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2021 Teen Writing Contest





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Maycee Markarian



Maycee Markarian
Middle School Essay

Why I am Obsessed with Harry Potter

The Harry Potter series has been an enormous part of my life for a few years now. I was 10 years old when I discovered the Wizarding World, and I instantly fell head over heels. When I first began to read J.K Rowling's work, I didn't realize how much I would come to treasure it in the near future. Overtime, my love for the series progressed, and my adoration became a sanctuary of warmth and delight. Even though this world of magic and fiction may not be real, comfort and excitement I can still find in it.

The way I came across the Harry Potter series is, for the most part, ordinary. My 5th grade class was taking mid-term exams, and we were waiting for the few of my classmates who hadn't finished yet. I decided to pass the time by reading a book, so I walked over to the bookshelf and overheard a couple of my peers talking about the series, so I figured that I would read it for myself. Following my reading of the few pages of *The Prisoner of Azkaban*, I was very intrigued, so I found the first book of the series, and began to read it. I was immediately hooked by the extraordinary and allure of all of it. Serendipitously, I had fallen in love with the Harry Potter series.

Another reason as to why I love the series so inordinately is the nostalgic value. When I was 10 years old, while I was still in the process of reading the books, my cousin Ava came to visit one weekend. Ava and I struggled to find something interesting enough to keep us occupied, so our parents ended up finding out that a local museum was holding an especial Harry Potter week. My cousin had recently been introduced to the series as well, so we were both ecstatic to go. When we got there, Ava and I were immediately immersed in a world that we would both one day come to love more than we could've imagined. We had an excitable time crafting our own golden snitches and getting our first wands, but the most important thing from that experience is

that we had found something that we both enjoyed, and that we had set the groundwork for our mutual passion for the Harry Potter series.

After I had read all seven of the books, I continued on to the movies. This was when I realized that Harry Potter was more than a minute amusement of mine, it was a colossal world of all kinds of emotion, and I suddenly desired to be more than a reader, an outsider who is merely watching and going through the motions, but to be inside of that mythical world, and to belong in it. Ever since I realized how deeply I care about the world of Harry Potter; my life has essentially revolved around the Wizarding World. I have seen the movies more times than I can count, I gobble up as much trivia as I can whenever I can, and the number one item on my Christmas wish list is the Harry Potter books. As if that is not enough, I am starting my own business motivationally based on my very costly Harry Potter room decorations, and a trip to the Wizarding World of Harry Potter. I know this might seem similar to a phase of some sort, but I can assuredly tell you that it is not, and I will love it consistently throughout my lifetime.

I know that most people will think that I am crazy for giving so much of myself into this “fictional world of nonsense”, but I see it differently. I see a world of marvelous and otherworldly treasures, a three-dimensional universe of wonder and mystic, a majestic creation of love and goodness that is thriving on magic. I cannot tell you how much I am infatuated by this ethereal world, and how even though I cannot live in it, I can still imagine, and since imagination is all inside your head, I like to quote Dumbledore on this one; “Of course it’s happening inside your head Harry, why, should that mean, that it is not real?” I know that preferences fade and change overtime, but not this one. I will constantly find joy and fascination in the Harry Potter series, I will cherish and love it forever, and no matter what, my gratitude towards J.K. Rowling for creating this astonishing world of awe-inspiring magic and ecstasy, will always be near to my heart.



Andrew Hernandez
Keala Kieckhafer
Magdalene McArthy



3

Andrew Hernandez

High School Essay

Untitled

I'm not going to use fancy words. I'm just going to say it so everyone understands plus I'm not very smart for big words but tell me this: Why do people think they're better than others because of the color of their skin?! We are in 2020 we are not in the 1800s this world is messed up with people like Trump. We need to stop this now. Why have racism in a cruel world already that we live in? We are losing people every day because of cops and people being racist. We just lost a man not long ago to cops in a cruel way. George Floyd, what if this was you or your family member? We need to stop this now! Think of it as that if you have a heart. It's been going on for hundreds of years we want to be able to walk the street to the store without being looked at in weird ways like if you're a new species or being harassed because we are speaking in a different language telling us "this is America speak English if you speak another language go back to your country". We need to stop having people think that way because if you were an immigrant or citizen that was born here Latino or black or another race you would feel the pain. We go through, the lives we see get taken because of cops or the law. I know this world is messed up. If you treat others better than any other because of their skin, God or your higher power will punish you in all types of ways. I know there's a lot of drugs and cartels coming from the places that we were meant to be at, but those places are ruined and we're nothing like them. That's why we come to America to have better lives. But the people here are no better than the people where we're from. If you believe in what I'm saying in this speech, make it known. This is a right people of different skin colors should be able to have.



Keala Kieckhafer

High School Essay

Untitled

For years, since the beginning of the hot dog, the debate of whether a hot dog is a sandwich was always apparent. Since this debate has been going on, many people are beginning to involve themselves, including famous actors like Matt Damon. In addition, some of the original hot dogs were called sandwiches themselves: the “frankfurter sandwich” or the “Coney Island sandwich”.

While these many points of a hot dog truly being a sandwich are present, a hot dog is most certainly not a sandwich because sandwich definitions are always changing, after all, a sandwich can be cold or hot or made with bread or without. Next, hot dogs also have their own classifications because one would never see a hot dog as a sandwich. Lastly, hot dogs are all different around the world and even in their own nations and are each differently not part of the sandwich community.

Sandwich definitions are always changing, and it makes it increasingly difficult to really decide what is a sandwich and what is not, but a hot dog is not one of those occurrences because it is not a sandwich. According to the Merriam Webster dictionary, which is a collection of definitions of words written and edited by lexicographers, a sandwich is pieces of bread or a roll in half with filling. This implies that a hot dog is truly a sandwich, but what about hot dogs around the world? How about gluten free hot dogs? Many gluten free hot dogs do not use wheat bread or even bread for some. This begs the question of whether every “hot dog” is a sandwich. The dictionary definition from Merriam Webster has a specific purpose, as every definition does, it is to inform. This particular informational purpose allows for readers to easily understand information without worrying about possible biases, a definition is simply available to inform but not to give specifics. In this definition of a sandwich, it gives only components, but even

those components do not match what a hot dog truly is. In conclusion, the definition proves that a hot dog is not a sandwich.

In continuation, the New York State Department of Taxation and Finance, which is the state's government department that enforces taxes and revenue in the state of New York, stated that sandwiches can be on anything: bread, wraps, rolls, pitas, etc., and can have any sort of filling. This definition implies that literally any item that has food on a carb-based item is a sandwich. This includes both hotdogs and burritos and cha siu bao (Chinese pork bun), however people would never say that a cha siu bao or a burrito is a sandwich. Therefore, a hot dog is not a sandwich either. Furthermore, this definition is quite different from the Merriam Webster definition, and this begs the question of, are all sandwiches (according to definition) actually sandwiches? The New York State Department of Taxation and Finance is a government-type agency, however its main focus, its point of view per se, is coming from an agency meant to give out taxes and other payments. Therefore, their main goal is to make profit from things called sandwiches, making everything a sandwich will add to their profit - so a hot dog being a sandwich in this case is completely untrustworthy as anything could be a sandwich according to this definition.

As aforementioned, a burrito is not a sandwich, and going along with those points, a hot dog is not a sandwich either, especially when definitions of sandwiches are all over the place. The testimony of Christopher Schlesinger, a chef and food writer, during a court case, suggests the prominence of sandwich confusion in the world. In this court case, a burrito restaurant was seen as a sandwich shop - when in reality it's not that. Schlesinger testified that a sandwich usually never has beans or rice, and that sandwiches are a cold food. There are many hot dog recipes that have beans--chili cheese dogs, rice can also be present if one cares for it. According to this definition, a hot dog is not a sandwich. However, many people are aware that Capriotti's hot meatball sub is in fact not a cold sandwich, this furthers the point that sandwich definitions are always changing and are always available to interpretation. As many know, a court case's main audience is the jury and the judge, making this definition vital in this particular

court case. However, the particular audience influences the exact definition of the sandwich to assist with defending the burrito shop that needs to be saved - making sure the burrito is not a sandwich because of the aforementioned reasons. Therefore, if a burrito is not a sandwich, then neither is a hot dog.

Secondly, a hot dog is not a sandwich because a hot dog is entirely its own thing - if anything it is closer to a taco. The United States Department of Agriculture, which is a government agency responsible for the information and management of food, agriculture, nutrition, and more, has provided another definition. The USDA says that a sandwich is made of two pieces of bread or a configuration of a top and bottom bun which encloses the filling (Doc 3). A hot dog, in this case, has neither two pieces of bread or a top and bottom wrapping of a bun. A hot dog has a bun that is split in the middle and hugs the meat on each side. In elaboration, a hot dog does not have a top or bottom because the sausage and or frankfurter (meat) is round. This makes a hot dog an entirely different classification. In addition, a hot dog can easily fall out of a bun making sure that the “enclosurement” is not possible, the meat will fall out if the hot dog is upside down or turned on its side. Lastly, a hot dog does not have a meat to bun ratio of less meat to bread/bun (Doc 3). If anything, a hot dog is completely equal in meat to bun ratio. Therefore, the only thing like a hot dog is not a sandwich . . . but a hot dog.

The hot dog as its own classification is crucial because the hot dog cannot be a sandwich, and it cannot be anything else. Further, on this subject, is The Atlantic’s take on the sandwich. The Atlantic is a magazine that is filled with all sorts of news articles, food articles, and more. The Atlantic shares the classifications of a sandwich saying that a sandwich has a horizontal flush to the plate, “not perpendicular”. A hot dog is, apparently, the only “sandwich” that does not lay horizontally - but then it isn’t even a sandwich. To elaborate, the meat of a hot dog sits in the bun, however, the biggest surfaces of the bun do not touch the plate at all - only the connected part of the bun.

Similarly, the only other food that sits perpendicular to a plate besides a hot dog is a taco, but even those fall down on their own. Therefore, a hot dog has its own classification: it is vertical and

has its own specificities.

There are many different types of hot dogs that are present around the world. Each of these hot dogs have something uniquely special about them. There are even different hot dogs in a single state. The pictures of the hot dogs from specifically the United States perfectly illustrate this point. Each picture has different toppings including coleslaw, peppers, mustard, and more. This implies that there are many variations of hot dog meaning that each variation has components that are not part of the definitions of a sandwich. The pictures of hot dogs have a specific purpose, to inform viewers of the different types of hot dogs and possible toppings that can be applied to them. Also, as an informational purpose, the credibility is high as each picture is a real hot dog and can help viewers know for a fact that a hot dog is not a sandwich. In the context of a hot dog as not being part of the sandwich group, knowing what a hot dog looks like is extremely important as well. A hot dog would never be confused with a Subway sandwich, for example.

The world of hot dogs is very different, and so much more different from the images of hot dogs above and especially different from any USA hot dog. According to a food blog/website that has articles on food pop culture, recipes, and more - Mashed shows many different hot dogs from around the world. Most notable to mention, is the Taiwanese hot dog which does not have a bun at all, it is made of a sausage made with rice that hugs the actual meat sausage (Mashed Article). This hot dog does not fit in with any of the criteria of a sandwich from the aforementioned definitions, mainly because its “bread” product is actually a sausage. This means that this hot dog is most definitely not a sandwich, and neither are any hot dogs since this dish is considered a hot dog. Another example is Brazil’s completo hot dog which is essentially open faced and has one slice of bread that doesn’t surround the dog (Mashed Article). This hot dog is most certainly not a sandwich as well because it does not have “two slices” or a hinged slice. Furthermore, the variations of hot dogs around the world make the “hot dog” its own thing and since they are each different - each are not sandwiches.

A hot dog is most certainly not a sandwich, even though many people would beg to differ. Even though the debate of hot dogs

being sandwiches has been drawn out for years, the answer is clear. A hot dog is not a sandwich because sandwich definitions are always different and changing, but each definition provides information that a hot dog is not a sandwich. Secondly, hot dogs have their own classifications. After all where was there ever a “perpendicular” sandwich? Lastly, hot dogs are all different around the world and each are not sandwiches. Look at the hot dogs around the world, even how each member of a family eats them - a hot dog can only be one thing. The answer is clear.



2

Magdalene McArthy

High School Essay

Untitled

On July 5th, 2019, my world took a rapid turn. It was a warm, sunny day in North Wildwood, New Jersey, and I woke up to my aunt swinging the door open in anger yelling at me to get up. As I approached the landing where everyone was standing and staring at me, there were just looks of pure disgust. My aunt started laying into me while her friends' daughters were telling their mother and my aunt I had drank all her vodka the night before. I remember standing there hungover feeling sicker than a dog from partying the last five nights in disgrace, I was so thrown I didn't know what was going to happen. I remember my mother on the phone with my aunt, my aunt was telling her, "She needs to go...Now!" As I started packing up my belongings, I was in a screaming fight with my aunt. My cousin came into the house, telling me to come with him, so I quickly put on my shoes and made a run for it. My aunt grabbed me before I made it out the door and then for the next hour or so she sat in front of the door so I couldn't make a run for it again, she was screaming she was going to call the police on me. I was beyond terrified in that exact moment I felt my heart drop to my stomach, my heart was beating out of my chest. I couldn't bear the feeling of discomfort.

We then proceeded to the Philadelphia International Airport; the longest two-hour car ride of my life had begun. We sat in complete silence. When we arrived at the airport, she walked me to the gate, turned her head, looked at me and said, "I can't believe you've done this to me, have a great life." I remember boarding that plane and all I could do was think about what was going to happen when those plane wheels touched the runway in Las Vegas. After a long drawn out five hours of sitting and over thinking in my head, the moment had finally come. I walked out of the terminal to find my red-headed mother standing there, arms crossed, wearing a stone-cold expression I'll never forget. She

started yelling at me, “Don’t look at me or talk to me. I am so beyond disgusted.” Remember in that moment feeling so ashamed I had let my mother down. I knew that I was certainly on the wrong track, but I felt stuck and I just didn’t know the right next step to take. This traumatic day still haunts me because looking back it was terrifying the way I treated those around me and constantly stabbed them in the back. That night, sitting sulking silently on the car ride home, I felt so ashamed of myself that I could feel the sorrow and aching in my heart. At the same time, a part of me didn’t care, I was so deep into my alcoholism that I just wanted to drink my soul away. As I was continuing to detox, laying in my bed feeling so angry, separated from life, and most importantly I had lost myself long ago. That was the most uncomfortable feeling I had ever felt before, I seriously was disgusted to look at myself in the mirror. I had lost my best friend, but a part of me had already chosen alcohol over everyone else. I remember laying in my bed late that night trying to put the pieces together of what really happened. It was so fuzzy and beyond tangled, the story I had created, but there I was blaming and shaming everyone else and had no room to look at myself and the chaos I had caused. Mom wouldn’t even talk to me. She was so full of hurt and anger, but I couldn’t blame her. I was a 15-year-old girl throwing my life away, but I just simply couldn’t see it. That night will always be a reminder of what it used to be like when I was in my alcoholism.



Mischa Abad
Brooklyn Ceccarelli
Talon Hayden
Emma McBeath
Emma Grace Rich
Catherine Vernaci



Mischa Abad
Middle School Poetry

Untitled

It was 11:55 post meridiem,
on September 21.

Five.

It's like leaves were made
to be stepped on.
As she stepped on the orange leaves,
she felt a sense of satisfaction.
Their enjoyable crunch
left her happy.

Four.

If leaves had feelings,
would they feel sad that they were being stepped on?
If she were a leaf,
she wouldn't feel sad.
Instead,
she would feel appreciated and noticed.

Three.

It would be nice to be a leaf,
she thought.
The cold wind
blew past her.
With the wind,
the leaves blew past her as well.

Two.

She was envious.
Envious of the leaves.
They could be free.
They could fly away.
But most importantly,
they couldn't have feelings.

One.

This angered her immensely
for reasons she couldn't fathom.
She ran to the leaves
that had been moved by the wind
and stepped on them
with envy.

Zero.

With that,
the start of autumn commenced.



POETRY

Brooklyn Ceccarelli
Middle School

Untitled

Earth,
growing, dying, mystifying
slowly drying, start subscribing
loss and love, up and above, same
war and pried, lossed and lied
Earth.

Where Are You?

I've looked all over,
through the bright,
with the clover,
in the night.

You're still nowhere to be found.
Are you in the tree?
I feel so compound.
I plea for you to show.

Perhaps you don't even know.
Right, you drowned.
To my knowledge, you are now below.
Into the underworld, you go.



3

Emma McBeath
Middle School Poetry

Islands

I didn't mean to die.
I fully intended to remain in my bed,
watching the dust motes cascade around me,
like we did when we were younger.
I didn't mean to die, I swear it.
I was watching the dust spin in lazy circles.
I threw a feather from one of my pillows into the air,
just to see the dust panic,
in the same way I speak.
Just to see you cry and scream,
I didn't mean to die.
I can say this with complete certainty.
Perhaps yesterday I would have meant it,
perhaps tomorrow I will have meant it,
But today I was tired.
Too tired to fall down that black vacuum,
into an empty outer space.
Don't cry, why are you blaming me?
Blaming yourself?
I never meant to die.
You never meant to kill me.
You keel over my casket like a praying man,
as though I am your god.
I am no god.

Remember when we said those things?
If we were stuck on a deserted island,
you said you'd bring me with you,
if you could bring only one thing,
and I didn't reply.
I had no response that day, no witty remark.
I still don't, and I doubt I ever will.
I didn't mean to die,
I'm sorry.

Poem

Closed in by chains of silence,
running from myself,
While I'm stuck in the cages of my mind.
Why?

No tears fall,
Smiles fade through my beady eyes,
No one to talk to.
Why?

The glisten of hope remains,
how long will it stay?
Why through all it's there?
Why?

Fifteen chances to change,
maybe that's not needed.
What is the blood in the water?
Why?

A chip on my shoulder,
feels like a Boulder.
Can't the young shine through?
Why?

No answer for this day.
I'll look back when the night changes.
I'll know then.
For now though,

Why?



Catherine Vernaci
Middle School Poetry

Of Words

Words are simple, straightforward, serene.
Words are extraordinary and enchanting.
And, in anger, things you don't mean.
They flow like a river to be seen.
Words fall like the dark rain slanting.

People are brought together by words.
Some words are happily powerful,
fly through your mind like little thought-birds.
The sweet, fresh smell of freshly grown herbs.
Words really are truly wonderful.

Not all words are meant to smile,
some are made to tear you down.
The words stack up in a hard rock pile.
Words can devastate for a long-lost while,
cry 'till your sorrows thoroughly drown.

Words are filled with things to say,
always darkest right before dawn.
Work hard, and hard we'll play.
Start with a smile, seize the day!
Words can be mud, or like a swan.

So to the writers, authors, and dreamers,
the painters, singers, and musicians,
the readers, the children and the teachers.
No more hiding, or secret-keepers.
And to the world, share your compositions.



Tahir Asher
Aileah Ensley
Logan Fawcett
Rebecca Frommer
Stella Garner
Ella Gaughan
Myka Gonzales
Ana Gonzalez
Alexa Guzman
Bella Hawkins
Kaleb Hayden
Emma Kusak
Ronny Mojica
Gema Mora-Aguirre
Lia Steinemann
Natalya Webster-Willis

Untitled

My race strides for togetherness in a world
where we are no longer constricted by others.
But our identity left to drown in the oceans crossed to get here.
Our accomplishments were shredded
and decades later
all we seem to receive is half-hearted partial credit.

I ask myself what is it?
What culture do I have left?

These questions made my mind go south.
So I did the one thing I learned from societies putrid mouth,
I went running.
But I didn't run from my problems, or responsibilities,
I ran for the abilities
to solve em.

What I bring to you today is what I conclude
as my own interpretation of truth.

Whether you ask Mrs. Parks, Martin Luther King, Biggie smalls,
Kobe Bryant, Lebron James, or Michael Jackson,

The one and only thing we got left from past generations is Hope.
Hope that will push you to hustle for your city as Nipsey.
The same hope that even if I fall short of my goals,
I am still able to move forward.

If there is anything I've learned from looking through my culture's
history,
hope is what will turn today's challenges,
into tomorrow's victories.

But I must remember it's the lack of hope
that can destroy us all.
To this day I vividly remember the situation
that started last fall.
The death of my icon Etika hit my life in ways
I cannot describe
in the passing of his life,
his last words gave meaning to mine.
I must not give in and be consumed
by the doom and gloom of my doubt.

Now it's my turn.
I must play my part.
Use that hope to fix my wrongs to rights,
and pick up that torch and march forth with all my might
Because this is my culture.

In the Woods Somewhere

In the woods somewhere,
I found a woman;
pale as bone,
with eyes like a fox.
She raised
a pointed hand.
As sharp as a knife,
“Go,” she said,
but when I turned,
there was nothing but fog.
My heavy feet
walked,
walked,
and walked.
The swirling sounds
of the forest
suffocating
my ears.
In the woods somewhere,
I found a light,
glowing like the sun.
a sip of water
in the scorching desert.
When I touched it,
it disappeared,
like the hope in my heart.
Will I ever get out of the woods?
Somewhere in the woods,
I lost my mind.
Where did the woman

with the fox eyes
go to?
Where did the light,
as rare as a sip of water
in the desert,
go?
Is my mind with the bone-pale woman?
Or has it been with me
this entire time?
My feet,
close to the bone
filled with the dirt
and leaves,
from the ground
walk no more.
I reach
arms up to the heavens,
begging the woman
with the sharp hand
to let my mind go,
into the woods somewhere.

Untitled

The hums and thumps of the 2020 age.
Construction workers building high towers.
Bakery shops baking new bread on an early morning.
Tik tokers making dance videos for big money.
The sound of the leaf blowers and bush trimmers.
Mechanics still tinkering and twisting on bolts,
teachers taking notes on all the bad kids online.
Chefs making food in a time of quarantine,
everyone working just wants to go home after a long day.
See their own family and keep bonds tight throughout.
Every day is a new hope things won't go back like the old south.

Beautiful Breeze

Oh, friendly breeze blow us away
with your amazing talents and beautiful grace.
Send your shivers down our spines.
Make us love our internal lives
for now on and forever.
Nothing, no nothing is better
then you my breeze.

So it Goes

Yesterday I watched American civilization beaten to its knees
and today I am back at school to learn very important things
like square roots.
mla formatting.

Just another day

and yet we sit at the television
like another moon landing
and think
how
could so many people be so
evil and hypocritical and hurtful?
This is not the America I know!

They shout,
but this is the America
we have
always
known,
the evil and hypocrisy and hurt was staring you straight in the
face.

But nobody ever wants to have a stare-off with a monster
don't look at the spider in the shower
and perhaps, perhaps,
it will go away on its own.

Besides, the spider isn't hurting me -
although the spider is terrifying those I live with
causing them pain,
causing them fear to sleep in a car,
causing them fear to simply be,
the spider is not hurting me
and so I leave the spider
alone.

Time

Time
time is a thief,
always taking,
never giving.
Ticking away,
never stopping.
To only play by his rules,
no going back.
Taking himself away from others.
Leaving them behind forever.

Time
time is a thief,
always taking,
never giving.
Leaving others to break.
To break until Time stops their clock.
Nothing good will every come from time.

Time
time is a thief,
always taking,
never giving.

When Your Hero Falls

When your hero falls from grace
all fairy tales r uncovered,
myths exposed and pain magnified.
The greatest pain discovered
u taught me 2 be strong
but I'm confused 2 c u so weak.
U said never 2 give up
and it hurts 2 c u welcome defeat.

When your hero falls so do the stars
and so does the perception of tomorrow.
Without my hero there is only
me alone 2 deal with my sorrow.
Your heart ceases 2 work
and your soul is not happy at all.
What r u expected 2 do
when your only hero falls.

Validation

I'm on a quest seeking male validation.

It's not some magical adventure from a storybook,

“It’s cloudy skies, cold bitter air, and the stench of sewage.”

My never-ending mission takes place in the one and only Sin City.

Cars honk and sky risers block out the warming sun.

I can't find what I'm looking for in this chaotic city.

Even when I'm close to victory I get knocked down and put back
where I started.

A five-year-old girl with no father, just her mom's alcoholic
boyfriend.

I hear glass break. Arguing. Screams.

The best and only solution is music.

I plug in my headphones and drift away.

When I listen to music everything fades and I get pulled back to
the present moment.

Then my song ends and my quest starts again.

That was when I learned to love myself.

Through self-appreciation I realized I don't need to seek men and
their attention.

Bands like Bikini Kill and Bratmobile showed me I need to be a
“woman” for myself.

Punk Rock bands taught me to think for myself and find
confidence.

I have all the love I could ever need; it's been with me the whole
time.

I just needed to open my heart and ears to close my mind.



Alexa Guzman
High School Poetry

A Locked Embrace

With a locked embrace she hides each secret.
A heart as hard as concrete.

With a locked embrace her situation is withheld.
A heartbroken that no one can weld.

With a locked embrace a tear is spilled.
A void inside waiting to be filled.

With a locked embrace her eyes are shut tight.
A presence as blank as missing stars in the night.

With a locked embrace a sense of ease is emitted.
A long silence with a single sigh permitted.

With a locked embrace the weight disappears.
A moral lesson to which she adheres.

With a locked embrace she prepares to let go.
An empowered woman ready to take on what life throws.

I am the Happy One

I am the happy one.
The happy friend,
The happy sister,
The happy daughter,
That is who I am.

That's who I am meant to be.

I was put on this earth to be the light in the darkness.

This I know, for I have been told my entire life.

But what happens when the light fades?

What happens when I am consumed by my own thoughts?

When I am up at night,

Only illuminated by the precious moon light that glides over my
tears.

What happens when I don't feel like cheering up those around me?

What happens when raising everyone's spirits drains me every
day?

Well...

Nothing.

Because the happy one can't be sad.

"Cheer up."

"I've never seen you like this."

I know you haven't.

Because I've never shown you.

I hide behind layers and layers of masks and personas,

So that no one knows how I truly feel.

Because how I truly feel

Is sad.

I am sad.

I am upset at how life is,

How people have to protest for their rights,

Only because of their skin color.
How there is a rampant disease
that's keeping us from our loved ones.
How I can't seem to wrap my head around
the idea that I am not okay.
Because I'm not okay.
I haven't been okay for a long time,
Because I was too focused on making sure
no one else was ever sad.
I spent all of my time making sure
that no one I loved and cared about was sad
Ever.
Because they were all broken.
They were all cracked mirrors,
And I tried to desperately see my reflection in them.
I ignored the crying girl that was right in front of me,
Because how could I be sad
when I've never experienced even half of what they have.
So,
I gave all of my love to those around me.
I gave, and gave, and gave.
I gave to the point that I had none left for the most important
person.
Me.
But that ends now
It's a new year,
And a new me.
A me that knows her worth
A me that loves herself more than anyone else.
A me that recognizes when she is not okay.
A me that accepts that she may not be the happy one all of the
time.
A me that allows herself to be sad,
Mad,
And upset.
Because this year,
I'm not going to be the "happy one"
I am going to be me.
I am going to be Bella Hawkins.

Suicide Prevention Acrostic Poem

You always have somebody.
Overcome your depression.
Understand the problem.

Aren't ever alone.
Respect yourself.
Expect things to change.

Never think suicide is the answer.
Open up to people you trust.
Take time to be okay.

Analyze.
Love yourself.
Open yourself to happiness.
Never give up.
Express your concerns.

Lately

Man this is my last call
and I hope that you answer it.
Going ghost for no reason.
Damn that's some real Danny Phantom shit
and I hate the fact
that we ain't even friends.
Now my life's a blur
just like a foggy lens,
and I pray to god
Baby I'm tryna make amends,
but it ain't workin
this needs to end.

Man I'm depressed and upset
ever since the day that you left.
Got me all up my head
cus man I don't wanna do this anymore.
Tears all over the floor.
I gave you all the love I had
and you just kicked me out the door.
Doesn't make sense.

I'm cryin in my bed
and I don't understand how you always messin wit my head.
I was someone to trust.
I ain't want you just for fun.
I wanted you because I needed you,
but our love turned into lust
and it sucks.

Someone help me out
finding you was my luck
and I guess it's runnin out,
cus man I gave you my heart just like a transplant.
I thought a relationship was supposed to go hand in hand
but you left me hangin like a damn ceiling fan,
and how the hell you gonn tell me I gotta be a man
when I would kill for you.
All of the police sirens.
Man I was trapped up in my head way before the virus,
now I'm left singin just like I was Miley Cyrus.
Seems most these girls are a bunch of selfish liars.
Yeah you messin wit the bully you gonn get the horns.
I really thought you was everything I been searching for
but I was trippin.
Now I'm steady reminiscing
all the times that you would listen
now you really actin different.

Untitled

Would you love me
if I wasn't so lovely inside.
If I didn't have a bread to bite
despite pick petals looking for peace
and finding when I try go to sleep at night.
In temptation there's no temptation
for you my love isn't out of spite.
I provide with figures and scriptures.
Numbers are nothing if you have nothing to show for them.
I break my back for them.
I break my back for you.
My heart apologized for our dissonance.
The instances when I believed we had it.
When I saw the potential but I didn't grasp it.
I hope that your happy from what happened.
Although gears turn your doesn't heart churn.
I wonder what I did to be able to earn.
Something I couldn't label.
The type of fantasy a fable couldn't enter or fin.
I hope you find what you're looking for.



2

Gema Mora-Aguirre
High School Poetry

A Gaze Upon the Stars

A walk around the neighborhood and a gaze at the stars.
I take a stroll down the street and make sure to not wander far.

A walk around the neighborhood and a moment alone.
Enjoying the nature around me with no hurry to get home.

As I skip and I run, I stroll and I spin.

I let nature take over me and let go of everything within.

Just a walk around my neighborhood, I won't go so far.

I hike up the hill to catch a glimpse of the stars.

I let go of everything that I hold inside.

There are sometimes that I start to feel alive.

My place of happiness, my comfort and my glee.

The stars are my happiness and it's all fine with me.

Untitled

I should've known better
then to place my heart
in unsteady hands
that didn't drop
but scarred
and handed back to me.
Impressions and wounds
all wrapped up and shiny
with bows and red paper
to hide leaking veins.

I can't blame you
I was momentarily fooled.
It's not your fault
you didn't "break my heart"
but your hands were not steady
even if your intentions were.

The scars will stay
they may never fade
but now
because I'm older
and (not) wiser
my heart will stay
in my own hands.
So no one else can treat it
like it's disposable.

I need to put my faith in me
and not in him or her or them
after all the safest hands
are still my own.

~ you live or else how will you learn.



Natalya Webster-Willis
High School Poetry

Under the Waves

The ocean holds secrets hidden in coves,
burrowed far beneath the ocean floor,
protected by sirens,
carried by sharks,
always moving with the waves.
So tempting to try to uncover them
but don't mistake the tranquil sounds of the waves rolling for
safety.

The water will drag you under,
encasing your body,
enveloping your mind,
stealing your breath away.
The ocean is not forgiving.
It does not show mercy.
It curls and shoves and digs into you, never letting up.
It will take and take and still ask for more.
Its appetite a never ending well,
its satisfaction paralyzing,
its allure claiming many,
its piercing water tearing into you.
The ocean wants you to try and uncover its secrets.
It wants to you take that dive,
because when you do it will be waiting.



Alyssa Chan
Brooklyn Chan
Paige Eden
Sophia Kutz
Mahika Madhu
Maryiam Syed
Ty Tan
Haley Westerfield

Crystal and the Birthday Burglary

It all started on my 13th birthday.

"Help!" I shouted. In a few seconds, my Mom came racing to my room, tired and out of breath. "What is it?" said Mom, her eyes darting around for danger.

"I can't find Lily!" I cried, rummaging around the chaos and confusion on my floor.

All of a sudden, Mom noticed something, my room was such a mess! Mom looked at the clutter of chaos on my floor with disapproval.

"Why is your room such a mess?" asked Mom, looking shocked or dissatisfied. As the middle sister, I was usually one of the most tidiest people in the whole house, but not today.

"Maybe I went a little overboard, but I have to find Lily!" I said, falling to my knees with the urge to cry, desperate and miserable.

Just before Mom could say anything, I suddenly rushed out of the room and called for everyone to meet me in the living room. Mom had hurried down from my room where we were talking, I had guessed she would try to convince me that I had lost Lily.

"I would, by no means, ever lose Lily! Someone must have stolen her!" I said, coming up with a wild solution. Mom sighed and was about to say something just before Mia, my older sister, interrupted.

"Why are you yelling?! I thought I told you not to yell!" said Mia, in her speech voice. I groaned, this was going to turn into yet another opportunity for Mia to give me a "manners" speech. Right before she could give me a speech, Dad and my younger sister, Lila, came bursting into the room.

"What is it now?" said Dad, impatient as usual.

All of a sudden, I had the intense urge to scream "This is no time to whine! Someone has stolen Lily!" but I strongly stopped myself. I knew if I said that, I would probably end up being

punished or something else. Out of the blue, Lila started to talk, which snapped me back out of my thoughts.

"What did you do this time!" said Lila, giggling as she attempted to get everyone to laugh, no one did.

"Someone has stolen Lily!" I screamed. I thought that everyone would at least show some distress or concern, but no one did. I only saw uncertainty on everyone's faces, except for Mom's face, which had the expression of uncertainty and dissatisfaction. A few minutes later everyone left, but Lila, probably because she wanted to bother me more about Lily.

"Did you lose her? Why? Why? Why!" she said, tapping me on the back to get my attention. I sighed with a very irritated, upset, or annoyed look.

"I don't know where she is! I didn't lose her, she was stolen! If you want to know where she is, why don't you go find her!" I said. Hopefully that would make her vanish or disappear into another room.

But wait, if no one was going to find her, I had to! I sprinted to my room and swiftly started to lift and organize everything. As I was almost finished, I found a shredded scrap of light blue fabric on my desk. I gasped in shock and astonish, it was a clue! Sadly, Lila saw it and started to fiercely and positively jump up and down with enthusiasm or excitement.

"Yay! You're a detective! Let's pretend to be detectives!" said Lila, giggling as she pretended to be a detective.

"No way" I thought. I was never going to pretend to be a bogus, fake detective! "No way! I'm looking for something of my own that was stolen, my own! Detectives look for other people's stuff, other people's stuff!" I stated. It was a fact, detectives in no way seem to be awe-inspiring, breathtaking, or remarkable, so they're fake, not real!

Anyway, back to the scrap of fabric. I knew my colors pretty well to know that there was only three things in the whole complete house that was this precise or exact blue, but I had to tell Lila. One of the three blue things was hers! I slowly, and cautiously, started to show her the light blue scrap of fabric.

"There are only three things in this house that is this kind of blue, Mia's light blue dress, Mom's fabric that she uses to repair

things, and your light blue elephant doll." I said, smiling at Lila.

Just when I finished my sentence, Lila burst into tears.

"I didn't take your doll! It always looked a little weird with the hole on it!" she shouted through her tears, wiping them away as more came down.

I sighed as she said--wait, did she say hole?

"Hole? What do you mean? Was there a hole?" I asked nervously as she kept crying. Before she could say anything, I rushed out of the room and grabbed her elephant doll to see that it was still whole! I swiftly, and rapidly, hurried back to my room to tell Lila the news.

"Good news! You are off the list of suspects!" I said, joyfully smiling at Lila. But oddly or strangely, as soon as I said the good news, she instantly stopped crying.

"The gigantic hole was made because of Mia! She accidentally dropped some scissors on your doll!" She said optimistically, leaving no sign that she used to be crying.

As she was cheerful and in high spirits, I was horrified and shocked to hear this. A hole in my Lily? Mia dropped scissors on her? But then, I confidently grinned as I figured something out, this was evidence for the culprit! I knew who did it, but I needed a little more evidence to back me up!

"Did you tell Mom about the hole?" I asked, hoping she would say yes.

"Sure, I did and I got Mia in trouble!" Lila strongly, and loudly, laughed so hard. I cheerfully smiled at my younger sister's lighthearted joke and sat down on my bed, so tired and so out of breath. As I closed my eyes, I felt something severely pierce and stab my finger.

"Ow!" I cried, startling Lila out of her thoughts.

"Huh? What poked you? Hey, look at that! You're sleeping on needles now!" Lila said, thrilled and perplexed at the same time.

As I was looking at my, now bleeding, pierced index finger--hold on a second, sleeping on needles? I don't sleep on needles, do I? I hastily turned and gazed directly at my bed where Lila had pointed. Looking hard enough, I saw a needle! Was that there the whole time I was sleeping? Confused, I snatched it up off my bed to examine it. After close examination, I could see that it

was threaded with a light blue thread. I knew I had seen that color before, but I couldn't think of it right now.

"So, can I see yet?" asked Lila, once again interrupting my thoughts. I cautiously revealed the threaded needle to Lila, but she peculiarly gasped and started to jump up and down bizarrely.

"What is it now?" I curiously said, gazing at Lila, awaiting for one of her crazy exclamations.

"That's the same color as my elephant and that strange blue trash that you found on your floor!! Um, I mean desk!!" she excitedly said quickly.

That was the clue I needed! I knew who took my Lily!

"Aha! I got it!" I swiftly said, before rushing out of my room, followed by Lila, shouting for everyone to come in the living room once again.

Mom came down first, followed by Mia and Dad. With Lila smiling willingly and gladly by my side, holding the clues, I took a deep breath and rapidly got ready to explain.

"First, this clue we found was a shredded piece of light blue fabric. Finding this clue helped narrow the suspects down to two people, Mom and Mia!" Strangely, as I said this, everyone started to stare at Mom and Mia. I also noticed that Mom had an expression of distress and puzzlement, while Mia had an expression of uneasiness and nervousness.

"Next, Lila told me that Mia had dropped scissors on Lily, causing a ho--" I said, but was interrupted by an angry Mia shouting at a cheerful Lila, who was also laughing.

"You told her? You weren't supposed to tell her!" said Mia, calming her voice. I looked at Lila, who was just smiling and waiting for me to start my sentence again.

"As I was saying, this event caused a hole to form on Lily! Lila told Mom, so Mom must have taken Lily to repair her!" I said, joyfully smiling as I knew I was right. "Mom came in my room and fixed Lily with her light blue repair fabric, but she forgot to take her needle and throw away her scraps!" I said. I looked at Mom, hoping I was right.

"Well, I didn't just repair her!" said Mom, slightly smiling, as she handed me my Lily! I was right! But then I noticed something, Lily looked a little different, she was wearing a new pink dress!

"Happy Birthday!" said my family.
I hugged Lily as I closed my eyes and thought,
"This is the best birthday ever!"



Brooklyn Chan

Middle School Short Story

Detective Sherlock and the False Fugitive

A shout from the kitchen is all that took to wake me up from my bed.

"What's going on?" I said, still drowsy from being awakened this early.

I looked at the clock that sat next to me, it said 6:00 am. What kind of person wakes up at 6:00 am?! I normally would just grab my blanket and go back to sleep, but my curiosity seemed to be keeping me awake. Who did that shout belong to and what happened?

Forcing myself to get up, I slipped on my slippers and walked towards the noise. I couldn't believe my eyes, if I wasn't awake then, I sure was now. There was a cake-tastrophe in the kitchen. I wasn't the only one there, Grandma was standing in front of me looking just as shocked and confused.

"This has got to be a dream." I thought, I pinched myself just to make sure, "Ouch! Nope, this is real."

Mom, Dad, Addy, my younger sister, and Grandpa came out a few minutes later to see what happened, and they all had the exact same expression that I had when I first saw it. Their eyes wide open and jaws dropped.

"Whoa! What happened here?!" exclaimed a voice from behind us.

Everybody turned around towards the voice and we were even more surprised than the mess in the kitchen. Standing in the hallway was Katrina in a cake covered pajamas that looked very similar to the cake in the kitchen.

"Why are you guys looking at me like that?" asked Katrina, my older sister, perplexed when she noticed us looking at her strangely. It was a moment of stunned silence for a couple of minutes, until Mom finally spoke up.

"Katrina! What have you done?!" shouted Mom, walking closer to Katrina.

"What? B-but I didn't do this..." cried Katrina, but the frosting on her pajamas said otherwise.

"Come on Katrina," said Mom, gently pushing Katrina towards the bathroom, "Let's get you cleaned up."

"But, I'm innocent!" shouted Katrina, before she disappeared in the hallway.

Everybody sighed, looks like there is no way of getting out of this one. We all got split up into groups of three and two. Unfortunately for me, I was stuck on team two with Addy.

"Just my luck." I thought irritably, as I held the trash bag open while she grabbed the cake and plopped it in the bag.

"Why would Katrina do this?" said Addy, asking the question that was on all our minds, she was really excited about the whole cake thing.

However, that wasn't what I was thinking right now, I was thinking about what Katrina said before she left. "I'm innocent...I'm innocent...I'm innocent," kept on echoing over and over through my head. I doubt that Katrina did this, she was as thrilled as everybody else about the cake, so why did she do this?

My suspicions were finally confirmed; positioned in a small pile of cake, was a tiny clump of brown hair. I quickly grabbed it before anyone could put it in a trash bag. I examined the bunch of hair closely. "This pile of hair is brown, but Katrina has black hair..." I muttered to myself, "Katrina couldn't have done this!"

"What are you looking at?" asked Addy curiously, crawling over to get a better look.

"Addy, I don't think Katrina did this. No, I KNOW Katrina didn't do this," I said growing more confident, I dramatically turned towards Addy, "And I'm going to figure it out! Looks like we've got a case!"

Without another word, I handed Addy our full trash bag, before I rushed back into my room. A few seconds later, I came out wearing a Sherlock hat with a notebook and pen in my hand.

"Why are you wearing a funny hat?" asked Addy clearly confused.

"If I'm going to solve this case, I might as well look the part." I simply explained. I read a lot of mystery books, my favorite was the adventures of Detective Sherlock and his sidekick Watson.

"Well, if you're going to solve the case, can I help too? I want

to be Detective Super Awesome Amazing Purple Unicorn. Pleeeeeeeeeeease!" begged Addy, she stood up and looked at me with her big, pleading eyes.

"Fine! Just stop looking at me like that," I yelled with frustration, "You're Detective Super Awesome Amazing-whatever-the-rest-was and I will be Detective Sherlock!"

"Okay, Detective Shamrock." she said, nodding her head.

"Stop calling me Shamrock," I shouted, "alright, first step to be detective is to look at the clues." I opened my notebook wide enough so both of us can see, inside were several doodles and the piece of hair that I taped inside.

"Here's what we know so far..." I explained, pointing to each drawing and the tape to show my clues, "One, we know Katrina was framed. Two, the culprit has brown hair. Three, the culprit might have some cake still on them from sabotaging the cake, so keep an eye out for pieces of cake anywhere, it might lead us to the actual fugitive."

"Okay Detective Shamrock, but what are we going to do?" asked Addy as I closed the book.

"First, stop calling me Shamrock. Second, in order to solve the mystery we have to question the false fugitive first." I said as we headed towards our first suspect, "I think we should start with Katrina."

A Few Hours Later...

"It didn't make any sense. Even after I interviewed every single person about the crime, nothing seems to add up!" I said in deep thought, I was standing in the middle of my room looking at all my clues that were pinned on the wall in front of me. However, no matter how much times I, Jack a.k.a Detective Sherlock, looked at them, nothing seemed to connect! I groaned aggravated, what's the final clue to solve the mystery?

"Jack, are you still in here?" asks Addy slowly entering the room with smoothies in her hand. "Did you figure it out yet?" replied Addy looking up at the clue-covered wall, sitting on my bed, and drinking her smoothie.

"No, but I will soon," I said, I took a quick sip of my smoothie before talking, "first let's look at what we have so far about our

crime." I pointed to each clue on the wall to explain our suspicious situation.

"Our crime began in the morning, and the birthday cake had been ruined. When everyone rushed to the kitchen, Katrina arrived with frosting on her pajamas! So, everyone pointed fingers that she did it!" I said briefly summarizing what happened today, "From what we learned so far from our interviews, everyone was asleep before the crime happened."

"Oh, I remember that." said Addy nodding her head, remembering the interview, "We talked to Katrina because we thought that she might have seen the person who did it."

"Exactly! Since, Katrina was up late watching a movie in her room, we thought she might have seen something." I said positively, "Katrina said that she only went into the kitchen to get a glass of water. She didn't want to wake Rover up, so she left the lights off and tip-toed quietly into the kitchen. The kitchen was dark therefore she didn't see anyone, so that means the guilty party had to be fast to damage the cake and swiftly leave before anyone saw them."

"That's when you went to your room and taped all the clues to the wall to figure out the crime," said Addy, then gave me a look, "Y'know, Mom's going to be mad that you used all the tape to stick stuff on the walls." (I ignored that last comment.)

"That basically summarizes everything up, but I don't get it," I put down my smoothie on the desk nearby and looked at everything with annoyance, "We interviewed everyone and investigated the crime scene, twice! I don't know who did it, and we're not any closer to solving the crime!" I moaned with exasperation and looked up at my evidence. "What are we missing?" I muttered, but I was interrupted by a shout in the kitchen.

"Jack! Addy! Can you give Rover his food and water, my hands are pretty full!" Mom shouted from the kitchen. Rover was our family dog and was pretty energetic so dad bought a metal fence to put around his dog bed.

"Okay." I grumbled, looks like the mystery will have to wait, "C'mon Addy!"

We were holding Rover's bowl of food and water when we got near his dog bed. Rover was already on all his four paws and was barking happily when we were just about a few feet apart. Addy

started giving him belly rubs while I placed his food down.

"I don't get it. Nothing makes any sense," I thought to myself, the mystery was still on my mind, "the cake, the hair, and our culprit...something just doesn't add up. It's on the tip of my tongue!"

I started getting up to leave when I saw a tiniest piece of what looked like frosting stuck on the metal fence, I slowly crawled closer to examine it. As I inched closer, I saw several more chunks of frosting, increasing in numbers and size, leading me towards the final piece of the puzzle. Everything was finally coming together.

"That's it!" I shouted, Addy was giving me an odd look, even Rover (who has an attention span of a three-year old) got up from his back to look at me strangely, "Addy, go get everybody to the living room! I just solved the case!"

A few minutes later, me and Addy were standing in the middle of the living room facing everybody. I wanted to make sure everyone was there so I can reveal the culprit.

"So, you're all probably wondering why I asked you all here in the living room. I solved the mystery of the cake-tastrophe! I know exactly who did it, and the culprit was none other than...Rover!" I shouted, pointing at Rover who lifted his head and looked at me. Everybody gasped.

"But Jack, Rover's just a dog, also there was a fence around his dog bed." said Addy, clearly confused, "How could he ruin the cake if there was a fence around him?"

"That's what I thought too until I saw this." I walked towards Rover's fence and pointed to the fence. On the gate was numerous amount of scratches on the bars, as if someone or some-dog was trying to escape. "I think Rover saw the cake in the kitchen and wanted to eat it so he clawed at the fence until he could climb out. "When Rover broke free he went crazy with the cake, but when he heard Katrina, he left and climbed back into his fence."

"Oh, then that explains the clump of brown hair we found. It wasn't hair, it was dog fur!" said Addy catching on, "It all makes sense now!"

"Okay, so Rover ate the cake, it still doesn't explain what happened to the rest of the cake." says Mom reasonably.

"You mean this cake?" I walked causally towards Rovers bed,

lifted it up, and revealed the remains of the cake, it was all still there just a bit squashed. Everybody couldn't believe what they just saw.

"When Addy and I went to give Rover his food, I saw a tiny trail of cake frosting leading towards his bed," I said putting down the dog bed, "that's when I saw the missing cake and the final clue to solve the crime!"

"Oh, Katrina we're all so sorry for accusing you." said Mom apologetically, giving Katrina a huge hug. I coughed to get her attention.

"It was all in the day's work for--" I began.

"Detective Super Awesome Amazing Purple Unicorn and her sidekick, Detective Shamrock!" Addy finished.

"Addy!" I groaned, which made everyone collapse in giggles.



Paige Eden
Middle School

Peculiarly Long Shift, Hm?

Choose a job you love, and you will never have to work a day in your life.
~ Confucius, Chinese Philosopher and Politician

Angelica “Angie” Maxis isn’t a normal person. Sure, she seems it. There are a lot of normal things about her. She’s 20 years old and lives in a small town near Las Vegas, Nevada, USA. She lives with her older brother in an RV. Her brother is named Ashley Maxis, and he’s 25 years old.

Angelica is very pretty, with curly brown hair in a pixie cut, eyes the color of ink, long and slender legs, a pinch of freckles on her cheeks and arms, and clear dark skin. She works at a general store named Allen and Beth’s to eventually earn enough to go to college for robotics. She has a best friend, Reeba Tanner, who works at Allen and Beth’s. Angie wears a lot of maxi skirts and muscle tank tops. A lot of people like her, employees and workers alike. She’s really smart and determined, and never gives up when she has a challenge. Her vocabulary is huge, and she loves technical language. She likes to breathe life into mundane things and entertains herself with pretty much everything.

But she’s not normal, is she?

Angie isn’t normal because she’s constantly paranoid that there’s something behind her. When she mans the cash register, she turns around every 2 minutes to make sure that no one's behind her. When she’s on her phone, she occasionally turns on the selfie camera and sees if there was anything behind her. And she can never walk home alone. Reeba thinks that it’s hilarious and laughs whenever she catches Angie checking behind her. Angie never liked having anything behind her, even when she was standing in a line at the grocery store or when she was sitting in the front row back in high school. But other than that quirk, she was really a normal, nice lady.

And then something terrible happened to her. This is what this story is about.

It was July or August, the hottest part of the year in the Western desert. Angie had Ashley drive her over to Allen and Beth's that morning. The morning shift started at 7:30 AM sharp. As they were driving, the RV ran over something just as 2 other cars passed them without noticing. It must have been big because it knocked Ashley's protein shake out of his hand. Ashley was one of those people who was always trying to lose weight for some reason, even if he was no more than 140 pounds.

"What in the world was that?!" Angie cried, and whipped around to make sure that no one was behind them. The road (made of dirt and those tiny rocks that stab into your tires and pop them) seemed normal enough. Ashley pulled over without answering his sister.

"WHAT IS IT?!?!" Angie shouted.

"Woah, get ahold of yourself. Probably just a load that fell out of some guy's truck or something." He stopped the car abruptly. They looked back at the road. There was nothing there.

"Must have been some sort of animal that ran out of the way," Ashley shrugged, picking up his bottle and frowning at the maraschino red stain on the light tan carpet of his truck.

"Yes!" Angie agreed nervously. "It could have been a burro. They're huge!" They didn't say anything else to each other for the rest of the ride, but Ashley kept looking over at Angie and saw that she was just trembling with fear. It was 7:28 AM when Angie entered Allen and Beth's. She was sure of it. She looked at the clock on the wall, and it said 7:28 AM. And that's why she thought it was so weird that it stayed 7:28 AM for the next 4 hours. She was running around the shop, manning the register and greeting guests and restocking the shelves and the clock didn't move. The second hand was in between 2 ticks, but it was frozen in place.

Angie finally went into the back room and found Beth attempting to get 3 crates full of Fritos off of a shelf at the same time. Beth was the morning shift supervisor, and her name wasn't Beth. It had been a tradition, since 1911 when Allen and Beth's opened, to hire a man and a woman as the shift managers and call

them Allen and Beth. Allen and Beth didn't actually exist. They were just characters created by the founder of the store to symbolize the perfect elderly couple, mainly because she really liked romance novels. Beth had long, bleached blonde beach waves and spray-tanned skin, and she always wore bright green contact lenses. Even if parts of her were synthetic and over-exaggerated, she just dressed exactly how you'd expect a shift manager to dress, mainly in sweatshirts and jeans.

"Beth, I believe that the clock's broken," Angie said, and Beth shrugged.

"Don't think so," she said in a thick Southern accent, not looking up from her work. "I only got here a few minutes ago."

"No," Angie said, trying to hide the quivering in her voice. "It's about 11 o'clock and you know it." Beth glared up at Angie. She was 5 inches shorter than she was, but that wouldn't let Angie intimidate her.

"Check the time on your phone," she said. "It's 7:28. Now would you please let me get back to my work?"

Angie rolled her eyes and looked at her phone. It was 7:28, alright. Angie walked out to the front of the store and parked herself right in a stool next to the counter. She sat there until her tailbone ached, and the clock hadn't moved a millimeter. People were coming in and out, but she was barely paying attention. They all looked kind of...the same. Angie swore that she saw 3 identical women with black hair down at their knees come in at different times, but their eyes were all different colors. The first one had blue-green eyes, the second one had hazel eyes, and the third one had gray eyes. A man with long blonde hair came in early in the morning and then, seconds later, he was completely bald. A little girl about 5 years old kept coming in and out, and she kept getting taller and taller.

Angie stood up to stretch, and a hand grabbed onto her shoulder. She turned and saw Reeba glaring at her. Reeba always looked intense. Maybe it was her porcelain skin or her dramatic makeup or her brown-and-teal streaked hair. If it were any of those things, none of them would have topped her glare that had been rumored to have killed 50 men from fright.

"Hey, are you gonna help me or what? We've got a long day ahead of us."

“No kidding.” Angie said it before thinking, but she didn’t care at this point. Angie stood up and worked the way that she usually would until she felt blood seeping through her toenails. She eventually sat back down to massage her throbbing feet. Reeba kept on working like she’d just walked in the door and didn’t lose energy for a second.

“Reeba! You’re not tired?” Angie gasped. Reeba shrugged.

“No. We’ve been working for, like, a few minutes. What’s wrong with your feet?”

Angie looked down at her feet and saw that there wasn’t anything wrong with them. They just hurt. A lot.

Angie sat on that stool so long that she almost felt her tailbone crack. She looked at the clock and it hadn’t moved at all. She stood up and darted to the window. The sun was still shining, the birds were still flying, and Angie was still panicking. Allen never came to work for that shift. His arrival was like a wake-up call for the workers.

"Welp, it must be 12 o'clock," they'd think.

"Guess we're halfway through the day. Good." Angie stood and stood and stood at the window, and nothing happened. The world was happening, sure, but no time was passing. It was the longest shift of her life.

Angie raced outside and around the corner and then saw their RV coming down the dirt road. She waved her arms and screamed for her brother, but then the strangest thing that she'd ever seen happened. The RV disappeared, only to reappear at the end of the dirt road. And that's what it kept doing over and over just as it got to the outside of the shop. It was.....Resetting.

And then Angie thought something that she'd never thought she would. She WISHED that this was behind her.

Angie collapsed to the ground and sobbed for the longest that she ever had in her life, even more than when she was a little girl and Ashley stepped on her watercolor set. She sobbed so long that her voice cracked and her eyes burned like her tear ducts were suddenly filled with bleach. She eventually felt footsteps coming up to the little porch that lined the building. Angie wiped her face and looked up.

A woman and a man looked down at her. The perfect elderly couple. They looked exactly like Allen and Beth in the company's

logo.

“WHAT’S GOING ON?!?!” Angie screamed, jumping to her feet.

“We just came to pick you up from work,” the woman said. “I was that little girl, with the blonde hair. You remember me?”

“WHAT?!” Angie shouted.

“I grew up since then,” the woman shrugged. “Everyone has. It’s been 50 years since you and your brother ran over the barrier. It’s been 7:28 AM ever since.”

Angie stared at those 2 like they were crazy. “I’ve been in here for 50 years?!” she gasped.

“No,” said the man, “but you have in your own world. You’re 70 years old, Angie.”

Angie’s eyes widened and she looked at her hands. Wrinkled, darkened skin. Age spots. Long fingers. Defined knuckles.

“You’ve spent your life already,” the woman said, sighing.

Suddenly, something behind them crackled like a firework tin can. Angie screamed and whipped around and caught her reflection in the shop window.

White hair. Sunken eyes. Smile lines. Worry lines.

And, through the window, Angie saw the clock.

It read 7:29 AM.



Sophia Kutz
Middle School

The Man in the Mirror

I walk away from the collapsing building. I smirk as I hear the screams. I'm not evil. This behavior is written into my genes. Forest fires aren't evil, right? So neither am I. I burn the old to grow the new. I'm a freakin' force of nature. My name is Nayr Sirdam. And this is my story.

I check my watch. It's 2:59 am.

I feel like I've got some explaining to do. You see, I'm a Mirari. We're put into you humans when you're born. We Awaken when your brain stops developing. Ryan being a first-class dunce, I awoke when he was 26, not the average age, 25. What an idiot. Mirari have been inside living things since the dawn of time. We are the opposites of our hosts. If a host is violent, its Mirari is the definition of rainbows and kitties, and vice versa. Mr. Goody-Two-Shoes is perfect, so I'm destined not to be. We are exact mirror images of each other.

If it's almost 3, I've been in control for about 6 hours. I feel the strain on my control. It's time to pass the baton.

Why not mess with him a little bit? I see a construction yard with a crane. One of Ryan's biggest fears is heights. I climb to the top and lay down on it. I wake Ryan.

The stream of his thoughts is HILARIOUS. Where am I? he thinks. And then he screams. Ha! He does his stupid breathing exercises. I am a peaceful flower. He glances at his watch. His thoughts take the direction of making it back to the hotel in time to continue serving in his stupid Peace Corps.

He continues thinking he's a 'peaceful flower' as he carefully climbs down. He makes his way back to the city and hails a cab. The cab driver greets him.

"Hola, Señor!"

"Hola."

They continue talking in a language I can't understand. SO inconsiderate of them. I tune it out and think of chaos.

There are legends of some Mirari breaking free from their hosts, in situations of extreme stress. When the host wanted to do something but the Mirari didn't, and they rebelled. That's what I want. I want to be my own person, not having to disappear and watch Ryan live his life while I don't get to live mine. I will break free. I have to. Why not make Ryan miserable now? They continue with their worthless conversation.

“De Verdad?”

“Si.”

“Guau.”

I begin with only a little force. This worm doesn't have any strength, so why would this be hard? I'm met with so much resistance that I can barely think. I try again. This time, I gather all my strength and meet the resistance with equal parts willpower and determination. I picture a sledgehammer demolishing a wall. It takes dozens of swings, but eventually I break a hole in it. I'm left so incredibly tired that I barely have enough strength to shout my insult.

I mean to say, “Your mother is a hamster, and your father smells of elderberries!” from that old movie that Ryan hates so much. But it comes out as, “Your mother is... your... father.” Ryan slaps his hands over his mouth. Too bad I can't speak Spanish. The cab driver just seems confused. Although the insult didn't come out as expected, it had the same effect.

When Ryan gets back to the hotel, he gets ready for the work day. The phone rings.

“Ryan?” It's Sabrina, his girlfriend. Sabrina was born a year after Ryan, and her Mirari is barely Awakened. Just a month old. Sabrina and Ryan are a great match. Almost as awesome as me and Anirbas. We go together as great as fries and destruction. What? You've never had that before?

“Yeah, ‘Rina?”

“We leave in ten minutes.”

“Okay. I'll be down soon.”

“Kay. Bye.”

They're such chatterboxes. Ryan shakes his head and says, “I can do this.” He gets his bag and makes his way to the lobby.

I've never taken an interest in Ryan's work. Helping people is just SO BORING. But the second I see the broken bus, I know I'm

in for a treat.

The leader of their group is named Bob. ‘Bob’ is not short for Robert. It’s just ‘Bob.’ I’m guessing his parents were expecting a girl, and had everything planned out. And then they were cursed with a boy. In the spur of the moment, I think they just shouted a random name. So now this guy’s official name is Bob Wilson.

Bob’s Mirari is super smart, but that’s the one defining trait about him. His name’s still Bob. Actual Bob is strictly decent. As such, Mirari Bob is decent too. There’s nothing to be flipped other than the pure stupidity of Actual Bob.

Bob is on the phone, presumably with a mechanic. He’s practically yelling in Spanish. He hangs up.

“Well, gang,” he says. “The mechanic can’t come, and our bus is beyond repair.”

Ryan is struck by a “fantastic” idea. “Why don’t we walk?” I hear some groans, surprised that I’m not the only one who’s not enthusiastic. Aren’t these people supposed to love pointless work? Someone says, “But it’s 6 miles!”

“Then we better get a move on!” Sabrina comes and holds Ryan’s hand as they start walking.

They make it in 143 minutes and at least 100 complaints. And then they work in the fields, harvesting crops. For. Twelve. Hours. Why? Why would you choose to do that? I can feel his back aching, and that isn’t common, even with Ryan.

The way pain works between the Mirari and the humans is that you carry the pain you ‘earned,’ we carry ours. But if the pain is extreme enough, both feel the effects.

When he’s FINALLY done, they walk back to their hotels, and Ryan goes straight to his room, where he puts on his jammies and climbs into bed.

He goes right to sleep. It’s late for him. 7:30. The poor baby must be tired.

When he’s out, I find that I can’t take control as easily as I usually do. On normal nights, it’s like a hand in a glove. But tonight, it’s like the glove is for a toddler, not a super handsome young adult.

Messing with him was extremely draining. It makes me wonder if it was even worth it. Of course it was. But if I plan to

torture him again, I have to save my strength. I decide to take the night off.

I give Ryan back control of his body, pulling my hand out of the now too-small glove of consciousness. He wakes up instantly.

The way we control who's in charge of the body at what time is strange. Consciousness is passed back and forth like a hot potato. It takes energy to be in control for a long period of time. Someone always has to be in the driver's seat. Before the Mirari is Awakened, the Mirari's hibernating form is in control while the human sleeps. But we don't exactly sleep. After our hibernation, we can't be Unawakened. We just bide our time until it's our turn in your bodies. We fade into the background.

Ryan's form of torture for tonight is insomnia. No way will he take my beauty rest.

The next day, as Ryan fills his water bottle, I feel refreshed, energized, and ready to torture this guy into submission. In fact, why not make him feel the pain I feel sharing a body with him? This is my turf. Something simple will do it. I just need to scare him enough to make him feel uneasy.

I grab my mental sledgehammer and start smashing the wall. It's not as hard as it was yesterday, but it's still hard enough that I only smash through enough to send him a thought. Hello, Ryan. He screams. Out loud. Like a baby goat. He also spills his water bottle all over his shorts.

"Who's there?" He demands. Yeah, like I'm going to answer, buddy. He mumbles his kiddie swear words as he changes his pants.

Sending that thought wasn't nearly as draining as I thought it would be. I guess practice makes perfect. Who would've thought loser humans could develop an accurate saying?

Months pass. Ryan goes back to the United States and takes Sabrina with him. They retire from the Peace Corps, feeling tired and achy.

Ryan walks in the bad part of town, on his way to a soup kitchen. He walks past an alley, but stops when he hears crying. He turns into the alley. What are you doing, Ryan? I think.

There's a young man, probably a few years younger than Ryan. He's sobbing. Ryan, being the stupid goody-two-shoes he is, walks over to the man. "Are you okay? What happened?" he asks as he

puts his hand on the man's shoulder.

He shakes his head and cries harder. I hear footsteps echo in the distance.

“Ey, whatcha doin’ here, punk?” Ryan turns his head towards the voice. It belongs to a middle-aged balding man.

“I said, whatcha doin’ here?” He spits the words at us.

Pathetic piece of trash. Picking on others, looking for a way to feel tough. Something resonates in that thought. Am I like this garbage? Sure, I pick on others, but I do so with honor. Right? Ryan stands and says, “I’m just trying to help.” The man laughs, then belches louder than I have ever heard.

“That’s a laugh!” the piece of human garbage growls.

“Then you’ve never done it.”

Ryan’s statement throws him for a loop. He reddens and clenches his fists. “I didn’t ask you!” He walks towards us, and throws his fists up. If he wants a fight, I’ll give it to him. I grab my sledgehammer and smash the wall. I smash again and again, until it’s gone.

I will fight this stain on the cloth of humanity. I force my legs to move. I stand. There is no Ryan in this moment. Only Nayr. I throw my fist into his jaw and he spits out a tooth. Ryan is screaming, but I ignore it.

The mobster answers by punching me in the stomach. It hurts, but I refuse to give him the satisfaction of watching me cower on the ground. I punch him in the nose this time, which makes a loud crack! when my fist collides, no doubt breaking it. He wipes away the blood and kicks me, before sweeping my feet out from under me with his other leg.

I fall, but I get back up, responding with a kick of my own. My foot strikes his stomach, and he throws up. He growls as he wipes the bile away. “You gonna pay for that, punk!” He tries to kick me again, but I dodge and hit him in the jaw. He responds with yet another kick.

This guy just does not know how to fight, does he?

I smash my fist into his head, knocking him unconscious. I almost feel bad for giving him such a brutal spanking. But hey, feeling bad is Ryan’s job. I give back control, but he just stands there, shell-shocked. He looks at the mobster on the floor, and then where the sobbing man used to be. He must have fled the

scene during the fight. Coward.

Ryan's jaw is practically on the floor. He whispers, "I don't know who you are. I don't know where you came from. But thank you. You saved my life." He puts his bloody fists in his pockets, and walks away from the unconscious scum and out of the alley.

Maybe he's not so bad after all. All he wants to do is live peacefully and help others. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad to coexist with this pitiful human. We may be opposites, but opposites attract.

You're welcome, Ryan.



3

Mahika Madhu

Middle School Short Story

Untitled

My bare feet touch the soft grass. My hands pat the ground and I stand unsteadily. I look up. The sun is low on the horizon and I don't know where I am. The sky is purple and a light breeze lifts my hair from my neck.

“Mom!” I scream.

“Dad?” I turn around and see them in front of me. Something's wrong, I think. This doesn't feel right. But what could be wrong? Everything's perfect.

I start heading towards them. There they are, sipping wine from delicate glasses that fog to their warm touch. My mother's pale hands squeeze the glass. My father's eyes narrow.

Suddenly they're arguing. I don't understand. What are they arguing about? They were enjoying drinks just a moment ago and now they're arguing. I don't know what's going on! I just know that I want it to stop. Anything so it could stop!

I cup my hands over my ears and urge my legs to move. I start running towards them, but it feels like I am standing still. I pick up speed but I can't reach them. The wind roars in my ears and my feet throb and I keep running, but it feels like I'm moving backwards. They seem further and further away and I know I could never catch up to them. They left me all alone. Something about this situation feels eerily familiar.

Suddenly, my surroundings change and I see my parents lying on the ground. They still clutch the wine glasses like it's their lifeline. Red liquid drips from my mother's mouth and my father's other hand holds hers - they're dead. My father's eyes stay closed and still, and his mouth doesn't move, but a voice echoes, sound coming from all around me.

“Kill them, Angelina. Kill them all, Angelina.”

My parents were the only people who knew my real name. How did this happen? Tears fall from my eyes and my unheard screams fill the silence. Why? Why does it have to be like this?

My eyes flutter open with alarming speed. My heart bangs against my chest so hard that I'm surprised it hasn't broken out of my body. It was just a dream. I gasp, desperate for oxygen because I can't breathe right now.

"Again, Angie?" Kelly stands by the doorway. Her red hair is tied in a ponytail - for once - and her bangs hover above her eyes. She smiles sympathetically but her eyes sparkle with amusement. She walks forward and shoves me off the bed. I wince. I glare at her and she smiles.

"Breakfast in 5 minutes. You better hurry or Dean Alina will end your life before you even get to do the test!" I nod sourly and she leaves the room. I decided that my black jeans and tank top will be acceptable clothes for the test. I threaded my arm through my jacket and looked in the mirror. I see my dark blue - almost black - hair and unusual violet eyes. I touch the embroidered patch on my jacket. It's a hand shaped in a fist, shrouded in flames - the symbol of the Insurgence. A so-called parting gift from my parents. I bind my hair in a quick ponytail and head out the door.

The halls that are normally full are empty. I must be late. I grit my teeth and start running towards the cafeteria. I stumble into the room and every head turns to look at me. Their eyes are cold, void of emotion. Kelly has her back faced to me and she whips her red hair around to face me. She grins and she stands up to take my hand. She guides me to the table she chose for us. Carl's blue eyes stare me down, like he's challenging me to a battle. His champagne-red hair falls around his angular face. He's cold, but he still accepts me. He doesn't think that I'm a monster like the others. Emma's black hair is tied in a messy bun that makes her look fabulous as ever. Her green eyes contrast perfectly with her clear, tan skin. I sit down and chew the usual spinach soup. The fact that I even have to chew it, is disgusting, but I guess I should be grateful.

The first week they trained us here, they made us train for long hours, and without food. Dean Alina said that we needed to learn endurance, and that sometimes during missions, we would run out of food and would have to continue our mission without food or drink. I thought that it was a bunch of trash, and that is why I got on her bad side. Being on her bad side was not good.

A poised lady with blond ringlets and hazel eyes walked into the room. Dean Alina. I would have mistaken her for a helpless

princess if she didn't have a headset jaw, or a scar across her neck. She normally did her best to cover it up with makeup, but I could still notice, even if no one else could. She walked into the room and sat down on top of an empty table.

“Recruits! Today, the Insurgence will be having a test for the Senior recruits, prepping them to get ready for battle.” She paused. “As you know, the Dark Angels are capable of mass death and destruction. I have seen first hand what they are capable of.”

At that moment, everyone focused their eyes on that scar on her neck. She touched it and winced as if it still hurt like a fresh wound. Then, everyone's eyes fixed on me. Because I'm the only one that is different. I sank back in my chair, staring at the ground. She looked up and realized that she wasn't alone in her room, she had to look strong for us.

“The test will be made up of two parts. First, is the written test, and the second is the endurance test.”

“Written test?” someone yelled across the cafeteria.

Dean Alina's eyes narrowed on the person who asked the question and spoke. “Is that a problem, Elijah?” Elijah gulped.

“Well, umm I-” he sweat nervously and his lower lip quivered.

“Since you have a problem taking this test, it might be best if you didn't take it at all. Isn't that right? You would dishonor your dead parents who worked so hard to bring the dark angels to fault, but I guess that's fine.”

“Wait, no! I didn't mean-”

“You just won't participate in the battle. And since the Insurgence has no use for you...” Dean Alina started admiring her nails, talking with ease as Elijah struggled to form words.

“I guess we would have no choice but to kill you. We don't take weaklings here.”

The eyes of the cafeteria widened at the word kill. She wouldn't really go that far, would she? Elijah stumbled out of his seat.

“N-no ma'am. I would be honored to participate in the battle,” he said with his hands stiffly at his side. His curly hair stuck to his face that was drenched with sweat.

“Well then!” Dean Alina said happily, “Let me continue. We have a written test and an endurance test. I would explain more,

but Elijah here interrupted me, and we ran out of time.” she spoke whilst glaring at Elijah. Her blond ringlets outlined her sharp features and her intense eyes as she spoke again.

“I will explain more about the tests before they begin. Make sure to be ten minutes early so I can explain.” Dean Alina left the room and I continued to chew on my stale food. My friends stayed silent. Even Kelly, who was normally outgoing, had gone quiet. I started at my food, a lump of dread settling in my stomach. My mind replayed the moment when everyone stared at me, singling me out, reminding me that I would never belong. A warm hand was placed on my shoulder.

“Hey, it’s fine. You’re one of us,” Carl insisted. I nodded half heartedly as my friends looked at me encouragingly. I was grateful to have them, but despite their efforts, I still felt like an outsider. I got up and threw the rest of the soup away and wiped my hands on my shirt. I felt beads of sweat start to roll down my forehead and I wiped them off with the back of my palm. I glanced at my friends quick enough that no one noticed me and headed out of the cafeteria.

As I walked the long halls, my mind pondered back to the cafeteria. They looked at me that way because I was different. Because I was an experiment. My mind flashed back to the day I learned the truth about myself.

.....12 years ago.....

I jogged up to Dame Alina as everyone stared at me. I lifted my hand and squeezed hers tightly. Sweat made my skin sparkle as I walked down the oh so familiar halls that I grew up in. Dean Alina led me outside. The grass tickled my feet as she bent down and asked in a soft voice, “What did you want to talk about, Angie?” I giggled at the nickname. Her hazel eyes were intense, but soft and caring all the same.

“I wanted to know,” I paused for a little, my smile disappearing from my face as I started at the microscopic droplets coating the grass.

“Why does everyone look at me that way?” Dean Alina’s smile dropped from her face as it drooped like a withered flower. She looked at me, her eyes holding wisdom and sadness,

“I guess I couldn’t hide it from you forever, huh?” she said with a smile.

“Well, you’re a big girl now, 5 years-old, almost 6!” she gasped as she poked my stomach. I giggled in bliss before my mind came back to the present.

“Wait, no stalling!” I giggled,

“What are you hiding from me?” I asked. Her face aged in front of me and she said, “You know the dark angels?” When I stared at her eyes blankly, she added, “The dark angels are bad people. You see, we have something precious that they want. It’s the Moon Monolith. The Moon Monolith enhances the abilities of the user, it can give you enhanced speed, or enhanced vision, or enhanced smell, and lots more.” My eyes widened at the thought. She continued, “But some people wanted the Monolith for themselves, so they tried to steal it from the dark angels. The dark angels tried to find a really good hiding place-”

“Like hide n’ seek?” I asked.

“Yes,” she chuckled.

“Eventually, the dark angels tried to hide it inside a person. They wanted a person of their own kind to have the Monolith’s power, and have the ability to grant enhanced senses to others at will. So they tried to hide it inside you, when you were a baby.” She poked my stomach again, but no giggle escaped my lips this time. My brain was malfunctioning, unable to process the thought of me getting such a great power. “They tried, but it failed, You only got enhanced sight. We found out the truth and found it possible that they would discard you because you were a failed experiment. So we saved you and brought you here.”

A failed experiment. Those words pounded in my brain and my thoughts muddled together in a thick fog and before I knew it, I was locked in a closet. A failed experiment. Dean Alina pounded the closet door, but they made the furniture strong and hard to break, so it would be a while before they got to me. But it didn’t matter anymore, because all I was, was a failed experiment.

...back to the present...

My thoughts pieced together and I noticed that I was outside, a large expanse of forest spreading out before my eyes. I pushed the flashback from my mind, told myself that I was not a failed

experiment.

“The written test isn’t ready yet so we’re doing the endurance test first. On your marks, get set, GO!”

I bent my knees and sprinted forward. And I would show them, show them all that I was not just a failed experiment. I was Angelina, and they will remember that.



2

Maryiam Syed

Middle School Short Story

Untitled

Before you go on reading this, let me tell you something: I am a killer. Yup, you read that right. A killer.

A killer who mercilessly stalks and tears and stitches and tears and stitches over and over again until my victims are tired of life and can't continue further.

A killer that's on the loose. Everyone knows where I am, but it's not like they can see me. I can enter a room with such grandeur and have the music played and songs sung and still you wouldn't see me. That's why I make such a good killer.

I'm definitely world-known. People know to steer clear of me, but some do, and some believe I'm a joke. But you shouldn't believe I'm a joke.

A killer only armed with one weapon: willingness to try again. Never giving up. Always trying.

A killer that has set a world record for deaths. No one has caused chaos the way I have, and surely no one will reach a quarter of my winning streak.

A killer whom you would think is savage and antisocial, but I feel. . . pain. I'm not your Golden State Killer or anything of that norm. I make a girl a wretch, then I board the ambulance with her, then I sit by her, then I watch her motionless body just sitting on that stretcher, then I cry and attend her funeral, if I can.

A killer that has no gender. Unlike English pronouns and plant parts, I am not a male or a female. But that doesn't mean I CAN'T be.

A killer who is part of a cult. I would have never wreaked havoc if I were assigned to do so.

A killer who is everywhere. . .

. . . is everyone. . .

. . . is invisible to the world. . .

So there you have it. Here are the clues to figuring out who I am. While you read this story, you're supposed to pick up details

and relate them to the clues.

See? I'm being nice to you. I'm providing you a little game to play. If you can figure me out just by reading this one page, game over; you win. If not, keep reading. You might find something.

You still here? Good. I need some company. It's not easy being alive if you can't find someone to share your experiences with. Anyway, most stories have female protagonists. You're probably familiar with Katniss Everdeen or Hermione Granger. It's just a recurring pattern: a lot of writers prefer heroines.

I'm pretty sure folks like you relate to these heroines. You remember the part where I said I was genderless? If you think I'm an antihero and are so intrigued by my story, I'll be so sweet to you and help you relate to me by assuming a feminine persona. And I'll be extra nice to you and assume an appellation while I'm at it. How about. . . Vida? Vida. Yeah, that's it. I like that name. There you have it. My name is Vida. Happy yet? You should be. Currently I'm in Irvine, California. It's not exactly the most interesting city here, but that's not my headache.

This is quite important. You remember the part where I said I was part of a cult? Well, I reported to my boss. Now my boss doesn't like going by gender either, but since I want you to relate to me and my story, and guys are usually the antagonists in stories, I'll say he's a male we call Lu. Now Lu told me to trace down this one girl named Sylvie.

Now I saw her file. Files usually come with pictures and facts about that person, such as their date of birth and parents (I'm not going to reveal how we obtain that information.). Poor Sylvie is so young and innocent, so why rob her of life? It's my job to, that's why.

Now according to Lu, Sylvie is staying at a hotel near Disneyland. Okay. Fair enough.

I head to a bus stop just in time, because the bus pulls in. I board the bus, find a seat, and try to stare at nothing.

"Where to?" one passenger asks.

"I'm heading to a Hilton hotel," says the driver, "unless you're heading somewhere else."

Good. Good, good, good. The hotel. That's exactly where

Sylvie is staying.

I do my best to not be noticed. But, wait a minute. I'm invisible. What's the point?

Have you figured out who I am? If yes, well, I don't know what to say. If no, I STILL don't know what to say. I mean, come on. I'm providing you with all these clues. Use your brain and THINK.

The hotel lobby. Ah, so vast, so roomy, so decorative, so many people coming and going. So many people to take to the cemetery. . .

But wait a minute. I've got a task. Can't get distracted.

Sylvie is staying in room 163, according to my file. And if I'm correct, that should be on the second floor. So I rush to the elevator and step inside.

In the elevator, there is one other woman. She's elderly. I'm not sure if that's hair or white cotton candy on her head. It's so bleak in this dumb elevator that I want to destroy it and get out. There's nothing interesting going on here. Stark contrast to the hotel lobby, this is.

Then I turn my focus to that old lady. Maybe if I could give her a little stab in the chest. . .

No. I'm on a mission. Not now. Maybe when I'm off duty. Maybe.

Although something like half a minute passed, it seems like forever. It's only when the elevator door opens that I can breathe fresh vanilla air again.

As I step out, the old lady hobbles out as well. I guess she's staying on this floor as well. Good. At least my object of pleasure won't be far.

Still don't know who I am? Tsk. So disappointing. Maybe I should talk to a monkey instead. Those chimps would figure it out.

Maybe I should tell you something: I hate corridors.

I really hate corridors.

So windy and twisty and so many of them. How am I supposed to find Sylvie's room here?

120, 121, . . .

These things are grouped by tens. Let's keep going.

135, 136, 137, . . .

Come to think about it, if I'm so close to my goal, I need to think about how to kill her. Perhaps I could give her a headache. Or I could attack with a gun. Or knives. Or a nuclear bomb that I stole from the rubble of the Chernobyl explosion and set it off and then not only wipe her out but also wipe out the entire city of Irvine.

Or maybe I'll just drop some intoxicants in her food. I don't know.

162, 162.1, 162.2, 162.3, . . .

Okay, this is ridiculous. The labels are going by TENTHS now?

162.99999, 163!

Yes! I found it! But it's locked. So I just decided to take a little walk near that door and act like I'm on vacation, too.

Then, suddenly, a woman and a little girl are walking towards me. The woman is a tall, slender figure who is basically a painting herself, and I don't mean I think she's beautiful. It's just that she's got too much makeup on. She must be the mother of that little girl.

Wait a minute, the little girl?

The little girl is fair-haired, hazel-eyed, and holding a lollipop. She reminds me of someone. . .

The woman and her little girl walk closer and closer. . . to a door. . . 163.

They're going into 163!

This explains why the girl was so recognizable.

She's Sylvie!

As the woman opens the door and leads her daughter inside, I slip in and duck inside a closet.

Sylvie is mine.

Okay. I guess I'm giving up now. You are so hopeless. There's no

point even TRYING.

Sylvie is sitting on a bed and watching TV. I'm right under her bed, so this should be a piece of cake.

How am I going to kill her? After doing some research and quite a bit of soul searching, I decided that I'm going to inject her. With what, you ask? That's confidential.

Slowly I crawl from under the bed, but I dive back in there as soon as her mother comes into the room.

"Sylvie, honey, we're going to the food court in half an hour."

"Okay, Mommy."

I expect her mother to leave, but instead, she walks further into the room. I hear a little thump, so she must be sitting with her daughter.

"So what did you like best at Disneyland?"

"I think I liked the little tour on the boat. That was fun."

"Hmm. And did they serve good food?"

"I liked the cotton candy."

They sound like such a loving mother-daughter pair. I start to wonder if this was all a big mistake. Why kill her? She's so little. She should enjoy life, not have it robbed from her.

But what would Lu say?

I decide to just get over it. I slowly inch from under the bed again, grasp my needle, lean a little closer to Sylvie's arm, and give her a little prick.

"I love you, Mommy."

And the moment that needle touches her skin, at that moment she utters those three words, I regret my decision instantly. What have I done? Poor thing needs a life. No, no, no.

I love you, Mommy. I never knew my mommy. Not a thing about her. I can't believe myself. Why have I done this? Why should I rob Sylvie of a mother? A mother of Sylvie? Why should I make the one thing I never had depressed and heartbroken? Why?

I duck back under the bed and pray that the injection didn't work.

It's quiet.

Eerie quiet.

Too quiet.

Then I hear a gasp. Choking. Panting. A thud to the floor.

Sylvie's finished. The injection worked. Her mother screams and runs to a nearby backpack and grabs some blue capsule. As I see what her mother does to rejuvenate her, I realize why it worked and why this response was so severe. Sylvie's mother is holding an inhaler. Sylvie has asthma.

If that was in my file, I didn't read it. And as her mother calls 911 and an ambulance rolls in, my tears form puddles on the floor. And a week later from that, I pay my condolences to Sylvie Marisol's tombstone, and, with a sigh, I follow my next victim.

Still haven't figured me out yet? I'll tell you now. I'm a betacoronavirus. I'm not the only one of my kind.

Viruses are everywhere but are microscopic, so they are unseen. Viruses have no gender. Viruses infect people and damage their bodily systems.

I set the world record for deaths.

Each one I pay tribute to and weep for hours before chasing my next victim.

I'm the reason you stay home and wear masks.

I am COVID-19.

Stopping Calamity: A Story of Pain and Suffering

“Good Morning!” hollered Clovis from his room.

“Come down Clovis, you're gonna be late for school and your breakfast is ready!” hollered his mom. Clovis ran downstairs and smelled the arousing aroma of eggs and bacon. He sat down and his chair and his mom brought him some breakfast.

“So Clovis, are you ready for your test?”

“Yeah I am.” Clovis finished his food and gave his mom his plate before running out of the house.

“Yes! I did it for the 5th time!” thought Clovis. He was running to make it to the slums of his city as fast as he could. “A 5th chance to stop it, I hope I can do it.” He brought his backpack and his tiny brown lunch with him, but it wasn't lunch. He opened it to reveal a bag full of rocks, all the sharpest they could be instead of a lunch. The slums of Casonovia were notorious for having the broken creations of the higher up there, but today something went wrong. One of the robots, a giant one intended to be for war, awoke. The giant, metal arms of the decaying robot looked down over the city as it got up. Screams from the slums were heard as the robot stepped on them. The robot had many holes where homes were in his body, for he was being used as such. “He's awoken it seems. Well, let's try again,” said Clovis.

Clovis began to run toward the robot as others ran away from the arms that attacked them. “Child run!” screamed out an adult, but Clovis didn't listen. Clovis had his rocks and began to throw them at the robot, and they began to stick. He had used a strong adhesive that his mother had lying around in her lab at home, and put them to his sharp rocks, making them stick and pierce. The robot looked down at Clovis, and his eyes turned red. A laser came out from the robot's face, and it shot Clovis in the arm. It came clean off, and Clovis began to smile.

“Well, it appears these rocks aren’t gonna work. I guess I’ll just try again,” said Clovis to himself as the robot stepped on him, crushing him.

“Clovis, come on down!” hollered Clovis’ mother from downstairs. Clovis came down the stairs like any normal school day and was ready for his test. He ate his breakfast and got on the school bus and saw his friend, Jameson.

“Hey James, are you ready for the math test?” asked Clovis.

“Yeah, sure am. Though I hope the teacher doesn’t grade all parts of our test on showing our work again,” said Jameson.

“Come on he won’t. We told him not too,” said Clovis.

“Yeah true, but you never know, he is pretty old now,” said Jameson. They began to talk the whole bus ride, talking about games and school until they made it to their school. It was gone. A massive footprint was all that’s left of it. Screams were heard all throughout the bus, and the bus driver said to stay calm. Clovis sat down in his chair, trying to stay calm, and looked out his window. Standing right outside was a giant robot. The robot’s menacing eyes looked at him and smiled. “A worthy opponent he is.”

Clovis thought back to his history class at this point and began to realize what this was. The slum homes, or what the slum homes were inside of. This robot had holes in it and was overgrown, just like the slums of our city. “So, the robots from the slums. That means something woke it up. Something,” thought Clovis. As he was thinking in the bus, not caring about what was happening outside, everyone evacuated the bus before it was crushed, killing Clovis.

Clovis woke up in cold sweat. The 5th time reliving the dream before it happens. That means it was the 6th day. Clovis was beginning to forget now, so he took his knife and drew on his arm the number 6 into his skin. “Now I won’t forget,” whispered Clovis to himself. It was 3 in the morning, and Clovis was awake. His mom woke up at 6 or 7, so he had 3 or so hours today.

“Too little time,” thought Clovis. The city he lived in was going to end again, and he was starting to finally lose his hope. Though, knowing he was the only one who remembers what happened in another reality, he had to stop the robot.

“I have 2 choices. Stop whatever turned on the robot or stop the robot after it's on,” thought Clovis. Clovis began work on his 5th weapon. A neutralizer. A neutralizer that will stop the robot before it leaves the slums. That will stop it, right?

Clovis kept working till 8, and then said, “Good Morning!” as usual. His mother made him breakfast and he ate as fast as he could before the robot woke up. Though, even while running as fast as he could, the robot had already awoken, but he still had to use the neutralizer.

“Oh, a challenger?” said the robot. Clovis began to back away in fear. “The robot can talk!” he thought. He was scared with his legs shaking, but he still threw the neutralizer. The neutralizer stuck to the robot from the same adhesive as the last attempt, and the robot began to slow down, but only one part. The neutralizer landed on the right arm of the robot, and that arm completely stopped.

“Ahaha, good try. Try again... hmm, NEVER!” yelled the robot as Clovis was stomped on and killed again.

“CLOOOOVISSSS!” yelled the voice of the robot.

“NOOO! HOW DID YOU GET IN MY HOUSE!” yelled Clovis.

“Oh, well, come here!” yelled the robot. His arm began to move up the stairs.

“Stay away!” screamed Clovis. Clovis was tucked up in his room, crying. “This is a dream, right?” Or not. I don't know anymore. Clovis had already put a 7 on his arm before the robot yelled. Clovis was crying, but the robot didn't stop. He came to Clovis with his arm and crushed him.

“AHHHH!” yelled Clovis as he woke up in cold sweat. “So, it was a dream,” thought Clovis. He began to move very cautiously.

“Hey Clovis, what are you doing up so early?” asked Clovis' mom.

“Nothing just going to the bathroom!” said Clovis. Clovis began to think again, but his thoughts were jumbled. There was fear in his brain, and he couldn't get rid of it. Now knowing that a neutralizer won't work unless there are multiple, and the design for the neutralizer was already made, he began to make 6 neutralizers. The neutralizers were weaker than the one he made before, for the materials had to be split a lot more so it was weaker,

but it was still good he believed. With an hour left, he made some rocks in case he had to fight the robot more and ran out of the house early before his mom even came downstairs. This time, he made it to the robot before it woke up. There were people blocking the slums though. They were strong, burly people who could easily beat up Clovis. Clovis just waited outside the main slums until the robot woke up so he could put down what time it woke up.

8:05 is the time the robot woke up. Clovis was sitting down at that time, but as the ground began to rumble, he knew it had awoken. The robot looked down at him and smiled.

“Again Clovis? Keep trying,” said the robot.

“How did the robot know I came before?” Clovis questioned.

“You're confused, aren't you?” said the robot.

“What!” thought Clovis. He was losing his mind, he thought. He thought he was dead. The robot just kept laughing and stepped on Clovis again, killing him before he could use his neutralizers.

The cycle of pain, suffrage, and mind destruction that occurred to Clovis continued.

“It's been 500 days hasn't it now, Clovis right?” asked Clovis.

“Yes, yes yes! I think about 500 days,” said Clovis to himself.

“Is this one reality or a fake?” said Clovis in a different tone.

“Yes, yes yes! This one is a reality. The, the, the robot! The robot is gone!”

“Well ok Clovis. Let's, let's get everything ready for our final attempt,” said Clovis.

“Clovis? Clovis?” said Clovis' mom from downstairs.

“Oh well,” thought Clovis' mom. She knew her son was smart, liked school, and loved his life, so she just trusted him. At this time, Clovis was crying as he ran to where the robot was. He made it just as the robot woke up, just as he planned.

“Are you done yet? Your finally boring Clovis. I'll end you now,” said the robot. The robot's shell, that was made of metal and huge, fell off, revealing a floating core like structure that had weapons around it.

“This ends it, Clovis. Your power won't survive total destruction of your atoms!” screamed the robot. Clovis just looked at him and laughed.

“DEATH? I CAN’T DIE! You, you just haven’t realized that I am unkillable,” said Clovis as he stared down the robot. The robot looked confused and felt a little scared, but just shook it off. Clovis took off his jacket, revealing 20 neutralizers and a bomb in his hand. The robot began to look scared as Clovis threw all the neutralizers. They were moving at fast speeds, for rockets that boosted their speed were attached to them.

“AHAHA ROBOT!” The revealing of his core was his end. All the neutralizers went to him, but it didn’t affect him. The neutralizers just destroyed all the weapons he had.

“You! How dare you!” screamed the robot. It didn’t faze Clovis anymore. He had visualized his death to him enough that it didn’t make him cry anymore, for he let out too many tears already. He just began to laugh and laugh. The bomb Clovis held was beginning to tick and Clovis smiled. He ran with the bomb toward the floating core.

“You can’t get to me, no matter what!” said the robot core as it looked down at Clovis, but at the last moment, another neutralizer went off, making him fall to the ground.

“Wait no!” screamed out the robot. The bomb blew up, killing the robot and Clovis.

“Clovis? Clovis?” asked Clovis’ mom as she began to shake Clovis. He woke up with dead eyes and a dead facial expression.

“Mom, the robot is dead. My, my suffering mom. It’s gone. It’s GONE!” screamed out Clovis. Clovis’ mom looked at him with confusion, but just accepted it as a dream making him crazy.

Later, on the news, reports of a robot destroying the slums were shown, and Clovis’ tiny body moving were shown, but no one could tell. Clovis smiled, happy knowing he helped but in the process losing all that made him human and his emotions for feeling. Though, this calamity wouldn’t be the last, for the end and the last calamity of the land was near in the form of war, and Clovis had no clue.



Haley Westerfield
Middle School

Middle School

“MEATBALL SPONTANEOUSLY BURSTS INTO FLAMES IN 13-YEAR-OLD GIRLS STOMACH!” These are just some of the types of thoughts that run through my head each day. This thought came from the incredibly hot meatballs for dinner. I know it probably won’t burst into flames in my stomach, but in my defense, they are REALLY hot, especially since Mom just took them out of the InstaPot. Right! I forgot to introduce myself, how rude! I’m Haley Westerfield, future journalist, and current anxious middle schooler. I’ve always wanted to be a journalist writing the stories that make the front page in magazines and the newspapers. Going through middle school has given me a lot of practice. Many headlines such as “BOY GETS STUCK IN LOCKER, SHOVED BY BULLEY!”, “WATER FOUNTAIN PIPE BURSTS, IS THE FOUNDATION BECOMING MUD?” and my number one best, “GIRL TURNS INVISIBLE HIDING FROM OTHER KIDS” Okay, okay. The last one is just what I hope will happen to me, but it probably won’t. I’m in 7th grade, which trust me, it isn’t exactly the best. Especially not since we started distance learning, which I find to be a bunch of hogwash. Before distance learning there were many problems for a very anxious person like me. It was an entire fight in your head about whether or not to raise your hand in class. What if I get the answer wrong? What if people laugh? What if the teacher has me volunteer to share my work since I raised my hand? What if the teacher gives me extra credit points? What if I make new friends? What if the mean girls come after me? Maybe it would be nice to change it up a bit, come out of my shell. What if coming out of my shell is the death of me? “GIRL COMES OUT OF SHELL, HAS HEART ATTACK FROM EXCITEMENT” You see, after the fight, even if you do decide to raise your hand the question has already been answered and the subject has moved on. After the torment of one class, you have to fight your way to the next

dungeo- I mean- classroom for your next class.

Traveling through the halls is equivalent to the struggle of fighting a dragon for their gold. People everywhere all going the opposite direction, tons of voices and shouts, trying to avoid talking to people, getting across the school, not to mention getting into the classroom after all of the rest of the people and getting stared at. That's the worst. Lunch period is fine after you finish eating, you get to go sit in a secluded part of the courtyard until your next classes. But inside the cafeteria, let me tell ya, it's scary. There are many tables, all side by side in rows leading to the back of the cafeteria. Most people sit at the front tables, so there aren't as many people at the back tables. Most of the time I sit at the empty table next to the special needs class. It's nice hanging out with them. Some days some kids invade my table, so I stay as far away and eat as quickly as I can. I'm fine with people I've already known, like my three friends Holley, Mary, and Joelle. But when new people try talking to me, I get nervous and mess it up. After lunch period I go to my favorite class of the day, English Language Arts. ELA is the class where most of my participation is put at. In this class I'm not afraid to share, I talk to other students, and say out loud headlines such as, "STUDENT CAUGHT SNACKING IN CLASS, WHAT IS THE PUNISHMENT?", "STUDENT GETS A ON AMAZING PRESENTATION, WHO WILL BE NEXT?" and, "TEACHER DECLARED 'MOST FUN' BY MOST OF CLASS" ELA is where I make most of the new friends, like my friends Kenzie, Erik, and Addi. After ELA is the trek to PE, which is as good as PE can get. Then I walk home with Holley and Mary, sometimes Mary's friend Maddison joins us, she's alright. I go home and work on homework. I mostly stress about math homework. You see, at my old school I was transferred into the advanced math class, but they were still reviewing fractions and decimals. Then I switched to regular math at the school I'm at now, but they were doing algebraic equations!! I'm caught up, (Luckily, I'm a fast learner) but I'm still nervous. Middle school can be difficult for everyone, but it can also be fun and embarrassing, but for me, it's just loco.

Quick note from the author:

The stuff in this piece is not true, and the information is from when I was at school in 6th grade. This is just something that had popped into my head while I was eating meatballs for dinner one day, partially because my inspiration was being a dork.



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The Kraken Will Spoil the Picnic

My lover's eyes sparkle as the sun rays warm his face, the ribbon blue of his pupils blending into the ocean behind him. That smile paints across his face again, friendly and sharp. The shaking in my fingers subsides as he passes me a napkin. As I spread the thin paper over my lap, the ocean patters the bottom of the bench. The pit grows in my shriveling stomach, shooting up with pent up adrenaline as it grabs the back of my throat. My anxiety rises as we drift away, and the shoreline grows thinner. I try distracting myself by poking my side with the pen in my dress pocket. It doesn't help. But I look to him and can't help but feel safe as he unpacks the basket.

"I'm so glad we could do this," he beams, organizing the assorted jams and butters onto the red and white tablecloth. Breads, fruits, cheeses and crackers are pulled from the wooden basket beside him. My stomach rumbles, and relief floods over me as dread is replaced with hunger.

"Me too," my words sound coarse as I spit them out. The day is hot, and the salt polluting the sea air has made my mouth dry. Luckily, he produces a bottle of icy lemonade. His thin fingers wrap around a frosted glass, and he pours me some before helping himself. I chug the cold lemonade until the glass is half empty.

I've never liked the ocean. Dreams of sinkholes and sea demons threw me from my sleep many nights, where my urge to escape the blue purgatory sent me flying from my bed. I'd call out for my father in attempt to escape drowning, and each time an unpleasant taste of salt lingered on my tongue.

He insisted on a picnic. Lights would dance in his eyes and the corners of his lips would upturn as he begged for a lunch date out at sea. I allowed it, as it was his birthday. Excitement beamed throughout his body, and he awoke at dawn to drag a picnic table out to sea and pack his picnic basket with all my favorite things.

I imagine him, laboring under the purple sky still littered with stars, and feel comfort at the thought. He pushes his sandy hair back and claps his hands.

“Let’s eat!” he beams. I reach for a slab of bread and spread a generous lump of strawberry jam across it. I litter the crystal plate in front of me with grape vines and apple slices topped with wedges of cheddar cheese. The flavors complement each other nicely, and I’m beginning to enjoy the ocean breeze flowing through my hair.

We take breaks throughout our feast, talking and laughing as we always have. His laughter melts my heart, bubbling with the ocean. The still sea behind my love quickly morphs into points as the wind molds it into waves. The water bobbed and dampened the edges of the tablecloth. He expected it and quickly brushed it off. That pit began to grow again, as the water was getting rougher. Rougher, and rougher, and rougher.

The water moved and molded around us, and it wasn’t hard to tell we weren’t alone.

“Darling,” I said. “We have to go. How do we get back to shore?” It had just occurred to me that we had drifted far from land. So far that the beach houses that looked faint at the beginning of our luncheon became nonexistent.

“It’s fine dear, probably just some carp,” he said. “You haven’t even had seconds!” His playful argument wasn’t welcome in this situation.

“We need to leave,” I spat. I peeked under the checkered tablecloth to see if he stored some oars on the bottom of the table. Nothing greeted me but the tables bare underside, dampened by the splashing water.

“Can you relax?” he asked. “I spent all this time packing a lovely lunch and—” he was cut off by a tentacle, slimy and red, stealing the jam jar off the corner of the table. Terror raced through my heart and all I saw was red as I sat frozen.

“We need to go! Now!” I shouted. His face was grave, and in that moment his youthful complexion became dark and thin.

“Let’s pack up,” he muttered. I rushed to hand him dishes, platters, cups and napkins. As I hand him the last of the dishware, another tentacle produced from the blue abyss, landing on my wrist and snatching the plate from my grasp.

I scream, and the ocean shakes. The waves become jagged, tumbling over each other in a white foam. He rushes to toss the leftovers into the basket, but another limb reaches for the handle and submerges it in water. A bottle stuffed with paper napkins rolls out onto the bench.

Suddenly, water floods the table and our checkered cloth becomes drenched. He jumps onto the surface of the table, water rushing past his feet. I feel it's chill as it pools around my waist. It feels infecting, and I can feel the ocean waste poisoning my skin and ruining my dress. He pulls me up onto the table, and I freeze further as the breeze taunts me.

Finally, the water settles as a kraken the color of hellfire emerges from the sea. Its crimson body is riddled with orange stripes, it's beady eyes dark and soulless. Pearly white suckers ran up its arms, like shiny cup links on a well-tailored suit, it's stripes like fancy tangerine ties. The creature was paralyzing, and I couldn't take my eyes off of the beautifully terrifying being. My love wrapped his arms tight around me, muttering desperate pleas into my shoulder.

The Kraken attacked, pulling the cloth out from under us and sending us scrambling to our feet. It ripped the seats of the picnic bench board by board as if they were a wishbone. I stood paralyzed as another of it's disgusting limbs ripped my locket from my neck, a gift my lover gave me with the intent to keep me safe. He reached for it, and the Kraken wrapped its thick tentacle around his thin waist. My love was ripped from my arms, and his screaming halted as the Kraken submerged him under the water. They disappeared, and the ocean was still.

My cries were soundless. The ocean grew much larger as it flooded with my tears. I now float out at sea, my hands in the water, still hopeful that one day he'll reach up and cling to my weak fingers. The Kraken took everything from me. Everything but the pen in my dress pocket, and the bottle that managed to sneak from the basket. I apologize for the crinkled paper, but hopefully this note reaches shore one day, however far away that may be now. I write with the hopes that someone will come find us and help me seek vengeance on the Kraken that stole so much from me. For now though, I float, my hands still reaching out to the cold, cruel sea.

The Origin of Fairy Tales

“What are we going to do, Rion?” Demanded King Voltan, glaring impatiently at King Rion. “The world’s ending!”

King Rion slumped in his chair, shut his eyes, and rubbed his temples, trying to temporarily tune out of his stressful surroundings. After all, these past couple days had been rough. Kingdoms had fallen, families had been torn apart, and homes had been lost.

The crisis began several days ago. The kingdoms were all living peacefully together—when it came. Tiny crevices began forming across the land and slowly grew larger, opening up to a pitch-black abyss. It took forests, oceans, mountains—anything that crossed its path. No one knew what it was or where it came from, all they knew was that if you fell into it, you’d be lost to the Dark. When it began its reach to the kingdoms, panic spread like a plague. Cracks swallowed houses and castles, taking many innocent lives with it. The remaining citizens and royalty fled to the only remaining kingdom untouched by the Dark, King Rion’s kingdom. And here they were in his castle, gathered by the round table, trying to decide how to stop this horrible threat.

“There’s nothing we can do,” Queen Iris said calmly.

“But we can’t just sit here and wait for the Dark to take us,” Queen Lyta said, cradling her newborn daughter, who slept peacefully amongst all the chaos occurring. She looked to her child with determination. “I’ve lost too many people I care about to it, my husband, my sons, my subjects. I won’t let this be how we end.”

“Then what do you propose we do?” Questioned King Quarius. “There’s no army for us to fight. No real enemy threatening our borders. Just face it, Lyta, this is the end.”

“But...” She trailed off; she didn’t know what else to say. What he said was true.

“Lyta’s right,” Voltan turned his gaze to King Quarius. “People are being lost to the Dark, people we care about are being

lost. We're the leaders of our kingdoms! We're cowards if we don't do something!"

"You don't think I want to do something?" Queen Iris raised her voice. "I've lost people too, Voltan! But there is nothing we can do!" The royals argued back and forth. Lyta's daughter was crying from being awoken by all the tension. The monarchs' bickering grew louder, each trying to be heard over the other. And it was this loud arguing that brought King Rion back to his present surroundings.

"Stop this! All of you!" King Rion shouted. The whole room became quiet, even Lyta's daughter had stopped crying. He took a deep breath. "Is this really how you want to live your last day? We've already had people we care about taken from us. We shouldn't let the same happen to us." The other royalty grew quiet, ashamed.

"At least we're together," Iris spoke with a sad smile. And the royals sat there in silence, as they waited for their fate.

"We have a solution," Spoke a familiar voice.

They turned to see two wizards, an old man and a young woman. The man held a scroll and a wand in his hands. The woman too, held a wand in one hand and a thick book in the other.

"Merlin!" Queen Iris smiled, "Thank the Heavens, you're alive! We thought we'd lost you!"

Merlin bowed. "Sorry for worrying you, Your Highnesses. When this all started, my apprentice and I went deep into researching this problem."

"What is it? Do you know how to stop this?" King Rion and the other royals looked to them with hope.

"Why's this happening?" King Quarius asked.

Merlin showed them the scroll filled with scribbled notes of research. "Our world has been powered by magic for eons. This is what has kept our world together. After billions of years, our world has exhausted its magic, causing what we are experiencing now. There's no way to stop it, but after an extensive amount of research, I have found a spell that opens a gateway to another world. We can use it to transport everyone to a new world."

"But," Queen Iris interjected, "that'd take too long to get everyone to safety. There are thousands of citizens, not to mention all the other creatures seeking refuge here. You couldn't possibly

get everyone through in time.”

“That’s where Crystal comes in,” Merlin gestured to his apprentice. She stepped forward and presented them the book.

“I’ve created a spell that can trap everyone into this book,” she said, “Then, when I am through the gateway, I can reverse the spell and let everyone out,” Crystal looked to the kings and queens. “So, what do you think, Your Majesties?” After what seemed like a long discussion on the wizards’ idea, they eventually agreed.

“Are you sure you’re ready for this?” Merlin ask her, full of concern.

“I’m ready, master. I’ve been training under you for quite some time now.” She told him bravely.

“I could do it.”

“No, master,” Crystal protested. “Opening the portal is already a difficult spell; doing both would make you exhausted. The person who goes through should have some strength to face whatever is on the other side.”

Merlin smiled and placed a hand on her shoulder. “I’m proud of you, my apprentice.” He told her.

Everyone stood back as Merlin used his magic to collapse the table and walked to the center of the room. He mumbled the portal incantation, waving his wand in a circular motion and conjured a pale blue circle—the gateway. After he finished, he nodded to Crystal to do her spell.

“Let us out right when you get to the other side, okay?” King Voltan asked firmly.

“Yes, Your Majesty. Don’t worry,” She reassured him, though he still seemed worried. She opened the book and recited her enchantment.

“See you on the other side,” Queen Lyta smiled for the first time in ages, holding her baby lovingly. Their bodies glowed, turning into a tiny wisp of white light, which drifted into the book. The same happened to the rest of the royals, the remaining subjects, creatures, and Merlin, adding words and pictures to the once blank book.

When no more wisps came toward her, she ceased the spell and shut the book, seeing her master right on the cover. She began walking towards the portal, when suddenly, the ground shook and

shattered, revealing the Darkness.

Crystal ran, nearing the portal, when a crack appeared in front of her and she fell. Fueled with determination, she pointed her wand below her and used her magic to boost her back up, landing a distance away from the portal. She clutched the book tightly and began again. Crystal swerved and jumped over forming cracks, propelling herself when she fell.

After what seemed like endless dodging and falling, she found herself on a piece of cracking ground, surrounded by the Dark. The ground she landed on was far away from the gateway. Her heart pounded in her chest and the book weighed heavily in her hand; she pointed her wand to the ground, hoping to summon just one more burst of magic to shoot her to the portal. Weak sparks sprinkled from the tip; she was too exhausted to use any bigger amounts of magic. She didn't have enough strength to bring herself across. Just as she was about to give up, a final thought came to her mind.

“Merlin...” she whispered quietly to the book, a tear trickled down her cheek, “I’m sorry.” The piece of ground she stood on crumbled away and she began falling into the abyss. She took one last look at her trapped master; using the last bit of magic she could muster; she shot the book up and towards the portal. And as she fell, she smiled tearfully and watched as it disappeared beyond the portal.

Somewhere Beyond the Portal...

A boy and his younger brother trudged along a dirt path in their village. They had finished their daily chores early, so their parents had allowed them to go for a nature walk before supper. However, looking at nature was the last thing on their minds. The older boy walked ahead along the path, his head hanging down, watching the pebble he'd been kicking. Another boring day. Another day of learning boring school subjects and coming home to do even more boring chores. But most of all, it was another day the same as the last. School, chores, school, chores. Nothing seemed to change. The boy looked up from the path to gaze at the setting sun. He just

wished something would happen for once. Something different, something exciting, just something...

He sighed and went back staring at the path. Like that would ever happen. This is how they were going to be...for the rest of their life. With rage, he kicked his pebble and sent it soaring towards a puddle of mud. He watched as it arched through the sky and landed in the mud with a...thunk?

“Huh?” The boy stared at the puddle with confusion.

“What is it, big brother?” said the younger boy, who had picked up a stick with a caterpillar crawling on it.

“There’s something in there.” The boy said, pointing to the puddle. He knew they should’ve went back home, and he knew his mother wouldn’t like him coming back all muddy, but his curiosity overtook him. He reached into the mud and grabbed the mysterious object. As he lifted the object from the puddle, the mud slid right off, revealing to him exactly what it was.

“It’s a book.” Most of the mud was off, but the cover was hidden beneath patches of dirt, dust, and grass that still clung to it. However, surprisingly, the pages were a bright white.

“What does it say, Jacob?” Said the boy’s younger brother, making doodles in the dirt with his stick, the caterpillar munching on a leaf nearby.

Jacob brushed the grime off, revealing a beautiful cover. The book was a deep brown with gold encircling its spine. At the center of the cover, there was an old man in a long blue robe and pointy hat decorated with stars. His hands were stretched above him, as if praising the heavens, and in one hand, held a glowing white stick. Around the cover were castles and strange creatures unlike any he’d seen before. And right above the man, was the title.

“It’s called ‘Fairy Tales,’” Jacob said, opening the book and flipping through the pages.

“That’s a strange name,” His brother snorted, still making drawings in the dirt.

“Look at this, Wilhelm.” He dropped his stick and walked over to Jacob, taking a look. There were pictures of creatures and people with wings, horns, scales, and even fins. Stories about evil queens, princes turning into frogs, and many other spellbinding tales of wonder. It all seemed so real and enchanting. This wasn’t

like any stories they'd read in school or heard from their parents; this was something entirely different.

“Wow,” Wilhelm said, gazing at the illustrations with the same wonderment as his brother, “It looks amazing!” But their amazement was cut short when someone called for them.

“Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm! Come inside and wash up, it's time for supper!” Bellowed their mother from somewhere in their house.

“Coming mother!” Jacob hollered back, still fascinated by the illustrations and titles in the book.

“Can we bring it back, Jacob?” Wilhelm asked.

“Well, we can't—“Jacob began.

“Please?” Wilhelm pleaded, giving Jacob the look he gave their parents when he really wanted something. His mother wouldn't like them bringing back something they'd found outside into their house. Then again, they'd never found a book outside...

Wilhelm must've sensed his brother's change in thought because when he looked at Jacob, he smiled. So, book in hand, he and his brother returned home, with a new light shining in their eyes.

A Runaway Princess

Emmalee looked out to the ocean from her gilded cage. She had always been fascinated by the sea, but in eighteen years, had never left her home.

“Princess?” Her maid, Fern, pulled her from her fantasy. “The ball will start soon. You should get ready.”

“You look stunning, Your Grace.”

Emmalee glanced at herself in the golden mirror. Her red dress perfectly complemented her alabaster complexion, her chocolate brown hair and eyes. Her hair was piled on top of her head, as she usually wore it, with a diamond tiara for the special occasion. Though Emmalee always made sure the least amount of make-up was applied to her face as possible, the “least amount” for a Princess was still a ridiculous amount. Perhaps she did look stunning, but Emmalee did not care. She was taught that her beauty was everything, yet what was her beauty? A wonderful façade of rich frivolity. That was all.

Still, no matter how beautiful she was, her betrothed did not see her as anything more than her position. Lord Buntoc was truly a deplorable man, but the people saw him as a man of humble beginnings and a promising vision for the future. In reality, he was cruel and greedy. His vision promised high taxes, war, and worse. Their wedding was in less than forty-eight hours.

The ball was filled with the rich elite, and Emmalee was paraded around for them all to see by her husband-to-be. She used to feel less like an ornament and more like the future Queen; then her parents decided she needed a husband to rule the Kingdom himself. Ever since, she was the beautiful bride, not the future Queen.

It was several hours before she was able to slip away, taking a servant’s passage back to her chambers to escape for the night.

Before Emmalee reached her destination, Fern rounded a corner and nearly knocked the Princess off her feet. Emmalee righted herself and looked to Fern, realizing that the maid was shaking, and her eyes were as wide as dinner plates.

“Fern, what is the matter?”

Her wide eyes stared into Emmalee’s for what felt like an eternity before she stuttered out a response.

“The Lord, he... he plans...”

Emmalee’s mind was racing, grasping for whatever Fern would say next, but with how flustered she obviously was, Emmalee knew she had to stay calm for her friend’s sake.

“It’s alright, Fern, you’re okay. Take your time, dear.” Fern looked Emmalee in the eyes, steeled her nerves, and spoke a horrible truth.

“The Lord plans to frame you for treason, Princess.”

Emmalee knew Fern was telling the truth, not only because she trusted Fern with her life, but because she knew Buntoc was more than capable of imprisoning someone for his own gain, no matter who.

Emmalee had to get away. Tonight.

Fern and Emmalee waste no time preparing for the Princess’s escape. As soon as she was back in her chambers, Emmalee packed a small bag with essential items while Fern went to fetch Emmalee’s disguise.

An hour later, under cover of night, Emmalee was running away from everything she ever knew. Emmalee arrived at the docks before dawn. Exhausted, she found a space behind some crates and laid down, pulling her cloak tightly around herself so no one would see the runaway princess.

Emmalee was awoken by rough laughter. She froze as the wooden boards beneath her shifted with the weight of many men. There was more laughter, followed by a single voice that called out, cursing.

“I left my wallet at the tavern again, boys. You go on ahead without me.”

Murmurs of acknowledgment followed, and Emmalee felt the boards shift more as all, but one man moved along. Emmalee held

her breath, waiting for the shifting to tell her the man had turned back.

When the voice called out again, it was much closer. “You can come out now.”

Emmalee did not respond, internally cursing herself that she had not even been gone a day and was already found. No doubt the castle had already been searched from highest spire to deepest basement, and the Princess was nowhere to be found. There had to be a reward for Her Highness’s return.

“There’s no use hiding there like a rat, young man. These crates will be moved within the hour and you’ll be found out anyway.”

He could have been bluffing. Either way, Emmalee did not have any choice but to stand up slowly, her cloak moving to reveal her disguise. Emmalee’s eyes met those of a young man, tanned from working on the sea and perhaps a few inches taller than she was. In her maid’s dress, hair losing its curl, and face bare, the man did not recognize her. One moment his face was filled with surprise – he thought a boy had run away to join a crew, not a woman – and the next it was filled with shock and genuine concern. He moved quickly, making sure no one was within sight or earshot, then whispered to her.

“You’re the Princess. What are you doing here?”

For some reason, she could not explain why, Emmalee trusted the man and told him the truth. As she spoke, she came to the realization that she could never go home. Not only to her castle, but she could never be safe in her Kingdom as long as Buntoc was running it. Emmalee saw the wheels turning in the man’s head as she told her story, formulating some kind of plan.

“You need to get out of the country, and fast,” he said. “I can get you on a ship leaving this morning, and if no one recognizes you on the way, you should be safe.”

“I do not even know your name, sir, and you expect me to agree to come with you on some ship? Even I know better.” She responded incredulously.

He met her eyes and sighed. “My name is Julian, Your Highness, and the ship I am proposing you come aboard is the Lady Ida.” Emmalee recognized the name, a rather prominent trading vessel, one of the biggest exporters in the country. If the

man – Julian – was telling the truth, it might be Emmalee’s best option.

Emmalee pulled the hood of her cloak far over her face to cover it from sight. “Alright,” she said, “but if you lay one hand on me, sir, I swear to the heavens you will pay.”

“Deal. You’ll need to keep your head down until we get to the galley, that is the kitchen on the ship-”

“I know.”

He gave her a look before continuing. “And you’re going to need a different name. Do you have any nicknames?”

She scoffed. “Everyone I know refers to me by one title or another, so no, I do not have a nickname.”

“Alright, we’ll go with ‘El’ then, if you’re okay with that.” She nodded. “Ida’s docked nearby, so it shouldn’t take long to get there. It would be less conspicuous if I...”

He trailed off, and El’s eyes fell on his hand, poised to rest on her back. She weighed her options once again. Deciding that Julian was still the best one, she looked him in the eyes and nodded. He placed his hand on her back, between her shoulder blades, and ushered her as fast as he could, without drawing suspicion, towards the Lady Ida.

The morning sun lit up the sails of the Lady Ida, reminding El of square-shaped clouds. Crewmembers bustled about the deck, double-checking things before the ship left port. Julian rushed El past everyone, straight down a flight of stairs into a dark room. Adrenaline rushed through her veins – had she just traded one terrible situation for another?

The darkness was driven away as Julian lit a lamp, revealing the galley of the ship. There were no tables, as El had seen in diagrams of other rather expensive ships. This galley was small; an island sat in the middle of the room with a gap on the right to allow passage, near the entrance on either side were barrels, assumedly stocked with food. On the opposite side of the island there was a line of cupboards along the left and a potbelly stove on the right.

Julian gestured to space. “Welcome to my lair,” he said dramatically.

“You’re... the chef?”

He nodded once.

“And you cook for an entire ship?”

He nodded again.

“How many crewmembers are there? Surely it’s difficult to accommodate the whole ship with this tiny kitchen.”

“One, do not insult the galley. Two, about one-hundred and twenty-five.”

A bell rang above, interrupting their conversation.

“I should get up there.” Julian looked to El, “stay here, I’ll bring the Captain to meet you soon. The hatch locks from both sides, and the Captain and I are the only ones with keys, so no one else can get in. Be back soon.” He rushed up the stairs, leaving El alone in the unfamiliar galley.

It felt like ages before El heard Julian’s voice nearing the galley. It sounded like he was not alone, which she expected, but something was off. Julian was projecting his voice too much, like he was speaking so that everyone would hear him rather than those he was actually speaking to. El slowly approached the hatch, peeking through the holes, trying to see the reason for the shift in Julian’s voice.

“This really is unexpected, Inspector, the Lady Ida has plenty of documentation at this port. I don’t see where this suspicion came from.”

El panicked – if the inspector saw her, she would go straight back to the castle and face the wrath of her betrothed. She had to hide.

Another voice, authoritative and strong, joined the conversation. “Indeed, the Ida is a prominent ship in these waters, boy, but the Princess has gone missing. One could never be too careful in situations such as these.”

All the barrels were sealed, she could not hide in one of those.

“Of course, sir,” Julian replied, starting to unlock the hatch. El leaped over the counter as quietly as possible and shoved herself in a cupboard next to some rather smelly fish just as footsteps began to descend into the galley. There was a gap between the boards in her hiding spot just big enough for her to see the inspector stop at the bottom of the stairs. There was a pause while he looked around the room.

“Do you always waste candles when no one is around?” He pointed to the still-lit lantern.

“I was just here, inspector. I only left to greet you when you arrived.”

They started walking around the room, out of El’s sight, and she tried to calm her heart. It was hard to discern the men’s footsteps from the blood rushing in her ears. She felt the boards shift as he neared her hiding place. Just as the inspector was about to open the cabinets, a voice piped up.

“Sir, we’ve completed the search. No Princess in sight.”

The inspector sighed; “Very well. Sorry to barge in during your departure preparations. High tide and smooth sailing, boy.”

A full minute passed after the sound of the inspector’s footsteps faded, Julian whispered for El.

She slowly opened the cupboard door and Julian gave her a handout.

“Well,” she said, “that was too close for comfort. Literally.” Julian chuckled and nodded. “Yeah. Perhaps meeting the captain should wait until we’ve left port.”

An hour later, after having proven herself to the Captain and gaining her permission to stay onboard, El leaned against the railing at the prow of the Lady Ida. She breathed in the fresh sea air, wind blowing in her hair. She had traded her crown for a life on the sea. And she couldn’t be happier.



The Simplest Casualty

It was a miracle that my place lived on. I had designed the halls, frost blue domes, skylights in the ceiling. Ancient art adorned its scroll-lined walls, tragedies. But it fell into disrepair. After a few eras, ice paved the floors. Yet it was still standing, this simple, dust-coated structure. It enjoyed many lives, morphing from library to observatory to museum. Each century, the walls twisted overnight, and the building renewed itself: three lives for the last three hundred years.

I had lived through every one of them.

I don't know how I made it this far. I just woke each day to sweep the halls, fearing the weight of death on my ancient bones. But the sun rose again, and dust demanded to be cleaned. Throughout the day, I went unnoticed. A mute servant tidying things up. I'd hide for days when anybody looked at me too long. On good nights, I delved through a scroll. Even though three centuries had passed, I never read them all.

The first century was the hardest. My loved ones died before my eyes. My mother was gone beforehand, but when my sister left, I couldn't go to her funeral. The second was an awkward journey on my own, but I was finally invisible by the third. I lived my lives through the scrolls. It was all I needed it seemed--work and writing--to make it through the third century. But the fourth was rapidly descending on me, and the popularity of my place was oddly booming.

Today, the owner of the building summoned us beneath the dome. "We are here to celebrate the coming of the fourth century of -----! Designed by famous architect... public party..." His vague promises dazzled us. Soon enough, tinsel and ornaments danced down the halls, hovering over mismatched tables and chairs. The iced floors were to be melted the day before the party. The date was set, and we servants shuffled back into work.

That night, after we closed up, a child lingered in the field

outside. He was playing in the grass, his parents nearby. I silently shut the glass doors behind the others, pocketing the key. I sat in a chair, opening my favorite scroll.

I crave escape. A simple line from a sweet anthology that whisked me away. This was the wind under my wings. The hope that tomorrow would be better, bring some joyous light illuminate my path. I smiled as I read the first stanza.

A scream pierced me. I jolted, scroll crumpling in my hands.

Quick screeching. Animalistic, high-pitched, mid-struggle. I snapped up. My body trembled as I ran to the source. Fear stalked my steps.

It was the boy, hunched over. Something writhing nearby. The moon glaring at him.

Then he ran into the forest. A dead squirrel left under the shadows.

I turned, grabbed a broom, hands trembling as I swept. I couldn't yell at him. Then he'd know about me, and even though the other servants didn't care, the owner despised me. I cleaned as much as I could. But I knew he'd would throw a fit. The stench, body: the disdain, judgment. Such sheer audacity: how dare a respectable man allow an animal corpse to stay?

Think of the children!

Death was our curse. This was supposed to be the immortal dome.

Reality couldn't touch us.

Here was the perfect escape. Always had been. And life's abruptness disrupted it all.

I couldn't save the squirrels. Or the sparrows the next day, bunnies in traps. Each morning, I dragged the hope of the celebration from the bloodied shadows of these deaths.

He always turned away, so I could never see his face. *I had to see his eyes.* How else could I know who he was, why he did it? For nights I stayed up, waited for him to turn. But I always blinked asleep, the sun forcing me awake. The festivities were too soon. There was nothing I could do.

The week blurred past, and the day before the celebration settled upon us. It was ridiculously stressful, trying to organize while children messed with decorations. Melting the ice was the

most overwhelming task.

But night fell again. The other servants exchanged fake sympathies and promises of joy. I watched them go and locked the doors. Settling in a chair, I sighed, curled up with my favorite scroll again. Halfway through a paragraph, the screeches came. The paper fell from my hands, soaked in an instant.

How did I forget?

I pulled the story out, but it was completely illegible. Spurred by this loss, I ran through the building, the water splashing at my ankles. There he was: lying on the ground, looking impossibly small. The moon hovered above his form, watching gently instead of scorning. Maybe, just this once, I could do something.

Instinct took over. I pulled the key from my pocket, thought a quick prayer, and slammed the door open.

The key clattered to the ground. I dashed out. The wind at my back--hadn't felt that in years. It was rushing, urging me on. My feet slammed on the grass, feet wobbling when I reached him. I grabbed him, hoping my arms won't give out, dreading to look at the creature he was torturing. I had to know what it was, so I glanced--then froze on the spot.

There were no twitching critters.

It was him crying.

Something struck me then. I would never know why *this* seemed so odd, stranger than me picking up a random child and dragging him into my place. But I hurried inside, the boy sniffling in my arms.

I shakily locked the door, wishing for my building to hold. Despite the small trembles, it seemed okay. With a sigh, I limped my way towards a chair, placed the boy in it. Somehow, his tears lessened, and he only let out a snuffle every once and again. I don't know why I'd brought him here. But I just had to get him out of this field, those dead critters, and morphing shadows. Now I was here, resisting collapse, miraculously alive.

Then it crashed into me. *I could've just left.*

All I had to do was train myself, build-up, gain some sort of stamina, feel the wind; then on some night when no one was here, leave, watch the building *fall*, find my escape-

A crackle burst through my thoughts. I groaned as pain rushed to my head, and I clutched it in vain. But it came from above: it

was the building, it was my body, it was the stupid connection between the two, and I vaguely wished everything, and everyone would survive the night.

I gathered the courage to look up. A crack broke through the dome, a faint curve etched below the night.

“Oh.” A single word drifts from me. Soft and slow like a feather on my ears.

Screams to anyone else.

If I had the energy, I’d cower. Slap a hand over my mouth, pretend I wasn’t the one who said it, turn around, take off. If I could leave? Run, run for miles, lose myself to these endless forests I gazed at longingly in those early nights, missing the world when I was dropped right into it, dreaming of the chase, the wind, the ocean. But all the energy was drained from me. Centuries of hiding, decades of sleep under the floor--I just couldn’t do it anymore.

My eyes rolled; stomach clenched. My eyes on the moon, the abyssal darkness that highlighted its light... I felt someone’s soft, tentative gaze.

The boy staring at me. His perplexed eyes shining periwinkle. Simple and innocent. Lacking judgment.

I wanted to yell. He made me lose that stupid story.

But I understood. He knew what I was saying.

By some stroke of fate or stupidity, we were the same. Perfect outcasts.

My vision blurred, coughs wracking my body. His eyes widened. He tried to pull me up.

I collapsed.

To Alya

*I craved escape:
these scuffed walls,
they forgot to decay;
and not even the wind
set me free.*

*Think of the children!
Death couldn’t touch us:
us foolish youth who
wandered the edge!*

*Think of the freedom!
I could leave:
but aged scrolls,
they cast ancient spells
and I will die reading
every last word.*

It was the simplest thing my sister had ever written, but it was the wind under my wings. Our letter frozen in time. Something lyrical. *Real.*

Why had I only remembered the beginning? Because it was about me? Because her end was too idealistic?

Because I thought I wouldn't be forgotten?

You'd think this was a family without connections. Isolated, silent. Growing under a place of private laughter and domesticity. But no, we had our fun. Endless dances and terrible gatherings.

My mother built my place from the ground and told me I designed it. *It was a dream from you.* Then she was gone. And we were alone: an empty estate, empty mind, empty conversations, darkening shadows at the edges of the forest. True isolation.

But why is freedom hinged upon others? Why would I need others? Where is my escape from reality? I yearned for an abyss between me and the world. A place where everything froze.

Alone. I thought. It didn't matter who was around me. I was always so, so alone.

But I was too young. And I built this place, found the magic in the shadows, felt it pulse within me. And my damned immortality was created. The expense? My voice stolen away. Nobody remembering me.

So here, I will write an end for her, for you to remember:

*"Freedom was impossible,
when traded for immortality.
but by some stroke of fate
and stupidity
we met each other in our eternities."*

I woke up. My body was practically frozen. The water drenched me, nearly reaching my nose. But I stood up. I was so close to the edge that even rising knocked out my breath.

I'd taken so much more neglect. A little bit of rot and glass damaged me more than I thought.

I turned to the boy, shaking him awake.

"You don't have anywhere to go," I muttered. A vague enough statement for how shellshocked we probably were.

He blinked up and shrugged as if that was helpful. I sighed, turning to pace. A faint glimmer caught my eye. I crouched down, picking up the key. "Here." I placed it before him. He stared at it, watching it warily. But he took it and felt immortality.

With the last of my strength, I gave him the poem. My sister's voice seeped from me into his bones. And he told me his hope. The simplest of things--dancing with friends. But we both knew he wanted that forever. I wished him all the luck I could give under this cursed roof.

Then I turned away and walked far into the forest.

He could speak at least. It was just his eyes that gave him away. But tonight, veiled by a mask, he would dance beneath the moon. Immortality would become his friend.

The fourth century finally descended upon us, and my place morphed into a ballroom.

The festivities went on. For years the boy hid until he grew and learned the rhythms, dancing waltzes in the moonlight, key in pocket. I watched him from the shadows, saw him grow up. He saw me a few times too, but those periwinkle eyes never shone as bright as before, no tears falling from his lashes. All emotion dead.

I learned long ago to stop caring. I had lived too long. I wished to melt into shadow, sink into the sea, and go up to the heavens to my family.

But I couldn't. The building had to live for him.

Then he gave up. The ruins fell on him, and we were just casualties.

But our souls lived. None of us were remembered. Forever we were destroyed.



Untitled

The brown long haired girl, Pia, woke up to a plain day. The binds of the curtain shut out the sunlight. Pia trudged out of the bed as she swept the curtains outside. It took the rays blinding her for the time of day to be apparent. The weather was clear. It has been for the past few days. She searched the sky for clouds as she told herself she was content.

She would always slip on the nearest set of clothes to her hand and hop on her worn bike. As she advanced to school, she analyzed her surroundings. The neighbors have always been the same in this pleasant neighborhood. The old guy in the yard cracked his back. The houses look slightly worn down. The gate was worn off. Still, she was content.

Soon enough, it was lunchtime in the cafeteria. She sat at the table nearest to her. Sure enough, her seatmate Greta came over to the same spot and greeted her. She decided to try space buns today. As if a simple low ponytail was enough. She strangely felt a tinge of bitterness towards that. She reminded herself to be content. The conversation went on like usual. Nothing out of the norm.

Wait. A volunteering/work opportunity on Tuesday? My friend offered me one? At the vintage film shop? Sounds interesting, I'll try it out. The conversation went. The world shone brighter in her eyes for a second. It would've lasted permanently if it weren't for that big brain of hers. Suddenly, the most random thoughts hit her in a flash. She saw herself sitting on the chairs of the studio of her favorite talk show beaming... while consumed by fame. She saw herself- someone else analyzing remnants of history time and time again... while trying not to collapse from the lack of sleep. She saw someone make an intense discovery from the past uncovered... while avoiding her surroundings. Yes... she everything. Did she?

She pondered too much to get out of the tangent of fear. Yet

she pondered too little that she couldn't contain that wretched two-letter word that she feared would come out of her mouth. Oh no!!! She thought to herself. Too late. She felt her mouth and voice generating the response that would normally follow that horrible word...

Greta said nothing... After a while "Suit yourself," she responded with a smile that was apparent in her mouth, but not in her eyes.

The homework today was really tough. The sepia of the movie was very distracting, but so were the liquids in her eyes. She decided that she would still continue on if that would distract her more. I am content, Pia thought.

The day has ended. The buildings have been weary. Everything has been tiring. She looks up at the stars and expects to see a wide variety of colors in it. Nope. Just pitch black. At least to her. Eventually, she gives up. She wishes things were different, she wishes she would've said yes, she wishes she would've done something! However, she smothers the thought to sleep. Behind her, one bright star gleams in the background. That's just the moon or the lights. No stars this time, she thought. The chill of the pillow faded into her cheek as she told herself, she was content with this...



Ethan Gaudioso-Nash
High School

Arthur Cummingham, Indiana Doper

I sat on the leather couch; my arms crossed as people around me danced to the bass of the throbbing music. Drinks in red, white-lipped cups were strewn all over the room filled with singular alcoholic drinks or concoctions of everything there is. Strobe lights flashed red, blue, and green all around, lighting the otherwise dark room. Smoke seemed to dance around the lights, as plumes of fumes exhausted from the e-cigs and marijuana joints. While basking in the lights, a friend sat next to me. He took out of his pockets a couple of sugar cubes, popping one into his mouth before putting the rest onto the mahogany table. He gestured towards the cubes for me to take, then sat back as he swigged the cube down with a hard shot of whiskey. I eyed the sandy white cubes. Being around this crowd for a while, I know what they are, but I've never been on acid before. My eyes were already bagged and seemed so dreary, so I picked up one of the cubes. I looked around the room as some sniffed the gravel in the kitchen, while others threw their syringes to the side as they continued to dance.

My mind seemed like a sea of dazed thoughts as I nonchalantly plopped the cube in the back of my mouth. As it dissolved, it had a sugar texture, but a bitter taste as it left my mouth.

I don't know how long my mind drifted for, forgetting the acid entirely, but my body quaked for a minute as my eyes dilated and I became alert. I got up as my legs shook a bit. The room seemed to bounce with the music, I could feel the beats of the music transcend around me. The words of the song blurred at me in the air in all different fonts. The colors of the lights seemed to be so much more vivid, as they spotlight the patterns of the carpet as they moved. I smiled, as everything seemed so psychedelic in the moment.

As if someone punched me in the gut, everything around me began to change. The walls seemed to breathe in and out, the paint

peeling from the grey walls. I turned around as I was now alone in the room, mirrors of all shapes surrounded me like being inside a fun maze at a carny. The mirror I was looking into, I was not in it, just manikins of people, all of the mirrors around me were like this; plastic, lifeless manikins seemingly stuck in their dance pose for eternity. Lifeless, if only for a few minutes. Their arms began to move, as their faces morphed into monstrous figures unrecognizable as any human. Everywhere I looked they were reaching for me, there was a sound of glass shattering behind me as a mirror opened up into a hallway. I jumped through as plastic arms reached for my clothes.

The hallway seemed to go on forever as I endlessly took turns and continued to walk down the corridor. The velvet walls were illuminated by an orange light while the felt carpet ran on the ground with blue and green zebra patterns. Now and then, I would hear a scream or smell something that wasn't there. Maybe eyes staring from a crack in a door, or whispers coming from the creaks in the floorboards. At the end of the hallway, I reached a red brick wall which was graffitied with an etching of some tentacled monster that looked like something from HP Lovecraft. The tentacles began to move as it gritted jagged teeth at me, its black eyes like coal and its skin like a leathery alligator. A cold sweat began to run down my forehead and my mouth became dry. I quickly darted to the left up a flight of stairs.

Every step I took, I felt as if the thing behind me was closer to entangling me within its slimy grip. I could feel every heartbeat as if it was ringing my body like a gong. The stairs moved like waves as the walls grew and shrunk every second. I wondered if this was how Alice felt when she fell through the rabbit hole.

I swung open a door. The air seemed to thicken, and I could feel moisture come all around me. I was standing at the edge of a cliff, below were sharp rocks being hit by the never-ending sea a vast in front of me, the smell of a salty sea breeze filling my nostrils. I looked behind me as I gazed upon the demon of my dreams. The monster was so monstrous that it made me shake and quiver while it loomed above me. I whipped the sweat from my brow as I took a step back to the final amount of land there was before the edge of the cliff ran out. The demon reached out, its cold black eyeballs staring with no emotion into the depths of my

mind. I closed my eyes.

Feeling a hand on my shoulder, I slowly opened my eyes. I was met by no demon, but a man in a police uniform. He proceeded to try to persuade me to step from the edge of the building. I was confused and my heart seemed to race, as I sweated like I ran a marathon. I could feel my stomach churn as if I was going to throw up. I looked behind me to see I was three stories above the ground, I quickly bounced backward in bewilderment, the cop grabbing me.

I woke up in an ambulance, the paramedics frantically calling out my high blood pressure levels and heart rate, while I laid staring at the ceiling. The medic reassured me that I wasn't going to die, yet I couldn't help thinking of it as I could feel my eyelids getting heavier. My whole life could come to a screeching end from what, taking drugs? From the day I was first coerced into taking drugs, by so-called friends, I've had an addiction worse than many addicts twice my age. The fact I hadn't been hospitalized before this would surprise any doctor. In the moment, I watched as my life flashed before my eyes. Years of substance abuse, no high school diploma, failed relationships with my parents; everything seemed to stem from drugs. Maybe when my friend asked if I wanted a joint, or when I was offered a sugar cube when I knew what it was, I should've said no. Maybe, while my eyes close and my consciousness drifts, if I hadn't accepted those drugs, I'd still be alive.

The Waterfall

My worn-out tennis shoes crunch against the rocky ground, each step a reminder that they weren't meant for this sort of hiking. But if I made this hike a year ago, I can definitely do it now, blisters or no blisters.

That thought spurs me forward a bit faster, enough that I trip, barely catching myself on a nearby tree so I don't fall on my face. I shake my head, glaring up at the forested trail like it betrayed me. I'm not even sure it's familiar anymore. It was hard enough to find the trailhead in the pre-dawn light that I could have made a wrong turn at any point.

When I got in the car this morning, it hadn't even crossed my mind that I might get lost on the way to the waterfall. Then again, I didn't exactly do much planning for this. Hence the blister-inducing shoes. I barely remembered to grab a flashlight on my way out the door. Without it, getting lost wouldn't just be possible, it would be inevitable.

Such is the price to pay of getting to the waterfall and back before my high school graduation at noon.

The sound of footsteps behind me makes me freeze. It's too early for me to be here, let alone anyone else. "Callie?" A voice calls, as if searching for a lost dog. I recognize it instantly and groan.

"You've got to be kidding me," I say as I step back into the middle of the trail and face my brother. Relief flashes across his face. It's not an out-of-place look on him, thanks to how often he thinks he needs to clean up after me. I thought that might end when he went away to college, but now it's like he spends his time in Pennsylvania bottling his protectiveness so he can dump it all out on me at once. "Can't you leave me alone for just a few hours? Is that so hard? I'm a freaking adult now!"

"An adult would know better than to run off in the middle of the night by herself."

I resist the urge to point out that it isn't the middle of the night. But with the trees crowding the sky above us, it might as well be. I shift my grip on my flashlight before turning and continuing down the path.

"That's it?" Max asks, following. "No explanation?" I scowl, not answering, or even bothering to look at him. "You shouldn't have followed me."

"If you didn't want me to follow you, you shouldn't have hit that garbage can when you were pulling out of the driveway and woken me up. You're lucky Mom and Dad's room is on the other side of the house."

I speed up.

"Besides," Max continues, "I'm here, and you're not getting rid of me."

"You're right. You'll get rid of yourself in a week, so I don't have to worry about it. If only you could hurry it up a bit so I could do this on my own, like I wanted."

Max is silent for long enough that I can't stop myself from looking over my shoulder to see if he's still there. He's looking down at his feet, his dark hair falling into his face. "You don't have to push me away. I feel bad enough as it is."

I would argue that he hasn't been home long enough for me to push him away. Just two days, since his school got out earlier than mine. But with how close we were before he left, two days is enough to see the difference, so I say, "Not bad enough to stay."

He shakes his head. "Callie—"

I cut him off. "I don't want to hear it."

Thankfully, he doesn't say anything else. My flashlight eventually loses its purpose and I'm able to tuck it in my backpack. In the increased light, the trail is even less recognizable. When we come to a fork, I just stop and stare between the two paths without any idea which one leads to the waterfall.

"I think it's this way," Max says, his voice tight as he starts down the left path. I follow, since I don't have any better ideas. We only make it a few steps down the path before he says, "I'm sorry I have to go back for the summer, okay?"

I don't answer.

"It's not like I want to leave you. It's just—" He takes a deep breath in that way he always does before he gets starry-eyed about how awesome Penn State is, and how it'll change his life, and how

he's so much happier now.

"I know," I say. "Penn State is great. You're great. You deserve each other."

"That's not it. I mean—yeah, summer term will help me graduate sooner, but that's not why I'm doing it." He doesn't elaborate.

"Why, then?" I prompt.

"That's all you get until you tell me why you decided to go on a sunrise hike where you can't see the sunrise." He looks over at me, a teasing smile on his face.

I sigh, deciding to be honest. "Last time we went to the waterfall; the world was normal. It was right. Now, it's anything but. Maybe I just want to—" My voice catches in my throat and I try again. "Maybe I just want to go back."

Max stops, turning so he can put his hand on my shoulder with mock solemnity. "You wanted to go back to a time when we hung out together, and you didn't invite me?"

I brush his arm away, unable to stop myself from smiling. "Yes, I did."

I'm saved from telling him why when we come up to what looks to be the end of the trail. In front of us rises a fifteen-foot rocky cliff face. "I guess you don't remember this trail any better than I do," I say, already starting back towards the fork in the road.

"I do remember this trail, thank you very much," Max says, slipping his fingers through the loop at the top of my backpack and spinning me around. "Don't you remember how I had to help you up last year?"

I cock my head. That does sound familiar. Max's words from a year ago come back to me: When I told you, I was taking you somewhere off the beaten path, I meant it.

He wouldn't tell me how he knew about it, which made it even more magical.

"Do you want to go first, or do you want me to?" Max asks as he steps up to the wall.

"You go first."

"Alright. Watch where I put my hands and feet." Max then scales the wall with the grace of someone who used to dream of free soloing, climbing sheer rock faces without gear. Our parents were relieved enough when he told them he'd rather be a journalist that they said they'd pay for all his college.

Once at the top, Max sits down and leans over the edge so he can coach me. I mimic him as best I can, only needing a few corrections. It's only fifteen feet, but with how it tears up my fingers and makes my legs ache, it might as well be fifty.

I refuse my brother's hand when I get to the top, instead trying to pull myself up on my own. But my elbow slips from where I hooked it over the edge, almost sending me to the ground below. At the last second, Max grabs my arm. The whole front side of my body scrapes against the rock face as he pulls me up.

"Hey, are you okay?" he asks.

I ignore him as I get to my feet. There isn't a trail up here, just a small area up against another cliff. If I'm remembering right, the waterfall should be close. Maybe it was off to the left—

"Callie!" Max shouts. The forest itself seems to flinch at the sudden sharp noise.

"What?" I turn to see him looking at me worriedly.

"I don't know what's up with you, or why you hate me all of a sudden, but you can't be so reckless, okay?"

"I don't hate you, and I'm not being reckless!" I say. Max raises an eyebrow. "I'm not. I just want to get to the waterfall, okay?"

He nods, apparently seeing that he won't get a better explanation out of me. "It's this way," he says, pointing to the right.

Of course it is.

We continue through the trees, pulling out our flashlights again when the foliage gets thick enough that the light of the sunrise can't make it through. Max keeps us close to the side of the cliff, so we don't lose our bearing.

It's only about ten minutes before we come into a clearing. The cliff towers high above us, with a basin at the bottom.

But there isn't a waterfall.

I walk down into the shallow basin, half-expecting the water to appear. It doesn't.

I can't believe this. We hiked all the way up here for nothing.

Still staring up at the empty place where the waterfall should be, I sit down hard, splaying my legs out in front of me. I start to feel strangely empty.

Max sits next to me, and I don't tell him to get away, or leave me alone. Suddenly, I don't want to.

"So much has happened since last year," I say.

"When we came to the waterfall, it felt like nothing was ever going to change, and that you weren't actually going to leave, and that we would be okay. I just wanted to go back."

Max puts an arm over my shoulder, and I lean into him like I have dozens of times, after fights and heartbreaks and loneliness. I've missed him so much this past year but shoved it down. Only now do I let myself feel the sadness of being without my best friend.

"I want to go back too," he says after a minute. "I want us both to be kids together forever. But that just isn't how the world works."

"I know," I sigh. "I know we can't stay the same forever. It's just—I'm scared. How did you do it? How did you leave?"

He takes a deep breath. "I still don't know sometimes." He seems to consider his next words carefully. "Leaving is just one of those things you do. You don't want to, and you don't know how it'll work out, but you do it anyway. I left because I had to, and so will you. It'll be hard, and college will be strange at first, but your only other option is to cower at home for the rest of time. That doesn't sound like much of a choice at all, does it?"

I laugh weakly. "No, it doesn't."

We sit there together for a long time, finally catching up like we should have been doing since he got home. We talk about his time at Penn State, and how cool the University of Chicago will be when I get there this fall. He tells me why he's staying for the summer, because he's convinced he's hit his big break with this famous newspaper. I'm surprised when I find myself understanding. I know if I got the chance to work with some of the best biologists out there, I wouldn't pass it up.

When the light of the sunrise starts to paint the cliff face, I feel so much better than I did this morning. I almost suggest missing my graduation to stay just a little while longer in this empty waterfall basin.

As I look over at my brother, who loves me enough to follow me at three in the morning just to make sure I'm okay, I realize that I found what I was looking for, even though the waterfall's gone.



A Prelude to Prearth

Over ten million years ago, when our planet was but a babe of rocks and magma, a plernet collapsed into it. Now, what is a plernet? Funny you should ask, because, to be honest, very few people really know. I suppose it is only those who control the forces of fate - and thereby the forces of good and evil - that truly know. I, for one, believe it to have been some kind of planet of magical beasts. Some believe it was simply a giant magical rock. Whatever it was, it collided into the ball of rock and magma that is our Earth and shattered into millions of tiny fragments - practically dust - and settled around the Earth. Out of these came life.

Not plants and animals as we know them - there was all manner of creatures - dragons, unicorns, alamin, blancvie, even the dark ones such as trolls, goblins, and Diablels. Then there's the magical plants. Ones that contained healing powers. Ones that would swallow you whole and extinguish your light in a blink of an eye. And then there were wizards.

Now, let it be noted: wizards are not human. Nor are they necessarily males with flowing white beards and pointy hats. No. They can walk and talk as humans. They can teach humans magic. In fact, when the first two humans - Adam and Eve - emerged from a garden, it was wizards who taught them how to light fires. But although "wizards" may imply millions, there were only two.

One was named the Dernier. It had no specific appearance, for it could change its appearance at will. It was this wizard that controlled one of the first sons as he killed his brother. And thus the first realm of Prearth was created.

Yet the realms are complicated, so let's continue with our story and learn about the Premierlin. The other wizard. He who chose to remain in one form - of a man. It was he who helped our first parents survive. It was he who was at the right hand of kings,

leading them to good. He controlled from afar and helped free the Israelites from the Egyptians. He led alongside King Arthur as they charged against the Dred King Mordred. He led Pilgrims to America, riled up the Founding Fathers to Revolution. Influenced Lincoln's actions against slavery. Who led in the background of Roosevelt and Churchill in the World Wars. He fought against the efforts a few years ago as the Dernier set up plagues, riots, fear, and uncertainty throughout the world, and helping it to see the good out of grief.

But alas, we once again drift too far into the future. The Premierlin had always favored the good, the Dernier always the bad. There was no compromise. Opposition in all things. They had warred constantly since their forms had taken shape with the creatures of the Earth. When the Dernier led the first son to kill his brother, it was the last straw. The Premierlin vowed to never again interfere in the going ons of men unless it be of absolute necessity. The Dernier, however, would take a step back and wage war with her own pieces against the Premierlin.

For a long while, they battled in barren lands of trees and water, magical creatures and animals, but no humans. The Premierlin waged war with the creatures of good as his army, the Dernier with those of darkness as hers.

They fought for years, moving constantly to avoid the ever-expanding population of humans. When the Dernier was not controlling her minions, she (as her preferred form was a she) was hiding up in a tower, controlling a human from afar and wreaking havoc that would cause many wars among humans. The Premierlin was constantly distracted. He would have to control and fight on two fronts - one with his creature warriors and one with humans against the Dernier's human puppets.

What started this whole mess? How could the only two of a magical race become so warlike?

The Premierlin, in his young age, played a prank on the Dernier. The Dernier, being the serious sibling, did not find this amusing and set off a blast that would kill all the current creatures, those which we call dinosaurs. But the wizards, being two of the only immortal beings on the planet, survived. And the Dernier hated the Premierlin. The Premierlin loved the Dernier as a sibling, yet had no choice but to fight back. And so years and years

passed, the first humans arrived, and the first son killed his brother, and still a war raged between good and evil.

It continues to this day, though, as the magical creatures were either killed off by the Dernier, or simply grew bored and moved underground as the goblins did, the war was brought between mankind. And despite his oath, the Premierlin had no choice but to fight back.

And so we find ourselves at the present day, wondering what on Earth happened when the brother died and created the first realm of “Prearth”.

Ah, yes, that will take a little explaining.

Do you recall the plernet from the beginning? The one which broke into millions of pieces? Each of those particles are attached to a being, with the potential to split.

There are many greats throughout history. And why shouldn't there be?! They aren't always the strong bold leaders we see leading countries or empires to victory. They may be the soldier who saved or spared an enemy. A doctor saving a stranger. A man who forgave and helped the man who wronged him. All that and more.

Those particles are particles of fate. Well, not fate, per se, but more of the possibilities of fate. They carry the vague potential of greatness or terribleness. In those tiny particles are a million possibilities for a single person. Throughout life, a person may grasp at some of those possibilities, making them reality. In a lifetime, a person may go through and realize a thousand of those possibilities. And yet, of all those million possibilities is one choice, that, should they choose that single possibility among millions, will give them the chance of creating a realm.

We all have the potential for greatness. At least a hundred of those possibilities are for greatness. But one is of such good greatness that it makes a very important split in possibilities when that person dies.

The few of us that are able to take a hold of that one in a million possibility of greatness literally have the future in our hands. And, just as there be only two wizards, there is only two possibilities for the future that those few hold: the good and the bad.

The creator of the plernet must've been so curious to know

both possibilities that he made a compromise with he who made the Earth: our creator could control the fate of our world if the Plerneter could at least make a copy of the world each time the one in a billion who took hold of the one in a million died. This copy would have every individual of that time that was alive at the second the one in a billion was not. Every one of those individuals would continue living in that time, not aging. Years would go by, and no development in technology. Sounds like bliss, yet it is unfortunately not. For one, they have indirect and rare control of their Earthian's body. The Prearthians (for that is what we call them), you see, can only die if someone kills them. But say someone kills a Prearthian at the same time their Earthian form lived. As the Prearthian took its final breaths, so would the Earthian. But that isn't the worst part of Prearth.

When the Plerneter created the compromise, he failed to realize one thing: our creator always wants the good for us, even in the bad. So now, as Prearthian realms go, there are now millions of terrible possibilities for the world that are living in multiple branched off (yet not exactly parallel) universes around us.

I have lived for over a millennia and have only recently realized how bad this is for modern Earth.

You see, at very meaningful locations on Earth for those one in a billions, one may, per se, accidentally cross over to that person's Prearthian realm. Often this results in bestsellers, as people see amazing magical possibilities and record stories of wars between light and dark (because, even in darkness, there must be those individuals who contain light and fight for it).

But recently something curious occurred. As I have helped many men over the years, I often come across the descendants of those men quite often. And so it was recently when I came across a descendant of one of my favorite friends, King Arthur.

He had recently discovered his heritage when he started being chased by monsters.

Now, goblins and other dark creatures of the Dernier will occasionally come out and steal your flock, horses, and children, so it shouldn't be so significant.

But they were literally crowding streets just to get to him.

It was worse than trying to get a book signed by a famous author. Oh, is that just me? Nevermind.

He was chased into a realm. I assumed he was dead. But here's the significant part: he had died in a realm. One full of terrible beasts that should not be released in the world. But his death in the realm tore a hole in the connection between Earth and Prearth. And so magical creatures that should stay hidden are able to cross over into our world.

As the days went by, and I was forced back into battle with my old enemy, I recalled a prophecy that was made about a thousand years ago:

*The blood of Arthur shall be raised up
To every continent he must go
To raise the standard of every king
They from there shall find the cup
And unite to fight the foe
Where it shall then be distinct
Who shall drink it up.*

The time is now. The blood of Arthur, wherever you may be, assuming it means that man's son, I implore you to do well. Should this letter fall before your eyes, I know you will do as well as your ancestor before you. Should it not find you, I am sure I eventually will. My own blood has been close to you all this time. I know she will lead you to do the right for Earth and the realms of Prearth. I hope this prophecy does not have to come to pass, but if it does, so be it. I will help how I can. Until then, stay safe.

A friendly Premierlin,
Merlin de Château

Epilogue

Before Aiden Walker realized what exactly he had done, Jacob Walker lay sound asleep in his crib, not breathing.

Laura's side of the bed was empty. A collection of cotton pillows and soft blankets piled on top of each other made it seem like she was hiding under the warmth of the covers, but whenever Aiden reached out to touch her, he found that her body was gone. The first nights without her, when he had managed some few forgotten remnants of sleep, there had been the waking moments just between consciousness and the land of dreams that he believed she was up nursing Jacob or singing him to sleep. He had believed in her presence, in her body being somewhere out of sight but not beyond reach. He had believed in her as completely as men believe in God. He hoped and wanted her to be there so desperately that he had made a religion out of a desire. But then, he would really wake up and hear his son crying in the nursery. What cheap faith that had been.

Since then, Aiden had brought Jacob's crib to his room in order to get to him faster whenever he cried at night and to remind himself that Laura was gone now. The crib was a white wooden box that he had set by the window so that the dim starlight would illuminate Jacob and Aiden would be able to watch him all throughout the night. The curtain was a thin sheet of yellow linen covering the glass—completely useless in keeping sunlight out, but helpful in the dark. All the windows in the house had the same mustard curtains which allowed light and loneliness to seep through the glass along with the melody of the rain's poetry at night, but the faint moonlight falling through the curtains always brought him back to reality. Laura was gone, out of sight, beyond reach.

Laura had left them last week and since then Aiden hadn't been able to get a single night of rest. She had been the one to quiet Jacob at three A.M. whenever he cried out to be fed or held.

Aiden would get out of bed and do it too sometimes, but Jacob clearly preferred his mother.

Jacob's mother... In his mind, Aiden had stopped calling her "Laura" and "honey" and "babe" and had started calling her "Jacob's mother" because that was what she was. That was all she was now. And yet, she had abandoned her son. She had left Jacob alone in what used to be their house, with a man she used to love. How could she do that? How could she walk away from her son? Didn't she love him anymore? Yes, romance always ended and passion was short-lived, but Jacob... Even if she didn't love Aiden anymore, Jacob would always be her son. Jacob's mother was a heartless woman.

Aiden questioned everything that had led up to that point. All the decisions—the mistakes he had made to drive her away. Had he made a mistake? He had to have messed up to let someone like that just leave him. Jacob's mother had been beautiful, and smart, and kind, and happy. She was always so happy. She sought freedom and adventure in everything she did. She could never stay still. She was always dancing and smiling and making jokes out of serious situations. She was an infinite person and the more he thought about it the more convinced he became that infinite people did not settle for endings.

The night was too cold for September so Aiden wrapped Jacob in a thick blanket before setting him down into his crib. Jacob's father was not a heartless man.

Jacob hadn't fallen asleep yet. He was still crying his little lungs out. No matter what Aiden did, he never stopped crying.

"Jacob, shut up."

It was amazing how much sound one baby could make. Jacob had cried when his mother left and that was understandable, but he continued to cry when she was already gone. He cried the day after and all the days after that. He had a strong set of lungs, that kid. He could cry oceans and scream sirens and still, it seemed unlikely that he would ever run out of pain to suffer.

"Doesn't that hurt?" Aiden could hear the breaking in his cries, the chaotic beginnings of flames without the placid endings of smoke. He was trying to put out a fire with more fire; that wasn't going to work.

The day after Jacob's mother left Aiden had bought beer, baby

formula, and cyanide pills. He considered sleep medicine, but he thought cyanide might be more effective in getting him the sleep he needed. When he was a kid, he had suffered from insomnia and not the kind that stole his dreams at night and gave them back at sunrise. He had survived sleepless nights and sleepless days but now it had come back to him again.

“Jacob, please. I’m tired.”

It was two A.M. when he gave in to holding Jacob again. He was tired of holding him for the time that had the audacity to call the eternities it produced days.

As he held him, he sought rest in thoughts of infinite people who did not settle for endings.

Jacob was the ending. He was supposed to be the happily ever after to their love story, but Laura did not live endings. She had gone out to seek the next chapter and now Aiden was left trying to rock the ending to sleep while it cried in his arms, stuck to live out the rest of it alone. No, Jacob wasn’t the ending anymore. Laura leaving them had been the ending. His love was over, his life was over, every story they had ever lived was over. This was just the epilogue.

Now that Jacob’s mother was gone, Aiden hated her. He hated her with more romance than he had loved her with. Jacob’s mother was a heartless woman. She was vile, and foolish, and selfish, and he hoped to God that she was happy. It would be so much easier to hate her if he knew that she was the happiest woman alive.

“Hey, bright eyes...little one. Shh. Please?” Jacob cried more.

“J-Jacob, don’t do that to me. I’m not the one who left you.”

Jacob had been a surprise, one that Laura had seemed happy about. She was delighted at the news that she was pregnant—at least, she told him that she was—but now that he thought about it, he could pick out moments when the fear outweighed the happiness, when she seemed caught between being a mother and continuing the story.

Jacob had been a dream when he hadn’t been here screaming his little lungs out. He was an absolute angel whenever they talked about him before bed, whenever they were buying him toys and decorating his room and choosing his name. Jacob, how perfect he had been. And then at the end of the prelude, he was born and the

real chapter began. Crying and screaming and the close companionship between them and ignorance. The feeling of urgent uselessness, the need to know everything and know it now. Intense unwinnable games of charades without the gestures. Patience for breakfast, if they were lucky to have it, and frustration for lunch. The worst part was that Jacob, the boy that was supposed to be their happy ending, drove them to hate one another. There had only been brief moments of “Can’t you shut him up?” and “You’re asking me like I know!” but still, the seeds of hatred had been planted.

“Do you think it’s too late to take him back?” she had asked one night. She had been making a joke out of a serious situation the way she knew how, but now more clearly than ever, Aiden could remember the broken look on her face. Jacob had been two months old and they had finally begun to know things, but there had been a change. Aiden should have caught it. The way her smile had shifted into a motion of simple muscle memory passing for happiness. How she stopped laughing at her own jokes and started facing the bedroom door when she fell asleep. The trouble with infinite people...

He had been so stupid to think that she was happy. He had been so stupid to fall in love with her and then have a baby with her and then think that anything would ever be enough for her. The trouble with infinite people was that they abandoned their own stories.

Aiden told himself he was glad that she left, but she wasn’t really gone. Jacob looked just like her. His bright eyes, his blond hair, even the way he laid in his arms with nothing but absolute trust reminded Aiden of her. He knew he would never be completely free of Laura as long as he lived. She was in Jacob, she was in him.

“You know what’s good for forgetting?” he asked Jacob, rocking him softly back and forth. “Beer and L-pills. But wait until you’re twenty-one.”

He had given so much thought to drinking the pills—the whole bottle of them—and freeing himself of this terrible ending. But Jacob’s father was not a heartless man. He couldn’t leave him too. He would do it though. He would do it when Jacob grew up a little more and understood the story, or when he found someone

to love him in place of his mother, or maybe he would just wait until he stopped crying and fell asleep. Aiden was sure that he would. Only... It seemed too cruel to leave Jacob motherless and fatherless, completely alone in what used to be their house. It was too cold a September night to leave him in his crib at the mercy of the wind knocking on their windows and the darkness creeping over the moon. It was too loud to go away now. Jacob was crying too much and Aiden was drinking too much—it was all too much to leave him here. He couldn't leave yet. He hadn't fed him.

Aiden wiped his wrist across his eyes but the tears were already falling. "I'm sorry I forgot to feed you," he said, his voice breaking. He kissed his cheek. "You did nothing wrong. None of this is your fault. It's mine. It's—I... You deserve better."

Still holding Jacob, he followed the light of the moon downstairs and mixed formula into one of the baby bottles. It was all white powder, milk out of baby formula and crushed cyanide pills. Jacob's father was not a heartless man. He couldn't just leave him here.

As soon as he held it up to him, Jacob drank. Aiden watched him drink almost as quickly as the poison left the bottle. He drank with so much urgency, so much indifference to the taste. A few seconds passed and everything was fine, but then a minute passed and Jacob started to cry again—at least, he tried. His strong little lungs, they were running out of air. Every single cell in his body was being robbed of its right to breathe and no matter how much he tried to inhale, he couldn't gather the breath to keep living.

He stilled.

At five A.M. Aiden Walker carried the body of Jacob Walker into his room and set him in his crib. Jacob wasn't crying anymore. Aiden had crushed the rest of the pills until they were white dust. He mixed the powder into a glass of water and drank. He kissed Jacob goodnight and with shaky hands laid his mother's blankets on him. Then, he laid his head on Laura's pillow and closed his eyes. Jacob did not wake up and Aiden was finally able to get some sleep.



Meghan Murphy
High School

Untitled

I always detested large crowds. I was generally unconcerned with their seemingly common reason for connecting and found no joy in mingling as many say they do. Judging by what I could hear, there are more people in the room than would have made me comfortable, had I been amongst the pretentious visitors. I estimate thirty, though, I'm ultimately left in the dark, considering both my lack of confirmation and physical inability to see. The room sounded vast, the continuous humming of sizable fans swallowing the murmurs of the despondent group. The size of the room made the occasional passionate outburst of some sniveling individual easy to hear as they bounced off of each far wall.

My place at the front of the room, however, saved me from the obligatory socializing I would have otherwise had to carry out, instead resting uncomfortably in this box as the sole source of conversation like some morbid centerpiece. It begged the question of whether I was the one at fault for the ordeal. If I hadn't ended up in this box, there wouldn't have been a reason for the group to converge, let alone mark me as the center of attention. I knew the answer, though, my permanent residence here was inevitable.

A solitary someone began to make their way up to a space next to my box and the multitude of bouquets, undoubtedly arranged by those at the funeral home. The sound produced from the microphone they spoke into was strangled due either to my position or to the poor quality, I couldn't tell. Despite my unfortunate state, I still found the will of anger to present itself at the fact that this cheap gathering was meant to send me away. To wrap up the entirety of my life on Earth with inferior microphones and deafening fans seemed inappropriate.

The person at the podium began their oration, letting the words fall over each other as they stumbled out of the increasingly careless mouth. Their voice rang at the same frequency as that of my mother's would. She blathered for longer than seemed

necessary, broadcasting to the mass about the wondrous life I had lived, rambling about the lives I had impacted due to my sensational acts and good deeds. She touched briefly on the fact nothing would be the same without me, though, it appeared she didn't want to speak about the horrors that her mind convinced her would ensue without my presence. It sounded as if she had a distorted sense of memory of the stories she shared about my life. The times I remember as being selfish and heedless, she found me to be independent. At times I was arrogant, she thought it was my unabated confidence, being sure to mention her envy of that positive state of mind. It filled me with a sense of guilt, though, as if I was using her warped view of me that came with motherhood to fulfill my individual desires.

It took my mother twice the amount of time to finish her deliverance than it should have, the sobs being more audible in the second-rate microphone than her shared recollections of her beloved child. Her high heels clicked against the marble floor as she receded to her seat at the seemingly front row of the congregation, a sound I admired particularly when I was alive, somehow associating it to that of windblown trees tapping on a window.

The next to make their way to the stand near my place at the front didn't wear the same hard soled shoes my mother had that made the satisfying tap against the marble. I determined that their steps must have been heavy as well, expectedly due to the lack of effort they put into walking, almost as if they couldn't be bothered to direct their attention to feet carrying them. I couldn't blame this unnamed someone for their resistance to looking confident in their stride, though, it did make me wonder what kind of trouble they underwent while dressing themselves if they hadn't even cared enough to walk as any other would.

Their voice was dry, undoubtedly due to the tears they had cried over the course of the day that had settled in their throat. My best friend had started his speech with the fact that it would be the last for the day, unless someone else wanted to speak their piece about the deceased. He hadn't much emotion in his voice, certainly not being the same expressive boy I had met in high school. We joked about being the ones to speak at each other's funeral while I was alive, but neither of us were honestly expecting

to take that commitment to heart. Rather than reminiscing like the speaker before him, a majority of his speech revolved around the future he would have to live without me. He had thought ahead often, that was one of his biggest flaws, never living in the moment. The speech wasn't exactly something anyone would anticipate to be said at a funeral. Regardless, he was able to share his last farewells along with a number of regrets he had toward me. With each, he made the cries of the audience that reverberated off of the far walls grow exponentially, sending back the woe he had provided. It made me wonder about the people who had thought the same things he was able to articulate, which once again tinged me with guilt regardless of my understanding that it was out of all Earthly control.

His sluggish footfall teetered from the comfort next to me to what seemed to be far into the assembly before us. I knew the number of steps he was taking was unnecessary, growing fainter as he continued with his careless stride. The sound of his shoes hitting the ground didn't stop abruptly like my mother's did, signifying he didn't stop to take his seat whatsoever. He doubtlessly staggered himself to the back of the large room and out of its now-closed door following his heart wrenching talk about his dead best friend.

The next thing I knew, I was caught up with every person left of the group, each of them individually joining me at my box to whisper their final goodbyes, or to grip onto my hand with all of the force they could muster just in order to show their affection if they were unable to summon the words on their own. I hated attention as I was sure many of these people knew, but the circumstance prevented me from wallowing away to some quiet and lonesome corner, instead pressuring me to listen to the words of these people who had used me as a conversation piece for the last time.

A vast majority muttered things of affection like "I love you," and "I'll miss you," which was to be expected considering the situation I found myself in. Of course, there were several people who decided they would give their five minute speech exclusively to my dead body, which some may find endearing, but the energy in the room suggested the fact that some found the setback to be more of a nuisance than an earnest final encounter. To my

surprise, there were a number of people who expressed their sustained resentment toward me, who couldn't refute their hatred, as their parting words. While their unanticipated confession did shock me, I remained impassive, given the entirety of who I was perished with my body.

When each member of the group used their chance to say their piece to the deceased, the box was closed and my body was alone in its separate room, shrouded away from my abundance of company at last. The sound of the clicking high heels sang in a chorus as each member of the gathering progressed from the seats they rested into the grave awaiting our arrival not far outside of the room.

Some time passed as I was transported to the new area, though, I wasn't able to gauge the amount. The wind made listening to the crowd more difficult than it was in the room. Without direct control of my body, the only senses I had to rely on were hearing and feeling, my soul only settled in the cold pile of flesh. I had the feeling as though my stomach would drop as I was hauled down the hole that was deeper than I was tall, not due to any unexpected jolts, rather due to the concept of what I was going through. The idea would have sent shivers down my spine, though, now that I was experiencing it, I found my space within the earth a strange sort of comforting. As if I was finally where the Universe wanted me to be.

The rain started, mingling with the droning piano of the somber music to fill the area with an ambiance fit for a proper funeral. My wooden box shook slightly as dirt was shoveled on top of me. Compared to the distant noise of the gathering prior, the movement of earth around me was deafening. I got used to the noise after a few minutes, engulfed in the sound of the weight above me. As soil was piled on top of my box, I was able to hear nothing but my own thoughts.

The jarring silence of the space I resided in forced me to listen only to what my mind produced, and at last, I was finally alone where I would be for the rest of eternity.

Untitled

Truck smoke filled the air from the exhaust pipes of passing cars and vans, giving the atmosphere a thick but satisfying stench. Kids from the back of the bus spat out curses to other nearby busses, with gang signs and middle fingers being thrown their way. Others in the front were sitting quietly, reading books, listening to music, or putting their heads down in shame of being sat next to the bus driver for misbehaving. I, however, was a part of the kids in the back, who were dancing to music being projected from my good friend Cheyron's - who dressed accordingly for the award dance tonight - Bluetooth speaker. This was a common thing to happen on my bus, as our previous bus never arrived and we've had to ride on a different one all year. The rides usually took thirty to forty minutes, so there was plenty of time to have fun. All of the students were recommended to attend the "Going Away" dance. Many plans were set for the day, and many were excited to be a part of them, including me, Cheyron, and my other good friend, Daniel. And so, we celebrated the whole school year by playing the most memorable songs that were used at peak moments of the year. Many wore the same backpacks from the beginning of the year, others wore the same outfit from the first day of school. We all reminisced on our past mistakes, wins, losses, and comebacks. That left me smiling at the wind while it blew through my hair and clothing. I looked at the sky, music still blasting through the speaker, and admired the odd but peaceful shapes of the white, puffy clouds that seamlessly glided through the atmosphere. However, my trance was broken by the screeching of tires as a car tried its best to hit our bus but instead played it cool by cutting us off. I was able to make out an all-black figure before the car disappeared into an entrance to a neighborhood and left only the tire tracks from its desperate attempt to make us crash. I stared at the side of the road, confused as to what just happened. I shrugged it off and turned to the kids dancing and

singing, in which I joined in.

After ten more minutes of throwing ourselves around to music we all enjoyed, our bus finally arrived at its destination. The whole bus packed up what they had and stepped out of the vehicle. I took a giant breath of the outside air to eliminate the smell of sweaty boys and girls, although that did me no justice. As I start walking ahead with Cheyron, I hear a familiar voice call my name from my front.

“Johnny boy. Still playing see-saw across the border with your primos?” the voice mocked.

Cheyron and I ignored this racist remark and tried to walk around the kid, although were stopped by two more kids, who were supposed “friends” of him.

“Yo chill, bro,” Cheyron protested, “We got a dance to attend and I’m not trying to fight. And his name is Juan”

“Oh, don’t worry, there won’t be any fighting today,” boomed Daniel as he came out of the bus. Daniel was large and intimidating, and also had Cheyron and my back. No one wanted to mess with us, for they knew Daniel would do something about it. Although, some didn’t get the idea.

“Ain’t that right Price?”

“Yeah, I guess,” Price mumbled, eyes on the floor as to not make eye contact with Daniel, “C’mon, let’s head out.”

The three then trudged off, heads low, and facing the ground. I could feel the disappointment within each step of the group. It seemed almost embarrassing. They went their separate ways, each of them disappearing into their blocks. Cheyron, Daniel, and I, however, walked silently as a group to our block as we all needed to get ourselves ready for the dance. It was only about a minute into our walk when Cheyron broke the silence.

“Yo,” Cheyron started, “you know who I’m taking with me to the dance?”

“Us?” Daniel and I teased.

“Well, of course, we go as a group, that was the plan,” Cheyron rolled his eyes, “I’m also bringing Chikita.”

“Chikita? Our friend that you’ve been trying to get since y’all met?” Daniel teased more.

“Yeah,” Cheyron said confidently, “She is also coming with Jaime and Valentina.”

“That’s because Jaime and Valentina are coming with me,” I told him.

“Oh, so I guess we all got someone to keep us company besides ourselves,” Cheyron winked.

“Sure,” Daniel said sarcastically.

We then proceeded to walk home, talking about recent fights or new outfits and video games. A few other kids that were headed our way joined in and we all were having a great time. Suddenly, when I turned forward to see what was in front of me, I stopped to see a car going full speed at us. However, this was not just some drunk or stupid driver you see all around Las Vegas. This was the exact same car and driver from when I was on the bus. The same all-black figure was staring right at my eyes. I could see the anger in his wide-open eyes as He sped right towards me and the group of kids surrounding me. It was not long before everybody else noticed and got out of the way. I, on the other hand, was stuck in a trance and could not escape it. I was frozen. I couldn’t hear anything but the sound of the loud engine that was attached to His car. I was numb to all feeling and motion and just stood there, staring at this two-ton vehicle hurtling towards me. It was only three seconds before the crash when I heard the screams. Juan! Move! Jump! Do something! I snapped out of my trance and finally understood the situation I was in. I’m about to die, I thought. I tried my best to get out of the way of the car, but instead got pulled towards the wall I stood by. It felt as if the vehicle went through me. It felt as if I went through the wall. It felt as if nothing went through my leg when this was all said and done. All of my senses went away once more before I closed my eyes. No feeling. No sound. No pulse...

* * * *

The first thing I could hear was the bits of glass falling from above me. The first thing I could see was smoke and broken glass, brick, and wood that lay around my body. I turned to my left to observe the things around me. The first thing I noticed was a large wooden spike about ten feet away from me, dripping with blood. I traced my eyes down the spike noticing every little details. The first thing I could hear was the bits of glass falling from above me.

The first thing I could see was smoke and broken glass, brick, and wood that lay around my body. I turned to my left to observe the things around me. The first thing I noticed was a large wooden spike about ten feet away from me, dripping with blood. I traced my eyes down the spike noticing every little piece of wood that stuck out of it like hairs on a spider's legs. Once my eyes reached the bottom of the diagonal spike, I saw a body attached to the other end. The giant piece of wood went through the stomach of my good old friend, Daniel. His arm reached for me as if that could save me from what already happened. I then turned my head up to the car that caused all this damage. It was a silver car that looked like it would've been made only two years ago with an emblem of a spiral attached to the grill of the car. What amazed me the most is that it stuck to the roof of the half-destroyed house, hovering only five feet away from my face. I looked closely at the hood of the car and noticed a black figure with waves of energy the same color flowing around its body. I looked into its wide but angry eyes, stuck in a trance that felt as if it could never be broken. After about thirty seconds, I looked back to my left where Daniel still lay, who was able to mutter the words,

“Don't...look...at...hi-” Daniel was interrupted by a cough, which released blood.

I looked back at the car, and the figure was gone. I shook my head around the area, trying to find Him. If I see him, I'm gonna kill him! I thought. I tried to lift myself but found that I couldn't move my legs. I looked down at where my legs should have been but instead saw a wide piece of metal that went through the middle of my thighs. The first thing I felt was a wave of pain rush through my body.

I let out a scream that could startle a bird sleeping in Mexico. Tears ran down my cheeks as the pain began to settle in. It was enough to make me faint, but I tried my best to keep myself from collapsing, as I heard my name get called from the distance.

“Juan!” a familiar voice called out, “Juan stay with me. It's Cheyron. Scream again if you're still alive.”

I opened my mouth to scream, but I was too weak to mutter a single word. I struggled to keep my eyes open, but my attempts failed, and I rested my head. The last thing I saw was the broken glass on the ground. The last thing I felt was my head on the wall

to my right. The last thing I heard was Daniel screaming at the top of his lungs.

Brief moments. Only brief moments I remember after that moment. Brief moments like red and blue lights flashing. Moments like me and my detached legs being carried. Moments like my mom and friends holding my hand as I struggled to breathe. Only these very brief moments I remember since the accident. However, I can recall one memory that lasted for quite some time.

I opened my eyes very slowly, only to see a dark room, all white with hints of light turquoise illuminating in the corners. I could hear beeps coming from a machine, steady and matching the beat of my heart. Beep. thump. Beep. thump. I couldn't move or speak, and when I tried, it only hurt. Suddenly, I could see a man with skin matching the pitch-black suit that He was wearing. He walked slowly towards the hospital bed, where I lay, paralyzed. I could see wide and empty white eyes, with no pupils. Once He reached the spotlight that was shining over the bed, He smiled. The inside of His mouth was the same as His eyes, bright white. His teeth matched His skin, pitch black. He then spoke three words that will haunt me for the rest of eternity.

“Remember me, buddy?” He said in a smooth but sinister voice.

I tried to scream, move, do whatever I can to grab attention from anybody else. Help! It's Him! He's the one who did this to me! I tried to screech. My attempts to send a signal were useless. I couldn't move or talk, let alone get attention. That's why when He knew what I wanted to say, it shocked me.

“There's no reason to try to get attention,” He started, “I'm both apart and not a part of reality. I cannot be seen by many, especially doctors. They have no hope, whereas you are full of it. What religion do you follow? Christian, I see. Why... not... ME!”

Tentacles formed from the back of Him, one feeling my thigh, two others grabbing my arms, and one going down my cheek to my chin. I closed my eyes and was back in a state of sleep.



Untitled

“Forgive my weariness, Lupus, but are you certain that you can take the job?”

Lupus traipsed through the concrete halls wordlessly, taking in the underground dungeons beneath the small town of Nysas. The ambiance was uncanny, prompting him to instantly shiver. Each step he took seemed to echo, which would reverberate for miles. Marching beside Lupus was Phoenix, the esteemed captain of the royal guard. His excellent sword of silver sat menacingly in a black scabbard, anticipating its next kill. He carried himself proudly, chest puffed underneath his metal panoply.

“Lupus?” Phoenix repeated. His strides were so long and full of purpose that Lupus nearly struggled to keep up with his pace. Still, he nodded reassuringly.

“Yes, I can.”

The captain drummed his fingers on the pommel of his sword. “She’s not an easy one. She’s been incarcerated for two nights now, yet no one can seem to procure information from her. The last three examiners we hired were quick to run out within the first hour.”

Lupus adjusted his tie assuredly. He would not be afraid. Show no fear and you shan’t have reason to fear, his father would always say. “She hasn’t been questioned by me.”

Phoenix delivered no response and the two men continued down the empty hall. They passed by each cell, most of which held prisoners staring blankly at the walls, until they approached a steel grey door. There was a small, square window in the center that peered into the room, revealing nothing more than a weathered stone wall.

Lupus furrowed his brows, turning to the captain. “The other cells are barred. Why is this one enclosed with a door?”

“There was an issue with aggression,” was all Phoenix disclosed. He grabbed a large ring from his belt, filled with a ridiculous

amount of keys. Before unlocking the door, Phoenix spoke again. “She’s chained to one side of the room. For your safety, remain on the opposite side. You’ll be given three hours.” The door clicked open. “Best of luck.”

Lupus nodded curtly before the captain sauntered off into the darkness. He stared at the black knob, which now granted entry to the room. With a deep breath, he made his way inside.

Although the temperature was concerningly low before, it seemed to drop ten more degrees once he stepped into the cell. Unlike the others, there was no bed, no toilet, no sink. There wasn’t much of anything, honestly, save the small bucket placed before a wall. Beside the bucket was a path of chains, trailing along the floor until they reached the unmet wrists of a young woman.

She sat quietly; legs crossed underneath her. She was watching him, her cerulean eyes cold and calculating. Her short, blue hair hung softly past her shoulders, divertingly contradicting her sharp features. Lupus cleared his throat, inching towards the opposing wall as he was told. Show no fear and you shan’t have reason to fear, he reminded himself, though it was difficult to maintain an impassive expression when her presence alone was thoroughly daunting.

He stood silently, all too aware of her piercing gaze. It wasn’t angry, nor was it irritated, but rather curious. He studied her carefully as she did him, and not a word was uttered from either party. There wasn’t a hint of hostility on her face, and Lupus found himself wondering how such a girl had gotten into this position.

He recalled her prisoner profile, which he’d studied carefully before taking up the job. Her name was Hydra, aged seventeen, a high-risk criminal. She had been arrested for single-handedly murdering four members of the royal guard – and, allegedly, multiple other people. She was noted for being clever and cunning, which was quite apparent in her eyes.

It wasn’t his first time dealing with a murderer. In fact, working with killers was common in his field. However, the other criminals he’d faced had seemed much more pugnacious. They wouldn’t hesitate to attack him on the spot, even with the

numerous security cameras spectating them. Hydra hadn't made a point to budge even the slightest bit. What could've caused the other examiners to quit?

"You didn't close the door," she monotoned, her voice a hushed whisper.

Lupus raised a questioning brow. Those would be her first words to him? He turned to the entrance, where the door was, indeed, ajar. It wasn't as if anyone would hear – her cell was a distance away from others – so why did it bother her that he hadn't completely shut the door?

Seconds after he closed it and returned to his safe space, she whispered again. "I can see you have questions. Why don't you go ahead and ask them?"

Remarkable. She could easily see through his neutral expression. Although he should have felt embarrassed, he was nothing but fascinated by her attentiveness.

"Why do you prefer closed doors?" he queried, rubbing his dark stubble.

"If they scream, fewer people will hear." Her chains clanked together with every small movement.

Lupus was yet to be shaken by her response. He'd heard plenty of statements like this one, few of which sent chills up his spine. Rather than recoiling, he asked, "What difference does it make? Surely you're aware that either way, you'd end up detained."

Her pale lips lifted into a daring smirk. "It's more fun when they believe no one will save them."

"So, you enjoy the killing?"

"I'm fine with it."

The clock ticked as silence fell over them. Did she truly feel no remorse? No guilt? Lupus had a hard time believing that. Even though it may have been deeply suppressed, she must've felt something for the humans she murdered.

"Why are you in chains?" he decided to question.

She glanced down at her hands, shrugging. "They're frightened by me. Believe that I'll go rogue." She then looked up at him, eyes narrowed. "Why aren't you afraid?"

"Should I be afraid?"

"Come unchain me and I suppose you'll find out."

Show no fear and you shan't have reason to fear. "How charming. Why did you stab those guards?"

Hydra cocked a brow. “That’s your next question? I thought you to be smarter than that.”

He knew what she was referring to. The sole reason he had been hired to speak with her. The one piece of information that prevented her immediate execution. Regarding this, she was well aware.

“Right then. Where is it?” He laced his fingers together, exhibiting his limited patience for the answer.

She smirked again, raising her wrists in front of her. “Come unchain me and I suppose you’ll find out,” she repeated.

Lupus scoffed, crossing his arms. “You know the king won’t rest until he finds it.”

“Why would I tell you when it’d simply lead to my death?”

He didn’t reply, for he had no plausible response to this. She was correct — decapitation would come the second she revealed the location. Only a fool would give up such information.

“You’re a moron. You’re all morons. You have no idea what’s coming.”

Lupus glanced at her. “Then enlighten me. What is coming?”

Hydra gestured for him to move closer. He was hesitant, for her motives weren’t exactly determined. But the only way to receive the information would be to gain her trust, so he was left with no choice. He took three steps forward, leaving a fair space in between them. She didn’t seem to mind.

“King Leo. He’s going to turn on everyone – on all of the kingdom. He’ll summon the Draco Dragon.”

Lupus rolled his eyes. The infamous world-destroying Draco Dragon? The one that brought war and death to the country all those centuries ago? Ridiculous. His years of experience had taught him that criminals would say anything for their personal benefits. Still, he decided to humor her and go along. “Oh really?”

She glared at him — a sight that was much more frightening than he’d expected. “In case you haven’t noticed, I’m not a child. Don’t ridicule me.”

“Apologies. Do continue.”

She scoffed. “So naive. I hope you said goodbye to your loved ones. They’ll be dead before dark.”

Lupus’s eyes darkened as an image of his fiancée, Mora, appeared in his head. This wasn’t humorous anymore. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You know,” she shrugged. “And all I know is that he’ll do it if I don’t stop him. Although, I suppose I’ll be unaffected. I’m already underground. It’s quite comfortable if you look at it a certain way.”

He gritted his teeth. This was absurd. Summoning the single most dangerous creature that ever walked these lands? It sounded thoroughly fictitious. But if it was true ... shoot, he couldn’t imagine losing Mora. Ever.

No. He wouldn’t fall for it. Criminals lie. That was how they earned such titles.

In a split-second decision — one that was undoubtedly moronic — Lupus took a seat on the floor beside Hydra. She, too, seemed astonished by his actions.

“Are you that dumb? I could wring your neck with these chains and have you dead within seconds.”

He shared a challenging gaze with her. “Then do it.” He knew he was playing a risky game. This could backfire, resulting in his immediate death. Or ...

Hydra glowered at him, crossing her arms. She then looked away, indicating his success. He let out a small breath of relief, drawing his knees against his chest. She couldn’t do it – she needed him.

“How would you supposedly ‘stop’ the King?”

“Unchain me and I suppose you’ll find out,” she whispered, almost silently.

Lupus raised a brow, caught entirely off guard. Mere minutes ago, each time she repeated the phrase her tone was enigmatic. It was as if she knew her methods wouldn’t work. But this time, her voice was soft. Defeated. He couldn’t help but wonder if this was another trick or if she was genuinely quelled.

He placed a daring hand on her shoulder. “Hydra?”

She flinched, shrugging him off. “Don’t touch me.”

And there it was again. She was cold, her eyes glossed over. But Lupus wouldn’t forget the shred of humanity she had shown. He couldn’t forget.

She spoke again, her voice hardened. “Listen. All I need to do is get out of here. I need to stop him.” She looked up at the security camera in the top corner of the room, which was watching them closely. “And I need your help to do it.”

“My help? Why, in Gaea’s name, would I become a criminal

aide?”

“You have something you care about up there, don’t you?” She eyed him carefully, as if she could see right through him. “If you help me do this, it’ll be a win-win situation.”

He thought of Mora again – of her bright smile and her curly, brown locks. Was it worth the risk? But he couldn’t ...

Hydra must’ve noticed the uncertainty in his expression when she continued. “Listen, something tells me you’re different from the others. I don’t want to hurt anyone; I wouldn’t care to escape if it wasn’t important. I need to get out of here.”

Need. Lupus had always hated that word. It provided a sense of obligation, which he detested. Whenever he was forced to make a decision regarding others, a tinge of guilt accompanied his refusal. Nevertheless, he had to come to his senses. This was a cold-blooded killer he was dealing with. He couldn’t help her escape. That would be his final decision.

He stood, blinking at her. “I won’t - ”

But before the refusal was complete, he was interrupted by a resounding crash. Lupus turned towards the entrance, where three guards held tapered swords aimed at him. His eyes widened in confusion as he looked to Hydra, who shrugged nonchalantly. What was going on?

“Don’t move an inch,” the guard in the center hissed.

Lupus furrowed his brows. “What’s happening?”

Hydra looked up, pity glistening in her eyes. “You’re not leaving here anymore. They never do.”



Anushka Phen

High School Short Story

Untitled

I stood above his sleeping body, dark curls fell over his forehead, shirt slightly open, revealing the smooth skin of his chest. The gentle moonlight coming through the window caused the blade of my dagger to gleam as I raised it above his chest, prepared to strike him down once and for all. I stared. And stared and stared. He looked so peaceful, so serene with the silver light casting a soft glow on his face. It was the perfect opportunity, but the dagger didn't plunge into his chest.

Come on. This is what I wanted. He was cruel and manipulative, he had used me more times than I could count, he deserved this. And yet my traitorous mind remembered every gentle touch, every single time he had saved my life. Every act of kindness, every action rooted in empathy, came back hitting me like a wave, crashing violently against the walls I had built in order to complete this task.

Task.

When did my lifelong ambition, my great plot for revenge, become just a simple task?

I stared until my hand, still holding the knife, began to tremble. And then his eyes opened.

His bright azure eyes traveled from my face to the knife above his chest, holding not even an ounce of surprise. It scared me that he could still look at me so calmly, when it was so clear what I was about to do.

"Are you going to kill me?" His voice was quiet and hoarse. The dagger shook, nearly dropping from my hand. I had him pinned down, even if he was awake he couldn't do anything to me, I could still exact my revenge. After years of pain and mourning I could finally finish off the man who caused me such distress.

"Guinevere" He raised a hand to my cheek "If you want to kill me, then I won't stop you."

"SHUT UP!" I choked out. It seemed as if a tape was playing

the last six months on rewind. I gained his trust, he opened up to me. I saw the old scars that ran up and down his arms, caused by his own knife. I saw the wounds on his back from when his father had sent him to war. We had shared forbidden kisses under the veil of night. I had been on adventures like no others with this man.

It was all just a part of my plan...wasn't it? It was all supposed to lead to exactly this scene, just us, all alone. "You took everything from me. My family, my friends, my home-all lost to your father's whimsical wants, and you so blindly follow in his footsteps!" My grip tightened around the knife "Why should I show mercy to the person who will wrench happiness away from more people?!" I could practically hear my heart pounding against my chest.

"Then do it." He was still calm, so calm-it irritated me. "If I could die staring into your eyes, then you will have given me a death I can happily accept." My heart felt like it was going to give out any second, and in a final burst of energy I brought the knife down.

It didn't land in his chest, instead digging into the mattress right above his left shoulder. My grip on the thin handle tightened until my nails dug into my palm, an immense self-hatred building in my chest. "I can't." All my vigor and rage from before had left me, leaving my voice soft and weak.

I was hunched over, the tips of my hair touching his chest.

"Why?"

I knew that I shouldn't say anything, I knew that I should get up and escape before the guards came by. But screw it. I had lied to him a thousand times; I could give him this one truth.

"I couldn't do it, you know why."

"No." He said clearly provoking me "Tell me why Guinevere."

I raised my head to look him in the eye, "Because I don't hate you. Because I can't blame you for everything your father did." My eyes stung from the tears I was holding back "And because...I still love you."

His smile was sweetly chaotic. The smug bastard. And then it struck me; that I had never told him my real name. I hadn't fooled him at all. From the very start he knew, once again I had fallen prey to his manipulations.

His arms were wrapped around me almost immediately after the words left my mouth, pulling me to his chest where I could hear his strong heartbeat. "If it's revenge against my father that you want, I could help you with that."

For a moment I wondered if he had gone mad and this was the final bow to his sanity. A dry laugh found its way past my lips. "You knew didn't you? All along you were perfectly aware of what I was doing."

"Of course I knew." His breath was warm against my neck, "Copper-colored hair, pale skin, and light gray eyes-the eldest daughter of the Artois family. I can never forget that description."

"Why?" My brow furrowed in confusion.

"Because I could do nothing else."

"What are you talking about?"

"I...my father knew that your family was innocent."

Rage and shock washed over me in equal measures. My family. We had been accused of betraying the kingdom and selling information to an opposing queen.

"The day before your parents' execution I overheard him speaking to a subordinate about it, he was scared because your family had gained so much power when they were of foreign origin." He continued, "He ordered the execution knowing that the evidence against your father was forged."

My mother, my father, even my younger brother. That oaf of a king had commanded their deaths. Memories of bright red blood seeping through the cracks of a wooden stage, the sound of mother's sobbing as father's head fell with a thump to the wood in front of her. The fear written all over my brother's pale face, with raised brows pulled together, his mouth half-opened. These memories were what fueled my thirst for vengeance, but now the king's own son was telling me my family had died simply to relieve his unfounded paranoia?!

"I heard that they had a daughter who had gotten away...I thought I would find her and make it up to her."

"You..." There was a high-pitched ringing in my ears that nearly drowned out my own voice "You think that you can make it up to me?" I growled.

"...No, I know I can't."

I attempted to push myself up, out of his embrace, but he only

tightened his hold.

"But I can make it better. We can kill my father, and then I give you my word, I will be a better king."

I pushed away from him with more force this time, making him let go. I looked down at him "Why should I believe a word out of your mouth?! And why would you kill your own father for me?!"

"I know you have no reason to trust me-"

"Good, we're done here." I didn't give him the chance to continue, nimbly jumping off the bed. His hand shot out, gripping my wrist as I turned my back to him.

"Give me a chance."

And I wanted to. I so badly wanted to. He was not the same kind of man as his father, I knew he would be a far better king.

I also knew what the sweet temptation of power could do to a person. I had seen the agony in father's eyes when he learned that the man who had framed us was his closest "friend" and most trusted counselor.

"...If you mess up, if you make even the slightest mistake, I will kill you." I doubted the words even as they left my lips, could I really do this? Could I really take the risk of trusting this man?

He smiled, a rare genuine smile. It was both poison and wine, deadly just as much as it was intoxicating. He let go of my wrist, standing up. Now he towered above me...how irritating.

And then his hand was tilting my chin upwards, and his lips were on mine.

We had kissed before, but this one felt different. This kiss was soft, tender...loving.

"For what it's worth, Gwen, I love you too."

His brown eyes sparkled in the moonlight, bright and unwavering.

I knew, I had found my answer. If he were poison I would drink it all without regrets, and since he said that he could change this kingdom then I believed him.



Untitled

6:37 p.m. said the clock when I looked at it. I was supposed to babysit Mr.& Mrs. Smith's daughter at 7, they were going out to dinner for their tenth anniversary. When 7'oclock hit, I was already knocking on the door. Mr. Smith opened the door and let me in.

The mansion was big and elegant. The furniture was mostly beige and had a chandelier in the middle of the room. Mrs. Smith and her daughter came down the stairs to greet me. After introducing each other they left, leaving me with Jane.

While playing tag Jane froze. "It's tag not freeze tag!" I said jokingly.

"He's coming..." she said frozen in fear.

"Who's coming, your dad?" I asked bewildered, but she just continued to play as if this conversation never happened.

After an hour of playing tag, hide and seek, and Candy Land we decided to watch a movie. We were thirty-four minutes into the movie and I didn't notice that Jane fell asleep, until she stood up startled and said, "He's here."

I thought she meant her dad, but it was barely 8:33 and they aren't supposed to be back until 9:45.

"We have to leave before he gets here" she said while pulling my hand towards the door. I asked Jane who she was talking about.

"It's too late she said" The door opened and a tall man came inside ready to attack. I then woke up frightened when Jane said, "He's here."

The Story of Evolution

Once upon a time there was a ducky. This ducky was different, first off his name wasn't a normal ducky name, his name was Bob. Other ducky names included Donatelli, Elizabeth, Fernando, Maddison and other long majestic names. Second, he had webbed feet. Bob was the only ducky with webbed feet. Being the odd duck out, Bob would get bullied. One day Bob decided he was so fed up; he decided to leave and find his purpose. He gathered some supply's in a leaf, not knowing how long he would be gone, and left the little ducky town behind.

After several weeks of walking, more like waddling, Bob had found a nice pond with bushes, little mud piles, and other animals around it. When he had finally settled down in his new makeshift home, Bob went to seek out the other neighbors. He had come across a toad, Frank, that had webbed feet too. Bob didn't feel as self-conscious noticing he wasn't alone anymore. When they started talking, Frank invited Bob over. His house was quite simple and spacious. As they started talking, he mentioned something about a party with the neighbors tomorrow and invited him. Talking long into the night, Bob felt as if he had made a friend.

He had awoken the next morning refreshed and bright eyed. He fluffed up his feathers, making sure he looked nice, and went to the party. Bob met all kinds of animals at the party. He had met one particular animal named Sam. Sam was a swan, she was stark white. Beautiful as can be. She also had webbed feet. When Bob went home that night he thought to himself maybe, I'm not so different.

Waking up, Bob had gone to his desk and started writing about what happened yesterday. That he may never forget it. He called the book he was writing in, "The Adventures of Me". After he had finished recording yesterday's party he went to Franks and asked him if he wanted to join him for breakfast. Coming home he had a whole meal plan waiting to be made for him. He made a

wonderful breakfast, and Frank scarfed it down. He asked Frank if he ever had food like this, and he said "No."

He told him that this is one of the specialties in his old ducky village. Frank asked him "Why he left", so Bob told his story of being the only one in the little village that had webbed feet.

When he was born his papa loved him when he first saw him; however, his mother though not so much. His mother left his papa because she blamed him for how one of her babies came out, so she left the ducky village taking the rest of his siblings with her. Papa named his little webbed ducky, Bob. In the early years, teaching Bob how to walk and such, it was hard seeing as he was the first and only ducky with webbed feet. When he had gotten into primary school it was even harder, he was always bullied in school. In secondary school it was even worse, so bad he decided not to continue school. Around that time is when he pondered the thought of leaving his ducky village. He had always thought that his feet were a curse.

As Bob finished his tale of his early ducky hood life, Frank had begun to pick up trash and put it away. He had started to too. He asked Frank about his earlier years.

"There ain't much," Frank said looking at a used leaf, "my dad left when I was little and my mom left me on my own a few years after that."

Sensing that Frank didn't want to talk anymore about it, he didn't push any further. Frank showed him around the town the rest of the day, and they went out to see the good places to sit by the pond and visited most the neighbors in town. At the end of the day, He told his new friend goodbye and went in for the night.

A week later Bob and Frank were basically best friends, they shared childhood stories, most of the food in their houses and their dreams that they wish to come true. He had also been hanging out with Sam, the stark white swan from the neighborhood party, she showed him around her place and told him stories about what her family used to do here and there. Her parents, grandparents, and great grandparents had lived by this pond; her great great grandmother brought her only child named Conner with her and raised him. He then met lady Swan. Shortly after they were married.

After learning of Sam's family they went for a swim, but Bob didn't know how to swim. He just sat on the lake while Sam swam in the pond. Sam asked him why he wouldn't get in the water, and if Sam could see his skin it would be pink with embarrassment. He made up an excuse that he didn't want to get wet. She swam a few more laps and asked again,

"Why don't you wanna get in the water? Is it because of the water or something else?" Defeated, Bob looked down and shyly said "I don't know how to swim."

Sam tried to hide her surprise face but failed, making him feel inadequate. Sweetly she asked, "Do you want me to show you how to swim?"

He said "Sure."

"Okay, then let's start now!"

"But it's almost dark, how about we start tomorrow?"

"Good thinking! Then we have more time to practice! Get some sleep and tomorrow at first light we will go out to the lake." Waking up, his thoughts raced This is gonna go terribly. Why would you agree to this, you're gonna be humiliated and look stupid. This is gonna be so bad. Walking up to the lake he was at last night; he saw Sam getting into the water. Nervously he stood at the edge of the lake.

"Just walk to about the farthest your feet can touch then we will start" Sam said to him from the water. "Okay" Bob's voice shook nervously. He walked as far as he could, which was not very far, and asked what's next. She told him to jump in.

"Just jump in?" He asked, "nothing added, just jump in?"

"Yeah"

He jumped into the water and flapped wildly with his wings, feeling as though he looked stupid and about to drown, he went back to the shore. He could hear Sam laughing from the water.

"Now that we know your natural instincts didn't kick in, let's actually teach you." The rest of the morning Sam taught Bob how to swim, and once he got the hang of it it was surprisingly easy.

Many years had passed and Bob had grown up into an adult ducky. He has lived a life of great experiences and adventures. He had learned how to swim, and he was quite well at it. He has met many wonderful animals during these years by the pond. One day out of the blue, Bob decides that he should go visit his old duckie

town. So, he got a leaf and some food and set off to his old town.

He had thought the pathway to his house was bigger, but then again he had grown. When he had knocked on the door of his old home, he was greeted by an old ducky which was his father. Papa recognized him immediately and welcomed him in. Bob asked if he could stay for a while and papa said of course and they talked long into the night. They had talked all about his adventures, the new experiences he had gained, and the new animals he had come to know over the years.

A week had gone by and Bob was the talk of the town. Animals had told him how handsome he was all grown up and how his different feet suited him. The lady duckies started to notice him too. This one lady ducky, named Lysandra, Bob had come to like a lot. He had begun hanging out, and shortly after they agreed to marry. The ducky wedding would be in a month.

The day had finally come. For Bob and Lysandra to be wed. It was a quite beautiful ceremony, everyone from the ducky village and Bob's new place were there. When they had to decide where to live, Bob and Lysandra had decided to stay and have a family in the duckie village. Few years later there were more webbed feet duckies in the ducky village, 7 to be exact; Rob, Alexis, Mina, Manon, Roni, Robert and Sabrina. Bob and Lysandra get confused on the names a lot; however, the ducky village cares for one another, so it was fine. Many more years had passed by, Bob and Lysandra had more baby duckies, and the webbed duckies married off. Being excellent swimmers they married into good homes. Over time there were mostly webbed duckies and almost no non-webbed duckies.

Many many years had passed and the non-webbed duckies were an old tale told by the elderly. At the end of this story we learn many things, one of which is the story of evolution. Another is that you shouldn't be afraid of your flaws or qualities because they are given to you for a reason.

Untitled

Slowly the blackness fluttered into the light. The great brown eyes that welcomed the grey sky, belonged to the rugged man. Scruffy as some might say. He did not have to analyze the sky for long because tiny, free drops of water began to fall. The man thought that it might be like needles, but he hadn't felt that pain in so long, so he compared the free drops to tears. Each bone cracked as the man slowly began to rise. Groaning and using his aching knees as the support he finally got up. The man began to stretch his old worn muscles. He knew that he had to find shelter from the rain and worse, the wind. One breath in and one breath out, the man began to walk. The wind was not raging at this moment, just existing and for the first time in the man's life, he felt that something could understand how his life was.

Step by step the man had made it to half a mile when the wind began to talk. Quiet at first, but continuously getting louder in the man's ear. He did not mind this at first until the wind began to fight. His hair blew into his face as small bumps grew on his arms and legs. Before long, the man's steps weren't in the same pattern of left, right. They became left, right, right, left. The steps became longer and longer until it looked like the man was pushing heavy objects. As if the wind was a demon it grabbed the man's shoulders and began to push. The man slipped, one-foot mis stepped by the other and the man fell. The man got up quickly, groaning with his bones, but the wind caught him off guard and threw him to the ground again. This time the man laid on the ground for a while. The cold, hard, wet ground. His mind wandering to the thought, "Man, I am a piece of garbage."

His clothes, not that it was much, began to soak and he could feel the cold water growing like a mold. The grey sky began to turn dark as the man closed his eyes. Shutting off his thoughts as if closing his eyes was a switch, he felt the raindrops. He began to remember how free they were. Just falling out of the control of the

cloud. A tiny flame in his heart began to grow. It grew and grew, but it did not burn. No, this fire was something else.

Ah, yes, hope.

With this feeling suddenly spreading from his heart to his head his eyes opened. He sprang up, ignoring the groan from his body. The wind fierce as ever now continued to fight with this man, but not even the wind could blow out the fire now flowing through his whole soul.

He walked with the hope and will of being free. About an hour after non-stop fighting the man found the outstretched arms of a tree. Once he was completely embraced by the comfort of the tree, the man laid down. His heart pacing, he soon realized that not only his eyes opened today, but his mind. As he watched the dry land drink every little water drop, he began to see that he was free. He was only ever bound by himself. Resting on the trunk of the tree, the man began to shut his eyes. He could feel the corners of his mouth begin to proceed upwards. For the first time in 40 years, the man was happy.

Not only happy, free.

Untitled

Your memory still lingers in the back of my mind like a whisper that I can't hear, but your ghost is beginning to evaporate. I may not be able to forgive, but I've been starting to forget. Slowly but surely, my recollection of you is fading away.

Last week, I forgot what your laugh sounded like. I didn't think that would ever happen because you thought everything was funny.

My cheek, which had been left tingling from your last touch, has just become numb. I don't remember your voice anymore. and I don't remember why I was so angry that night. I don't remember exactly what you said to me. But for some reason I haven't been able to forget what happened after that.

There are still traces of you in that room. The cup still has your smudged fingerprints on it. The broken mirror still lays on the floor, shattered into a million bits. The scent of bleach remaining is reminiscent of my struggle to clean up the mess you left on the rug. I didn't even attempt to tidy anything else. I knew I wouldn't get away with it, so what was the point in trying? But blood makes me nauseous, so I did the best I could despite my shaking fingers and blurry vision. And the rest of the room? I haven't touched it since.

That night, I just sat on the mildewy couch and waited. And as the stillness of the room left the hairs on the back of my neck in a constant state of standing, and the goosebumps on my arms never ceased to disappear, and the color drained from my cheeks, I never budged.

"They're coming," I'd think with a shiver, "and you'll be done with." But nothing ever happened. Nobody stopped by. And nobody has. So of course, I'm still paranoid.

Every little creak of the old house makes me jump. Every gust

of wind that blows through confines me to my room for yet another week. And as I sit alone in the ever-creaking house, I feel myself starting to rot faster than you did.



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