a little more than a little bit of a sting... BUT!

Well- I already know it's true.

*(SMOKE shrugs and moves to turn around)*

*(ASH looks affronted, and DUST looks worried. ASH makes a beeline to SMOKE and grabs their shoulders, making SMOKE stops turning around and looks at ASH instead)*

**ASH:** You did not just say that.



**SMOKE:** Huh?

**ASH:** *(She shakes SMOKE a little)* You cannot be telling me that you think it was your fault. It wasn't

**ASH:** *(She drops SMOKE's arms and turns away)* It wasn't your fault

*(ASH exits, taking one of the mirrors on the side of SMOKE away)*

**DUST:** You know that, right?

**SMOKE:** What...? ...No? It was... wasn't it??

**DUST:** How could it have been your fault?

**SMOKE:** No... no- no but it was. It was my fault.

**DUST:** It hurts me to see you like this

**SMOKE:** No? But he cheated for a reason... right?

**DUST:** He would have cheated no matter what. He would have found a reason. He was not a good guy. *(He hugs SMOKE)*

**SMOKE:** ...What?

**DUST:** There was nothing you could do

*(DUST releases SMOKE and exits, taking the mirror on the other side of SMOKE away)*

*(SMOKE looks between where DUST exited and where ASH exited, confusion evident on their face)*

*(They look down at their handheld mirror and back up)*

**SMOKE:** There was ...nothing I could do?

*(A pause)*

**SMOKE:** That can't be right.

*(A pause)*

**SMOKE:** No. No- it can't be! I swear I- I could have done so much better! If I had just been better- If I had just *tried* a little harder. If I didn't wear that suit in place of a dress? If I went on more dates with him? It would have been okay. It had to be. If I talked a little less about myself? If I had worn nicer clothes more often? If I had just been what he wanted, none of this would have happened. If I didn't make a fuss over what he did- If I just believed him and didn't investigate my suspicions or if I *just* ignored it in favor of loving him.

*(A pause)*

**SMOKE:** It would have been okay. We would be okay. Had I *just tried a little harder*. Which makes it all my fault.

*(A pause)*

**SMOKE:** Right?

*(SMOKE crumples in on themselves and looks into their handheld mirror, as if for guidance)*

**ASH:** *(From offstage)* It wasn't your fault.

**SMOKE:** No- it had to have to been.

**ASH:** *(From offstage, this time more insistent)* It wasn't your fault.

**DUST:** *(From offstage)* How could it have been your fault?

**SMOKE:** That- that's easy! I just needed to-

**DUST:** *(From offstage)* He would have cheated no matter what.

**SMOKE:** That's not true!

**DUST:** *(From offstage)* He would have found a reason

**SMOKE:** No but! He loved me! He wouldn't do th-

**DUST:** *(From offstage)* He was not a good guy.

*(A small pause)*

**ASH:** *(From offstage)* It wasn't your fault

**DUST:** *(From offstage)* There was nothing you could do

**SMOKE:** But if that's true... that means that no matter what I did, I would have gotten hurt. *(As SMOKE is speaking, DUST and ASH creep out from the part in the curtain- upstage center- until they are standing silent behind SMOKE and their last remaining mirror)* I had no control over the outcome. I was just a victim to chance. I was helpless to the situation.

**SMOKE:** ...That hurts more.

**DUST & ASH:** *(Speaking in unison)* It wasn't your fault. There was nothing you could do

**SMOKE:** But- it hurts to think that I couldn't have done anything!

**DUST & ASH:** *(Speaking in unison)* You don't have to lie to us. You don't have to lie to yourself

**SMOKE:** The distraction of rationalizing what I could have done better- what I could have changed doesn't hurt as much!

*(DUST and ASH cross their arms in unison)*

**SMOKE:** *(As SMOKE is speaking, ASH and DUST take the mirror behind SMOKE and exit the way they came)* But that's all it is. A distraction. It'll find its way out eventually, like Dust said. It's just a matter of when.

**DUST & ASH:** *(Speaking in unison, from offstage)* It wasn't your fault.

**SMOKE:** If all it is is a matter of when, then why not now?

**DUST & ASH:** *(Speaking in unison, from offstage)* There was nothing you could do.

**SMOKE:** I won't- I can't- pretend that I'm okay anymore. I won't pretend that I could have changed the outcome anymore... I will be okay. But I'm not now. I can't keep saying that I am.

*(SMOKE sets their handheld mirror on the ground, and raises their leg to stomp on it)*

**SMOKE:** I am so tired of these smoke and mirrors!

*(They stomp the handheld mirror, and as their foot hits the ground, the  
lights go out)*

