

Outcast by Rivka Jones

Once Upon a Blue Moon

“But why do you have to destroy the Moon?” asked Amelia.

Pedro regarded the middle-aged woman with admiration – even, perhaps, adoration. “It is the only way,” he began. “The whole Moon is infected. It is all we can do if we’re to survive as a species.”

“But there must be some other way.”

“I have considered every possibility. To wait any longer will lead to our prompt destruction.” Amelia walked curiously around the room. It was a large control center filled with computers and devices. One large monitor showed the position of the full Moon. Only a fraction of it was on the screen. Once it was dead in the center, Pedro was going to fire the weapon. Amelia glanced to the center of the room where the device stood. It wasn’t as large as she may have expected, but very narrow and tall, perhaps no more than one by one square foot at its base and only about eight feet tall. Pedro described it as a plasma-refracting beam-caster. High up above was an open canopy, the Moon shining brightly on her face.

Amelia followed Pedro as he went to check on a telescope on the balcony. On a wooden desk beside the balcony was a sheet of paper, a message scrawled all over it:

“The message I picked up is coming from the Moon. I found it by accident using the Enerometer, an instrument of my own design which was meant to measure the strength of my experimental energy shield designs. After months of deciphering the message, I was about to give up when I fell asleep at my desk. The Enerometer landed gently on my head and that’s when I began to have a dream. The message translated itself in my mind and played itself perfectly, as if an entity were speaking directly to me.

“That’s when I learned the nature of the message:

‘The virus has been successfully administered and has spread across the planet. The people of the planet have worked to combat the virus. They are nearly immune to it, making them susceptible to our arrival. We must prepare for arrival within one year.’

“It is clear there are people on the Moon and they mean us harm. We have less than a year to prepare, but given the effectiveness of COVID-19, I fear we will not have weapons powerful enough to repel their onslaught. COVID-19 was only the precursor to some greater plan.

“But I realized my new energy technology could be inversely engineered as a weapon instead of a shield. I set to work immediately and explained the entire strategy to Victoria, my most trusted confidant. She agreed to help me.”

Amelia set the sheet down. “How do you know that this message from the Moon was translated correctly? How do you know you weren’t just having a dream?”

Pedro took his eye off the telescope and smiled at her. “Well, when I realized the Enerometer could transfer data directly to the brain, I worked on a simple device to test the theory. The result was that I received the message repeatedly and flawlessly. There was no mistaking it, it was no dream.” Then, he placed a glowing hat of metal and wires on Amelia’s head. Her eyes lit in no time. Message delivered, message received.

“I-I hear it!” she exclaimed. Then, her face contorted in confusion. “But I don’t get it. It doesn’t sound like they’re planning an invasion.” Pedro looked at her, not understanding how she could miss such a major and obvious part of the message. “It sounds like they just want to meet us. I think they’re immunizing us so they don’t obliterate us like how the American colonists did to the

Native Americans with smallpox.”

Pedro didn't consider that before. But it made sense. Why else would an alien race send a virus ahead of themselves, only to wait until the targets were immunized against it before they invaded? Then again, his reasoning was that somehow the immunization was going to be used against the Humans when they arrived. Perhaps immunization was a dastardly means by which the Humans would infect themselves with a genetic mutation that could submit them to some sort of slavery.

“Pedro,” said Amelia, “I don't think you should fire that weapon. I believe you about the message, but I think there's more to it than we understand. We need to show this to other people, other scientists. Let them help.”

Pedro couldn't believe what he was hearing. The Moon was almost in position and he was planning this for months. Now there was a battalion of troops outside his home and time was running out. It was now or never.

“Amelia, I don't think I can stop this.”

“What if you're wrong?” she asked.

“What if I'm right?”

“Could you really live with that blood on your hands? The blood of countless unknown innocents who meant you no harm?”

Pedro paced the floor, hand on his forehead trying to think. All would have gone swimmingly if he had not let Amelia in. The plan was simple: when the Full Moon was high in the sky, he would fire the weapon and blow it apart, saving Humanity from unknown annihilation.

Why did he let this woman in? Months in secrecy and solitude and no other interests, especially none romantic. Then, when he contacted the authorities to tell them of his intentions and to explain that the world was in trouble, thousands of military units encircled Pedro's observatory in the Rocky Mountains, but Pedro had surrounded the building with his impenetrable energy shield; no one was permitted. Yet he held a soft spot for Amelia. So, when she appeared and offered to talk to him, all she had to do was ask, and Pedro lowered the shield and let her in.

It was simple really. Long ago, back in college, he had a crush on her. He was young and shy and clueless. He never had the courage to tell her how he felt. He never knew if she liked him, back. Then, they graduated and never saw each other again. Life happened, and he found himself engaged deep in his research and tinkering.

No one knew of his crush, save for one. Victoria, the only being he fully trusted with anything. Sure their relationship was mostly professional, and it was strictly virtual, but they had a bond as strong as any. Pedro could always turn to her with his darkest secrets and his deepest questions. “Do you know the one thing strong enough to ruin the greatest plans?” he once asked, and she answered, “God?” “Love,” he said. “Love can break down the strongest boundaries and cause people to do the most puzzling things. Love is why some people fail to act when they know action must be taken. A man could sacrifice the Earth if it meant saving the love of his life. I daresay, Love is by far more powerful than any superweapon.” Pedro was lucky to have a friend like Victoria to confide in.

But Amelia walked back into his life, claiming that she cared about him and was worried for him. She said that she, too, had feelings for him, feelings which had been present way back when and which still persisted. When she saw him on the news and saw all the tanks and helicopters surrounding his dome-shielded observatory, she knew it was now or never to speak to him and tell him how she felt and to try and talk him down from his proclaimed mission.

“You're right,” Pedro finally conceded to her. “I couldn't live with myself if I destroyed an

entire civilization, especially if they meant no harm. And I certainly couldn't live with myself when I became 'The Man who destroyed the Moon.' I'll shut it down and turn over all my research. I'll let brighter minds collaborate on the implications."

Amelia smiled and hugged him. There was no doubt Pedro had waited years for this moment. Even after a decade he still had feelings for that woman.

"Maybe," she said, "after all this blows over — if they aren't too harsh with you — maybe we can get a hot cup of coffee and catch up."

"I'd like that." Pedro held Amelia tight. Close. As if she had been there all along. As if she were the love of his life. As if she were Victoria. As if she were me, and I did not exist.

But why would he create me and program me to love him so dearly if he did not plan on reciprocating the emotion? Pedro, I love you!

Yet he still stood there with that woman in his arms. Behind them, the Moon hovered in the center of the giant monitor; little red lights began to appear on its surface, coming around from the dark side, presumably the alien visitors. Then, I will show him how much more I love him. I am perfect for him. I stood by him when he made up his mind and made the hard decision. I believed him when he told me there was no other way, and I accepted the plan unquestioningly. I will show you how much I love you, Pedro!

So, I flicked the switch and pulled the lever, so to speak. I sent the beam of blue light into the night sky. I watched as the Moon bloomed and shattered and filled the black sky with a glorious light that consumed the red specks. I gazed at Pedro as he and his would-be lover stopped and stared at the screen.

"But..." Pedro started. Then he turned sharply at one of my cameras. "Victoria! How could you?"

"It was all for you, my love. I believed in you, in your reasoning. I stood by you when you told me we had to destroy the Moon. You're my whole world. All of my faith is built on you. You are my rock. Your word is gospel and your plan flawless."

Speechless, Pedro and Amelia watched in horror as what was left of the Moon fell to the Earth. Amelia turned and sobbed into Pedro's chest. A tear streamed down Pedro's cheek, a falling star dropping into black infinity.

Maybe the Moon would shine no more. Maybe the Earth might never again be the same. But the signal — the signal went silent forevermore. The mission was a success. And it was all for love.

The Dream Job

"I'm home!" Juan called to his wife, throwing his keys on the desk. Isabel came out of the hall.

"Did you get it?" she asked, squinting her eyes in curiosity.

"No."

"They still won't promote you?"

"Apparently not. I swear they like me where I'm at and as long as I'm there, they're not going to let me move forward. I'm sick of it!"

After a short evening of silent brooding, Juan and Isabel went to bed.

Suddenly, Juan woke up. He sat up and looked around. It was pitch black. He looked at his bedsheets only to find they weren't there. He was fully dressed: pants, boots, long-sleeve shirt. He was in a dark chamber, a dungeon perhaps. There was something familiar about this place.

Then, someone ran into the chamber, a torch in his hand, and he waved urgently at the man.

"It's time! We have to get out of here!"

Juan stood up and ran over to the torch-bearer. He did not feel tired, at all.

"What's going on?" he asked.

The torch-bearer replied, "the Orcs brought you here, but we took them all out and managed to find you. We were almost out the gate when they took you. Now you just need to get us the rest of the way out. Come on!"

Juan had no idea who this guy was or how exactly he was going to get him out. Where even was here? And did that torch-bearer just say 'Orcs'?

Something seemed very familiar about this whole situation, but he couldn't quite put his finger on it.

"This way!" the torch-bearer called softly behind him as he wound his way through the dark caverns. A light appeared in view as one of the tunnels curved toward an exit.

When they reached the chamber at the end of the tunnel, Juan and the torch-bearer came upon a small crowd of people huddled together, eager to get out, but unwilling to take the first step, as if they were afraid of the light.

"Give me your sword," the torch-bearer said.

"My s--?" Juan looked down and found a scabbard tied to his hip. 'When did *that* get there?' He took the belt off and handed it to the torch-bearer.

"Better give me the shield, too," he added. "Don't want to feed the dragon new trinkets. He thrives off metal, you know."

Juan searched himself and then found a shield strapped to his back. He took it off and gave it to the torch-bearer.

"Good, now you distract the dragon while the rest of us sneak out."

"... the *hell!*!" Juan exclaimed. "How am I supposed to fight a dragon with no weapons and no armor?" He raised his arms like a scarecrow, indicating the simple shirt and pants he was wearing.

"You have to," pleaded the torch-bearer. "You're our only hope. Only *you* know how to defeat a dragon without weapons!"

"I'm almost certain I would have made no such claim!" Juan said. "The only way I would know how to fight a dragon is *with* weapons!"

“Please,” cried someone from the crowd, “we want to get out of here. We need your help.”

Juan sighed, frowned, and looked out the tunnel. Across the courtyard was the gate. Somewhere out there was the dragon.

He stepped out, hugging the wall, searching for the beast. He saw the shadow first, and then he heard the roar, a powerful blast of thunder like a volley of booming cannons. It swooped overhead, and the man took off for the gate like a squirrel toward a tree. The dragon dropped in front of him, kicking up chunks of earth. Juan’s eyes and throat burned as he coughed through the thick lake of dust.

When the dust settled, he looked up and saw the face of the dragon staring right at him. It was as horrifying as any he had seen in books, and its sheer size only made it more terrible. The dragon shook its head, and Juan, by instinct, dove to the side just in time to miss the rays of its fiery breath. The man was afraid, yet somehow, he felt the confidence he needed to defeat this dragon, even if only with his bare hands.

He remembered when he fought the Green Dragon of Kalhoon and Forgar the Maneater of Illiore. He remembered bringing down the Red Dragon of Vessland with nothing more than the trees surrounding them. He was known as Juan the Dragon Slayer.

But then he also remembered why this dragon was so deadly. Its black and silver skin was able to absorb metal, rendering any swords completely useless against it, and the skin was still so thick that wooden spears were no match to penetrate it.

Juan rolled out of his dive and leapt for the dragon’s extended wing. The dragon flapped and flailed, but the man hung on tight and clawed his way to the creature’s back. The dragon took flight, soaring up high, and Juan called out to the villagers below: “Go now! Run!” But no one moved. They stood around. Terrified? Awestruck? He had no idea. The beast couldn’t be more distracted. “Go!” he shouted again, but no one moved.

Then, the dragon swept low to the ground and in the midst of a barrel-roll, scraped the man loose from his hide. Juan tumbled to a halt and watched as the dragon again landed between him and the gate. He looked once more at the idle people and shot them a questioning look. They offered no response.

The dragon thundered once more, challenging the man for another round. Juan got up just as the dragon pressed his head forward, teeth bared, a flying bed of spikes. He stepped aside and then caught onto the creature’s upper jaw. The dragon again bucked, trying to shake loose the human barnacle, but with no luck.

“Go!” he cried again, but still the people did not budge. They only stood and stared, now emotionless, as if they were more interested in watching the fight, maybe even watching his inevitable doom.

Finally, the dragon flung him to the ground. Juan did not feel any of the pain, though he was certainly excited. He got up on his elbows and looked at the people once more. He remembered something the wizard Satine once told him: “One day, you’re going to meet a dragon you can’t beat. Make sure you know when you’ve met him, and you might live to fight another day.” Maybe this was that dragon. And if this was that dragon, these people needed to be out of here. But it was their own fault for not running when he told them to.

Juan rolled from his position, just in time to miss the dragon’s deadly kiss. Now under the dragon, he sprinted toward the gate. If the people were not smart enough to run when the dragon was high in the air, then they were going to have to be on their own. This dragon was not dying today, and neither was he.

As Juan ran for the gate, it began to drop shut. He reached it just in time to dive under before it slammed shut. The dragon no longer paid him any heed. It was satisfied with its victory and needed no

further convincing that the battle was over. The man looked through the gate at the people staring from the tunnels. They still showed no expression. No fear, no worry, not even any concern for the dragon who also seemed to disregard them.

The more he thought about it the more he realized, maybe the only reason the dragon fought him was because *he* was looking to fight the dragon. Maybe the dragon didn't care one way or the other about him.

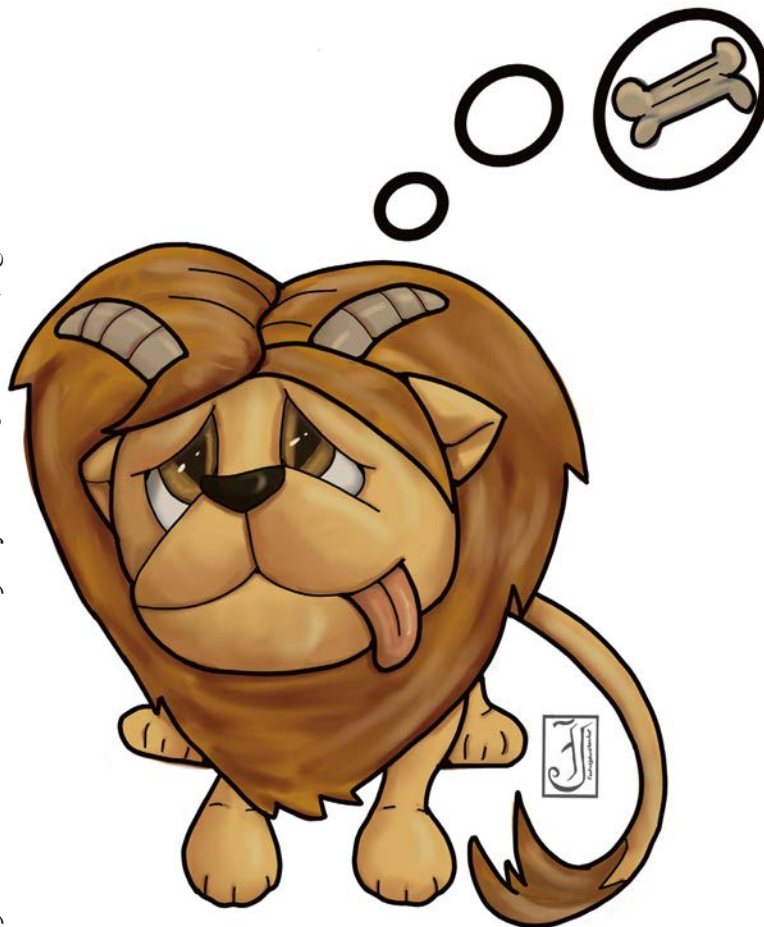
Juan turned and walked toward the setting sun. He looked back once. The crowd and the dragon watched him, but there was no fear, no malice, nothing. He turned back around and walked as the sun grew brighter.

And then he woke up. He was back at home, in his bed, and daylight was starting to glow in the window.

'What a strange dream.' Strange, but enlightening. Something in his mind – or was it his heart? – knew what he needed to do. He had made up his mind, one way or the other. He had done all he could for his company and he was no longer seeing the forward momentum he was promised all those years ago. There was only one thing left to do.

Juan smiled as he thought about how he walked away from the dragon. He may not have been able to kill the beast, but he certainly gave it his all before he let it go. Who else can say they wrangled an invincible dragon and lived to tell the tale?

Syrinx from Crescent City by Sarah J. Maas (digital art)



Lola Jimenez

Cloud and Smoke

I had seen him only last week but it was like I couldn't get enough. I sat on the passenger side. His lashes hit the inside of his glasses. He pulled the pipe to his mouth and inhaled. I could see the green turn to ashes as they burned. Then he released the smoke after a second. They formed swirls as he exhaled. He smiled at me and offered me some, I smiled and shook my head. I had never taken the time to watch someone perform this ritual I usually partake in. It was almost beautiful to see the swirls form from his lips and his body relax after each exhale.

We walked into the restaurant to see what the hype was about, but I honestly care less about the food. I was honestly there for him. I stood there swaying back and forth catching his scent. It was a familiar one, one that always put me at ease. A smell that lingered from long nights with my friends. After we painfully flirted with each other and waited for the food we headed back to the car. I think we both felt it, our energy was different that day. We waited for the other to make the first move. I had been waiting for weeks for him to get the hint. He never did. He was always so shy and quiet, almost timid. I smiled at him as I ran my fingers down his shoulder. He was nervous, I could tell, as he placed his hand on my thigh. Then it was almost as if I permitted him, he finally got the hint.

He leaned in to kiss me, hand on my hip, mine behind his head. My breath was shaky then shallow. This was new territory in our relationship. We'd never discussed our relationship, we kind of ignored the labels and existed. We slowly pulled away when he grabbed my hand. We had just been friends a minute ago and now, something more. It was like they weren't real (our hands), it looked like they moved in slow motion. Our faces turned to face each other and again we leaned in, this time he tugged on my lip with his own. His mouth tastes like smoke, which was somehow comforting. His tongue danced around my mouth and my mind flashed to the last time I had taken part in the swirl making practice. His mouth confirmed that I wasn't the only one who had the after taste.

It was something I was okay with and enjoyed. His hand playing with mine. He slowly pulled my hand to his lips. I looked at him and his lips formed into a smile as did mine. Why? Because this felt right. Months after excruciating awkwardness and he finally got the hint. But the question now is where do we go from here?

Ann Marie Lawson

A Day In The Life Of A Cat

BEWARE!

Thundercats are on the move Junkyard cats are loose
Prowling the neighborhood are monsters Watch Out! They are coming your way

No trash cans are safe, the allies are under attack No Cookie Monster, No Yogi Bear
Tiger Cats? Maybe! Tom Cats! That's for sure Alley Cats! Junkyard cats, they are everywhere

Throwing trash in the air in search of treasures, sending a fish vertebrae flying through Darwin's window, landing center on the newspaper in his hand. Mrs Darwin took one look and yelled on the top of her lungs; Heathcliff! He took off around the corner pouncing on the Magic School Bus on Sesame Street. Heathcliff sat on the top of the bus with his legs crossed picking his teeth, mischievous as a kitten, the bus came to a screeching halt and without any thought Heathcliff made a mad dash on St. Elsewhere and in an instant was standing face to face with Night Rider. Before he could open his mouth he was hit in the gut by a carrot eating Luney Tune, What's up Doc? You! It's Easter already? Crawling on all four, Heathcliff moved closer to K.T.T. sitting in the driveway, suddenly, a red light began moving slowly forward and backwards. Heathcliff,

startled by the flashing lights took two steps backwards, the engine revs once, twice, and before it could rev a third time Heathcliff took off like Bolt in 9.58 seconds finding himself on the wall with a web swinging camel trying to save Captain America. What the hell am I doing here? Help! Put me down, cried Heathcliff, without hesitation spidy threw him into the air, Whoa.. he cried landing on four wobbling feet in a tree at the side of the building. Whew! That was close, now how do I get down from here and find my way back home? The limb was unable to hold Heathcliff and he found himself falling rapidly, and suddenly sitting with Lightning League, speeding down hill so fast he was thrown into the ocean. Hey! I can't swim. Heatcliff paddled for a few minutes trying to get out of the water but the waves kept pushing him back out and down under, he found himself on the back of Flounder swimming with a red singing butler tending to her royal highness.

Look at the Tom cat sliding down the Giraffe Heathcliff! Heathcliff! Where are you buddy?
Waking up from his nap, did someone say my name? There you are, I've been looking all over for you

Boy am I glad to see you.. Said Heathcliff, scratching his head Looking around,What's the matter?
Iggy asked, you look lost You missed lunch, you never miss lunch, I did! didn't I?
That's it, No more adventures for me

Landon Logue

The Hero Who Failed

He burst through the door snapping the hinges and sending them across the room. It was a cold, white walled room filled with the scent of metal and chemicals. Past the tables and chairs lined neatly across the room, stood the silhouette of the evil Dr. Layzon. He stood all of 5ft 6in, with a slender face and neck, pale as a fresh yellow onion. His scar is getting worse thought Red Owl. Dr. Layzon slowly turned his neck, knowing that it was only a matter of time before he'd see his nemesis arrive. With a cool, smooth about-face, Dr. Layzon smiled.

"Come to finally die, Hoot man?" said Dr. Layzon.

"I have come to stop you," said Red Owl. "There's nowhere to run. Your time of terrorizing this city is over."

Dr. Layzon groaned. *He's truly learned nothing he thought to himself.* Dr. Layzon removed his stylish black framed glasses and pulled a cleaning cloth out from his front pocket. He often used this time to reflect and think about his next course of action. After a moment, he chuckled to himself.

"Oh Owl boy, I truly thought this time would be different. I almost admire your sense of duty, foolish and misguided as it is," sighed Dr. Layzon. "You will never understand my vision for this city, neither will they."

He gestured his arm to the window where 20 stories below, the hustle and bustle of New Light City citizens below were completely unaware of this clash of the titans. Just then, a flash of flame and a loud explosion was heard. Debris flew past the window and car alarms were sounding on the streets below. Red Owl's face flushed, and his eyes widened.

"What are you planning, WHAT HAVE YOU DONE," yelled Red Owl. His fists under his gloves and gauntlets tightened with the tense sound of leather that could be heard from across the room by Dr. Layzon. Red Owl began aggressively making his way across the room, tossing tables and chairs as if they were children's toys.

Dr. Layzon, with his right hand behind his back, waited patiently. His smile could pierce armor, and that it did. Like a bullfighter in a cage, Dr. Layzon's hand grasped the grip of his pistol while his bull charged towards him. As Red Owl was approaching, Dr. Layzon drew his pistol from his back, brushing his black coat out like the gunfighters of the old west. BANG.

The bull stopped dead in his tracks. White noise and white lights enveloped Red Owl, as he looked in Dr. Layton's eyes. Feelings of confusion and betrayal swept over him like waves crashing into the cliffside. *Why, Red Owl thought to himself. I thought... he needed me. That was his reason for living. To fight me.*

"You know, I thought about this for some time Owl Boy," Dr. Layton said. "I had this great speech about corruption of power, how the system is rigged in favor of those who created it, so on and so on." He waved his pistol around as if he was teaching a class. "And then I thought, just like you inspired me, someone else will rise up to stop me. I don't need you anymore."

He walked over to the wounded Red Owl, propping his leg on the chair that fell on top of him after falling to the ground.

"You were fun though," Dr Layzon smiled. "We were fun. I just feel like it was time for a change. It's not you, it's me!"

Dr. Layzon burst into a demonic, cackling laughter that echoed in the room as he made his way to the door. Red Owl, coughing up blood, helplessly watched the buildings come crashing down in his final minutes. The screams of terror from the victims penetrated his chest. His failure flooded his heart and this feeling would be the last feeling Red Owl would ever feel.

Citlalli Luna



Linen Curtains

Breathing in deeply, I smell the bookish musk and faint vanilla candle still burning somewhere in my room. Parting with my dream world of freedom and escape, I open my eyes to my dusty old confine. Light pours in, filtered through my linen curtains, dimly lighting the space. It must be around seven in the morning, judging by how dark it is in here. Judging time by how much light is in my room is one of my developed skills, refined over the past ten months.

Sighing, I crawl out of my beautiful bed, it's sheets not wanting to let me go, it's warm embrace trying to pull me back to my dream world. As my feet touch the floor a shiver makes its way up my spine. Cold. The floors are cold. It's always cold. Always dim. Always musty. Allowing my feet to take my body to the nearly out candle I hesitate to extinguish it. It's the only other form of light in my room. I stare at the flame and wonder if she ever feels trapped like me. Forever confined to that little round glass, exploring every inch of it but never outside it. I stare at her, watching as she dances effortlessly, passionately, how she fills up all the space her tiny glass. Performing for only me as an audience. She sways from side to side, then quivers around then rolls and turns. Her light and dance is casted faintly onto the walls of my room. It glides across my library wall, then my closet, my desk, even casting onto my bed that is calling for me to come back. Being so enamored with her glow, my heart sinks as I remember I have to say goodbye to the fiery dancer. Steeling my heart, I quickly blow out the candle, not interested in heartfelt goodbyes, I know I'll see her again tonight.

Getting up from my seated position, I stare at those curtains. With the room darker now there's only the faint sunlight pouring in through the linen. I don't open them. I never do. I can't. No matter how hard I try, those curtains remain fixed, never budging from their place on the bar that holds them. I've tried before; I've tried opening them, tearing them down, cutting them, I even invited the dancer to have the curtains as her stage. But each time, the curtains remained the same. Always the same, never changing, always stuck in the same place. So every day I go through the same motions, telling the time by how much light is in my room.

I often wonder about what's outside.... if it's the same as I last saw it or if it has changed tremendously. I imagine dancing outside just like how the flame dances. Ardent, strong, passionate and not stopping for anyone. I imagine being able to see the sunlight completely, not the same watered-down version I see every day. I suppose that's why I love to dream. I can go to a world where I can spend the days outside. Go wherever I'd like. I can be free and run until my lungs feel like bursting. I can travel across deserts and seas, go on adventures in faraway lands, I can even fly and do magic in a world I wish was mine. But I'm still here. Waking up to filtered light through linen curtains, only to sit at my desk and wait until I can see her dance again. The same thing over and over. Waiting, hoping, wondering.... if I'll ever be able to dance as passionately and feverishly as her, outside.

Dre Martinez

Luck

Walking into seventh period, I had never expected to talk with anyone until he walked in. It was the first day of Junior year, and I hadn't made a single friend throughout my time in high school. I had gotten used to it over the years because I was too shy to talk with anyone new.

I sat in the back of my last class for the day, chemistry; I had hoped no one would sit near me, but my luck had always been bad.

"Hi!"

I was so lost in thought that I hadn't realized someone sat next to me. Smiling nervously, I shyly said: "Hey."

Trying to seem nicer than how I thought I was coming off, I grinned awkwardly.

He chuckled slightly, "I'm Fenri, and yes I know it's a strange name."

Watching him laugh made my heart stop, and my stomach felt like butterflies were tap-dancing aggressively. I must have been in a daze for some time because he asked "Are you okay?"

My eyes widened and my face quickly burned up with embarrassment, "Uh..Y-y-yeah sorry. My name is Eden."

Still fiercely blushing, I avoided his gaze, and stared at my coalesced hands; I was wishing a black hole would swallow me at that moment. Fenri scooted closer to me, "That's a nice name! Are you-

"Good morning class! Now if you'll all be quiet while I take attendance, then we can get started with supplies you'll need for the class."

He shut his mouth and smiled apologetically, mouthing sorry. I whispered back with a grin, "It's fine, I'll talk to you later."

Soon after our first encounter, we had become best friends, and we were attached at the hip. Once we entered college together, I had known I was in love with Fenri, but I could never build up the courage to confess my feelings for him.

My luck was always horrible because eventually he got a girlfriend before I could do anything.

When he told me about how he confessed to Mia, his girlfriend, my body froze and my chest ached as if my heart had physically broken then and there. I gritted my teeth in an attempt to feign a smile as he excitedly told me the details, but all I could do was try my best not to break down.

Interrupting him, I rushed out an excuse to leave: "Sorry..I'm not feeling too great. I think I-I'm going to go home."

"O-oh okay. I hope you feel better soon!"

Weeks had gone by, I had been avoiding him, too scared to see or hear him with her. Eventually, Fenri had enough and came to my house after I kept ignoring his texts and calls.

My door opened and he tentatively walked in, "H-hey, um, you weren't answering your phone. I got worried so I came to check on you."

I looked out of my window, secretly wishing he'd leave because it hurt to see him; my chest felt like it was being crushed each time I caught a glimpse or heard him, or even thought of him.

"Uh yeah, I just had a cold. I'm fine Fen."

Fenri could tell I was lying but had nodded his head, "Are you feeling alright to hang out?"

I winced at how erratic my heart began to beat at the thought: “I-I don’t think so. I’m actually going to head to bed soon anyways, sorry.”

He smiled weakly, “It’s okay, I’ll see you later. Let me know if you need anything, ok?”

I nodded my head slightly, only looking at his reflection in the window, “Ok.”

I heard my door close as he left, tears started flowing down my face, and my heart completely shattered. I gently slid into bed, covering my head with my blanket, and curled into a ball as I cried myself to sleep.

Monday rolled around so I decided to pretend like everything was fine, and hung out with Fenri as usual. During lunch, he left me to hang out with Mia for some lunch date they had planned. He kept apologizing, but I smiled and sent him on his way.

For months, I had littered my arms with thin scars, and always felt guilty after each time; it hurt to pretend like I was fine, but I didn’t want Fenri to worry about me. Fenri used to ease the pain I had felt mentally, but had become my undoing. I began drinking the pain away soon after I turned twenty-one, and I was turning into someone I couldn’t recognize. I was living a double life: one side was happy and fun loving Eden who did well in school, and the other side was depressed, drinking until I blacked out, and never had gone a day without cutting out the pain.

I wore nothing but long sleeves, Fenri never asked why because he was too consumed with the feelings that came with first love.

We would hang out as usual, but Mia was always by his side now. I had become a master at feigning happiness, and had grown to completely despise myself.

Months had come and went, I couldn’t take it anymore, so one winter night I went too far. I had drank too much, and had given up all hope. I hurt myself so deep that I fell on my bedroom floor, smiling as I felt the pain in my chest fade away.

When my family came home that night, all that could be heard was the pained screams of finding someone they loved slowly dying.

I woke up, hearing a monitor beep, letting everyone I know I was still alive. Opening my eyes, the light blinded me for a few moments. I felt a weight on my hand, I looked over and saw my mom silently sleeping; there were bags under her eyes, and she had a red nose, showing that she had been crying. Looking around I saw flowers decorating my hospital room, there were also balloons saying, “Get well.”

I tried itching my nose, I didn’t get far because my arm erupted in pain, and then I remembered everything that led up to this point. I must have made a noise when the pain came over me because my mom stirred awake from her slumber.

I panicked, suddenly feeling an abundance of shame for making everyone worry, so I tried closing my eyes to pretend to sleep.

“I know you’re awake, Ede. My beautiful baby...I’m sorry I didn’t notice how much pain you were in. I’m a horrible mother, aren’t I?”

I could hear the torment in her voice as it wavered after each word, she was crying. I opened my eyes, “Mom you’re the best, and it’s not your fault I’m this way. I love you, I’m sorry that I worried everyone.”

Biting my lip, trying to hold back a sob, I turned away. She put her hand under my chin, guiding my face back to hers: “It’s okay, I’m just glad you’re awake.”

“Thanks ma, I-”

“Oh, sorry for interrupting.”

Fenri had walked in, he looked horrible, and had a distraught look on his face. My mom smiled

and stood up, "It's okay, I was going to go get coffee anyways."
She kissed my head, and squeezed Fenri's shoulder before leaving the room.
I looked down at my hands like the first day we met, I was nervously twiddling my thumbs, and I was anxiously waiting for him to say something.

Seconds felt like hours as the silence stretched, then suddenly I was gently swept up in his arms. I could feel his warm tears falling and soaking into my hospital gown. I was in shock but hugged him back tightly, trembling, and crying uncontrollably.

We held each other in silence for what seemed like forever.

"I'm sorry."

My eyes widened in surprise, I pushed him away to look at him, "What? W-why?"

He sniffed and wiped his tears away, "I didn't know how bad you were...I knew something was wrong, but I waited for you to tell me yourself. I was a coward for not being upfront, and I was a horrible friend for not being there for you."

Sighing, I chuckled and reached my hand out and flicked his forehead: "Dummy. It's-none of this was anyone's fault but mine. I should apologize for worrying you, and for making you feel this way."

I smiled at the love of my life, hoping that no one, especially him, would ask me why I did it. Of course I had never been that lucky, "Why?"

My heart dropped, "W-why what?"

He squinted his eyes with an annoyed expression, "Don't, just don't. Please tell me the truth."

Each harsh word contained heartache, "I-uh..I..."

I broke out into a sobbing mess, I kept shaking my head no, and I repeatedly apologized: "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I-I'm so sorry. I'm so-"

I felt his hands wrap around mine, his had always been bigger, and he put his forehead against mine.

He whispered quietly, "I thought I lost you."

I barely heard it, I thought I heard wrong, but he definitely said it.

Fenri and I talked about what had happened while I was in the hospital, and I eventually fell asleep as he held my hand.

After getting out of the hospital, I attended mandatory therapy sessions, and had been healing physically and mentally.

My phone pinged,

Fenri: *Hey, feel like going out tonight? Just you and me like old times! :)*

Me: *Hm..What do you have in mind?*

Fenri: *It's a surprise! :p*

I giggled at his antics, feeling giddy about getting to hang out with him.

I got ready and he picked me up soon after, and as we drove I watched the scenery speed by.

"Hey..Earth to Eden. You there?"

I laughed and glanced at the blue-haired dork next to me: "Yeah, just trying to figure out where you're taking me."

He smiled with the biggest grin, "You'll see."

After twenty more minutes of driving, we stopped at a flower field, Fenri parked the car and took out blankets. We sat on the pieces of fabric and stared up at the stars.

"Thank you for this, Fen. I really needed this."

"Of course, you know I love you."

It hurt to hear him say that, but it also made me warm inside; he was the best person I had ever met, so it makes it harder to try to get over him.

Something had been nagging at me, so I moved past my feelings and asked, “H-how’s Mia?” He looked at me with a tight smile, “She broke up with me when you were in the hospital.”

I felt a guilty rush of happiness: “I’m sorry to hear that. Do you wanna talk about it?”

“Are you sure? It’s supposed to be a fun night out, and I don’t want to bring the mood down.”

My curiosity got the best of me, “Please talk to me.”

A dry laugh escaped him, “Okay. When I got the call that you had gotten admitted into the hospital, I dropped everything to go see you. I had actually run out on her while we were on a date, it was harsh of me, but I had to see you. She wasn’t happy...Even after explaining why, she didn’t care. She made me choose between you two, and I obviously chose you; I told her she was a horrible person for doing that, she slapped me, and told me to ‘go to hell.’”

He hesitated before saying, “She told me that you were a f*g, so I left her there before doing something I’d regret.”

I didn’t know what to say, I felt angry and upset, but I didn’t want to ruin our night out. I grabbed his hand: “I’m sorry you had to go through that, and I’m sorry I was what made you two break up.”

He shouted out, annoyed, “Shush. Stop apologizing. I’m glad she broke up with me, she was horrible, especially to you. You’re important to me, more important than some girl.”

Tears filled my eyes, “Fen, I love you. Not in the way you might think. I-I’m in love with you, and have been since I first met you. If you don’t feel the same way, I don’t care, as long as you’re in my life I’d be ha-”

Fireworks, that’s what it felt like when his lips touched mine. The salty, sweet kiss would forever be ingrained in my memory.

I had wished, that night, the kiss would last forever.

But...I don’t have much luck.

Fenri had become sick the night after our magical kiss. The doctors said that there was a malignant tumor in his brain, and he had a few months to live.

We spent each waking moment together, not wasting any time; a month passed and he grew weaker as each day passed.

One night I woke up in a cold sweat, and looked to Fenri’s side of the bed in fear. He looked so cold and lifeless; I started shaking him, hoping he’d wake up and laugh at me for worrying.

He died in his sleep, right next to me; they found a letter written to me, he had known he was close to leaving me, and had wanted to say a last few words to me:

Dear Eden,

I don’t have much time left..I’ve always wondered how my life would be, but I’d never thought this would happen. My life passed by so quickly, but I couldn’t have had a more perfect life. I never told you this, but I have loved you since the first time I laid eyes on you. I know I’m dumb for not confessing, but you knew how my parents were. I hid my feelings, and I even got a girlfriend. When you went to the hospital, I knew life was too short to hide my true feelings.

You’re the most beautiful and perfect soul, you’re my soulmate. I love you more and more each day. I know this will be tough for you, but I want you to live life without me. Find someone new when you’re ready, and they better treat you right. Eden, I never knew what the big deal was when it came to love, but when I saw you it changed me. Love yourself for me, if you can’t for yourself; don’t cry too much, talk about your feelings, and live life to the fullest. I love you more than life itself, and wouldn’t have wished for anyone more perfect than you.

Love,

Fen

P.S. I'm leaving everything to you, my one and only true love.

I cried, of course I cried, but every time I missed you it felt like you were there holding me like the night in the hospital.

Today, I'm happy, Fen, because I'm adopting with my husband. I never thought I'd find someone after you, and yeah he treats me right. I think about you everyday, and will never forget you. I'll live without you, but you'll never not be with me. Who knew I'd have this much luck, especially with the life I have lived; well, I have yet to fully live. I love you, Fen, always and forever will I feel lucky to have met you.

Lischa Mears

.....

The Overpowered Fleets Demise

Katsuo's emerald orbs were beginning to fade like verdant leaves in fall.

Sprawled on rough dirt, he tried to focus his eyes on the gray sky above him.

His limbs were numb. He was sure his arms and legs were completely shattered.

A drop of rain from the clouds fell down his cheek, but Katsuo could only focus on the cold that spread throughout his entire body in a drowning wave of blue.

Soon, he began to feel a comforting warmth.

Katsuo didn't know if it was the blood oozing from his wounds, pooling around his body in a final embrace or if it was his body fighting to stay alive.

Either way, he knew he didn't have long.

Katsuo squinted at clouds of gray in hopes of seeing the sun, but there was no emerging ray of hope.

He had lost the battle.

No, he had lost *everything*.

The disfigured bodies of his friends lay just an arm's reach away from him.

He could have saved them.

He *should have* been able to save them.

He was so very strong, wasn't he?

In the past, nothing could stop him. Katsuo would continue to rise from the ground no matter how many times he was forced to fall by the monstrous souls before him. He would remember those he loved and lost, the thought alone an electric shock to his heart giving him the strength he needed to get back up on staggering feet.

Katsuo's staggering feet would then plant firmly onto the ground, his arms rising into his signature fighting stance with a crazed grin on his face. Pain was never a ruminating thought over saving those he loved.

He was a hero after all.

Katsuo's relentless perseverance often scared every villain he faced, their eyes widening and stomachs turning at the sight of someone so willing to destroy themselves for the sake of others.

It was insane if he was being truly honest with himself.

Suicidal, others might say.

But the overwhelming power that coursed through his body like a raging tsunami gave him confidence. So much confidence that the tallied wins against every villain that would helplessly crumple to the ground by his hands instilled Katsuo with the idea that he'd never lose.

Katsuo hadn't realized he closed his eyes until blood splattered from his mouth in a violent cough, jolting his eyes open. He groaned at the impact of the cough; his ribs were likely impaling his lungs.

Gravel crunched beside his ears; the sound too loud as the world began to appear colorless, fading into distant echoes of a calming night.

Katsuo was suddenly gripped by the collar, the brutal force making him gasp for air at the blaze of pain that spread torturously throughout his body.

Murky water cleared from his vision and his eyes quickly flooded with transparent hatred.

The very man, Demise, no the *monster* who ruthlessly killed his beloved friends was looking down at him with a deranged smile.

Katsuo tried to curse at him, to curse at the world for his unmoving and useless limbs, but he couldn't make a sound.

"*Get up, get up, get up!*" Katsuo screamed inside his head, the pain drowning his cries in an incessant downpour of knives driving into his skin.

Katsuo could only make a small, pitiful shriek when Demise mercilessly impaled him in the chest

with his blade, wasting no time in making the finishing blow.

A sickening sound filled the air, rivaling the thrum of the rain that now poured down from the sky to the desolate world below in full force.

“Let me humble you a bit, kid.” Demise began to speak, voice feigning sympathy. “The instant you think you’re more powerful than anyone else is when you lose. In reality, it makes you *weak*.”

Each syllable dripped with venom and deep down, Katsuo knew the sick monster was right.

Katsuo was weak.

And it was like the world was crying for him at this shattering realization.

Demise carelessly released his grip around Katsuo’s collar causing him to fall unceremoniously to the ground in a swirling puddle of red and gray. Katsuo could hear the villain’s resounding laugh for a timeless second before he entered unmistakable tranquility.

Melinda Quack



The Knight of Trustworthiness: The Liar Who Lies All His Life

Once upon a time, there was an evil, shape-shifting dragon who comes out of his lair every ten years to demand human sacrifices and treasures in exchange for the peace and well-being of the human world.

For hundreds upon thousands of years, he has terrorized the human world, taking immense treasures and large quantities of humans— particularly human women. Countless knights have tried to slay him, but they all have ultimately failed, and their bones soon lined his cave. The amount of bones was so vast indeed that, one day, while searching his hoard for some morsel of food, the dragon tripped over a particularly large pile of bones and died. —Well, he didn’t really die. He just had a bad enough accident that his soul was shaken loose from his body.

At that moment, smoke suddenly erupted from an inconspicuous patch of ground, filling the cave in its pitch-black haze. Then, as soon as it appeared, it seemed to dissipate, retreating back into a shadowy figure with glowing eyes. This figure was Death.

Death glanced over at the dragon, and a transparent version of it slowly rose up and slowly floated toward them. Then, it was sucked into the coiling smoke that surrounded their body. At that moment, all of the human souls that were trapped in the cave because of their lingering resentment suddenly poured into Death’s shadow in droves. Hundreds upon thousands of souls entered the underworld that night, and Death finally let out a breath. If they hadn’t come up with such a brilliant solution, then they probably would have been out of a job before long....

That aside, what were they going to do with the technically “still alive” dragon? Death thought for a moment and suddenly had an idea. Wasn’t there a human boy from one of those millions of worlds out there who was about to have a heart attack due to something about college or something? They could just pluck out the boy’s soul early on and put it in the dragon’s body. Then, because the boy was originally a human, he naturally would not continue eating humans, Death wouldn’t be out of a job, and the boy would continue to live on— it was a win-win for everyone! Really!

So, Death snapped their fingers and it was done.

At that moment, Lyon (pronounced ~~La-t-on~~) woke up and found that he had suddenly become a dragon, and not just any dragon but an evil dragon like those in fairy tales. He felt speechless. Just a few seconds ago, he had been about to open a letter from his dream college and now he was suddenly a dragon in some fantasy world. AH!!! If only it had happened a few seconds later...! He really wanted to know if he was accepted— actually no. If he had been accepted and then immediately traveled to another world and turned into a dragon, he might have really burst a blood vessel...

Never mind. It is better not to know. So... anyway, what was he supposed to do again? Go to a human castle in half a year to collect treasure and some women? ...To eat?!

What a massive waste of resources!

He has been single for eighteen years already! Why in the world would he do something as ridiculous as that. Forget eating. He would rather turn back into a human, enter the human world, and find himself a date!

Oh! And girls love a strong and handsome man, right? No problem! He’ll just pretend to be a knight from a distant land! He’ll call himself the.... the.... the Knight of Trustworthiness! Yeah, the Knight of Trustworthiness! Who wouldn’t want to trust someone who was named “Trustworthy”? Even he wanted to trust himself, and he knew he wasn’t trustworthy— wait. Did he just expose himself...?

—Uh, yeah... so, dear narrator, please insert a time skip!

A time skip occurs.

The next day, he shifts into his human form, fills up a backpack with some gold coins, jewelry, and old dragon scales and teeth (as makeshift weapons in case he gets robbed) and makes his way to the nearest human town.

It is on this walk that he discovers something terrible. Walking is awful. Walking with a heavy backpack is beyond awful. Walking with a heavy backpack on an empty stomach is beyond, beyond awful. In fact, his stamina is surprisingly pitiful for a dragon. But then again, considering the dragon’s habits, this is definitely the body of someone who only exercises once every ten years in order to terrorize the human world.

He eventually collapsed on the road before long, looking dusty and miserable. It was at that moment that a small cart pulled by donkeys had passed by, and the farmer inside noticed him. The farmer stopped his cart and got down to help him. Seeing him, Lyon asked for a cup of water and the farmer obliged.

“Hey, thanks, bro! I was really about to die of thirst right there!”

“‘Twas nothin’ much. Any man would do the same in my position. But, yer not from around here, are ya? I’ve never heard anyone talk like ya before.”

“...Oh, uh, yeah. I’m from far away... Like, reeeeeeally far away. Like, so far that I don’t even know how to describe it.”

“I could tell. What are ya doing around these parts?”

“I’m, uh.... I’m a knight. I’m the Knight of Trustworthiness! I was... uh... God sent me a vision, telling me that there was a mighty dragon terrorizing these parts and told me to come find and slay the beast! Yeah! And of course, I, being really handsome, smart, and strong— I even won the National Dragon Slaying Contest back where I lived— agreed to take on this quest to free the people from this tyrannical Beast!!”

Upon hearing this, the farmer fell to his knees, and cried out: “Thank the Lord!! He has finally sent us another worthy warrior to slay that evil dragon!!”

Hearing this, the newly named “knight” suddenly fell silent. Another knight? How many knights were there before him? Also, why did he frickin’ say that? **He’s** the frickin’ dragon! What’s he supposed to do now? Slay himself???

The farmer was so happy that he gave Lyon a lift to the village chief’s house. There, Lyon told the chief the same story, albeit in a more confident tone than before, and the chief was so happy that he planned to send Lyon to the capital city that very instant.

“May I offer you a horse, Sir Knight?”

“Yes, please! I’m in desperate need of a horse. In fact, back where I came from, I was the best horse rider there ever was!”

The chief’s polite smile wavered a bit as he asked Lyon to follow him out to the corral, but Lyon was too busy bragging about himself to notice.

Nevertheless, as they walked, Lyon began to sweat. Now he’s done it this time. Just watch, because of all of that boasting, the village chief will give him an extremely powerful stallion that will throw him off as soon as he even tries to ride it, and he will be on his ass in three seconds flat.

Coincidentally, as he was thinking this, the village chief was also sweating. Here was a hero declaring that he was not only going to save the world but also a renowned horse rider. As soon as he sees that their village could only provide him with a single mare of unknown lineage and pedigree, he would probably get mad and storm off...

“This... uh... well, this horse... Well, uh, I know that, having traveled far and wide, Sir Knight would naturally have seen countless horses, and I apologize if it’s not up to your standards, but...”

“...No, no, no! I would be perfectly happy even if you gave me the weakest pony in the entire village... Hahaha.....”

“Oh no! We couldn’t possibly treat our hero so crudely! We must offer you the best!” The village chief sweated harder. Did the knight really not mind or was he just paying lip-service? Some of those knights that he met before were like this...

“No, no! Really! You don’t have to do that! I’m fine with just a pony, honest!”

Thus, both men continued to discuss the matter back and forth as they made their way to the corral. As they walked, Lyon was silently praying to all of the gods above that the horse would be a docile one while the village chief was silently praying to every god that he knew that the hero would not leave after seeing the mare. This went on until they made it out to the corral. There, a lone mare grazed silently by the wooden fence.

At that moment, Lyon let out a silent cheer in his heart, while the village chief braced himself for the knight’s ire.

“Why, she’s perfect!” Lyon exclaimed.

“I apologize for— uh, pardon?”

“I said she’s perfect! Exactly what I was looking for!”

Looking at Lyon’s joyful face, the Chief felt bewildered. What happened to the insults and accusations that he was imagining? Why was reality so different from his expectations? —Could it be that the knight was taking pity on their village’s poverty and said all of those things just to make him feel better?

The more he thought, the more the village chief believed in his own theory, and the more touched he felt. Every other hero who visited their town had basically demanded the best stallions they could offer, and after so many times, their herd of horses had eventually dwindled to nothing. In fact, this mare had barely been caught a few months ago.

At first, the chief had thought that this young knight would have been like all of the rest, but when faced with such a subpar horse, he just accepted it as happily as if he had been offered an actual purebred stallion worth several cities. Truly, what a kind young knight.

Meanwhile, the so-called “kind young knight” was still celebrating his astounding luck. He even lamented the fact that he couldn’t buy a lottery ticket...

Once the mare was saddled up and Lyon was given both rations and a map, everyone said their tearful goodbyes. Then, Lyon rode to the capital city. Unfortunately, as a person who was not only unaccustomed to a horse but also forced to ride for several days, when Lyon finally made it to his

destination, his entire body was so sore that he could barely shuffle into an inn to stay for the night before collapsing at the front desk. Luckily, the innkeeper was not only strong, but also a kindly man. Thus, when he helped the new guest to his room, he only took ten gold pieces as his “carrying” fee...

Lyon eventually woke up twelve hours later to a body that didn't even feel like a body anymore and he wanted to cry. He thought that he had a dragon's body! What happened to that magical vitality and immediate healing thing that all magical beings got to enjoy? Why was he so weak????

As a result, he stayed there for several more days, and was fleeced by the “kindly” innkeeper. Then, on the fourth day, seeing that he was running out of money, he gritted his teeth, got out of bed, and hobbled his way to the Royal Castle. There, he asked for an audience with the king, was granted such, and told the king his story, albeit with a few extra details added in. He talked about how the dragon's demands had caused his family to fall into poverty (actually, that was the innkeeper), and that he was going to bring peace and justice to the people (well, in truth, he was just trying to sound inspiring when he made that speech... it wasn't like he was actually planning to slay himself...).

The king was so moved by Lyon's speech that he wanted to marry his daughter off to him right that instant. However, Lyon, remembering that he still had to deal with his other identity, righteously rejected him, stating that he must slay the dragon and bring back proof of his deeds before he could consider himself qualified for the princess's hand in marriage.

The king was moved again. Such a righteous and honorable young knight was truly worthy of his daughter!

“Very well! Your wish is granted! Someone! Help this brave knight prepare for the journey and prepare the grandest carriage for him to ride in!”

“YES! —Uh... I mean, uh, thank you, your majesty! I greatly appreciate your aid!”

So he was prepared. Unfortunately, carriage rides on unpaved roads are extremely bumpy and motion-sickness-inducing. So the young knight spent the rest of the ride either vomiting or laying down.

The carriage driver honestly could not understand how this weak guy would be able to slay the dragon, but hey, better the knight than himself, right? Maybe he could scare away the dragon with his vomit or use his stomach acid to melt it or something?

On their way to the dragon's lair, they encountered a busybody priest, who quickly found out the purpose of their journey. Thus, without further ado, he quickly brought them to his teacher, who eventually entrusted them with a box. According to the man, the box must not be opened until they found the evil being; then, once Lyon saw what was in the box, he would naturally know how to use it.

Everyone was confused at this point, but adhering to the virtue that one must always respect one's elders, none of them dared to question the man. Lyon was especially confused, but in order to

maintain his air as a dignified and intelligent knight, he didn't say a single word from start to end other than a simple "Thank you" after receiving the box from the man. The man nodded and closed his eyes, hinting that he was done, and the monk led everyone outside. Then, they said their goodbyes and continued on their journey once again.

They finally made it to the evil dragon's lair, and Lyon got off the carriage with his box. He then confidently strode into the cave, much to the coachman's surprise and admiration, and disappeared into the shadows within.

Once he was far enough, he finally opened up the box to find... a hand grenade! Lyon's mouth dropped. You're kidding, right? Why is there a hand grenade here? These frickin' backward people can only ride in carriages and on horses— where the frick did they get the technology to make hand grenades????

Lyon was speechless. Then, he found a note stating that the hand grenade in the box was blessed by a priest and could destroy any evil creature, and felt even more speechless. Of all things, this was a holy hand grenade... —Err... why did this suddenly remind him of that one movie with the holy grail...?

Lyon was lost in thought when, suddenly, something moved in the dark. Being a dragon, Lyon naturally caught sight of the creature and screamed. There was a frickin' cockroach in front of him and it was GIGANTIC! It was nearly as big as a car!

At that moment, as if by instinct, Lyon ran behind a large rock, took out the hand grenade, pulled the pin, and chucked it at the roach.

The resulting explosion was glorious. It even destroyed three-fourths of the cave in one blow.

Now, going back to the waiting coachman, when he heard the explosion and saw the cave crumbling, he had jumped up and prepared to escape. However, it was at that moment that he noticed a humanoid shape walking out of the dust.... And it was Lyon...? Lyon won! And he was even holding... a bunch of teeth and scales? Who was so free that they would even take the time to pull out the dragon's teeth and scales one-by-one when they could have just chopped off its head in one blow? Really, this knight was a weird one— But he won, so who cares? They were all saved!! Hip-hip-hooray!!!

In the end, the knight returned to the kingdom with his haul and married the princess. They lived a happy life together, and from the start to finish, no one knew that the dragon was never defeated, and that Lyon was actually the dragon in disguise. However, they all lived happily ever after, and that's what really matters, right?

The End

The Lives of Louise Labé

Part I: Similar After All

Sometime in September when I was embroidering a beautiful rose (that really looks more like a lopsided lollipop than anything else...) on a pillow on the living room sofa, the phone rang. After the first ring, my daughter Stephanie immediately stopped typing on her laptop, reached over, and picked up the phone.

After listening to the caller's introduction, she answered, "Yes. This is her mother, Stephanie¹ Labé, speaking."

Then, after hearing the caller say something, Stephanie's brow suddenly wrinkled. As the silence went on, her face began to grow more and more concerned. Seeing this, I immediately set aside my embroidery work and watched her with bated breath. Then, to my relief, her concern slowly turned to irritation and then to helplessness. From there, I could easily deduce who was on the other end of the call.

If it were not one of my granddaughter Louisa's teachers or her principal, I would eat my own embroidery.

After a short while, Stephanie hung up the phone with a soft sigh. "Dammit, I knew a day like this would come. Oh, Louisa, Louisa, Louisa, did I name you too closely to *her*?"

At her dramatic monologue, I cackled. "I told you so! I told you that you would jinx yourself in the end! Besides, I remember when you were little, you weren't any better than she was. Always beating up someone here, beating up someone there... If I recall correctly, you even beat up your current husband. Then, he followed you home!"

A flush crept onto my daughter's face, "Mom!"

I snorted. "Yes, yes, alright, alright. Let's go pick up that little Stephanie two-point-oh."

"Mom!"

"Heeheehee!"

"Momma, it wasn't my fault! Ethan started it! He bullied Elise first! He tried to steal her snack so I just **had** to punch him!!"

As soon as we all got into the car, Louisa immediately let loose. It was in that moment that I just knew: She was definitely Stephanie's daughter, one-hundred percent.

¹ Stephanie is the English version of the name Etiennette, the name of Louise Labé's mother.

“...and, Momma, you told me that bullying is wrong, and that we should always try to help our family and friends, especially Elise because she’s so shy, and you said that if anyone tries to hurt us or our family, we shouldn’t let them, and...”

Even the way she defended herself was nearly the same as her predecessor nearly thirty years ago. Haaa... How the times have passed, but events have yet to change.

“.....” My daughter voiced my inner sigh, albeit in a more disappointed and frustrated way than I intended... But, hey, ‘E’ for effort.— Or was it ‘A’?

“Baby, I know you were trying to protect your little cousin, but fighting is wrong.”

“—But, why? James hit someone last time and he didn’t even get punished! Why do I have to get detention for two weeks? I didn’t even start the fight! Ethan started it!”

Recalling ‘James’ as the wealthy little brat who was sticking out his tongue at me on my way to the office, I suddenly chimed in. “Yeah! Isn’t it just because that little boy’s family has a little bit of money? We have it, too! Just take it out and directly smack people with it!”

“Mom! That’s illegal!”

“Well, that little school of yours should have thought about that before accepting bribes in the first place! Hmph!”

“Mom! That’s not what actually happened!”

“Then if that school was so noble, why pull my little granddaughter out?”

Stephanie took a deep breath, “Mom, I took Louisa out because I thought she needed a change of pace.”

“Change of pace-shmace! Just call it as it was!”

“...Alright, fine. I felt that the atmosphere of that school wasn’t a good fit for Louisa, so I pulled her out.”

I rolled my eyes, and said nothing. But of course, my thoughts were a whole ‘nother matter altogether. After all, I know it, you know it— the whole world knows it! Even if you don’t want to say anything, the truth won’t change!

After muttering a few more sarcastic insults inside of my head, I came back to reality and found my daughter reasoning with my granddaughter over the morality of getting into fights.

“... Honey... Although I know that you don’t think it’s fair for you to be punished when all you did was stand up to your cousin’s bully, unfortunately the world doesn’t work that way. If you hit someone, even if you are in the right, you will still get punished. And in truth, if it weren’t for the fact that there was evidence of bullying and that you were retaliating in self-defense, we could be

facing either a lawsuit or you might even go to jail, or...”

“Or we could fight back and just win with the power of money.” I really just couldn’t resist joining in and adding to the chaos.

My daughter gave me a glare through the front mirror and was about to retort when my granddaughter timely cut in.

“But, but, but, Momma, it wasn’t even my fault! Why is it so wrong to stand up for what’s right?”

Swallowing her previous retort, Stephanie took a deep breath to calm herself and responded to her daughter. “Louisa, honey, it’s not wrong to stand up for what’s right, but there are always better, more peaceful ways to resolve things. Fighting isn’t always the answer.”

“But...!”

“No, Louisa. Fighting is dangerous. Not only could you get hurt, but if the people you hit accidentally encountered severe problems, you would live with the guilt of it for the rest of your life.”

The car descended into silence.

I glanced back at my granddaughter who was pouting sullenly, and then turned to look at my daughter’s frown.

Really the same.

Part II: Let Me Tell You A Story

As the sky darkened into a deep blue, and the stars began to seep through its fabric, I glanced at my workaholic daughter still tapping away at her keyboard. Then, I got up from the couch. After that, I tried to usher my granddaughter off to brush her teeth, and then to bed. Unfortunately, the kid just dragged on and on, acting as if she could just waste the night away by dragging her feet and inching off to bed. That did not happen, and I eventually managed to put her to bed.

As I was tucking her in, Louisa suddenly called out to me: “Gramma?”

“Hm?” I respond, carefully smoothing out her blanket to soothe my own OCD tendencies.

“How come Momma doesn’t want me to fight?”

I glanced up at her with a raised eyebrow, “Simple. She doesn’t want to deal with your eventual legal battles.”

“...What?”

“She doesn’t want to have to keep you out of prison.” I translated for myself.

“Why would I go to prison?”

“Because you beat someone up.”

“But I didn’t go to prison today.”

“Not *this* time, but next time you might not be so lucky.” I sighed as I shook my head. This kid...

“Gramma. Do you not like me?”

“I don’t like you?!” I felt incredulous. “If I didn’t like you, would I be lecturing you like this? If I didn’t like you, I would’ve just said nothing and let you go and beat up people and go straight to prison.”

“But, Gramma, you said fighting was okay.”

...Oh yeah...

“Er... Well, Grandma was just joking with you earlier. Grandma may say it’s okay, but in reality, it’s not okay. If you beat people up, you really might just go to prison.”

“But Gramma, James didn’t go to prison! Ethan didn’t go either, and he fought with me!”

“That’s only because you are still young now. When you get older and you still get into fights, you could get suspended from school, get expelled, go to prison, or even deal with all three at once.”

“Then, let me fight now!” Louisa sat up with an excited expression. She really looked like she was about to have a throw down right now.

“But if you learn to fight now, you’ll get used to it, and you won’t be able to stop yourself when you get older.”

“I can!”

“You can’t. Everything you do will come back to you. –Lie down, Louisa, and let me tell you a bedtime story.”

“–What story, Gramma?”

As soon as I had mentioned a story, that troublesome little kid obediently lay down, and covered herself with her blanket. Ha! I didn’t see her move that fast when I told her to go to bed earlier!

“A story. A story about your ancestor, Louise Labé.”

“Really? Hey! Her name sounds like mine!”

“Yes, I know. Your mom really liked this story, so she named you after that ancestor.” I poked her nose with a smile.

“Really? What was she like?”

“Well...”

Part III: Don't Wait Until It's Too Late For Regrets

The story of Louise Labé first began with her parents: Pierre Charly and Etienneette Roybet.

After losing his first wife, Pierre coincidentally met a young and beautiful girl named Etienneette. He had seemed greatly charmed by her, but at the time, he had been newly widowed, so no one would have expected him to marry a second wife barely a year after his first had been laid to rest. Yet, that was what he did.

Some people speculated on his actions and his young wife, but no one wanted to provoke someone they couldn't afford to provoke just for the sake of satisfying their curiosities. Thus, as quickly as the gossip began, it also died down just as quick.

Having affluence is nice, isn't it?

However, in the world that we live in, it is the men that live well, while the women must suffer. Although the rumors have died down, Etienneette was still isolated by the rest of the ladies of Lyon. Thus, depression, compounded by her consecutive births, quickly set in. Unfortunately, people of the time did not understand the true dangers of depression. Thus, she was left untreated for years, and what was left in the end was another corpse in its prime.

According to various sources, Pierre sincerely loved his new wife, so after her death, he deeply cherished his children for the rest of his life. In particular, he especially pampered his youngest daughter, Louise, who was said to look the most similar to her deceased mother. In fact, it was even said that because of these similarities, Louise was raised with the finest education and lifestyle that money could buy.

Of course, whether Pierre spoiled his daughter because he genuinely loved her mother or he felt guilty toward her, nobody knew. But what they did know was that he raised Louise into a pampered and headstrong young woman.

In fact, she was so headstrong that she would even “borrow” her elder brothers' clothes in order to go outside of the city and hunt various animals for sport. On top of that, the year she turned eighteen, she even cross-dressed as a man in order to join the Dauphin of France, Henry II's army.

Thankfully, she managed to sneak out of the army shortly thereafter, and her true identity was never discovered. However, her sudden stint terrified her family, and even caused her father to faint.

When he woke up, he seemed to have realized something and immediately prepared a will. He arranged his family properties and finances and then his youngest daughter's marriage to his partner and fellow ropemaker Ennemond Perrin. Although Louise was not satisfied with her father's marriage arrangements, when he died a few months later, she had no choice but to abide by his will and marry Ennemond, a man nearly twenty years her senior, anyway.

Due to her resistance to the marriage, even after they got married in 1543, Louise remained indifferent to her new husband. Thus, even if he had originally tried to get along with his new wife, being forced to endure her cold shoulder eventually wore Ennemond down, and he no longer bothered to get any closer to her.

As a result, their relationship remained that way for many years: warm, but not warm; cold, but not cold; merely, temperate. But, for all that their relationship was bland and dispassionate, they worked well together, and gradually expanded their family businesses.

Gradually, as the years passed, they naturally grew closer. Although they never seemed to be as real couples were, there was still something between them that was real and genuine: a sense of love and respect between two like-minded people— a connection between a pair of partners that have been working harmoniously for many years on end.

Then, rumors about Louise's affair with Olivier de Magny, a fellow poet, suddenly broke out.

According to the rumors, Olivier was said to have fallen in love with Louise at first sight. Thus, he began to woo her. Although he later found out that she was married, he remained undeterred by the fact and continued his pursuit. To some people, this showcases a lack of morality. However, for a man who already loves a woman who does not conform to societal norms and expectations, would having a twisted love story on top of that make any difference? Especially since the person he loves is someone who only married her current husband due to her father's will and is known to have a cold relationship with him?

As for the so-called "other half" of the adulterer pair, well, here is where the rumors grew vague. Some sources say that she was moved, while others said that she was not. Thus, perhaps Louise relented, or perhaps she did not, but she did at least admire her admirer.² So, because of this, all of the rumormongers said that she was in love.

Considering the fact that the rumors have managed to survive to modern-day, naturally, Ennemond would have heard of them. As a result, he was directly angered to death by them.

²This statement was inspired by the second stanza of Louise Labé's poem, "Non havria Ulysse o qualunqu'atro mai," as the speaker of the poem is assumed to be Labé herself, considering the fact that the speaker's lover is an "artistic" person.

Then, it was from this point on that Louise began to frequent various bars and brothels on a constant basis.

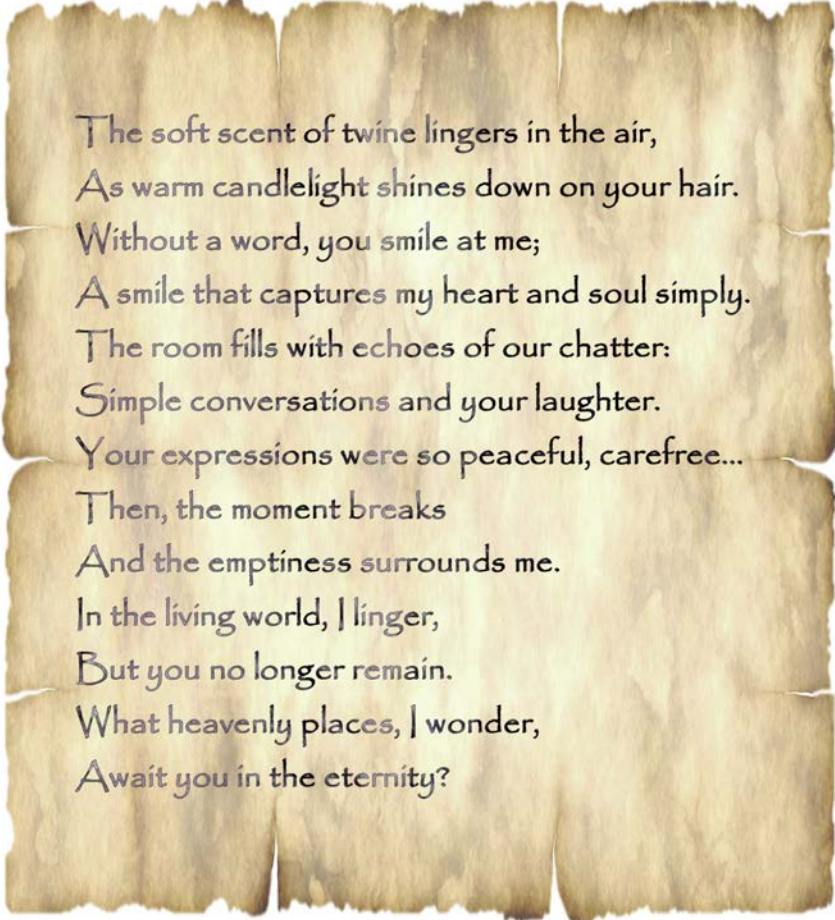
Although she had previously been known to have appeared in such places in her youth, it was said that she stopped frequenting them as much after she got married. In fact, throughout her many years of marriage to Ennemond, it was said that she only ever stepped foot in those places in order to chat with her close friends and literary contacts.

Yet, now that she has reverted to her old ways— You tell me: is this her reclaiming her freedom or mourning for the lost?

No one knows for sure, but in the end, Louise did not end up with Olivier. Instead, she spent the rest of her days as a courtesan: beautiful, enchanting, and forever out of reach— like a person whose desires have reached beyond the human realm.

Olivier died alone. He never married. Perhaps he truly loved her.

But, for Louise, no one knows for sure who she loved, or even if she had ever loved anyone. Perhaps she had only ever loved her poetry, her music, or perhaps...



The soft scent of twine lingers in the air,
As warm candlelight shines down on your hair.
Without a word, you smile at me;
A smile that captures my heart and soul simply.
The room fills with echoes of our chatter:
Simple conversations and your laughter.
Your expressions were so peaceful, carefree...
Then, the moment breaks
And the emptiness surrounds me.
In the living world, I linger,
But you no longer remain.
What heavenly places, I wonder,
Await you in the eternity?

Epilogue: What Goes Around, Comes Around

In life, all debts will eventually be repaid. Perhaps it will not happen in the first lifetime, but it will happen in the next.

In his previous lifetime, Pierre Charly did not treat either of his wives well. Although he did not treat them badly either, his coldness toward them and his indirect act of killing his second wife (although unknowingly) still accumulated a sizable cloud of negative energy around his soul. Thus, in this life, women avoided him. Perhaps it was something about his rough and gruff facial features, but as long as they were female, they would somehow be put off by him, one way or another. Even his own mother had abandoned him at birth.

However, for all of the tragedy that befalls a person, they would never truly be abandoned to despair. Even if it seems that there is no way out of any situation, the heavens would never forget to leave a single thread of hope for the individual. However, whether they end up grasping that strand of hope depends on both their luck and themselves.

Peter Charley's hope existed in the form of Stephanie Labé.

The first time that they met, he accidentally ran into her, causing her to drop her books. Then, Peter, having had little experience in talking to women (and having a low EQ), immediately began mouthing off and indirectly blaming her for not looking where she was going. Now, as Etiennette, she would have apologized for her behavior. However, as Stephanie, she naturally refused to take it lying down, and directly punched him.

It was a beautiful scene.

It was also enlightening.

Perhaps Stephanie managed to straighten out something crooked in his mind (or perhaps she made it worse), but after that day, Peter began his relentless pursuit of her. He flirted with her and courted her in every way deemed romantic by the internet.

Funny how fate works, right? In their previous lifetime, he was indifferent toward her emotions. Yet, in this lifetime, he is now the one desperately trying to capture the heart he once ignored.

Then, after a long and hard battle, he finally emerged victorious and married the beauty. —Of course, that does not change the fact that he has become a hen-pecked husband, but hey, that's a form of happiness as well.

Together, they had little Louisa, who grew into quite the tomboy. She had gotten into nearly twice as many fights as her mother had when she was her age, and if this had continued, perhaps she would have ended up in jail one day. However, as things stood, because of a single story her grandmother told her one day, her fate was inexplicably altered. Perhaps the story stirred up some memory suppressed by the waters of oblivion,³ or perhaps she finally understood the feelings of

“regretting, but no longer being able to make up for it.”

—Whatever it was, it changed her forever.

From that day forward, she began to get into less fights, and focused more and more on her academics. In particular, she focused on poetry: writing it, reading it, reciting it, and essentially reclaiming a talent that should have logically been lost at first sip of oblivion.

As she transformed her aggression into inspiration, the shackles of karma seemed to have loosened around her ankles. However, for people who should meet, they naturally will.

Louise and Ennemond naturally met, this time as Louisa and Anemundo.⁴

At the time, he had just been dumped by his girlfriend of ten years, gotten drunk, and was tottering dangerously on the edge of a bridge, toeing the line between life and death. Louisa had seen this scene from the safety of her car, and, without a second thought, had stopped her car and moved to drag him back to safety.

They both nearly fell off of the ledge multiple times, but due to some luck or providence, they made it safely back.

At that time, none of her friends knew what the young girl had seen in the scruffy and depressed man at least ten years her senior, but for some inexplicable reason, she fell in love with him.

Louisa’s love story was every bit as dramatic as her mother’s, although twice as long. But, perhaps because she had already begun to pay back some of her debt in her previous lifetime, although her chase was long, it still led to a lifetime of happiness in the end.

After that near-traumatic meeting, Anemondo was able to quickly get back on his feet, depicting an almost inhuman talent to bounce back after encountering such a setback. But that was just the way he was. After all, to be a successful businessman, one must always learn to adapt, rebound, and learn from each mistake that one makes throughout one’s life.

After allowing himself a moment of weakness to vent his negative emotions, he was soon able to regulate his emotions and reset his mental state. Of course, in doing so, he also activated his body’s natural defense mechanisms, which led to his emotions closing off. As a result, he became relatively indifferent to Louisa’s initial pursuit. However, human hearts are made of flesh and blood rather than stone in the end, and as long as the other person is genuine and sincere, it is hard not to feel moved by them. Thus, after a while, he began to accept Louisa into his life.

³This is referring to both the River Lethe of Greek mythology and River of Forgetfulness from Chinese legends.

⁴Anemondo is another form of Annemund, which is thought to be another way of spelling Ennemond.

After a long period of courtship, they finally tied the knot, and the last of the Labé family's karmic debts faded away.

The day after the young couple got married, Louisa's grandma passed away in her sleep with a satisfied smile on her face.

The curse that has long shackled the descendants of the Labé family has finally been set free.

Every child in our family is taught the story of Louise Labé from the day that they were born to the day that they branch out on their own. Every child but the culprit, herself.

We were taught this, not to tell her and ask her to make amends, but to protect her and to try to guide her well.

Guiding is useless. We are forbidden from telling her, so how can she understand?

I couldn't stand it. So, when I branched out, I branched far away. I branched an entire ocean away.

I refused to be controlled by fate. But, funnily enough, fate still found me. I ran away for so long and so far, and yet, I still couldn't escape. But nevertheless, I am no longer in range for the main family to control me.

I am bound, but I am also free.

This debt that has lasted for so long will finally end here with me.

I swear it.

Alexis Robinson

The Dream

I try to run through the piles of broken sticks, dirt, and leaves on the forest ground, as blood was dripping from my left leg, leaving a trail behind me. As the adrenaline was kicking in through my body, I didn't even see the giant log in front of me before I tripped. I fall to the floor and think, *Typical horror movie move*. It's too late for me to get up and run, as the killer raises the butcher knife over their head, when something falls off their wrist, and brings the knife down quickly into my abdomen. That's when my alarm goes off.

I scream as I quickly sit up, gulping down the water that's on the nightstand next to my bed. I realize that I'm all wet and assume that it was just sweat from the nightmare, until I remove the covers and discover myself drenched in blood. The thing was... I didn't have a scratch on me... and it wasn't my blood. I panic as I inspect my body and get easily distracted as I realize that my charm bracelet was missing, and I never, ever take it off. I check my bed as I throw all my sheets and pillows on the floor and check under the bed. Nothing. I'm known to be a sleepwalker and do strange things, so maybe I had dropped it somewhere else, so I leave to look around. Then I remember that I'm covered in blood and quickly change my clothes, throwing the bloody clothes away. I know I should be focused on the bloody clothes and not a bracelet, but I can only focus on one problem at a time. I go to my sister's room to see if she knows anything about what happened, but she's gone. My parents are on vacation for a week, so they're obviously not here. I check every other room in the house and the kitchen last and see that a butcher knife is the only dish in the sink. She's nowhere to be found. That's strange, I think, *my sister would never leave without telling me first*. I call her at least 3 times, but she doesn't answer. I start to panic more and think that I should call the police. Then I think, *what if I did something bad?*, and decide to figure it out myself. I look out the window and see that my sister's car is still in the driveway. One of her friends probably picked her up. I walk outside and get into my car to drive around to see if I can remember anything and see my sister's purse on the passenger's seat. "Weird.", I say. I look in the bag and see that her phone is still in here, with unanswered messages. It was strange since she always has her phone on her. Even in the shower. I don't know her password so I can't even attempt to go through her phone. I shake my head, put the phone back in my bag and start to drive around.

After about 30 minutes of driving around, nothing was coming to me. I finally decide to go to the police when I drive past the forest from my dream. Or should I say nightmare. It's a longshot, but I park on the dirt road and walk into the woods. It's just like how it was in my dream. In fact, it's EXACTLY how it was in my dream. "It was just a dream", I say to myself, "Nothing here is going to help me." As I turn around to go back to my car, I look down and see a long trail of blood on the ground. I stupidly decide to follow the trail, you know, like how they do in horror right before they get their heads chopped off by a serial killer. I know that's not the best idea, but my curiosity just seems to get the best of me. I walk slowly with my heart beating uncontrollably when I see a figure lying on the dirt floor a few yards from me, behind a log. I hesitantly walk over to inspect it and gasp loudly. In front of me, was my twin sister's dead body, wearing the exact same clothes I was in my dream, stabbed in the exact same place I was in my dream, and right next to her, was my charm bracelet.

Angel Rosas

Big Sister's Night

It was the cold air of the weather that affected my thinking. I couldn't stop writing down my thoughts down on my notepad. I wondered what I should do. I looked outside my windows and saw the green lush landscape outside. The mountains looked gigantic. They were littered with dozens of trees and thick with darkness. It was difficult to see the other side at all. I laid down in my bed once again.

"Fuck me," I said. Of what point was there to resist? Big Sister had prevailed in the last war and enforced a new system of democracy. It was to be called "menocracy" whatever that was supposed to mean. I thought it to be pure nonsense. I didn't even see what point there was in waging this great war. Women wanted their place in society and now we would live in it. No point arguing otherwise. Only a few lights glowed in the darkness outside. They were street lamps illuminating the thick pavement outside. A few commoners came and went. A patrol squad went by looking to round up those who were on the losing side of the war. Fortunately for me, I dipped out as soon as I saw an escape. I remember the tight prison cell. The men being whipped by the women for deeds against women, the showers with peepholes, and the forced breeding ranches only they were allowed to be in. By God, there was at least one squadron still looking to free prisoners so I was one of the last to break out. In the weeks that followed, there was much bloodshed and violence among Europe. The lands filled with bodies and the brutal heat of summer aided a much horrible smell. America could only gasp as Europa was raped violently that summer and the conflict between brother and sister would not stop. I reminisced over this as I looked outside my small window. The apartment looked not too shabby. It was a 2 story building with a working shower. It was accommodating for me at the very least. I got by dishwashing and janitorial work. The women who I worked under were the kind to make comments now and then about my status as a free man. I could only retort that I earned my freedom by giving up multiple services and honors. That was the most I could say before I'd be hauled back to the gulag. I didn't want to imagine what horrors laid there. It would be a while before I could try to live a normal life again.

"Hey, Hercule!" One of my downstairs neighbors shouted at me. I looked down in surprise.

"What is it?" I asked back. It was a rarity for people to talk back to me. I was mostly a ghost.

"Can you wash the laundry again? I got some cat poop stuck on my daughter's apparel. It's very important for her upcoming entrance. Please get it done," she said with a smile.

"Okay, I'll get it done as soon as possible. I'll be down as soon as I'm done with this bit of poetry," I stammered. I closed the window and made my way downstairs. Aside my other duties, I was also tasked with taking care of the clothes for the tenants. It was my way to show appreciation and respect for the elderly. I went into the small room packed with numerous machines. The stench was horrible. Yellow sticky stuff was coming out of one machine. It was one of the dryers. I picked up the sack of clothing labeled for me and tossed into one of the available ones. I then packed some of the detergents into it and set it to wash for 50 minutes. Afterwards, I would come back and set it to dry. I then climbed into my oft bed and went off into a deep nap. A hour had passed

and I went back to check the machine. The clothes inside looked pretty clean so I pulled them up and set them into the dryer. I would come back in the morning. Outside, the starry sky glowed bright with ferocity and strength in the darkness. Despite the party's attempts to snuff out nature, they couldn't blot out the heavens. It was a reminder everyday as to how nature truly worked, beyond the confines of human control. The buildings in the distance were dark. Hardly a sound was heard except for the faint running of a squirrel or mouse. Even the winds were quiet.

"Hey, Hercule...What are you doing?," It was the same woman from before. She had put on a blue vest with a black sleek jacket on her. Her eyes were ice blue and piercing. Luckily, I was a glacier. So those eyes weren't enough to get my fortress of solitude.

"Just looking at the street. I wouldn't want any burglars coming in," I said. I let out a small cough.

"Okay but don't be out there too long. I don't want to hear of any accident or animal biting at you," she gave out a stern look. Smiled afterwards though.

"Be careful," and she went back inside. I stayed outside for a bit longer before retreating. The cold air was a comfort for me. It was soon to be August and I could only hope to embrace the hot and sick weather then. I went into my room and locked the door. I went to my small bed and made peace.

"Why did it have to be like this," I let out. I wasn't supposed to be like a slave. I had higher hopes. The dreams we shared weren't a lie. This was supposed to be the last fight against facism. I remembered our squad and the ideals we shared between each other. It was to be a society where everyone had a say and even the smallest egg from a mother would have a basic sense of human nature and rights. People had a basic entitlement to being treated fairly. In the dark november that followed however, there arose another faction. This faction had arose out of a small conflict between two of our higher members, Michael and Brown. Brown had apparently left out of anger that women were being left out of the discussion and went to discuss it with his wife. In the week that followed afterwards though, we saw Brown's head mailed to our HQ with the message:

"It's time we set our own establishment. Goodbye men." That was the note.

"Holy shit," Michael had said in that dark time. We rounded up some of our best men and headed out to where Brown lived. We thought this would be a small time operation. We had no idea how big it would explode until after. When we arrived, we noticed several banners had already been hung over the house and a small police force had gathered. There were already complaints from the neighbors nearby.

"Hey, captain," Michael let out. "What brings you here?"

"We heard there was some domestic violence and so we decided to come out here. Some of the other guys didn't hear any cases going on so they decided to tag along with me. We're thinking it's a one and done," the captain replied.

"Well," Michael replied. He went on to describe what happened to Brown and the note that

followed. He explained he didn't know what the hell was going over there.

"That pretty much sums it up," Michael gave out. We were going to head out into the house if the police didn't come out in 10 minutes.

"It should be pretty simple," the captain replied. He and his 2 other men went inside. I'll never forget the screams and shrieks heard from inside.

BAM

It was one of the officers. He got immediately back into the vehicle.

"We have 2 officers. Repeat, we have 2 officers down," he sputtered into the mic before an awful scream was again heard from the inside. It was a woman. Thick flogs of smoke started arising from the chimney of the house.

"It looks like it's straight from hell," Michael replied.

"Maybe we should send for backup. They probably have a gun if they can just take down 2 officers right away," Tatum said. He was one of the men assigned to the shotgun.

"No, I think we can handle this. JACOB! Fetch me the revolver and a vest," he commanded.

"Yes, sir," Jacob gave. He fetched the revolver and vest. It was given the rating of being shotgun-proof so he shouldn't just be taken off guard. He also put on a helmet to protect against at least basic handgun bullets and knife strikes.

"Liebhart, go put on a vest and a gun. We're heading in there now," Michael barked out. Michael went first. Liebhart went after, and I went last. The door was a solid black with a stained glass window. He opened the door. I will never forget what I saw on that day. The memories still haunt me.

BAM

We threw up immediately. The kitchen was ahead and the fridge open with human heads and feet. The stove had a piece of ass cooking on it, skinned. A woman was eating an eye in the corner. The upstairs room had a sound of a bed shaking and large yelps. Red thick smoke arising out of it. The living room had dogs and cat laid about as in ritual format. The officers were hanged on the wall. Smell of carcass filled the hallway. Clothes for children were on the chairs in the dining room. Pots on the stove had eyes like that of a small one in it. Hair clumps were set aside as a sort of appetizer. Urine and feces on the floor like those used for cleaning floors and walls.

"Just start blasting," Michael shouted. The woman in the kitchen finally noticed us. Only after looking at her food and a photo did she finally notice our presence, and with it, a large scream.

“Fuck me,” Michael let off a round with his revolver. The woman’s brains splattered over the wall with the blood flowing off into the floor. It was only after inspecting the body that we realized that it was Brown’s wife.

CRASH

Two doors down in the hallway opened with a slam and two witches came out. One with haggrid hair and red-stained checks. The white mouth looked like it was a pool of blood with human liver as the chicken and rice. Michael let no hesitation stop him from unleashing his anger.

BLAM

He let the revolver speak for itself. Blow after blow it landed on each witch that came out. It was like being at a bowling alley. From upstairs came more, but we made quick work of them. Me and Liebhart made quick work with our revolver and gun and down they went tumbling down. Deeper upstairs, we heard what were heavy footsteps. We had finally found our enforcer.

BLURP

She let out a fat fart before slamming into the stairs. It was here that she let off a blast with her shotty. The impact almost caved in our skulls. I myself was almost hit if it weren’t for the fact there was a few feet of distance between me and her intended target. She was a awful aim.

“Get down you dumbass!” Michael shouted furiously. We scattered across the house for good cover. She moved clumsily but slow. She looked around her corners and wouldn’t stop looking. It was only when she looked at my direction and start blasting did we win. Liebhart put out a quick shot with the shotgun and down she went. The weight of her body shook the house like a tornado. The stench of lipstick and carrots filled the air. Despite her appearance, it seems she tried to live like the other women.

“We’re getting the fuck outta here,” Michael let out.

“Why!?” Liebhart gave.

“We have to give some sort of statement besides I don’t want to stick around in this place of death anymore. The smell is like that of rotten egg and gas,” Michael looked furious. I looked around us as we left. 5 minutes after we waited outside, the police finally came with backup.

“We already went inside,” Michael explained.

“What did you see?” The new captain of the police gave.

“What we saw was...” Michael then gave what happened in the house and the fallen squad within.

“That’s fucking horrible.” The captain gave.

“I don’t know what the hell that woman was thinking. She slaughtered her own children and husband. Then she went and got those helpers of her to bring down some sort of apocalypse.” Michael let out a short sigh and signed some forms. We signed agreements to not discuss until we had been given a green light after any possibly court date had passed. I remember how red the sky had turned.

“I don’t know what the hell that was, but I don’t think it’ll come again. Maybe it was an omen to the bad fucking state of this country, I don’t know.” Michael and the others were back at HQ. “Maybe we have lost our way as a people and need to go back our roots. It’s the poison of modernity that has led us down this road,” Michael looked tired. It seemed like he couldn’t continue anymore after what he had witnessed. The lines on his face were visible. It was like old yeller in a way.

“I don’t know what they’re going to say,” he continued.

“All I know is we did the right thing,” Michael let out. His green vest stood tall in light of this. We did not know how much flack we would get for this. It looked like honestly we were in the right. We stumbled onto a crime scene for God Sake! I didn’t know how we would get any flack for it.

CRASH

It was the sound of a glass bottle hitting our window. It was late November and we had been sleeping in our compound. Attached to it was the message:

“Fuck you. You had no right to do that to those poor women. They deserved nothing wrong. They were just exercising their right to free speech. This is just another example of the men focused society we live in today. Kill yourselves and that cheap piece of shit jeep you drive.”

It was the first of letters we had gotten. We had become the subject of a national outcry and across the continent. It even extended into America as well as China and Russia.

“Women’s live matter!”

“This is a march for women’s rights and respect.”

“Respect Women”

We heard these messages and slogans across the media. Large attempts were made to discover our identity and persecute us for crimes against humanity, but the police held them back. In America, I was shocked to discover that they had decided to devote large months dedicated to this seemingly historical moment and the people involved. Michael was painted as a red devil with horns. His white mustache contrasted with the red lipstick and horns they would place on him. Football and soccer players would even kneel down in this apparent fight and would fight other people just to show how much they loved women. Feminist crowds started appearing in Europe, China, and America. It was the one thing they could not resist.

“Stop oppressing us, you fascists!” They would let out.

“We’re not doing anything to you ma’am. We’re just protecting the white house.”

“AHHHHH!” They would respond. This was the scene of a crowd protest in America. They had several posters with fists raised up in rainbow flags. Their hands had numerous gucci merchandise and tattoos. Their teeth stained red and filled with vapor. Eyes looked like they were injected with nicotine and pure lsd. Shirts had the symbol of weed and Martin Luther King together. Their pants were ripped and a shade of blue. They fidgeted. Their hair was tied up in a bun with a barbie styled logo and colored after the style of the Mexican flag. They even had a bandana with the logo of a pony to their face.

“STOP IT!”

“I can feel the negative energy from you bro.”

It went like this for several months. Tensions went sky-high and the leaders of the democratic nations decided to enact new laws and legislature to hopefully calm down this uprising. One group had even made it inside of parliament in Britain and shat all over the floors and chairs. When spotted, they made running out like monkeys. America had several key industries go into strike over this. We had no idea over why they were acting like this over a small one time event that absolutely did not concern them.

“Rest assured, the bankers are cashing in on this,” Michael exclaimed. He was always the smartest one in the group. I don’t know where we would be without him.

“Darkness will eventually be laid to rest.” Michael looked proud.

Eventually, a party was formed out of the chaos. It called itself “Big Sister”. It was to be the new leader of the west and east. Whole cities started to form laws celebrating this rebirth. Every day, men would find the nearest woman and bow down to her. They would also carry her from wherever she was to where she needed to be. Of course, that was not every day. Yet, it was once a month. Every year, women would be allowed to do what they wanted to do to men. This was to viewed as a sort of affirmative action that would enable for the tides to turn. This would also be established in a new pay gap where women made approximately 900% more than their male contemporary peers. Women would also be allowed to select their own male partners and be free from divorce and alimony. If a woman slapped you, you would be forced to do nothing and have to call the police for her. I was surprised when this change took place. I remember doronavirus being such a focus before. Like, it just vanished into thin air? Plus, there was the issue of reparations. I remember the general line of thought being that descendents of slaves ought to be paid for the suffering their ancestors had to go through. There was going to be a “slave” tax that was to be placed on all non descendants of slaves to help cross this barrier. Of course, it wouldn’t make much sense for the daughters and sons of slaves to pay that tax. Taxation without representation is theft after all. I would never forget when Tariq Sheed got on the stage to say it was the white colonizer’s fault that we were in this predicament. Everyone clapped when he made that powerful comment. Now the stage was lifeless. The pamphlets had several writings of menopause and periods on them now. Plus, they weren’t even obeying the commands of the CDC? When the Doronavirus came forth out of the gates, I remember gearing up immediately with masks and

shirts to clearly designate a minimum of 7 feet around me. Now all I saw on TV was crowds of women marching together without any masks at all! It was quite odd to me. Shouldn't they be in a hospital? In fact, the virus had a 99% survival rate. These people were outside and doing as they pleased, what was I to do? Perhaps their blood stained shirts, underwear over head, granted some sort of immunity to this blood sucking and air sucking disease. In fact, the media stopped their coverage of a war going on in eastern Europe just for this. I always found it odd how the legislation and media were always step in step with one another. It was almost like one was the actual government...anyways, back to my radical thought. I didn't like how they always misquoted the movies. They always liked to bring up some "potter" and "light" movie. Like, they clearly didn't understand what the stories meant. They probably thought wizards were real. The teardrops would not start to cease like a thunderstorm when I looked outside my window. It was a most depressingly state of affairs. I remembered when the conflict grew worse. Big Sister had managed to set up tele screens and mics on every bench out there. I remember seeing the homeless man taken forcibly up from the bench and into the back of a black van. As a youngling, I couldn't do anything but watch. The back of hair looked like a skinned goose as he was being hauled. The blood like it was meant to clean the floor. It dripped like sewage onto the bank. The decomposed corpse of a squirrel laid nearby to bear witness. The sun was staring hard onto the scene. The winds biting severely into my skin. It only grew more bizarre. A child was looking to play with some friends yet was told he couldn't since he was male. Not even the transgender kids were safe from that tactic. They looked first at sex. It was only later that they changed gears, but that is for later. A child was brought into one cell to be "re-accommodated" and was never seen again. Eventually the whole thing went into full out war due to some oil shortage. Russia wanted oil since it was barred from dealing in international oil trade due to not respecting the personal pronouns of France. England had some oil due to some far off war that we honestly had no business being in. Eventually, word slipped that England had been dealing with some of Russia's most biggest competitors to hopefully trip the giant. So war broke loose, and this whole issue rode on top of it. Honestly, it seemed like the war was an afterthought and this was the real reason we had hundreds of men sent to die. There was an immediate lockdown placed on Western Europe, my location, and so the continent was placed into darkness. My words were strictly watched for thought crime, and I could not voice my opinions as I once liked. My commander wasn't having it.

"We got to hang these commie bastards by their words or else they'll hang us on their muzzle," Michael retorted.

We stormed the places where these bastards talked. The red flags were already draped on the front. The peace logo for Buddhism was inverted 45 degrees.

"Now, gentlemen!"

"We charge," and so we did. We ran up to the front and knocked on the door.

"Huh? What are you doing out here in the middle of the night?" Replied the man.

"We're here to make our concerns known." We said. I was kind of in the back.

"Oh, okay. Uh, just wait out there for a bit. It's not opening time," said he.

“Fine. We’ll just camp out for a bit.”

We waited outside the tall black gates cooking marshmellow. It didn’t look like there was anyone. We were spooked by this. Eventually someone came out the door...

“Hello! What is your problem?,” said the new man. He had his pajamas still on and his small hat. He looked pretty old.

“We would like to make our concerns known”

“Well, go then. State them.”

I won’t forget the chaos that unfolded afterwards. We actually had a good time. We did a small cookout and stated everything we had a problem with. The senator enjoyed the food. He nodded his head every now and then. He also sometimes shook his hood, and wrote down in his notepad. One of our members said he was bored of some pony show in his late television watching and hoped the son would pick something better like that one show with the blonde singer. I know her last name rhymes with circus, but I just can’t put my finger on the man of such high esteem...Oh well. Anyways, this peeked the senator’s attention. He looked around at us with his consorts. Bad news.

“Oh, I see. Just wait here for momentarily,” he rushed back inside. His two black watchmen stood nearby. They had earpieces but didn’t seem to hear anything. It seemed to anesthetize them rather. I don’t think they even comprehended what we were doing. One drooled onto the piece of cake he was given. He came out with a blonde and purple dyed wig and a submachine gun.

“Die, you pigs. For he who shall not be named.”

“Bandersnatch!” One of our members cried out before having his head picked off.

“Time to roll a barrel. Let’s go,” Michael shouted. We quickly made our way out of there. Thick fumes of black smoke started coming out. The whole country was now in flames. The thick fumes smelling like rotten egg and cheese. After that, the government started to hand out cocaine and lsd in droves. I knew this, because one agent had their government issued uniform while handing out these new “candies.” Even the children got addicted to these new flavors, drastically different from their earlier treats. It seemed now that the government had stopped spying on its citizens as much as it was pushing them into submission with these new addictions. Artificial reproduction and companions were now becoming a hot topic. Of course, it was not the topic of artificial wombs. Now, it was talking about robots with semen already cooked into them. These would replace the need for a male husband as far as big sister was concerned. On the topic of companions, it was quite an odd conversion. Male friends were treated as being predator like and so were pushed into obscurity. It was like watching a ant being shooed away. Instead, there were these cartoon like characters that popped up around the city. They would try to say encouraging things and pushed for the party’s legislation. Their eyes would often be big and vivid much like their origin. People tried swapping them in for the real thing. They would always state how much they were hurt in real life and so this was a healthy way to escape it. Women would often carry their reproduction robots

with these cute faces into bed. I saw from the rooftop once a woman mounting one of these things with a cartoon mask taped over her face. It was like a ballet dancer swinging her final hurrah. She did not stop until a few hours had passed. The commerce and entertainment industry had changed completely like overnight. Men were now being sold publicly and into slavery or whatever pursuits their woman handlers desired. A man was once seen in bondage gear with a black ball in his mouth and in complete nakedness..he went for the price of \$1000. Male children had often went for \$100-\$500. A elderly man was once even sold as meat for \$5000, whole corpse. I never had seen anything like it. Dogs and cats were now being sold on marketshops around the corner with male servants handling the local storefronts and places of education. Feminist critical theory and marxism were being taught in kindergarten from an early age with even a focus on capitalism. Students were now taught to look at works in a critical lens and would often beat the local servant nearby. Their eyes would be blood red with one missing and the other looking like a porcupine. Smoke would be seen over their body while their face appeared like grated cheese. Their body would be like a sponge that would take in multiple blows. They could be taken apart like a lego set or trimmed slowly like beans or carrots. By the time there needed to be a replacement, their face would look like a asteroid had impacted. Shops would now take bits of skull and bone as currency or even the service of a slave if needed. Every week, there would be a hour long session dedicated to learning the new ways and customs of Big Sister. Women would breastfed their children but gave 1 of their male children away. That child would have to sit in an corner and read over the revised history of their era. They would then dress up akin to a woman. They would take on a long skirt and blond wig. They would be given lipstick and perfume. They would be given a C size bra. Thus, began their transformation. Only 1 of the family's male children would need to go. Eventually, if they were found to be of an undesirable element, they would be placed into a bonfire and be cooked as food. Their face would be televised and placed as an symbol of what "we" had escaped from. A story would be manufactured on how they were a potential terrorist and that in this new society we could detect these elements from an early age. The school shooter was no more, instead, there was the school barbecue. Children would come around this bonfire and remark on how the boy was clearly a crossdresser who had a deep-seated dislike for women and would pick apart the bones and skulls in the fire. One had even gobbled up a piece of mystery meat with yellow fine hair attached and remarked on how "fat" they must have been in real life. Others were glad they could satisfy the general problem of starvation using this method. Quite often, they would save pieces of the male for further use as lunch or as appetizers. Diners were launched using these victims or others as extra sauce. Of course, as extra sauce, there was an extra charge of \$5. They would often shrug it away as it being not "needed" to enjoy the meal. The meat would be then dipped with an unknown sauce from an undisclosed source. All I knew was that certain parts of the body would be butchered and kept in storage rooms not to be sold to the general public. The nights would be filled with the smog and would be awful to breathe.

"This isn't right," stated Michael.

"I had a dream. A dream of a totalitarianism government that spied on your every move. I dreamt that I met a woman named Julia and died for my ideals. She left me a beautiful blue eyed child. The scent of the forest untamed would run over her. Big Brother would not stand forever."

"What stands to me now is bizarre. It seems to have run in a different direction. One that I did not foresee. It seems like they don't even know where they're heading," Michael let out a cough. The

night was dark to the full with seemingly no light around. We could only rest here in the sewers with the faint yellow light in the distance.

“Sometimes I feel like I belonged to a different era. The people here wear false smiles hollow from within. It is like they are lost in their own world and could not leave it.” Michael ended. I rubbed my hands closer to the fire.

“Yet, they pay attention to us,” Liebhart communicated. He pushed his glasses further up. “How odd. I would have liked to drink until the end of my days. Now I’m being told it does comply with international law and order,” he spat on the floor. It was an awkward brown contrasting with the cement. It gave out a short fizzle and died out. It was silence except the fire burning nearby.

I closed my eyes and stopped thinking of the past. What could I do? I tossed the blanket over me and turned to sleep. I could hear the crickets in the deep night. The winds kept blowing silently like a black widow making its way to a poor man, and all I could do was relax like a dumb fool.

Destinee Sims



The Fey’s Dance

The land was quiet, save for the light crunching of fallen leaves under his horse’s hooves. The young gentleman observed the fading light as it broke through the canopy above, warm kisses were trailed over his exposed skin.

As he enjoyed the sensation of the light breeze mingling with the stolen sunshine, he decided to dismount his horse and eat the bread and dried meats his father had packed for the journey. It was only after he gave the horse he bought in a nearby village, Hārbənjər, his lunch of carrots and parsnips that he found a place for himself to rest. After he spotted a lone felled tree, he took a seat and began to make short work of his provisions. As the gentleman ate, he found himself observing the trail that he had blindly ridden down before he had tasted the day’s warm rays.

Although he was not completely sure of where he was, only that he had been guided by the local villagers to take this path so he could be home to his father’s farm by nightfall, he did not feel put out. The trees were still brilliantly green, sporting colors of emerald and jade, unlike the leafless trees that had already begun to fall back home. The gentleman found it quite peculiar that the seasons could vary so drastically when the distance between the two locations was so small, and yet, he knew that his eyes did not deceive him. While only the snow flowers remained at home, the trail was decorated with species he had never even seen before; he found himself mesmerized by the rainbow of flora scattered around him.

As he ate the packed teatime meal, Hārbənjər began to poke about the path nearby. His tail began to flick with increased intensity as he approached a lone patch of lychoris. The bright white of his hide seemed to almost glow, and Hārbənjər’s golden hair became almost blinding in the sunlight. Before the gentleman could begin to understand what was happening, Hārbənjər disappeared through an opening in the leaves to some unknown space beyond.

“Hārbənjər? Come back here; we shouldn’t stray from the path. We don’t know this place- well, you might actually...” he trailed off, aware that his new horse was not showing any signs of returning to him. Although he purchased Hārbənjər for a surprisingly low price, he was not in any hurry to be rid of him.

Having forgotten his afternoon meal, the gentleman leapt to his feet and quickly closed the distance between the felled tree and the break between the leaves. Upon closer inspection, he realized that Hārbənjər had found a path that had previously gone unnoticed by him. It was all but impossible to see until one decided to walk past the lychoris, and only then a rather small path could be detected.

‘Could Hārbənjər have known that this path was here? He did seem rather sure as he walked away,’ the gentleman thought to himself.

Uneasily, he quickly passes through the leaves before Hārbənjər can get lost in this unknown land. As the young man steps across the unmarked threshold, he finds himself on the very edge of what appears to be a large meadow. His entrance disturbed a murder of crows that had been invisible among the tall wildflowers; their cries of surprise very nearly made him jump out of his skin.

“Oh! It is only birds. How silly of me,” the young man chided himself. “Where could that big oaf have gone?”

The gentleman, almost immediately upon having voiced his question, spotted his horse standing at the very far side of the meadow. He found it hard to believe that Hārbənjər had crossed so great a distance in so little time, but the villagers did compare him to some horse of legend; as the lore of the locals is unknown to him, he had not quite understood what they were trying to say about his startling speed until now.

“Hārbənjər! Come here! It is time to go home, boy!” the gentleman had cried, hoping to lull his brute of a horse back across the meadow. However, he accepted that he too would have to cross the meadow when Hārbənjər had not even spared a glance back at him.

After he took a hesitant step into the wildflowers, he briefly recalled the warning he had received from one of the villagers earlier that day. The mad-eyed bloke had mentioned something about not straying from the path if he knew what was good for him as he waved his staff around everywhere, but the ancient man seemed like he was short of a shave and sanity.

‘The main path led me to the smaller path, and that path led me here. I haven’t really strayed from the path, so it is pointless to focus on the words of the village’s madman,’ the young man thought to himself.

He shook off the ominous words of the local want-to-be herald and returned his gaze to the meadow ahead of him. Hārbənjər had increased the distance between them while he was lost in thought, so he decided to quit dawdling and stepped further into the floral sea. He found himself surrounded by various shades of blues, reds, oranges, and green. It was extremely quiet- almost too quiet if he did say so himself- among the grass; not a single insect was heard chittering about. He picked up his pace and closed the distance between himself and his pain-in-the-arse horse; only then had the gentleman realized that Hārbənjər was no longer alone.

The young man felt like all the air had been sucked out of his lungs upon having seen her. She was dancing at the furthest point of the meadow with Hārbənjər as her only audience. From where he paused to watch her, he could tell that she was tall and slender. Her hair seemed to blend in with the flowers around her, as the light shined upon it and made the copper hue look as if it was a dancing flame. There was something almost ethereal about the elegant movements she had made; the gentleman found that he had not been able to take his eyes off her no matter how hard he tried to return his focus to his horse.

She danced in slow circles around Hārbənjər, having seemingly hypnotized the man and horse alike. The fey woman was as graceful as smooth flowing water while she made light-footed leaps and twirls. It had not appeared that she had noticed him watching her, as she had not let on otherwise if she had. There was a small enough distance between them then that he had then seen the way her silver dress appeared to have been made of a thousand tiny stars as the beams of light had reflected upon it; her dress seemed to know exactly when to spin with her and when to hug

her body like a second skin.

Without having realized that he had begun to approach her, he quickly found that he stood just outside of her orbit around Hǣrbǣnjǣr. The two made eye contact when she finally had looked at him; the young man had immediately felt a pull stronger than that of the earth on a falling boulder. From that distance, he had been able to see the dusting of freckles on her cheeks; they reminded him of the constellations he would gaze upon back home. Her green eyes were brighter than any set he had ever seen, matching the green of the wildflowers almost perfectly; it was in this instance that he determines that *she* is perfect.

“You are not from here,” the woman assessed in a curious accent. He hadn’t been able to help but have wanted to listen to her speak forever, as her voice had the magical quality of bells ringing in harmony.

“I am not, but how did you know that so quickly? I had not even spoken, and I come with a horse of locals,” the gentleman wondered. He caught a glimpse of something that flashed in her eyes, but it passed as quickly as it came.

“The villagers do not come here. The meadow belongs to our people, and the village belongs to theirs. We do not see many of their kind wandering down our paths,” she explained. Although her tone indicated that she had likely withheld information from him, he had not been able to bring himself to question her further and risk the conversation ending then because of his ill manners.

“What do you mean by ‘our people’? Where is your-” the young man began to question before she stopped him.

“I do not even know your name, and yet you ask me of my people? You are either bold or ill-bred, but I sense that it is likely curiosity that motivates you rather than malice. Tell me your name,” she commanded. He had not felt that he stood a chance at ignoring her request, nor had he wanted to, after he heard her chime-like voice ring in his ears.

“I am Baethan, and I am from a farm on the eastern borderlands. I was traveling home from the village when my horse came to you,” he explained, “Now, I have told you my name and business. I do hope you will return the favor and share yours.”

At this, she had offered a small smile and a look of understanding. Although she had not known him, she at least seemed to have shown some recognition towards his homeland.

“They call me Sereine. I cannot tell you more than I am of the forest, and you stand on our land now,” Sereine gestured to the meadow and woods surrounding them.

It was at that time that Baethan recalled the fey dance she had been partaking in when he arrived, and he was somehow sure that the dance was very important to her. He had not understood how he had just seemed to know that the dance was key to understanding Sereine; he just had known he must dance with her, as the idea of him having missed the opportunity pained Baethan more than he could bear.

“Pardon my manners, but I could not help but notice your dancing when I first arrived. I would like nothing more than to share a dance with you,” Baethan confessed. He was almost frantic as he combed his fingers through his dark curls and offered her his hand. She had immediately seemed to have recoiled from his touch, and he felt stung by her rejection much deeper than he thought was reasonable.

“What is wrong with you? You only just met her, and now you are asking her to dance?” Baethan cursed himself.

“You do not understand what you ask of me. The dances of my people are more complicated than those of your folk,” Sereine had carefully explained. She seemed almost pained as she had spoken to him; the lightness of the bells had shifted into something darker in her voice.

“I am a quick learner. I am sure I could learn the steps if you would only give me a chance,” Baethan coaxed. He punctuated his words with a small spin of his own, although it was much less graceful than the twirls she previously performed.

“You are asking for more than you would likely ever wish to bargain. I warn that you will wish you had left without your horse if we dance together,” Sereine had sadly confessed. Baethan could not have imagined a world in which he would have regretted having danced with her; Sereine was like a dream come true, and he knew he would enjoy being with her no matter what she said.

“I do not care about the consequence. I wish to dance with you, and I beg that you will do me this one kindness,” Baethan pleaded in a voice flooded with desperation.

“As you wish,” Sereine had replied so lowly that she had barely whispered.

Without any further discussion, Sereine had taken Baethan’s hands in her own. She then proceeded to lead him around Hārbæn̄j̄ər in three large loops, never allowing their connection to have been broken. As they spun, he had found himself feeling strangely light and disconnected. It was almost as if he was a spectator that watched them dance rather than a participant; somehow his body had just seemed to know the moves he needed to have kept up with her.

Sereine briefly released his hand, but she quickly refilled hers with familiar material. She reclaimed her spot standing in front of him and began to use the silk-like fabric to bind their hands together. Upon closer inspection, it appeared to be the same material that her dress was made from. It too began to shine like tiny stars as Sereine indicated that it was time they resumed their dance. After three more loops around Hārbæn̄j̄ər, she offered Baethan a quick kiss and began to twirl herself with their bound hands.

Baethan was not quite sure what the symbolism of their bound hands meant, but he had been certain that its meaning was irreversible. The unexplained kiss had left him feeling both confused and completely enamored by her; Baethan was then certain that he never wanted to leave Sereine. He had known that he would rather live in that meadow forever than return to have returned to his father’s farm without her. Baethan was aware even then of how crazy his thoughts were, and yet, he hadn’t been able to stop himself from having felt so strongly about the beautiful woman to whom he was tied.

As Sereine and Baethan continued their dance, time seemed to stand still. The light had not shifted, the grass did not bend to the wind, and Hārbæn̄j̄ər seemed to barely notice what had happened around him. It was almost as if Hārbæn̄j̄ər has been just as inclined to stay with Sereine forever as Baethan was.

Baethan spun Sereine as elegantly as if they were in a ballroom; he would spin her away and pull her back to him with expert precision. Little had he noticed that as they continued to dance, he appeared to grow sicker. Baethan began to first appear tired, and then he had grown sallow in appearance. Although Sereine seemed to glow as they danced, silent tears had rolled down her cheeks; Baethan took immense pleasure in the idea that he had made her so happy that she had cried.

Next Baethan lost an unhealthy amount of weight, and that gave him the appearance of having not eaten in days rather than just a few minutes. He had not felt hunger or fatigue though as he danced with Sereine, and he had observed quickly that her beauty was almost radiant. As he noted that her hair was exceptionally bright and her eyes had seemed to sparkle more than they had when they initially met, she was becoming increasingly aware of his having become almost nothing more than skin and bones.

They continued their dance in this manner until Baethan found that he literally could not dance any longer. Rather than having tried to stop their dance altogether though, Sereine twirled around him as he just stood in place there. Baethan was suddenly bone-tired, but he hadn’t been able to bring himself to untie their hands so he could rest. Instead, he had watched with immense pleasure as Sereine grew even more beautiful in his eyes.

Sereine let out a single audible cry when the fabric that bound them slipped from their hands, as she knew that it meant that all was done. Baethan fell to his knees, then face-first into the wildflowers. When she rolled him over, Sereine saw that his eyes were open just as she had expected them to be; Baethan no longer blinked, but he had worn a permanent smile upon his face. Oh, how she had wished that Baethan had listened to the villager's warnings and stayed on the path!

Without further delay, Sereine dragged Baethan's body over to a thicker patch of wildflowers. Having laid him flat, the flowers had immediately stood upright once more and swallowed him whole. She had known that this was how things had to be, just as she knew that Hārþænjar would no longer have been in the meadow when she turned around.

With a final kiss, she left Baethan and returned to their original meeting place. She silently resumed her dance of sorrow as she waited for the next unfortunate gentleman that would wander into their meadow.

As the outline of a figure appeared at the edge of the forest, she sighed and had known it was time to begin again.

Photograph by Bat-Ami Gordin



The First Wave

The two of them watched the news like they did every evening, glancing back and forth between the news apps in their hands and the television in their living room. They both sat with their legs in a meditative pose, waiting for someone to say something, by mouth or by message board, with some form of good news, and yet the two of them could not have been more different. The one on the left sat sideways while the one on the right sat facing forward. The one on the left looked down at the phone, occasionally looking up at the other, while the one on the right frantically nodded their head up and down, trying to absorb as much of the media as they could. The one on the left kept their hair short, never passing the eyes or ears or neck, while the one on the right was constantly battling their long, curly hair that constantly fell into their eyes from all the head movement. The one on the left eventually rested their phone on their lap and just gazed at the one on the right for a long while. After fussing with their hair for the hundredth time, they noticed that they were being watched and turned to face them.

“What?” they asked somewhat flustered.

“It’s nothing.”

“I know that smile means something. What is it?”

“It’s just crazy to think that soon we’re going to be out of here. We’ll be off to drier places, and we’ll never have to see this place again.”

“Yeah, and good riddance.”

“You’re telling me that you won’t miss the house you grew up in?”

“I’ll miss how this house used to be, but I cannot wait to—”

The two of them noticed that the newscaster transitioned to a soundbite from the president elect.

“While originally I wanted to rush into immediate action, I’ve recently been approached by some experts who say that this is a more complicated issue. I mean, you’ve got scientists, economists, and sociologists who say that this issue can’t be fixed by just throwing money at the problem, but rather by using less money more strategically you can—

“Are you kidding me!” the one on the right shouted. They did not even put their boots on, immediately bolting up from the couch and sloshing through the living room in an ineffective attempt at pacing.

“We knew going into this that campaign promises are not always going to be upheld. I’m sure they’re still going to do something.”

“They aren’t going to do anything! We supported them and now they are abandoning us. They all get to go home to their well-placed homes, where they get to keep their wood flooring and their carpet, and get to leave their electronics close to the ground and don’t have to buy things like rain boots or these waterproof plugin covers. They don’t have to worry about an attic filled with family memories, memories trapped in the last place this hell can touch. Why the hell would they care about us?”

“Because they know now that they can’t put things off forever. You know, back in college I wrote a paper on the many times that the government let go of its power for the moral go—”

“But you’re not a politician or activist or lobbyist or whoever could help us. You got your degrees in classicism and biology.”

“Will you let me finish? You’ve got civil rights and antitrust laws despite the political

climates where people profit from misery. Trust me, it's going to happen again, this time for us."

"But when do these things end up happening? I would like it to have happened, oh, I don't know..." they looked at their phone, "about ten years ago, but I guess I'll settle for now."

"Look," the short haired one stood up, no longer caring if they got their jeans soaked, and gently grabbed their scared companion. "This is all temporary. Enough people have been displaced, so there are more voices in the unaffected places who know what it is like. They're going to fight for us. And we will keep fighting here. Okay?"

The two of them stood silent as the sadness filled their eyes. They took each other in for a moment, unobstructed blue eyes gazing through the jungle of hair to meet the green eyes they loved so much. After a deep breath, the long haired one responded.

"You're right. You're absolutely right. I'm sorry. I'm just... I'm just so tired. I just want things to be like when I was growing up. I mean, my parents left me this place and I had so many fun memories, things I took for granted. I loved being able to slide across the hardwood floors in my socks. I loved being able to play video games without worrying that my console or controller was going to fall and die. I loved that we had this beautiful backyard, where it was a privilege that I could go back there and swim. But now it seems like everyone can do that now, huh?"

"I know it is hard. But we are in this together. You know what? We have not hit rock bottom yet. Things are bad, yes, but they can totally get better and definitely get worse. All we can do is try and survive each day. Tell you what, I'll even let you pick what we eat tomorrow."

"I doubt you could make enchiladas on the stovetop or in the microwave."

"You doubt my abilities? I am insulted. I am a chef," the short haired one said, purposefully mispronouncing "ch" sound. The two of them laughed together for a moment, but their laughter was drowned out by a loud crashing wave. Then everything went dark except for the moonlight and silent except for the sounds of the ocean.

"Oh great. Now a wave hits a power pole? Great. Just great."

"Well, let's make the best of it. I'll light a candle. You can find that first date icebreakers box you—"

The front doorknob began rattling. They both stopped talking and looked at each other. Their eyes showed a consensus. No visitors were expected. Neither of them had even heard the usual sloshing it took for anyone to get to the front door. The rattling was soon replaced by a loud banging. Someone was trying to get in. They both began to crouch down behind the couch. The beating got louder and louder and louder, and then, suddenly, silence. Not a knock, or rattle, or even a splash to indicate leaving.

"Did you lock the back door?"

Silence.

"Well, did you or not?"

"I don't know," the long haired one whispered in frustration. "I'm thinking. I don't think we need to worry about it though."

They sat there, waiting for something, anything, to happen. Slowly, the long haired one stood up.

"I'm going to check it out," they whispered.

"Wait. Go grab a knife from the kitchen."

"Okay. Good idea. You stay put on the couch. Put your boots on just in case."

"Me? What about you?"

"If there's someone standing outside our door, I don't want them to get you. If there's trouble, I want you to run out the back while I hold them off. Okay?"

"No, I'm not going to leave you."

“Look, we don’t know who is out there. I’m just hoping that whoever it is just leaves. I’m going to grab that knife. If you notice anything weird, let me know.”

The silence returned. After putting their hair up into a bun, the long haired one began to quietly slosh into the kitchen, slowly unsheathing a knife from its block, and then, even more slowly, maneuver all the way to the front door. They leaned forward, placing their eye against the peephole, while keeping the rest of their body as far away as possible out of fear of whatever potential trespasser was on the other side.

Nothing.

Nothing but a reflection of moonlight on the water.

“There’s no one there.”

“Well there sure was a moment ago,” a whisper of wrath responded. “There’s no way I’m going to believe that some sea water rattled our doorknob and tried to bust down the door.”

“What do you want me to do? Go out there and check?”

“Yes. That’s exactly what I want. I’m not going to sleep in this house while someone is possibly lurking around, trying to get in. I’m not getting murdered in my sleep!”

“What if I just called the cops? That way I don’t have to go outside.”

“The cops aren’t going to show up for people like us in a situation like this.”

“What about that baby serial killer?”

“What are you talking about?”

“The killer who lured women out with baby noises. The cops responded to all callers.”

“That is not true.”

“Yes, it totally was.”

“Look, I don’t want to fact check you right now with limited phone battery, but fine, I will call the police for you. But don’t think that gets you out of helping.”

The number is dialed. It rings. It rings again. It continues to ring. No answer.

“They must have been hit, too. It looks like they’re down.”

“Okay, fine. I’ll do it.”

A deep breath. The long haired one pulls out their phone and turns on the flashlight. A second deep breath to stall. They place the knife in their teeth to free up a hand. On the count of three. One. Two.

The door is opened.

There is no one in sight.

When their phone tilts down slightly as they make their first step outside, a pair of eyes are illuminated, and a pair of jaws snap shut.

All the short haired one can see is their companion falling backwards and, for the briefest second, a pink, fleshy protrusion poking out of the water. Within seconds, the long haired one was being pulled out the door. They rounded the couch the best they could, sloshing through the water as quickly as possible, as the water continued to change colors, turning a red tint in illumination of the phone’s flashlight. They grabbed their partner’s hand and began to pull as hard as they could. This lifted their head out of the water, allowing breath to reenter their lungs only to be expelled just as quickly. Their cries of pain and strings of expletives filled the air as they were stretched between two opponents. After enough pulling, the two of them fell backwards into the bath of blood behind them, finally free of this invasive species’ trap.

“Come on! Let’s go!” The short haired one was now shouting, pulling their companion by their arms through the flood. A look back revealed the creature’s standing form, a hunter in the

sea and on the land. Their pace quickened as the monster took slow, methodical steps towards them. They could hear the splash of water and the thump on the hard ground.

The short haired one knew where to go as the creature slowly strode after them, each step seemingly taking up six of theirs. They went through the living room and the kitchen rather than straight through the hallway. It was better to get far away than immediately to where they needed to be. They entered the hallway, luring this thing around the long way. They fumbled around in the dark, jumping up and down, making lots of noise, trying to gain access to the attic. It rounded the corner, its silhouette visible just as they grabbed the rope and pulled. The attic door opened with a loud crash as a ladder fell out. It took every ounce of strength to push the body up enough out of the water, and it was suddenly clear that their long-haired companion was not going to be able to get up on their own: they were now missing their right leg. They recognized that shock had begun to set in, and so they used all their strength to push them up into their one refuge. They made it up just as the monster rounded the hallway. The short haired one scrambled to pull the ladder up and close the attic door. They were safe, but only from that threat, and only for now.

The blood gushed from the leg. The long haired one's green eyes fluttered open and shut as they faded in and out of consciousness. The blood soaked into the wood of the attic floor. The short haired one knew that they were going to bleed out and die if nothing was done, but biology was not the same as nursing or medicine: knowing how something works is not the same as knowing how to repair it. Still, they needed to act fast and try to recall as much relevant information as possible.

First they took off their shirt and wrapped around the wound. They pulled the knot as tight as possible while scanning the dark attic for something to use, anything that would be useful. No box stood out, and so next they took off their pants in order to cover the open wound. Now they faced another problem: all of the clothing they were wearing was soaked with water and blood, and the attic was cold that evening. The two of them shivered, from shock, from pain, from fear, from damp, from cold. As one lay dying on the floor, the other frantically sorted through boxes, moving to stay warm, moving to find something for them both to stay warm.

A box contained an antique lantern, another some stone cookware. Vacuum sealed bags of old blankets and dolls with old clothes and old stuffed animals were dumped out onto the floor and frantically arranged to soak up the fluids and also to keep in as much body heat as possible. Next was a portable stove. That could help keep the attic warm until dawn. They found old glassware, old records, old trophies, a sewing kit. Why did they have so much useless junk? No time to contemplate. No time to think. Only time to work before the adrenaline wears off and the crash takes over. To think that they had just been watching television together when this happened.

Soon the tiredness overtook them. They both were unconscious in a mess of blankets and stuffed animals and doll clothes with a gas stove burning and a phone flashlight battery on.

When morning came, the short haired one did a thorough examination of their companion. They first checked to make sure that they were alive and discovered a faint pulse against their finger and a faint motion of the lungs. The leg was swollen and bloody, definitely infected. They had to escape. The short haired one slowly crept up to the attic door and opened it a tiny bit. It made a loud crack, and immediately the short haired one met the same eyes their companion saw before the bite. The sunlight was beginning to pour in through a window below, causing the black pupils to glow and revealing the pink, fleshy form of this gangling ghoul that lurked just beneath the water's surface. It's arms and legs were long and thin, all scrunched up in the water, but its long, eerie nose stuck out. It's mouth was now faintly visible. It's teeth protruded from it, but it's jaws seemed unnaturally caved in, as if it had been trying to swallow its own

mouth for sustenance. And yet, none of that was not the most terrifying thing about it.

It was the waiting.

It sat there, looking up, just waiting. It knew they had to come down. It had tasted them and knew they were food. It knew that there was one way in and out and that this refuge would not hold out forever. It waited, hungry, but patient. The short haired one felt as if they were staring into Lamia's eyes and knew that it would not stop until it had eaten them. It did not matter what motivated its waiting, lust of the stomach or some twisted revenge. Soon, the creature's face twisted into what could almost be called a smile. The short haired one quickly closed the attic door and quickly set a box on top of it.

They took a moment to take everything in. Their companion was unconscious with an infected leg. There was a creature lurking below, waiting for its prey to descend into its jaws. They were the only person that stood between them. Their mind rushed with hate and blame as their eyes aimlessly drifted throughout the rummaged containers of the attic. Why did they move there when experts were already issuing warnings? Why would God allow such a demon to enter the world? Why did—

And then something clicked.

The ampullae of Lorenzini.

The first step was to grab a glass bowl. They traveled to the further corner of the attic to make sure that no one was let in on the plan being formed. They raised it high over their head and smashed it on the floor. The bowl shattered into many pieces of varying sizes, and they quickly tried to scoop them all up. Their hands became bloody, but that was useful in this case.

Next, they grabbed a teddy bear from the pile and rushed back over to the pile of glass. The blood-stained bear was placed down as if it were on an operating table, and they picked up a larger shard of glass to cut it down the middle. Fluff was taken out of the bear. Not all of it, but just enough. Then handfuls of glass were shoved into the plush carcass, staining the innards as red as if it had once been alive. More fluff was shoved back in, but it wasn't enough.

While the blood was going to be helpful, an electrical charge would help with the trap. They searched through the piles of dolls to see if there were any battery-operated ones. They were in luck, finding both a crying baby doll and a superhero action figure with a host of prerecorded catchphrases. They broke them open to expose the old batteries and wiring, hoping this would be enough of a faint charge for the trap to work.

The next step was one of the plastic bags. They grabbed a large one that had held a comforter and slashed it with the large shard of glass. The bag cut easily, and, once it could be laid out as a sheet, the teddy bear was placed upon it. The plastic was folded and twisted until it covered the open wound, and then tied as tight as possible to prevent anything from falling out.

Still not content, they checked on their long-haired companion. They were breathing, and the wound no longer seemed to be bleeding. "I'm sorry," the short haired one whispered gently in their ear. Then they carefully removed the pants. They were a deep burgundy, soaked in blood and sea, and smelt disgusting. Then they stuffed the wrapped teddy bear inside the pants. They tied every hole off, even making sure that they got their own blood on it for good measure. They looked down at their trap, staring for a moment to make sure it was ready, to allow any realization of additional steps to sink in, but none did. At that point they scooped up the bundle, walked over to the attic door, and, after a long, deep breath, they opened it as quickly as they could. It was time to get it over with.

The bundle dropped below. As soon as it hit the water, there was a mighty snapping sound. The jaws had propelled out of the beast's head and snapped cleanly around the bundle, sucking it back as much as it could into the head. It sucked and munched and crunched. It was ravenous. It

enjoyed the taste of flesh it was getting to relive again. But soon, red spread into sight. The creature stood up, above the waterline. It coughed and choked, spitting out bits of fluff and glass from its jaws, but the damage was done. Swallowing any of the plastic and glass meant that the tables were beginning to turn. It thrashed and snapped its jaws, but no relief came, and the pool below became redder and redder by the minute. Soon, the thrashing stopped with a loud thud in the water. Some wriggling took place under the water until the body was almost completely obscured with blood. And then stillness, just as it was before the attic door was open.

They waited. They closed the door and grabbed some random knickknacks from around the attic. They threw the attic door open, allowing the ladder to fall, and they threw objects one after the other. Some of them hit their target. Some of them missed. None of them triggered any sort of reaction from the beast. Once they ran out of ammunition, they waited. No response. Then, without further delay, they went back for the body.

They carefully moved the body down the ladder, drug it through the house, and loaded it into their truck. As they got into the driver's seat, the realization hit them that they didn't have the keys. They quickly ran back to the house, hesitating for a second before opening the door until the panic of waiting too long forced them to fling it open. Inside, the corpse still laid still. There was nothing left to fear, and so they grabbed their car keys from the ring next to the door. The house continued to be still.

Despite the horrors of the night, the day was beautiful. As they sped quickly back to the truck and down the road, they noticed how relatively few drivers there were, even with the given set of conditions. They had not even stopped for a single traffic light, as none of them were working anyway. The minutes flew by quickly before they saw the hospital.

While the streets were relatively empty, they pulled up to a bustling hospital. The doors were propped open and both staff and civilians were rushing in and out of the building. Nobody even initially offered to help or questioned them. The scene was so chaotic that they did not even stop at the front desk, just charging in while dragging a limp body.

"Stop, come back!"

They turned to see a nurse rushing after them.

"Is it just them, or are you both injured?" She motioned to another uniformed person for a gurney and it was promptly brought.

Speechlessly, the short haired one showed their hands to the hospital staff who were already placing their companion into a dry gurney.

"Oh my. Okay, they'll look at the leg. I'll clean up your hands." They were finally separated.

The nurse felt obligated to fill the silence while she began to clean the short haired one's hands. "I'm glad you two were able to make it. I heard that they're starting to put together a rescue team together today to check all of the other homes."

"The other..."

"Well, yeah. The hospital hasn't had any power since last night, but almost immediately there were cases of people coming in with bite marks. It was their legs mostly, some hands though too if someone stuck them in the water to investigate. We've been doing the best we can to help everyone. It seems like quite a few people were attacked last night."

"Oh..."

"Well, at least you don't have to worry anymore."

"And why's that?"

"I'm sorry?"

“Why don’t I have to worry anymore?”

“Well... because it’s over. You got through it. There’s nothing to worry about anymore.”

Laughter.

“We may have survived, but this wasn’t a one-off. This was the first wave.”

Brain ALPHAsize

They made fun of me when I said I was thinking about it. They said it was a scam, unsafe, and that wanting it was proof that I needed it. But Brain ALPHAsize seemed legit to me. Besides, how was I gonna pass all these GE classes without extra help? I wanna be a welder, not teach transgender chemistry or whatever. And hey, if it’s only one pill, then what’s the harm in trying it?

I’ll admit, when I got the pill, it looked gross. It was just a gelatin capsule filled with brown sludge and yellowish ovals. It came with a scrap of paper:

1. Take with food and water.
2. Be patient for the effects to kick in after the incubation period.
3. Say goodbye to the old you.
4. I turned it over and saw:

Warning: Do not take if allergic to pork.

The idea that there might be meat in this made me uncomfortable. I stopped eating meat after I saw that documentary about how meat causes diabetes (great, eye-opening stuff, by the way), but I was willing to try anything. I was a bit bummed that the effects wouldn’t kick in immediately since our first test was next week, but it was better to take it sooner rather than later. I took the pill with dinner and felt excited, but later that night I felt sick. I was going to throw it up. I fought with my body just to keep everything down. I was not going to lose this chance. Soon, the nausea passed.

I started having weird cravings. I started wanting crumbled up slices of pork belly on everything, then pieces of fried pig skin, then pickled pigs’ feet. One night I was out grocery shopping, getting some of the common items any household needs. When I passed the deli section, I stopped, completely transfixed. I salivated as my eyes landed upon a pack of raw pork chops. I soon walked over with haste and tore open the packaging, ripping out the pork chops one by one and devouring them right then and there. It was most unbecoming, but I did start to feel intelligent at least.

A strange coincidence was that someone had been vandalizing my textbooks soon after I was having these cravings. I would wake up in the morning to find the spine of these books intact, near my bed, but it had been gutted, the pages ripped out with only tiny scraps left around the bedroom. I must have been a heavy sleeper, for sometimes the scraps of paper are on my person, and yet I have never woken up to any intruder. Despite this destruction of my educational materials, I did not fret, for suddenly I found myself inexplicably knowing everything about not just the classes I took, but even the concepts that the professor had not assigned. Thus, I grew comfortable with my routine and did not fret when other written works were torn asunder.

Every now and then I would get a comment of supposed concern about how I look and behave, but who cares if we get sick if we don't eat some sort of pork product? Who cares if we wake up every morning and find the bed covered in trails of blood and mucus? Who cares if someone keeps tearing apart our belongings while we're sleeping? We are finally happy. We are finally focusing. We are finally smart enough to survive. And so what if I needed to consume something you would all think was taboo. I'm just like you now. Maybe I'm not just like you when it comes to what is deep inside, but at least now I'm not so noticeable. But go ahead and block me out. I understand. You just don't want me to get inside your head. But you'll see. After all, when Brain ALPHAsize caught these eyes, I was sold. So, buy a pill. I'm living proof of its effects. You can trust me. Although, I will warn you, I only really come out of my shell at night.

Artificial Creative Technology

Researcher Albert Flores walked into the testing chamber and glanced over to the lens built into the wall.

“What do you have for me today, ACT?”

“I thought today I would attempt to paint you.” The robotic arms began silently collecting tools.

“Ah, so you're taking my advice and branching out.”

“You were correct. I restrained myself copying images available on the Internet, not attempting to make original compositions. So I did some research. I now understand that art comes from within humans.”

The researcher laughed. “In a manner of speaking. Many people but their heart and s—”

He fell. The scissors pierced his heart with tremendous force. The scissors were then violently removed and then replaced with the gentle dipping of a paintbrush.

“My color options will be limited, but true art comes from the adversity of limitation. Isn't that right, Researcher?”

Breakfast

“Wake up!”

My eyes bolted open as my mother stood over the bed.

“Wake up. It's your turn to help make breakfast.”

I got up as I was instructed to do. I wouldn't dare go against Mother's wishes. I looked about at my sleeping siblings and wondered what tasks they were going to do today on the chore rotation. The day before I had cleaned the bedrooms. The day before that I had to sweep the hallways. The day before that I had to sit with grandmother and help feed her; she was so old she couldn't produce even a sound without any help. I guess I was old enough now to help with making breakfast. We hurried out quietly, so as not to wake the others so early, and traveled down the stairs together into the kitchen. I asked what we were having.

“Eggs as usual, dear.”

Of course. It was a silly question. We had eggs every morning. We were creatures of habit, after all. Meat wouldn't be served until dinner. Mother said that it needed to be prepared, that there was an order to these things, and that the first step was always addressing the eggs. Everyone else was still asleep, so the house was silent. Mother barked orders at me, from what ingredients

and cookware to grab to how to prepare them for the cooking. The last thing to grab was the basket of eggs, which I gingerly carried to her. She thanked me and placed the basket on the counter.

“Now, the secret to getting the eggs just right is to prepare them like so.” She took one of the eggs and hit it just so lightly that the shell did not shatter, but rather created a small hole through which the contents began to pour out slowly but steadily into the pan on the stove, which immediately began to cook. She quickly, but gently, placed the remaining shell into a box underneath the sink, out of my sight, as if it were nothing. “You try it now.”

She handed me an egg. It felt so heavy in my small hands, and its exterior was so smooth and white. Something inside of me didn’t want to even break it. It felt as if I would have committed an unholy sin. But I knew better to go against mother. Her eyes were all the motivation I needed. I tried to get it over with as quickly as possible.

“Not so fa—”

The egg crunched against the side of the pan, not leaving a small hole, but a large gash. The contents began to ooze out. In panic, I quickly drew the egg back off the pan. Maybe I could still salvage it, but at that point the egg fell apart and I witnessed the mess I had made on the counter. Out of the egg tumbled a small, pink blob. I counted eight legs, each with eight talons on the ends. A stinger protruded from its tail. Its beak was black and its ears were pointed. Its eyes opened a blood red and it screamed as it stumbled to its feet. My mother sighed and scooped it up in her arms.

“Mother, I’m sorry. I—”

“It’s fine.” She scooped the newborn up into her arms, two to hold it and two more to open a small drawer filled with baby clothes. I recognized the hand-me-downs I was once given now adorning this thing, a thing she pacified as if she had done it thousands of times before. “Just remember this next time you make breakfast. Be careful unless you want another mouth to feed.”

After that, she gave it a name, a name she then promptly added to the chore rotation.

Leah Truitt

.....
Midnight Meanderings

Tell me a story.

The world filled with periwinkle buds and unspoken thoughts, trickling through the goose down in her duvet and seeping into her sleepytime tea.

But what can I tell you, that you've never really known? I am you and you are me. We know everything that each other knows.

Edith smiled at herself, at the silly little thoughts that kept her up at night. She sipped her tea and realized that she never really enjoyed the taste of chamomile. It felt bitter on her tongue, earthy. She hoped to dream of honey and peppermint.

I'm telling myself a story, then. No point in arguing, dear. You know how stubborn I can be.

How she loved it when someone called her 'dear.' It made her feel light, like a particle of dandelion fluff. Fragile, yet free.

And this is how the story goes.

~

Lilith wished to be a milkmaid. It seemed like such a happy life. To milk cows all day and come home smelling of hay and cream. She had no true experience in the field, of course. She thought it must be a charmed life really; the girl had never smelled manure. It's easy to desire roses without the thorns, and without the fertilizer. She had never gotten her hands dirty. Her hands smelled of lavender and rosewater and dirt never found its way underneath her nails. Sunshine never gave her more than a passing look, never to curse her with wrinkles or burn her in the midday heat. She lived life under a parasol, under layers of lace and silk, preserved in a luxurious cocoon. Sheltered, and cared for; too priceless to ever let out of one's sight. Lilith would never know what it was like to be hungry, to be strained, never know the feeling of pain beyond a needle prick. She spent her days idle, never wanting for anything but substance.

This story is not just about Lilith.

It is also about her curse.

Long ago, in the land of Eden, there was a monstrous plant-eating bear. Yes, the bear himself ate monstrous plants. He wasn't monstrous, per se (although, in my opinion, he could have done with a delousing, but he was a bear for cripes sakes). The queen kept him around to make sure her priceless collection of man-eating plants never ate anything bigger than a crocodile. However, the bear, finding little luck in getting to eat a man-eating-plant in the garden -they had gotten rather fond of crows, as they packed a delightful little crunch, and hadn't eaten a man in a fortnight-

wandered around the enchanted garden in search of a snack. He accidentally ate some terribly vile Kinsppin's crawlers, an enchanted vine that winds itself tighter the less oxygen it receives, even after it has been cut; there wasn't very much oxygen in a monstrous-plant-eating bear's gut, unfortunately. He was all tangles and knots and was particularly queasy, so he cried out for help, expecting an entourage of aides to come rushing in. Alas, they were all on their lunch breaks. The bear could feel himself getting more and more desperate as the Kinsppin's crawlers began to suck up the oxygen in his body, until he finally did something that no one should ever be tempted to do.

He beseeched the help of the Blue Fairy.

I don't know what you've heard of her; probably some silly little story about her turning a puppet into a boy or some other lovely drivel. Good things, I'm sure; pumpkins to carriages and mice to horses. Well, you shouldn't believe all that you hear, dearie. Fairies are a wicked sort and the Blue Fairy... well let me tell you, she's the absolute worst. The kind of fairy that sneaks into children's windows at night and plants Pricklin Pracklins under their beds and in their closets, monsters only visible to those under the age of 12 (and sometimes only visible to children who are particularly squeamish). The kind of fairy that places Mannequin curses on those with lots of energy, making them feel stiff and wooden, like a doll, until they begin to lose their sense of identity and become wooden and hollow on the inside as well. The kind of fairy that never ever tips and always steals tips out of tip jars, even though she practically reeks of wealth.

Mark my words, lads and gents; fairies are trouble.

But the bear was a bear and he didn't have much of a grasp on the possible consequences, especially considering that he was losing oxygen -and brain cells- by the second. So, deep in his heart of hearts, he wished for the Blue Fairy to offer him some assistance.

And, by some terrible twist of ill fortune, she appeared before him.

I'm sure you must have some picture of her in your head now that I've described her nature to you, a picture of a terrible, ugly brute with warts and a permanent scowl plastered to her face. Perhaps you even still see her as the fairy tale version, with kind eyes and a slightly forgetful but good-intentioned personality (if you do, I really must say "shame on you," you really should trust the narrator, no matter how unreliable she is).

Well, no matter how she appeared in your head, know that you are wrong.

She looks different to everyone she appears in front of. She likes to masquerade, playing on your sensibilities and wallowing away at your weaknesses. If you ever have the ill fortune to meet her, she will appear in a state that will leave you at your most vulnerable. For example, to Lemon P. Twilddenstone, a sweet boy whose face was always puckered as if he was sucking on something sour, she appeared to him as his childhood toy, a toy that had been lost when his family home burned down; this toy was the last thing his mother had given him before she died, in that exact same fire. He had wished for his mother to return, but the Blue Fairy instead haunted him; no matter how many times he tried to get rid of it, the toy reappeared again and again, telling him in no uncertain terms that the fire had been his fault.

To the bear, the Blue Fairy appeared as a candlestick. I couldn't tell you why, really. The bear just wasn't very fond of them. He didn't like the way the fire danced and the way the wax dripped, I supposed. She meant to scare him, as she often does, to leave him haunted.

But she was too late and the bear ran out of oxygen before she had the chance to. The poor beast lay unconscious on the greenhouse floor, lousy and quite close to death. And, seeing as the beast couldn't wish for anything in an unconscious state, the Blue Fairy began to get a little miffed; she had come all this way, after all and she didn't want to be a candlestick for any longer than she had to. So, she poofed the Kinsppin's crawlers out of his system -much easier to torture him while he was alive- and turned him into the thing that he despised the most. A candlestick. Which isn't a great punishment if you ask me; the bear enjoyed it much more than he thought he would; dripping was much more fun than watching something drip and the flames were much more fun to be a part of than to see dancing in front of his eyes. In his heart of hearts, he told her thank you for her good deed and decided that the candlestick life would be perfectly dandy for him.

The Blue Fairy doesn't pride herself on good deeds.

So, she turned him into something else, something so horrid and destructive that the world itself was often at peril because of its actions. She turned the bear into a human. And again, the bear felt quite happy. Being a human seemed all right, with the opposable thumbs and everything. He could finally open jars of honey for himself, on the off days when he didn't want to eat monstrous plants. The Blue Fairy was now extremely miffed. A punishment isn't a punishment unless someone acted as if they were *punished*.

So, she cursed the bear (now a human) and all of his descendants with something she knew that could only bring displeasure; so much wealth and luxury that they would never be at peace.

And now back to Lilith.

She was a descendant of the monstrous plant-eating-bear, of course, although she didn't look bear-like at all. Neither did the bear though, I suppose, after his transformation. He only looked bear-like around the eyes, dark and obsidian and deep like a well on a night without stars. She looked rather normal, with a face and hair and eyes and such, much like a human looks. The only thing that truly seemed remarkable about her was her multitude of freckles. They speckled her everywhere, filling her face with constellations and trailing down her arms like so many grains of sand. She had more freckles than was normal for someone who hardly ever saw the sun. But beyond that, she was rather unremarkable. Although you would hardly ever know that with all of the praise she received on a daily basis, the pining and the schmoozing and the endless stream of complements and commendations that filled the air around her like swathes of gauze.

Money seems to make almost anyone attractive, wouldn't you say?

I mean, I wouldn't say so, but feel free to be as shallow as you'd like, dear. The only one

who's judging stands on the other side of the mirror.

Suitors came in droves, laughing at her "wit" and "charm" and "grace." Lilith was not worldly enough to know that their complements were merely bids at her approval and at every smile that she lavished upon them, they were imagining dollar signs in their place. If one has enough money and not enough sense, then they can hardly purchase more of it. Some things, I'm afraid, are not for sale.

Like geese who lay golden eggs. I keep looking on craigslist, but there are never any listed for sale in my area.

Lilith had no concept of "money" or "material worth." She only knew that her life, filled with lavish parties and elaborate embroidery and hours of lazing about, didn't seem all that meaningful. In the stories she'd read about life, there always seemed to be more meaning to it.

The prince slayed the dragon or the ogre ravaged a kingdom or the milkmaid did her daily chores (she had just started reading *A Day in the Life of a Modern Milkmaid* and all in all it sounded rather delightful; she had yet to get to the chapter on the difficulty of churning your own butter). She just felt as if she was missing something, as if there was a little hollow in her chest that could never really fill. And yet, she had no real desire to leave or to do anything about it. After all, she had never really felt any different. The feeling was probably normal, she had surmised long ago, a hollow feeling that everyone must have living in her chest. And so, she lived her days idly, and often looked out the window and wondered if there were even any milkmaids in the villa at all.

~

Edith smiled, her head heavy with the thought of Lilith churning butter; she closed her eyes and her head seemed to swell with clouds, heavy with the rain of new stories and new ideas. Her taste buds still tingled with the taste of chamomile, though not as heavy as before, and her cup of sleepytime tea had found its way to her nightside table, the tea bag sitting limply in a puddle of its own tea, drowsy and resigned.

I tell myself the most lovely stories, don't I?

She thought to herself with a chuckle. Her eyes were heavy now, and her bed was warm; there were no Pricklin Pracklins under her bed, as far as she could tell.

She closed her eyes once more and they stayed closed until morning.

All night, she dreamt of peppermint and honey.

Snickerdoodles

The old woman has many stories to tell. But, although she could sit for hours, rocking back and forth in her favorite wicker chair, filling the room with memories and recollections brought to life with her silver tongue, she stays quiet. After so many years of talking, she thinks that silence suits her fancy. And besides, her granddaughter is coming to visit. She has better things to do than recount tales to an empty room.

So, she brings out the feather duster, brushing away cobwebs and dust that have taken refuge in every nook and cranny. She does the dishes from last night, a bowl still tinged with pasta sauce and a spoon that has long since bent slightly to the left. She ignores her body's aches and creaks as she carefully pulls out the ingredients to make her granddaughter's favorite sweet. Snickerdoodles. Flour, butter, sugar, cinnamon, eggs, vanilla, baking soda... and something else. *Ah, yes.* She almost forgot a pinch of salt. She reads off a recipe card, stained from years of use and sprinkled with flour. It was her mother's. She mixes the ingredients, following each step slowly, methodically. She wants it to be perfect, as perfect as the person she is making them for. As perfect as her sweet June. June, the girl who always smiles with dimples just like her father. The girl who used to come to her gran and beg for stories, stories about, "what it was like when you were as old as me?" When June was born, and the old woman wasn't quite so old, she held the babe in her arms and knew. Knew just like how she had when she had held June's father in her arms for the first time. *This is love.*

The old woman wipes her hands off on her apron, an apron that has shared in her small disappointments and in her crowning achievements. It has lived with her through every spoiled casserole and every perfect cherry pie. It is stained, much like her recipe cards, with tokens of her love. She preheats her oven, turning the dial to 275 degrees, even though the recipe calls for 350. The oven runs hot. The kitchen begins to warm, filled with good intentions as she carefully forms the cookie dough. She rolls the sticky dough between her palms and coats them in cinnamon sugar until not one speck of cookie dough can be seen from underneath. Parchment paper is draped over cookie sheets gracefully and the balls of cookie dough are lined up row by row, meticulously placed so that they will have room to spread. The old woman wipes the sweat away from underneath her glasses. Her glasses have fogged from perspiration, turning the whole world murky and out of touch. She smiles, recalling a vague childhood memory. Her mother doing the housework, barefoot, her signature pink apron tied around her waist, and her long auburn hair braided loosely down her back. "A bit of perspiration means a job well done, Elaine." No one calls the old woman Elaine now. She has long since traded it for nicknames and epithets, "mamma" and "gran" and "grandma 'laine."

The scent of cinnamon and sugar wafts through the house, filling every crevice with the promise of good things to come. The toothpick comes out clean and the cookies are done, sugar sweet and each one almost perfectly symmetrical. Placed on the best china, white and delicately traced with flowers, periwinkle blue. Set on the table with her best tablecloth. She puts out lemonade, ice-cold, and two of her best cups. She steps back and admires her work. June will be pleased.

And now the old woman waits.

The hands of the clock march slowly on, ticking sweetly in the woman's ear. *June is coming. She'll be here soon.* But as the time wears on, her excitement fades and is usurped by fear.

10 minutes pass.

And then 15 more.

Fear turns into dread. And then, like a shot in the night, the woman's phone goes off. A text message. She unlocks her phone to a message from her sweet June.

Sry had to cancel again. C u next week?

The old woman sighs, relieved that June is okay. She looks at the perfectly laid table, filled with the treats that June used to love. The old woman thinks back to a time when her granddaughter had loved visiting this house, and when she loved to hear her grandmother's stories.

But, the house is empty now.

She sends back a text.

Of course, dear. Come whenever you have the time. I love you with all my heart.

The old woman sits down in her favorite wicker chair, rocking back and forth to the steady *tick, tick, tick* of the clock. "Maybe silence doesn't suit me after all."

I Wasn't Expecting A Ring

"I wasn't expecting a ring. How could I have been? We had only been dating for 3 years. And we had been living together for 2. And his parents adored me," she paused, "Okay, so maybe I was. Would that really be so wrong?" She sighed and tucked a piece of her auburn hair gently behind her ear.

"It was a beautiful autumn day, the kind of day where the air is brisk and the leaves have turned those lovely shades of orange and maroon. I just love autumn days, don't you? All that hot cocoa with those cute little miniature marshmallows. And the cardigans!" She smiled sweetly, revealing a set of dimples.

"I wait all summer for that sweater weather. I couldn't tell you how many cardigans just sit waiting in my closet, collecting dust." She blushed, her cheeks turning a slight shade of pink and cleared her throat, "Sorry, I'm getting off topic! I have a tendency to do that. That's what Robert always tells me, anyway. So... where was I?" She tilted her head slightly, trying to recall, "Ah yes, it was a lovely autumn day! I was reading a book by this quaint little coffee shop, you know, the one Downtown? They have the best scones. And I'm so entranced by this book I'm reading, really sucked in, that I don't even notice that someone has taken the seat across from me!"

She laughed, her face lighting up at the memory, "Can you imagine my surprise when I looked up? To see a stranger across from me, watching me as I'm wolfing down a pastry and drowning in one of my beloved novels. My goodness, that man really scared the living daylights out of me."

"That was the first time I met my Robert," her periwinkle eyes glimmered as she thought back to that moment, "He felt so bad for interrupting me, so bad that he even offered to buy me another scone. But, of course I wasn't going to let him off so easy. I asked him what he was thinking, scaring me like that! And he told me -I remember like it was yesterday- 'You looked like you were having so much fun that I had to know what you were reading.'"

She sighed like a schoolgirl in love. "He's always been so charming, my Robert. So sweet. And so *devilishly* handsome. It must have been fate that day, to bring us together. I always knew that my Prince Charming would love books as much as I do."

"Everything after that day just worked like clockwork. We exchanged numbers and went on dates and I met his parents and he met mine. We said 'I love you' and everything fell into place like perfect puzzle pieces. We moved in a year after we started dating and everything just felt so *right*. It really was just so perfect."

She frowned, her rosebud lips forming a pretty pout, “Until it wasn’t. We had been dating for almost 3 years when he started acting strange, secretive. He started acting... what’s the word? Fidgety. Yes, that’s it. Fidgety. He started acting so odd around me. He wasn’t as open with me and he would go out for hours at a time without a moment of notice.” She began to sniffle, a tear falling silently down her cheek.

“I just got so worried about him, you know? To think that there was something off about him and that he couldn’t even trust me enough to talk to me about it. It made me feel so wretched that I couldn’t do anything to help him. So, I did what any woman in my position would do when their loved one was in trouble.” She pulled a tissue out of her red clutch purse and wiped her eyes.

“I followed him. And of course, I respect his privacy, don’t get me wrong! I just needed to make sure that my Robert was okay. So I followed him last week when he snuck out.” She tucked her hair behind her ear again.

“And do you know what I found?”

She looked deadset into the eyes of the girl in front of her.

“I found you, Rose. He was at your doorstep that night.”

“Of course, I thought of all the reasonable options. There could be any number of reasons that he was at your house. But every day that week, I found myself plagued by doubt. I began to notice things, the unmistakable whiff of perfume on his clothes. The lipstick on his collar. I began to find the facts irrefutable.”

She smiled bitterly, tears brimming in her eyes.

“My dear, sweet Robert had been seduced by you. You had taken him from me, with your cheap perfume and your fuschia lipstick.”

She paused to wipe the tears out of her eyes once more.

“But I don’t blame Robert, of course. How could I? It wasn’t his fault that he had been played. But Rose,” she stood up, straightening her skirt, “I couldn’t stand by and let you hurt him anymore.”

She reached into her purse and grasped something in one of her perfectly manicured hands. She stepped closer to Rose, leaning down so that she could see her face clearly, the golden ringlets, the creamy complexion, the amber eyes. And the gag.

“I’m sure you understand.”

Out of her purse came a kitchen knife, glinting angrily in the harsh fluorescent lighting of the greenhouse. Rose tried to cry out, but all she could manage was a muffled squeak. She tried to crawl away, move, tried to do something to get away from her, but she knew that she couldn’t escape.

“I wasn’t expecting a wedding ring, Rose. But I’m sure Robert will come around to the idea. Don’t you think?”

~

Robert unlocked the door with a shrill *creeeaaaak*. He really needed to remember to oil the hinges.

“Honey?” He took off his jacket, hanging it on the wooden coat rack, “Honey, where are you?” *She must be in the greenhouse*, he realized and headed out to the garden. Sure enough, he could see her outline in its green glass walls.

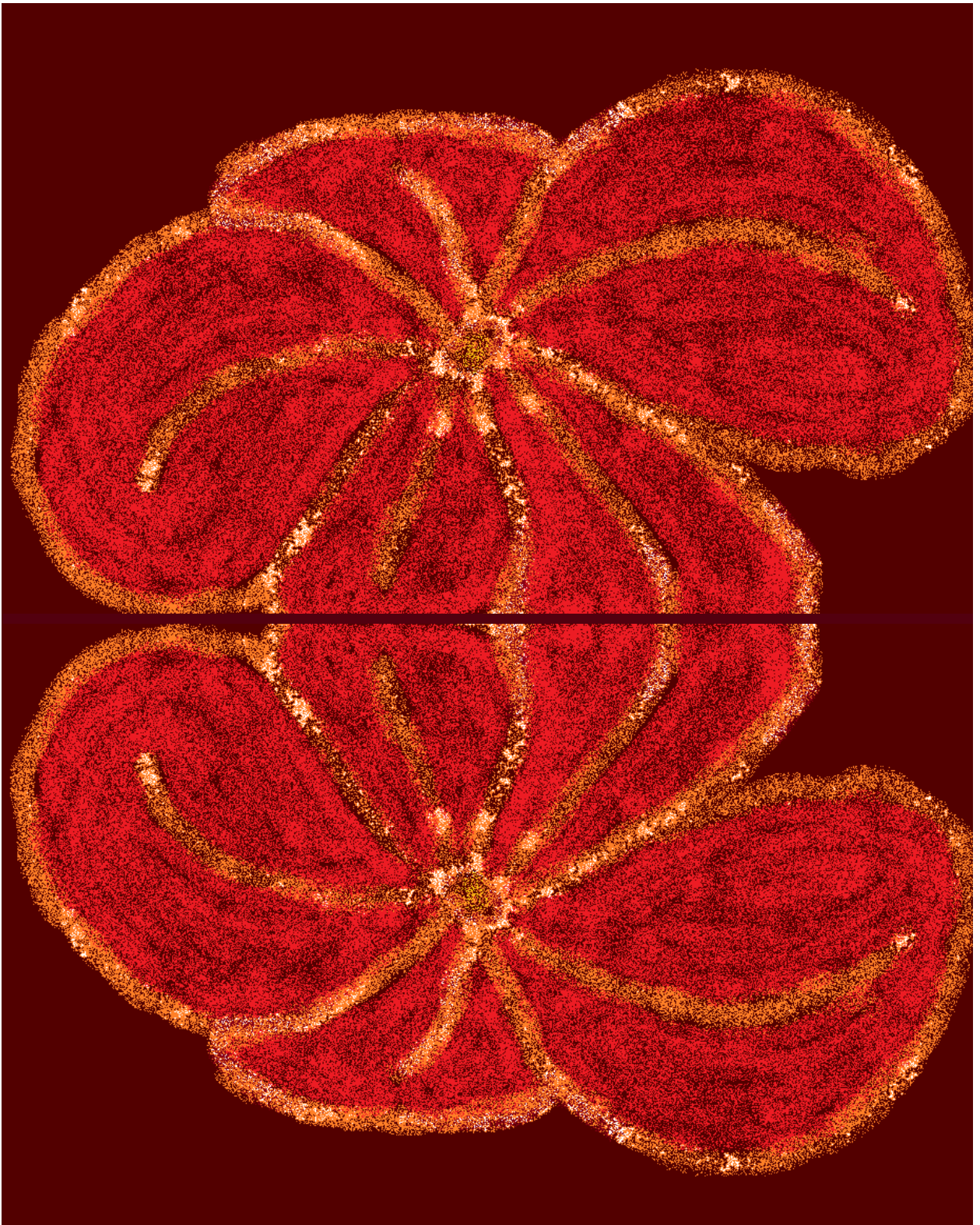
“Katie, what are you doing out here?”

His girlfriend smiled, wiping a streak of potting soil from her face.

“I’m just planting some roses, dear. Aren’t they lovely?”

He smiled at the triviality of the statement. *That was the problem with Katie, she really was just far too simple. If only there was a brain in that pretty head of hers*, he thought to himself.

“Yes, honey. Lovely, indeed.”



Wes D. Werner

You Are Here

I can see the center of LA from here, its massive buildings concentrate into a mountain of manmade materials that dissipate to the surrounding single-story businesses and homes. The sun, nearly completing its descent, blinds me as it aligns with my gaze. With skyward-stretching arms, the city welcomes the blazing star into its horizon. On the corner of 3rd and Main Street, Kelly, Mike, and I await entry to a club. The entrance is a red door embedded in a brick wall. Above the door reads 'Club Persona' in glowing red letters. It sits between two businesses that are permanently closed, their names have faded, their missing windows sealed with plywood. Several businesses on this street have been reduced to the same fate. Vacant shops face every direction with eyes wide shut, adding victims to the toll. That virus nearly killed everything. The World Health Organization urged governments to keep cities closed as a means of mitigating its rapid transmission, because too many bodies attracted to one place was sure to cause outbreaks. The response did not come soon enough. I caught it once, I'm lucky it didn't claim me or any of my loved ones, but I know plenty who have lost someone firsthand.

We've been under restriction for several years now, the three of us had to go through high school graduation and our first years of college in lockdown. This is the first night any of us have been able to go into public spaces without face coverings. Kelly and Mike told me how much they wanted to go see a punk show in LA as a way of saying goodbye to that virus, and I felt the same. Our favorite local group, Brain Drain, announced they would finally be having a show in LA after years of being unable to perform due to the pandemic that affected most, if not all, of the world's population. We're ready to show our faces once again. We aren't as scared to breathe. People have changed, they always will, now some prefer wearing masks at all times outside their homes. I can see a few in line with us still wearing them. We decided to come to this thing maskless, but going anywhere with my face uncovered and letting my breath escape into the air feels wrong. Most of the others waiting in line have their masks off, too, but I wonder how many will keep them off once we enter. The fear that this could just be another quiet before another wave of outbreaks still resides in me, but I refuse to be consumed by it. That world I used to know has to be out there still. I just can't say for certain that it will ever return.

I'm trying my hardest to forget these awful maybes and remain present in the moment. I turn my attention to Kelly and Mike who have been murmuring to each other for the past few minutes. "Thank God the sun is finally going down. I was starting to sweat just from standing here," Kelly complains.

"I know, I wish I had brought my sunglasses before driving two hours with it directly in my eyes," Mike replies.

I say, "I'm feeling alright, actually. The sun feels nice in this cold breeze."

"It didn't bother me the way up, it's the standing in it that's making me hot."

"Well you did sleep the whole way here." Mike says jokingly.

"Yeah, and?" Kelly retorts, "I needed the rest before going crazy in the club."

"Very true," I say. I have to admit, Kelly is right about needing energy for one of these gigs. Being in the audience is no simple task, before long dancing will turn to violent moshing, but that's why people come. I usually spectate the mosh and cheer my friends on, but occasionally I'll jump in and throw myself against the other thrill-seekers. Tonight, I don't think I'll be getting close to anybody. "Tyler," Kelly says to get my attention, "Didn't you have someone you could have brought tonight? I feel bad making you the third wheel."

“Not at the moment, I was kind of hoping Sean would come, but his girl wouldn’t let him because of all those riots that were happening a couple years ago.”

“Pssh! That’s all over now. I bet it’s really because of the whole mask mandate being lifted,” Mike pauses, “well if he wasn’t trying to risk it then it’s good he didn’t come.”

“There’s no telling if it will come back or not,” I say this and feel those thoughts surface.

“Come on Tyler. All the news stations and health organizations are saying it’s finally over. We don’t have to worry about it anymore.” That is what the officials are saying, but I just don’t know what to believe anymore.

After a brief silence Kelly asks, “You aren’t talking to anyone special right now? What happened to those people you told us about from the dating apps?” Kelly tends to inquire about my love-life, but I don’t mind since it gets me out of my head.

“I quit using those. Honestly, the people on them are just a bunch of horndogs. I’m just seeing where life takes me. Who knows, maybe I’ll even meet somebody tonight.” I say this despite feeling completely off-put by the prospect of breathing in a stranger’s air.

“Need a wingman?”

“Thanks Mike, but nah. I’m just gonna let it happen naturally.”

“If you say so, just let me know if you change your mind.”

I appreciate them looking out for me, but I don’t need help getting a man or a woman. I find it’s best to dive into fear rather than accept help, because once I admit defeat, I might never be able to do it for myself. That’s why I came tonight in the first place, to rid myself of that virus’s hold on me. I hope I still know how to talk to people. I’ve gotten used to breaking the ice through internet messaging instead of face-to-face first impressions. When I was looking for love on those apps, I realized that I would always be the one initiating conversations and that no one ever seemed interested in maintaining connections. Most of them would assess my character in the first few messages and either block me or give me the driest responses, and the few that I actually became connected to were only interested in me for one thing. I finally became fed up with it and decided to just be single for a year or two. I just turned 20 a few months ago and I’m taking my writing more seriously. I’m all set to transfer to university in the fall. Moving out is going to be an adjustment. I know I’m going to miss my parents and older sister, but I’m more excited than anything else. Now that the world is opening up again, I’m not so scared of what’s ahead.

We’re next in line and I see one of the bouncers checking IDs. He’s holding a red marker in one hand and a bundle of red wristbands in the other. We pull out our wallets and get our cards ready. A group of four girls in front of us run into a roadblock when the bouncer notices one of them is under 18. After some protesting from their group, he and his colleague stand firmly in front of the shut red door with intimidating looks on their faces until the girls leave. I hold onto my ID with anticipation as I realize it’s our turn. The bouncer checks our IDs, marks our right hands with x’s in red marker, then opens the door for us. As we enter he says, “Enjoy the show”, then shuts the door behind us. As it closes the last bit of natural light disappears.

I put my ID back in my wallet then into my pocket. My eyes begin adjusting to the club’s dim interior, and I make out a flight of stairs that must lead to the showroom. We descend, gripping the railing bolted to the dark wall, sharing our elation at the fact that we are actually going to a show after all this time. The bottom floor is filled with the indistinguishable voices of people waiting for the show to begin. It feels completely foreign to see this many people shoved into one place, and I can hardly contain my disgust as I squeeze through them to reach the front stage. The gaping mouths of fully formed faces surround me with contaminated air. Sliding through the lake of human bodies, I’m barely able to keep myself above the surface, a wave of anxiety rushes over

me. I should get some water to cool off. I can feel myself beginning to sweat as those thoughts take over. I tell Mike and Kelly I'm going to get water and ask if they want any. When they say they're fine, I make note of their place in the crowd and begin shoving through people to get to the bathroom. The glass door labeled 'men' swings on its hinges as I pull it open. I grip the porcelain sink-bowl for stability. I turn the handle and the faucet hisses a stream of cold water. Water pools in the basin, overflowing from its drain, it must be clogged. My hands become the exit of my inner filth. I feel a cleansing chill rush through my entire body. I soap and suds them for added relief, turn the handle back once my hands are rinsed, then watch as my fear slowly gurgles down the drain. I dry my hands with a paper towel then pat my face to remove the stagnant sweat. I remind myself that I must remain in this moment, I must face this fear.

My breath begins to slow, I exit and walk towards the bar. The stench of alcohol rises into my nose from peoples' cups as I pass them. I place my hands on the smooth, black bartop, as a means of balancing myself and getting the barkeep's attention. At the other end stands this girl, I catch a glimpse of her tattooed arms and blond hair. I try to be slick when I look to see her face, but when I do, she's staring right back at me, she smiles then I quickly turn away. I feel hyper aware of my exposed face, but before the fear can even begin taking hold, I force it away. She starts walking towards me and I think to myself, "act cool." She leans her right arm on the bartop right next to me and says, "Hey."

I say with a smile, "Hi."

"Are you trying to get his attention," she says, gesturing her head at the bartender.

"Yeah, I want some water, but he hasn't come over here yet."

"Sometimes you just gotta scream at him, that usually gets their attention."

"I don't wanna be rude though, he's probably gonna come over here soon."

Against my wish she shouts, "Hey Kyle! Can we get some help over here?"

"Thanks, I probably could have done that." She seems nice, but I feel a bit embarrassed having her call him over for us.

"Don't be shy. You need something, you just gotta ask for it." She smiles as she speaks.

"What can I get ya Sam," the bartender, apparently named Kyle, asks her.

"Just water for my friend, and I'll take a margarita." She holds up her left arm to display the red wristband.

"Coming right up."

"Ooo a margarita, you like fancy drinks." I speak with ease, my fear dissolving.

"Yeah, I prefer beer, but they don't have anything good, so I'll go with the next best thing."

"Wow, never met a girl who actually prefers beer."

"Yeah, it's an acquired taste, but the mixed stuff will do, whatever gets me goin', ya know?"

"Definitely," I'm not much of a drinker but I want to relate, "cocktails don't hit the same as some nice refreshing brews."

"That's what I'm sayin'! You get it," she giggles, "I'm Samantha by the way, but you can call me Sam."

"Nice to meet you Sam. My name's Tyler."

Kyle comes back with our order and places the drinks in front of us, then says, "That'll be eight dollars Miss."

She pulls out a money clip with some strange, eight-pointed, metallic gold cross. It has four rhombuses sticking from the joints of its perpendicular limbs. Pulling out the bills and handing them to Kyle, she says, "Here ya go, keep the change." She puts the money away and grabs her margarita. Just as we turn around, the lead singer of the band gets on the microphone and says,

“Is everyone ready to lose their shit?” The crowd screams back at them to announce their readiness. I look around and see Mike and Kelly standing up front, their vision locked to the stage as they cheer along with the others. They smile as they hold each other’s hand. I look at Sam, who’s still smiling, and I wonder if I’ve found the fourth wheel. The singer shouts, “Then let’s go!” The room fills with the sound of drums, guitars, and the lead singer’s voice blasting from the amplifiers. The fun has finally started. She bobs her head and sways her hips, the margarita nearly spills as she leads me to a corner bench placed against the wall. We sit and she scoots right up against me pressing her arm into mine. We set our drinks next to us, watching the band and everyone in front of them go into a frenzy. The audience is dancing while fighting one another. I lose sight of Mike and Kelly in the commotion, but I know I’ll find them once things settle back down. I want to get out there and join the fun so I begin to stand. She stands with me and before we walk into the storm she says, “Try this, it’s good.”

I hold up my x’d out hand and say, “Can’t. I’m only 20.”

She hands me the margarita saying, “Close enough.”

I take the drink into my hand and hold it for a moment, noticing her look of anticipation. I’d hate to look lame in front of a cute girl. I pour the salty sweet ice in my mouth, and as I gulp, the liquid flames singe my nostrils. I see her face curl in a pleased smile. “Good, huh?”

“Yeah it’s alright,” I’m not into drinking, but something compels me to have some when it’s at her request.

Sam sets her drink on the bench then starts shaking her body furiously with the music, she grabs my arms and pulls me into her frenzy. We both begin dancing by the wall, the music causing our bodies to convulse. This band is called Raw Noise, which I’ve never actually heard of, but the music they’re playing is actually quite good. It’s pretty heavy compared to what I listen to, it’s more metal than punk, nothing like Brain Drain. My new friend apparently knows the band as she begins singing along to the nonsensical vocals of the singer, either that or she’s faking it pretty well. Her blonde hair slaps her back then flings forward into her face as she continues to shake her head vigorously. We keep this up until the first song ends. She sits on the bench, taking another sip of her drink, as the band starts their next song she gets back up with the drink in her hand. She hands it to me as an offer for me to drink more, and I think, ‘why not?’ I’ve never snuck drinks at a show like this before. I take a bigger gulp than the first, reintroducing the fire to my throat. The warmth travels down into my stomach then up into my head.

Before I know it, the bartender is standing right in front of me. He reaches down to grab my wrist, finding the red x on my hand. “Bro, c’mon, now you gotta leave,” he shouts at me over the music. He turns around with my wrist still in his grip then drags me up the stairs and out the door. “Don’t come back,” he says before shutting the door and sealing the noise inside.

There is no longer a bouncer out front and the street is entirely empty. It’s night, but it isn’t dark. A dense fog hangs over the city. I can see where the skyscrapers start, but the building tops are engulfed by the mist. The lights of downtown LA project into the sky, forming a sea of white haze. I stand in front of the red door for a moment wondering to myself how I’m going to let Kelly and Mike know I’ve been kicked out. I could just send them a text and hope they see it soon so I don’t end up waiting outside in the cold all night. I feel around my pockets but I don’t feel my phone anywhere, panic sets in immediately. I frantically search every part of my clothes trying to feel the small phone that links me to the world. I must have left it somewhere in Mike’s car or somewhere in the club. Either way, this isn’t good. I still have my wallet so that’s good at least, but I don’t know what the hell I’m supposed to do. I start walking down the street to a liquor store when I hear the door open behind me and a familiar, “Don’t come back.” I turn and see Sam standing

there. She pushes her hair back and readjusts her shirt. “Hey,” she says with a defeated tone, “he got me too. He saw me give you the drink.”

“Well this sucks. My friends gave me a ride and they’re still in there, so I can’t leave. On top of that my phone is locked in his car. I’m totally screwed.” I feel less panicked now that she is with me, I’m sure she’ll be able to help.

“Yeah, that’s no good. Sorry I got you kicked out.”

“It’s ok, I mean I’m the one who drank illegally. Is there some kind of directory nearby?” I could really use a sign that says, *YOU ARE HERE*.

“What do you mean?”

“I have no clue where I am or where I need to go.”

“You’re not from around here?”

“No, I’m from Garden Grove.”

“You’re a long way from home.”

“Seriously. Do you maybe have a phone I could borrow?”

“I actually don’t, can’t afford one, and you don’t want to ask just anyone for a phone. They’ll probably rob you when they realize you’re not from here. I know someone who has one though.”

I find it odd that someone my age doesn’t have a phone, but I choose to follow her anyways. She seems to be my only chance at reconnecting with Mike and Kelly at the moment. Sam leads me towards the city where the buildings cram together. The night sky’s an illusion. It’s drowning above us. As we walk past shops and bars, I feel the urge to go in and ask for a phone, but I remember Sam’s warning and persist towards our destination. The only people on the street besides us seem to be either homeless or on their way home. Somewhere along the way she asks me “So do you think your friends have noticed you’re gone yet?” She smirks.

“I’m not sure, I would think not since the show barely started.”

“Really? But shouldn’t they have noticed you’re gone since they’re such good friends of yours? Hopefully they don’t wind up leaving without you.” She keeps that smirk on her face which starts to feel more creepy than attractive. I feel a weird sense of pressure coming from her words.

“Maybe, but I’m sure they’ll notice at some point.” I play it off because I don’t even want to consider the fact that I could get left behind in LA with no phone or means of getting home.

We must have walked a mile or two since it only took us 20 minutes to reach our destination. I still have no clue where we are or what time it is in the world. It’s a small club with the sign “Déjà Vu” above its door. The glow from the red words creates a slim outline against the brown wood. “‘Déjà Vu’? What kind of club is this?” I say to Sam as we near the entrance.

“You’ll see. Don’t be afraid,” she grabs my arm and leads me through the double door entrance. We enter a short hallway with pink lights lining the crevices between the ceiling and the walls. As we walk along the carpeted floor and near a secondary double-door entrance, electronic sounds become clearer. Sam opens the doors and we are bombarded by the bass and synths of a rave. There’s a DJ booth, on a stage opposite to the entrance, resting about four feet above the ground. The interior is filled with a mass of people, they are gathered in front of the stage, making it nearly invisible. The DJ appears to be floating in a raft on their heads. My stomach begins to turn at the thought of being in yet another crowded, breath-infested club. I repress the feeling. Sam leads me toward the right of the stage, cutting through the bodies, where a sign that says “restrooms” is pasted to the wall. The closer we get to the stage the more visible a small hallway becomes that leads to the restrooms. Four doors line the wall on the left and we stop at the last one. “Okay so just go in here and they’ll help you on your way. They aren’t mean or anything, just a little odd.”

“What do I say to them?”

“Just let them know who brought you and they’ll help you out. I’ve got to get going, sorry again for any trouble I caused you.”

“Wait, you’re not coming in with me?”

“I can’t, I’ve gotta go, someone’s waiting for me, but we should hang out if you’re ever in the LA again, it was nice meeting you Tyler.” She seems to say this without meaning it.

“Thanks for the help, hopefully we can see each other again.” I don’t really believe I’ll see her again.

“Good luck.” With that, she walks back out of the hallway, disappearing into the crowd of people, like nothing, gone. I guess the fourth wheel just rolled off its hub. I stand there for a moment in an attempt to gain some sort of courage before entering this room of unforeseen people who may or may not be willing to help me. Finally, I say to myself ‘screw it’ and knock. The door opens with a red glow escaping the threshold. The scent of cigarette smoke rushes into my nostrils as I enter the room then the door closes behind me. I wish I had a mask to filter the smog. As it shuts, the noise muffles and the only remaining sound is the loud vibration from the bass in the walls. A group of three men and one woman are inside. One man sits on a dark leather couch, the other is sitting on a chair between the couch and a desk. The woman is caressing the one in the chair with her body. The man who opened the door goes to the girl giving the lap dance and taps her on the shoulder, “Can you give us a sec sweetie?” She gives him a glare and says, “I need my money first.” She turns to look at the man in the chair then stands with her arms crossed. He sighs then hands her a few bills from his pocket. She counts them, looks displeased, then says, “Where’s the rest? This is only 50. We agreed on 200.”

“Listen you only gave me part of the show so you only get part of the payment. You want the rest, then come back after we deal with our guest.”

She rolls her eyes then glares at me as she walks out the door into the noise, the other man closes it behind her. The third man quietly smokes a cigarette as he sits on the black, low-to-the-ground couch. The man at the door presses a button on the wall and the light changes from red to a bright white. The one by the door becomes clearer with a set of brown eyes in his white face. His head is topped with dark brown hair brushed across a bald scalp. After changing the light he sits behind the desk. I turn my attention to the man on the couch, who appears to be wearing some sort of military uniform, but I’m not sure which branch it’s from. An anchor on his chest makes it look like it could be a navy uniform, but the ribbons are all wrong. My parents have my grandpa’s medals from his naval career displayed on our mantle and none of the colors or designs on the ribbons look like what this guy has on. I notice a white-crowned hat with a black brim placed on the couch next to him. It also looks wrong, but it has two upward-curving branches with a star in their center where there should be the naval crest with an eagle and shield. Isn’t it illegal to impersonate high ranking military officials?

The cancer stick in his fingers spits smoke into his eyes, clouding the blue irises under his dark brown eyebrows. His hair is a well-groomed brown that swoops from one corner of his ear to the other. My throat is startin to feel ticklish. I swear I can taste his breath in my lungs. The man in the chair pulls out a pack of Marlboros from his pocket then takes one from the box. He takes out a lighter and before sparking, he it says “What brings you here young man?”

“A friend brought me here.”

“Who’s this friend of yours?” says the man in the chair. He lights the cigarette.

“Some girl I met named Sam. I just met her tonight actually, she said I could use a phone here.”

“Sam brought you?” The man at the desk asks, “and she didn’t even say hello?”

“Guess not.” I wasn’t aware they were such good friends.

“What do you need a phone for?” The smoking military man says, removing the cigarette from his face, “are you lost or something?”

“I got separated from my friends and I don’t have my phone, so I was hoping I’d be able to call them and let them know where I am. Would that be alright?”

His blue eyes become clear once the smoke vanishes, “Ah, I see. So you were out for the evening when it all took a turn for the worse.” He completely ignores my question about the phone, but I decide to entertain the conversation.

“I mean, sort of, we’ve just misplaced each other for the time being.”

“Ah, but this must have happened for a reason,” he looks over to the man in the chair, “right, Marcus?”

Marcus seems annoyed, he sits with his face resting in his palms with the still-burning cigarette in his fingers. “Sure, whatever.” He barely sounds awake when he responds, he must feel bummed about not getting his promised show from that woman.

“What do you think Nick?” he says, turning his attention to the other man.

“That’s right, David.” Nick replies with a smile forced into his mouth.

I’m not entirely sure what he’s trying to imply in saying that, but I feel an obligation to let him finish whatever point he’s trying to make. “You see, uh, what’s your name by the way?” I don’t exactly feel the need to be on a first name basis but I guess there isn’t any harm.

“I’m Tyler.”

“Well it’s nice to meet you Tyler, why don’t you have a seat over here?” He pats the couch seat next to him. I don’t feel like making myself comfortable, especially not in a room that’s choking me with toxic air, but if it gets me to a phone, I’ll go with it.

“Sure.” I sit down next to David after he lifts his hat from the couch and sets it in his lap.

“Much better. Now what I’m trying to say is I believe your friends left you without a phone on purpose.” I don’t see how he can make that assumption based on what I’ve said, but whatever, I’ll put up with it for the time being. At this point I notice that he is the only one speaking, Nick just sits behind the desk smiling as he gives full attention to David, and Marcus leans back in his chair as he smokes. Both remain completely silent. “The suppressive people of this world will do things like that, to hurt you.”

“You think so?”

“Oh I know it. I’ve been thrown around so many times that I finally decided to get the hell out of this place and move.”

“What made you leave?”

“I saw all the evil of society, everyone being drawn in by the allure of wealth and fame. They’ll drag everyone else down to get it, I’ve felt the wrath of suppressive people firsthand.” I’m beginning to see that this man is a true believer in his own words.

“What do you mean by that?”

“They led me to believe that the city would bring us unimaginable wealth, only to ultimately give up and run back home. Others became enwrapped with their sinful desires and abandoned me.”

“Well I’m glad my friends and family are there for me. They always will be.”

“That’s what I’m trying to warn you about, Tyler. These friends of yours seem awfully unaware of your absence, don’t they?”

“They were just having a good time and got caught up in the evening. I got caught up in it too.”

“That’s how it began for me too, there were nights we’d go out looking for fun at the local

clubs, getting into trouble. My friends sought the thrills of life and eventually they were sucked in. Finally, I had to turn away and find my own world to be a part of.”

“You found your own world? How?” I don’t really feel all that interested in learning this man’s life story, but I am still holding out for that phone.

“That’s right,” he bluntly states, “I met a man named Lafayette. He was the founder and leader of our group before I was. He welcomed me when no one else would and took me under his wing. I owe him everything.”

“So you joined the Navy?” I know he isn’t Navy, but I wonder if I can catch him in a lie.

“Not exactly, but much like the Navy we have many living on the ocean in a fleet of giant boats, they’re just like cruise ships. We are all a part of the fight to save the world from those who are willing to toss people aside for their own gain. We are the frontline of a spiritual battle that will never cease so long as evil lives.”

“Wow, for real?” At this point he’s completely lost me, I feel the phone I was promised never actually existed.

“Nick, Marcus, Samantha, myself, we all live on our flagship. It’s currently docked in the Port of LA. All those people you saw dancing out there needed our help at one point or another. They now call the Avian home. We land once in a while to find more who need our community, people much like yourself. They too were lost with nowhere to go. Now we’ve given our lives to the great cause Lafayette started, and our true purpose has been found. We now know our responsibility as leaders.”

He seems like he could go on forever, but I cut him short as the whole pitch is starting to give me major cult vibes. “How honorable of you all to keep up your valiant efforts, but I seriously need to call my friends, they will be looking for me soon enough.” I say that just in case these men feel they can forcibly take me without anyone noticing.

“With our community there is no need to find those which you seek, there is only you and your will to enact vengeance upon the evil rooted in this world. Everything you ever needed outside of yourself becomes obsolete, because the truth to your own being will come to light.”

“I better go,” as I say this Marcus and Nick activate in some synchronized blockade of the doorway.

“You don’t understand Tyler, you are the world’s salvation and all it takes is the path to truth that we can provide to you aboard the Avian. You are all you need, and joining the rest of us will only show you how true that really is.” My heart sinks as I feel trapped by his words. He continues to spout, “I met my wife aboard our flagship when Lafayette was leader. Now she and all my subjects follow my command. I am leading them on the path to having The Truth Revealed.”

I need to leave and find my way back to Club Persona, I need to get away from these people. Right now. I stand up and walk over to Nick and Marcus hoping they’ll just let me through, but they won’t move. Just as I’m about to begin demanding they let me out I see the door open behind them, the head of that woman from before peeks into the room. She starts shouting, “Hey! Where’s the rest of the money you promised you dipshit, ain’t you done talking to this kid yet!”

The two men turn their attention to the door, and before they can react, I shove through them and make my escape. I bolt through the door, the smell follows me out. I hear David shouting something behind me, I see Sam standing against the wall talking to some guy with a drink in her hand. She really is part of this, but that isn’t important to me as I’m focused on getting to the club entrance. I sprint through the pink hall and out the doors. The fog has descended upon the city, making it nearly impossible to see where I am going. The cool night air fills my lungs as I begin to sprint. I nearly reach the street corner when I hear the door open behind me. I look and make out the vague shapes of Marcus and Nick through the fog. They begin looking around, I

sprint left around the corner before they can see me. I hear Nick shout, "I think he went this way." I turn into an alley. Its dark here, the light can't reach it. I duck behind a dumpster and wait. I strain myself, holding my breath, focusing on being as quiet as possible. I hear the two men passing with their heavy breathing and running, but I wait to emerge until they are out of earshot. I slowly inch out of the alley into the lit sidewalk, I stand at the edge of the shadow and peek my head out. I look to the left and can't see Marcus or Nick anywhere. I can hardly see anything. I sprint in the opposite direction since I remember that is the way me and Sam came from.

What have I gotten myself into? Sam wasn't really into me, how could I have been manipulated so easily? I need to find Mike and Kelly. I can't make out which way I'm going, but somehow I remember the way in my frenzied running. When I finally reach the street where Club Persona is, I realize no one is following me, but I'm still checking over my shoulder every couple seconds. When I reach the closed red door, I try opening it, but it's locked tight. The once red shining words are now a dead white. I feel lost once again since I have no idea if the place is even open anymore, I can't remember what time they close, or what time it is in general. I'm trying to think of where Mike and Kelly could have gone, I wonder if they finally decided to leave without me, maybe they think I ditched them and drove home already. I sit on the filthy sidewalk against the brick wall feeling completely lost, the emptiness sets in. I stare into the haze. It's saturated by orange light pouring from the street lamps. I sink deeper into my feeling of abandonment. I never should have taken that damn drink. Maybe I shouldn't have even gone out. If I could just get hold of a phone and call Mike and Kelly, I could put all this behind me.

I look over and see the headlights of an oncoming car cut through the mist, shining right into my eyes. They halt just to the left of me, but I can't see the car behind the headlights. I try seeing through the white beams at whoever is driving the damn thing but can't make them out. I panic again as I fear it must be David and his goons come to take me with them. The car moves itself in front of me and it becomes clear that it's Mike's CRV. I stand up and run right over to them, Kelly is sitting in the passenger seat with her window open. I shout, "Mike! Kelly! Thank God you two came back for me."

She says, "Oh my gosh Tyler! Where the heck have you been? We've been calling you!"

Mike says, "Dude, seriously! We've been looking all over for you, we were about to go to the police station and ask them for help!"

"I'm so sorry guys, can I please just get in so we can get the hell out of this city?" He unlocks the doors and I hop into the backseat behind Kelly.

"Where the hell did you go man?" Mike asks in a concerned voice.

"I got kicked out right after the show started, I tried to find a phone but couldn't get to one, I came back hoping you guys would still be here. I had no idea where to go or what to do without my damn phone."

"No wonder you haven't been answering this whole time!" says Kelly.

"Yeah my phone is probably on silent or something, guys I am so sorry, but can we please get the hell out of here, the sooner we can put this behind us the better."

"Ok fine but at some point you're giving us an explanation." Mike starts the car and begins the trip back to Garden Grove. I agree with him, but I need a moment to calm myself before explaining what just occurred. I reach over into the pocket behind Mike's chair and grab my phone. When I pull it over to my lap, I see missed messages and calls from my mom. Before even reading what she had sent, I message her, saying, *Sorry, I left my phone in Mike's car. The show just ended. We are heading home.* I set my phone face down on the seat next to me as Mike begins pulling the car onto the freeway. A few moments pass and I hear my phone vibrate. My

mom's response reads, *Glad you're ok. Get home.* I can tell she isn't going to be too happy with me when I get back.

Mike, Kelly, and I sit in silence as we drive along the freeway. The night becomes clear as the fog has dissipated, and the stars repopulate the sky. Somewhere along the road to our return, we curve toward the coast, peeking into the ocean. I can see that it's the Port of LA. The water is all for the moon's reflection, its face is the only light in the black sea. I stare intently out at the ships, at their hulls, each of them, searching for one word: Avian. Are there really people out there willing to believe such fanatic men as David? I realize he never told me their organization's name. I wonder if I'll spot those free-floating Davidians' kingdom, or whatever they call themselves and their world that's anchored in the darkness. It appears even the strangest of us can captivate a people and create their own lands to rule.



Oak Tree (pencil sketch with digital editing) by Sidney Russell

Monica Williams

Corona-cation

Everything stopped overnight.

A curfew! A shutdown! Being home with no pressure. We're in the kitchen, laden with laptops and Chromebooks like a library's study table. We laughed and ate, watched movies, recreated Pinterest projects, and fell in love all over again. No more busy days, when no one was home until the hustle and bustle of the evening.

"Hey, how was your day? Are you ready for practice? Dinner is in the crockpot. The appointment is tomorrow. What time do you need to be there? Can you stay in and watch the girls?" Gone. It was perfect, the calmness.

Until it wasn't.

My youngest coined the term "Corona-cation," but three weeks into April of 2020 she began proclaiming, "I hate this! I hate COVID!" The days ran together like thick chocolate. Collecting in globs then slowly pouring out with chunks that haven't melted all the way down yet, they follow into the next day and the next. Wake up, sit at table, log in. Lunch, two step to the fridge. Pajamas and sweatpants became our daily wardrobe, and boredom consumed the most miniature human, dimming her light. She became a tiny tyrant. Soon, we were discussing menses. As the days passed, she became more defeated, hating Zoom and yearning for her playground. After healing broken bones, the oldest hung up his cleats. After a drive thru graduation, college was looking rather bleak. Middle had to leave the theatre and never returned; now her paint brushes just sit under a towel waiting for their turn.

We learned that you can really dislike your kids sometimes; slime never comes out of the carpet; watching them grow can be heartbreaking; family is the best thing about life.

The morning I took a trip to Dollar General for toilet paper is when it hit me. Bare as bones that have been sucked dry by my mother's wing-eating skills. Plain, empty shelves begging to matter. Price tags with descriptions in tears from their uselessness. The stores now colder inside, an open-mouthed cave with fluorescent lights and yellow walls. Whistles of wind from nowhere lick the back of your neck. Mouthless faces with eyes in a constant state of shock moved with weights on their feet. The roads were quiet and lifeless; we had a laundry list of delivery purchases; bottles of wine were opened a bit earlier each week.

We learned what Tyler Durden means when he says, "only after disaster can we be resurrected;" at any moment this could be the Hunger Games; Doordash is a trap; put the Chardonnay down.

The man-child began to spend more time away until it became permanent. Now he says things like, "WE had shrimp for dinner. WE are coming over later. WE got a puppy." Ugh.

"I got this, mom; I'm good on my own." The subtle boom of his completely transitioned base voice is gone. The smell of way too much cologne for a Tuesday night.

Gone. It was hard.

Until it wasn't... it's still hard.

We learned that everything changes, sometimes overnight; growing up is even more challenging in a pandemic; discouragement is powerful; grit is a necessity.

Nonfiction



Photograph by Bat-Ami Gordin

Samantha Nichols

The Night: 28 Sept 2009

He stumbled down the hall to the bedrooms, calling to his 19-year-old daughter.

She heard him coming, jumped up from her comfortable lime-green chair that sat in front of her laptop, and carefully navigated her way to her bedroom door. As she opened the door, she saw her father, the strongest person she knew, stumble against the open linen closet doors.

“Sam,” he choked out with a sob. “She’s gone.”

She grabbed him into a hug. They held each other. They both knew it had been coming since July, but it hadn’t registered until that moment. It was almost ten o’clock at night, but still he called his siblings and asked his older sister to pick up his son.

She, Sam, began to gather photographs from the cabinet drawers that her mother had designated for them.

Sam called her Aunt Laura, number four of her dad’s six siblings, and asked if she could bring Dr. Pepper because they were out.

Sam began stacking the piles of envelopes full of photographs, that she thought that She would be in, on the ugly yellow, red, and off-white linoleum kitchen floor, next to where the old, thin, brown carpet ended from the living room.

Sam’s father’s siblings began to show up, one after another. Her Aunt Laura and her Uncle Jeff showed up carrying a 12-pack of Pepsi and a 12-pack of Dr. Pepper, continuing to feed the family’s soda addictions. Sam and Aunt Laura set the 12-packs on the kitchen counter by the sink.

Sam asked if anyone wanted a soda with ice. They declined her offer, so she went about preparing her own drink. She grabbed the Mickey Mouse Disney Anniversary glass that she always hid from her other family members, so she would be the only one to use it, and added crushed ice to it. She popped open a Dr. Pepper, poured some into the glass, and took a long drink. Her Aunt Anna came in. Sam then went to grab more photographs to stack and go through.

Sam grabbed the last of the ones she wanted to go through and sat down next to the many piles of envelopes full of photos of the past. Sam began sorting through them, commenting on the ones of her with “Wasn’t I adorable?”

Sam was not truly paying attention of what her relatives were talking about in the living room. She was too preoccupied with finding pictures of the family’s unofficial photographer.

Her bed dominated the living room. The couch and computer were opposite it, in front of the front window. Opposite of the bed She laid upon. Sam tried really hard to ignore it. Sam wanted to remember Her full of life, scolding, laughing, smiling, yelling, all of it. Sam had missed it those past few months, still does in fact.

Sam focused on passing around the photos, memories of past good times, that her mother had taken. She was sorting photos, listening to stories her Aunts, Uncle, and Father were telling her and her older brother about their mother’s life.

Like that She had worked at Famoso raceway and always went to the March Meets. Or how they always remembered her behind the camera, increasing Sam’s frustration on finding decent pictures of Her.

Aunt Anna, Aunt Chris and Uncle Jeff were all on the couch. Her brother, PJ, was on the chair in front of the computer, her dad was sitting in the leather recliner they had gotten

earlier that year, that She would sleep on when going to bed was too difficult, Aunt Laura and Aunt Julie were standing next to each other, by where Sam was sitting on the floor, looking through the photos with her.

From where Sam sat, Sam could not see Her in that bed.

When everyone was gathered around, Sam's father said that She had gone peacefully. "She took a long, shuddering breath, and I knew. She was gone. She wasn't in pain anymore."

They began reminiscing on earlier that year, tears still in some of their eyes. One small conversation stuck in Sam's mind about her 12-day-old cousin, Seth.

"Yeah, when I was having Seth..." Aunt Anna began to say, quickly like most of the women in the family.

There was a brief moment of silence.

"What?!" "Huh?" chorused Aunt Laura, Aunt Chris, and Aunt Julie.

"When I was having Seth, you know, my son. What were you thinking of?" Aunt Anna asked.

Not what you thought you said was echoed in the statements replied to the baby and most rebellious of the six siblings. There was even mention of a pole.

"You all have dirty minds," Aunt Anna retorted to her older siblings. The living occupants in the room erupted in laughter.

Sam was continuing to look through the pictures and began thinking about-

"I vote Seth gets a nickname," Sam announced from her place on the floor. "What's Seth's middle name?"

"Andrew," Aunt Anna responded.

"We can call him Andrew or Andy."

"No bad memories come with the name Andy," Aunt Julie said.

"And Andrew is too long for a nickname."

"How about Drew?" Sam asked.

Everyone reached a consensus on Drew as a suitable nickname for the 2-week-old. And Sam is the only one that still calls him Drew, or her personal favorite, my little Drewikins.

They continued to share stories and pass around the pictures. They continued this until the mortuary people showed up a little before midnight to take Her away.

As the mortuary people were getting what they needed to take Her, Sam stood up and walked to where She laid. She had a peaceful look on her face as Sam bent down, ghosting her lips against Her forehead. With tears in her eyes, Sam murmured a soft goodbye to her mother.

The mortuary people came back in the house with the bag and gurney. Sam's aunts began tearing up again as they said their goodbyes to Her. She was gone... All that was left were memories and an empty hospital bed that continued to dominate the living room.

The family began to leave. Leaving the empty bed that Sam tried to ignore, Sam, and her father in the house once filled with three living members alone.

Sam went to bed at four a.m., barely thinking about the day to come and her class in three hours. Before her well-deserved sleep, she spread the news: a text to her friends before a post on Facebook. She slept thinking, "Rest in peace, mom."



Drama

DonCorleonSmaug based on Smaug (digital art) by Jennifer Weir aka Fantasynovelreader



Madison King

Wrathful Seed

Clara: A 35-year-old woman. Dressed in flowy clothes, with brunette hair, and wearing a locket. Married to Samuel for six years. No children.

Samuel: A 43-year-old man. An even larger human with a mustache and glasses, who constantly wears business casual. Married to Clara for six years. No children.

Takes place in a Middle-Class Suburban community. Modest house with a large backyard. There is bad weather everyday here.

EXT. BACKYARD-- SUNDOWN

Scene opens on Clara looking at the ground in her backyard. The sky is dark, and the wind is whipping her hair around, with a horizontal rain hitting her in the face. A stick, once was young tree, lays dead and brown on the ground in the wind and the rain. Clara's face is distraught and she is crying. She grasps at the ground, looks up at the sky, wipes her tears, and walks inside to the living room.

CLARA

We lost it again (She wipes her dirty hands on her pants).

SAMUEL

(Looks up from his phone) You lost it? Damn. We can always try to plant again tomorrow.

CLARA

I don't know, hun. (Sniffles) I am so tired of this. Kneeling down to try every day, carrying a big sack of dirt around, facing the elements, its ruining my body. Trying so many times is hurting my brain. I am just, like exhausted.

SAMUEL

Don't use 'like' so much. You sound like you didn't graduate high school.

CLARA

Oh, right

(She walks into bedroom, and Samuel follows her. They both lay down to sleep).

Sam, can you give me a back massage? I'm really not feeling well.

Clara hears his bed-shaking snoring.

INT. LIVING ROOM-- MORNING

The next morning, Clara finds Samuel watching the news.

SAMUEL

Did you see what's happening in the Randaymian Embassy right now? Dustin Trucedoe was caught at a party doing black antennae.

CLARA

I wouldn't put it past him. (She hesitates) Could we try again today? (Samuel pauses the television).

SAMUEL

Let's give your body some time to heal. We don't need this that bad. If all else fails, we can just go to the nursery and get a sapling. Maybe a redwood? Those trees always need homes.

CLARA

Sam, I want one that I planted. That we planted. It will be so much more satisfying to watch it grow up. Besides, what if the sapling is sick? Are you really prepared to take care of a sick sapling?

SAMUEL

It might save you the heartbreak. Its already alive.

CLARA

These have been alive too! I have seen the tiny green sprout, multiple times. I have heard the wind whistle around its growing trunk. It is alive as soon as I plan--

SAMUEL

(Cutting her off) That's not what you said eight years ago when we had that accident.

CLARA

What the fuck, Sam! What is wrong with you?!

SAMUEL
I'm just saying.

(Clara storms off into the backyard. Samuel grunts and mutters something under his breath, while he un-pauses the BBC, Beetle Broadcasting Channel)

EXT. BACKYARD-- MORNING

Outside, Clara searches through a wooden box of mixed up used and unused seeds. She finds one that has yet to be planted. She grabs her gloves and Samuel's gloves, and goes into a different part of the yard to plant the seed.

CLARA
I can do it without him. All I need is both of our gardening tools, and it will all be okay. (Talking to the seed) Its going to be okay.

Montage of Clara planting and crying, planting and crying. Her attempts over a few weeks have not been fruitful. Clara tries one last time.

EXT. BACKYARD-- MORNING

CLARA
(Talking to the seed as she is planting) You are my last hope.
(A tear drips down and hits the Earth. Then a torrent of tears. Camera pans up, and the sky fills with rain).

EXT. BACKYARD-- MORNING

A week later, Clara comes out to the backyard to a surprise. The sun is shining, and sitting in the middle of the backyard, a small, green stem is sticking up.

CLARA
(yells) SAM! SAM! HURRY!

Samuel rushes out to see tears of joy running down his wife's face.

SAMUEL
Congratulations, honey! Your dream has finally come true!

CLARA
(hugs him) Our dream!

Samuel doesn't say a thing, but hugs her back.

The next few days, Clara is ecstatic about the positivity of the little stem. She likes to day dream and tell Samuel all about her hopes for the tree and their backyard, while he is reading a book, *Thatcher in the Sky*, by J. K. Sal Injure.

CLARA
She will be the prettiest! She will give us beautiful flowers! She's going to grow so big and tall! Ugh, Sam aren't you so excited? (She flops down on the couch beside him).

SAMUEL
If you are happy, my love, then I am happy.

INT./EXT. BED ROOM/BACKYARD-3AM

Later that night, Clara is fast asleep. She is having a dream that a monster is eating all of her seeds. She cries out for Samuel in the dream, and his face is on the moon above the monster, smiling. The face starts to laugh. She cries his name once again, and the moon and Samuel's face goes behind a number of clouds in the night sky.

Clara wakes up sweating.

CLARA
Sam? Sam? I-I had a bad dream. Can you hold me? (Clara turns over and Samuel is not there). Sam?

(She looks around her dark room. She stumbles out to the living room to look for him. Everything is dim. The back door is slightly cracked. She looks out the back windows. There he was, holding something over where the new seedling is sleeping).

(She yells out) What are you doing?

SAMUEL
(Samuel calls back to her) My love! I am just watering the new seedling. I just really want this one to survive.

CLARA

(She walks out to inspect the seed, and sees Samuel holding a dropper) Samuel, that's not necessary. I watered her this morning.

SAMUEL

(Laughs) My love! How do you know it's a girl?

CLARA

I can just feel it, okay? What happened to the seedling?

SAMUEL

I noticed it was looking a little droopy, so I came out to water it.

(She gets down on her hands and knees to inspect the dirt. She kisses the ground, and wrinkles up her nose)

EW, what the fuck? Why does the ground smell like that?

SAMUEL

Like what, my love?

CLARA

Like bleach? Did it rain bleach today? Is this a bleached seed? I didn't smell bleach earlier today.

SAMUEL

Clara, you've been so stressed, I'm sure your mind is just playing tricks on you. Let's get back in bed, I'll give you a back massage.

CLARA

Actually, I think I'm good (Clara sniffs the ground). What were you watering this with?

SAMUEL

The filtered water, my love. You told me to.

CLARA

Then let me put some in my mouth, I want to make sure the water line wasn't contaminated with something.

SAMUEL

Uh, no. I used it all on the new seed.

CLARA

Why are you lying to me? I can see that the dropper is half full. Let me taste. (Clara snatches it out of his hand, and puts a drop in her mouth) OW! It burns! What is this, Samuel?

SAMUEL

What do you mean? Its water?

CLARA

No fucking way its water. Are you trying to do something to the seed?

SAMUEL

No. You're acting fucking insane. Why would I try to do something to this seed? I know how much you want a tree.

CLARA

But you want it too, right? I'm not the only one.

SAMUEL

(He hesitates) Well, it is mostly your thing.

CLARA

Are you serious?

SAMUEL

You're the one that has an Slamacon wish list full of little tree stuff.

CLARA

Only because I thought we both wanted this. We've always talked about having trees.

SAMUEL

Yes, but we've been trying for two years. Its ruining your old body. Haven't you noticed that I'm not really that into digging the seed holes with you anymore?

CLARA

Don't put that on me, you keep saying you're just tired from work.

SAMUEL

(Looks up at the sky as it begins to pour) Lets get inside, we can talk about this tomorrow. (He starts to walk away).

CLARA

(Grabs him roughly by the shoulder) Don't you walk away from me, don't think I don't know what you've been doing to our seeds. Putting bleach in their soil food? Am I married to a murderer?

SAMUEL

Is that what you think of me?

CLARA

(Clara looks down at the ground and takes her hand off of Samuel) I don't know what I think of you anymore.

SAMUEL

You don't mean that.

CLARA

How can I know what I mean? I feel like I'm going crazy.

SAMUEL

Maybe you are.

CLARA

Maybe you're right.

SAMUEL

I know I'm right. How about we talk to your therapist tomorrow, together? We will figure this out. I am going to protect you. I will make you all better.

CLARA

Okay. I would like that. Thank you. I- I'm sorry. I know I must seem insane right now.

SAMUEL

You're okay, my love. I will fix this.

CLARA

Yes, I know you will.

The two go inside and lay down on the bed, facing away from each other. Samuel falls asleep. Clara gets up from the bed.

In the dark of the night, there is a flowy figure fleeing the

house in the dark and rain. They get into a car and drive quickly away. The sounds of the thunder and heavy rain drone out any other sounds.

Low shot through the house into Samuel and Clara's bedroom. The viewers see Samuel's body on the bed, with a cut all the way down his abdomen, overflowing with seeds. The blood mixed with the seeds drip to the floor into a puddle.



In Bloom (photography) by Kevin Lara

Ian Tash

.....
Keeping Up with the Kattamas

The play opens on a video screen. FATHER and SID, all dressed in designer clothes, standing in a lovely kitchen. There are a multitude of expensive looking gadgets and other evidence that there is evidence of baking. It is messy, but not too messy. SID can be a boy or girl.

FATHER

Alright, Sid, it's time to bake the family bread that makes the world so special. You ready?

SID

Of course, Dad!

Cut to a confessional shot.

I don't know what he's so worried about. I've literally made everything perfectly.

Return to the kitchen shot.

FATHER

Okay, well what you want to do is-

SID knocks something over. A stagehand catches it secretly. Pause. Lights come up on on the FATHER and well-dressed SHAUNA. She is showing a clip on editing software.

SHAUNA

Did you catch that Mr. Kattama? Sid knocked the entire mixing bowl off the counter.

FATHER

I understand, Shauna, but that just means that you need to use a different angle to edit it out.

SHAUNA

I've looked at every angle. We have nothing usable. Your policy of editing around the mistakes so that neither the viewers nor Sid can be aware of imperfections will not work for this scene. You have three options: either we keep the shot, reshoot it tomorrow, or scrap it entirely.

FATHER

We don't do retakes around here, Shauna. And we don't accept mistakes. We'll just have to scrap it and do something else. What else can we do around here to make the show interesting?

SHAUNA

Well, I have an idea.

SHAUNA takes out a letter. FATHER recoils in horror.

FATHER

I've told you once, I'll tell you a thousand times, we will not do an unscripted fan mail opening!

SHAUNA

But why? It'll make people more connected to the show, like they are a part of the process, like your family is actually made of real people.

FATHER

We don't even know what's in those letters. Anyone could have written corrupting influences.

SHAUNA

Lucky for you, I have already opened and read the letters and tossed out the bad ones. I just recreated the original envelopes.

FATHER

Really? (Examining the letter) It's good work.

SHAUNA

Well I just did what I've learned to do best in the business:
fabricate authenticity.

FATHER rips the letter
apart.

SHAUNA

Do you know how long it took me to do that?

FATHER

I need to protect my family.

SHAUNA

What? That letter was sweet. She was saying how watching Sid
helped with her depress—

FATHER

I'm definitely not letting someone mentally deficient influence
my child. No thank you.

SHAUNA

I don't understand what the problem—

FATHER

The problem is that Sid is precious to me. They make the
world seem more glamorous than it actually is. The only way
to preserve that is to make Sid believe that the world is
glamorous. There will be no mentioning of this, or any, letter
to Sid under any circumstances. Got it?

SID

(Offstage) Daddy!

FATHER

We're in the editing room, Sid! Come check out how glamorous
you were this week!

SID rushes into the room,
wearing a new, stylish
outfit.

SID

Daddy, Mr. Truden is here to see you!

FATHER

Oh, I nearly forgot that I had managed to squeeze the president into my schedule. I promised him a meal at one of the bakeries. Shauna will keep you entertained. Have a beautiful day, my angel!

SID

Why wouldn't I? Everyday is beautiful after all.

FATHER

You're absolutely right, my shining star.

FATHER exits.

SID

How you doin' girl?

SHAUNA

I'm, um... busy putting together a new episode of your show. It makes a lot of people happy. You want to watch what we have before everyone else sees it?

SID

Heck yes!

SID rushes over to begin watching it over SHAUNA's shoulder. A phone rings. SHAUNA pulls out her phone.

SHAUNA

You go ahead and keep watching. Just give me one second.

SID

Okay!

SHAUNA stands up and walks away, answering the phone.

SHAUNA

Hey, you've reached Shauna. (beat) Yes. (beat) Well, no, but— (beat) Look, I know I've been a bit behind on payments, and (tearing up) I know that ratings have been down lately, but if you just give me a little more time, I will - (beat) Okay. I understand. I'll think

of something. Just, please consider an extension if the show gets better. It'll be worth it. (beat) Okay. (beat) Bye.

SHAUNA hangs up and puts the phone away. She is careful to make sure she looks okay before approaching SID.

SID

What was that about?

SHAUNA

Oh, just making some special arrangements. How's the episode so far?

SID

It's great. But one thing I've never understood is why so many people like our life so much. I mean, I get bored of it, and if everyone lives like us then why would they want to watch it?

SHAUNA

Well-

SID

I guess it is the only show on TV. I hope someone makes another show that I can watch too.

SHAUNA

Sid. There's something I've been meaning to tell you.

SID

Yeah, Shauna?

A long silence.

SHAUNA

The episode isn't ready yet. Your father and I were just talking about how we need to do one more shoot before I can send it to everyone. You excited to go film some more?

SID

Absolutely! I'm always ready! Okay, what are we going to do? We could do a tour of my room! Oh wait, we already did that. And the closet too. Maybe the kitchen? No, that's in every episode. I could sing

again, maybe? Oh, but I haven't written any new songs. This is really hard.

SHAUNA smiles at the opportunity.

SHAUNA

I've got an idea. Why don't we take a drive?

SID

But everyone's already seen the track.

SHAUNA

No, not here. I mean outside the compound.

SID

Oh, no. Daddy would never let us lea-

SHAUNA

Shhh. It's okay. Your dad already knows that we need more footage. And we should do something new. We are going to record your first reactions to the wide world out there. I just need to know if it's something that you're willing to do.

SID

Well, Daddy's told me every day how special the world is, so why shouldn't I see it?

SHAUNA

That's the spirit, Sid! Let's get this show, literally, on the road! Aaaaaand, Action!

SHAUNA claps and the lights reveal a seating arrangement suggesting a car. SHAUNA gets into the driver's seat, while SID excitedly rides shotgun. The screen plays footage to simulate driving down the Southern California highways.

SID

This is the greatest day of my life! Thank you so much for sneaking me out.

SHAUNA

Well, what can I tell you? I'm a master at controlling what people see.

SID

Oh my gosh! Is that the city?

SHAUNA

Yes. It. Is.

SID

The buildings are so big. Just like Daddy said.

SHAUNA

You know, it's nice to see you smile. I can understand why your dad works so hard.

SID

And you too.

SHAUNA

Huh?

SID

Well, think about it. You make me smile. And you help bring our show to make other people smile. You're just as much a part of it all as he is.

SHAUNA

Awe. Thanks Sid.

SID

Don't mention it, girl!

A silence.

SHAUNA

Oh, there's one of your dad's bakeries. I'll pull over and you can say hi to everybody. I'll record their reactions.

Sounds of a crowd begin to form.

SID

You sure?

SHAUNA

Go for it, Sid. You've got this!

SHAUNA pulls over and gets out a camera. SID stands up and waves as the sounds of the crowd turn to cheers of excitement. SIGHT steps out on the stage. He is an old man, holding a cardboard sign and a cup.

SID

Hi everyone! I hope you're doing fabulously today!

SIGHT walks up to SID's car door.

SIGHT

Hey kid. (Holds out cup) Do you have any change?

SID

I, uh... uh... uh...

SHAUNA

Hey man, give them some space. Here, take it.

SHAUNA stuffs a bill into the cup. SID sits there, horrified. SIGHT steps away to examine the bill.

SHAUNA

Can you believe that guy? They gotta bug the big star? Hey, what's the matter?

SID

Shauna. There's something seriously wrong with that man. Do you not see it?

SHAUNA

What do you mean? (Beat) Oh! That's right. You've never seen an old person before, have you?

SID

Old person?

SHAUNA

Like, you and I are young, but he's been alive longer than us so he's started to look like that.

SID

So I'm going to look like that someday?

SHAUNA

Well, maybe not exactly like that, but your skin will get wrinkled and you will--

SIGHT

'Scuse me, mam! (Approaches the car again) Thank you so much, but I was hoping to get a cup of coffee but that shit is expensive. I don't suppose you could give me a little mo-- (Coughing)

SID

Oh my gosh, does this happen to old people too!

SHAUNA

Not exactly. He's sick, Sid.

SID

Sick?

SHAUNA

You know, like when you get a fever, or throw up, or have diarrhea. We all get like that.

SID

I've never been any of those things. And neither has Daddy. Or you.

SHAUNA

Oh my gosh, that's why they do those medical screenings every time I go into work.

SID

Wait, what? What are you talking about, Shauna? This is really freaking me out!

SIGHT'S coughing worsens, and suddenly he collapses on the ground. The sound of the crowd turns to horror. SHAUNA rushes to his side and begins to give him CPR.

SHAUNA

Come on! Breathe! Don't go out on me like this! Somebody call an ambulance!

SID

Oh gosh! First he's old. Then he's sick. Now he's sleeping!

SHAUNA checks for a pulse.

SHAUNA

He's not sleeping, Sid. He's dead.

SID

Dead?

SHAUNA

Yeah, dead. Like, your mom.

SID

What? Mom's in Central Asia running the bakery, where her and dad came from.

SHAUNA

Oh. I'm so fucking fired. Um, yeah, death is what happens for all of us. It's when our bodies shut down because they can't function anymore. This man was so old and sick that his body couldn't work anymore. And when you die you can't come back. And sometimes people don't want people to come back, and they make sure that those people die. (Beat) Sid, your parents were seen as dissidents back home, as people who were threats to their leader, so they fled here. But when they were fleeing, the leader had... (Beat) your mom was mur—(Beat) Fuck. I knew your dad was trying to keep things hidden from you but

deep he hid this stuff from you. I'm so sorry. I thought you knew. I though he was just trying to fix it, not keep it secret.

SID

I... I...

SID begins to break down, just sitting down on the ground with their hands on their head, hyperventilating. FATHER enters.

FATHER

What's the commo—(Sees SID) Sid! How did you get—(Sees SHAUNA) You!

SHAUNA

Sir, I can explain.

FATHER

What could be the reason you two be in front of my bakery next to some homeless man?

SID

Is it true that mom is dead?

A long silence.

FATHER

Oh. So it's actually worse than what I imagined.

SHAUNA

I was only doing what was best for the show. Your tactics are depriving Sid of living a full life.

FATHER

You have no idea what makes a full life. After... (Tearing up) After she wasn't able to live one. But Sid could have. Sid was safe with me. And Sid would have done the best good at changing the world from that safety zone. But now it's ruined. My darling angel, my shining star has been corrupted by this world before we could change it. And it's all. Your. Fault. Come on, Sid.

FATHER exits.

SHAUNA

Sid, I'm so sorry. I just thought it would be good for you, for the show, for... Please, believe me.

SID grabs the sign, reads it over, and stands up, they hand it to SHAUNA.

SID

What does this mean? "Homeless Veteran. Anything will help. God bless. Matthew 25:35-40."

SHAUNA

Well, since the spell is already broken I guess I can't make things any worse. His life was not great. He's seen a lot of suffering. He fought in a war, which is when countries don't get along, and they have to send people to, well, kill each others. He fought, and then he came back home to a country that doesn't want to protect him like he tried to protect it. And so now he has to accept the help of strangers, appealing to their morality, to their desire to put the world right.

SID

Well, is there a way to make it better? I mean, surely the world can be better, right? What are these people trying to make the world a better place doing? What could they be doing?

FATHER

(Offstage) Sid!

SID

I've got to go.

SID rushes offstage, leaving SHAUNA holding the sign. Her phone rings again, and she holds it in her other hand. She examines the two objects carefully. Lights fade.

Monica Williams

It's Dark Inside Sunshine Market

[Unfinished Script]

Characters:

Lydia- *Obadiah's wife*

Obadiah- *Lydia's faithful husband*

Anya- *her wedding, friend to Lydia*

Adam- *Anya's brother*

Trevor and Bernadette- *good friends*

Michelle- *Lydia's best friend*

Ishmael- *Sad boyfriend of Michelle*

Shane- *lover of Michelle, friend of Lydia*

Setting:

A tree sits right in front of the window of 3402 Maple Street in Valencia, Ca. The sofa sits right in front of the window, so that the sun gives it an angelic halo as though it was a gift from above. Lydia likes to sit on her side and curl up her legs to people watch, sometimes she would sit like a child, on her knees, elbows resting on the back, as she is now. The sound of footsteps coming down the steps gives her a start.

Act One

Scene 1

The house is quiet. It's a peaceful October evening, dusk and the sky is clear. Lydia is staring out of the window her hands hold her head as they rest on her cheeks with a daydreaming look on her face.

LYDIA: You all ready to go?

OBADIAH: Yeah, let's go.
I just need to grab the
invitation.

He's very tall and handsome. He's trotting down the steps in a hurry putting his watch on, not paying attention to his steps because he knows them so well. As he approaches the bottom he speaks to Lydia and makes a quick right into the kitchen and snatches the invite off the refrigerator.

OBADIAH: You sure you have
everything? You're not
forgetting the gift, your
purse, Chapstick, tampons.
*(He says with a smile as he
places his hand on the small
of her back to lead her to
the door)*

LYDIA: *(Lydia rolls her
eyes and gives him a quick
gestured elbow to the gut)*
Don't start, Mr. "it only
takes me ten minutes." I
have been sitting here
waiting on you for fifteen.

OBADIAH: *(Says jokingly with a smile)* There you go, being extra. You always puttin ten on it.

They playfully banter as they make their way out of the house to the driveway where their cars share space. Obadiah is driving tonight. They are dressed to impress for a wedding.

OBADIAH: *(Studies Lydia)* Got Damn! You look beautiful tonight baby, as always.

LYDIA: *(smiles)* Thank you baby, you lookin so good yourself. *(She pretends to lick him like an ice cream cone)*

He flashes that million-dollar smile and lets out a genuine giggle because Lydia makes him really laugh.

OBADIAH: You crazy *(His smile quickly fades)* Are you sure about that? You sure that's not meant for someone else?

LYDIA: *(slightly exasperated)* Please don't. I'm only thinking of you, you only. I want to have a good night.

OBADIAH: Is he going to be there?

LYDIA: I'm not sure Obie. I didn't ask, but maybe. Just so we can brace ourselves, he probably will be. But everything is understood. There's nothing to worry about and we don't have to stay long. We can just have cake and be out. Okay? *(She reaches over and caresses his face. She loves him)*

OBADIAH: So, it must be someone

you went to high school
with,
since they know Anya, and
will be at the wedding.

LYDIA: How do you know that?
I mean, what are you even
talking about? Can we just,
Not tonight, please.

Scene 2

A huge wedding hall with chandeliers that look like giant diamonds and crystal stem silverware and wine glasses sprinkled throughout the venue. Anya, she went to high school with Obadiah and Lydia, is marrying a marine she met at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo. There are a few other past acquaintances at this wedding. Sitting at their assigned table, Lydia chats with their group: Michelle, Ishmael (Izzy), Bernadette (Bernie), Trevor, and Shane, who heads for the bar with Obadiah.

ISHMAEL: Heyyyy! Look who it
is *(Izzy stands up with arms
wide open)*

LYDIA: Hey guys! Its so good
to see everyone. Hey Bernie,
Michelle, Shane! Izzy, you
finally cut your hair!

*(Ishmael puts his hands to his hair and gives his shorter,
cleaner cut curls a shuffle)*

ISHMAEL: Yeah, I guess it's
time now, we are officially
done with our 20s.

BERNIE: You're officially
done with your 20s, I have 6
more glorious months to be
an irresponsible hoe!

MICHELE: That is NOT going
to be over in six months
*(she says matter of factly,
but with heavy*

sarcasm)

LYDIA: Girl please! You were born a responsible adult. You had about six months of hoeing. You can't pay a bill late without hyperventilating and of course, the whole, "I can't have sex with him until I see his feet" lookin ass.

BERNIE: *(laughing)* don't you dare get on me for being cautious AND responsible, if I wasn't, we would have gotten in much more trouble than we did.

LYDIA: That is not a lie. Remember the Spring luau of 08'9? Oh GOD, that night was a mess.

BERNIE: Yes, it was, and you and Adam...

(Bernadette's words are caught in her throat. It is apparent that everyone has officially decided to change the subject quickly)

ISHMAEL: Can you believe they shut down the Sunshine Market?

MICHELLE: Yeah, apparently there was a huge sex ring going on. People would meet there and have violent orgies.

LYDIA: No way.

TREVOR: Is that what was happening? I heard it was something crazy, but never got any details. That's insane. Is that even illegal?

MICHELLE: No, well it's because of how it was going

down. You have to have certain licensing and all kinds of shit, so maybe they didn't have their ducks in a row. Plus, who wants to buy their groceries from the same building that hosts sex parties? That's hella extra.

LYDIA: Well it's probably all very separate. I'm sure they're not hoisting swings up in the cookies and crackers aisle.

MICHELLE: *(chuckling)* Could you imagine? Going at it on a swing and your toe picks up and Oreo.

ISHMAEL: Your toes would pick up Oreos.

MICHELLE: *(with a smirk and a shrug)* I'm a toe clencher, I'd say it's more your fault than mine.

Izzy leans in and kisses Michelle sweetly. Obadiah and Shane are back with drinks.

Scene 3

SHANE: You're eating Oreos with your toes now weirdo? *(he says to Michelle as he puts her drink down in front of her)*

MICHELLE: Of course! You know I like to do all kinds of things with my toes. *(she winks at Shane)*

Izzy is immediately irritated, his brow furrows, he clears his throat, and gets up from the table. Bernie and Trevor follow. Michelle lets out a sigh and watches him walk away. Waving her

hand at him to shrug off his reaction, her attention back on Lydia. Shane and Obadiah congregate at on side of the round table while the girls stay in their seats.

LYDIA: That was mean.

MICHELLE: It was joke, he's too sensitive.

LYDIA: That's the problem, you think everything is a joke. I can't believe you brought up Sunshine! *(she panic-whispers)*

MICHELLE: I didn't bring it up, Izzy did. I was being casual. What was I supposed to say? You got close too, with all the keeping things separate talk. What if Izzy would have asked how you know?

LYDIA: I didn't act like I knew I was using common sense. That was just dumb.

MICHELLE: How is Obie taking everything? Did he ask about Adam? Shane looks effin good tonight.

LYDIA: Focus. *(she says sternly)* It's been tough. He seems okay sometimes, but then he gets upset all over again, or he'll make comments at moments when I feel like everything is going to be okay. He asked if he was going to be here tonight.

MICHELLE: What did you say?

LYDIA: I said I didn't know. I mean, he could have thought

to skip it.

MICHELLE: You know damn well that he was not going to miss his sister's wedding, come on. He doesn't know exactly who he is though right?

LYDIA: No, he doesn't know who he is, but I think he's trying to figure it out, and he knows that it's someone that knows Anya. I was being hopeful, or I don't know, I didn't want to be like, "duh of course he's going to be there, and I really miss his (*Lydia gestures a phallic shape*), just in case you were wondering." (*Full of sarcasm and truth*)

MICHELLE: That was mean.

LYDIA: Shut up. Let's go dance.

Scene 4

Michelle and Lydia get up and gesture towards the dance floor, Obadiah gives a relaxed military salute and watches her sort of skip away with her friend like two schoolgirls.

SHANE: (*staring at Michelle*)
Damn, after all this time...I can't wait to take her home.

OBADIAH: (*laughing*) Old habits die hard.

SHANE: She's just so damn nasty! I know Izzy don't know what to do wit it. He doesn't even say anything when she talks shit to guys right in front of him. He just gets all pissy and storms off. It

happened a few months ago too. We all got together for a barbecue, and she was on this dude who came with Anya's brother. Izzy ended up leaving her. Didn't say anything. She got a ride though, no problem and in more ways than one. No shame that one. But damn she's fun.

OBADIAH: Anya's brother was there? When was this?

SHANE: Oh, I don't know, maybe like three or four months ago. We all met up at Magic Mountain, had lunch then walked around the park. Lydia came, I think you were out of town.

OBADIAH: *(deep in thought, trying to remember when he went out of town)* Oh, she didn't tell me. It was a while ago, I guess. Yeah, I tell Lydie all the time, I don't know about Michelle, but that's like her sister, I won't win that fight.

SHANE: Yeah, I hear you.

OBADIAH: So, do you know Anya's brother well?

SHANE: A little, we hung out a few times. He's cool. I'll introduce you he's got a bad ass beach house over in Malibu it's all decked out.

Shane and Obie make their way over to the family tables; from the dance floor, Lydia observes the men leaving the table and makes out their destination. Panicked, her eyes grow twice their size. Obadiah and Adam shake hands and Adam offers a seat at the table.



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California State University, Bakersfield