



HENDERSON  
LIBRARIES



# Unlocked Voices



2023 Teen Writing Contest



# Table of Content

## ESSAYS

*Middle School 2*

*High School 7*

## POETRY/PROSE

*Middle School 29*

*High School 49*

## SHORT STORIES/FICTION

*Middle School 75*

*High School 230*



Valerie Lopez-Mendoza

3



Valerie Lopez-Mendoza  
Middle School



## The Things I Should Have Said...

They never tell you that the worst fight to go through is a silent one. You walk hallways, sidewalks, and anywhere in the world but the strangers that surround you tell a different story. Those people who make everyone laugh and gleeful could be the people who also cry themselves to sleep at night, muffling their sobs. “I am so sorry for your loss; I am here if you need something”. Pathetic. Feigned liars.

I think no one ever took the time to explain to their kids the difference between sympathy and empathy because when I glance at my classmates, the sarcasm fumigates the entire establishment. My eyes feel drier by the minute, my mouth is dehydrated, and every single atom my body contains goes numb. I am exhausted from the nights before, staying up and labeling out regrets I had. The things I should have said, the actions I should have done.

It took almost 13 years for me to finally realize how important my parents' words were, “You never know when is the last day that person is by your side.” Of course, only a kid would believe everyone was with you forever.

I grew up calling my grandparents every Monday through Friday at 3 pm when my mother would get out of work. The bond we fabricated was irreplaceable. My grandmother became my rock in the hard times, my motivation to reach for the sky with no limits and my reason to prove the impossible possible. Whenever I'd feel nerve wracked, I would replay the words she always said to me; “Oh princess, I couldn't be even prouder of the person I love.” That would always help. I think never in my life would I have thought that it only took less than 2 days for my life to completely turn upside down.

On January 10th, I received the worst news alongside my mother. My cousin called my mother, out of breath from screaming and crying so drastically. My grandmother had collapsed on the sofa unconscious. I wasn't aware of this until a

few hours after, so my mother was carrying all that weight. So many tears, so many calls. I had no moment to retaliate against what was going on. The idea of what happened after was blurry. I remember sitting at the marble countertop at home eating a grilled cheese sandwich with a pounding migraine. The entire left side of my head felt like it was throbbing from how much it hurt but it didn't matter when all I thought of was how my grandfather and grandmother were holding up. My mother is talking over the phone and there is a voice crack when she finishes perceiving what the rest of my god family had told her about the updates. She drops her phone and starts sobbing uncontrollably.

They finished running what felt like thousands of test results to finally rule out a blood clot on the left side of her brain. It was causing inflammation and that was dangerous regarding my grandmother already had other illnesses to battle. Due to her condition, they had to insert a catheter tube through her upper pelvis and push a slim syringe toward the vein in her brain to take out the clot.

I held my mother in my arms as she started listing the pros and cons out loud about the situation. She was overwhelmed with things she had to do all the way here from America to Colombia on a whole different continent. It got late, the moon had risen hours ago, and they regulated that the left side of my grandmother's brain was dead. No signs of function under all of the throbbing inflammation. What are the chances of a coincidence like that? The doctors said that the chances of my grandmother waking up were hitherto possible. The only hope left was a miracle.

My mom was desperate for a sign from God. She called my father and asked him if she should book the next flight to Colombia because she doesn't want her loving mother to die while she is more than 3,335 miles away.

"My love I felt this coming, but I didn't think it would be reality. No wonder she wanted all of December to be with her family." At that moment I did not get what my mother was saying but there was so much going on I didn't even bother expressing my opinions. A flight is booked for Friday which is the 13th. I had a bad gut feeling. For 2 whole weeks, my mother left at the airport while I stayed home with my dad. I had to go to school the next

day and act like nothing was happening. I don't know how I got through that day without breaking down because not even the world's most renowned actor could fake a smile the way I did that day. I was drowning in my unreleased tears trying so hard not to let my eyes pool.

I felt guilty, I can't explain why but I had the idea that if I was to cry, I would be insensitive because of the victim my family, and my mother was. Not me. My mother's 51st birthday was that Sunday, the 15th. I had planned to take her to the mountains but plans got messed up so quickly. She visited my grandmother at the hospital and had long talks with her. Word by word, my mother expressed how it was okay to go to the light if she felt it was time to part from this dimension.

"I know you are worried about Dad. I want you to be certain that everything will be okay. You were an amazing wife, the best mother, and the best grandmother any person could ask for. You have taught me right from wrong. The sacrifices you made for me and my brother so we would one day grow a family. If only you knew how peaceful you look and how radiant your skin is glowing. Even in the worst cases you still look as dazzling as ever. The way you put up with Dad is just incredibly hands down remarkable. It's admirable how committed you were to 'keep by his side in sickness and in health, forsaking all others, for as long as you both shall live.' You always said you would love us all until your last breath mother and that is a life well lived. I will be in pain for a while but calm knowing you will be in such a better place where all your suffering vanishes within seconds." My mom said what she needed that morning. It's 12:30 pm, and my rock has left this game of life. Apart from the resuscitation, she had a cardiac arrest and died. Those were the first words I heard when I woke up that morning from my father.

It angered me how no one seemed to notice how I was struggling to stay strong for my mother yet again I didn't want to make a fool out of myself in the first place. I gave up the chance to say three words to her just because I couldn't handle the news. People weren't lying when they said the last sense to go when a person passes is their sense of hearing. The most painful part should have been assuring them that it was her mother who had passed as they pulled the covers from her head. One thing I could

not take out of my mind was how my grandfather was going to react to the news. 52 years of marriage filled with heartfelt memories that are sacred to him is not easy to say so long to.

My mother sat down with him, on the phone with her brother. As she told him, my mother's heart was wrinkling up like a prune from the reactions. "I don't understand...she's gone? Oh, not my dear sweetheart, no please" he mumbled softly.

The next day was the cremation; it was an emotional day for our entire family. They all said their goodbyes and prayers, going over moments that will forever be cherished. Her sense of humor, her Master Chef worthy cooking skills, her bravery, her resilience, I could go on and on about what they said. "Until we meet again my dear sweetheart" my grandfather laid his head on the frame of my grandmother's picture. The 2 weeks went by slowly and finally, Mom was back home with me. She handed me a bag and it carried the most prized possession for me.

The woman I once knew, the one which I would embrace so tightly with my small arms that barely fit around her, now fitted perfectly in the palms of my hands. She was now just a fragmented corpse that transcended and no longer existed, just remains inside a glazed brown box. A memory was all that was left now.

A month has passed and already I had forgotten the sound of her voice. I failed to recall the last words I ever said to her. The things I wanted to say were, I love you.

In loving memory of Elisa Rendon de Mendoza  
March 27th, 1952 - January 15th, 2023



|  |    |
|--|----|
| <b>Katelyn Chan</b> ~ <i>2nd Place</i>   | 8  |
| <b>Mia Delorme</b> ~ <i>3rd Place</i>    | 10 |
| Arissa Greene                            | 14 |
| Caleb Morales                            | 16 |
| Ginika Obiefoka                          | 19 |
| Rehan Pervaiz                            | 22 |
| <b>Cadee Sessions</b> ~ <i>1st Place</i> | 24 |
| Elizabeth Wirthlin                       | 26 |





Katelyn Chan  
High School



## Fairytales, Fiction, and...Facts?

For many individuals, we first learned about the world through works of fiction. Stories of animals teaching math and fairies going on adventures to learn about themselves became engrained in our little minds and provided a source of entertainment and education. However, as our time becomes more limited and we begin to mature, what use does the imaginary bring? Why immerse ourselves in a world of wizards when we should be immersed in our studies or professions? Why waste time memorizing the politics of a dystopian world when knowing the rules of our world would have a greater impact? As I approach the end of high school, I too have considered this. However, I've learned that fiction can also have positive effects.

First, fiction gives us an outlet to destress and relax. After a stressful day of homework assignments and exams, reading fiction helps me distract myself from my problems. In fiction, I can explore fantastical worlds and see amazing sights. I can read about suspenseful mysteries, daring space adventures, and fierce elemental battles from the comfort of my home. Instead of spending all my time immersed in learning difficult school topics, fiction gives me an escape from the real world. Through this escape, I am able to relax and take time to read something I enjoy.

Moreover, fiction also helps us see things from a different point of view. While both non-fiction and fictional works can tell about an individual's life and perspective, fictional stories tell their tales through a person's journey rather than just stating facts. By reading fiction, I've seen the downsides to seemingly perfect lives, the cultures of countries, and different backgrounds. With all of these together, reading fiction helps me consider and accept different points of view. By telling a story through a character's perspective, readers can see inside their life and better understand how it feels to be them.

Finally, fiction gives us inspiration and inspires us. Similar to

non-fictional texts about famous individuals, we can read about strange and unlikely characters facing seemingly impossible challenges in fictional stories. Growing up, I found role models in the characters I read in books. In fiction, I found strong female figures, the consequences of being evil, and reasons to keep fighting for what's right.

Reading fiction helps us relax, see a different point of view, and feel inspired. Diving into a world of good vs. evil gave me an escape from reality and its difficulties. Through these stories, I could read about adventures from different cultures and points of view, teaching me to consider all sides and not judge a book by its cover. Stories of knights and brave princesses have inspired me to work hard and never give up. Fictional stories have been a part of my life for a long time, and without them, I wouldn't be the person I am today. Without fiction in the world, life would be centered on logic and facts with little escape.



Mia Delorme  
High School



## Untitled

In 1924, the Snyder Act gave Native Americans citizenship, allowing them to vote. However, this act hasn't allowed a clear path for voting for Native Americans, and as such many of them have become discouraged from politics in general. As voter suppression becomes a more widely known dark secret of American politics, a known grudge against Native Americans is becoming more apparent. Native Americans are already an overlooked minority, and their protections are being stripped like the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) and Dakota Access Pipeline protests that we see in recent news. Often, Natives see no gain in participating in a government that does not care about them or sees how their vote can change it. The trauma from genocide, ethnic cleansing, and residential schools are passed down and told as warnings to optimistic Natives. Although, as a new generation comes into voting, we can not only acknowledge the atrocities that our community suffered but move past them. Then we can see how to increase our voting numbers and prevent such tragedies from happening once again.

Voter suppression is the practice of deterring voting from occurring with a heavy focus on minority groups. In this practice, strategies like gerrymandering where district borders are manipulated in favor of one group, and suppressive voter laws that cut voting hours, limit third-party ballot collection, and more requirements to vote and vote by mail. These measures can target non-white communities the most, especially Black and Native areas. The earliest example of voter suppression, besides laws, are taxes and tests at polling locations. Poll taxes affected Black and Native voters because they simply couldn't afford the toll, but poor white people could find a way out of it if their ancestors voted before the civil war. Poll taxes were banned in federal elections in 1964, and then in state elections two years after, in 1966. Literacy tests were used as a way to select who should and should not vote.

As election officials were the ones evaluating the voter answers, often they were the final say. Not only were poor people of color, who had disproportionately high illiteracy rates, targeted but even those who got a college education were denied the right to vote. In 1970, the Voting Rights Act banned the use of these tests. Although, the legacy and effects of voter suppression live on in the United States.

The Iroquois Confederacy was made up of multiple tribes along upper New York and was renowned as one of the oldest democracies in the world, even inspiring our own government. Though the government's constitution was inspired by the Iroquois Constitution, just like all tribes, the Iroquois tribe was not given the right to participate in the United States government. One, they weren't considered citizens, and two, during this era, most indigenous folk were not even seen as human. As more and more colonists came to the 'New World', they began to see the Natives as a sign of danger. Therefore, began a long, dark time of Native genocide, enslavement, child separation, rape, and displacement. Not only was this violence overlooked by the government, but also encouraged. A large example was during the Gold Rush era in California where the 1850 act for Government and Protections of Indians was where Native scalps, hands, or heads were placed on a bounty. Many children or women were sold into slavery. This was a peak of ethnic extermination in Native communities. In 1870, the fourteenth amendment gave all citizens the right to vote regardless of race, even Black Americans. Unfortunately, this act did not include Native Americans, as they were under the jurisdiction of their tribe. Despite this, their tribes were still under the power of the United States government, and they could not have a voice in the country they resided in. It wasn't until the Indian Citizenship Act in 1924 that Natives were given full citizenship. But their privileges of citizenship were given up to the states to decide, and ultimately, they didn't enjoy Natives voting in their elections, federal or local. Many Natives themselves were split on whether having citizenship was beneficial. On one hand, they needed to participate in the politics happening that affected their land and their freedoms, but on the other side, they worried about preserving their culture and identities. Along with the Indian Citizenship Act came residential schools. These schools

separated Native children from their families and forced them to disregard their tribal culture, including their language, their dance, and even their names. The children were subjected to mental, physical, and sexual abuse by the educators and priests that ran the schools. Despite their mission to “kill the Indian in him, and save the man,” as Richard Henry Pratt said about the education of Natives, most of those who created these schools saw Native children as objects and often disposable. Many of the children who died in these schools, either from disease or neglect, were buried under or around the school. Native Americans couldn’t change this reality without voting, and they would have to go state by state to fight and protest for their right to vote. Eventually, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 would make any practices that deny the right to vote on race or color illegal. This legally secured Native Americans the right to vote, but even today, they still face voter repression.

Today, Native voter suppression comes in more subtle ways. As states try to prevent voter fraud, they push strict voter ID laws. Since reservations don’t follow the same street signage as traditional American neighborhoods, their tribal IDs are not allowed to be used to register. Taking a trip to the DMV to acquire a new ID is often not an option for those who can’t afford the trip. Drop-off ballot boxes and polling stations are found outside of reservations and can take a whole day to travel just to vote. Often, Natives can’t afford to take a day off to deal with these issues as they already deal with poverty at disproportionate levels. Even mail-in voting can be a struggle. Because Natives don’t have convenient routes to the postal office or even mailboxes, they can’t guarantee a vote. Due to overcrowding of reservations, mail routes are slow or irregular. Many Natives cannot find jobs in them either, leaving them homeless. This status does not help them vote, in fact, voting is often the last thing on their minds. But not all Native voter suppression comes from outside sources. Often, elders tell the younger generation not to vote so as to prevent further assimilation into the European-American culture. Many of these elders also deal with severe PTSD from both residential schools and the more extreme racism they may have faced from attempting to vote before. Our modern forms of voter suppression still affect Natives in similar ways as in the past, only now can we

call more attention to them and solve them.

Despite our government's deep-rooted push against voters, there are many solutions to attempt to accumulate Native voters. The Native American Voting Rights Coalition found that 1 in 3 Native Americans was not registered to vote. Often, those who were not registered cited that they didn't know how or where to register. To fix registration problems, some states automatically register eligible voters as they services, like the DMV. Another solution might be to expand voter registration agencies to Indian Health Service clinics. This gives Natives living on reservations a closer alternative than driving far distances just to register. Larger issues, however, cannot be fixed simply. For the many homeless Natives, the solution is to increase homeless services to help them get back on their feet, but ultimately this goal should not be to acquire a voter. One controversial debate is whether to allow felons to vote. As Natives are often a focal group of police surveillance and are incarcerated 38% more than other Americans, allowing felons to vote is beneficial to our communities. Although many of the surface-level solutions to voter suppression can be easy to identify, and even solve, many of the issues Native Americans face are far deeper than voting.

Voter suppression is the tip of the iceberg of the ingrained racism that America is built on. Although residential schools and genocide have been swept under the rug and declared America's dark past, the effects of those times still linger around. Our reservations are constantly being intruded on for oil, are exposed for not having proper water, and their grocery prices rising beyond what most can afford are common issues that Natives face. Unfortunately, if they can't vote, then these issues won't be fixed or even addressed. It's important to have Natives in office so they can protect future generations and preserve the culture.

## Untitled

Creativity is a way to express yourself without any guidelines or limitations except the ones that we set for ourselves. Creativity allows us creative freedom to make whatever we can imagine. Creativity's important to me because it allows me to express the most genuine versions of myself. I express my creativity through art and sewing. While creating art I'm relieved of all my stress and become liberated when creating whatever I can imagine.

Art has been one of the first ways I was able to express my creativity. I remember watching my dad draw and becoming amazed by all the colors and shapes he would use. At a young age, I had been given a sketchbook and art supplies. My parents did not tell me what to draw, but instead, let me experience using different mediums. Pencils, markers, paints, and charcoals; all allowed me to craft a world of my own design, where there are no constraints. Having such freedom allowed me to express myself. Early on I discovered that I cherished drawing. As I got older, I continued to draw using different computer programs. My characters are all distinct and reflect me in various ways.

Recently, I've begun to design and create cosplays. I worked on designing and sewing my cosplay into existence a couple of months ago. I needed a cosplay for an upcoming convention. I always wear one to these events. I would typically buy one already made but this time I craved something original. So, I took to my notebook and started sketching out designs and concepts left and right until I came across one that I was keen on, a plague doctor magical girl. Once I had my final design, I started ordering all the fabrics and decor I needed. I spent days painting the mask I needed for the costume and months (filled with many all-nighters) constructing the weapon to pair with it, a battle ax. When I wasn't working on the props, I would work on sewing the dress. The dress consisted of an undershirt, an overall pink dress, and a petite coat underneath.

This had been my first time sewing so I took it easy on myself and bought the clothes I needed instead of making them from scratch, so I had a base to work with. The clothes didn't quite fit my design, so I had to tailor them to fit my version. I took to work hand-sewing all of the ruffles, lace, and frills to the dress. Along with altering the length of the dress making it shorter to show more of the petite coat. Sewing was a challenge in itself. This was my first time, mind you, so I made many mistakes. I would sew a whole row of lace just for the thread to snap right before I got to tie off the thread. Sometimes I would spend almost an entire hour altering the dress just to realize I did it wrong and would have to start all over again. After months of work and dedication, I had made my vision come to fruition. When I wore it to the convention, I received many compliments along with people asking to take photos of me. All and all the entire experience was exciting along with something I look forward to doing again.

Buying cosplays and dressing as specific characters is fine but making my costume and dressing as my original characters make the cosplay more meaningful to me since I created every aspect of it. Being able to make my costumes eliminates any creative restrictions that buying one would have, from designing the character to constructing the outfit. I'm in total control of it all. Dedicating time and effort to making my designs a reality. Creativity's a wonderful thing that distinguishes everyone from others. Imagination has allowed me to express parts of myself, I would have never had the courage to share with others. I have grown mentally, emotionally, and socially by exploring who I am through creativity and imagination.



## I Love Rollerblading

At nine years old I was obsessed, as any nine-year-old would be, with roller skating. Even though neither of us lived very close my best friend and I would still beg our moms to drive us to the local roller rink all the time. I loved roller skating. I even had my own pair of skates. For whatever reason, going in circles on a shiny wooden floor with tons of strangers in a dark and rundown building made me happy. I was perfectly content to roller skate for the rest of my life.

That is, until one fateful day when I walked over to my best friend's house after school. Almost as soon as we got through the door she informed me of her newest obsession, rollerblading." Come on! You have to try it," she pleaded, "it's so fun!" I was obviously pretty scared. Balancing on 4 wheels is still difficult when they're evenly spaced. How am I supposed to stay balanced on 4 wheels that line up single file? I was nervous, but I decided to take a leap of faith anyway. I cautiously slipped the boots onto my feet and secured all the different buckles and strips of Velcro as if I were an astronaut suiting up for a mission on the moon. I lifted off the ground slowly and nervously, clutching onto the back of her leather couch for support. When I finally got to my feet I began to slowly skate around on her laminate floors. I was amazed. My feet were gliding with ease. I wasn't tripping or falling on my butt. I was having fun! I had so much fun that I ditched my roller skates. Who needs four evenly spaced wheels when you can have them lined up single file? Instead of bringing my roller skates to the rink, I started bringing my own pair of rollerblades. I had a blast flying through the colorfully lit roller rink and gliding across its shiny wooden floors on my brand-new rollerblades.

After a while of skating in the rink, as most things do for kids that age, it got boring. I wanted to take on the next feat of my road to mastery, outdoor skating. So one afternoon my mom drove me to the park to test my luck rollerblading on sidewalks. I was

extremely nervous. “It can’t be that bad,” my mom reassured me. I hopped out of the car with my rollerblades tightly on my feet and I started down the sidewalk. In my first few seconds of outdoor rollerblading, my biggest fear had come to life right before my eyes. A giant downward-sloping hill was staring me directly in the face. As I began my descent down the hill all rational thought quickly disappeared from my head. Was there an end to this hill? I can’t see a stopping point, maybe it goes on forever and ever. What if I hit someone on my way down? Do I even know how to use my breaks? I need a way out and fast. Then, BAM. I slammed myself right into the side of a concrete park bench in an attempt to stop myself from going out of control. My knees ached with pain, and my consciousness with disappointment. Not only had I hurt my knees while trying to stop myself, but I also let myself down. My first time trying to take on the big challenge of outdoor skating and I’d already given up.

I didn’t touch my rollerblades for a long time after that, not for about seven years. Then, one fateful day in the summer before my 11th-grade year I picked them back up. I had just finished watching the movie *Whip It*, which details a teenager’s passion for roller derby. Seeing how much roller skating had changed her life, how free it made her feel, and how much joy she took in it re-inspired me to try my hand at rollerblading again. I was nervous but I thought it can’t be that bad, right?

I decided to rollerblade on an outdoor basketball court since I didn’t have anyone to go to the rink with. So, one afternoon I drove myself to the park and hopped out of the car ready to take on the challenge. I made my way to the park bench across from the basketball court and swapped my sneakers for my rollerblades. I strapped and buckled them tightly onto my feet like an astronaut adorning a space suit in preparation for a mission on the moon. I stood up slowly off of the bench, nervous about what was to come, and made my way onto the court. I was amazed. I wasn’t tripping or falling on my butt. I was having fun! I was having fun exactly like I did the first time I dared to take that leap of faith. I was gliding around the court at unimaginable speeds, and I was loving it. After a few weeks, I was doing fantastic things that were exactly what I saw as markers of incredible rollerblading technique at nine years old.

Although I still fail to possess the courage required to attempt some of the marvelous tricks I've seen performed on rollerblades, I'm much more daring than before. Since then, I've even reattempted to rollerblade on sidewalks and succeeded without any unfortunate accidents. For a long time, I let my fear of failure get in the way of rollerblading. I was incredibly scared to disappoint myself again. After taking the chance, I see now that it kept me from discovering one of my greatest passions. I love rollerblading.

## Defining Revenge

Christopher Nolan once said, “Revenge is a particularly interesting concept, especially the notion of whether or not it exists outside of an abstract idea.” The abstract meaning of revenge is not an easy one as there are many reasons why someone needs to declare revenge on anybody. If anything, revenge is something that makes you blind to reality as the outcome is unpredictable. Revenge is an action that causes harm to those who have wronged others. Revenge is a complicated concept that is personal, punishes others, and is a natural human instinct.

First, revenge can be described in one way, and that is universal. The function of revenge often creates an ongoing cycle of retaliation. Eadeh says that “the emotional consequences of revenge are a mixed bag, in that we feel both good and bad when we take revenge on another party” (HuffPost, 7). This is merely saying how humans feel two different things when revenge is acted on. In addition, the function of revenge comes from deviant betrayal. In the article [scienceofpeople.org](http://scienceofpeople.org), it states that “revenge re-opens and aggravates your emotional wounds” (Scienceofpeople, 21). The article sums up the betrayal and the heartache that was felt when you lose someone’s trust. Another way that revenge is portrayed is in the show *Revenge* where the main character Emily Throne states, “In revenge, as in life, every action has an equal and opposite reaction. In the end, the guilty always fall” (Revenge, S1, Ep.5). As a result, revenge is a way to find those who have wronged you and have them admit to their guilt that is caged and looking for a way out.

Second, there are examples of revenge in our everyday lives: literature, violence, and capitalism. Revenge can be found in literature in different ways as different components. A summary of Stephen King’s *Carrie* is, “She then became a victim of a prank in which pig's blood was dumped all over her on stage, so she uses

her telekinetic powers to kill her peers, but even after Carrie's mom stabs her, she manages to kill her too" (bulbapp.com, 1). Revenge was used on the people who deserved it in the end, an eye for an eye. In addition, violence can lead to disastrous consequences. The article *Legal Revenge for Domestic Abuse?* states that "Surely, many relatives of domestic-abuse victims have considered taking the law into their own hands and exacting revenge on the assailants" (abcnews.go.com, 1). Revenge used in the form of violence is essentially bad but the reason why it is being used is good. Finally, capitalism speaks on how revenge is used politically. "...nonetheless the outcome (rather than the intent) of global racial capitalism is a kind of needless, unwarranted, and potentially self-sabotaging vengeance" (socialtextjournal.org, 4). The ignorance of the planet by the older generation will slowly and surely kill us. A way that activists got their attention was by throwing a can of pea soup on a Van Gogh painting.

However, there are several aspects of revenge that cannot be defined. The first is forgiveness. According to the article it states, "Forgiveness is the act of compassionately releasing the desire to punish someone or yourself for an offense" (psychologytoday.com, 2). Forgiveness frees humans from doing things that will hurt them in the future. Stability could also work. "Wasting our time and energy trying to ruin other people's lives, instead of improving our own" (sofoarchon.org, 2). Stability helps us maintain our social, emotional, physical, and mental health and keep up with them constantly.

To conclude, all humans feel the need for revenge, but the development of their emotional intelligence and personal choices will dictate whether they act on those feelings or not. Revenge can be done in many ways; it could get the best of us if we let it. Revenge is an irrational concept where anything is necessary and illogical to get to your goal. Everyone experiences revenge at some point in their lives whether they realize it or not.

Works Cited

- ~Gholipour, Bahar. "Why Revenge Is Bittersweet."  
Huffpost, 30 June 2016,  
[https://www.huffpost.com/entry/why-revenge-is-bittersweet\\_n\\_577532b1e4b042fba1cf4827/amp](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/why-revenge-is-bittersweet_n_577532b1e4b042fba1cf4827/amp).
- ~Edwards, Vanessa Van. "The Psychology of Revenge:  
Why It's Secretly Rewarding." Science of People, 2015,  
<https://www.scienceofpeople.com/the-psychology-of-revenge/>.
- ~Awad, Abigail. "Novel Analysis: Carrie (Stephen King)."  
Bulb, 9 Dec. 2018,  
<https://www.bulbapp.com/u/novel-analysis-carrie-stephen-king~5>.
- ~News, ABC. "Legal Revenge for Domestic Abuse?"  
ABCNews, 1 May 2001,  
<https://abcnews.go.com/GMA/story?id=127021&page=1>.
- ~Haiven, Max. "Introduction: Revenge Politics, Revenge Economy, Revenge Culture."  
Social Text, 20 Apr. 2022,  
[https://socialtextjournal.org/periscope\\_article/introduction-revenge-politics-revenge-economy-revenge-culture/](https://socialtextjournal.org/periscope_article/introduction-revenge-politics-revenge-economy-revenge-culture/).
- ~Orloff, Judith. "The Power of Forgiveness: Why Revenge Doesn't Work."  
Psychology Today, 8 Sept. 2011,  
<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/emotional-freedom/201109/the-power-forgiveness-why-revenge-doesnt-work>.
- ~Archon, Sofo. "Why Revenge Doesn't Work (And What Does)."  
Sofo Archon, 2017,  
<https://sofoarchon.com/revenge/>.

## Untitled

Before I start, I want to disclose that this essay was NOT written using any AI tool, even though this essay is all about them. Because sometimes, for certain affairs, it's better to listen to a human than a robot.

It seems that AI is all the rage these days, with news headlines touting a new AI every month and social media going ravenous over if AI is good or bad. But what no one seems to realize is that this all has been creeping up in the last decade or so, just beneath the surface. And as AI gets more advanced, we as a species might have to face some difficult questions to answer. But first, let's talk about the history of AI.

The origins of AI go way back before smartphones, game consoles, and even personal computers. It stems all the way from 1956 in the Dartmouth Workshop, but the AI we know today didn't exist until around 2012. Faster computers, larger datasets, and a new AI training method called Deep Learning all made the perfect storm of events for AI to truly enter the mainstream. They first were integrated with smart assistants, then with phones, then with cars, advertising, robots, etc. All of a sudden, there seemed to be a new project integrating AI with something popping up every month. Now that we finished talking about the past, let's see what the future holds for AI.

Many people have different opinions on what the future of AI will have on society. Some say it will transform it into a utopia. Others think of a dystopia. Whatever stance you take, know that we have some important questions to ask ourselves about AI. For example, should we give rights to AI, as they can act just like a human would? Another example is if AI is taking over more jobs than it creates, how is anyone going to find work? No matter what questions we ask, it seems that we are ill-equipped to answer these questions as of now. This is a bit worrying, as we need to choose now before we face the consequences of our actions in the future.

AI has no doubt changed how we live and function in society. Most of your actions have been influenced by AI, from watching something on your feed to waiting at a traffic light, and it seems that many people don't know the true extent that AI has on our lives. They might understand the surface-level features of the AI iceberg, like chatbots and search recommendations, but they don't know how deep the iceberg goes. All in all, it can be quite frightening when we ask if we can't understand AI, or if AI can't understand us.





## Talentless

As I start applying for colleges and almost start this new chapter of adulthood, I realize how hard it is to write essays on life when you truly haven't experienced it at all. Many of these prompts ask you about challenges you've overcome, a time when you were a leader, and simply ask questions that ask you about you. I remember applying for a scholarship where it asked me for a talent I had, and I almost closed out of the tab. I am eighteen years old, the start of adulthood, and it has taken me eighteen years to realize that I have no talent.

I grew up learning almost every hobby possible from tap dance to karate, and nothing has stuck with me. It was discouraging seeing my younger family members do their favorite things while I just watched in amazement, at the love they had for their hobby. I could come up with a million different excuses as to why I don't have something I truly love doing, but I really don't have one. It wasn't the fact that I wasn't good at those things, I just found no happiness in it. I am the oldest daughter in my family and there is nothing harder than that. I have raised not only myself but also my siblings and cousins along with it. While my classmates have jobs, my job IS to make sure my siblings are fed and clothed. These last two years of high school have probably been the most difficult to come to terms with knowing that I can't leave for the college of my dreams, or that I can't have the "regular" high school experience I've dreamed of all because my siblings depend too much on me. I could use my experience of having to grow up too fast as an excuse, but I don't see it as one. All these scholarships have made me wonder whether or not you can become successful without having a talent or even a job, and I have finally found that answer. When I applied for that scholarship asking for a talent I had, it took me weeks to come up with something, until it hit me. Although you may think you don't have talent, not all talents are physical.

Your talent may be sports, or cooking, or dancing, but mine is self-sacrificing. I haven't met any other teens, besides myself, who have the talent to raise kids that aren't their own, while sacrificing their future dreams. I haven't met another person who isn't bitter knowing that they will be the only one who can't follow their dreams and will have to watch the rest of their family members achieve theirs. I have the talent to watch people pursue their dreams and talents of their own. Another thing I have learned is that I am not talentless, I am just a person who finds joy in many different things. The harshness many of us give ourselves for not being good at one thing, blinds us from the rest of the things we CAN do. Talent comes in many different forms, and that is something I wish I was told growing up. Those life experiences I thought I haven't experienced, I have, I was just too focused on the basic responses so many people give, that I thought my own experience wasn't acceptable.

So, as I do these scholarships, I like to remind myself of all the things I have gone through raising all these kids while being a kid myself. All the "experiences" asking me for moments of courage and leadership, all were just hidden in different forms. Those moments of leadership were times of me giving advice, and the moments of courage were me killing the bugs they were afraid of. Although five-year-old me didn't imagine my high school self spending the majority of her time inside, I know she would be happy to finally see that I have finally found a talent I am passionate about and is something that many people don't have.

## Nothing

Zero doesn't exist. Zero is nothing. Zero has no worth, no cost, and no value. The number zero itself is considered to be an important value in math and when used as a verb, a description within the real world. Oxford languages define nothing as, "not anything; no single thing." To even talk about nothing, or zero, is to describe it as the opposite of anything. This is further reinforced as the Greek philosopher Parmenides suggests, "To speak of nothing, is to speak of something, so nothing cannot exist." This is only proven by basic math, as you cannot divide, multiply, add, or subtract with zero. It does nothing to change the value of the original number. Our minds cannot fathom the meaning of the number, because zero is a concept. Zero will never truly exist.

Nothing is something that has been taught since childhood, both domestically and in schools. If it's important enough to be integrated into our lives at such an early age, through the generations, it must be to guide our pathways to success. We are taught the ways of the past, to help usher in our futures... or so they say. Why do we learn of the philosophers of old, of centuries worth of aging and refinement and interpretation? It is important to learn from the past, to prevent making the same mistakes in the present, that is the lesson of history. But what use is philosophy and free thinking in a world that doesn't value it? The government and the generations before the rising one don't care about the future since they won't be alive to see it. Children don't have a voice, or a value until they are 18, and then, they are only important through the taxes they pay. They'll join the workforce, trying to make something of themselves, maybe, something substantial, but it won't really matter. There are 8 billion people on our planet, so why should my choices really matter? My worth among the millions and billions is not worthwhile to the groups that control and dictate my world. This is only shown through the lack of care for children and teenagers actively reflected in schools,

with the lack of funding and lack of experienced teachers. We are only cared for in the masses, as we are a larger part of our sums. Alone, we are zero, we are nothing. Yet, when we all have a number that is threatening, we are mulled. But being part of a crowd is safe, as to mindless sheep, until we all find the cliff we'd jump off or the thing to sell our very souls to. Everybody has a price, to convince them that they're not the mere fraction that they are.

My individuality is not cared for, and yet the media argues that it is. The pen is mightier than the sword, but actions speak louder than words. The arguments and indoctrination of information we experience only try to control our train of thought until it is too late to change them. On the other hand, I say that I value individuality, or my own, unfiltered thoughts, but even they are not my own. To even prove my train of thought I have to use other sources to support it. It shows that I'm not the first person to conceive of this concept, I'm not the first or the last. So, why do my thoughts matter? There are 8 billion people on this planet, and I am only one of them.  $8,000,000,000 / 1 = 1.25 \times 10^9$ . My percentage as a person = 0.000000125. Rounding is also an important concept in math, so rounded down, zero is your answer. Therefore, I am zero. I am nothing.

Zero describes absence. Even darkness does not exist by itself, because it is only the absence of light. Dark will always be overpowered by light whenever it is present. Just because something is not directly in front of us, does not mean that it doesn't exist. Nothing only describes absence. In our universe, we know about the galaxies, the stars, and nebulas that illuminate our need of knowing what's out there. It's connected by a vast nothingness. Darkness. But the contrast between light and the limitless black shows that nothing may be necessary. After all, nothing is what makes the stars look so brilliant.

No matter your perspective, the glass is both half-full and empty. It's important to keep both in mind. But my voice is drowned out in a sea of others, as the media tries to overstimulate us into caring and thinking about other topics. So, what if we start living like everything does matter? Every choice, every act, every step we take, has a direct influence on the world around us, and it is frivolous to think otherwise. Zero is a bigger concept than we

can imagine, it makes countless theories true as it serves as a placeholder. It exists, maybe not in our world, but in the imaginary. Zero is a different concept to a philosopher, than a physicist. It has a different worth as zero can mean the difference between life and death to an astrophysicist, but an unsolvable problem to a mathematician. For a philosopher, leeway is allowed, as thinking is free, and math is not. I mean, zero doesn't matter.  $1+0$  still equals 1. Zero doesn't affect other numbers. But from a different perspective, zero can add value. 10 is worth more than 1, and the only difference between the two numbers is zero as a placeholder. So, if I am a zero, maybe I'm not supposed to be by myself. Maybe I add to others' value by being in others' lives and participating in school, in my family, and society. We may be a small part of each other's lives, but we have a bigger impact than what our numbers suggest, more than the count of our Instagram followers, more than the percentages of our grades, and more than our worth of  $1.25 \times 10^{-9}$ . After all, nothing really matters.



|   |    |
|---|----|
| Alissandra Campbell                       | 30 |
| Isabella Conner                           | 31 |
| <b>Melody Fay</b> ~ <i>2nd Place</i>      | 33 |
| Juliette Hemmer                           | 34 |
| Trinity Hudson                            | 35 |
| Nathan Hullinger                          | 36 |
| Sarah Manzanares                          | 37 |
| Haylee Marshall                           | 38 |
| Mary Nally                                | 39 |
| Keval Patel                               | 40 |
| <b>Sophie Ross</b> ~ <i>1st Place</i>     | 41 |
| Lyndsee Schroeder                         | 43 |
| Lylah Serrano                             | 44 |
| <b>Ilakkiya Suresh</b> ~ <i>3rd Place</i> | 45 |
| Michelle Van Nest                         | 47 |
| Destiny Vega                              | 48 |



Alissandra Campbell  
Middle School

## BTW, I Love You

I stay awake at night thinking of you  
I say good morning and good night to you  
When you talk to me, I don't feel blue  
Sometimes I wished you'd get a clue

We're like comets in a solar system  
The people around us are just some stars  
If we wanted too, we could run a kingdom  
We could totally be like superstars

I wish to be as pretty as you are  
I make and listen to playlist of us  
You're so pretty, it's just as bizarre  
When I look at you, I silently cuss

I just hope I'll be enough for you  
Just enough and I'll never wish you adieu



Isabella Conner  
Middle School

## The Loneliest Birthday

Sitting near the window  
Watching the rain fall  
Felt sorrow,  
Like I wanted to crawl up into a ball

On the counter,  
My cake melted  
The candles next to it  
My cake felt it,  
My loneliness

The birthday balloons hung high  
As if flying in the sky  
They seemed happy  
Unlike me

I cried like the rain  
It understood my pain  
I was alone  
Nobody came

If only I knew,  
That nobody would show,  
I could prepare  
And know  
I would be lonely on my birthday



Threw an unnecessary party  
Since nobody would show  
If only I knew,  
Nobody would care  
Not even partly

The evening was lonely  
The night was lonelier  
I laid in my bed  
With nothing in my head

I looked at the stars with jealousy  
They had company,  
Unlike me  
They seemed happy  
While I was lonely



Melody Fay  
Middle School



## Untitled

The searing cold cuts through my skin,  
Clothes cover my body, all up to my chin,  
A walk through the woods,  
And there I stood,  
Watching those blue lights flicker on by,  
Observing the blue lights fly  
Underneath the snowfall and the branches of the weeping willows,  
I am no hero,  
Yet these fantastic creatures glow in the dark,  
Singing melodies, floating above the forest's dock,  
That can make anyone's night and keep someone alive.

Though these blue lights cheer me up,  
Years of tragedies within a cup,  
Make it grow moldy and damp,  
The light of a lamp,  
Cannot compare to the blue lights,  
Those luminescence's are so bright,  
Here as I lie in the snow,  
Maybe I won't be alone,  
Hypothermia? I don't care,  
Once these lights lead me to their lair,  
I'll finally find peace,  
I'll finally meet my niece.  
As I close my eyes,  
I feel the warmth of those blue lights,  
I'm up above,  
With the angels and doves.



Juliette Hemmer  
Middle School

## Untitled

Holes in the ground dotted everywhere  
I try to close them all  
But every time I close one hole  
It reopens larger

I'm getting tired of closing them all  
But the result of having no holes in the ground  
Is worthwhile  
No one will fall into them

The only things I have  
Is a half-empty roll of tape  
And a wish for more of it  
I might need to use less  
But it's ok  
No one will fall into them

The holes get bigger as the tape gets smaller  
Beings are coming soon and there are still many holes  
They will be upset  
But it's ok  
No one will fall into the holes

The Beings flood in  
I panic as I direct them away  
I can't let them see the holes  
Or they will be tempted to open them and fall in

One by one they all exit  
No one fell into any holes  
But a few Beings saw them  
I hope they don't fall in



Trinity Hudson  
Middle School

## Untitled

Depression,  
it isn't something to just come and go  
But instead decides to stay  
Keeping me awake with a sudden fray

I can't help but to be tired and at loss of mood  
As the curtains close and leave me feeling like my mouth is glued  
Trying harder and harder to sleep,  
Nighttime seeks the worse does my depression get as  
I struggle with closing the curtains on my face  
As the next day I might be displaced

Unknown of where to go  
Unknown of where to sleep,  
I lie awake in hopes that you would allow me to find peace  
But that crease in the cracks has only left me wondering  
Will that thundering sound of depression help me sleep?



Nathan Hullinger  
Middle School

## Forever

Sometimes, I wonder what I did to deserve  
someone with such a wonderful personality.

You have charm, kindness,  
you're funny, you're smart, and you're so much more.

I know we have been through so much  
but every day I know that no matter how much we go through,

I will continue to treasure  
these thoughts and memories of you for the rest of my life.

It's not every day you meet the love of my life, right?  
I never expected to find someone as well-suited to me as you!

You give off the same energy as me,  
we share the same humor,  
we share the same interests and  
we love each other for who we are.

I love being around someone who finally understands me  
and is there for me when I really need them,  
and I am eternally grateful

for someone as amazing as you to come my way.

Our love reminds me of a beautiful story:

I am a prince and you are my king.  
I never believed in love at first sight but when I looked at you,  
I immediately fell in love.

My future has you in every moment  
and I don't know what my future would be without you there!

I knew from the second I met you,  
I would love you forever.

Being with you is like winning the lottery  
over, and over again, and I couldn't be more grateful!

I don't know how to begin  
explaining how long I want to be with you...  
but let's start with forever.



Sarah Manzanares  
Middle School

## Growing

I try to think of where that was going  
But I guess that's the definition of "growing?"  
Every time I tried to take a step forward  
    You pushed me back  
    I took your word  
I tried to rewind the track

I was thinking it was my fault  
Like I had done something wrong  
You were bringing everything to a halt  
And I said, "We can make it through anything, we are strong!"

You dragged me down and then brought me up  
    Like I was a puppet in your show  
    That's when I started to back up  
I called you out, I became the pro

Now I realize why it stopped going  
I guess that is the real definition of "growing"



Haylee Marshall  
Middle School

## Untitled

A blue and green sphere,  
With seven sisters and brothers.  
Floating through space,  
With billions of faces.

Plants are growing,  
The sun is shining.  
Humans are killing,  
They find it fulfilling.

Our crops were cut down,  
Forests and all.  
They make our trees disappear,  
They always seem to interfere.

They bombard my beauty, with plastics galore,  
Carbon dioxide is embracing my fall.  
The heat is rising but the end is not near,  
It is getting quite severe.

They are humans,  
They act so rudely.  
They hurt this planet,  
The worst part, they plan it.

The end is quite far,  
And we all will live on.  
But life might end sooner,  
And it might not just be a rumor.



Mary Nally  
Middle School

## Untitled

I'm not perfect like everyone else,  
there's something wrong with me.

People say it's the way I look, dress, or act  
but I think it's just me in general.

Everyone looks heart eyes falling in love  
then look at me and call me names.

I never cry about it,  
I don't care.

It just hurts,  
knowing that I'm not perfect.  
It hurts knowing  
you changed yourself for other people  
and I'm still not perfect.

One person loved me  
but once that love went away,  
It turned to hate.  
It turned into arguments and rumors.  
Then they look at her with heart eyes like everyone else.

I finally let it all out  
by crying by myself with that door completely shut.  
I accidentally cry at school,  
people start calling me a crybaby and an attention seeker.  
I wasn't looking for attention,  
I was looking for help  
because I'm not perfect like everyone else





Keval Patel  
Middle School

## Untitled

An empty sheet represents  
A world full of ideas and dreams;  
A place where someone can finally vent  
Ideas that burst out like beams.

Dungeons and castles, vast imagination,  
A work of art is emphatically made,  
Where you can write without hesitation,  
A pool of ideas in which to wade.

Uncountable works have filled the sheet:  
The Bible, the Torah: ancient texts.  
An endless spectrum of things to meet,  
And you'll never know what to do next.



Sophie Ross  
Middle School



## Untitled

In the grand scheme  
Of everything everywhere  
Life is nothing  
A speck  
Been and gone in an instant  
Nothing, nothing, nothing

And yet

Life is infinite  
Everywhere  
All the time  
The color of the Earth  
The Ocean  
Green and gold and rich, warm brown  
Everywhere

Butterflies and beating hearts  
The human experience  
Empathy and sympathy and love, love, love  
Family and friendship and memory  
A hundred foot elm tree  
That's been here  
A thousand years  
And is ready to stay a thousand more

In the grand scheme  
Of everything, everywhere  
We are nothing  
This planet  
This life  
These people  
These struggles  
This joy  
This sorrow  
This hope  
Nothing, nothing, nothing  
Never

And yet

It's everything.  
Everything, everything, everything.  
If only to me



Lyndsee Schroeder  
Middle School

## Again...

Mother, Mother  
O, Dear Mother  
I hang a picture  
Of you, Mother  
And if the picture  
Were to fall  
The shattered glass  
Would sweep the hall  
A nail would sit  
On the floor  
And I'd watch it all  
From the door  
An evil grin  
You didn't win  
Put together once more  
To begin a war  
And starting this night  
Begins a frightful fight  
For this picture will break  
Again and again  
Its forever fate



Lylah Serrano  
Middle School

## Untitled

Where I'm from, everyone lies dead beneath my feet.  
I feel pretty smug, and it's the most convoluted thing.  
I never anticipated feeling this way.  
It's not the way I used to be.

I must find a way, a way to associate and wit my truths.  
Maybe if I improvise my ways with a more gingerly gesture,  
I can finally break free.

Free from rain, which comes and goes on occasion.  
Free from the pain, but I'll keep trying regardless.  
So please understand that I'm trying my hardest  
because it's not fair.

It's not fair trying my hardest to walk and feel like a swagger.  
Trying my hardest  
to turn and cue my voice to sound and be comical,  
because

Apparently, it's not amusing to be quiet.  
Trying my hardest to extinguish all of these problems  
because I'm rolling off the deep end.

Maybe I'm exaggerating, and being too literal  
Maybe I just need to sprawl on my bed and forget.....

So please understand that I'm trying my hardest.  
This world is pretty tough and I'm done now,  
I'm rolling off the deep end just trying to resolve it.



Ilakkiya Suresh  
Middle School



## Earth's Warning

The sun and the moon, they circle each other,  
fighting on how to help their brother  
while the earth shivers in his bed.  
The thermometer is slowly turning red.

The sun argues, "Let me shield him,  
from the danger on the rim."  
"No," the moon argues, shaking her head,  
"You will only increase the heat he is fed."

"But then how will we help him?" they both cry,  
"How do we shield him, when death is nigh?"  
"Humanity he defends, he tries and he tries,  
but even so, all he tells himself is lies."

They whisper and they think,  
but all their ideas go down the sink.  
How to save their brother, they do not know.  
All they can do, is hope humanity grows.

The sun and moon, they whisper and wonder,  
what should they do, to keep their brother above the water?  
The earth's temperature keeps rising  
as the two keep fighting.

Once again, the thermometer is high.  
The sun and the moon's hands are tied  
as they watch in sorrow,  
while their brother fails to see tomorrow.

So, dear humans,  
do not allow yourselves to run  
from your problems,  
for someday you will be swallowed.

One day, the earth will die,  
do not make it so this day is nigh.  
Stop polluting your home,  
for otherwise, it will become your tomb.



Michelle Van Nest  
Middle School

## Untitled

A strong mind comes with an empty heart  
day to night of fighting fear  
A heart of stone sheds crystal tears

As pain kicks in with no warning  
sometimes the mind can be left storming  
Thoughts of sadness won't shed a tear

A state of mind called pain and fear  
an empty heart will never care  
for only a hart of stone sheds crystal tears.





Destiny Vega  
Middle School

## You Shine

The lights shine on the paveway,  
I Never knew you were this way anyway,  
Beautiful, Creative, Smart, & fun,  
Look at your reflection in the ocean,  
Its shines and brights up my world,  
You - my friend,  
Is the one I treasure most-  
You shine like a diamond and I love your smile,

Keep shining the way you do,  
I can't believe I have you,  
Cause you shine like nothing I've seen before-  
Honestly- I could've swore,  
But your mine- no one can say otherwise,  
Not even until I die,

Because you're mine, Maddie. And thanks for your love.  
Because in my opinion you're tough,  
but also you shine like a dove.



|   |    |
|---|----|
| Shannon Alexander                                 | 50 |
| Kristopher Drapacz                                | 52 |
| Ella Gaughan                                      | 54 |
| Destiny Gilles                                    | 57 |
| <b>Fernanda Gutierrez Garate</b> <i>1st Place</i> | 59 |
| Tylah Howard                                      | 61 |
| Ella Jensen                                       | 64 |
| Sanya Jolly                                       | 65 |
| Lilliana Matthews                                 | 66 |
| <b>Louis Alban Morais</b> <i>~ 2nd Place</i>      | 67 |
| Kaiya Norcutt                                     | 68 |
| Payube Philimon                                   | 69 |
| Racheal Ramis                                     | 70 |
| Alexandra Sears                                   | 72 |
| <b>Leila Stewart</b> <i>~ 3rd Place</i>           | 73 |
| Julianna Travieso                                 | 74 |



Shannon Alexander  
High School

## Untitled

Mother Is

Mother is a kiss of Light

Mother is Always Telling You  
Everything's Gonna Be Alright

Mother is A Confidant and Friend

Mother is a steady rock with strength to lend

Mother is a nurse to offsprings  
Who gave her such delight

A tutorer instructor nursemaid  
A remover or Blight  
For her grandchildren can never leave her heart  
Her sight

Mother is a Believer of God and Truth, Faith & LOVE

Mother is Looking for her rewards only from up Above

Mother is A Slight INTRUSION on Personal Affairs

Mother is Grooming Fulfilling and Sustaining

Her Presence In Our Lives will always be there

Mother is patting your shoulder with words of cheer  
Don't worry Baby,..Momma's Here".

Mother Is A Precious Memory  
When Trails and Tribulations Seem Oh So Dim

Your Assurance That Thru Her Sprit of Support  
You'll Somehow Never Be Left  
"Hanging On A Limb"

Mother Is

An Old Cliche A Familiar Hymn:  
Mother Is

## Untitled

They start you off young, crisp, and open-minded.  
Right before the thoughts begin to craft in your mind.

Who am I going to become?

Well, nobody will ever know the answer.

You may want to ask that question to everyone you know,  
but we're all in the same boat.

The boat that stays adrift in a sea full of monsters  
who wait for you to fall down and drown  
until you have nothing pushing you back onto shore.  
Those monsters eat at every being you have inside of you  
because it takes too much energy to fight them off.

We begin combining together in one classroom,  
full of emotions and creativity destined to find other people  
who fit the missing pieces to our grand puzzle.

That feeling of a completed puzzle only lasts for a second  
when you realize that one puzzle will be never permanent.  
Always on the brink of falling apart or being forgotten about  
because the new puzzle has appeared out of the shrink-wrapped  
box.

That same wrapping is around us,  
suffocating the ideas that we once had  
but now we are too out of breath to say anything.  
It's that feeling you have when you truly understand  
that you are the only one who will ever know the true you.

Not the one that you use to advertise and sell,  
but the one that gets set back on the clearance shelf  
after not ever being wanted by a potential buyer.

That's the feeling we all run away from  
to ensure we never have to feel worthless.

But it's not just being worthless,  
it's the feeling of not understanding.

We all understand  
having some sort of support system  
that wants us.  
But that system feels like it's an intertwined  
spider web full of care and love  
but I'm the only spider  
in a world full of exterminators.  
Because the way they leave tells you everything.  
The pain that is left behind  
seems so normal after they find someone new.  
So, we sit here, day in and day out  
wondering if any of our questions will ever be answered.  
I raise my hand to ask a question  
with the same hand I use to slice the pain away.  
I think and I ask, why me?  
Why is this the way the cards were dealt?  
I beg to see the other side  
however the only thing that appears  
is the darkness that I tried to run away from.  
All I asked was to disappear,  
for only a minute to put the pain on pause,  
however it never wants to stop.  
It eats at me more than I can eat my dinner,  
but it's not because I can't,  
it's because they told me I can't.  
The image of success and happiness is wrapped in my mind,  
but my mind is suffocated  
with the feeling of not being worthy of anything.  
This is the same mind that tells me day after day to do more,  
but what is more when you know nothing anymore.  
Nothing.  
It's the feeling of nothing after doing everything you can.  
You try and take a step back to realize what you have done,  
but you can't even answer that question for yourself anymore,  
because you don't know anymore.  
Tangled, tied up, and tossed around  
by these thoughts of wanting more but what is more?  
So, I ask the question once more,  
Who am I?

## Only For You

From the moment we met each other,  
everything started to change.  
I thought it was a joke at first.  
Someone who only saw himself  
and his title  
was destined to decide my whole future.

Being blissfully unaware of your arrogance,  
you had no idea  
that just being in your presence was a job all on its own.

But time began to break  
the secrets that lay beneath  
the armor you put on,  
secrets burning only at a flicker.  
You'd lived in the cold for so long  
that your warmth had turned  
into a rare rainbow amongst a storm-stricken sea.  
Your humanity was a gusting wind,  
wanting to blow me away,  
but I only held on tighter,  
knowing who you were to become.

Every time you yelled my name.  
Every time you beckoned orders.  
Every time you failed to see my efforts to please you.  
I almost left.  
It would have only taken one step,  
just one step.  
But that one step  
would break something far more precious,  
to forever be lost in the changing winds.

I wasn't ever one to follow the law.  
My staying was all your doing.  
Your insults no longer bore any weight  
and brought only a smile and a clever retort.

Our stolen glances  
had turned into longing gazes  
with cavernous understandings.

Your secret trust in me  
put you at peace  
and eased your burdens.  
It was your open heart  
that kept me by your side.

I don't remember  
when you'd given yourself to me.  
Your hand felt so familiar in mine  
that the ping of its longing has been forgotten for quite some time.

When I sought answers for them  
only to be put in another box,  
saving you from evil's blinded eyes was far from easy,  
but now, I couldn't let you go.

Never would I let you go.  
You'd become my life source,  
and everyone wanted to take you away.  
Your value reached only second to the stars.  
You never knew of the weight we shared,  
not until now.

With the last of your forever-giving trust,  
I told you my secrets  
and watched it burn practically to dust.  
I'd feared this day,  
feared your resentment.  
But you only asked me why  
I never took credit for the life that you still had.  
I told you that was never the reason I did it.



Your compassion had killed you.  
I saw it fading in your eyes.  
The last time I saw it was when I last saw you.

Your dying wish was for me to hold you,  
thinking I could ever let you go.  
Never will I let you go.

Your smile.  
The smile that brought light into the world  
like dawn breaking over the horizon  
fell and didn't rise again.  
My eternal palace beside you ravened.  
But time and destiny  
made friends with patients long ago.

The coin we'd shared  
was left to rust in a forgotten lake.  
But I'll wait,  
I'll wait for you to come back,  
come home,  
I'll wait.

I'll wait until you rise again.  
For however long it takes,  
I'll wait.

My King.

My Lord.

My Love.

Only for you, only for you.

*Based on a love story never spoken, only shown.*



Destiny Gilles  
High School

## Untitled

I want the affection a dad's love provides.

Often times, I feel a sense of jealousy  
when I see others with their fathers,  
achieving the love I never received.

I want someone who will support me  
even when my mom disagrees with me.

I want a person who fills the void  
that the boy who hurt me created.

I want that small piece of my heart that he took,  
given back to me.

I want to laugh at his jokes.

I want to act like the food my dad cooked was good,  
when in reality, I wish it was my mom's food.

I want to be forced to sit in the back seat  
because the front seats are occupied by my mom and dad.

I want to have the privilege of celebrating Father's Day.

I want to have a dad that shows me what real love is,  
and not what my first heartbreak feels like.

I want to feel protected.

I want his comfort  
to make me feel like a little girl again  
as I cry with what life throws at me.

I want to be able to relate when others talk about their dads.

I want to share my accomplishments with him.

I want to hear him say that everything will be okay  
because he is there for me, and I am there for him.

I want someone to take care of me while I am sick.

I want a dad to bring me ice cream  
because I had a bad day.

I want the peace only a dad gives,  
which is different from a mother.

I want to hear his car door slam  
while I have been waiting for him to get home from work.

I want to be able to share  
memories with my future children about him.

I want to have no trauma  
caused by a parent who could not be present in my life,  
even in the most important moments.

I do not want pity.  
I want him to be able to feel the pain he has caused.

Though I know what it feels like  
to be neglected by someone who is important to me.

I just want to give him a hug  
and tell him I need him in my life.



Fernanda Gutierrez Garate  
High School



## Wild Child

I want the affection a Dear Wild Child,  
How do you do it?  
You run trying to chase  
the wind and laugh when  
storms come to steal your love.  
Do you ever get tired of it?

Dear Wild Child,  
When you're among  
the stars, do you ever  
miss the earth?  
Do you ever miss the  
feel of gravity keeping  
you tethered to the world,  
holding you close in its  
embrace?

Dear Wild Child,  
When you dance with the  
flowers in the wind,  
do you ever want to go home?  
Do you even know where  
home is?

Dear Wild Child,  
How did you become wild?  
How did you manage to escape  
from society's pain and forge  
your own song?

Dear Wild Child,  
Who were you before you  
became wild?  
Were you like me,  
a normal kid forced to grow  
up too soon?  
Were you ever lonely at home?  
Were you ever alive?

Dear Wild Child,  
I hope this finds you soon and  
in good health.  
I hope that one day we'll be  
able touch the heavens together.

Dear Wild Child,  
I'm just like you.

## Untitled

This is a story of a girl I knew.  
Her name was Tylah Howard,  
it's so much she's been through.

From a broken-down family struggling to get by,  
to aspirations that match her fly.  
If only you could see her dreams higher than high beams,  
with means.

A little girl that grew up around love,  
never thinking she was enough.

One day she said she would go off to college  
and make her family proud,  
in this recurring indigenous cloud.  
Not even knowing if she would make it through high school,  
proving others wrong was her fuel.  
She hopes whoever reads this sees her story  
and that her path may be paved with glory.

There was once a time  
she had mixed faith even with god on her side,  
shedding so much pride.

Granny always said to hold your head high,  
even when she tried to commit suicide.  
The family almost lost the one they loved,  
in a flood of blood.  
Even in the darkest times, something was pulling her forward,  
even when thoughts were bordered.  
The mindset that she had chosen was draining her,  
with old thoughts full of emotion.

A question she asked herself  
“Where shall I go” in this world of darkness,  
while others grow?

A day-by-day process,  
when life was still passing her by.  
Faith and religion  
are the only things that keep her going,  
though the future is unknown.

From a girl to a woman, she has grown.  
A girl from south central is paving her way,  
“realness is what I wanna portray.”

Growing up in south central is more challenging than it seems,  
trying to chase your dreams.

City of Angels,  
hearing mothers and fathers cry was painful.  
Even though the smell  
of food and the music  
of Mexicana in the air was beautiful,  
that culture to others was unconstitutional.

In the summer  
feeling that Cali breeze  
will put your mind at ease.

Mothers struggled to get by,  
while their sons were off on a high.  
“I said one day  
I'll be better than the ones who came before me,  
unto that I guarantee.”

Those who failed in the system,  
wish they never existed, while they're so twisted.  
Some say to live and die in L.A.,  
but you may if we live to see another day.  
Though her city taught her all she knows,  
she's a pursuer and it shows.

Yet, she never felt out of place here,  
the love she felt for her city was clear.

Therefore, this is a story of a girl I knew.

One day saying she would go off to college  
to make her family proud,  
she vowed.

She had mixed faith even when she had god on her side,  
shedding so much pride.

Growing up in south central was not easy as it seems,  
trying to chase your dreams.

Yet, she never felt out of place here,  
the love she felt for her city was clear.

By all means,  
she's just a girl from south central paving her way,  
realness is what she wants to portray.





Ella Jensen  
High School

## Sorry

sorry is such a funny word.

a pathetic attempt to reconcile.  
it's not an action, it's not shown.  
it's spoken.

it's just a word.

The weight behind it is gone.  
drained by the amount of times it was dragged out before

-----

“I’m sorry”  
Now? Now you’re sorry?  
What about all the times before?  
The words YOU’VE already exchanged?  
it’s already been done.  
you can’t try to undo a web already spun.

-----

“Sorry but I’ve changed now.”  
A laughable thought truly.  
It’s not justification.  
It doesn’t make it right.  
and how much can one truly change?  
Don’t say you’re sorry when you’re not.  
A naive way to mend broken glass.

## Untitled

He said I am crazy, and I am,  
but not in the way he thinks.

I dream of golden gates and bright blue skies  
and see the world with lenses of pink.

He said I am crazy, and I am,  
but not in the way he saw.

I look at life like a game that needs to be won.

He said I am crazy, and I am,  
but not in the way he is.

I have life inside of me that I let go with a kiss.  
I look up at the stars and read them from afar.  
I will tell you what they mean underneath the blue dark.  
I scribble in old books and hide away my heart.  
Because kindness is often mistook,  
or made sour like your lemon tarts.

I lose my mind when I am thinking of you.  
You can't live your life within shades of blue.  
Don't wanna be a lost story and lose my mind for you.  
Don't wanna be like Ophelia  
Drowning in your sea.  
Let me go and let me be free.  
Free from this life.  
Free from your greed.  
Just let me be free.

## Glass Butterfly

A glass butterfly shattered and glued back together.  
Broken in horrible ways.  
Dropped and torn apart.  
Pressured under cruel things.

They never noticed how it fell apart,  
Not until they stepped on the shards.

They pity the pile of broken glass,  
Guilt tore their hearts away.  
Pick them up, pick up the pieces,  
One by one each shard has their own story.

Repaired carefully and slowly with much time.  
It hurt a lot, but it made it stronger.  
It shouldn't break again, unsure that it even can.

Happiness is chased just like the butterfly,  
Except this one is glass.  
Both so fragile, but glass can be repaired.  
So beautiful, but yet, so tragic.  
The glue in the cracks is still visible,  
Everyone can see that it's been broken,  
But not many consider how hard it was to heal it.



Louis Alban Morais  
High School



Sonnet:

From the bottom of my heart, to the Freedom of my voice!

My young freedom, you inspire me to write,  
How easily we can forget to stand,  
Leaving our worried mind before the night,  
Dreaming of rivers across the woodland.

My strong freedom, you inspire me to speak,  
Ideas thrown in the air like to juggle,  
Waterfall drops protesting in the creek,  
Carving the stones, after the struggle.

My old freedom, inspir  
ed me to the end,  
Underneath the ground forging vast strong roots,  
Leafless trees covered in white left unbend,  
Gray droplets rise and join in cahoots.

Like a Phoenix flying in hot July,  
Heavy colored clouds stormed down from the sky.

## Untitled

Your mother.  
Is she proud?

Does she know of all that you have done?

Would you look her in the eyes and feel justified when asked?

Feelings, they seem to have defied you.

Everything has gone to waste.

There is no point in trying anymore.

Why do you continue to fight this meaningless fight?

Lonely soldier, your army has abandoned you.

Look around, have you not realized?

Your comrades are reflections of your own flawed thoughts.

There is no one to stand by your side any longer.

And yet, with your shield of cardboard, and your armor of paper,  
you continue to attack.

Your eyes like vice, your mouth of poison.

What motivates you to continue?

Your efforts have left your life meaningless.

Your victory will be overshadowed and forgotten  
when all is said and done.

Past lessons learned have left you.

You operate like an animal,  
relying solely on carnivorous instincts.

Why must you fight?

Your wounds open as you aim to hurt.

Who will be left to nurse your inflicted pains?

Pitiful soldier, your battle leaves you with nothing.

Your muscles ache, and your brain grows dreary.

In the end, who are you truly fighting?

Observe!

The enemies' flesh melts away to reveal bloody mirrors.



Payube Philimon  
High School

## Chaotic Mind

Broke a lent and true braid  
Lore the raiders that is so ore and frantic  
The sea soared through the sky.  
I flew through the window.  
I saw a fluorescent beige sound that filled the whole room.  
A red and black seagull which was flocking towards me.  
The seagull looked scared and abandoned.  
There was so much fog that filled the place  
The way it shot towards the sky.  
I truly didn't quite get it.  
It was contradicting and sad.

The storm was chaotic and rendered,  
Lovely and problematic.  
Sounds and sounds,  
Roaring and roaring,  
Swirling and spiraling.  
The way the place was shaking and trembling,  
Bored and bored was surrounding the quiet noises.  
Laughing and laughing was all I did for the past 10 minutes,  
Cheering and cheering the crowd did for an infamous minute.  
Challenging were the words that filled my mouth,  
I was utterly stunned.



Racheal Ramis  
High School

## They

She, her,  
Daughter,  
Sister.

She, her,  
Daughter,  
Sister.

It's not who I am, it's not what I need.

But do they know?

They never seem to see

The discomfort I feel

Every single day,

Without fail.

They always say,

She, her,  
Daughter,  
Sister.

She, her,  
Daughter,  
Sister.

I can't speak,

The words never come out.

They, them,

Sibling,

Child.

They, them,

Sibling,

Child.

That's what I say

When I refer to me.

It doesn't matter because they never seem to say,  
They, them,  
Sibling,  
Child.  
Slowly, but surely,  
Tears begin filling my eyes  
Every single time.  
I feel as if I slowly die inside  
Because they always continue to say,  
She, her,  
Daughter,  
Sister.  
Every time, without fail,  
Nothing in between,  
It begins to bubble up,  
The anger and resentment that I feel.  
I shouldn't be mad,  
I can't be mad.  
I've never corrected,  
I never speak  
"Don't call me  
She, her,  
Your daughter,  
Their sister.  
Because I'm  
They, them.  
I'm their sibling,  
I'm your child.  
I'm nonbinary,  
Neither girl nor boy.  
I'm in between."  
They scoff and say "okay,"  
But they never seem to accept, because  
They never seem to correct,  
and begin to say  
"They."





Alexandra Sears  
High School

## Untitled

Please adore me so my actions are valid.

Never mind.

I don't need your love to know who  
I am.

I am strong.

I am lovable.

I am enough.

I am still myself,  
Even without you,  
Social Media.



Leila Stewart  
High School



## Untitled

I wish I knew what to write about.  
So many things happen throughout my days,  
yet they still feel as empty as this paper once was.  
I wish I knew what to write about.

Writing about something that I love will get me a 50% on a test,  
opposed to writing careless nonsense  
that allows me to pass with 100%.  
Where is the sense in that?  
I wish I knew what to write about.

Even if it's just a few small lines of words,  
force together to make a sentence, at least I will know that that,  
forcing of those words were of my own brain.  
I wish I knew what to write about.

Eventually, I find myself feeling lost, without thought,  
and purpose, and desire to do the things that are of my own brain.  
I wish I knew what to write about.

I wish I could write about something without missing the point.  
I wish I could write a poem  
without appearing as odd to those who might read it.  
I wish I could write about the things  
that make me uncomfortable and sad and lonely,  
just as easily as it is for me to write the colors of the rainbow,  
Red, orange, yellow, green, blue, violet.

.....nothing.....

I wish I knew what to write about.



Julianna Travieso  
High School

## Untitled

It's difficult to know that just years ago,  
I had never even foreseen my woe.

I lived in a house upon happy girl street,  
Thinking of all the friends I was soon to meet.  
Slowly I realized,  
With a great scare,  
That friends wouldn't happen,  
They just weren't there.

The woe that I'm feeling,  
The woe that's right here,  
Condemns me to a future,  
A future of fear.

The woe I feel now is barely enough to scare,  
But that of which I will feel,  
Cannot compare,  
Because this surely,  
Will leave me impaired.

But this fact I know, and I know for sure,  
The woe that I bear,  
The woe that fills me with despair,  
This type of woe is always there,  
This type of woe I simply cannot share.



Middle School  
**SHORT  
STORIES**

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Alexander Amador                           | 76  |
| Kimani Blake                               | 78  |
| Brynnlee Brunson                           | 80  |
| Carlton Burney                             | 81  |
| Frankie Cannon                             | 84  |
| Bryant Castellanos Camarena                | 85  |
| Amy Chan                                   | 90  |
| <b>Lily Cho</b> ~ <i>1st Place</i>         | 95  |
| Marie Citino                               | 100 |
| Bella Cress                                | 103 |
| Ellie Dela Cruz                            | 105 |
| Shirah Falin                               | 107 |
| Augi Ford                                  | 111 |
| Fatima Gonzalez Montilla                   | 117 |
| Ishanvi Goyal                              | 118 |
| Rumelle Goze                               | 124 |
| Makaila Hodge                              | 130 |
| Olyvia Hoog                                | 134 |
| Blair Johnston                             | 137 |
| Braelyn Jones                              | 143 |
| Dayna King                                 | 148 |
| Jane Lee                                   | 150 |
| Danna Lima Cortez                          | 153 |
| Luka Lingo                                 | 154 |
| Deborah Martinez                           | 158 |
| Charles Mazzella                           | 160 |
| Liberty Mirchell                           | 161 |
| Gio Onofre-Segura                          | 162 |
| Riley Page                                 | 163 |
| Layla Patino                               | 166 |
| Sophia Ramis                               | 169 |
| Anna Rennie                                | 171 |
| Addison Roderick                           | 176 |
| Arabella Rojas                             | 179 |
| Leila Sady-Kennedy                         | 181 |
| Torres Sage                                | 182 |
| Quinn Satterwhite                          | 183 |
| Avigayil Sentigar                          | 186 |
| Landa Sparo                                | 191 |
| Anna Stewart                               | 194 |
| <b>Jesse Sundstrom</b> ~ <i>3rd Place</i>  | 196 |
| Anna Swenson                               | 201 |
| Paige Tassin                               | 207 |
| <b>McKenzie Tillack</b> ~ <i>2nd Place</i> | 210 |
| Aiyana Wilson                              | 212 |
| Maliyah Wilson                             | 219 |
| Yadira Zambrano-Oregel                     | 222 |
| Isabelle Zolczer                           | 228 |



Alexander Amador  
Middle School

## Heartbeat

The scene shows the cloudy night sky. Filled with sounds of police sirens where hundreds of people crowd in the street in front of a house. Paramedics depart from the house pulling a stretcher with a child in it. The ambulance leaves and turns the corner as a poor woman chases the ambulance. As the ambulance fades into the distance, the woman stops and breaks into tears. 4 months later...

We see the sky in the most glorious rain, it falls outside of a hospital. We get a close up of the unconscious child on a hospital bed while cartoons play in the background with a young woman sobbing while the doctor speaks inaudibly. Then the doctor leaves the room, and the woman speaks to the child.

“Caspian, it’s been a long time since you’ve been asleep. Come on, Wake up.”

She chokes up while expressing those words as she comes in close and just sobs in the blanket that covers the child.

The scene changes to a courtroom, a bailiff speaks up to say, “All rise.” The judge enters the room, and the young mother takes her seat in the plaintiff’s box. The judge puts on her glasses, she reads the case in front of her. She comments, “Today, we are here to have a hearing of 15-year-old Elias Sorensen.” Guards bring in Elias in handcuffs.

The judge comments “Elias Sorensen is here for the attempted murder of his younger brother, Caspian Sorensen.” The mother hears ringing as the judge’s words grow distant, until it’s inaudible...

Later the same day... The mother sits in her car. She looks calm, then she sighs, then immediately punches her steering wheel. Looking outraged, she slams her hands on the dashboard, she turns from outraged to sobbing. She tears up.

And then she turns on the car and then turns left. She pulls up into her street and then sees her driveway is filled with flowers,

flower bouquets, candles and a teddy bear with a photo of baby Caspian. She gets out of the car and stands in front of them.

She glares hardly at the gifts then she kicks, and stomps then throws the teddy on the street. The neighbors come out of all the loud noises with the mother screaming, “HE IS NOT DEAD! HE ISN'T DEAD!”

One of the neighbors tries to reassure her, but then she cusses him out and pushes him to the sidewalk. She walks to her house, while the neighbors gape in shock.

Nightfall comes on and then the mother drinks more wine. She gazes blankly at the TV, then hears a ruckus from the kitchen... She gets up to find her pet cat, Cookie, sitting at the kitchen table. Faint memories of the two brothers bonding and the mother feeding baby Caspian. She sees baby Elias drawing. The young mother was only 19 when the father left...

Young Elias was drawing him and his mother and then walks slowly then gives it his mother while she was doing taxes. She hugs him... The faint memories end. Then she mutters, “I need a sleep Cookie... let's go to sleep on the couch...”

The next day she drives up to the hospital and goes to Caspian's room...He's awake... doctors in the room are fully crowded to find Caspian awake. Then in a glance he sees his mom and tries to get up as the doctors make space for the child to pass...

He hugs the young mother... she tears up... Then the mother wakes up in bed, it was all a dream, but it felt so real... She sits up in the bed to see a black dress.

A car honks outside.

Wearing black and riding in a hearse... The cars from behind ride slowly as they stop in a cemetery as the mother sees the casket slowly go down... She gazes at Caspian's grave and sits until everyone is gone.

She talks to her son's grave “If only I was awake... if only I paid attention... if only I was really there for you...”

She bows her head lightly then she leaves her son's grave...

As it all fades black...

## Untitled

May and June are twins who live in a nice, gated community in Miami where everybody on their block knows each other. The girls live in a large modern home with their gran, and ma. One Monday evening, June was watching YouTube on her iPad in the room she shared with May while May sketched on the floor beside her, gran was making candy in the basement kitchenette, and ma was making lasagna in the main floor kitchen. Suddenly, the lights went out. May and June shared a confused look and rushed downstairs to see Ma fiddling with the electric stove. She had the same confused look on her face. “I was trying to toast it in the pan when the stove turned off out of nowhere!”

“The lights-” said May.

June ran to the window to see the rest of the darkened block; no streetlights were on. Gran appeared from the basement steps. “It’s a damned power outage,” she grumbled.

“The whole street is out,” June reported back.

As if they practiced, the whole family grabbed a flashlight from Gran’s room. Gran was paranoid so she always kept at least 5 bright flashlights in her bedside drawer, finally, her paranoia paid off. “How’d you all know to come to my room? And why are you taking free range of my stuff?” Gran exclaimed, annoyed.

“Mammy, there’s a power outage, isn’t that precisely what these things are for?” said Ma to gran. Gran rolled her eyes and mumbled.

They all walked out to the street where everybody was already standing. They all had the same idea: to meet outside to discuss what should happen now. Should they stay in their own homes and wait it out, should they call the state, try to fix it themselves? As the adults congregated, Ann, the girl who lived straight across from May and June, went up to her mom, who was listening to the other parents’ ideas, and said, “Mom, could the girls on the block come to our house for a sleepover while the boys go to someone

else's house?"

"You know what Ann? that's a good idea." Ann's mother turned back to the group, "What if the girls and their parents come to our house while the boys go to someone else's home? The children are welcome to stay the night."

"I like that idea, makin' good outta' bad," piped up Jonathan's (the boy who lived next to May and June) dad. "The boys could stay at my house."

All the parents started agreeing, though some had their withdrawals, they all ended up deciding the girls would go to Ann's, and the boys would go to Jonathan's, while a few parents call FPL to see what the damage is.

Ann was one of those people with a walk-in pantry filled to the brim all kinds of snacks. She had Ferrero Roche, pop tarts, potato chips, Nutella, almost everything anyone could think of. When the twins were told the plan, they rushed home to grab duffel bags of blankets, pillows, water bottles, their iPads, phones, and sketchbooks. June changed into her fluffy pajama set of long sleeve shirt and pants covered in rubber ducky print. May changed into her pink nightgown covered in a strawberry print with some basketball shorts underneath. They were so excited because Ann was their favorite mutual friend. "Do you think we'll eat pizza?" Asked June.

"I hope so!" exclaimed May, "pizza is so good."

"Omg, what if we watch Riverdale, we could all huddle up and be scared, eating all those snacks."

"Mmm," sighed May happily.

They were now on Ann's porch with about 8 other girls who were chatting amongst themselves, plus Ann. "Do we even know how many girls live on Dookey street?" asked May.

"Well, there's... 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8," Ann counted, "and then there's Maya, Mabel, Aria, Layla, Jenny," she thought for a moment, "12!"

"Ann," said June, "that's 13."

"Oh! Yeah." Ann turned a bit red.

First came, Jenny and Layla, who were cousins living in the same house, then Mabel, the sweet cinnamon roll of the block, and lastly, Maya and Aria, they were best friends who lived right next door to each other. Everyone was set, they were all ready for the slumber party of the year.



## Where Did We Go?

“Hey where do you think we’re going?” asked Tyler.

But I had already started running. Tyler started to chase after me quickly maneuvering around garbage pails and piles of rotting food. “Keep up, we will need to keep the gang off our tail if we plan on getting out of here.” I shouted while still running. We need to get out of here while we can. The woods were dark, cold, and wet from the lightning storm earlier. The dark cloud cover is great protection for our hidden meeting spot with the refugees. We were planning on taking food and blankets to the refugees, but the cat caught our move and is chasing us. Now don’t get me wrong, it’s not just any old vulture, it’s a 5-foot-tall guardian that me and Tyler got into a mess with and ever since it has kept a close eye on us.

“Josh! The guardian is catching up!” Tyler called.

“Run to me and I will boost you up so you can hide in the vents at the bakery!” I replied breathing heavily.

He got in the vent and then pulled me up. The vent smelled of rotten eggs and sweat. As we crawled toward the other exit the vent panels started to creak.

“Hey what was that!?” the baker, Mr. Nico questioned, “Come out now and let’s assess the situation.”

As me and Tyler came out of the vent Mr. Nico told us that he guessed it was us.

“Takin’ food to the refugees again?” He asked, “You boys gotta’ stay away from that vulture ya know.”

We explained the situation and he gave us some extra pastries to give the kids. We got out of sight of the vulture and ran for our lives. We finally got the things to the refugees, and they thanked us. The smiles on their faces is something I will never forget. I will always help them out. They deserve it.



## Bewitched

### Chapter 1

It was a snowy day in Kaitlynville. The local high schools were dismissing their students as soon as possible. The children wearing their hoodies ran to the bus, and the teenagers bore their umbrellas while walking home. It was December, and everyone was excited about Christmas. In the classroom Mrs. Bush was trying to focus on her transfiguration potion. She was struggling getting the right materials for the job.

“Damn, where are those orangutan toenails?” She asked herself. Her husband Mr. Bush came in. Mr. Bush was quite the unusual man. Instead of his wife taking up his surname, he took up her maiden name. He was the high school math teacher, while his wife was the reading teacher. They were both born of magical blood, and both practiced. Students loved him and learned he would let them do whatever they want.

“Hey babe, I’m going home. Do we need anything before I go?” He asked. She walked up to him and gave him a kiss on the cheek.

“Just some chicken, laundry pods and get me a King-Sized Twix bar please?” She asked.

“Ok, love you” he said before departing the empty school. Mrs. Bush resumed her search for her ingredients.

“Finally. There they are,” she said to herself.

Mrs. Bush kept her magical items hidden with illusions spells that stop students from seeing, touching, or stealing them. It can only be sensed by witches or wizards. Suddenly, Bard, the crow, landed through the window to get out of the rain.

“Perfect. What took you so long, Bard?” Mrs. Bush said excitedly.

“You try flying in the rain after almost being snatched by a red-tail.” Bard complained.

“Yeah, sorry.” She said, as she plucked a feather from Bard’s tail to complete the potion.

“And now for a finishing touch,” she said. She spit into the potion and stirred it in the cauldron. She scooped it and put it in a little bottle.

“What should I test it on Bard?” She asked the corvid creature. He looked around for something to find. He didn’t find anything.

“Test it out on me,” he said.

“ON YOU!” She yelled. “Have you gone mad?”

“No, but let’s see what it could do. What did you think to turn it into?” He asked.

“Something bird related.” She said, “But ok, you sure. There is turning back but, you know.” she warned,

“Ok, let’s go.” Bard said. She got the bottle and poured it on Bard.

“Nothing happened. That was anticlimactic,” Bard said. Suddenly pink and purple sparkles surrounded him. It glowed so bright; Mrs. Bush could only see his shape changing. After the sparkles vanished, what happened was rather unprecedented. He was still small, just around the size of a Yorkie. His feathers were still prominent, but his 3 toes evolved into 2 toes with one sickle claw.

“You turned me into a VELOCIRAPTOR!” Bard croaked. His feathers were blue and red.

“Well, I was thinking of the Jurassic Park iteration. Not the real one,” Mrs. Bush replied.

“Did you think of the real version at the last minute before you spat in it?” Bard asked.

“Maybe. I thought about how it would look if it was real,” she said before cutting herself off.

“Why would you think of that!? The spell is dependent on your thoughts,” Bard said. Suddenly, the sounds of footsteps were heard by both of them.

“Oh no, someone’s coming. Bard, hide!” Mrs. Bush whispered.

“People might just think I’m a weird bird, it will be fine,” Bard said. “Let’s figure out how to change me back in that spell book of yours.”

“I’m not taking the risk,” she said. Suddenly she whipped out

her wand.

“Tenebris Absconitdae,” she casted with a flick of her wand.

Suddenly most of the magical items went dark and disappeared. The principal, Mr. Hank walked in and he was surprised by what he saw. Mrs. Bush was still working on grading for the semester.

“Oh, hello Mrs. Bush. What are you still doing here, Christmas is next Saturday. Go home and enjoy the break,” he said.

“Oh, you know, just getting some work in.,” She said with visible hesitation. Mrs. Bush wasn’t a good liar. She always believed in telling the truth or covering things up with magic.

“Are you alright? You don’t look okay,” Mr. Hank said.

“Oh, I just have a little bit of food poisoning you know?” She said.

“That sounds horrible. Well try to get better and take some penicillin. We close up the building in 15 minutes,” Mr. Hank advised.

“Got it!” She exclaimed.

“Merry Christmas, Esmeralda.” He said.

“You too, Harold,” Esmeralda said. Harold left the room. Esmeralda went to close the door. She grabbed her wand, put it away and grabbed her stuff for the break.

“Bard, hold my hand,” she said, he looked at her oddly trying to mimic a high brow expression.

“You know what I mean,” she said sternly. After she put her bag on her shoulders and grabbed out her wand.

“Evanscet,” she casted. Bard and herself disappeared seemingly in thin air.



## Shagoz

Keegan hid in the battlefield grass as he saw people drop dead. Some shot down and some blown up by canons or grenades. He ran up to another cover as bullets flew by him. Keegan thought of the promise he made to his wife and kids of coming home to them in one piece. All his allies were pretty much dead, and he was the only one left. Keegan hid, afraid that it was over for him. A good hour passed by, and he didn't hear anything, so he stepped out of hiding then that's when a grenade was thrown. It rolled towards his feet then...

Keegan woke up sweating and scared again. A passenger riding in the bus with him asked if he was alright. They were sitting in the back of the bus as that's where colored people are only allowed to sit. He replied relieved that it was just another dream of the war. Keegan is on his way back to his hometown after hearing that his dad has gone missing. He is used to not having any contact from his dad for long periods of time, but this time it's different as it's gone to the point where he's been reported missing. "How much longer?" Keegan says loudly, the people in the front rudely ignore him. Knowing he can't do anything; he just waits patiently. A few hours pass, then he notices they're entering the town. They get to the bus stop, and everyone is getting their bags down, Keegan and the girl that sat next to him are next in line to get their bags, but then the bus starts driving off. He starts smacking the bus as it's taking off "HEY STOP THE BUS, OUR BAGS!" The white people stare at him laughing as they hold their luggage in their hands. Keegan apologizes to the young black woman, "I should've gotten our bags down sooner, I'm so sorry." The Young Black Woman replies, "It's really nothing, my family is just down the road, thanks for trying to stop the bus though. I'm having dinner with my family tonight; it really would be our pleasure." "I can't, I'm all caught up with my dad; better get to his apartment before anything gets worse." "All right then, come on

by if you have a change of mind.” Keegan goes on his way, knowing it's going to be a long walk. He's looking down the street and starts remembering biking through those exact roads as a little boy.

“I must be close,” he says, relieved as he's been walking for a while now. His dad would always be the one to visit him back in Utah, so he hasn't seen these streets for many, many years. He gets to the apartment complex and starts remembering all the things he did there as a kid. Staring at his arm, then at the stairs, remembering when he broke it falling down them.

“Oh, to be a kid again,” he says. As he gets to the door of his dad's apartment, he sees the door slam wide open as if something was waiting for him to approach.

“Who's there?” he yells, hoping for someone to step out or say something, but no response. Keegan walks cautiously towards the door, ready for anything. He ends up inside after a long few steps. There doesn't appear to be anyone or anything, so he shakes it off. He starts searching for anything, clues to where he is, what happened to him, anything. He then finds a piece of paper on the floor that just says, "Shagoz is next." Confused by what that means, he just puts it in his pocket and continues searching. Keegan searches the whole house and finds absolutely nothing, until he stumbles upon a locked door. He wastes no time and starts breaking it down. It only took a few hits before the door crashed down. He looks up from the door into the room and sees absolute madness.

“Is my dad crazy?” he thinks as he spins looking around the room. The walls, roof and floor are full of random locations, newspapers, conspiracy theories, monster drawings, books, etc... He couldn't take a single step without stumbling on a piece of paper. He looked at the locations first, of course, to see where his dad could be, but they were all just random colored pinpoints on a map. Keegan then glances at the monster drawings and sees they all have some colored stamps similar to the pinpoints. He starts connecting all the drawings, and then, he sees it. “The Shagoz” monster, just like the note said. It has the color blue stamped on the bottom of it, so he starts looking for the blue pinpoint on the map. It's marked at West Virginia, which isn't too far from where he's at right now. He flees the apartment without a thought and

starts running towards the bus stop, so he could get on a bus and head to West Virginia immediately.

The next train to West Virginia is 2 hours from now and he was getting pretty hungry. He remembered the nice young woman that offered him dinner that night, without hesitation he went on his way. It was no more than a five-minute walk from the stop, Keegan walked up the steps and knocked on the door and expectantly the young woman was there waiting for him.

Keegan says, "Hey! I never caught your name?"

"Sarah, yours?"

"Keegan."

"Well then, welcome Keegan!" He then went on to have dinner with them for a good 30 minutes, then Sarah asked, "What are you doing tonight?"

"I'm actually leaving for West Virginia"

"Already leaving? You just got here!"

"Yeah, I know, but I'm sure that's where my "missing" dad is right now and I just need to find him, I know he isn't dead or anything like that."

"Well, I don't really have nothing going on later, that bus ride here was just me coming back from a trip I went on; I don't mind another"

"No, you don't have to, it's my dad that went missing, I wouldn't wanna drag you into this."

"I insist, we're all friends here, and I would be worried if my friend's dad went missing too, also you can go ahead and forget that bus ride, we can use my brother's car, he just went outta town yesterday, I'm sure he wouldn't mind."

They gathered some snacks, and a change of clothes just in case. Then, they went on their way. Sarah says, "I've actually never been to West Virginia, you?"

"Nope never."

"There should be a map in the compartment right there," Sarah says.

Keegan proceeds to open the compartment then gets a surprise, "Yo, I think your brother forgot something."

"What do you mean?" Sarah questions.

Keegan then slowly pulls out a fully loaded pistol from the small compartment.



“You put that away right NOW!” Sarah exclaims.

“Ok, chill out, chill out, the map is right here, behind where the gun was.”

“It’s fine, just don't get that close to me ever again, please.” Keegan actually pulls out the correct thing this time and starts giving her the directions. They drive for a good hour getting closer to West Virginia until they come across a cop that pulls them over. Confused as to why they're getting stopped, Sarah asks, “We didn't do anything wrong, did we officer?”

“Well, not yet you haven't.”

“What do you mean by that?” Sarah asks.

“Well in 5 minutes here, coming through these woods would be considered trespassing for ‘You People.’” The officer is gripping his gun tightly as he speaks.

Keegan replies, “We should be out of here immediately, no worries officer.”

“I don't know about that, going forwards from here, you'll never make it in time,” the officer warns.

Sarah says, “Well, what about backwards from where we came?”

“Well with the 4 mins Now that you have left, you just might,” the officer chuckles.

Sarah immediately takes a U-turn and stomps on the pedal. The officer rushes to his car and starts chasing them.

Keegan screams, “Go Go Go, He's following us!”

Sarah responds, “I'm trying! This is as fast as this old piece of trash goes.”

The cop car gets extremely close and starts ramming them from the rear bumper. “What's his problem?!” Sarah screams.

“Well, he obviously hates our people, and we are no different.” The officer continues ramming them continuously while also staring at the clock, eagerly waiting for it to turn to 10.

“Oh No No No No No,” Sarah says.

What Happened?!”

“The car’s giving out, I can feel it slowing down.”

The officer gives it one last ram, then boom. Their car flips over and crashes, knocking both of them out.

Keegan slowly starts to wake up to the sounds of Sarah yelling at him, “Keegan! Wake up, wake up!” Keegan looks around and

sees he's tied to a tree, and so is Sarah. Sarah continues, "Don't tell me that's who I think it is."

Keegan asks, "What are you talking about?"

"Look on the floor," she nervously says.

"Dad! Nooo, NOOO!" Keegan breaks down into tears as he stares at the half-eaten body of his father.

"What did this to him?" Sarah asks with tears rolling down her eyes. She's scared that they're next.

The officer steps out into the woods where they are hanging and says, "Y'all really thought you could escape, huh? Well, y'all came into the wrong woods, let me just tell you that"

"What did you do to my dad?" Keegan screams sobbingly.

"Oh me? I didn't do a thing, would you like to see what did?" The officer whistles a rhythm never heard before, then they hear rustling in the trees.

"Please! Leave us alone, we didn't do anything to you!"

"Well, it's a little too late for apologies now." The rustles get louder then.... A big, 10-foot deer with bodies as skin, runs out of the trees and stabs Sarah in the stomach with its antlers. It then looks at Keegan with its red glowing eyes, all the bodies from the antler come apart and run up the tree to Keegan, eating him alive, as the officer just watches his demonic deer eat lunch.

## The Life of a Pixie

In the peaceful village of Neliria, flowers bloomed, kids played cheerfully, and birds sang their cares away. But, that all disappeared when I came into the equation.

“Hehe, looks like today is my lucky day!” I whispered mischievously to myself. I’m Xena the Pixie! Unlike those useless fairies, our job is to spread mischief all over the kingdom cause if we don’t, we get transformed into humans. You heard me. HUMANS! They can’t fly or nothing. They just carry on with their days saying things like “Things will get better” or “All we can do is hope for the best.” BLEH! If we want things to get better, than we just use magic. We don’t need that garbage!

“My Mom has cookies, guys! Let’s go!” One of the kids said as they all ran inside, leaving their toys outside. Hehe, looks like my time to shine! I crept over there slowly to make sure nobody was looking, then I brought out my bottle full of skunk gas.

“They’ll never know what hit them! As soon as they touch the toys, they’ll explode into skunk gas! Xena, you really are a genius.” I cackle softly as I pour the remaining skunk gas onto the toys.

“Oh, I forgot my toys outside! I better get them.” One of the kids said.

“We’ll help you! Come on!” Another kid said.

“Looks like my work here is done.” I whispered, as I flew behind a tree to hide. The kids rush out of the house to grab their toys, “I’m gonna stay here, I don’t want to get tricked by a pixie!” A kid said, peeking through the crack in the door.

“Come on, it’s perfectly fine! I don’t see any fairy around here, so there is none.” Another kid said, trying to pull the other kid out, but she shakes her head no.

“Your loss then.” He jogs back to the group to help.

“Hehe, any second now...” Suddenly, the toys exploded into a skunk gas making all the kids smelly.

“Ewww, what is this?” a kid said crinkling in disgust.

“It’s a curse, a spell, a-a...”

“A pixie.” The kid at the door said, looking at me. I flee away as fast as possible making sure none of them could follow me. Rats, she saw me, oh well, there has to be someone to tell my tale.

Now, who will be my next victim...

“Wow, it’s not often you can just get a fresh batch of roses.” A man said.

“I know, right? I’m planning to give it to that girl next door. I hope she likes it.” Another man said.

“Well, I wish you the best of luck. Bye!” The other man turns to walk away. Perfect...

The man hides it behind his back and walks to a house. I flutter swiftly towards the flowers, and then I wave my hands and mutter an incantation. The flowers quickly wither and some of the wilted petals fall gently to the ground. I fly away giggling and hide behind a bush. He knocks on the door with the now withered bouquet of flowers still behind his back. A woman with beautiful brown hair, blue eyes, with a long white dress with the prettiest floral design opens the door. Hehe, now this will be funny.

“Hello, can I help you with something?” the woman says.

“Uhh..um..I-I have something for you!” The man said and brings out the bouquet.

The woman gasps, “So rude!” she smacks it away and slams the door.

“Wait, it wasn’t like this! I swear!” The man says, then sighs and leaves.

“I-I CAN’T TH-THIS IS HILARIOUS!!!” I said, while laughing like crazy. One last victim and I’ll be good.

“Ha, I’ll be rich!” a thief said. He was in a dark part of a forest and was holding a bag full of shiny objects. “Those higher ups will never know what hit them! HA!” Humans and their obsession over useless shiny objects. I’ll never understand them, but it makes them a perfect victim. I use my magic to throw a rock to distract him.

“Huh? Who’s there? Show yourself!” he yells, he puts down the bag and walks to the sound.

I quickly fly towards it, “Now what should I turn this into?”

Turnips? Eggs? Wait, I know the perfect thing..." I do my incantation and fly away behind a rock.

"Huh, no one there. Strange..."

"Are you the Nightwolf?" a new man with a black cloak says.

"First, answer the question. What does the moon say to the stars?" The thief said.

"It calls for midnight." The cloaked man said.

"Just had to make sure." The thief said. "So, you got the money?"

The cloaked man brings out a bag of shiny round things.

"Now the goods?"

"I got it right...Hey, what the...!" he opens the bag only to see a whole bunch of cabbages.

"I was promised goods, Nightwolf, not cabbages." The cloaked man said darkly.

"I can get you the goods, I swear!" Nightwolf shouts.

"Goodbye, Nightwolf." The cloaked man takes the money and disappears in the forest. A few moments later, guards appear and take Nightwolf away. Woah, that was kinda dramatic...and funny, too, two of the best things in one, perfect. I take a flight back home. I can go home, rest up, maybe do some shopping...

"We haven't had some good luck in a while. Do you think things will get better, Grandma?" A man said.

"Yes, of course it will. If we hope for the best, things will get better." An old woman with a walking stick said.

"Really?"

"Yes, my child." The two things I don't like hearing: old woman and the "hope for the best" talk. I think I have time for one last victim.

"You can go back inside, Grandma. I'll handle everything here." The man said.

"You're so lovely, dear." The old woman says. The old woman goes back inside. The man stares at the cart of eggplants, "I know! I'll sell them off! Someone might take these!" he runs off somewhere. What should I do with these? I already used up my ideas for the other victims...

"Come on, Abrahorse Lincoln. Come on, boy."

"Eh, I'll just do the same things I did to the other victims." I wave my hands and the eggplants turn into cabbages. I dash away

and hide behind a rock.

“Come here, bo...wait what?! It-it’s...”

MWHAHAHA, HE’S SO SURPRISED HE CAN’T EVEN...

“It’s a MIRACLE!” Wait, what?

“GRANDMA, SISTER, COME HERE!” he shouts.

A little girl rushes out the door and the old frail woman slowly comes out of the door.

“Where did all the old carrots go, brother?” the little girl said. THOSE WERE CARROTS?!

“I don’t know, but whoever took them gifted us with fresh cabbages!”

“Look, Grandma, we have cabbages!” The little girl exclaimed.

“Oh! And so much! We could be fed for months!” The old woman said, “Quick now, children. Bring it in the house. It’s my famous cabbage soup tonight!”

“YAY!” The little girl said. The little girl starts pushing the cart inside with her brother. WHAT!? ARE YOU SERIOUS!? I’m not leaving till this family is crying on their knees! I look around the house to see if I can do anything to it. AHHA, bouquets of flowers out in the sun. Now, this is begging to be withered!

“I’m gonna see if the bouquets of flowers cha...” He stared at it in awe, “LITTLE SISTER! LOOK!” The little girl comes out and smiles, “I thought it would never wither! Now I can finally finish my Trash into Treasure Project!” She grabs the bouquet and runs into the house, “I’m gonna be working so don’t bother me, goodbye! “ARE YOU KIDDING ME! JUST...JUST...UGH! Before the man was able to go back inside someone from the village yells, “BEAR!”

The man grabs a pitchfork and runs to the village. Follow or not to follow? Follow or not to follow? Hmm... I follow the man. I can prank him with my skunk gas, so he’ll be so smelly, he’ll chase away the bear and anyone else who goes near him! it’s the perfect plan! There was already a group of useless humans trying to chase off the bear. Ugh, humans, don’t they know that the best way to chase off a bear is to sing to it? They were all poking the bear with their pitchforks and trying to scare it away with torches. The man tries poking it with the pitchfork, but the bear swipes it out of his hand. Now’s my chance! I fly over to the pitchfork. Rats! The

bottle of skunk gas was only a few drops. It will take a few seconds to explode with only this much. Oh, well this will have to do! I fly away just before the man sees me. He leans to pick it up. Yes...yes...Then, he quickly jumps out of the way before the bear hits him with its paw, and the bears paw landed right on the pitchfork. NO! The pitchfork exploded and the bear ran away. There was a long silence before someone said, “THREE CHEERS FOR JACK!”

“HIP, HIP, HOORWAY!!!” Someone yells. Other people followed, starting a chain reaction that caused everyone to start saying it.

“This deserves a feast; FOOD IS ON ME EVERONE!!!” Another person said. They all cheer and head to the thing they call a rest-ur-rant, leaving me in the town alone.

“HOW COULD THIS HAPPEN! I WORKED SO GOOD ON MY PLANS AND NONE OF THEM WORKED!” I shouted, I face the rest-ur-rant, “MARK MY WORDS, JACK! I WILL HAVE MY REVENGE! YOU HEAR ME, HAV...”

I let out a huge yawn, then I start flying back home, “I’ll have my revenge...tomorrow.”



Lily Cho  
Middle School



## Together for a Day

It was there where I was left in a daze when I set my eyes on the waves which broke across the shore and spread into the shallow coast, leaving me under a rain of cherry blossoms on the first night of August.

The sky was a mix of deep blue and purple. In the whirlwind of cherry blossoms, I could spot you from afar, standing in the middle of it. The bright moon illuminated the world around me, enough to give off the impression that it was daytime. Your profile was dim, facing in a direction which looked as if you were just about to look back. Affectionate yet precious, just looking at you gave me the sense of being in love.

A sky full of stars above our heads, the gentle breeze of the summer air, your lingering shadow, the sound of murmuring waves, it was all breathtakingly beautiful. I wondered if the night sky was always so vast.

I reached my hand out and slowly walked towards you. The night overcast of dark clouds and starry skies; the cherry blossom petals dotted and flickered across the everlastingly rushing waves on the shore of the sea. I grabbed your arm to see you swivel your head around behind you, a warm smile steadily appearing on your pale face.

We jumped into the crashing waves of the ocean that night. I don't know what came over us. Perhaps we were both just sick and tired of everything. Perhaps it was the hell and torture around us we were living in.

I can clearly remember the images and memories of that night. The muffled sounds of our chokes, the unbearable pain in my lungs as they tightened; how powerless we were, even if we changed our minds and wanted it to stop. The flurry of bubbles surrounding us was the last thing I saw through my pained and aggravated eyes before I fell into the deep void of unconsciousness.



I did not know your intentions, or what you had perhaps seen in yourself to choose those actions, to decide that you would end the precious life that you had been once given to.

Up until then, I had never realized on how incomplete I had seen you. Your beautiful smile and your alluring sense of appearance, how you attracted people in flocks, seeming so easy to talk to. But who really were you? Behind that flawless public facade, would you have masked an entirely different face of desperation?

But in all my fascination with you, I could not help but romanticize you, just as so many others had. Who wouldn't? You were the definition of a perfect figure. I had always thought of you as more humane than the rest of us. Not cruel or violent, you did not steal, cheat, lie, or even think to do so in any way. Most, if not all, thought of you as innocent and ideal, endowed you with nobility and beauty, flawless compared to any other.

But then I came to realize, you were human, just like the rest of us. Due to the perfect exterior facade you had always put up and shown, it was far too difficult for me, or even any other persons to understand the reality and grave seriousness of your pain.

However, by then it was far too late. Even if I had asked you, stopped you, caught you in your tracks to tell you, everything would be fine, that things would become better, would you have believed me? You were everything to my world, but I would never have understood your suffering and agony fully. Nobody could. Nobody, not even I, had seen you completely. We all had our own aspects and perspectives of you, each one different. Not a single person would have been able to understand you more than you could of yourself.

And throughout all that, you had made the grave choice to end your discomfort and hurt in the most severest way possible. At times, I wish that I had stopped you, to tell you there were better ways to get through the pain. Through this. Through everything.

But at that point in your life, you had further isolated your true self from everyone, making it even more difficult and harder to bridge the gap between you and the real world. I'm sure that in your last moments, you had felt the most alone than anyone else on the planet.

Your death would never have been my fault. I knew that, but deep down, I believe I never truly understood it. I knew that I would have to live with the guilt for not having stopped you, for not having fully understood what you were going through when it was at a time where it could be solved.

If people knew, they would tell me, that even at that point for you, I could have stopped it if it weren't for my idiocy, that I could have prevented what I knew was coming. My premonition. But what they do not understand, is that not only were you at a point so far there was no turning back, but I did not believe in myself. I did not have the confidence, neither the faith or dependence in myself to think that I had the ability to convince you otherwise.

I had found out too late. There was no turning back. And so, I had joined you instead, knowing I could not live on with the guilt. You were everything to me. My world and stability, my strength and happiness. I had nothing left in my life but you.

We were close friends, so taking an evening walk by the shore was not an unusual thing for us. We had frequently met each other outside after school, playing video games, shoplifting at convenience stores, anything that could take our minds off of our lives, even for just a moment. But even after the sun had set, and time continuously dragged on, I knew something was wrong. At that moment, when the sun had finally set and could no longer be seen over the glassy shore, I could sense what was coming. And I had accepted it.

When you had told me what you were planning, I wasn't a bit surprised. What did surprise me though, was that you had not shown a hint of reluctance at it. In fact, you were beaming down at me, as though what you had told me was all but a simple joke. A laughing matter. This was when I knew, there was no going back.

And so, hand in hand, we stood on the edge of a cliff that dropped below into the crashing waves of the sea. We did not say anything for a while and stared into the distance of the glittering night sky. Finally, when you turned around to look at me, you gave me the most broken-hearted smile I had ever seen.

We jumped. The deep blue and purple sky filled with the millions of stars and galaxies we would never be able to see from

then on, shined so brightly at that moment that I believed I was hallucinating. You clutched my hand tightly, and even without looking, I knew you were smiling, and I had smiled back.

I don't know how much time has passed since then. Somehow, our bodies floating in the water at dawn were spotted, and rescue had come.

You died. I was saved.

I knew I could not live on with the guilt, so I had chosen to follow you through the path of death instead. So why had this unfortunate event fallen upon me? I simply could not understand. But I imagined you, the distance between us stretching several light years apart. Had you watched as I had slowly gone down with you through your suffering, which then created my own? I had my own guilt, but did you have yours as well? Was this not just a coincidence, but something you had wanted?

Thoughts flooded my head, and as I woke up in my hospital bed by the window every morning, looking out into the same ocean we had once thrown ourselves into, I felt more at peace.

I still knew it would be practically unbearable, impossible to live on with the guilt that I had gotten. Especially when you had told me, right before we jumped into the sea, "I love you." A simple three words, really, but it had given me a whole new world of possibilities. If you had really loved me, and if I knew so, would things have turned out differently? Could I have truly, truly, saved you from your fate?

But I will never know the answers to these questions. You were gone, and I knew for a fact you wouldn't come back. And so, instead of bringing myself down into a deeper state of misery, I had decided to try, truly try this time to live on. This time, I would try to believe in myself. I would try my best to muster up the courage to continue on throughout the path of life. And hopefully, you would be watching.

The day I was to be discharged from the hospital brought me no joy. I felt utterly miserable, sitting on my bed, staring out the window into the evening sky and its glittering reflection of the sunset onto the glassy ocean. I wanted to stay gazing at the scenery until morning dawned upon me.

But as much as it hurts, I must face the future. At that moment, I could swear I had heard your voice echo throughout, as

though the stars were singing. Locking the special memories of you deep within my heart, I'll paint the dreams of far beyond until this spell of life is lifted.

Together for a Day  
Lily Cho

## Untitled

A girl like the both of us, well most of us. Her name is Amelia. Amelia is a young teenager like any teen should be. No makeup, no crop tops. She has many flaws but the most noticeable one is her disability. She has two arms, but only one leg. She did not have the power to grow two legs, just one. She was perfectly healthy at birth, nothing wrong with her. Growing up, her mother made her feel just as special as any other kid should. She would never let anyone judge her for growing up with one leg. Yes, she could not walk or play sports, but she would not let that stop her from doing what she loved. She loved to help out around the house, mostly cooking with mom. Her favorite hobby was making fashion shows. She lived for fashion. All the new clothing lines were like a spark inside her to make of her own. She would go through clothes she didn't fit into, even some of her favorites, cut them up, and sew them together to make one piece. She wasn't the best at sewing, but she kept practicing every year. When she got to be fifteen, her grandfather bought her her first sewing machine with some layouts for many outfits and got basic tools to start sewing more. She received a gift of happiness that day, girls her age would want a car or an expensive purse, and she got a sewing machine, something that meant the world to her, a passion she would never let go of. As school went on, the bullying got worse. Although it never affected her, she still felt different from everyone else, the black sheep of the herd. It made things worse when people knew her family didn't have much. CLASH! Amelia bumped into a seemingly tall girl, with the looks to be in a rush. Her crutches fell right on her face, creating a bright red spot on her small forehead.

“Oh my god! Are you okay?!”

The tall girl asked with a boyish voice. Amelia looked up, rubbing her marked forehead. She began to blush lightly at the sight of the boyish figure of the girl, her hair was short, up to her chin, and her clothes were unusual like Amelia's designs.

“No, it was my fault. I wasn’t paying attention.”

The girl looked at Amelia’s leg.

“Hey, you’re the fashion girl right? I’m Emmelyn.”

For once Amelia wasn’t known as the disabled girl. She felt her stomach drop, her face light up and butterflies all around. Emmelyn helped her up with a smile on her face.

“I’d love to hang out sometime. Here’s my number.” As the bell rings she gives Amelia her number and runs to her next class. Amelia turned to see Emmelyn’s oversized jean jacket, with a bunch of pins on the back. Some pins have the gay flag printed onto it and a pansexual flag. This caught her eye, knowing she’s seen that jacket before in the main hall. After weeks of endless conversations, Amelia asked a question she thought she’d never have to ask before to someone.

“Do you find my disability weird?” Emmelyn looked surprised.

“No not at all, I love it even! You’re not boring like everyone else is. You’re Unique!”

Unique? She said unique? She’s never been described as unique. She felt those butterflies again. Could she be in love with her best friend? Would her being gay change her life? She didn’t care as long as Emmelyn felt the same way. She told her family she had felt this strange and odd feeling inside her heart. As soon as she told them they smiled happily and accepted her. They calmly told her they wouldn’t have her any other way. Not everyone has this kind of feeling at home, she very well knows that the fact of the matter is, her parents did not even blink an eye. They just took it for what it is. She felt as lucky as someone winning the lottery. So, on Emmelyn’s 19th birthday, she asked her out. Of course, Emmelyn had to say yes. Amelia didn’t do much as she knows Emmelyn isn’t cheesy. All she did was write it on a heart-shaped cake that they later ate and enjoyed together as a new couple. Graduation flew by, the two had to get jobs in the real world. The girls had moved in together and started Amelia’s dream. It started off to a rough start, the two weren’t getting paid a lot and rent wasn’t exactly due on time. Would that have stopped them? No, it didn’t. Like any other, they had major doubts. Can I do this? The doubts were almost consuming her until her mother said something that would change her point of view. “Those who may

doubt themselves will always stay in their shell, those who push past their doubts can be even better than the famous Einstein.” That’s when she really pushed forth all her efforts. She had signed up for many shows, turned in her designs. They were all accepted! Her creativity paid off. She hired models of any size, color, and skin type. Yes, and skin type. Every texture, scar, and bruise was shown off to the world. You don’t have to be like Barbie and Ken, everything is perfect, with blonde hair and blue eyes. You can be anything with the right motivation, some good supporters, and an amazing dream. Even disabled people can do anything!! That’s why you don’t just put your mind into it, you also put your heart. This is Disability, she wrote.

## Deja Vu

I couldn't believe this was actually happening to me. It was like I was a rabbit in a wolf's den, about to be hunted down and eaten alive. Perhaps this was a prank? I slowly peeked around the corner from my hiding spot, yet the same scene came into view. This is like something out of a horror movie. "Mmmr."

The noise grew louder, and I cowered yet again behind the corner. I thought back to what had even happened in the first place, trying to gather the pieces of my mind like a 1,000-piece jigsaw puzzle. Earlier, I was playing kickball with a bunch of my friends, ready for the fall to arrive. I kept on daydreaming throughout the game about fall's crisp leaves and cool weather. This brought so much joy upon me, but little did I know it wouldn't last.

Halfway through the game, a strange figure came into view halfway across the field... its skin color was a dark green, and it had to have the skinniest limbs I've ever seen. I was the only one from my friend group who dared to back up. Something wasn't right, and it looked beyond horrifying. Not to mention it gave me the chills. "It's not Halloween yet," chirped my friend, Isla. Laughter followed. The figure slowly walked up to us, step by step.

"Get lost." Isla continued, and now she started to back up.

It wasn't listening, and the figure came into view more clearly. It looked like an adult male, perhaps 20 years old with greasy, untidy hair. He looked human, which isn't out of the blue, but his skin and facial expressions reminded me of a zombie.

Ean was the first one to approach the figure.

"Hey, do you need help? You look like a big weir-."

Everything happened in a flash. Ean was immediately screaming, and I watched as the figure turned him into looking exactly like him. Red oozed everywhere, and I was about ready to pass out. I took off in a flash, yet my friends screamed in terror. Flight or fight hadn't gotten through their minds yet. The nearest



place to get help was a little gas station, so I ran into it like my life depended on it.

It actually did.

No one was in there, so I shouted and rushed throughout the store, like a lost kitten shouting for my mom. Still no one. I went to the bathroom to take a moment to pause. What in the world was happening? I just needed to gather my thoughts...

While splashing cold water on my face, a radio out of the distance came on. “Please p-protect yourself a-and f-f-families. A virus is o-ooo-n the loose.” The signal sounded horrible, so I didn’t catch the rest of what the person was saying.

Although...a virus? Was that man we saw earlier infected with it? What would happen to Ean? Are my friends okay? While browsing the store, the bell on the door rang, telling me that someone is in here.

“Oh, thank goodness,” I thought to myself. I quickly hurried to the door, ready to greet and ask for help from the person. “Hi, I’m so glad you’re here, I need help.” I exclaimed. But as soon as I looked up, I knew I was done for.

It was Ean, but not Ean if that makes sense. His dark hair was all tousled, and his clothing ripped. All that was on his face was a blank expression. “Uh...Ean?” He continued towards me, and that’s all I needed to know I wasn’t safe. I turned the corner next to the bathrooms and prayed that he wouldn’t find me here. What chance do I have? He’s going to infect me as well...

As Ean slowly rounded the corner, I could hear him dragging one leg behind him steadily. I held my breath. Soft breathing ran down my neck. As I turned around, all I saw was another infected person behind me.

I woke up in a cold sweat. Was that all a dream? I got up and ran to my window. The sun was shining, and a smell of bacon ran through the vents, as my brother was probably making it.

I checked my body, and all was good. That was seriously the most zany dream I’ve had. My phone buzzed, and I read the text messages from my friend.

“Want to play kickball today with the group today?” Isla asked.

I stared into space. Was my dream going to tell the truth?

## Untitled

This story takes place in a faraway land in the early 1900's. This is the story of my Great Grandpa Chutarō from Japan.

I was thinking hard in my dim lit room. I was elected the mayor of my town. I supported poor families and helped unionize our farmers but I'm most proud of the high school in our town that I established. I believe that everyone should have the chance to get an education. I sat at my desk and put my hands over my eyes. I took a deep breath and sighed. I have three young daughters. Most girls don't go to school past elementary. Instead, they learn how to cook, sew, and care for children. Only boys get to go to school. It didn't seem right. I wanted my daughters to have the same opportunities as boys. But how could I make this wish come true?

How could I convince people that women can do much more than just be homemakers? What would people think if girls were in the classroom? Would they be teased? Would it be hard for them to find a husband one day? "Time for dinner!" my wife told me through the door. I could already smell the wonderful aroma of her delicious udon. "Alright" I responded and started to get up. I would have to think about how to accomplish my goals after filling my belly with warm noodles. I started to walk through the door and saw them, all three of my little girls giggling with happy faces. I smiled back at them. Right then and there, I knew what I had to do. I had to stand up for them. I would tell them to stay in school and to keep learning, even if it meant that they might not be able to cook or sew properly. If educated, they could give back much more to our community and have fulfilling lives. I vowed to use my money and pay for the college tuition for all of my children, no matter what.

And so, he did. In the end, my Great Grandpa had ten children. Six girls and four boys and every single one of them graduated from college, including his daughters.

The high school that he established still stands to this day. After his death, the people of his town built a monument to honor him. I hope one day I can go there and see the monument that was built for him. I would like to touch the monument and look up to the sky and tell him “Thank you” for believing in girls and for pushing us forward.

One hundred years later, it seems that women are still fighting for equal rights. My Great Grandpa started to fight for us a long time ago. As his great granddaughter, I feel that it is my duty to graduate from college too. I will try my very best to make him proud.



Shirah Falin  
Middle School

## Who's Taking These?

### Chapter 1: Alice

Today I went to Disneyland with my friends. We were having a lot of fun and had just gotten off the Jumpin' Jellyfish ride when suddenly, I get a text from an unknown number. I open the text, curious as to what it was, and saw a picture of me and my friends on the ride. "Guys, did you take any photos?" I ask, wondering who took it. "No, I didn't—No, not me—I didn't!" Everyone was saying no, but then, who did? I shrug it off and we went to our cars and drive home. When I got home, I want to take a shower. I get my clothes and go to the bathroom. When I got out, I change and go into my room. I got another text, from the same number. This time though, no photo. Just a text saying, "I see you" I freak out and run to lock all my doors. Afterward, I go to bed. I'll ask my friends for advice tomorrow.

### Chapter 2: Rowan

Alice comes to school today, saying, "Guys! The number who sent me that photo at Disneyland texted me again saying 'I see you!' What should I do?" Alisa quickly says, "Block the number!" I don't think it will work. They can always get a new number...but what do I know? It's not me, it's someone else, right? "Alice, you'll be fine. Someone's probably just playing a bad joke." I say, trying to get away from the subject. Alice and Alisa block the number and get on to their gossiping. I talked to Damien about soccer. The bell rings, and we all head to the gym.

### Chapter 3: Alice

Alisa, Damien, and Rowan play soccer, while I watch them. I

broke my wrist a week ago and can't play sports. Rowan goes to get water, and Alisa walks over to me. "Are you ok?" She says, concerned about the texts. I say I'm fine, but I'm kind of worried. I get a notification as Rowan and Alisa go back to Damien to continue playing soccer. I check it, and it's a new number, with a picture of Alisa and me. I scream, and Alisa, Damien, and Rowan run over. "What happened?" They all ask. I just show them the photo. They are all distraught, but Rowan seems distant.

"You ok Rowan?"

"Yeah...Just Tired."

"Oh Okay."

## Chapter 4: Rowan

Alice is stupider than I thought. She honestly still hasn't figured out who's sending her the messages? I've sent 3 already, I'm about to send another. She deserves it after all. She's the reason Yui is dead. It's all her fault. Just because Alice was SO jealous of Yui and me having a wonderful relationship, she killed Yui. I will never forgive her. She took something away from me and now I WILL avenge Yui. I see Alice...she's with Alisa and Damien. I'll take a picture and send it. There, sent. "WHAT THE HECK," Alice screams. I run over; I'll act concerned.

"Alice, what's wrong," I say, trying to soothe her.

"It happened again!!"

"I thought we BLOCKED the number," says Alisa in her squeaky voice.

"We did!" Alice is crying now, scared out of her mind. Good.

## Chapter 5: Yui

No, Rowan. Stop. You shouldn't do this, no matter how mad you are! You don't even know if it was her! I wish I could say these things. But, I can't. Rules say: NO CONTACT UNTIL IT GETS TOO FAR. Well, it's gotten too far! My boyfriend is trying to scare the heck out of my SISTER! Oh, Alice. I'm so sorry. But I promised and I have to keep it to save you...

## Chapter 6: Alice

This time it was a picture and a text saying, “Yui’s death was your fault. You will pay.” It does and doesn’t make sense. People think I killed Yui out of anger and jealousy. But, she’s my sister. I would never do that to her! At least my friends know I didn’t hurt her. Rowan waves his hand in front of my face and says, “Earth to Alice, we’re trying to help here.”

“Oh, sorry. My mind was wandering.”

“Yeah, we know. Block the number and if it happens again, we’ll figure it out,” Alisa says. “Okay.”

## Chapter 7: Rowan

It’s not working! She’s not scared enough. I have an idea though; Alisa’s birthday is tomorrow and we are all having a sleepover at Alice’s house because she has a mansion. Everyone will be in separate rooms. Perfect. I can play a prank. Who’s calling me? Oh, Damien. “Hey, what’s up,” I say.

“You ready for the game tomorrow?”

“Huh? Wha-”

“The soccer game!”

“Oh-uhh, I forgot?”

“Oh, saints Rowan, you always forget!”

“Yeah yeah, I know... when?”

“After school, then Alice’s mom is picking us all up for the sleepover thing.”

“Wait, us ALL?”

“Yeah, Alisa is on the girls team, and Alice and Yui are - I mean Alice is a cheerleader.”

“...Right.”

“Sorry bro, I’m still not used to it. We were...”

“Yeah, I know, it’s hard. Well, I have to go.”

“See ya.”

“Bye.”

See what I mean? Alice messed all of us up. She even made a mess of our group. We were the House of Five. Now we’re the Ride or Dies. I hate it, and I hate Alice.

## Chapter 8: Alice

“Thank the Saints that it finally my birthday,” Alisa says, walking over to Rowan and Damien.

“You say that every year!”

“Well, it’s true!”

“Just be ready for the game, it’s in an hour,” Damien says, excited.

“Yeah yeah, I always am,” Alisa says with a twinge of irritation.

“Okay, but it’s the semi-finals! NO ONE can be ready for that,” Rowan says.

“You guys will do fine! I’ll be cheering you on the whole time,” I say, trying to make them feel better.

“Oh no,” Alisa cries.

“Alisa what’s wrong?”

“I forgot to text my mom, and I forgot my phone at home!”

“Saints, you’re lucky I have my phone!”

“Thanks.”

After Alisa called her mom, she gave me my phone and we went to ELA.

## Chapter 9: Rowan

After the game, we were at Alice’s house talking about random stuff.

“Guys, I miss Yui,” Alisa says, out of the blue.

“Alisa! Not now!” Damien is furiously telling her to be quiet, and I’m glad. I’m torn between wanting to let her continue for the pain of Alice and wanting her to shut up because I’m hurting. That’s what sucks about revenge. It’s ok though. Tonight, I get my final revenge. Then, maybe I’ll be happy.

“I’m going to sleep,” Alice says, yawning.

“Same here! I’m so tired,” Alisa says.

“Same,” Damien replies.

I say, “I’m going to bed as well.”

## Homesick

Two girls. Fay Itski and Aurora Mae. Fay’s real father died in a large forest fire only 3 months after she was born. He was an explorer, and he was traveling from South America—where he died—to Boston, where he and his wife lived.

Around the age of 2, Fay’s mother introduced her new partner, James Mae. He seemed perfect! He was a great husband and father figure, and Fay and him always got along. For Fay’s 3rd birthday, she got the present she never expected. Her mother was pregnant. Fay was so excited! She had always wanted to be a big sister, but she didn’t really know what was going on. When she was born, her mother gave her the choice to name the baby. A choice that all big siblings want. When she was born, Fay chose the name “Aurora”. She said she chose it because it means “Light”, and she said Aurora is the light of her life.

One Friday afternoon, when Fay was 10 and Aurora was 7, they both got called to the office at their Elementary School. They didn’t know what was going on, but when they got there, they saw their dad. They went home, and when they got there, their dad started crying, he told the girls to go to their rooms and look for a red envelope. When Fay got hers, it read:

“I love you so much. I can’t believe I have to say goodbye, but my old life is calling me. I have to do this. I have to leave. I love you so much Fay. Take care of Aurora. I promise I will find a way to see you again. Never lose hope. I love you.”

When Aurora saw her red envelope, she didn’t know what to expect. She just sat on her bed and looked at it for at least half an hour. When she finally opened, she took a deep breath and read:

*Ori.*

*I love you. You know that right?*

*I love you, your sister, and father very, very much.*



*But this place isn't right for me. I'm going to tell you the same thing I told Fay. I love you. Please never lose hope. Take care of your sister. Again Ori, I love you so much.*

*Goodbye Aurora*

As soon as she was done reading, she broke down in tears. She couldn't believe that her mother was leaving. She didn't understand why, and she didn't want to know. She thought if she found out, she would feel even more despair. Now, Aurora is 12 and Fay is 15. Everyone was so sad that day, and that was when everything changed. That's what got the sisters where they are now.

"I cannot believe we actually did this!" Aurora boomed.

"I'm glad you're excited Ori, but we still have a long way to go," Fay said stiffly.

"Why don't you seem happy?"

"I am! It's just.. I'm worried he's going to find us."

"He won't! If we're going to that weird old forest, I don't think he will even look for us."

"I sure hope so."

Fay and Aurora walked for what seemed like an eternity. I'm sure they would have preferred to drive to the forest, but the only person they know that has a car is their father, and that's the person they were running from.

When their mother ran away 5 years ago, Aurora's father—Fay's stepfather—became intensely depressed. It was inevitable, really. He loved the woman so much. He became verbally abusive, and then physically. Today was the day they finally left.

"Oh, my lord! Are we there yet?" Aurora said, exhausted.

"You tell me!" Fay said as she pointed to the forest, smiling slightly.

"Yes! Finally! Let's go!"

Fay and Aurora sped to the forest while grinning and giggling. They found what looked like an old bench and decided to rest there. That, they determined, would be where they would sleep for the night. As Aurora got comfy and settled, Fay looked around,

with a face full of concern and bother.

“What's up?” Aurora asked, now feeling a bit of distress herself. After all, when Fay looks worried, Aurora is certain it's for a reason.

“This place feels... odd. It's very strange, but I don't know why,” Fay explained, now more confused than worried.

“Now that you say it, I agree. It's kind of eerie.”

“That's the word! But still, why?”

Fay sits down while Aurora sits up. They sit there together, looking around at the trees, sky, ground, bench, and at each other.

The sky is a dark navy color, and you could see very few stars in the sky. The ground is made up of dirt and rocks and the trees and bushes around them are a dark, desaturated green. The trees are abnormally tall and there's no sound. No movement. Nothing. The only thing lighting the place is the very vibrant full moon. But even with the moon lighting the place, it still feels so dark.

Then suddenly, a blinding beam appeared in front of them, farther and deeper into the forest. After waiting a few minutes to see if the beam would disappear, Fay spoke the very words that Aurora expected her to say:

“I knew my feelings were right about this place.”

“Let's go,” Aurora said, a bit unsure.

As they were walking, they got closer and closer to the strange light, and the beam got brighter and brighter. It looked like the source of the beam was close, and so they kept walking. But a few more steps into the forest and—whoosh—the wind was blowing like crazy. It was blowing them towards the light, and they could barely hear themselves think.

“Ori! Can you hear me? Are you okay?!” Fay bellowed.

“Sorta! And I'm fine! But what happened?!” Aurora yelled back.

“Like I know! Let's just keep going!”

“Fine!”

As they inched closer and closer, waves of wind were pulling them deeper into the forest, closer to the huge beam. It was like the beam was pulling them in. But then, everything went black.

Of course, when the girls were awoken by a hare jumping over them, they were startled. They immediately stood up, wondering where they were, how they got there, and what happened to them.

They had so many questions, but no answers.

“Where are we?” They both said, very tired and even more confused.

“I don’t know!” Fay said, annoyed.

“Well, neither do I!” Ori answered.

“Where is the light?”

“Fay, I know just as much as you.”

“Okay, well you still have your backpack, right?”

“Yeah, I do. Do you?”

“Yep.”

“We are still in the forest I guess, but I don’t know where.”

“Okay, well—”

Fay was cut off by a monstrous roar. It made birds fly out of trees and animals run wild. They looked around, then at each other.

“What the heck was that?!” Fay yelled.

“I don’t know!” Aurora said.

“We need to leave this forest.” Fay said.

“Yeah.” Aurora agreed.

“You’re right. That’s why we need to leave.”

They walked for what seemed like hours. They had no sense of time, and it was still dark out. They couldn’t even see the moon anymore because the trees were so tall. They were so tired, and they couldn’t find their way out, although they didn’t go that deep into the forest.

The forest felt more eerie than before. It felt darker, and it felt like there was no escape. After what seemed like a few more hours, Fay and Aurora sat down on the wet muddy ground, but they didn’t care at all. They were exhausted and it felt like death was around the corner.

They were so tired but they prayed that they could stay awake so they could find their way out of the forest that they dreamed of going to for years. The area they were in was odd though. It was closed off by a large ring of bushes and had no animals around. There were many large holes in the ground, but they didn’t seem to notice, or care. They were way too tired.

They lay on the muddy and dirty floor, exhausted and beat. They are unaware of what danger is a few feet behind them.

“It feels like we have been walking for hours, and the sun should be up by now,” Fay said.

“Be glad it’s not, cause—” Aurora took a pause to drink her water. “Cause we would be sweating even more than we already are,” she continued.

“You’re right.”

“I know.”

They continued laying there and didn’t bother to pay attention to their surroundings. Suddenly, Fay got up, looking shocked, and whispered:

“Do you hear that?”

“No? You have pretty good ears,” Aurora answered, confused.

Fay said nothing else and started walking farther into the ring of bushes they were inside of. Aurora grabbed her and Fay’s bag, and followed closely behind Fay, very confused. Fay stopped, looked at Ori and signaled to her to stop walking and stay where she was. Ori was confused and worried, but she listened.

When Fay walked a bit closer, she couldn’t believe what she saw. She covered her mouth, and her eyes grew wider than a watermelon. She looked at Aurora and mouthed the words: We need to run. Now. Aurora was shaken, and even more uneasy, but she listened. She didn’t make a sound. Aurora trusted her sister. Her sister always helped her through hard times and she always knew what to do. But this time, she didn’t. Fay was in complete shock by the time they ran out of the ring of bushes. They were far enough away to where Fay seemed comfortable enough to finally speak.

“Monster,” was all Fay said. Aurora was even more confused and needed more answers than just one word.

“Monster? What do you mean? A bear? Explain more,” Aurora responded, annoyed and confused.

“There was...a monster. It was eating a bear.”

“What do you mean? Are you sure? It was probably just a—”

“Aurora. Listen to me. It had no eyes, a large circular mouth that had teeth like a razor blade. It was huge. Bigger than an elephant.”

“How?”

“How am I supposed to know?!”

“Calm down Fay. I’m sure you’re just hallucinating.”

“I know what I saw Ori! Listen to me. I don’t think we’re in Boston anymore. I don’t know how we got here, or where we are, but I know we need to stay safe.”

“Fine. I still don’t believe there is a monster though.”

“I don’t care what you believe, I just want to keep you safe.”

Aurora rolls her eyes and starts walking in the opposite direction of the odd area they were just in. Fay follows behind her.

Aurora is pondering where they could be, and neither of them pay attention to the growing darkness. They find an open area, with only grass and a couple berry bushes, and they decide they can sleep under the tree for the night. Or, whatever time of day it was.

“Shouldn’t it be day by now?” Aurora says frustrated.

“I don’t know. Maybe wherever we are doesn't have day,” Fay answers genuinely.

“That’s stupid. Everywhere has day, and we’re in Boston.”

“Aurora, listen. I just feel like you’re in denial-“

“Shut up Fay!”

Aurora stomps to the other side of the tree and slides down it and passes out on the floor, while Fay stands there hurt and shocked. Fay wants to wake Aurora up so she can eat, but she knows that if she does that, it will just make everything worse. Fay opens up her bag and eats a small box of raisins. She wants to save her food. Not eat it all at once. Fay lays down and falls asleep on the opposite side of the tree Aurora is on.

As they sleep in the moonlit sky, they have no idea what—or who— awaits their arrival.

## My Way to Say Adios

I never really think of soulmates, I never feel that I could find that person who loves in the way that you did but since we meet I saw love in a different way, love that word means a lot of different things but between us was just the way that we talk to each other, the way that we see each other and that same feeling that never change, but we never learn how to understand each other.

Your eyes stop looking at me in the way that they did before but just sometimes I want to go back to that memory to that opportunity to make things different to take another way and be myself not something that others want, now it's too late for change the way that we end, I learn in the hard way that I can't buy your love that for more that we know that our souls are looking for each other but we never be going to be destiny to be together, we keep looking for each other until you find a new love and I know that the way you look at her is something that I can't change, we are soulmates but we broke each other, we stop loving each other, we just became stranger, just stranger's.

The walls divide the love that I have for you, but our eyes are always connected a simple smile became a shining thing but now are just tears, I don't want to say goodbye but I feel this is the end, but I feel we going to meet again, and take the change that we didn't take before, now I have to live knowing that I, not your girl that your eyes never going to look at me again and I am just a stranger, just friend, just someone that you never fall in love this my goodbye, I hope that in another life we meet each other again, I always going to be yours and you mine, but from now I think this my way to say I going to wait for you, I going to stop thinking on, it's my way to say that just love can hurt like this in a way that no one can explain that just us know that huts, it's my way to finally say Adios.

## A Day in My Shoes

### REVA'S POINT OF VIEW:

Sometimes, I feel like the world is judging me. My peers, my friends, my family, my teachers, and even strangers!

“Reva Sharma! Did you hear me?”

I snapped out of my dream to see that my math teacher, Ms. Patel, had called on me. I scrambled to find the page we were supposed to be on. I looked around to see what question we were solving, but the girl who sits next to me, Varsha, was asleep, and unfortunately, her workbook was closed. Ms. Patel, stared at me, her hands on her hips.

“We’re on question nine.”

Lucky for me, I was pretty good at math. Okay, who am I kidding, I came in second for Mathcounts last year, and I’d be rich if I got a dollar every time I answered a math question in math class, except for this time. Ms. Patel expects a lot out of me because she’s my mom’s childhood friend, they’re practically sisters. But I don’t exactly like her, because she’s also Varsha’s mom.

“23.45 rounded”

“Yeah, you can see me after class, for a detention.”

I felt everyone staring at me. Some kids oohed, and my cheeks burned. I was furious and embarrassed. How could she do this to me? Doesn’t she understand, despite knowing me so well, that this small detention could ruin my records and my chance of getting into Harvard? Forget about the detention, my parents will be so upset. Ugh... so unfair. I mean, her daughter is drooling on the desk, and I’m the one who gets detention, unbelievable.

“Reva, this is a new low.” my mom sighed.

“I agree with your mom.” my dad added from the kitchen.

I rolled my eyes. Well, in my head I did, but considering the circumstances, that would probably not help the situation, or my

punishment.

“Anyway, we’ll decide on the punishment later. Right now, we need to get ready for the Diwali party at the Patel’s house.” my mom announced, changing the topic.

Okay this time, I just couldn’t help myself. I had to roll my eyes; I didn’t want to see Ms. Patel’s face. And I especially did not want to see Varsha’s face. Ever. Again. So, you’re probably wondering, why I hate her so much. Well, besides the fact that she’s generally annoying, rude, and a big fat pick-me, she and I also...have a complicated history. We grew up together, like sisters, and we were best friends until fourth grade at least. Then, Mr. Patel got a new job, and they moved out of our neighborhood, and she started going to some fancy new private school, and apparently, I didn’t exist anymore. Once in a while my mom and her mom would still get together, but not as often. Then at the beginning of middle school, something changed, I don’t know what, but she moved back to our public school, and her mom started teaching here. But that doesn’t mean we’re friends or anything.

VARSHA:

I had just gotten back from cricket practice. Now as I cleaned my room, I rewound it in my head. Suddenly, I spotted a picture of my family together. I felt my heart sting, as I picked up the photo to examine it. My mom, dad, and elder brother, Virat, smiled back at me. My parents held on to each other, and my brother had a stupid smirk plastered across his face, as he put his arm around me. I sighed, my parents acted like they didn’t even need each other anymore, at home. Outside, though they seemed like the perfect couple. My brother, was out of state, studying to be the perfect son, for a broken couple.

“Varsha, you have to be faster than that, the guests will be here in less than an hour!” my mom called from downstairs.

“Yeah, I’m nearly done.” I lied. But in my defense, why did I have to clean my room? It’s not like we were going to eat dinner in here anyways. Sometimes, I wish I could make my parents happy like my brother did whenever his perfect little footsteps echoed



through the halls.

REVA:

Our family climbed into the car, and my elder sister started driving. I stared out the window as my familiar block blurred together. Soon, we parked in front of a fancy mansion, with loud Indian music blasting from inside. The front yard was neatly trimmed, and bright lights and blazing diyas (clay oil lamps) floated in their fountain. We rang the doorbell and heard Ms. Patel scream for Varsha to let us in. Great, Varsha, just who I needed to see right now.

She opened the door, with a perfect smile and gracefully lead us in. She had a stunning sari on, with perfect makeup.

Sometimes, I wish I could be like her. After all, she's just a more perfect version of me...right? Of course, I looked ridiculous like usual. The rest of the night was a blur. I was happy the party was finally over, and by the time we got into the car to drive back home, it was 2 am. Suddenly, I was fast asleep.

VARSHA:

I pulled open the door for dozens of families, some I knew, some were family, and some I had never seen. Each time I plastered a fake smile on my face. When I thought I was done welcoming, my mom called me downstairs, again! I stomped down and pulled open the door, and there was my old friend, Reva, I didn't know what to do, so I just smiled.

I was pretty quiet most of the time and observed as others talked to my parents. I couldn't even believe the stupid show my parents were putting on, pretending that they were so in love. At some point, we had a dance competition, and I won. But other than that, it was honestly boring. When we finally wrapped it up, it was 4 am. And I stumbled to my room, practically sleepwalking. But when I got there, I couldn't fall asleep. After a lot of tossing and turning, I drifted into a deep sleep.

The next thing I knew, I was awake, I turned and put my blanket over my head. I went to sleep pretty late; I think I can get

by with a couple more hours of sleep. Then I heard people talking downstairs, I got up and I wasn't in my room. Maybe I was still dreaming, I tip-toed downstairs, and saw two people talking, at first, I thought it was my parents arguing, but then I saw that it was...Reva's parents?! I went back towards my bed, actually the bed, and on the way I saw the mirror. I looked exactly like Reva...funny bangs, black glasses, and acne. No way. I couldn't look like her...I couldn't be her.

REVA:

I heard a big thud, then came the pain, as reality rushed over me. My bed was so low, it shouldn't even have hurt if I fell off. I felt around for my glasses, except I couldn't find them. I opened my eyes and put my hand over my face. I stood up, and surprisingly felt a lot taller. I went to the mirror, and almost had a heart attack. I looked so perfect! I looked exactly like...Varsha? I couldn't believe it. I was practically Varsha Patel's identical twin! Wait, I wasn't even in my room...I was in Varsha's gigantic mansion. Honestly, though I couldn't believe her room was so messy, if my room was ankle-deep in trash, my mom would have made me shovel my room every day. As I went downstairs, I saw Mr. and Mrs. Patel arguing. But, why? They were like...the dream couple!

I went back to Varsha's room and stomped over to her desk area. Over her desk hung weekly her calendar. I ripped last week's page and crumbled it. Oh my god! How in the history of the world did she get all of that done in one weekend? She had a gymnastics meet in less than two hours, and nearly after that she was meeting with her friends in the mall, gardening with her mom, a swimming competition, volunteering at a local pet store, she had football practice in the evening, and lastly, she had a dance group with her neighbors. That's more than what I would do in a month! Wait, now I was Varsha, I had to come up with a good excuse, and fast! I heard someone coming upstairs, and dove for the bed, to act sick.

"Varsha?" someone said. I pretended to flutter open my eyes, like I had just woken up.

"Yes?" I yawned.

“You have gymnastics, honey, aren’t you going to get ready?”

“I feel sick mom...can I please skip today?”

“Really? But you never skip anything Varsha! Okay, I’ll text coach.”

VARSHA:

I had to do something. But what could I do? I found Reva’s closet and dug through her clothes. This girl had no style, luckily, I was Reva’s size now, or else her clothes would be too small for me. I quickly threw on a plain black hoodie, and some jeans. Then, I went downstairs for some food.

“Good morning, mom and dad!” I announced cheerfully.

“Good morning, Reva!” they replied.

I grabbed an apple, although some freshly squeezed orange juice might have worked well too and started on my way to my house.

“Reva, where are going?” Mrs. Sharma asked, sipping some coffee.

“Umm.. just taking a little walk. I read about how it helps your body to do that in the morning on a blog yesterday.” I offered a goofy smile.

“Okayyy... just be back soon, we need to get ready for your math competition. Alright?”

“Yeah, no problem!” I squeaked.

I shut the door and released the scream I had been holding back. I looked like Reva, had Reva’s clothes on, and worst of all, was going to a math competition? Are you serious right now? I had to figure out a plan before that competition, or Reva would be real sorry to hear that she scored in the negatives. I ran to my house and knocked on the door. My mom opened the door.

“Reva?” she asked.

“Yeah, I just need to...return something to Varsha real quick.” I smiled.

“Okay, I’ll let her know.” she said.

I need to return her life I thought, as I walked to my room. I could see the panic in Varsha’s eyes. We both needed to switch, and fast.

“Varsha, is that you?” Reva asked.

“Yes, it’s me, and now I look like you! And you look like me! We need to switch back, quickly. And you, need to come up with a plan, because you’re the smart one. Also, you can’t play football, and I can’t win a math competition!”

“Yeah...except my greatest idea so far was to pretend to be sick, so you’re gonna have to help.” she replied.

“I think I know how this happened. Last night, I kind of wished that I could be like you, because you’re so pretty and perfect.”

“Well, it wasn’t just you, I wished that my family would be back to normal, kind of like yours.” I mumbled; my eyes glued to my feet.

“Since, now we both know how hard the others life is...maybe we should try wishing again.” she said. “On the count of three...1...2...”

“Reva! Stop, please for a minute. I’m really sorry that I kinda started ignoring you, after my family moved. I let my ego break our friendship, and our bond isn’t that weak, can we please be friends again? You and I might be different, but that’s what makes us unstoppable together, you can do things I could never do, and I can do things you don’t”

Reva smiled back and hugged me.

“1...2...3”

I opened my eyes, and we were both back to normal, back to our own lives.

## Memorialized

Inside a village, isolated from the rest, everyone lived a quiet and peaceful life. Although, it was never peaceful and quiet whenever these two peculiar children were around. The two had been together forever, Mai and Ritsu. When you think of one, you think of the other; of course, they didn't mind that. Mai always said that Ritsu was her forever and that she loved every aspect of her. It was her jet-black hair and jeweled red eyes that show how courageous she was. She had never foreseen Ritsu leaving and never expected her to. That was until the end of summer.

"Mai," Ritsu warmly called her name. Her expression was soft yet stern. Puzzled, Mai kept finding a reason why her face was like that. Is she angry? What's wrong? Did I do something? Questions were running through her head, forgetting to think about what the tall figure in front of her was going to say.

"Mai," Ritsu repeated to catch her attention.

"Ah, yes?"

"I'm going to leave the village."

"What?" Mai stuttered; she couldn't believe what she heard. She went into a spiral of confusion.

"I'm sorry. My parents wanted something better for me."

"But what would I do without you?"

"You gotta help yourself now, we're going to be far apart."

A single tear from the ruby-red eyes rolled down her cheek, she was beginning to regret telling Mai about her leaving. Then, Ritsu faced the maroon-haired girl struggling to keep her tears in her eyes.

"It's okay! I'll write letters to you!"

She put her arms around Mai, pulling her in for a hug despite Mai being as tall as her chest. In return, Mai felt blood rush up to her face as she couldn't help but cry in Ritsu's arms.

The years passed but it felt like yesterday to Mai. The day her most closest friend left her small world had her heartbroken. She

often reminisced about what she remembered about Ritsu to keep her memory fresh in her mind. However, they have kept in touch in a way. The windows on the weekends were always open just in case for a peculiar bird with a wrapped letter attached to its collar.

The letters Mai would get would always be along the lines of “Morning, Mai! It’s the weekend again.” It was then followed by how Ritsu’s day was, what she wanted to do, or asking about Mai. How she responded to the letters was by saying, “Hi, Ritsu! Write back to me soon!” And then would talk about what happened in the small village or about herself, sometimes even asking about Ritsu too.

The pieces of paper being delivered back and forth always had gotten both of them so excited for each weekend to see what they had written to each other. Unexpectedly, this one peculiar letter left Mai in confusion.

*Great day, Mai!*

*Today is an exciting day for me. Do you know why?  
Can you guess? I bet you can’t! I’m about to go on  
this huge trip to slay some huge creatures! Seriously!  
Dad had...*

She stopped reading soon after the opening. She froze in bewilderment. Of course, Mai was happy for Ritsu, she was excited for her to be able to go on some huge adventure but there was still a lingering thought in the back of her brain. Mai didn’t know if she trained for it or if her safety was guaranteed. None of it was mentioned to her at all throughout the millions of letters she gets. Although, something else in her head told her, what are you worried about? This doesn’t concern you, or it shouldn’t concern you. This is Ritsu’s own life now, you have nothing to worry about at all. Mai continued to read the paper in her hands.

*... Don’t worry about me, I will be fine! I have  
been training for this, did I forget to mention that?  
Let’s write again when I get back.*

The girl sighed in relief, maybe not seeing her best friend for a long period of time has taken a toll on her. Now, she really couldn't wait for next weekend. Mai really wanted to hear about Ritsu's adventure. After all, she forgot how heroic Ritsu was compared to her. Mai jumped up from her bed to distract herself with at least something, she believed that she needed to keep busy so she would have something good to tell Ritsu as well.

The month went by slowly. Mai sat at her open windowsill for hours for the delivery bird in the night sky. Until one cold night, the creature finally came. Mia was overjoyed, she could finally rest easy after four weeks! As she unraveled the paper from the bird's collar, her hands trembled.

*Good afternoon, Mai!*

*The trip went well! I was so happy!*

*But I'm so tired. Hehe, did I scare you after not writing? Sorry!*

*We had to walk on foot the way to and back...*

Mai sighed out of relief. At least she knows that Ritsu is safe and what happened during the time she didn't receive a letter. As she continued to read, a sentence stood out to her.

*... You know, I might end up on the official hunting team, haha! So, I might not send anything when I'm gone.*

Oh, the maroon-haired girl thought. Ritsu's doing better than I predicted. Maybe, I really didn't need to worry about her after all. Mai scrambled up the piece of paper and left it at the windowsill. She laid down in bed and pulled the covers over her head, thinking about the decrease of letters from her best friend.

More and more months had passed since then, Mai had only received one or two throughout the time passing. Her loneliness rose as she had no one else to lean on for her worries, all she had to do was work around the village. More often than not, Mai has been told by others that her vibes decreased. It was alright though, she got used to being by herself by now.

Winter was right around the corner and the letters had been coming slower than usual. Of course, Mai hadn't noticed because she already knew what was happening and that she had been busy herself too. Although, when she read this particular letter, Mai had a shiver run down her spine.

*Hey, Mai.*

*I'm really about to have a life changing adventure. Please root for me.*

*This one's a huge fella! I may not make it alive, but I want to have you in my head in my last moments. Thank you for always having me in yours and still supporting me.*

*Best Regards,  
Ritsu S.*

“What in the world?” Mai couldn't help but say. Out of panic, she scurried around her room to find paper and pen. Once she finally found the materials, she started writing immediately to Ritsu. Her hands were trembling, making her handwriting look different than usual. She didn't know what she was writing for, but something felt off about the way the letter was written, she was desperate to reach Ritsu.

*Good afternoon, Ritsu.*

*What do you mean? I believe in you and your power that you'll make it out of there alright. Please, don't say that. I know you'll do your best and be able to slay that monster. I know you will be safe. Don't say that you'll die. There are still many more things for us to do, for us to meet again!*

*Stay hopeful. Please.*



Mai watched in uneasiness as she sent away the bird with her letter. The possibilities were endless, and anything could go wrong. Her head was spinning from the thoughts of Ritsu's death, it was going to keep her up all night. She couldn't help but think about the future.

Many months passed; Mai was a sorrowful girl. She was restless as usual and a little more uneasy. The lack of writing from Ritsu put her on edge. Her mind was going crazy about the last letter she had received. She wanted to know what was happening to her friend but the only information she got was that she was going on a life-threatening adventure. The sole thing Mai was able to do was just hope for the best, if she stood around at least.

The short female had an idea that might've been dangerous, yet she didn't care. She could go to the big city where Ritsu resided and maybe look around for her. Mai is a naive girl anyways, so by the time she got home, she immediately knew what to do. She started packing and packing to set off for a journey tomorrow with the morning sun across her face. The moon shined through her window as she was dozing off just as she finished getting the last thing she needed.

Of course, setting off for a journey in the morning was just wishful thinking. Mai woke up to the sound of people rushing outside her home. Curious, she rose immediately to the front door without changing her nightgown. There was a carriage led by a horse that seemed to be... Ritsu's father? Mai couldn't believe her eyes. Why was Ritsu's father here? Isn't he supposed to be in that city? What is that look on his face for? Just before Mai could run up and ask him, something else caught her eye. It was another carriage following behind Ritsu's father yet this one seemed to have a beautiful flower arrangement along it. Of course, she followed the carriages to see what was going on.

When Ritsu's father dismounted from the horse, his face was more emotional than it has ever been. The look on his eyes was a sight of grief and they were swollen. What emerged from the first carriage was Ritsu's mother and other people Mai could not recognize. Ritsu's mother had the same look on her face, but she was desperately trying to cover her eyes. Leaving the carriage, those people went straight to the one followed behind to carry something that had the silhouette of a casket.

Oh. Mai thought. She had finally realized what was going on. Instead of breaking into tears, she had to recheck. Mai walked up to the teary-eyed parents with a sigh.

“That casket, it’s Ritsu’s isn’t it?” Mai spoke, her voice quivered.

As the parents started to look at the short, maroon-haired girl, their faces even broke even more.

“Ah... Mai... We weren’t expecting you,” said the father, clearly not ready to talk to her either.

“We’re sorry. We haven’t visited in forever,” he sighed.

“Don’t worry about me. Was that really her in there?”

“Yes.”

“Was it that creature hunting adventure?”

“...I regret not protecting her in that cave, she tried saving everyone from the attacks of the creature, yet nobody had her back.”

Mai’s eyes had started to water, “I know her, she would be happier dying knowing she protected people.” She smiled bittersweetly as she noticed that Ritsu’s casket was being set down. She ran slightly to the casket homing her best friend’s body. She felt Ritsu’s mother caress her shoulders in sympathy.

“Did you know, Mai? She always talked to us about you and your letters,” the mother said gently. “She would be overjoyed in her room whenever the delivery bird came back, she’d jump so much the whole world would shake,” she laughed a bit. Mai’s uneasiness slept away as the words came out of the mother’s mouth.

“Did she really think of me all this time?”

Ritsu’s mother replied, “Of course she did. She would even talk to us about visiting back here just to see you.”

“I know what you mean, I wanted to see her as well.”

The maroon-haired girl’s eyes softened as tears rolled down her face. At that moment, she wanted to see her best friend’s face for the very last time.



Makaila Hodge  
Middle School

## Where Barriers Break

One.

I don't know what's going on. I'm in this strange place and I feel apprehensive. I'm in a dark eerie tunnel. It's so quiet you can hear the water from the pipes dripping on the ground.

Drip

Drip

Drip

All of a sudden, I hear something drop.

What was that?

I fear that I'm not alone down here. I start to walk down the tunnel. With every step I take, you can hear the splash of the water on the floor. I can listen to my heart pounding out of my chest.

Boom Boom

Boom Boom

Boom Boom

pshhhhhehaha

I heard the traumatizing laugh of a little girl. There goes that anxious feeling again.

What the hell is going on down here?

Two.

I take a brief pause as I continue down the tunnel.

"Hello, is anyone down here", I call out

No reply.

All of a sudden there's a breeze flying past me as I hear that terrifying laugh again.

"Hello?!", I yell again

Still no reply.

I turn around the way I came. Ready to leave, but I hear something drop. It makes me even more curious about what this thing is. I turn back around and continue down the tunnel. My heart is now beating faster than it ever has. I come across this creepy, old, rusty door. When I open it, it makes a loud noise

Creeeeekk

When I look through the tunnel, it's all darkness. It's so dark I feel as if I went in there, I would get sucked in, and wouldn't know which direction I'm coming from. I take my phone out and turn on its flash. I'm startled by the strange figure sitting on the ground. It's a girl. Her legs are crossed, and she's sitting with her back faced to me.

What is going on?!

"Hello", I yell out to the girl

She doesn't respond. She kept sitting with her back faced to me. Now, my heart is pounding faster than it was before if that's even possible. I take one step closer, and the girl starts to rock back and forth. Her legs remain crossed. I take one more step closer.

"This is it.", she says in a terrifying voice

I pause for a moment.

"What does that mean," I ask while my lips start to quiver from fear

She starts to laugh. God, that awful laugh.

"Pshhhhhehahaha"

The girl stands up, and she runs away laughing.

"Pshhhehhaaaa"

The words "this is it", ring in my ear

I turn around quickly and pace back and forth. Wondering what to do next.

I have to get out of here Now.

I run through the rusty door quickly, and I stop dead in my tracks.

Right in front of me, was another little girl. Similar to the one I saw past the door. She was waiting with her legs crossed. Just like before. She had a blood-red dress on, with dirty white Velcro shoes.

"I can't see anything", she says with a strained voice.

They took my eyes.

"W-who did?"

They did.

She says as she points behind my back. I slowly back up and I turn my head slowly. Right there was a group of people. Men and women. They all had bloody clothes and no eyes.

“We’ve been waiting for you”, they chant

Three.

Every time they chant, I feel a chill fall down my back. I take slow steps back. All of a sudden, I’ve felt as if I’ve bumped into something. Now I’m shaking in my boots because I fear what’s going to happen to me. Who are these people? What do they want from me?

I feel someone breathing on my neck.

“This is it”, the girl whispers in my ear

The chanting people start to slowly walk towards me.

I push the girl out of my path, and I run towards the exit.

I come across a gate that wasn’t there before.

No

No

No

I just want to go home. I turn around and see the girl and the people.

“We’ve been waiting for you”

“This is it”

They chant.

“Why are you doing this? Please stop”, I yell out as the tears fall from my eyes

“We’ve been waiting for you”

“This is it”

I fall to the ground knowing there’s nothing left to do. I am trapped here with these people. This is the last thing I’ll ever feel. Fear.

The girl walks up to me and holds my hand. She brings her mouth to my ear and she whispers.

Wake up.

My eyes snap open and I’m no longer in the dark tunnel.

I’m home?

There's no girl, there are no people, just me.  
Was it all a dream?  
I walk downstairs to see my mom cooking breakfast  
"You won't believe it. I had the craziest dream", I  
say sniffing the air  
"We've been waiting for you."  
My heart drops. My mom turned around to face  
me and her eyes were all bloody.  
"This is it."

## Untitled

My eldest brother ran breathlessly into the room. The only reason our spots are not switched is because of a mistake. A quite fatal mistake. I rule this kingdom as my parents would have wished. "Lucas, News from the outer border!" He coughed out holding his arms around his stomach. I rubbed the bridge of my nose and scoffed; a thin smile peeled onto my face.

"What is it this time, a bunny?" I retorted with hints of a laugh. I try to pay no attention to these warnings. It is usually a bunny or a fox, the people are so fearful. It is disgraceful to be shuddering at a small pest especially with the power of gods at their fingertips.

"Humans, they are on the outer banks of the town!" My head jerked up at this, my smile retreated from my cheeks. Humans don't venture this far into the forest. They fear our danger. Ever since their creation we have been their largest predator.

"Are they sure they are humans?" I asked with a hint of hope in my voice.

"Yes, they have photographs of them." He blankly stated.

"Let me see." I crossed my legs on the large throne as he walked up the steps and showed me. Although we may not be as technologically advanced, we have cameras. There were many Different photos but the one that caught my eye was a girl with navy blue hair that dripped into a purple that reminded me of lavender, her eyes were emerald green, her cheeks were sprinkled with orange freckles. She seemed familiar. I had seen her before. The thoughts washed over me. I needed to know. At that moment I remembered.

"Noah, bring her and her group here to the castle." His eyes widened in surprise.

"Are you sure?" He asked, watching me flip quickly through the other photos.

"When have I ever been wrong?" I growled. It echoed off the

walls.

"Lucas, don't growl at me! I'm worried, If they aren't, we will need to kill those kids because of a mistake!" I nodded "This mistake could cost them their lives, we have thousands of their lives to live, they have less than ¼ of ours!" He points out.

"I understand that but if we wait another month, we will all die!" I shouted back. "Now find out anything you can and bring me those kids or be responsible for the extermination of our kind!"

He nodded and stomped from the room. I saw my sister's long black and silver hair peeking out from behind a pillar. "Jackie, come here" I said.

"What?" She asked. Jackie and Noah are twins. They are 19 so everyone expects them to rule and not me. Every time this comment is made I grit my teeth.

"Gather my special threat guards and have them search for them." She smiled

"I don't think we should send them; they are for threats; you know the Garcia sisters?" She asked and I nodded.

"Their parents trained in the military for 20 years before they passed." I commented, we both hung our heads for a few seconds in respect. They passed a year ago.

"Their daughters are quite talented, and I believe they are more suited for this task." She paused, "And with the strength of some of the civilian wolves, the guards should line the forest." I thought to myself for a moment before saying

"Fine, Bring them here first. Nobody leaves until I say." She left.

That girl, she was the one that wandered to the edge of town. If what that old woman said was true, she has the power to save us all. After all of this though, what will happen? If this crazy lady is lying? The wind blew gently through the large open windows as I sat and pondered the questions. I glanced up from the marble floor to the painting of my family. Me in the front with my red hair hanging down into my face. Nobody expected this. A pang of pain shot through my heart as I saw the smile on their faces.

"I will bring this kingdom to victory, whatever it takes!" I declared getting up from my throne and walking across the floor. "Stop smiling! Stop Laughing at me!" I growled. I raised my hand



and pulled my nails across the painting tearing a hole through my parents' smiling faces. I felt instant regret. I began chewing on the inside of my cheek, a small habit I collected when I was younger. I ran my tongue across the scars on my cheeks. Feeling the taste of blood.

The metallic taste was almost comforting.

## Untitled

Bonjour. Au Revoir. Oui. Non. Merci. Rachel's eyes narrowed fixedly on the page in front of her, the words echoing inside her head. Merci Beaucoup. Fille. Garçon. Femme. Homme. "...Amour. Français. Si'l vous plaît. Bonsoir. Bonne Nuit." She hadn't realized the woman next to her, Sadie, had begun speaking the words aloud from the textbook. Although, seeing as Rachel had been attempting to tune her out for most of the day, she wasn't surprised.

"Hey," Rachel snapped, looking up from her textbook. Sadie's head perked up, her platinum blonde hair swishing around her shoulders. "Could you stop that?" Rachel whispered.

Sadie's expression soured. "Je suis désolé," she muttered, turning back to her textbook. Rachel sighed and turned back to hers as well, but not before glancing at the clock. It read 8:46. She huffed and leaned her cheek into her palm, her elbow balanced on the wooden edge of the table.

She knew she only had just under half an hour left with her study group, but it felt far too long.

Her eyes wandered away from Sadie, who was mumbling French under her breath spitefully, to the two other members of their study group. Tom and Gareth sat at the opposite end of the table, looking as bored and miserable as Rachel felt.

Tom adjusted his glasses as they slipped down his nose. Rachel heard Gareth mutter something snarky, which made Tom turn his head with a look full of indignation. "Guys," Rachel said, breaking the silence and (hopefully) preventing an argument. Tom and Gareth scoffed in unison. Good enough, Rachel thought.

She'd been forced, as she would put it, to start a study group with the three others in the room after she realized she was barely passing French. She needed the language credit to graduate, so she rounded up the few others that were doing as bad as she was, regrettably in desperation.

Her grade was getting better. But she was stuck with three people she'd rather never exchange a passing excuse-moi with under any circumstances.

"This is boring," Sadie interrupted Rachel's thoughts. "I'm going to get a drink," she declared as she stood up, slamming her textbook closed. "Nobody cares," Gareth spat at her, earning an intense glare. She flipped her hair and began to leave the study room, staring daggers into Gareth as she left with a "hmph."

Rachel and Tom watched her leave, eyes following her back until she disappeared into the library. "Why are you so rude?" Rachel asked once it was clear she was gone. Tom groaned, attempting to hide his face in his textbook.

Gareth crossed his arms. "I don't know why it matters," he stated with his eyebrows knitted together. Rachel's eyes narrowed. "You're making this worse than it already is. Which is definitely an accomplishment," she breathed out a laugh. "Why?"

Gareth bit on the inside of his lip before answering. "I don't know why it matters," he repeated, prompting Rachel to roll her eyes and scoff "whatever." They sat in tense silence for a while. Before Rachel heard Sadie's heels clicking against the linoleum tile quicker than normal.

She pushed open the study room door, looking shaken.

"What's wrong with you?" Tom asked. Sadie's posture was rigid and anxious, her hands in tight fists at the hem of her skirt. "Outside," she muttered in a squeaky voice. Everyone else stared at her in confusion, before Gareth spoke up.

"What? Are you scared of the dark or something? It's eight PM. What did you expect?" He cooed mockingly. Rachel shot him a disapproving look that—of course—did nothing.

"No," Sadie protested. She smoothed out her skirt. "There's just... someone outside. He doesn't-doesn't look well, okay? I think..." She glanced behind herself at the study room door before continuing. "I think he needs help," she concluded.

"Shouldn't we call someone?" Tom asked, glancing around. Rachel shook her head. "If he needs help now, it'll take too long for the paramedics to come." She stood up, making haste towards the study room door. Sadie stood still, watching after her with her hands covering her lap.

Rachel paused at the door, her hand on the doorknob. "Aren't

you guys coming?” She turned to face the others. Tom stood up wearily. “Sure,” he muttered under his breath. He took a few steps from the table, spinning on his heels to stare at Gareth. Sadie and Rachel turned to him as well expectantly.

Gareth threw his hands in the air exasperatedly. “Oh, come on.”

Nevertheless, the four of them walked cautiously down the library hallway, past empty study rooms, to the entrance. Sadie pushed open the door, motioning for Rachel and the others to follow after her.

Rachel spotted what she’d been talking about—a sickly old man stumbled slowly across the library patio, wearing a tattered shirt. He looked injured, the skin on his body clinging loosely to his bones.

“Sir? Are you okay?” Sadie’s concerned tone snapped Rachel out of her fixation on the grotesque man. Sadie walked towards him, Tom following after her by her side. “Sir?”

When the man didn’t answer, still limping across the concrete, Tom stepped forward. “Sir. Are you alright? My friends and I here, we’re concerned...” He attempted to put a hand on the man’s bony shoulder, jutting out through his shirt.

The man’s head snapped towards him. Tom’s palm hovered over his shoulder, but for a moment—fear flashed in his eyes. The man’s gnarled face stared intensely at Tom, who opened his mouth to say something. His eyebrows contorted into worry, his eyes going wide. Sadie took a step back towards the door, where Gareth and Rachel still stood, watching with bated breath.

“Sir?” Tom choked out, sounding strained.

The man reached for his wrist, his rough bony fingers wrapping around it as Tom attempted to jerk away, a small cry of shock crawling its way from his throat. Sadie began reversing towards the door faster, mumbling something incoherent under her breath.

Rachel nearly fell into the concrete as she sprinted off the library steps, towards Tom and the man. Tom was attempting to shake him off in a panic as the man pulled on his wrist, dirty fingernails digging into his tan skin. Something feral flashed in the man’s eyes as he yanked Tom’s wrist towards his mouth, baring rotting teeth as Tom cried still.

Rachel launched herself towards them, attempting to wrench

the old man off of him. His fingers slipped away from Tom's wrist, letting the boy run away with a few more shouts of fear. He joined Sadie at the library door, holding it open and attempting to usher Gareth in.

Rachel glanced at both of them, then behind the man, and her eyes went wide. She didn't realize the man had grabbed her forearm instead as she saw a small huddle of people who looked similarly ill and deathly thin, staggering toward the library. She yelped as soon as she realized what was happening.

She sprinted towards the library door, the man still holding onto her forearm and weighing her down. He made a low, growling noise as she limped up the library steps, dragging his legs across the concrete as if he were weightless. She whimpered gently and stared towards the door, where Sadie stood, holding it open.

"Come on!" She screamed.

"I'm trying," Rachel yelled in reply, motioning to the hand on her arm while still attempting to shake it off. She ran toward the library door, pulling the man along with her as he groaned. Sadie jogged into the library after her, attempting to slam the door on the man—but only catching his leg.

Everyone watched in fear as he squirmed, his lower half squashed between the two doors. Rachel whimpered, pulling her arm away to her best ability as her heart raced in her chest.

Without warning, Sadie took a metal chair that had been resting on the wall and hit the grotesque looking man over the head with it.

Everyone yelled as the metal met his skull, but he let go of Rachel, which was comforting in an... odd way.

His face met the floor. Sadie threw the chair aside as if it weighed nothing. Rachel, eyes wide and chest still heaving, stared at her dumbfounded. Sadie looked back at her, a determined, wild look in her eyes as she fixed a lock of hair from her face.

Rachel gulped, still recovering from an adrenaline rush as Gareth grabbed her bicep and pulled her away from the library door. Sadie pushed the man's upper half out of the library warily with the tip of her shoe, seemingly having recovered from a rush of her own.

Everyone paused and turned to Rachel, staring at her almost expectantly.

She caught her breath soon enough to mumble: “I saw more of... whatever he was.”

Tom’s face went grim. Gareth hissed out a groan. Sadie’s hands clenched into fists before she turned back to the library door. She slammed it shut, peeling off her cardigan and tying the door handles together.

“Oh, like that’ll stop them,” Rachel spat without thinking.

Sadie looked over her shoulder at her furiously. “You got a better idea?!”

“Yes, yes,” Tom interrupted. “I vote we all run back to the study room as fast as possible, hide under the table, and just... pray.”

Gareth crossed his arms. “That’s stupid,” he laughed. “We should go home. Why not just... run into the parking lot to our cars? They’re right out there.”

“I’m stupid?!” Tom shouted, turning to Gareth. “A parking lot is an open area! Who knows how many of those... things are out there?!”

Gareth opened his mouth to argue before Sadie interrupted, her voice gruff and commanding. “Study room. We’re going to the study room.” Everyone went silent, begrudgingly nodding and padding along the hallway briskly back to the study room.

When they got there, Tom pulled a couch in front of the door with Gareth’s help. Rachel bit her nail as she sat at the table, sulking. Sadie stepped over and put her hand on her shoulder. “We’ll be fine,” she assured. Rachel looked up, sorrowful.

“Maybe Halloween came early,” Sadie added after a moment of thought. “Maybe they’re scare actors!” Her voice was hopeful and overflowing with optimism, so much so it almost made Rachel uncomfortable.

“Yeah right,” Rachel whimpered out, burying her face in the wood of the table.

“Okay, all boarded up,” Gareth said as he walked towards Rachel and Sadie, Tom following after. Sadie nodded and left a lingering pat on Rachel’s shoulder. They all stood in silence for a long, agonizing moment, dragging on for such a long time it could’ve lasted years.

“I’m scared,” Tom admitted in a small voice. Gareth nodded slowly in agreement.

Then, Sadie did too. They didn't need an affirmation from Rachel to guess how she felt.

"I think we should try our best to... rest." She sat down next to Rachel. "We still have tomorrow, right everyone?"

Tom sighed. "We still have tomorrow," he said weakly, hugging himself. Rachel and Gareth added in a chorus of "tomorrow, yeah" quietly. The silence in the study room was deafening. They could hear the air flowing through the vents.

"Goodnight, then," Sadie said, glancing over at Rachel with a sympathetic smile.

Tom nodded and sat down on the floor, beginning to crawl under it while Gareth rolled his eyes. Tom paused. "How do you say that in French again?"

"What?"

"Goodnight."

"Bonne nuit," Sadie answered. Tom nodded. "Bonne nuit..."

"I swear, the world's like, ending, and you still care about our French class," Gareth said, joining Tom on the floor. Tom's face contorted into a scowl. "Learning will always be important."

Gareth began to argue. "Yeah, and when we're dying, you can ask them for a coffee in français!"

"Bonne nuit, you two," Sadie shouted over their argument, a comforting hand on Rachel's arm.

"...Bonne nuit," they said for perhaps the last time.

## Lotus

It was seven P.M when Aurelio came home. He was exhausted. He had to go downtown to stop yet another bank robbery, as there had been three other ones within the week. Aurelio put his dirty power suit on the floor as he traveled into his bunker, leaving it for his butler, Edwin. He placed his middle and index fingers on his left temple, causing his wardrobe to slam open. He retrieved a white sweater and gray sweatpants whilst putting away his snow white flute case. After getting dressed, Aurelio flopped down on his couch, grabbing the remote. He flipped to the news.

“BREAKING NEWS! Super villain, “Ozul”, has broken out of jail once again! Tread carefully, travel in groups! If you see him, call (702) 192-5927, I repeat, call (702) 192-5927.”

Aurelio stared at his television in disbelief. He ran his fingers through his wavy, pale pink hair. He couldn't believe that Ozul, the illustrious villain of Openshaw, had escaped jail once again, especially after Aurelio sent him to jail for the third time. “Didn't I already send him to jail? If I can't keep him there, nobody can!” Aurelio sighed.

Aurelio dreaded seeing the wicked individual again. He couldn't stand to look into the villain's eyes. Aurelio laid down on his couch, covering his eyes with his hands. Dozens of thoughts raced through his head. Suddenly, an old familiar feeling came over Aurelio. It was the feeling of guilt. Then, a scene came back to him.

It was the year 2016. Aurelio was standing outside of his favorite steakhouse, waiting for a dear friend to come. The brilliant lights from the entrance lit up the dull concrete. He gazed into the distance as a lanky figure emerged from the shadows, a cloak masking their appearance. Aurelio's eyes widened in surprise, as he watched tan hands reach up, pulling off the hood of the cloak, revealing a dark-haired male.



“Hey, Lio!” The male smiled.

Aurelio’s face relaxed. The men walked into the restaurant, were greeted and escorted to a table in the corner of the restaurant.

“You know why I asked you to meet me, right?” Aurelio asked, receiving a puzzled look in response.

“I wanted you to meet me here because I’ve been considering becoming a hero, just like my father.”

The tan being’s expression changed.

“What?! I thought we were going to be villains together, at least anti-heroes!” The male’s eyebrows furrowed.

“I know, Khalan, but you know how my father is! He didn’t become one of the most righteous heroes in Openshaw by being wicked.”

“We’ve been planning this since we were in sophomore year! Did that mean nothing to you?”

Aurelio sighed; he didn’t know what to do. His father was going to retire soon and wanted Aurelio to carry on the great legacy of the Lotus. Aurelio didn’t want to upset his best friend, but he had run out of options.

“I’m sorry, Lan, but I need to do this for my family,” Aurelio slammed his fist down on the table.

Khalan’s face became carnation pink as he stood up and stormed out of the restaurant. He felt betrayed, he had spent nearly a decade planning his lifestyle with his best friend, for nothing.

Aurelio drifted back to reality. He sighed, slapping his forehead lightly. He sat up and scrutinized the television, looking at the picture of his best friend on the television.

“I’m sorry, Khalan,” Aurelio mumbled, turning off the device as tears streamed down his cheeks.

Filled with sadness, Aurelio laid on the couch. He felt like he didn’t have the strength to make it to his bed. After several attempts to fall asleep, Aurelio woke up every thirty minutes, he couldn’t get comfortable. It was around three in the morning when Aurelio fell asleep. Yet, that sleep was interrupted by a heap of phone calls.

Aurelio wanted to ignore the continuous ringing of the phone, but the sound got repetitive. Eventually, Aurelio became agitated and decided to pick up the phone.

“What?” Aurelio mumbled, his tone coming off angrier than he expected.

“Lotus? I need your help. Ozul has broken into OpenMart. I’m hiding in the back room... please, come quickly!” The shopkeeper whispered into the phone.

Aurelio’s eyes widened. He shot up, and raced upstairs, into his bedroom. He threw on his power suit and grabbed his flute case, securing the strap around his torso. Aurelio slammed down on the button near the bunker’s exit, causing the door to screech open. He took off, jumping into his Uranian blue Chevrolet Corvette. Aurelio pressed the start button, causing the car to rumble as the engine started. Pressing down on the gas, the car zoomed out of the bunker, traveling through the underground tunnel, into the city. White rose petals and baby pink steam flew out of the boosters from his car.

As Aurelio raced down the streets, he started to see OpenMart in the distance. Crimson red lights flashed as the booming sound of the store’s alarm echoed through the city. Outside of the store, Ozul laughed maniacally, raising his bruised arms in the air. Aurelio began to tear up at the sight of his old friend. “Khalan,” Aurelio started, his words getting interrupted by the livid look in the miscreant’s eyes.

“Well, well, well. Look whose favorite hero showed up?” Ozul laughed, running his fingers through his coarse, shaggy black and purple hair.

“Khalan, stop this at once!” Aurelio demanded, his eyebrows pointing downward.

Ozul laughed at Aurelio’s expression. Placing his hand on the floor, Ozul moved the shadows from people, trees, even stores, towards him. The shadows lifted the individual into the air, serving as a throne. The shadows inched closer to Aurelio, Ozul laughing and waving his arm in the air. Aurelio’s mouth dropped. He stood still. He had never seen Ozul obtain so much power so quickly.

After Ozul was close enough, Aurelio watched as the shadows morphed into stairs. Ozul slowly walked down the stairs, his black cloak trailing along as he walked. He stepped in front of Aurelio, looking him up and down. Aurelio looked down, looking at the dusty road, his heart racing.

“What’s the matter, Lotus? Can’t bear to look your best friend

in the eye?” Ozul laughed, grabbing Aurelio’s chin, raising Aurelio’s face, causing him to look Ozul in the eyes.

Aurelio’s body froze. He gazed at the crazed look in Ozul’s eyes. Aurelio had the urge to stop Ozul while he still could, but he couldn’t. Instead, his eyes began to well up with tears.

“Are you crying, Lotus? Really?” Ozul laughed, his white fangs poking out as his smile formed.

“Khalan, I’m sorry,” Aurelio said, “None of this would have happened if I were on your side all those years ago.”

Ozul scoffed, then began to frown. Moving his hands in a circular motion, the shadows Ozul previously manipulated began to swirl in circles above him and Aurelio. Ozul extended his arms forward, causing the swirl of shadows to go into a straight line. The shadows struck Aurelio in his chest.

BOOM.

Aurelio’s smashed into a nearby building. The walls of the building broke from the impact, the rubble falling onto the ground. Aurelio laid on the soiled ground, coughing. He tried to stand up but failed each time. Aurelio landed on a large, sharp piece of glass that impaled him. Ozul began to approach the wounded hero, snickering, but that immediately ended when he saw the state Aurelio was in.

“Aurelio!” Ozul rushed to the hero.

Ozul placed his hand over the wound, trying to stop the bleeding, but his attempt pushed the glass deeper into Aurelio’s chest. Blood spurted from Aurelio’s mouth. The hero slowly raised his shaky hand, seeing his palm go pale. His fate was sealed.

“Khalan..I’m so sorry,” Aurelio weakly spoke, his voice coming out raspy.

“Aurelio, hush. I’m gonna help you, okay? I’m sorry, for all of this. I just wanted my best friend back, but I promise, I’m gonna help you,” Ozul rambled, starting to panic.

Aurelio placed his hand on Ozul’s cheek, smiling at him.

“I forgive you,” Aurelio muttered, the smile on his face slowly fading.

Ozul’s eyes widened.

“Hey! Aurelio! Lio!” Ozul yelled, tears blurring his vision. Aurelio’s hand went limp, moving away from his face. His

heart had finally stopped. His blood spilling from the wound. Ozul hugged Aurelio, sobbing.

“Aurelio. No... Not you. It should’ve been me instead,” Ozul muttered. “It should have been me instead!”

## Just My Thing

I step onto the stage with the luminescence lights hanging above, I do a combo of twists and turns, all on the points of my very own feet. I could see my teacher in the audience, she's elated with joy, I'm hitting every beat of the rhythm of the music. But all I could think about was how did I get here? Ballet was never my first choice. Just a couple months ago I was bored in my room wondering what to do with the hundreds of hours of free time I had.

The only thing I had done was go to school, I would come home bored with nothing to do. I wished that I was like others, like my friends who had these amazing gifts, aspirations or special interests they can express outside of school. But I had tried everything; nothing had ever stuck with me or satisfied my need for enjoyment. I've tried boxing and ended up with a purple and black bruise from a brutal uppercut to my jaw. I've tried gymnastics and fell on my butt trying to do a tuck jump. I've tried swimming, but all I ever did in the water was splash around. I've tried all these and more, but I still can't find one that sticks with me.

That was until I heard about the need for dancers in a local ballet company from my friend, Samantha. "Valerie, have you heard about Dance Til' Dawn?"

"No? What's that?"

"Well, it's a dance company here and I've been hearing about how they need new dancers, and I know you have been wanting to do something after school for a while, how about you give it a try?" Hearing this, it gave me some hope, maybe I can find something to do, something that will motivate me.

"I'll think about it definitely," Now, dancing is not one of my strong suits but if it's my shot at trying something new, I'll take it! After that text from my friend, I go and search up the website and sign up for it. I hope they see my application and accept it now.

A week later, I got a message from Dance Til' Dawn, and I excitedly opened it up. It read, "Dear Valerie Cortez, you've been invited to join my dance company" As I read those words, I started jumping up and down. I had the biggest smile that I could ever remember. Literally ran down the halls of my house. My official start date is next week!

Walking in with a leotard on with a jacket over, I'm beyond scared. I see pro looking girls, with tight muscles all around. Of course, seeing them makes me more nervous. I breathe in and out to calm down and chill. I ask the front desk for directions. "Hi, do you happen to know where Ms. Lewis is? She had said in her email for my first time here, she'll give me a private lesson," I asked, and she immediately picked up the phone.

"Hi Ms. Lewis there's a girl asking for you." A pause, her annoying chewing with her gum didn't stop though, I could tell she didn't choose this job.

"What's her name?" She instantly looked back at me. "What's your name?..."

"Valerie, Valerie Cortez,"

"Yeah, her name is Valerie Cortez or whatever.... You want me to send her to you?.... Okay,"

"Yeah okay, just go up the stairs and turn to the right, she's right there."

Taking what she said, it was quite easy to find her. "Hi Ms. Lewis, I'm here for the private lesson!"

"Yes, of course, hi Ms. Cortez, right this way," and of course it was a lot more walking to do, I didn't know the building would be this big. Finally, I made it to the room intended for the private lesson, and then on from there, she taught me everything I should know if I were a student for years. I can't believe this is happening. It was a lot to take in, but I am always passionate to take on this and finally be able to do something I can do. My new start is here, and I'm ready for all of it!

As the months go by, I become more skilled with everything that I do. Now as you see, I'm on the stage dancing with the tips of my toes going up and down. The stage lights shine on me, while my friends and family watch. Ballet is just my thing.

## Broken, Then Reunited

I opened my eyes, blinking blearily against the morning light streaming through the shop's windows. The store would open soon, leading to another day of shivering and praying I wouldn't be sold. My family's spot was the most vulnerable place in the shop because it was at the checkout, where everybody could see us. I shifted uncomfortably on the dusty shelf, feeling a sneeze come up. I tried holding it back, but it blasted out of my nose, and the force of it made me topple off my perch. I had fallen into the shelf right below my home. I felt an angry snarling next to me. I jumped up to face a Mentos gum container squeaking at me. I let out a shrill scream and hopped away quickly, clumsily climbing up to my own shelf. When I got there, I sighed in relief. I angrily thought, "I hope those lazy cashiers know the lives they are jeopardizing when they're not dusting the shelves!" I closed my eyes and started to drift off, only to startle awake when I heard the sound of many footsteps. The store had opened.

I made myself comfortable, preparing myself for the nerve-wracking day. As the day went on, nobody glanced at me, but occasionally, I heard the shrill shriek of an Icebreakers gum container being seized. The next customer came to check out, and she had a little child with her. I thought it was cute. It wore pink things and skipped around singing. And then, what she did next drained me of my adoration. She grabbed me with her grimy hands, laughed, and turned to the bigger one.

"Mommy, can we get this?" she said.

I was trembling, "No no no no no no", I thought, pleading to the Great Gumball Machine that her mother would say no.

To my dismay, the mother nodded and said, "Sure, put it in the cart!"

I turned stiff, locking eyes with my relatives who were staring at me with horror in their gazes. And then, I was put in a plastic bag and never saw them again.

The ride to my new home was short. The plastic bag's contents were dumped out, and the child immediately grabbed me and took me to her room. It was also very eye-burning pink. I was put on a comfortable tabletop surface, much more comfortable than my old shelf, and she promptly opened my mouth and shook out a piece of gum. That was the most agonizing feeling I had ever experienced. My organs were being ripped out of my body and popped into her mouth, where she proceeded to chew them with much happiness. I was horrified. A few weeks later, all my organs were gone, and when the girl came for some more, she shook me upside down, but nothing came out. Frowning, she poked her finger into my mouth and poked around, but there was still nothing. She sighed, then took me and threw me into an oversized metallic cup-shaped thing. It was lined with a plastic bag and some tissues, and I found it to be a satisfactory hospital bed. It was considerate of the girl to let me rest in a soft place while my organs grew back.

The mother came in and, much to my surprise, lifted the plastic bag out of the can and carried my bag bed to a bigger bag, which also consisted of similar contents. The big bag (with my bag in it) was then placed in a huge rectangle-shaped container. I found it even cushier without the hard metallic surface pressing into my back, and relaxed. I heard another pair of feet coming in my direction, and soon, the big bag was lifted out of the rectangular container and placed in a pile of similar-looking bags. The whole pile started to move. By now, I realized that this was not a comfy recovery hospital; I was being thrown away in a dumpster!

The dumpster dropped all the bags off at another, larger place with even more bags. I struggled out and looked around at my surroundings with dismay. What could I do now? Then I heard something. Thinking I must have imagined it, I ignored it. But it came again. A shout in our native Orbit Bubblegum language. "Hey!" I turned, and I saw the most unbelievable sight. Thousands of Orbit Bubblegum containers were hopping toward me. The leader stopped in front of me and smiled.

He said, "This is your new home now! We are all the discarded Bubble mint containers, but we live happily, reunited with our family. Why, I think I know some containers related to you!" A



few containers hopped forward. I goggled at them. Why, there was my great aunt Becka, who was sold three months ago! And my uncle Fernando! And my grandfather Bob! I laughed in joy and let myself be led away into the beautiful landfill.

## The Rainbow Dog

Once there was a dog named Daisy that lived in a really big tree, like a tree house, which was all wood that shines brightly in the sun. She got home and she had brown eyes and of course, rainbow fur. She loves Easter; she loves how the families next door are always reunited on that day and play fun games. On the day of Easter, her grandma came across the street to see what she was doing. She was scared that she was going to be alone on Easter Day, so then the grandma went over and then she walked into the house. She looked at every single room and Daisy was nowhere inside her house. Then grandma went to the shed, walked in, and yelled out loud, “Do you need help?” Daisy was carrying so many things, like decorations.

Grandma went in and helped her carry the things. As they were staring at each other, they laughed so hard they almost fell over. They decided to get to decorating the house, but first, they made food. When they were almost done decorating, they had to put up a banner. The fan on top of the house caught the banner’s string and soon Daisy and grandma were flying across the room. They both were so dizzy. They took a break and ate the food they made, which included: sugar cookies, chocolate, marshmallows, candy, roasted beef, cranberries, pie, and fruit cake. At night, grandma goes to sleep, and Daisy thinks today was a great day, I can’t wait until the 4th of July.

## Perel's Peril

02/21/22

My name is Perel, but my friends call me Sue because Perel in English is Sue. I love chickens, I have them all over my walls. My favorite stuffed animal is Chikna the Chicken. My room is small, but that's ok because I am happy. I was told to keep this by my teacher for the year, so I'm gonna write when I remember to!

04/16/22

I love my twin brother. He's really great at math and we always work on homework with each other. He makes it so easy, and he always helps me study for tests and other academic things. We are best friends, and we are about to head to the park. Write later!

06/11/22

Omg it was the best day today! I got a bunch of toys including a new set of sheets for our bunk bed (which I get top bunk) and the sheets have chickens. My bro got transformer sheets and a few posters. Haha I got better stuff!

10/03/22

Bubbles my fish just died and so did my hamster Hiccup. I feel really bad for me and Férfi. We really loved those pets. I hope that he isn't too upset about their death like I am, but hopefully the grief passes considering everything else we have to be happy about.

10/31/22

I'm being bullied by these mean girls, May and her two friends

Willow, and Frankie. They call me ugly and fat and said my costume is dumb and ugly, but whenever I come up to a teacher, they tell me to ignore it but it's becoming really hard to "JuSt IgNoRe iT" like what the heck do you think I've been doing?!? JUST SITTING HERE REACTING TO EVERYONE!?!"

11/01/22

THIS IS THE WORST DAY OF MY LIFE! My brother was just pronounced dead because of a StUpId car accident going to my StUpId dAd'S house. Also how did I survive?!? LIKE ALL I GOT WAS THAT MY RIGHT ARM IS BROKEN NOW, BUT FÉRFI HAS TO DIE. (I'm left-handed so I am still able to write) WHAT AM I GONNA DO WITHOUT HIM?!? I DID MATH WITH HIM, I HUNG OUT WITH HIM, SAT WITH HIM AT LUNCH, WHAT AM I SUPPOSED TO DO?!?"

12/20/22

I want to die, life is very, very, very hard after my brother died in a car accident two months ago. We had his funeral 12/15/22 after school that day. Just after that my grandfather fell and had a heart attack and had to move in with us so we could take care of him before his inevitable death. We live in a 2-bedroom apartment. It's only one thousand square feet. I now sleep in a converted linen closet, my mom sleeps in the master, and my grandfather sleeps in my old bedroom.

Gosh it's so hard to write with tears in your eyes, and you know blood isn't exactly helping me when it's rolling down my arm and getting all over the page. I'm failing math and my mom took away my electronics until I bring my grade up, but I can't bear it because I can't do math without my brother.

01/05/23

Ok this is it I'm done. I'm done with life, with school. I'm failing math with a 55%. My only good class is English with a 79.51% so I'm barely at a B. I'm not fine, my mom keeps asking me, "Are you ok, Perel?" Like I'm physically fine (except for my

wrists), but mentally it's sad I still have my stupid bunk bed SO EVERYTIME I HAVE TO GO TO SLEEP I HAVE TO CLIMB INTO BED AND BE REMINDED OF FÉRFI. I want to get rid of it, but my mom says I can't so for now I use my plush chickens to cover up the transformer sheets as best as possible.

01/08/23

MY MOMMY GOT A NEW BOYFRIEND. Ok like I want my mom to be happy especially after my brother's death, but I seriously hate him. He is so rude and disrespectful to my mother. She's already going through some things, there's no need to be mean to her. The only reason I'm excited is that he has a four-bedroom house and if they get married, we can move into his house. He does have a cockroach infestation, but he calls them his friends so it's fineeee.

01/17/23

Sooooooooooooooooooooo I'm not allowed to use knives now. That's fun, but my mom's boyfriend bought me a pair of headphones just to smash them in front of my face. LIKE WHY GET THEM FOR ME JUST TO BREAK THEM 2 DAYS LATER?!?

01/31/23

So, this is harmful. I wanna die. My cat is on her deathbed, my grandfather is on his deathbed as well. I do have a boyfriend; he doesn't know about my fresh and old cuts/scars whatever you wanna call them. It doesn't matter since they are all pretty recent like in the past month and a half or so.

02/19/23

Ok so my boyfriend found out about some things (cuts). He was really mad that I treat myself like this, but I can't help it. My mom seems upset about cuts too, like it's either this or death and right now I'm kinda considering the second option.

03/12/23

Ok life is interesting now, I'm getting kinda better at my classes. I have a C average now which is great. But other than that, nothing has really changed mentally or physically.

05/21/23

May keeps insulting me. It's getting annoying, like she thinks she is smarter than me but I'm in 8th and she is in 6th, so that's kinda confusing. I gave her an 8th grade math problem that she said she could solve, but then she suddenly doesn't know everything as I do because "I'm older than her." Which I am, but she seriously needs to try and remember what she's saying when she insults me, she also might have seen some markings that she doesn't need to see so I'll update you on that as that continues (if it does).

06/03/23

I want to try and make it to my birthday. I'm so close and if I turn 14, I will have reached my goal for life right now. I think I could mean I was born 06/11/08 and it is 06/03/23 it's only 08 days away thankfully!

06/09/23

God damn it I can't do this anymore. I'm not going to make it to my birthday. I just physically can't do it, it's only 2 days but I just don't think I physically can make it. This is my last diary entry. I'm taking my life, I'm done. I can't be any more; my mom's upset, my grandfather's upset, my boyfriend's upset I'm, just gonna die. I'm sorry mom, it's not you, it's me.

## Bus Stop

From the beginning to the end, there was something odd about me, I just don't know what it is. From the day I was born to the day I died; I was always lost in a mist of darkness. I didn't know if this was me, but then I saw light and with curiosity, I had to run so I ran as fast as I could. Then...

"Mom... mom! Sis woke up, she woke up!!!" My sister screamed and I could feel a tight grasp on my back and heavy tears running down my shoulder. Then I felt myself starting to tear up too, slowly putting my hand on her back and a few moments later my mom came in. She looked pale like she hadn't slept for days. Her hair was messy and tangled but her eyes were still the same. They were still open like on the day of the accident, they were still a gorgeous olive green.

My mom gasped and started to run toward me with tears, giving me a tight warm hug and saying, "I knew you would wake up." But then I asked, "How's my little brother, is he ok?" My mom just looked down with a sad look on her face and my sister put her hand on her face and started to cry even more. I knew what happened, but I couldn't believe it. He did die, my sweet little brother did die.

He was so innocent and was the best in his class, even with his brown hair and a big smile. And it's all because of that dumb accident that day. We were on a field trip with me and my little brother. Until we hit a stop but that stop was harsh and everyone fell off their seat, surprised. I took my brother's hand and slowly the bus started to move backward and there was a cliff.

Everyone started to scream, and I just stood up slowly walking toward the bus exit and making loud screeching noises on the metal floor. And at that moment I could feel sweat running down my cheek and my legs trembling with fear. I started to breathe heavily; I froze but kept myself controlled. When I made it to the exit, I grabbed the handles and started opening the doors. Making

the opening wider and wider than another person started to push too. I looked at them and it turns out it was Libby, a girl who I've known since kindergarten, but we weren't friends at all. I started to widen my eyes making a shocked expression on my face then she turned around asking why I looked so shocked.

It shocked my face, making me go back to reality after making a very obvious excuse. That's when the bus made everyone slide to the back. They started to scream even louder than before which made my ears hurt badly, but then, I saw my little brother have tears in his eyes filled with fear and for the very first time I felt an unpleasant feeling running through my body making me brave enough to be a hero.

And without any thought, I climbed again making everyone do the same and again I had to open the door and let everyone out. Slowly and carefully, everyone started to leave the bus with tears, fear, and sweat.

Finally, my brother was the last one to leave and the bus started to bend over even more. My brother and I slid to the bottom which made the bus bend over even more. As my head hit the bottom, I could hear Libby screaming my name over and over. Then, I felt a tingle go through my body and I snapped then tears started to fall out of my eyes. My body felt as if all my life was gone.

All I could hear was my brother trying to talk to me, but it was too late. I felt a heavy weight go over my shoulders and pressure from every corner. Boom the last thing I heard was Libby screaming "Cammy!!" and then everything went dark. At that moment I knew everything was over. I heard sirens and people screaming, talking but all I saw was a slight bit of light. I could hear things being touched and cars running past us.

And now I'm here like no other day waiting for a nurse to come in and give me lunch, but such a thing did not happen. Instead, my mom came and my sister, not flanked by him. Just why he was lost at only 10, he was so small and so nice. Then at that moment, my mom clutched me and now I'm telling you this story. Until the end.



## Untitled

It all started when I was 9. I was a kid genius but someone ten times as smart as I was couldn't stop the car crash.

My parents died on a road right next to the house in a new Rolls-Royce Phantom. Thinking back on it now, I still can't think of a way to stop the crash.

You see, my parents bought it that morning and my father wanted to show his friends. Apparently, there was a mouse that crawled into the engine and made a nest which caught fire and made dad lose control and crash into a big tree. It was undetectable unless you took apart the whole car.

My parents left me with a big mansion, a lot of money, their car remains, lots of science equipment, and their graves. When I got the news, I was so sad that I decided I would devote the rest of my life to bringing them back even if it is the last thing, I do...

50 years later I created an immortality serum and drank it...

500 years later I think I'm going mad...

450 years after that I've finally done it.

I brought my mom and dad back to life, but their bodies are so decayed that I had to merge them into one. I'm calling it Frankenstein's monster. It will be my friend for the rest of eternity. Or so I thought until about ten years later some rude teens came and "killed" it. I eventually brought it back but this time I kept it safe...

to be continued?

(Probably not, don't count on it.)



## Untitled

Once upon a time there was a girl named Lisa. She was going on a little midday stroll then she found herself lost in a forest she did not know what to do. Lisa called and called till her throat hurt. Then she fell asleep.

The next morning, she woke up in a different place. She was surrounded by clovers, so she looked and looked through the clover hoping to find a four-leaf clover. Time to find that god darn clover.

It was the third day and Lisa still hadn't found that god darn four leaf clover. She got so mad that she screamed at the top of her lungs and that made all the birds fly out of their nest. She was so surprised she could scream that loud.

She finally found that god darn four leaf clover. It was silver and she didn't know how the heck she didn't see this thousands of times she looked through the clover patch.

Back home finally. She wished so hard and for so long this was the 80th time that she wished to go home "it didn't work" Lisa said in a hushed voice.

At this point in time, she had been there for six months, and her parents thought she was dead. She was so sad that she wanted to run away from the forest, but she didn't because she knew what that would do to her parents.

She went to bed when she woke up and she was at home she screamed, and her parents ran to the room and said "what the #@%\$\$&%^%^ happened" her parents yelled in a scared voice "I was in a weird forest for 8 months".

## Brandon's Story

There was a kid named Brandon who loved this game called Fortnite. At the time it was so popular it had the whole world playing it and they were in-game items such as skins and pickaxes. All his friends had skins and he was the only one left out. He was sad so he had a plan to use his moms credit card. So, he had to wait until night while she was sleeping. As he made his way to find her card, he tipped something over and almost woke her up. He stood still for a couple minutes making sure she wouldn't wake up. So, he made his way to her wallet which was in her drawer. He took the credit card and made his way out of the room as fast as he could, then he made it over to his game and started spending. He ended up buying 100 dollars worth of skins. He didn't know that she would get the notification of the purchase, so when she woke up, she saw a notification.

She saw a transaction of a hundred dollars and called Brandon over. He kept denying until she showed him proof. She was planning on giving him a punishment. What she did was shave his hair bald. They ended up in a barber shop with all his hair cut off. Brandon then ran away in rage at what his mom had done to him. He ran it to his friend's house who promised to feed him every morning as he slept in the garage. One day, he was over it because he was getting the same food over and over and decided he wanted to come back home and his mom's meals. As he was running back home, he got hit by a car going 70 miles per hour and he died. He was peaceful in the afterlife, but then his mom was mad and sad that he died but she wasn't gonna let that stop her. She got a belt and committed suicide and took the belt with her in the afterlife to beat Brandon's ass with.

## Untitled

The warm sun flooded into her room, the sun smothering her face in a warm kiss. The chandelier above her head sparkled in the sunlight as if it were a thousand stars. Azriel's eyes fluttered open as her brother, Dorian barged into the room.

"Good morning Azriel." Her brother said loudly as he dramatically threw himself onto her bed.

"Dorian!" she shouted rolling over to face her ball gown.

"Are you excited about the ball?" Dorian yawned.

"No, I wish we didn't have to go." Azriel said staring at the long royal blue dress sprawling onto the floor.

"That's too bad, it could be fun."

Dorian sat up and stretched as he walked out of the room closing the door behind him. Azriel sat up rubbing the darkness from her eyes. She grabbed her long and elegant dress and threw it above her head and slid it on. As she sat down at her vanity, she grabbed her hairbrush and very gently brushed out her curls making her hair soft and fluffy. Her dirty blond hair fell behind her back. She took her mascara and rubbed it along her long lashes, making her emerald-colored eyes pop. Her freckles splattered across her face as if paint had splattered so perfectly onto her cheeks. As she finished getting ready, she walked downstairs where she was greeted by her father.

"Good morning, Dad," she said as she wrapped him in a warm hug. She sat down at the table as her maid brought her a plate of eggs and toast with a glass of ice-cold water. She watched the steam rise from her plate as her father began to make plans with her regarding the ball.

"Azriel, this ball is very important to me. I can hopefully make a deal with the king of Olinn." her father said as he took his morning coffee from the maid's hands. Azriel knew what the deal was, even though her father hadn't told her yet. He was going to ask King Windsor's son to marry her. Azriel was turning 18 very

soon and needed and prince so she could be crowned queen of Ivor when she turned 21. She didn't mind the arranged marriage, but she wanted to find true love like in the fairy tales. Her father walked to his study leaving Azriel alone in the dining room. The time of the ball was near as Azriel finished tying the bow on her corset. The maid helped her slip on her skirt, the last layer of her dress. As she slipped it on the silky fabric spread all around her and fell to her feet. She looked in the mirror and smiled as her dress twirled with her every movement. As she pulled on her royal blue velvet gloves, she noticed that she could hear the carriages arriving. The thudding of the horse's hooves on the gravel and voices of ladies and gentlemen greeting all their friends. She sat down on her bench watching through the window as the guests arrived and the sunset. The sky was a pink and orange color as the sun slowly started to disappear behind the mountains. As more and more guests arrived the sun was gone, and she finally saw him. Prince Oren stepped out of his carriage with his father and mother. His brown hair swept across his head like a dark sea. His cheeks were the perfect rosy pink, and his dark brown eyes made him look like he wasn't real. She rushed downstairs almost tripping twice over her dress. When she finally got to the door, she found her father standing with King Olinn and Prince Oren. She fixed her hair as she nervously walked over to her father smiling a greeting everyone on the way.

"Ah, speaking of! This is my daughter Azriel." He proudly stated smiling down at her. Princess Oren looked at her curiously while King Olinn began to speak.

"Such a beautiful young lady," he said sticking out his hand to Azriel. She took his hand and gently shook it as Oren redirected his attention to her father.

"How about you two go run along and get to know each other?" Her father said patting her on the back. Oren stuck out his hand for Azriel as they both walked through the crowd and to the dance floors.

"Hello, Azriel. It's nice to meet you." he said trying not to make eye contact with her.

"It's ok Oren, you don't have to be so formal with me. If we are going to marry each other, we should know the real versions of us." she said smiling up at him. Oren finally rested his eyes on hers

and smiled.

"Well then Azriel, what's your favorite color." she laughed softly and smiled.

"Pink, how about you?" Their conversation went on until the night ended. The two of them were still dancing as the guests started to slowly drain out of the castle. The two kings approached them slowly as Oren and Azriel's dance came to a stop.

"Azriel, Oren," her father started

"I see you too are getting along very well but, we don't see this relationship between the two kingdoms working in the future."

"What?!" Azriel said as her eyes began to burn. She didn't know why; it wasn't like she could love this stranger in less than a day. Oren stood blankly staring at the two men then moved his eyes to Azriel.

"Father please, this is who I want as my queen." Azriel's eyes flung to his as if someone pushed her head toward his. The two Kings looked at each other and then nodded. If you both feel that way and you prove to us that you can rule both kingdoms together as one, we will allow the marriage. Azriel and Oren locked eyes smiling widely as the Kings walked to her father's study to discuss future plans for their kingdoms.

Azriel knew it would take time, but she believed she found her true love.

## Clementine

I dash into the bathroom stall, hoping they don't find me. "Clemmyyyy! We just wanna be friends!" Three cruel girls tune towards me. They slam the stall door open and pick me up from the floor.

"I asked you to do my history homework! Why isn't it done?" Diana, my school bully, threatens. They threw me to the ground, making my legs hit the floor.

"I'm sorry, I've been busy. Just please give it to me and leave me alone." I grabbed the papers and ran out the bathroom, listening to them cackling. I stare at my old, cuffed shoes, as I trudge down the middle school hall. I wonder to myself, "Why me? "I tried to look at the scars Diana and her ghouls gave me on my arms and wrists, but I heard their voices echo across the hall. I speed walk to my next class; history. I flopped onto one of the back desks, hoping no one glanced back at me. I start to tear up, letting the tears drip onto my pants. I quickly wipe my eyes as my teacher, Mr. Maverick starts the lesson. I look over to my right and notice an innocent looking girl sitting next to me. She had light brown hair like caramel, light blue eyes, almost like the ocean. I noticed Mr. Maverick didn't introduce her to the class. I glimpse around the room and scoot my desk closer to her.

"Hi! I'm Clementine, are you new?" The mysterious girl looks over to me and nods innocently.

"What's your name?" I ask while fidgeting my pencil.

"Rose," She looks down at my fingers, as I push down my cuticles with my pencil.

"Are you ok? Why are you doing that?" Rose whispers, removing the pencil. I hesitate and look down.

"Sorry, I do it when I'm nervous." I look into her eyes, are they similar to someone I know? I hand her a smallish, ripped piece of paper.

"Wanna be friends? Put your number here!" She grabs the

paper and starts to write.

Later that day, I head home and knock on the door. My mother opened the door. I notice she's crying.

"Mom what happened!" I push her inside gently and sit her down onto the sofa.

"Your grandma Rose died," she whispers, trying not to break down. I then began to realize why I recognized my friend Rose's eyes. I hug my mom, trying to comfort her the best I can, still trying to figure out why Rose has my grandma's eyes and name. I helped my mom to her bed and headed to my bedroom. I sit at my desk, still trying to figure everything out. I think to myself, "Is Rose my grandma somehow?" I didn't want to overthink it and maybe I was just really sad about her death. I cried myself to sleep that night. The next morning, I knew my mother wouldn't be in the mood to drop me off at school. I just slept most of the day hoping my life would just end already. After many hours, I looked at the clock and noticed school had already ended. I ran over to my mother's phone to see any missed calls from Rose.

None. I trudge back to my room, but the phone rings. I ran over to the phone and answered quickly.

"Hello? This is Clementine."

"Hi Clementine, it's Rose. "My heart skips a beat, hearing my dead grandmother's name from someone who also has the same eyes as her.

"Oh, um hello, I can't talk right now, but maybe later?" I hung up before she could say anything. I stand at the phone, staring at our old floor carpet. I start to tear up again. A few weeks passed and my mother barely recovered from her mother's death. She drops me off at school and I head to my first period. I step at the door and everyone's eyes are on me. As I walk past all the desks, I hear whispers. Whispers about me.

"I heard her grandma died," "Look she cuts herself!" "She's probably depressed." I sit down and open my sketchbook to draw. Drawing calms me and blocks everyone out of my mind. A few minutes go by, and Rose taps my shoulder.

"Hello, where've you been? I've been calling you...?" I try not to make eye contact with her.

"Sorry I've just been busy, um, with something."



“Oh. Whoa what are you drawing there?” She points at my sketchbook.

“Nothing really, just animals. I really like animals,” I move her hand to continue drawing.

“Oh, that’s lovely! My favorite animal is a red panda. I love the color red, it’s so unique!” I look at her with a horrified expression.

“My grandma’s favorite animal was a red panda also... for that same reason,” I mumbled under my breath.

“I’m sorry, what was that?”

“Um, nothing, I gotta go.” I dash out of the classroom and run to the bathroom. I slam a stall door and throw myself to the floor. I start to break down. I don’t understand this. I don’t understand anything. Am I going crazy? Is she real? I hear light footsteps walk into the bathroom.

“Are you ok?” A weak voice trembles.

“Uh, yes, I’m fine. Just don’t worry.”

“Are you sure? What’s wrong, tell me.” I slowly open the stall and notice it’s the sweet girl in my Spanish class, Eleanor.

“I think I’m going crazy El, the day my grandma died that new girl came.”

“New girl? What new girl?” Eleanor tilts her head, in confusion.

“You know? Rose Clinton?” I say with hesitation.

“There’s no new girl, silly?” I stare into her eyes in fear, trying to process all this.

“I- I don’t understand anything... What’s happening...” I head back to class and sit in my seat. I stare at my desk and slowly turn to look at “Rose.”

The desk was empty.

She’s not real...

## Untitled

Have you ever wondered where sirens really came from? Ever wondered if they were even real? But... if they were just a figment of our imaginations, what would explain the countless drowned sailors? What would explain the state their bodies were found in? It couldn't have possibly been just drowning. Their necks twisted in an almost full 360... scratches all along their bodies... there's no way that was natural.

My parents always said that sirens weren't real, but that might not be true. I, among others, have caught glances of them. Although, it might have just been a trick of the light. They always have ropes tied tightly around their tails. Some, who are not as far gone as the others look as though they could have legs, but a thin webbing has connected them. That's what makes me believe that they used to be human. Drowned girls and women who were tied by their feet so they couldn't escape. Their bodies being underwater for so long they have morphed into what they are now. Animalistic creatures that only want vengeance, using their eerily sweet voices to lure any sailor that comes their way to their watery graves. Without anything to cut them, their nails have grown long and sharp, almost as if they were claws. Their hair in long, wiry strands, if they even have any left at all. Their skin is a sickly almost green color, wrinkled from the water. I wonder why the men would try to save them.

I first saw one of them when I was 10, if only I could unsee it. My dad, older brother and I were all going for a fishing trip in the bay when we heard a woman singing. My brother looked over the edge and fell in. I looked over and all I saw was her face. That face and song still haunt my dreams, many years later. For days we searched for my brother. Eventually, when we stopped looking some scuba divers stumbled upon his body miles away. No one knows how it got there. The police said that it was just a current. It's very rare that currents are in our bay. Ever since that day, I

have searched for that woman. Once I was of age, I built a house that looked into the bay, so I could keep watch of the area in hopes of seeing her again. Since I built that house, I have had many experiences with what I believe are sirens. Yes, I have not seen any since that day, but I have my suspicions. Beautiful, almost angelic singing, but when I look outside, no one is around.

Arms reaching out of the water to grab sailors, pulling them in. Alas, I am the only one around for miles, the only one witnessing things. I have been admitted into the mental hospital over the years. I don't understand why, I know what I'm seeing, I know I'm not going crazy. But they do say that crazy people don't know that they are crazy. Watching all of the boats come in and out is really a very interesting pastime. Seeing how many sailors fall in every day really makes me start to believe that sirens are real. But, of course, they aren't. How could you believe that childish tale?

I always look out my window to look at the sailors in the bay. I have seen many peering over the side of their boats before diving into the water. There used to be so many boats every day. Now, I hardly see any sailors out in my bay anymore. If sirens aren't real, the sailors must have just moved away, right?

## Dark Spell

“HEY! You did not pay for that!” yelled the huge man with the scar. He started waddle-running toward me, but he was so fat that by the time he had taken five steps, I had vanished. I slowed my pace. My name is Mirza, and yes, I did just steal a loaf of bread. No big deal. Scar man had plenty, he could easily spare one for a poor kid like me.

I made a right turn into a dark alley; the scent of garbage and decaying rats reached my nose as I exhaled deeply. Not a very pleasant smell to come home to, but it’s home. I stepped over some rotten fish, their eyes, or where their eyes should have been stared up at me blankly. That’s what happens when you live next to a witch, I guess. I think she eats them raw, or at least that’s what Cornelius told me. I walked past a few more things I do not think you would like me to explain (seriously) and came to a hole in the wall of the witch’s house. Sure hope she doesn't find out two boys have been living here for the past two months.

I ducked my head and stepped inside to what we call home, a locked-up room from the inside. I don’t even think the witch knows about it, and if she does, who knows why it’s locked up.

“Corn! You home?” I asked. I walked in and saw Cornelius leaning over the fire stirring something in a big pot. It looked like he had thrown in a bunch of whole potatoes, a few carrots, stems and all, and covered it in a light layer of broth. It somehow smelled delicious, far better than the rotten fish outside.

“Smells delicious!” I exclaimed a bit loudly. Cornelius jumped smacking his head on the ceiling of the fireplace swinging his right hand to the left causing it to bang into the pot which nearly flipped over, causing a dirty look from Cornelius. From the side of my eye, I saw the pot slowly swinging as a bit of broth sloshed out, hit the hearth, and smothered the fire. In a flash, it was pitch black. I heard an unhuman like yelp as a dark figure darted past me, running toward the door. I grabbed Cornelius’s arm before he got

to the door. His hair stood straight up poking into my hand.

Startled, I loosened my grip just enough for Cornelius to yank his arm free from my grip and sprint out the door.

I rushed after him into the light of the sunset looking around for Cornelius. “Corn, Cornelius! Where’d you go?” I shouted looking around for movement. Then Cornelius came to view. “Geez Corn,” I exclaimed rolling my eyes.

“Sorry.” Cornelius answered innocently, smoothing down a few ruffles on his brown tunic. “You know I’m afraid of the dark,” Cornelius is an averaged sized guy like me. We are both 16 years of age. He has sleek black, shoulder-length hair, straighter than the straightest stick you could imagine, while I’m stuck with hair the color of the ground with a slight wave to it.

“Why are you afraid of the dark?” I muttered.

“Let’s go inside,” interrupted Cornelius. “Soup’s almost done.” He pulled out a candle and picking up two rocks, he struck them together three times to make a flame. Quickly but gently, he caught the flame on the candle. Holding the candle up to his face he walked back in.

I quietly tip toed over to where Cornelius slept, careful not to make a sound. Cornelius and I sleep in the west corner of the room directly across from the fireplace on brown cots. He looked peaceful in his sleep, his face glowing in the candlelight. Ever sense the night we arrived, Cornelius always sleeps with three candles arranged neatly around him, two at his sides and one at his head. Now I know you’re wondering why I’m awake in the middle of the night, and that’s a very good question. The answer’s simple, I’m going to play a little joke on Cornelius to see how afraid he really is of the dark, and maybe I’ll finally get some real sleep too.

I squatted down next to the candle on Cornelius’s left then licked my thumb and pointer finger, quickly pinching the candle wick just below the flame and extinguished it. I extinguished the one on his right too till there was only the one at his head left. I don’t know why, but my hand started to shake just as I was about to extinguish the third candle and I suddenly I felt very tense. I slowly lowered my trembling hand to the wick, but misjudged it,

landing my fingers on the flame. I yelped, startled, and quickly dropped my hand from the flame. I cautiously turned to Cornelius, afraid my clumsiness had awakened him, luckily though, he had not stirred.

I released a breath I hadn't realized I was holding, surprised at how fast my heart was beating. I shrugged off my panic and again reached for the wick, this time I shot my hand out quickly so it wouldn't have time to shake, succeeding to get my fingers on the wick and pinched it hard. The room became pitch black. As my eyes began to adjust, I saw a dark figure begin rising his back towards me. My breath caught in the back of my throat as Cornelius slowly became full height.

My instincts told me to run, but my mind told me jumping back into bed pretending to be asleep was not a great idea. Surprisingly Cornelius hadn't yet made any move to relight the candle or to run into light as he had earlier that day. Weird shadows were playing with my eyes, giving Cornelius long pointy ears and fur all over his arms. Come to think of it, hair all over all his exposed parts! And - stop it Mirza I scolded myself, do not let your imagination get to you.

I blinked trying to erase the horrid thoughts from my mind but when I looked back at Cornelius, I saw nothing different about him. His ears were still pointy, and he was still covered in hair. I then realized something was very, very wrong. I broke into a cold sweat. Then Cornelius started to turn around. I tried to turn around and run but it was like Cornelius was holding me in a trance. I ordered my feet to move over and over but they would not listen. Cornelius lowered his head as he came close, and his hair fell over his eyes.

Curiosity got the better of me as I whispered, "Cornelius?" Slowly, Cornelius raised his head to reveal not the face of my friend, but the horrifying face of a wolf. My heartbeat wildly in my chest. I had never felt so scared in my life. The wolf opened his eyes. They were bright red and startled me so much I yelped, stumbling backwards, tripping over my feet, and falling hard on my elbow. I winced as my elbow started to sting. The wolf was walking toward me at a slow pace. I scrambled up only to lose my balance again, sending me crashing to the floor a few feet back. I whimpered, landing on my already injured elbow as the werewolf continued walking towards me, his red eyes burned into mine.

That is when something unbelievable happened. The door to the witch's house flew open and an old lady hobbled in holding a candle.

"Oh dear, oh dear!" she exclaimed looking at the wolf. She was tiny with pure white hair wrapped in a scarf and an apron wrapped around her waist. I realized immediately she must be the witch.

"Oh dear, oh dear," she repeated. This time looking at me, she rushed over all the time muttering under her breath something about an evil spirit. I scrambled up, thankfully not falling this time. I fumbled with my belt drawing my rusty dagger and pointed it at the old lady, then the wolf, then the lady again. The old lady stared hard at me and frowned.

"I didn't do it," she said in a hoarse voice.

"Do what?" I asked confused.

"Turn your friend into a werewolf."

I took a step back alarmed. Pointing my dagger at the wolf and nodding I said, "He is not Corn."

"Oh yes he is!" She shrieked. "This is Corn, they have done it to him! They have turned him...into a werewolf! Yes, they have chosen him to be the next victim. They have chosen him."

"They?" I questioned.

"Yes, they. The evil dark spirits have, yes. They have chosen Corn. Poor Corn, poor Corn."

"Chosen him for what?" I asked, impatiently looking at the wolf who looked ready to pounce on me any second.

"They lived here once, yes. William and Eleanor those were their names I remember, yes. It was the year 1165, I remember yes. Two thieves came. The thieves wanted their money. William was out getting his horse ready when he saw them. Yelled for Eleanor lock the doors. Thieves heard him though." She hung her head in sorrow. "The first stabbed William and shouted for the second to find who William was yelling to and deal with her but the second was no killer, so he helped Eleanor escape from his partner. Eleanor lived for another year till she died of grief for her husband and ever since they have wandered the house searching for the two thieves and when they found them, they would turn the first to a werewolf but spare the second for sparing Eleanor." I looked at the old lady for any trace that she was lying but her face was grim with no trace of lying.

“So, they think Cornelius and I are the thieves? And Cornelius is the murderer?”

“Yes, and he was exposed to the dark one to many times making the spell permanent.” While I was thinking this over, looking wearily at the wolf, I saw the old lady pull a tiny bottle out of her apron pocket and uncork it with her teeth. Then she looked at me.

“This is the only thing that can save Corn,” she said staring at me hard. “But it comes at a cost.”

I gulped. “What cost?” I asked.

“I am very lonely here. No one wants to come here because they all think I am a witch.”

“Okay.”

“I want you and Corn stay with me. I have plenty of rooms and you could each have your own. I will cook for you too. You wouldn’t have to live in this haunted room anymore. If you agree, then I will heal Corn,” she said looking around the room. I couldn’t believe my luck, not only would Cornelius become normal again, but we would also have a home!

“We would love that.”

The woman then took the bottle and slowly walked over to Cornelius her arms outstretched. Cornelius growled, snapping his jaw at the woman but the woman had put some sort of trance on him so he couldn’t move. Then she poured the potion on Cornelius’s head. In the candlelight I saw Cornelius start to become human again.

“Cornelius!” I shouted happy to see my friend again and so we live happily ever after with the old lady (whose name we found out was Agnes, but we just called her grandma).





Addison Roderick  
Middle School

## The Animated Voice

“Now trade your essay with the person next to you so they can grade it.” Mr. Sato informed the class.

Takashi, a boy with stringy midnight blue hair with a right part. He was wearing a purple long sleeve shirt, a neon green puffy jacket with no sleeves. over that and black ripped jeans. Not the best grades but very popular, looked around frantically trying to find Hajime, his best friend.

“Uh, Hajime is not here. Should I just do it by myself then?” Takashi asked while flapping his hand up in the air

“No, just have Masaki grade yours.” Mr. Sato replied back

Masaki, a student with short fluffy hair dyed dark red covering his eyes, a plain black hoodie with a white vest over that and black cargo pants. He was either drawing or sleeping but still managed to get above average grades, but still had no friends.

“MASAKI!!” Mr. Sato yelled.

“Hm?” Masaki sleepy replied.

“Go sit next to Takashi and grade each other’s papers, and don’t cause any problems” Mr. Sato demanded.

“Alright” Masaki said not really caring unlike Takashi who would rather die than work with him.

Masaki brought his bag over to Takashi’s desk while Takashi groaned. They read over each other's papers and gave pointers reluctantly.

“Hey this is actually pretty good! I never knew you were so good at writing” Takashi exclaimed.

“Yeah, I want to make my own anime one day, so I write scripts and stories in my free time to practice in hope I’ll get the greenlight to make one” Masaki replied a bit more enthusiastically

“Really? I wanna be a voice actor someday” Takashi added laughing.

“Cool! Maybe we could work together! Like we could make an indie anime, I animate it and you could voice a character! Or

multiple characters like Alex Hirsh from the US! You know he has voiced at least 5 characters in his own show!” Masaki Exclaimed.

“Woah you're getting ahead of yourself! I don't even know who Alex Hirsh is and I don't plan to! I just said I wanted to be a voice actor, I never said I wanted to do it with you!” Takashi hissed back.

“B-but-” Masaki murmured.

“Masaki! Takashi! Did you finish!?” Mr. Sato thundered

“Y-yes sir!” Both of them replied in a matter of seconds

“Well then. Other people have not, so be quiet!” Mr. Sato said caught of guard.

After what felt like forever the ringing of the bell filled the classrooms as all the students left for the weekend as some teachers yelled to finish the classwork or assigned homework in time for Monday.

“Think about it! We might be able to be popular! Even famous!” Masaki screamed across the hall

“Maybe” Takashi mumbled under his breath so that no one would hear him.

After baseball practice Takashi headed over to the library to check out some books on voice acting, and to use the computers there to look up who Alex Hirsh even was.

“Hey Takashi! Don't see you coming here much, how's it going? The librarian said joyfully.

“Hey, same as usual. Where are your voice acting books and can I use a computer?” Takashi asked.

“Over here in the aspirations and jobs section! And yes, you MAY” The librarian replied.

“Okay thanks.”

Takashi checked out 2 voice acting books and 1 voice training book, surprising the librarian as he was known for a boy who wouldn't read voluntarily if he was offered 1000 yen. After he checked out the books, he looked up Alex Hirsh on the library computer. He found out he was an American animator who was most famous for his show “Gravity Falls” and for his voice acting part in “The Owl House” both western based cartoons that were anything but realistic. He loved it. He decided maybe just maybe he would take Masaki up on that offer.

“You almost done Takashi? It is 4:00!” The librarian

interrupted laughing about how he got lost in reading.

“Oh, um yeah! Sorry about that” Takashi replied embarrassed about his obliviousness.

“You're fine, just make sure to read them so you can return those books in 2 weeks!” the librarian smiled.

“Oh, I actually finished all of them, but I'm gonna study them more! So, thank you!” Takashi replied.

“Oh, well then, see you on Monday!” The librarian exclaimed

As Takashi got home, he decided to watch “Gravity Falls” and could not believe the person voicing a grumpy old man also voiced the villain. But as he was beginning to feel a bit more convinced Masaki was trying to find ways to convince him as he did not know that the jock of the school would even try to read a book, let alone take up a worthless nobody up on an offer that had a 75% of failing. He thought of “We could get all the ladies”, “We would be super popular” “We could bond” even “Maybe we could even be friends” but he did not think that would sway his opinion in the least. By the time both boys knew it, it was already Monday morning.

The day went by slower than usual and by the time lunch hit everyone was exhausted. 5th period is creative writing, the class where Masaki and Takashi first met. Hajime was back in class so Masaki did not have time to talk to Takashi, which is probably a good thing, because he could not think of anything to say to persuade him. Soon enough the bell rang, Masaki decided that he had nothing to lose and went up to Takashi.

“Hey, I know you will probably say no, but have you thought about my offer?” Masaki said reluctantly.

No response.

“No what it was probably stupid, see you around” Masaki frowned walking away. Masaki walked about 6 meters till.

“WAIT! ... I'll do it.” Takashi called while running up to him

“Alright! Here's my address, be there at 5:00 today!” Masaki Cheered.

## A Rich Life

One sunny morning there was a girl named Ivy. Ivy was woken up by a girl named Amy. She was kind of like a maid, but she wasn't. Amy had no parents, no siblings and no friends. She was just a normal girl that had nothing but a job cleaning for a rich person. Ivy woke up and got dressed because she had school, and it was her birthday.

Ivy was going to throw a party at her house. Ivy got in the car for school. Amy rushed to get ready, so she won't be late for school. Amy didn't have time to take a shower because she just woke up and she had to clean the house, wake up Ivy and get ready for school. When Amy got in the car, ten seconds later Ivy said, "What died in here? I am going to move into another car." Amy wanted to cry but she held it in.

When the girls got to school, Ivy ran to her friends quickly. Amy just went to class. Amy said, "Hi" to a girl, but she didn't answer. Amy just went to sit in the back. When a boy came in, Amy tried to say "Hello" again and again she was ignored. Amy was sad, but she just wanted friends to talk to and people to laugh with and just understand what it is like to have a friend.

Amy just wanted to be like Ivy because she was so popular and had a boyfriend and had friends, but she couldn't because no one liked her.

When class starts the teacher moves everyone's spot and assigns all of the students. "Amy, please sit here," said Ms. Clover. Amy said, "Okay," but she was not too happy where she was sitting and that was in the front of the class with two other students. When Amy got into her seat, Ms. Clover said, "Michael, please sit here with Amy." Amy's face was red like a tomato. She was sitting by her crush. Amy had a big crush on him. Michael was a rich and popular guy in the school. He has a big house, and he was surprised that he had to sit by Amy.

After class Ivy went to hand out an invitation to everyone she

wanted to be invited. So, when Ivy and Amy got home, Ivy started to decorate for her birthday party and she was so excited. Amy said, “Can I help, and can I also come to your party?”

“NO! I don't want you to come, so you can take over who I like. Okay? Just please don't come.”

Amy was really upset she went upstairs and started to cry. Three hours later, Ivy's party was ready, and people were coming in. When Michael came in, Ivy said, “Hi,” and Michael said, “Hey.” Amy had a dress ready for the party and she wasn't going to let Ivy stop her. Amy got ready for the party. She was really scared.

20 minutes later Ivy asked Michael how he liked the party. Michael said, “it would be better if there was good music and food. And this place is a mess because people are messing it up.”

Ivy panicked; she never heard that from Michael. She was really upset, but she was going to do her best.

Amy came down with a beautiful dress that she had from her mother. Everyone froze and looked really surprised and confused. Why was she up there and didn't come through the door. Ivy got so mad when she saw her coming down when she told her to stay up there.

Michael really liked the dress. 'Wow, she looks good,' Michael said under his breath. Ivy and Amy had a fight and Michael broke it up. Ivy was surprised that Michael took Amy outside to talk and couldn't believe that they kissed.



Leila Sady-Kennedy  
Middle School

## Untitled

There was a little girl named Aria Jane Shmidit. She had 2 loving parents and a sister named Julia Rose Shmidit.

One day Julia and Aria left to the park. Their parents died in a fire and there was no one to take care of them. So, Aria and Julia had been taken to an orphanage. Someone had adopted them.

He was very tall and suspicious. His name was Sir Kristof. He was rich, but mysterious. They left to his home which was a very big mansion with maids, chefs, butlers, and it was very...run down looking.

That night, Aria had heard screaming that sounded like Julia. She had checked the old man's room. It was Julia screaming. The old man was a monster that ate children. It was very tall, glowing red eyes, wide smile, all black, and blood all over. It had eaten Julia.

Aria had ran away and no one knows where she ran away to.



Torres Sage  
Middle School

## Untitled

Blair was a 15-year-old girl. She believed in witchcraft but everyone at her school called her freak and weirdo.

Blair and her sister always thought they were different than everyone, but little did they know their mother had a secret.

The mother was a witch, but her daughter Blair and Luna didn't know that until they started practicing it, and found out and confronted them.

## The Volcano Survivor

It was Saturday morning. It was a typical day. There was no school, and I was playing video games in my room. I was playing a game called Natural Disaster. In the game, you could pick what kind of natural disaster occurred. I was never really into science, but it was fun, nevertheless. You could pick between a volcano, an earthquake, a hurricane, and a tornado. I picked a volcano because, let's be real, volcanoes are awesome! Anyways, there was magma coming out everywhere. I was running to escape the spewing lava, but then I ran into a pool of lava. "You Have Died" the screen said. Just then, I heard a loud CRACK coming from outside.

"Mom, what's happening?" I asked.

"Um, I don't know. Come downstairs," she replied. There was screaming and a lot of loud cracks.

"What's happening here?" my dad asked, getting up from his chair and grabbing his in case of an emergency backpack.

"I don't know," my mom replied. We went outside. There were holes in the street and people running around everywhere.

"Ahhhh! Run for your lives!" yelled a man, running down the road. I looked up. Now, I could see that there was lava coming down everywhere.

"Where's it coming from?" my dad asked.

"I don't know!" I yelled. Then, there was rumbling. The ground was shaking. I looked up again to see a giant volcano coming up from the ground.

"Oh no!" I exclaimed.

The volcano was rising up very fast now. It was 50 feet tall, 100 feet, 250 feet, 500 feet until it was about 1,000 feet tall. It was so tall that it looked as if it touched the clouds. I was so amazed by the height of the volcano that I almost didn't notice the lava rock flying straight for me. I barely jumped out of the way as it fell to the ground and created another lava pool. There were cars being



flattened until they were only about a foot tall. Trees were even smacking against the ground.

“We need to go!” my dad called.

“Where?” I asked.

“To the mountains,” he said.

“They’re far away.”

“Yes, good idea! Now, let’s leave before we either get crushed or burned!” my mom announced urgently, another lava rock crashing down near us. We tried to run away, but there were lava rocks on the ground all around us.

“Well, well, well, what do we have here?” I looked up to see where the voice was coming from. There was a man in black robes in an airplane that seemed to have cannons shooting more lava rocks.

“Ha, ha, ha!” he yelled, shooting even more lava rocks.

“Who is this guy and what does he want?” I asked. He seemed to have heard me.

“You don’t know who I am? Well, what a shame.” he bellowed, nodding his head. “It is I, Lord Lava, master of destruction! Ha Ha Ha!” I jumped over the lava pool.

“Come on!” I yelled, waving my hand.

“You cowards! Get back here!” Lord Lava howled, starting to chase after us.

“Run!” I called. I ran until I ran face first into a mountain. Lord Lava was cornering us. He was only about 100 feet away. Then, he came. He was charging up his lava cannon.

“There, a rock!” I told my family “If one of us holds it up, we could use it as a shield and escape!”

“I’ll do it,” mom said. She had always been the bravest of the three of us. She picked up the rock and Lord Lava fired his cannon. Dad and I ran away, but unfortunately, I could still see the lava vaporize the rock and then the blast hit my mom!

“No!” I screamed, but my dad held me back. My mom, now gone forever, was lying motionless on the ground.

“No, Mom!” I screamed

“Come on, let’s go” dad said through tears, picking me up and putting me on his shoulders.

“Where are we going?” I asked through my own tears.

“To the mountains,” he replied back.

“How are we going to get there?” I asked. “They’re so high

up.” “Well, lucky for you, your dad’s a great climber” he grunted, smiling. We started climbing. We climbed for about five days, setting up a tent when it got dark. On one of those nights, dad and I were sitting by our tent, around a campfire that dad had made using a match. Thank goodness he had brought his in-case-of-emergency backpack. Then, I asked “Dad, what are we going to do now? Are we going to keep climbing forever?”

“Forever is a long time,” he replied, sighing. “But I don’t know. The city’s in ruins. I don’t know if we can go back.”

“Dad, what about Lord Lava?” I asked.

“What about him?” dad questioned.

“Why is he trying to get us?” I asked.

“I know some things about him. I can tell you what I know.” I settled in because I knew that this was going to be a long story.

“Lord Lava was once a high school student in my grade. He was a very smart student, always creating crazy science experiments.” He paused. “Yep, he was brilliant. Absolutely brilliant. But he was obsessed with volcanoes, you see and once, uh, you’re not going to believe this.”

“What?” I asked.

“He jumped into a volcano. But it wasn’t just any volcano. It was a volcano that made you evil. So, he has been a villain ever since, destroying cities and towns with volcanos, causing thousands of innocent citizens to evacuate their homes and many others to perish.”

“Wow,” I said after a little while. “Just, wow.”

“I know,” he sighed. “I still can’t believe it myself.”

“And now he’s coming to our town,” I said. “We have to stop him.”

“Now, now. We can’t go down there with the city in ruins and the volcano still spewing.” Dad cut in. “Yeah,” I said, now thinking. “I have a plan for that.”

“Really? What’s the plan?” Dad asked.

“Well,” I said. “Step 1: We go down to the city and sneak past the guards.”

“How are we going to do that?” dad asked.

“We defeat them and get into their uniforms.” I continued.

“Okay, I like this. Go on.” he nodded.

“Step 2: We find Lord Lava using his Supercomputer. And, finally, step 3. I go to Lord Lava and defeat him in battle.”

“Are you sure this plan will work?” dad asked.

“No, but we’ve got to try,” I replied. “Ready or not, let’s go!” We went down the mountain. It was a long climb down but eventually we were there. “Wow.” I said. The volcano was spewing more than ever. Surprisingly there were only two guards.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” I asked dad. Dad patted me on the back. “Don’t worry son. We’ve got this,” he reassured me.

“Okay, let’s do step 1.” I said, picking up a rock. I threw it at the closest guard. Dad did the same. They both fell down, unconscious. We got into their uniforms.

“Step 2, find Lord Lava.” We found the Supercomputer and searched “Lord Lava.”

“1,000 feet away.” the computer said. “Step 3, we battle,” I said, grabbing the sword I had gotten from the guard.

“You got this, son,” dad said.

“Thanks,” I said, hugging him. I ran to Lord Lava. He didn’t notice me.

“Hey, Lord Lava!” I yelled. He turned around.

“Oh, it’s you,” he growled, charging up his Lava Cannon. “Why are you here?” he asked.

“You killed my mother,” I said through gritted teeth.

“Oh, did I? I hardly remember,” he said, smirking and shooting the cannon. Now, I was MAD. I blocked the shot with my sword and charged at him. He charged at me. I swung my sword at his plane. He fired another cannon at me. We both got hit. His plane fell to the ground with a loud BOOM. But at the same time, I fell on the ground with a bleeding lip. Nevertheless, I got up.

“Let’s finish this,” I said.

“Gladly,” he declared, charging at me once more. “Arrrrgh, you are so hard to hit!” Lord Lava exclaimed.

I was indeed beating him, hitting him with my sword and then running away before he could hit me. Then, I tried to hit him, but he blocked it with his own sword, and then pulled another sword from his belt. Now, he had two swords! I didn’t care. Swords or not, I was going to defeat him. But I was taking more hits than

before. I hit him with my sword and that flung BOTH swords out of his hands! Before Lord Lava could get up, I put my sword near his neck, so he couldn't move.

“Dad!” I called. “Could you get some rope?” A few seconds later, dad was there with rope. I tied up Lord Lava's hands behind his back.

“Let me go!” he yelled.

I looked around. The town was completely destroyed. The few houses that hadn't fallen down looked as if they were about to. There were also lava pools and flames everywhere, hot red and burning. “Alright, what should we do with him?” my dad asked, cracking his knuckles.

“I don't know. But what I do know is that this town has got to be rebuilt.”

“True, it is, well, a mess,” dad stammered.

“I think that he should help us rebuild the town,” I said, indicating Lord Lava. Lord Lava didn't say anything.

“Good idea, son,” he said. I turned to Lord Lava.

“Do you know how to get rid of all this lava?” I asked. He still didn't say anything but after a while, he nodded his head.

“Let me out and I will,” he stated. I glanced at my dad, and he nodded his head.

“Alright,” I said, untying the ropes. He stood up, stretched and went over to the Supercomputer. I got my sword, ready for another fight, but he pressed a button and just like that, there was no lava anywhere!

“What are you going to do with me?” he asked. Dad called the police. About 5 minutes later, the police arrived.

“You're coming with us,” they said, tossing Lord Lava into the back of the police car.

“The city's still in ruins. How are we ever going to fix it?” dad wondered. “Yes, the job will be hard. But we can do it if we work together,” I told him confidently.

One year later, the town was rebuilt and safe. It took a long time, that's for sure, but when working together, we achieved it. Well, what about me? Well, thankfully no volcanoes have shown up since the VTDTT (that's short for the Volcano That Destroyed the Town). I'm back to a normal life. I started high school. Yep, my life is pretty much back to normal, except for the fact that I miss my mom and think of her every day.

## The Golden Tear

The golden tear. This was a common thing for many people in our little town of golden things. The town next to us uses us for our gold, becoming rich off our bodies.

There was a girl, Jocelyn, that always picked on people along with her mom, Macy. They were crazy rich; they were the richest in their town all because of the gold tears that we cry. Thanks to that, our eyes hurt, but they didn't care as long as they made money.

"Mom, do you wanna go to the gold town and pick on others?" She asked

"LET ME FINISH MY PRINGLES!" She yelled from the other room.

"Fine, I'll go myself!" She said,

Once she got close to the town, there came an obstacle that she could not do on her own so then she tried to call her mom but had no signal because of how far she was into the woods leading to our town. She was climbing as quickly as she could. She wanted to make money off of our bodies, you could see it in her eyes once she got here

She overcame the obstacle and got to our town. "PEASANTS! Bow before me!" she said. There was someone that did not tolerate her attitude

"We have had enough of your BULLYING!" said the girl.

"Oh well. You're gonna have to deal with it." The girl got mad. Her blood boiled; her veins popped out of her body.

"I have an idea." the girl told herself.

"Psst! Joey!" She called out to me.

"Yes?" I said.

"Wanna set up bear traps around the town?"

"Isn't that a bit...gory?" I asked. She looked at me with an evil smile. "Yes... that's the whole point Joey!" she said.

Jocelyn walked up to us and asked us in a mean voice to carry

her purse. We didn't tolerate that. We walked up on her and started a "riot".

"WE HAVE HAD ENOUGH OF YOUR BULLYING JOCELYN!" said the girl and 20 others. She threw a bear trap at Jocelyn's face knowing it would hurt her.

The trap had clung onto her arm, and she was crying in pain. We had no regrets; she had deserved it for what she did to me and my town. The girl was a bit crazy and decided to set up bear traps around the town, hopefully not to kill them, but just to keep them away.

We set up the traps and everyone stayed away, except Jocelyn and Macy. They ended up stepping in the bear traps, one got so deep into the vein it killed Jocelyn's mom, Macy. Jocelyn was careful, she didn't want to die but she knew she would because of how many there were.

"Please don't step on- OW!" she cried.

I started for no reason crying golden tears. I have never cried gold tears. It was highly rare for 10% of the population to cry these "gold tears" and I was one of them.

I looked outside of our town's gates and saw Jocelyn crying with the trap clung to her leg and asked myself "was this a good choice?"

I walked to the girl's house and asked her mom if I could see her to talk for a bit. "Yes, come in dear!" she said mysteriously. I looked at her with an odd look and she looked back with the same look on her face.

"Pst, hey! Can I talk with you?" I asked the girl.

"Oh, hey, Joey! What are you doing at my house at 1:00 in the afternoon?" I explained what happened.

"Oh, please. Jocelyn deserves it and so did Macy," she said with glee.

"WHAT? Jocelyn is outside of our gates CRYING HER EYES OUT all thanks to US!" I said.

"Oh Joey, you could have started with that!"

"WHAT THE HECK?" I shouted to myself.

I knew something was wrong with her, I just didn't know quite what it was. She obviously had something wrong, I don't know what. I took off my crystal bracelet and told her,

"Wear it..." She put it on and instantly you could see a new

person inside of her. “Wait, what just happened?” she asked.

“You’re a new person,” I said.

We went outside our gates and both of us cried gold tears. Once we got to Jocelyn, we helped her with the trap clung to her leg and took her to the hospital right away for her to recover from her severe injuries. We soon left the hospital, but Jocelyn stopped us in our tracks.

“Wait!” she yelled to us.

“Yes?” we say.

“Thank you for helping me after all I've done”

I nodded my head and walked out of the hospital crying and with a smile on my face. Me and the girl walked to each other’s home and said our goodbyes for the day, in the meantime I wrote to the girl asking if maybe we should take the traps away. She replied with “nah, leave them there they will eventually come in handy.” And so, we agreed never to use those to harm ever again. Over time we became friends with Jocelyn and every now and then she sneaks into our town to visit us.

10 years later, still telling the story really makes me happy that I met her as a child.



Landa Sparo  
Middle School

## Untitled

*The things that are the most scary are the things that go bump in the night. You might think that this is the normal ghost story. The normal white family move to a house in the middle of nowhere and the little brother or sister see a ghost at the end of the hallway and lights start to flicker. This is not that story. That is not how this story ends. This is a story that will chill you to the bone.*

January 1

Just moved in and already started seeing stuff around the house. I told my mom and she said she had also been seeing shit to. We might have a preacher come on Monday; we are not positive. These spirits are not protective spirits keeping the evil out. These spirits are evil demonic cruel. If I don't write next week, I'm surely dead.

That was the last entry she wrote 2 weeks ago that night still haunts me and my mother. Her screams, her cries for help as she floated into the air. Her screaming in pain as the exorcist trying to curse the demon out of the house. 15 minutes later she was dead on the floor neck shattered, bones broken all throughout her body. 2 days later we buried her in the backyard. Now you might be thinking this is so traumatic for a 14-year-old girl to go through, but it's not, it never will be. I'm used to it. I'm used to all the pain of losing someone. Well, I was 9 when I watched my dad die. When I was 7, I watched my favorite dog get possessed and drop-dead right in front of me. So much more has happened that if you asked me what my story was, I wouldn't know where to start.

January 16

My body feels lifeless. It's so dark, if I knew it would be so



lonely in the coffin, I would have wanted to be cremated....

“Carly Mary Davis get your ass down here NOW,” my mom called down sounding pissed, “well” I thought to myself, “might as well delete my search history now as I have the chance to.” I walked down the stairs of my rickety old built in 1888 house trying not to wake up my mean ass cat Mr. Chuckles.

“Ya mom,” I say my voice shaky.

“Tell me why I just got a call from the school saying that you were absent all day today.”

“Mom, you let me stay home today remember that’s why,” sounding confident she would take that as an answer.

“Oh, your right sorry Carly,” sounding apologetic.

“Its fine.” I haven’t been to school in 2 weeks since well, “the incident” is what me and my mom call it.

January 18

These halls are so quiet, I remember when these halls were filled with spirits and demonic entities alike. This was a portal for all ghosts especially the room at the end of the hall. That room was for all the new entities, the people who had just died went to this room but like I said, this house is empty except for the people that live in this broken house. They don’t know its history like the spirits do. What used to happen in these walls, these broken walls.....

The incident was one of the worst deaths I have seen in a long time. I thought as I got dressed for the day mom is making me go to school why does she hate me. My phone buzzed on my desk where I threw it.” Yo, you coming to today?” The text read. I looked at the message but didn’t respond. I don’t know why it’s like my hand wouldn’t let me type the words. I really wanted to respond in all caps OMG YES SO EXITCED, but just didn’t. I shouldered my book bag and walked out of my room. My mom was waiting in the car for me. Texting someone. I got in the car; my seat was cold from being outside all night. That car ride was silent, no one said anything. Me and my mom just sat there in silence the entire 5-minute car ride.

“Goodbye,” she said as I grabbed my bag from off the car floor “bye love you,” I said.

“Love you too,” she said as she drove off.

I went inside the old, cracked concrete and the old alligator statue. I walked up to my group. My best friend Samantha pulled me into a tight hug, “Where have you been girl? We miss you.” Sounding way too energetic for 7:40 in the morning.

“I have been moving house not states or anything,” I say sleepy. The bell rang for first period.

Another torture chamber of school, fights, drama, stress, and I can't forget the worst one, depression. I sat at the table wishing I was anywhere but here.

Writing has always helped me make sense of the world. The only class that has ever made me belong is my writing class. The teacher walks into the class from greeting kids at the door.

“Good morning class, today we are going to...” blah blah blah. I sat in the back of the class watching the clock like a hawk waiting for the STUPID class to end. For the day to end and I can go home and watch my mom perform an exorcism.

The school day ends at 3:11....

## Untitled

“This is my life.” I sighed leaning my head back on the Ferris wheel as Wyatt enclosed his hand in mine. I giggled and smiled as I rested my head on his shoulder.

“Hello... HELLOOOO” I snap back to reality to see Wyatt waving his hand in front of my face. “I’m leaving for work, where are my keys?”

“They’re in the same place they are every day, ” I reply.

“I know, I just want to hear your voice one last time before I leave,” Wyatt says with a grin. He turns and grabs the keys from the little clay tray I made him when I attempted (emphasis on the attempted) a pottery class. He turns back around with a little spin

“Don’t forget, we have dinner reservations at 7:30pm tonight”

“I know, now get out,” I say with a chuckle.

“I love you, “he says.

Wyatt grins and steps out of the house. I watch him pull out of the driveway in his 2004 gray ford mustang. I take a step back and look around my kitchen, “I have so much to do today,” I mutter to myself. I head over to the kitchen and get started on the dishes. My eyes linger around for a second when they get caught on me and Wyatt’s wedding photo. I smile as I reminisce on our wedding. The beautiful pink flower bouquets, my long, elegant wedding dress. Then my eyes shoot over to the pink roses he got for our three-year wedding anniversary tonight. I finish up the dishes and take a seat on the couch.

“Bzzzz, Bzzzzz, Bzzzz” I can feel my phone vibrating in my pocket. My cell phone reads an unknown number. I ignore it. Then again,

“Bzzz, Bzzzz, Bzzzz” The same number. I answer it this time.

“Is this Sophia Baker?” A lady say’s over the phone with a sad tone. I’m hesitant at first, but I reply “Yes, this is her?”

“Sophia... I regret to inform you that your husband has just been involved in a serious car crash and is currently in critical

condition at the hospital, we don't know if he will make it."

Everything stops. I can hear the lady talking on the phone in the background. I ignore her. My phone crashes to the ground. I begin to sob. I hang up with the lady on the phone and grab my keys. I jump in the car and race over to the hospital. I begin my drive down the street, trying to see through the tears. I hit a red light and rest my head on the steering wheel sobbing. I cannot live without Wyatt; he is my world. My thoughts are interrupted by a loud honk. The light turned green. I make the final turn into the hospital parking lot and sprint into the lobby.

"Where is my husband!" I begin to sob.

"Mam, mam, calm down, what's his name?"

"Wyatt Baker," I tell the reception lady his name and she leads me to his room. I pause at the door. He's in a coma. I stare at his unmoving body. I take a seat next to the bed and hold his hand. I sit there with him for two hours. I sit there sobbing as the sounds of monitors beeping fills the room. I am startled as one of the machines starts beeping like crazy.

"Doctor!" I yell.

"Doctor!"

Two doctors rush in and begin CPR. The doctor informs me that he is under cardiac arrest right now. I step out of the room sobbing as the doctors are with Wyatt.

Then.

Everything goes quiet. I hear the doctor say, "Time of death 8:36am." I rush back into the room sobbing.

"NOOO!" I sob.

"NOOO, WYATT COME BACK, COME BACK TO ME PLEASE."

I lay there hugging him for a few minutes when doctors lead me out. They tell me to go back home, and the funeral will be arranged shortly. I start the depressing drive back home. The last bits of happiness I have seep out of my soul. I feel my whole life crumbling into darkness. I walk in the front door knowing I will be all alone in this house from now on. "This is my life," I sobbed. I reached for a tissue and headed into the living room. In my saddened state, I grasped for me and Wyatt's wedding photo.

"I miss you," I whisper through quiet sobs.



Jesse Sundstrom  
Middle School



## Untitled

Shoot first, ask questions later. That's my motto. It's catchy, it makes me sound cool, and most of all doesn't apply to a room of fifty buff men. It was just a regular day at Green Valley High. I was walking down the halls, just chilling by my locker. Some friends came up to me, and we started talking about boy stuff, mostly video games, sports, and girls. I see a banner outside saying "Silas Woods for president." It has a picture showing a young man with blond hair and light brown eyes. I hate political ads. Suddenly, I get a call.

"Why are you calling me? You know I'm in school!"

"Help---underground--guards---" my friend cuts in and out. Ugh, this can't be good. The bell rings and I head to class. I jump up and shout "MRS. WATSON, CAN I GO TO THE NURSE?"

She jolts up and says, "Keep your voice down, Nathan. Why do you need to go to the nurse?" "Too much Taco Bell."

My face turns bright red and I start walking away. I heard laughter coming from the classroom, but at least I got out of class. I ran to my locker and suited up. A quick tip: If you're going to fight villains and protect people, wait until you graduate. It's a lot more convenient. I find my friend's location through the find my phone app, and- Oh, wait, you don't know my power yet.

So, here's the deal; I can do electricity zaps and travel around on electricity. (So mostly things like power lines and outlets.) I can absorb electricity, but not too much before I fry myself. My suit has a black base with cyan lightning bolts running up the sides of my body. My friend (the one that called me) his name is Jack. He has the strange ability to spit acid. It's kind of sticky, so he can use it to stick people and objects to nearby surfaces. His suit closely resembles a frog. (Jack's mom helped make it. We told her they were for a cosplay convention.) We're crime-fighting butt-kicking name-taking roommates. You're probably thinking, "Ugh, not another superhero story. These cliché books don't even make any

sense. How did this high schooler get superpowers?”

To answer your question, yes, it IS another cheesy superhero story! As for my powers, I'll say I was bitten by a billionaire orphan's pet spider that had fallen into a vat of acid after being struck by lightning.

One-in-a-million miracle, or lazy writing? I don't know. Ask the author. Anyways, that about covers it. Good for my first fourth wall break, huh?

Alright, back to the story!

Not a usual thug crime. He sounded serious. Oh, yeah, you're going to have to get used to my inner monologue for a while. I zap up to the power lines nearby and start moving toward Jack. I see a big building with a couple of people wearing purple uniforms chatting around. I jump up to a high vantage point and throw a rock in front of them. They immediately pull out their guns and start looking around where I threw the rock. I sneak past the guards and run inside.

Just like that, I'm inside.

There were a lot more people inside. I picked off some ranged attackers by zapping them from behind. There were too many for me to stay stealthy, so I jumped into the middle of the room and yelled, "Tackle me one at a time, please!" They all rush at me, so I discharge the energy I was storing up, electrocuting them all. Suddenly, the door bursts open and there's a large figure standing in the doorway.

"Crap! I just used all my energy!" I get punched in the face, collapsing straight to the floor. I see my friend standing over me with a smug grin on his face just before I black out.

I gain consciousness and see two people standing by me. One was Jack, and the other had a ski mask with a purple skull on.

"Back up, your breath stinks." I said to Jack. He laughs and then slips me a note that reads:

*Nathan.*

*YOU are really bad at being a superhero.*

*NEEDless to say, I won this battle.*

*TO lose a battle against me is just sad.*

*Our evil plan is in motion, so RUN while you still can.*

*You know I HAVE A POWERFUL  
ATTACK THAT CAN DESTROY you!  
THIS FACILITY is so secure you'll  
never escape.*

*P.S.*

*You still owe me this week's rent.*

I look at him with a dumbfounded face, whispering, “WHY WOULD YOU LET HIM READ THAT?”

The unknown person immediately turns and bashes my friend in the head. Seconds later, we're both tied up in chairs.

“Great plan.”

“How was I supposed to know he can read? Maybe he forgot his glasses or something.”

“He forgot his glasses?!? YOU LITERALLY CAPITALIZED THE WORDS: YOU NEED TO RUN; I HAVE A POWERFUL ATTACK! HOW WOULD HE NOT SEE THAT?!?”

“We can talk about this later, right now let's just get out of here.”

“Fine, but I'm NOT paying that rent money. “He spits on his handcuffs and spits on mine, disabling both.

I look around and see a vent. He turns and says, “I'll fight the guards, you try to disable the door.” I zap up to the vent and crawl around, navigating through the ventilation tube. I got to say, for a scary-looking base, this place has remarkably clean vents.

I see a computer in the room beneath me, so I jump out of the vent and take in all the energy from the nearby generators. The reinforced windows open, and I see my friend hurling spit around at the guards.

I'll never get over how gross that is.

I continue sliding down the vents and take some of the guards out along the way. The computer has a video of Silas Woods yelling at some of the purple-uniformed guards on the screen.

“Our project is almost ready! We can't let anyone stop us! Once I become president, I will take over the world!”

As I regroup with Jack, I say in disbelief, “Silas Woods! The guy running for president! Is he the man with the mask? We have to stop him! Also, isn't taking over the world such a weird goal for

villains? What's up with that?"

"Stay focused, Nathan. We're still not out of this." Jack replies.

I record the evidence on my phone and email it to 911. Just as we start to run, the ceiling crashes down onto us. Silas has a giant mechanical suit with big gauntlets at the end of each arm.

With a strong Russian accent, he says, "Crossing me was a very big mistake."

He jumps straight at Jack. I jump behind him and repeatedly punch him while Jack tries to keep him pinned with his acid goo. He breaks loose and grabs Jack by the leg, slamming him into a wall. I continued trying to hold him down, but his armor was too resistant to my shocks.

"I need more energy," I shout to Jack.

"There are some nuclear reactors over there, go absorb them!" I start taking in the electricity.

This is convenient. I run up next to Jack and he hoists me into the air.

For a split second, all I could see was Silas. My fist comes crashing down onto him, knocking his head straight to the ground. I remain in the air as Jack hoists me into the air while covering Silas in his spit. I transfer all 300 million volts of electricity into my feet.

"Guess who's not getting my vote this year!"

I flip forward and extend my leg mid-flip, slamming my ankle into him, sending him straight through the floor and into the lower level. I rapidly punch him as he's falling, breaking more and more of his armor. I jump off of him, sending him hurtling toward the hard metal floor even faster. I land gracefully, and he crashes down behind me.

"I gotta work on my one-liners." Jack spits a giant wad of acid drool onto him, pinning him to the ground. His head collapses as more purple uniform guys come in with guns.

"Freeze, HPD!" Multiple cops burst into the room, outnumbering and outgunning the henchmen. Silas is escorted into a big police van.

"This... is why... I hate kids..." He utters as he slumps down again. The van starts driving away, and I start walking away.

The words "YOU WIN" appear on the screen, and I put down



my controller.

“We finally beat the boss, Jack,” I say with a smile.

He laughs and says, “This game is awesome.”

“Dinner’s ready!” I hear from the other room.

“I gotta go, my dinner’s ready.”

“Alright, see you tomorrow, Nathan!”

“See ya!”

Just then, I see a danger alert on my phone. I pick it up and read Shockwave Villain Wreaks Havoc in Las Vegas. I grin, put my suit on, and jump out the window.

## Untitled

“This is stupid,” Brayden mumbled, tugging on the straps of his life jacket.

“Shush.” Leon swung his backpack off his shoulder and into the boat. “Come on, hop in.” Brayden nudged the boat nervously with his toe. “No, seriously. This is a terrible idea. We’re going to die.”

Leon ignored his friend, casting his eyes over the serene lake. It was a crisp Saturday morning, just chilly enough to create a pleasant nip in the air. A light breeze created faint ripples across the water. In the distance, he could see where the lake broke off into smaller, more secluded areas. Dark clouds hovered just beyond the horizon, promising a nice rain later in the day. He grinned, turning back to Brayden. “We’re completely alone. Isn’t that cool?”

“Not in the slightest.” Brayden grimaced. “That just means no one will be there to hear us when we’re eaten.”

“Eaten?” Leon snorted. “You’re being dramatic.” Brayden pulled his phone out of his shorts pocket. Hastily pulling up a page, he waved the screen under Leon’s face. “This is an article from two years ago. ‘Boater’s remains found scattered after brutal moose mauling’.”

“Moose mauling? Give me that.” Leon snatched the phone from Brayden, scanning the article. He laughed. “Idiot. This story is on The Onion, Brayden.”

“So?” He handed the phone back. “So, it’s fake news. No one would ever get mauled by a moose. That’s ridiculous.” Brayden shrugged. “You never know. There’s plenty of moose in Washington.” He tugged his life jacket straps again. “Any of them could be rabid.”

Leon shook his head. “You’re ridiculous. If you don’t want to go, just say it.”

“I did say it,” Brayden grumbled. “You dragged me along

anyway.” Leon reflected on this morning. He’d been a touch impulsive. It was his friend Amelia’s birthday, and after discovering a social media post saying she would be boating at Easter Lake today, he’d decided on the spot it would be the perfect setting to ask Amelia to prom. Although they were close friends, Leon and Amelia weren’t dating. Yet.

In a flash, he’d grabbed his backpack, some snacks, and of course, Brayden. Leon needed his wingman, after all.

“Come on, don’t worry. It’ll be fun.” Leon patted Brayden dismissively. He knelt on the dock, fumbling to untie the rope tethering the rental canoe to the wooden platform. “Hop in. I just need to get this.”

“This lake is gigantic. We don’t even have a map. And how can you be sure Amelia’s even here?” Brayden asked, eyeing the blueish lake water skeptically. “She could have already left.”

Leon smiled sappily. “I can feel it in my heart. It’s true love.” He winked. “Also, I know her pretty well. She’d want to stay here all day. We just need to find the right area of the lake. And then…” He mimed a fake proposal.

Brayden wrinkled his nose. “You act as if this will lead to a wedding. It’s just prom.”

“Just prom? Brayden, you can’t be serious.” Leon waved his hands dramatically. “My parents went to senior prom together. Then they reconnected after graduating, got married, and now I exist! Prom is everything, my friend. Everything.”

Brayden huffed. “I think you’re overestimating the importance of this. Besides-”

“I’m not. Promise.” Leon grinned, slapping Brayden lightly on the back. “Come on, get in. I’ll push us out.”

Sighing, Brayden eyed the boat. “Fine. But don’t say I didn’t warn you.” He eased himself into the boat with a shudder. “When we’re dead, make sure people know this was your stupid idea.”

“My brilliant idea, you mean.” Leon winked. Grabbing his bag, he tossed it and the rope into the boat. “This is going to be amazing. You have the roses? And the flag?”

“Yes, I have the ridiculous roses.” Brayden patted an overstuffed bag at his feet, rolling his eyes. “I’ve got all of it.”

Leon hopped into the boat, snickering at Brayden’s tight knuckles. He tossed a paddle to Brayden and picked up his own.

“I’ve never been in a canoe before,” Leon admitted. He fumbled with the paddle, grimacing at his horrible paddling. “How does this work?”

Brayden whipped around, hissing in fear. “You’re saying you have no idea how to drive this thing?”

“You don’t drive it, you... canoe it?” Leon shrugged. “I don’t know. Doesn’t matter.” He shoved the paddle into the water. It worked better this time, and Leon smiled in delight as he managed to push the canoe a few inches forward. “Look, I’ve got it. It’s pretty easy.”

Brayden grumbled but obligingly dipped his paddle into the lake.

Leon sighed contentedly. He’d never gone boating before, but he found it surprisingly enjoyable. There was something extremely relaxing in the repetitive motions of the paddle and the quiet ripples of the lake. By now, the sun had risen and burned away most of the early morning chill. Leon pulled his jacket off.

“So, tell me again,” Brayden asked. “How are you planning to do this? We don’t even know where she is- and this lake is enormous.”

“We’ll find her.” Leon waved him off, grinning. “Don’t worry. My love for her is enough to move mountains. Part rivers. Grow fields. Raise-”

“Alright, alright, I get it.” Brayden snorted. He smirked. “You’ve got it bad. Blegh. Glad I don’t date.”

Leon clutched his chest dramatically. “My poor friend. Never wants to date. Will never experience the pressing desperation of falling in love.”

“Yeah, sure, whatever.” Brayden paused, poking through a bag of snacks and selecting a granola bar. “Barring the love ballads, how are you planning on going through with it?”

“First, I find her,” Leon said. “...but that part’s easy. As I said, my love for her will guide me. Then, I yell her name across the lake- and as she sees me, I toss roses into the water and wave a large ‘prom?’ flag at her. Simple.”

Brayden rolled his eyes. “Sure, sure. I still think you’ll have an equal chance of success if you just slip some chocolate into her locker- and it won’t require slavery on my part.”

“I don’t even know if she likes me!” Leon protested. “I need something elaborate and fantastical for someone like Amelia.”

Brayden grinned slightly. He coughed. “You know, I haven’t told you this, but-”

“Wait!” Leon shushed him. “I don’t have my glasses or contacts. Don’t get mad, you know how lazy and forgetful I am.” He pointed to a dark spot across the lake. “Is that her?”

“Good to know that you can’t see. I feel so much safer and secure now.” Brayden’s tone was thick with sarcasm. He leaned towards the dot, squinting. “I don’t know what that is. But it’s not Amelia. Look, I don’t even think she’s here anymore.”

Leon tapped his chin. “Who knows? It could be. Maybe you’re lying to me so we can leave sooner.” He grinned maliciously. “Let’s go check it out.”

Brayden shuddered. “No, I don’t think that’s a good idea. I’m not lying. What if it’s a moose?” He gripped the edges of the boat tighter, white as a cloud. “I don’t think I’ll live to see the sunset.”

“Don’t be so dramatic.” Leon punched him lightly on the shoulder. “What were you saying earlier?”

“I was trying to tell you that-”

“Wait!” Leon stood up, trying not to enjoy Brayden’s terrified scream as the boat rocked dramatically. “It’s moving! We have to”

“Leave, right? We’re leaving.” Brayden scrambled for his paddle, frantically dipping it into the water. “It’s a moose, I swear! It’s going to eat us!”

“A moose? Brayden, that’s so cool!” Leon paddled excitedly. “I’ve never seen a moose before. Come on, don’t be afraid just because of a silly article.”

“Don’t be afraid?” His friend sputtered. “Of course I’m afraid! I’m terrified! We’re going to die, and it’s all your fault.”

Brayden scrambled to the edge of the boat, gripping the edge. The boat rocked violently as he moved, only turning him paler. Leon’s insides twinged with guilt. Brayden did look scared.

Leon sighed. “Look, we’ll just go a little closer, okay? We won’t go all the way in front of it or anything.”

“Do we have to look at this thing at all?” Brayden scowled. He pointed to the sky. Thick clouds crept along the horizon. “It’s probably going to rain. Seriously, Amelia probably went back.”

Leon groaned, setting his paddle down. “Brayden quit it! You keep trying to find excuses to get out of this.”

“Well, yeah.” Brayden snapped. “I keep telling you- I don’t

want to be here! But you keep ignoring me. It's like you think I'm only your- your backpack!"

"With the way you're yelling at me, maybe I want you to be!" Leon eyed Brayden with disgust.

"You little-" Brayden lurched forward in anger, giving Leon an angry shove backward and smacking his face against the boat rim. The canoe leaned deep to the right, in serious danger of tipping.

Leon righted himself, sitting back up with a scowl. "You jerk! Why'd you do that?" He touched his lip, grimacing at the blood that dripped onto his finger.

Brayden paled. "I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to hurt you, I-" He wrung his hands. "You're right, I'm such an idiot. I just got angry, and..."

Seeing Brayden's truly apologetic face, Leon sighed. "It's fine." He let out a slow breath, giving himself a few seconds to cool down. Brayden hadn't meant to actually hurt him. "I probably deserved that."

"...yeah." Brayden flushed, avoiding eye contact with his friend. "Doesn't make it right."

"I got caught up in the moment, didn't I?" Leon smiled sheepishly. "You never wanted to come along."

"Not- not really." Brayden brushed his fingers gently along the lake's surface, watching the cold water dripping slowly off his hands.

"Hey, look man, I'm sorry." He held out his hand. "I shouldn't have hurt you, and you shouldn't have hurt me. Are we good?"

Brayden smiled softly. He shook Leon's hand. "We're good." He grinned. "Hey, you still don't know what I was trying to tell you earlier."

Leon looked up. "Oh, true. What was it?"

Brayden snorted. "I dunno... might make you a little mad. Means this was all for nothing."

"What are you talking about?" Leon eyed his friend suspiciously, turning pale. Had Amelia told Brayden something? Maybe she didn't like him. Maybe she was going to ask someone else to prom.

"Well..." Brayden grinned slyly. "I talked to Amelia yesterday."

Leon leaned forward impatiently. He felt sick with dread.

“And?”

“She’s going to ask you to prom.” He laughed. “In two hours. But she thinks you’ll be at your house.”

“What?” Leon sputtered. He scrambled for a paddle. “I- I’m not ready! I’m covered in lake water and I’m smelly and-!” He turned on Brayden desperately. “Please help me! We’ve got to get back- please.”

Together, the two boys paddled away the lake, Brayden stifling laughs, Leon hissing in panic, and the probably-moose left far behind.



Paige Tassin  
Middle School

## Untitled

Mara sat in the empty parking garage, staring blankly at the place around her. Pots filled with plants lined the plain gray of the walls. She traced the shallow scratches on the wall behind her, remnants of the time that this place had been her home.

Standing up, she gripped the silver shaft of her umbrella. Its long sturdy structure glinted as the sunlight reflected off of it. She smiled, remembering the hard work she put into creating it. Stepping forward, she placed the umbrella on her back and walked toward the stairwell.

Her feet bounced along the steps in a complex rhythm, and soon she was facing the street. She continued walking, following the crowd of people ahead of her. Almost in sync, the group stepped to the left, avoiding a bright plastic sign. She stopped; her eyes wide as she tilted her head. It had been a few months since she had seen a crack in the pavement. She smiled, laughing at the inscription on the sign, "Step on a crack, you'll break your mother's back."

It was insane what had changed in the past years: Ladders came with barriers to stop people from walking underneath, horseshoes were hung above almost every door, only a few people owned umbrellas, and all black cats had been taken away.

Mara opened her locket, staring into the deep golden eyes of her cat Shuki. Memories that she had made with her came back for a second, along with the terrible thought of when they'd taken her away.

She headed left, walking away from the flow of the crowd and towards a simple apartment building. A large metal ladder clung to the side of the building like a vine to a tree. While she was heading to the same spot as them, she was planning to get there in a different way. She looked around, making sure that no one would notice her. Then, she began climbing,

The long metal ladder felt cool on her hands, soothing her



well-worn skin. By the time she was halfway there, her hands were slippery, and legs were aching. The wind blew across her face as she peeked over the roof of the building. Mara pulled herself over the edge and laid on her back, breathing heavily.

She sat up, looking at the hollow support that connected the building she was on with a large white coliseum. Mara leaned her head back, trying to calm her nerves before she made her way to the coliseum. She stood up, slowly walking to the edge of the building where the beam lay.

She looked down at the city below, her vision blurring as she stepped back. She shook her head and looked towards the coliseum in front of her.

She stepped out onto the beam, breathing in and out slowly, “Don’t look down, don’t look down, don’t look down...” She rapidly repeated the mantra in hopes that she would make it.

She stepped, one foot after another, finally making it across the beam. Gripping the roof tightly, Mara looked through the large, open windows outlining the coliseum. Just above the window stood a large white support, stretching from one end of the coliseum to the other. She bit her lip, knowing that the best spot for her to be would be on that support.

Pushing down her fears, Mara stepped into the window and started climbing. Her hands narrowly gripped the carvings on the window, and soon she made it to the support. She clung onto the support, clenching her teeth as she crawled towards the center of the support. “Why did my plan have to involve so much climbing!” Mara muttered, her voice rumbling quietly.

As she neared the center of the support, a voice boomed out through the podium beneath her, “Welcome, and thank you all for coming!” The iconic sound of knuckles knocking on wood soared throughout the auditorium like a round of applause. “As you all know, I am President Matakai, the second president since the Superstitious Degree. Before I continue in the ceremony, I would like to give a moment of silence for President Hesp.” The crowd went silent, all in awe as they remembered President Hesp’s term.

President Matakai raised her head, continuing her speech, “The Superstitious degree has allowed us to live to our fullest without the fear that we used to carry... the fear that was brought onto us by bad luck.”

President Mataki paused for a second, letting her words seep in, “Now, we are blessed by good luck for we have worked hard to achieve it! We don’t have to fear... because we stopped breaking superstitions!” The crowd cheered as the president walked off of the podium. Recognizing the time of opportunity, Mara took her umbrella off of her back and started preparing. Her hand pulled at the carabiner on the tip of her umbrella, drawing it out along with the rope it was attached to.

She delicately wound the rope around the support, clipping the carabiner to the rope and tugging it to make sure it would hold up. She then opened her umbrella, gripping it with all the strength she had, and leapt. The rope slowly released, allowing Mara to seemingly float down.

Mara landed on the platform, looking across at all the faces that now stared directly at her. She froze, leaving her umbrella to hang in the air. She wished she would have time to think, time to calm herself, but deep down she knew that she had to take the precious seconds she had and use them.

Mara gripped the mic in front of her, and began to speak, “At first I chose to run, to hide, to hope for the world we live in to change.”

Standing up taller, Mara’s voice rose as she continued, “Eventually, I realized that doing nothing will change nothing. That, maybe if I stood up, I could make a difference. Over sixteen years ago I was sent to an orphanage simply because I was born on the thirteenth of the month. Eleven years after that I saw my cat, Shuki, taken away simply because she was a black cat.”

She paused, looking down at the workers who were desperately attempting to make their way up to the platform. Her eyes darted across the coliseum, and she began speaking faster in an attempt to get her speech in before it was too late, “These superstitions became an unspoken law. A law that we all lost too many friends to. Does this seem right?”

The crowd went silent as the workers made their way to the podium, dragging Mara off of the platform. Mara smiled slightly as they escorted her away. Today would be the slow start of a revolution.



McKenzie Tillack  
Middle School



## Untitled

Izabella Katz  
13th Street. 47  
New York City, NY  
6-3-1945

Dear Helen, it's been a year since you died. My guilt for letting you out of my sight is catching up. I've missed every second you've been gone. There have been a lot of things that you've missed. After you and mother's tragic death, our sisters and I spent a few months in that camp. We were starved, and sleep deprived. Countless people died, but we managed to stay out of sight. We worked all day with little sleep. It was hard sleeping because every time I closed my eyes, I saw a glimpse of you. You were always smiling, and it killed me inside to know I would never see that joyous face again. But it killed me more to know you had to suffer. After those harsh months in the camp, we had to go on a death march through a blizzard. It was freezing, we would march all day and night with no rest. We would only get food and water after 2–3 days. The prisoners there knew if you couldn't keep up, you would be shot. Many would stop walking because they physically couldn't, or they wanted to be put to rest and not have to suffer those long cold days. One day we all saw our chance to escape. We slipped away in the sea of snow-covered trees and into the night. We hid for 2 days when we knew they had arrived at the labor camp with those that survived. Soon after, we all met up with father. He had our immigration papers. We stayed a few more months, helping those suffering from the effects. Comforting those who lost loved ones. In that time, I met Irving A Leitner, and we fell in love.

On May 8th, 1945, we all moved to the United States. Irving got a job, and we moved into a house in New York City. Life is

great. I'm planning on writing my own novel. I plan on writing our cruel experiences and others. I want to be a voice for those who couldn't speak. I want to get justice for all those people who slipped away from the world and couldn't do anything about it. But it seems the organizer of this murderous time responsible is dead. Hitler committed suicide in April. It still doesn't make up for all those people who didn't get a choice. Whose lives were thrown away simply because they were different. I just hope you are at rest. Finally at peace.

Love,  
Izabella



Aiyana Wilson  
Middle School

## Untitled

2002-1942

**February 14, 1942, 8:47a.m.**

“Honey!” Edna yelled. “Breakfast is ready!”

“Okay here I come!” Eddie yelled from the living room. Edna set Eddie’s plate on the kitchen island. Three young boys came running down the flight of stairs. “Mommy!” Eddie Jr. yelled.

Edna smiled, admiring her beautiful boys. She knew that one day they would grow up to be such great and successful men.

“Hurry quick! You don’t want your food getting cold!” She told them.

“Okay!” Enard replied.

“Otat mommy!” Little Efron said. All the children ate at the table eating pancakes, bacon, and eggs. Eddie turned on the television and the news came on.

*Breaking News:*

*Here in Central City, we are live with what seems to be Mirthun the Lord of Death. It sounds like he’s calling Serpent and Inferno. Mirthun is now currently destroying homes trying to look for them. Please wherever you are Inferno - Serpent help us.*

*This is Lindsay signing off.*

Eddie looked Edna in the eye, and they zoomed off in their suits. Eddie, like an average superhero in the comics, had the flight power but he also had the ability to control fire and flames, making him Inferno. Edna had the ability to control all Serpents of the world, making her Serpent.

Usually, Eddie would carry Edna as they flew and they would defeat the bad guy, but this time she decided to ride her motorcycle so they could hit Mirthun from up top and from below.

As they arrived at the location, Serpent was looking up at a tall ginormous being whilst Inferno was flying above.

“I see you heard my calls,” Mirthun smirked.

“You're the reason my father was killed and I'm going to make you pay!” He roared.

Mirthun began swinging at Inferno trying his hardest to hit him. Inferno circled around Mirthun dodging every swing. Mirthun then stopped and closed his eyes, and when Inferno got distracted- Mirthun smacked him down leaving him to fall onto the concrete unconscious.

On the other hand, Serpent went after Mirthun yelling, “How do you like snakes?” She said as serpents started slithering up Mirthun's legs.

“Get them off of me!” Mirthun yelled. A large boa constrictor crawled up and bit his leg. Since Mirthun wasn't even human, he bled blue!

An hour later, Inferno woke up with a headache. When he awoke, he could see Mirthun's huge purple body with his blue blood spilling out onto the ground, but lying next to Mirthun was Serpent, covered in scratches and blood coming out near her ribcage. “Edna!” Eddie yelled, taking off his mask.

He could hear a slow heartbeat, but with that, tears ran down his cheeks. “E-E-Eddie...?” Edna said as her voice cracked.

“Honey!” Eddie yelled.

“I-I-I need you to do something f-for me...”

“Anything my love. Anything.”

“T-Tell the boys...I-I love them.” With that Eddie had lost his wife and Inferno had lost his partner in crime. “NO!!!” Eddie yelled, crying.

Thirty minutes later, after sobbing for so long, he put his mask back on and took her to the hospital. When they announced that she was dead, of course he already knew. They asked if he wanted her to be cremated. He replied with a quiet yes and asked if he could get some of the ashes put into a necklace that Serpent had given him on their first-year wedding anniversary, and the rest in

an urn.

**February 14, 1952, 3:30 p.m. Exactly 10 years later.**

“Dad,” Effron said while tapping Eddie.

“Yes Effron?” Eddie answered.

“What was mom like?”

“You don’t remember her!?”

“No...you know I was only 2 when she died of that heart attack.”

“Well- she was beautiful. And not just on the outside, she had a kind heart and she absolutely loved you. It warmed her heart when she would see you smile and always know that she loved you.”

Effron started to tear up, “Thanks, Dad.”

Eddie nodded and he was reminded of the thought that all his kids were grown up. Eddie Junior was already 16, Enard was 13, and little Effron had grown up into a 12-year-old pre-teen.

“Dad, can I go to the library?” Eddie Jr asked.

“Go ahead, but bring your brothers, and here’s some money to get food and to buy new books.” Eddie replied as he placed \$100 on the coffee table.

“Okay! Thanks Dad!”

Eddie had been acting as the family’s superhero for 10 years to care for his boys just like Edna would have wanted him to. He wore the necklace filled with her ashes and talked to her every night before bed and every morning when he woke up. It seemed that there was a new hero anyway. The world didn’t need him. He was just a worthless bum who couldn’t save his wife from the Lord of Death.

It was the next day and Eddie said his daily good morning to Edna. He felt that today was going to be a good day. He woke up, turned on his jazz and zoomed into the kitchen. He tried to make pancakes, eggs and bacon, but it wasn't the same as Edna’s. Edna made her pancakes with love and bananas. And she made caramelized bacon and cheesy scrambled eggs. Eddie knew he couldn’t cook like her but at least he tried. He tried his hardest to be both parents. And he tried his hardest to raise them right and give them the best.

Effron, Enard, and Eddie Jr. all came out of their rooms yawning and rubbing their eyes.

“Morning, Dad,” Enard said.

“Mornin’ boys! I made you some... P.E.B!” Eddie replied.

“Well, I’m not hungry and we have to get ready for school.”

“Oh- Okay. I guess we can have breakfast for dinner.”

“Okay, sounds fine.”

Eddie sighed disappointed that he had spent all the time and energy into making them the perfect breakfast just for no one to eat. “I’ll eat dad!” Effron called out.

“Effron- what are you doing? Get ready for school,” Eddie Jr. said.

“Junior. If the boy wants to eat, let him eat!” Eddie said.

“Fine, but we better not be late to school.”

“If he makes you late, I’ll drive you.”

Suddenly Eddie had his smile back and he began putting eggs, bacon, and 2 large pancakes on Effron’s plate.

5 minutes later Effron had completely devoured his plate. “Is there anymore?”

Eddie looked back, “Boy, you must’ve been hungry!” He laughed.

Eddie gave him more eggs bacon and this time 3 large pancakes. Another 5 minutes went by, and he was done. “Want me to pack your lunch?” Eddie asked.

“Yes please!” Effron exclaimed. “Can you pack me the leftover P.E.B please?”

“Of course, son!” He said smiling. “I’m glad you liked the food!”

15 minutes later all of the boys were ready, and they headed off. The boys walked to school and Eddie drove to work...

**May 10, 2002, 2:57 p.m.**

“But mom, why can’t I go!” Edna yelled.

“Because I said so!” Rebecca yelled.

“Hey Hey- what’s all the fuss about?” Effron asked.



“Our daughter wants to go see your father but it’s pouring outside- and she has lots of homework to catch up on.”

“Rebecca...that’s her grandfather! And the only living one if I might add! Let her go see him. I’ll drive her.”

“Yay!” Edna exclaimed.

Usually, Edna’s dad always has her mom’s back. He always says, “Edna you’re 15, you can’t make your own decisions yet; you’re a baby!” Edna grabbed her raincoat and headed outside toward the car. Edna sat in the front, and we drove off to Grandpa Eddie’s.

“Edna!” Grandpa Eddie exclaimed.

“Grandpa!” I yelled excitedly.

Effron wanted to name his daughter after his mom, he felt it may bring him closer to his mom even though he doesn't remember her.

“How’s my little rugrat doing?”

“Grandpa, have you been watching TV!?” I laughed.

“You mean the telly?”

“Yes.”

“Why yes I have!”

Eddie is like Edna’s best friend. They do lots of things together and he even tells her these stories of the 1940s and how he and her grandma were superheroes. Her dad doesn't believe him. He says they're just stories and that her grandma had a heart attack. Sometimes Edna questions if it's true or not but she did see an old red and yellow superhero suit in her grandpa’s closet one day.

“Why you've grown since yesterday!” Grandpa exclaimed.

Suddenly, her dad got a call. It seemed that Uncle Enard needed help moving into his new house. “Edna, Dad, I gotta go help Enard with something. I'll be back in about 3 hours,” her dad said.

“Okay!” She replied.

Grandpa nodded. “Wanna hear more of the story?” Grandpa asked.

“YES.” Edna exclaimed.

**February 14, 1942, 10:32 a.m.**

Inferno left to go to Sarah the visionary's hut. He wanted to see if he'd ever have a chance to bring Edna back. "Eddie...!" Sarah said. "I've been expecting you."

"I'm here to-" Inferno tried speaking.

"I KNOW WHAT YOU'RE HERE FOR EDDIE."

"I'm sorry."

"Sit down."

Sarah started swaying her hands over a cauldron. "I can see it. I CAN SEE IT!" she yelled.

"You will have a chance to get your true love back. BUT- you will not be the one to bring her back. In the year 2002 your granddaughter will travel back to 1942 and save Edna. Be aware that if she fails. Time will corrupt and you will never see either of them ever again."

**May 10, 2002, 3:43 p.m.**

"So, I have to save Grandma?!" I asked.

"Yes." Grandpa nodded. "You have powers."

"Really!?" I exclaimed.

"Yes. So do I."

"Do my dad and uncles?"

"No, that is why it is up to you."

"How do I travel in time?"

"Concentration. You must concentrate on the stories I have told you. Think about February 14, 1942, around 8:30 a.m. You must think Edna!"

Edna thought long and hard about what Grandpa had told her about 1942. And suddenly- she was in a black void. She was floating. In the distance she could see a doorway. It looked like there was a fight. She moved toward the doorway and there she was standing before the fight of Mirthun vs. Inferno.

**February 14, 1942, 8:52 a.m.**

She saw when her grandpa was about to get hit by Mirthun so

she yelled, "WATCH OUT!"

Her grandpa moved out of the way and shot fire into Mirthun's eyes. Her grandma then had a boa poison him and he fell to the floor barely breathing.

"You were weaker than your father Mirthun!" Her grandfather yelled.

Mirthun tried swinging but he was too weak. He took his last breath and said, "my sons will a-avenge me."

Inferno flew down towards me and said, "Who are you little girl?"

"I'm, uhm, Cindy Lou!" She quickly replied.

"Well Ms. Cindy Lou, you just saved me."

"Yeah, you really did! How can we repay you?" Serpent asked.

"You don't have to pay me! I did it because I wanted to," Edna replied.

"You sure?" My grandfather asked.

"Yup! I should really get back to my mom though, bye!"

Edna quickly ran behind an abandoned building and concentrated. She thought long and hard about 2002 and then she was back in the void. She was floating once more, and another doorway appeared. She moved towards it, and she was back in her grandpa's room alone.

**May 10th, 2002, 5:28 p.m.**

Effron came back with Enard and they all came in and hugged my grandma and grandpa. It seems that they had forgotten that my grandma had died, and I was the only one who had a memory of it.

"Edna!" My grandpa called. "Your grandma made cookies!"

"I DID IT!" I yelled.

"What was that dear?" my grandma asked as she entered the room.

"Nothing," She smiled. "Nothing at all."



Maliyah Wilson  
Middle School

## Being Abandoned Can be a Good Thing

A new mom running as fast as she can with her baby in her arms. As she ran, she dropped the baby and left it there. Then the baby's mom left and never came back to that abandoned alley again. It was all black, scary and dark and bummy people around everywhere you looked or turned your head.

Then five minutes later, a nice-looking family had come across the baby lying in the alley. Not moments later, they had taken her in and raised her as their own. They called her baby Anna. And Anna was hard to handle, by the age of two she was getting into everything and that was stressing out the parents.

Finally, they had thought that Anna needed some education and by the age of eleven, her parents enrolled her in a nice private school. Anna was homeschooled before then, but she was learning faster than her parents could teach her. The same day Anna went to school, and she was very scared to walk inside the building. To her the building looked intimidating and nerve wrecking due to her anxiety. When she walked into the building, she had a whole breakdown in the middle of the hallway causing her to have a bad first impression at her new school. After that everyone came to help her up and to make sure she was ok. "Yes, Yes, I'm fine thanks for helping me," Anna had said and knew she had her first set of friends. Once she had her first class all the teachers loved how silly, funny, and gifted she was.

After that she had run down the steps to the office, so she could pick up her schedule. Anna had seen that she had many classes with her new friend group. When she returned upstairs, her next class was Math class and Anna knew that she hated math and called herself not good at it. Math class came and she sat in the class not speaking and daydreaming. Then, the teacher had asked her if she was distracted and she replied, "No." The lesson continued with no comment. Anna was earning Ds and Fs in math and her parents thought something was wrong, so they had

taken her to visit the doctor. They found out that nothing was wrong, but she needed more attention than other kids her age. Once Anna was about the age of 13, she had started to make better choices in her grades, behaviors at home, everything had just started to get better, and Anna was proud of that. Once she finished high school her whole life changed.

Her parents were on a business trip, and she found some old stuff in the apartment because she was moving out. It was old so she decided to go through it and she found her adoption papers and was very angered. She called her parents and yelled, “Why would you hide this from me? Don't act like you don't play!”

“We don't know what you're talking about sweetheart.”

“Don't lie to me! I'm already mad as it is, don't make me even more mad! You treated me like I was slow and took me away from my parents. How could you?” I hung up and ran back to the apartment to get more information. As she looked and looked, she found pictures of her real parents and their address that was not too far from her fake parents' apartment. Moments later, Anna packed the most important things like her phone, money and a bus token and went out the door.

Her fake parents kept trying to contact her but, in the end, couldn't because she blocked them. After she got off the bus, she had to walk the rest of the way to her real parents' house. By looking at the papers with the information on them, she found that the name of her parents was on the paper next to an address. Soon after that, she saw her fake parents following her and she yelled really loud, “STOP FOLLOWING ME! I HATE YOU!” And at last, she got out of the sight of her fake parents.

Anna had a quick look at the paper and found that the names were Walter and Sophia. She finally reached her parents' house, knocked on the door and said, “I'm your daughter,” and shook some of the important papers in her parents' face.

Then they spoke and said, “You are our daughter and we have missed you so.”

And soon we heard a voice. It was my fake parents trying to take me, but I stopped them. “I am 16 now and you can't control anymore. I'm not under your little spell anymore. Right here, right now there is going to be no more fighting.”

We went to the adoption center and showed them the papers.

“Yep, so what happened?” the adoption agent asked, and my real parents opened up.

“It was us. We left Anna in that alley. I was 19 when I had her. I was not ready to be a mom and my mom wouldn’t let me, so I left and never came back.”

Then my fake parents opened up, “We took Anna after we saw a baby just crying in the alley. All there was was homeless and not wealthy people. We just couldn’t leave her there.”

Then I spoke, “Then, why did you make my life a living hell?”

“We wanted the best for you and only the best.” The adoption agent said, “Ok, we’ve heard enough and it’s best for Anna to decide.”

“I choose my real parents.”

“What? All we did was care for you, and love you and we got this attitude,” and then my fake parents walked out.

I hugged my real parents for the first time.

“At least you are smart, beautiful, talented, so maybe being abandoned was a good thing for you. We will never leave you again baby. We love you.”

## A Little Place Away from Home

“Alright Karma you're up next!” the scientist cried out loud.

“I'M COMING!” Karma yelled across the room.

“I wonder if she's gonna be okay” Octavia said scared and reckless.

“She's sensitive but...I think she'll be fine!” Mizuki said.

I could see Mizzy glaring at him across the room from him. Mizzy and Mizuki never got along, they both had a traumatizing past...well all the experiments here had a traumatizing past. Caravan and Lara...well we call her “Lara” for short since her name is almost the same as her twin sister's names and the scientists get confused. These two twin sisters had the most traumatizing past ever.

They are one of the top three strongest experiments.... all of the experiments here have powers. Octavia is an angel. She has a halo and wings that look just like dandelions. She has the ability to heal people. Mizuki and Mizzy both look alike...I mean they are siblings after all but they both are very different...Mizuki has super strength and Mizzy is smart as heck. Next is Buzlin we call her Bun for short; she's a bunny and her secret technique is telekinesis.

Caravan and Lara's secret power is fire and black magic. Carter has a power called “love eyes” whenever you look into his eyes you fall in love with him...exactly why the scientists cover his eyes. Karma is a demon. She has horns and a tail. Her power is something called “black and white lightning”. And then there's me.

“Karna” people say my name sounds like Karma's name just replace the M with an N, my secret technique is super smell and super speed. I have brown hair, pale skin, dog ears and a tail, explains the super smell. I'll start explaining how we know what each of the experiment's powers are. It's easy to tell with super strength cause anyone who has it has orange eyes, same thing with

the “love eyes” anyone who has those eyes are pink and has a red heart pupil. Angels always and I mean always have the power to heal so it’s really easy to tell, Caravan and Lara wear masks across their eyes because they don’t have eyes, they have a red mark and a black mark on their face which explains their fire and black magic power. Mizzy is smart as heck you can tell because of the mark on her forehead it’s a plus sign with a circle and it’s green.

She covers it with her bangs because she doesn't like showing it. Now for Me and Karma you can't tell if we have a power because nothing is on our arms, faces, or bodies that can give you a hint...scientists experimented on us which is how they found out. Bun has a third eye; it's white and whenever she uses her power her hair and eye turn purple. It's more easy to tell now because scientists put on a necklace on us, strength has an orange necklace, super smarts is a green necklace, telekinesis is a purple necklace, fire and black magic is a white necklace, love eyes is a pink necklace, black lightning is a black necklace, a heal necklace is light green, and super smell/super speed's necklace is red.

Mizzy and Mizuki have light chocolate skin and lightning blue hair. Octavia has blonde long hair, pale skin and green eyes, Carter has strawberry light skin and red hair, Caravan and Lara look like Carter, Karma...u can't tell the difference between a black crayon and her skin color she has white hair, horns, and tail, and finally Me I have pale dandelion skin and I have brown hair that matches my ears and tail.

“It’s kind of crazy don’t you think...?” Bun said pointing at the window where we could see every single person and thing on the ground, “The only reason we are here in the first place is because out of everyone we are strongest.”

“Yea, Mizuki we know everyone in the world has powers, but we here know how to use them, to strategize, etc,” Mizzy said looking outside the window.

The doors to the experimented room flew open as Karma fell on the ground, “is she okay...?” Octavia said nervously.

“I’m fine,” Karma said while standing up.

“Carter you're really quiet you and the twins haven't said a word” Bun said,

“Because we have nothing to talk about,” they all said at the



same time.

“ALRIGHT WE'RE CLOSING UP EVERYTHING,” one of the scientists exclaimed,

“EY, why do you guys get to leave but we don't?” I said angrily,

“Because unlike you we have things to do, plus you guys have to stay here and protect everything while we're gone. Sweet dreams,” the scientists said, closing the door and leaving us in a pitch-black room that looks like an empty canvas left for decades.

The only light source we had was the glowing part of our necklaces and the window in the corner of the room.

“Hey, we should really try and find a way out of here.”

“Oh look, he talked,” Mizuki said.

“Mizuki, leave poor Carter alone,” Lara said.

“OKAY GUYS STOP FIGHTING OVER WHO TALKS AND WHO DOES NOT!”

“You guys are acting like children.”

“But Karna we are-”

Before Mizuki could say any more, I stopped him and said, “Shhh.”

“Wow, okay,” Mizuki said.

“How are we even gonna escape did you guys forget that they put a collar on us and when we use our powers the collar shocks us and alerts the scientists something is happening” Bun said.

“Well...I guess we are just gonna have to try and find out, plus they left the collar shocks, and they won't do anything about it. The lab is about 30 minutes away from where each of the scientists live. We will be fine” I said.

“Karna how do u even know-”

“Don't worry about it,” I said again, cutting Mizuki off.

“Okay, so we need something sharp to cut off these dumb collars...” and then I thought of an idea.

“Karma you still have that hair clip you found on the floor right...?”

“Yea why...?” She said responding worried and confused.

“Let me see it,” I said. She handed me the hair clip and I put it in a little hole our collar has, there's a hole in our collars because sometimes if we are lucky the scientists give us a break, but they watch us at all times.

“What are you doing?” Octavia said, and then everyone gasped as the collar fell on the floor...

“IT WORKED!” I said happily.

“Karma come here,” I did the exact same thing I did with my collar, except I did it with her collar. A few minutes passed by, and everyone’s collars were off and on the floor.

“Alright now Mizuki,” I said while handing him all the collars that were on the floor.

“What do I do with these?” He said worried.

“Smash them,” I said smiling. He did as I told and then we were thinking of what to do next.

“The scientists don’t come back until tomorrow,” Bun said.

“Exactly,” I responded back.

“Alright now we have to think of a way out without setting off the alarms,” Mizzy said.

“Well, Mizzy, you’re the only one who can think of a way out,” Lara said.

“Hmm...” Mizzy said while thinking...and then she thought of something, “okay so the only way we are going to be able to get out is if we dismantle all the alarms and if we put our hands in that little machine to get the doors opened...”

“Who here has the smallest hand,” Mizzy said while we all looked at Octavia.

“Wha-what are you looking at me for!?” Octavia said.

“Octavia...put your hand there,” Mizuki said.

“Okay, jeez,” Octavia put her hand there and it opened the door.

“Yes!” I said.

“EVERYONE OUT!” Carter said.

“WAIT HOLD UP...” Mizzy said.

“WHAT NOW!?” Mizuki said.

“I’m going to disable the alarms,” Mizzy said,

“What about you?” Octavia asked.

“Just go,” she said.

“I’ll stay with you Mizzy,” Bun said.

“Bun, you can’t stay, you’re one of the top three strongest experiments. Plus, your power is telekinesis; we need you, please” I said.

“Exactly, I’m one of the top three and so is Caravan and Lara.

They will help you guys out, trust me.”

“Okay...” I said as the doors closed.

“ALRIGHT, LET'S FIGURE OUT SOMETHING FAST!” Mizuki said.

“Let's run to the electric room where they have all the energy,” I said. We ran as fast as we could down the hallways and made it.

“Okay, Octavia put your hand there again.” Octavia put her hand on the machine and opened the door, “Mizuki, break it,” I said.

“Break what?” He answered back confused.

“Break the machine,” I said. Mizuki broke the machine and then we heard the alarm go off.

“CRAP WE ONLY HAVE 1 HOUR BEFORE THE SCIENTISTS COME, IT ALERTED THEM AND NOW THEY ARE COMING!” Octavia said, screaming at the top of her lungs.

I grabbed an old timer on the desk and set a timer for 1 hour, “Okay, we’ve only got 1 hour to get out of here COME ON!” I said as I was running back to where Bun and Mizzy were stuck trying to disable the alarms.

“Blitz on,” I said, and it activated my power. Octavia was right behind me when we reached the door and Octavia put her hand on the machine. When it opened, Bun, Mizzy, and I came running out. As they were running, Mizzy was screaming “THE WHOLE BUILDING IS GOING TO EXPLODE! WE GOTTA GET OUT OF HERE!!”

A few minutes later, we were all together and Mizuki used his super strength. “Power on,” he said to activate his power. He crunched up the door, and just in time we all left. The building exploded right behind us.

“SHIELD ON,” Octavia said as she created this new power; it was a little bubble that kept us all safe from any harm.

Everything was on fire right behind us. “How did you learn that?” I asked.

“A little practice,” Octavia responded.

“Alright, let’s get out of here,” Mizuki said, running in front of us. Everyone else followed him. I was right behind everyone. We ran into the forest, and I checked the clock; it said 0:00:00. There was 0 hours, 0 minutes and 0 seconds left on the clock. I looked behind me and saw the scientists freaking out.

I smiled and Caravan said out loud, “You know we didn’t get along well, and we all made a mess.”

Before she could finish, I said, “But we all got out of it together.”

“So what? Teamwork makes the dream work?” Carter asked.

“Something like that, yea,” Caravan said, and we laughed as we vanished far away from land and into a forest everyone likes to call...

“A little place away from home.”

## Untitled

I only remember this hallway. It feels like I've been walking forever endlessly. The fluorescent lights have been hurting my eyes, and the lights still aren't able to light the whole way. The smell of dirt and spray paint fills the air, it's sour. Yet, there is something else, the breathing getting louder and louder as I walk towards the endless darkness. I can't stop walking; I can't turn back the way I want to. The darkness scares me.

All the words on the walls telling me to go back and stop. I can't help but think to listen. The air is heavy and cold. I have goosebumps up and down my body. I want to stop, my feet feel numb, and I'm going weak.

The breathing is getting closer and closer than farther away. I smelt the foulest thing I have ever smelt. I wanted to know, as soon as the breathing stopped, I finally could stop.

I felt thick warm liquid on my face, I looked up and everything made sense. It had four arms, five eyes, and blood-stained teeth. It wasn't human it's never been. It opened its mouth wide as possible and threw itself at me.

Everything was dark and cold. When I opened my eyes all I saw was the endless hallway and the endless darkness. I only remember his hallway. The sense of deja vu was running over me like a wave. I started walking down the hallway, my feet getting soaked from the low water levels.

There was a choice of a left or right turn, I took the right and I heard heavy breathing and the sound of slow light whimpering. I turned left and saw the light. It was light, not dark. I finally saw the light.

I followed, my heart racing a million miles per minute. I was free. Until I hear feet scurrying, I turn around and the thing jumps at me, only this time I feel the flesh ripping, I sob and scream for help.

Everything felt fuzzy as this thing fed off of me, all I heard

was the ringing and the sound of the thing eating me alive. I opened my eyes and saw the endless darkness once again.

I had no choice but to walk.



*High School*  
**SHORT  
STORIES**

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Mischa Abad                              | 231 |
| Angelina Agasi                           | 233 |
| Ashley Catalan                           | 236 |
| Alyssa Chan                              | 241 |
| <b>Brooklyn Chan</b> ~ <i>1st Place</i>  | 244 |
| Mandy Cohen                              | 250 |
| Lucy Creer                               | 256 |
| Hannah Delaria                           | 263 |
| Tabatha Freer                            | 267 |
| Parth Joshi                              | 271 |
| Asia Kim-Failing                         | 273 |
| Mallory Kurtzman                         | 279 |
| Matthew Lawrence                         | 282 |
| Christopher Lewis                        | 287 |
| Jasmyn Liberatore                        | 291 |
| Rianna Patton                            | 292 |
| Anushka Phen                             | 297 |
| <b>Madeline Pojar</b> ~ <i>3rd Place</i> | 300 |
| Sheri Spencer                            | 302 |
| Charlotte Swenson                        | 308 |
| Maryiam Syed                             | 312 |
| Maya Van Mossevelde                      | 314 |
| Valerie Victor                           | 316 |
| <b>Carina Wang</b> ~ <i>2nd Place</i>    | 317 |
| Ian Woods                                | 322 |
| Izzy Yucha                               | 327 |

## An Unsent Letter

To Whom it May Concern,

Lately, I've been spending much of my time outside of that one arcade near your house. Sometimes when I walk home, I find myself in front of the double door made up of dirty glass. It amazes me that the old place is still open. I remember watching you for hours playing that one pinball game that was so obviously rigged. You adored that game, and the arcade workers knew you adored it too; the sound of your sigh when you reached inside your empty pocket for more quarters is eternally echoed in my mind. I hope for nothing more than to hear it again every time I hear this echo of you.

I've learned to adore the things in the arcade that you adored. I believed the dirty carpet decorated with colorful, abstract shapes to be too bright and tacky, but its current lackluster appearance serves as a reminder for me to be nostalgic for its past hues. The neon lights that blinded me when I stared at them for too long are now well-dimmed, but now, I long for their brightness. Their past luminescence presently enchants me, as it did you.

As I look around, the quality of most of the arcade's features has dulled: the lights have dimmed, and the carpet has faded. Yet one thing has intensified throughout the years. The stale tang of cigarette smoke is now flooding my senses. The accrual of third-hand smoke smells sharp, like stone. It's made up of jagged edges that are sharp enough to cut the light into fragments. It's colored with a sickly yellow, a jaundiced hue that can somehow be translated into an odor of aridity and bitterness. It pains me to know that this stinging, dreary scent is my only physical memento of you.

When I would arrive at the arcade early, I impatiently waited for you while walking along the outline of the carpet's assortment of shapes. And now, here I sit, knowing that I would burn the



entire world just to feel that impatience again, just to know that I'll be able to see you in a few minutes. I am now surrounded by the black cushioned stools that have sunk due to age, and I am enveloped by the familiar smell of old plastic and rusty metal. The only unfamiliar variable is the absence of you.

I hate this feeling of you. The knowledge that you are simply out of reach, away and taken but not destroyed, hurts me. It hurts—this loving yet tragic waltz we have danced over the years—conjured by my brain hurts, but it does not quell my adoration for you. I wish I could tell you that I do not love you anymore, but that would be a lie. And you, of all people, know how much I hate lies. I firmly believe my candor is my main virtue, even though you have told me on multiple occasions that it is my fatally flawed vice. In these past occasions, I would silently concur, but presently, I disagree. As of now, my hamartia is my inability to forget you.

I hate you for hurting me. In this letter, I find myself disagreeing with myself. How is it that I can write of you as my dearest, my most beloved, while I also detail you as the person I hate the most? I remember you telling me there was a fine line between love and hate. These supposed opposites: love and hate, are they truly opposites? I don't think so. I think the opposite of love is apathy. Love and hate are the strongest emotions I know, so what can possibly be farther away from intense emotions than indifference? The absence, the unfeeling feeling of apathy is the opposite of love. I am able to love and hate you because they are not conflicting. Just as the blinding orange rays of the sun can starkly compliment the moon's blue ocean tides, I can love you just as much as I hate you.

Now I have to bid you adieu, my dear. What else is there for me to do other than cross my fingers and hope to whatever God is up there that you will be waiting for me at our arcade? The answer to this is nothing, and I would rather be a productive person. So, farewell, my hated lover, and I want you to know that unfortunately, there is nothing I love to dream of more than you.

From,  
*Yours Truly*

## Mommy Kissin' Santa?!

Young Suzie was bursting with excitement on Christmas Eve, unable to sleep as she imagined the presents waiting for her under the tree. Her entire body shook with joy and anticipation. She couldn't stop thinking of what she would find under the tree in the morning. As Suzie's parents walked into her bedroom, she looked up at them and squealed, "Eek! I'm so excited!" She threw her hands up above her head.

"We know you are," Daddy said, smiling. His mouth was so wide, most of his teeth were visible.

Mommy pinched Suzie's cheeks, then kissed her on one side.

"Goodnight, Sweetheart. I love you."

"And so do I." Daddy gave her a kiss.

"I love you, too." Suzie wrapped her arms around him and squeezed. Mommy flipped the light switch and Suzie's bedroom lights flickered until the entire space became dim. Her reindeer night light was turned on at least.

Now that her parents were gone, Suzie could finally put her plan into action. She waited a few minutes, then heard a thump from outside. It's time!

Every year, Suzie heard a thump outside that had to have been from Santa's reindeer landing on the roof. She would always try to see Santa flying away from the view of her bedroom window, but she never saw him. This year, Suzie was going to catch Santa in the act.

Suzie snuck out of bed, then slyly crept out of her door into the hallway. She could hear the gentle sound of Christmas music. "Baby, It's Cold Outside" was playing. Then Suzie heard a quiet "Ho Ho Ho" in the living room. She gasped in disbelief and covered her mouth, trying to keep the noise from coming out. Santa's in my house?! Suzie was astonished at the thought. She knew Santa was inside and now she had to catch him. Maybe then he would let her ask him about the North Pole.

Suzie snuck down the stairs, as quietly as a mouse. She smelled gingerbread from Mommy's favorite Christmas candle. The further she got, the richer the scent became.

Santa was putting presents under the tree—she could hear the screeching sound of wrapping paper scraping against the tree branches. To her, it sounded like fingernails on a chalkboard.

Suzie took a few deep breaths, ready to take a peek at Santa Claus. Just as she was about to turn the corner, Suzie heard a woman chanting, “Ho Ho Ho.” Mommy?

Suzie peeked her head around the wall and saw Mommy hugging Santa Claus. Did Mommy know Santa and not tell her? If Santa was Mommy's friend, Suzie would have already met him, wouldn't she?

Mommy pulled Santa's beard down slightly. Suzie couldn't believe her eyes. Santa's beard is fake? Suzie's jaw dropped and her eyes widened as she watched Mommy . . . kiss Santa! She gasped and this time the sound definitely came out. How could Mommy have done that? Daddy would be so mad. Mommy and Santa turned around. “Suzanne, what are you doing down here?” Mommy scolded.

“I saw you,” Suzie exclaimed, still in disbelief.

“Yes, obviously. You're down here, aren't you?”

“No, I saw you,” Suzie stressed.

“Saw what?” Mommy had her hands on her hips.

“You and Santa. You were...” Suzie leaned forward and whispered in Mommy's ear, “kissing.”

Mommy's jaw dropped, and she rubbed her forehead in frustration. Santa laughed. What kind of joy could Santa possibly have gotten from this?

“I think we should tell her.” Mommy looked back at Santa.

“Are you sure?” He asked, his voice sounding awfully familiar. He wore the classic red and white suit. He was definitely Santa Claus.

“Yes,” Mommy insisted. Santa nodded and removed his beard. Daddy smiled at Suzie and shrugged.

Suzie's jaw dropped. “Daddy? You're Santa? Why didn't you tell me? I've gotta tell all of my friends that my daddy is Santa Claus!”

Her parents looked at each other and sighed.

“Sweetie, we have something to tell you.”

Suzie looked at them with utter confusion.

“Okay...”

“Well, Sweetie... Santa... and the elves... and the flying reindeer... and the North Pole...”

For the next twenty minutes, Mommy and Daddy explained why Daddy was dressed up as Santa. She didn't fully understand everything that was being said but tried her best to listen intently. Her heart hurt in some ways. How could her parents lie to her?

Now, they sat in dead silence in the living room as Suzie kept trying to wrap her head around the secret she had just learned. All of it was so... unbelievable. Her body was encompassed with goosebumps. She still had questions, but it was late, and tomorrow was Christmas. Her questions would have to wait...



Ashley Catalan  
High School

## A Conversation Between Deaths

The topic of death was always a sensitive one - a topic that would strike fear into everyone and be avoided if possible. Of course, it couldn't be avoided forever and when that time came, so did Fia and Lypi.

They were two sides of the same coin. Lypi was the sorrow and grief that came with death, the ugly part. He roams across the spiritual plane, bouncing from person to person, never stopping. His target audience was the young, creatures who haven't lived a full life, the ones that weren't ready. He would sometimes get the rare case of older victims, but either way they all reacted the same. Lypi was the one that was widely recognized, yet Fia was the one that was favored.

Fia promised a painless death - a death full of love and compassion, where a person would see light instead of darkness when their time came. She promised that after they were gone, their remains would become a part of the earth, and grow into something bigger. She would often linger around her victims, in order to provide the comfort that they desperately needed. This meant that she couldn't visit as many people, but she was willing to take that risk.

Fia and Lypi didn't necessarily hate each other, but they didn't like each other either. Lypi thought Fia's process was agonizingly slow, a waste of time. While Fia thought that Lypi's process was cold, uncompassionate, disorganized, and 'straight up inhumane'. They would work separately, rarely seeing each other. On the occurrence they did see each other, a small coin toss would have to decide the way their victim would go. Fia always went for heads while Lypi was tails. No matter what, one would leave grumbling while the other would give a sly grin. This was their process for centuries; all the humans knew it and would often pray for Fia to win the race to their deathbed.

It went the same with this next victim. A sick man in his fifties, he was basically walking into death's doorway when Fia and Lypi found him. Finding each other in the room was a surprise, not a pleasant surprise, but a surprise, nevertheless. They both glared at each other and gave each other a nod of acknowledgement before Lypi went off to get a coin, finding one between the man's mattress and its bed frame. Lypi met Fia's blank eye; both of them squinted at each other before flipping the coin. It made a thunk sound when it hit the wooden floor and gave its signature metallic sound as it spun.

No matter how many times the two of them did this, tension would always fill the room. The spinning coin began to slow down, it didn't lean on either side, it just kept spinning in a circle. Silence came throughout the room as the coin stopped. The two stared at the coin, standing upright on its ridge; the two of them caught each other's gaze as they looked up.

"Is...is that supposed to happen?" Fia asked, breaking the silence. Lypi stayed silent for a minute, keeping up with the awkward eye contact.

"I don't- I don't think so," Lypi stuttered out. Only the man's shallow breaths were heard as the silence fell again. Fia tried to look for words but only kept closing her mouth. Lypi broke his gaze and looked back down at the coin and then to the man, "What do we do now?"

Another beat of silence before Fia spoke, "We could flip again." Lypi looked at the coin, then at the man, then finally Fia. He shrugged. Fia blinked in shock and stuttered out another response, "What do you mean you don't know?"

"I just don't know!" Lypi yelled, "This has never happened before! I don't know what you want me to do!"

The man groaned and shifted around in his bed. Fia brought a hand to her hip and the other to massage her face, "So what do we do?"

"I'll just take him." Lypi began walking towards the old man.

"What? That's not fair!" Fia grabbed Lypi's frail, cold hand.

"When has life ever been fair?"

"Well," Fia paused, "Never...but he still deserves a painless death."

"It doesn't matter if it's painless, he just needs to be dead."

Lypi tugged his hand away from Fia.

“But he’s old.” Fia let him go.

“Okay? How does that change anything?”

“The old have lived a fulfilling life, they deserve a painless death.”

“Death is death, it doesn’t matter if it’s painless. No matter what he’ll be without pain when this is done.”

“What if he hasn’t accepted death yet?” Fia blurted out.

“What?” Lypi’s eyebrows lifted in surprise.

“What if he hasn’t accepted death yet?” Fia repeated quieter, bowing down her head. Lypi’s eyebrows furrowed, and his mouth formed a thin line. He switched his gaze from Fia to the old man; he grimaced.

“Death isn’t something easy to accept.”

“But it’s possible for it to happen. Every single one that went under my curse accepted death in one way or another.” Fia paused, “I cannot kill anyone that hasn’t. It is too much for me to bear. Why do you think that you have killed so many more than me?”

“Because it’s my duty to kill anyone when it’s their time,” Lypi said with pride.

“I can only promise a painless death to those who have accepted it. If someone hasn’t accepted it, then they cannot die without being overtaken with regret and grief. They cannot become a part of the earth if they’re in pain; if they do, then their pain will pass onto the earth; their pain will infect the earth, and I refuse to do that.”

Lypi didn’t have anything to say, only staring at Fia’s head. He gave a small sigh and slowly turned to the man. The man was becoming white; they needed to get on with the process.

“It’s not my place to say something,” Lypi turned to Fia, she quickly looked up, “But we have to keep up with our duties. We cannot keep the people living until they have accepted their fate, that will just make them immortal. They cannot accept death itself, but they must accept that it will come for them no matter what.”

“It’s your job to keep them in check.” Fia muttered.

“And it is yours to reward the ones who do,” Lypi replied, “To reward the ones who somehow overcome all the pain and regret that they have in their lives and accept that death is coming for

them.” They stood in silence, listening to the man’s breathing, knowing that each second only led to the inevitable.

“It pains me to know that I can’t grant them the luxury of a painless death.” Fia shifted so that she still stood beside Lypi, but her body faced toward the man’s death bed.

“The job of death is a heavy one, but that means we are strong.” Lypi grabbed onto Fia’s hand for support. Fia glanced toward their hands and glanced back up at the man.

“Take him,” Lypi’s eyes widened at Fia’s response, “I only came to see if I could stop you. The only reason why we ever see each other is because I try to stop you. And I’m sorry,” Fia began fidgeting her feet, “I thought that maybe if we just gave them more time then they wouldn’t have to suffer. They wouldn’t have to go through you. No offense.”

Fia tried to chuckle off the weight of the conversation, but Lypi only continued to stare at her, “I’m only causing people like him to suffer longer,” they both turned to look at the man, “It’s like you said, death is a hard topic to accept. Who knows how long it would take him to accept it, but in that time, he would’ve gotten over dying.”

Another wave of silence fell as Lypi took her words into mind. She took a deep breath, “So take him. He’s already suffered enough, it’s time to set him free.”

Lypi turned to Fia and gave her a reassuring smile. He let go of her hand and walked towards the man.

“It’s not your fault,” he sighed out. Lypi put one of his hands on each side of the man’s pale face, “It’s hard for me, too.”

Fia watched as the man’s breaths slowed down and his groans of pain became quieter. “It hurts for me to realize that he’ll never be able to feel the sun or wind again,” Lypi began caressing the man’s cheek, “That he’ll never be able to grow old with his wife just like he promised on his wedding day. Or that he’ll never be able to see his children grow. The pain that will come with him to the grave that he wasn’t able to reassure them that he was proud of them and that they will no longer think of him with only love, but with sorrow and grief instead. That it will pain him to leave everyone alone even though he promised that he would stay, and that he was strong enough to fight this illness, yet here I am.”



The man's groans of pain finally stopped, his last breath a sigh of relief, free from the pain that had tortured him for years.

"No one wins the game of death." Lypi let go of the man, "No matter who's dying, someone will be in pain."

"Even the strong." Fia stated as she saw the pain in Lypi's eyes.

"Even the strong." Lypi reassured as he closed his eyes in shame. Minutes of silence passed by until a thump could be heard from downstairs.

"The family will be coming to check up on him. We must go." Fia began walking to the window. When she passed Lypi, she put a hand on Lypi's shoulder. She didn't say anything, yet Lypi could feel her words of comfort through the touch.

Fia went through the window and vanished back into the spirit realm. Lypi opened his eyes and turned his gaze onto the man. A pair of footsteps came closer to the door; Lypi gave a sigh and went through the open window, instead jumping onto the roof and crouching down.

He heard the door creak open and closed his eyes, knowing what was next to come. A fragile voice began talking, reassuring the man. There was a pause before the man's name was called out, it came out gently before quickly getting more desperate.

Lypi stood up on the roof and gave one more look at the human world. A scream of pain ripped through the silence of the night as Lypi vanished into the spirit plane.

No one wins the game of death.

## Within War and Strife

How did this happen? Anne had often pondered. Days ago, she was smiling around the table with her family. Her life had been as ordinary as life could be with the usual worries—high school, college, and her part-time job as a cashier, with the typical customer outburst.

And now, years later?

She looked back, so fond of the days that had seemed nothing more than a dream. Before the bombs and learning to fight, how could she have hated the happiness and change the war brought? But if the war had never started, she would never have met him.

Boom. Boom. Boom. Fear was all that had resided within Anne. She was so out of breath, but she had to keep running. They all needed to keep running. To find a new home. To find a way out.

“Hey! Who are you?” Someone in front of her had exclaimed, while everyone in the back of her gasped.

And then she’d turned her head, and she saw him. Holding a knife to her throat, a mask covering the features she would one day grow to stare at with such affection.

But all he seemed to show was fury.

“Who are you and with whom do you stand?” Someone behind him had demanded. He slowly inched the knife closer to her throat.

Shaking with terror, Anne had answered reluctantly. Her family, friends, and the rest of their group would be in danger if she didn’t.

“We are escaping another bombing from the war. We don’t stand with anyone. I’m the leader of this group. Please. Kill me if you must but keep them safe.” Anne whispered, her eyes pleading.

His gaze seemed to soften as it shifted from Anne to her group. He lowered the knife and signaled his companions to stand down.

“Come with me and be quiet.” He’d told her.  
“We have much to discuss.”

One thing after another, he slowly accepted them into their resistance, teaching her to fight and then falling in love. Battle after battle, she’d fought with him and his team, fighting for a chance to live without fear.

With him, she felt as if she could face an entire army of that accursed nation that had brought all this fear and anguish. Anne used to regret much if what she’d done in her life before him, but not anymore.

She was still scared for him every time they were forced into battle, remembering the dead bodies littering bloody battlefields. One bullet, one action, and it could be his downfall, for how could she live without him? He was her strength and her heart.

Anne shifted into the light as she stared at that door, awaiting the warm personification to burst through the threshold, but no answer. Minutes and hours seemed to go by, although it’d only been seconds.

He was supposed to be back by now. He said he’d be back by now.

No. It couldn’t have happened. He couldn’t have. Her heart stopped, eyes blurred; the world was out of focus.

Anne stood up from her seat and rushed to the weaponry. In her rush, she didn’t notice her mother running up to her.

“Anne? What are you doing?” Her mother said, concerned. Anne might’ve hesitated in a far-away dream long ago.

“He’s not back. He’s not back.” She mumbled repeatedly, panic slowly taking over while she gathered her weapons and supplies.

“What? Anne, stop.” And with that, her mother ripped her bag from her grasp. “Let’s be rational; stop; you must tell me.”

But all reason went out the window, and Anne refused to listen. She couldn’t, and she wouldn’t.

“I’m sure he’s fine. He’s one of our best fighters; he’ll be ok. It would be best to stay here, where you’ll be safe. He’d only worry for you if you went out.” Anne’s mother reasoned, hugging Anne to comfort her.

Anne’s arms reached out seemingly to hug her mother, only to twist out of her embrace and run through the door to the outside.

“Mother, I’m sorry.” And with that, she picked up speed; they’d never be able to catch her.

“Anne, wait! Come back!” Her mother yelled for the other fighters around Anne to stop her, but as Anne looked back, all she saw was sympathy in her comrade’s eyes as she sped up.

Anne would never stop. She hadn’t stopped during the war, and she certainly wouldn’t now for her mother. She had a mission, even if he wasn’t alive anymore.

She needed to know if he was alive. She had to know because she’d certainly be lost if she didn’t.

“Please, hold on. I’m coming.” Anne whispered, the wind whipping at her locks of scarlet he’d always said he’d loved. Even when she was covered in blood, she’d been beautiful to him. They’d made a promise. “Even if one of us dies amid this unforgiving war, we must live on,” he’d once said before all these events had transpired.

She refused to think that, to give up on him so easily.

Anne would keep that hope and hold onto it even if he might be gone. Because the sun always rises with a new dawn.



Brooklyn Chan  
High School



## Shelia Holmes and the Haunted Cathedral

“Ms. Watson! Ms. Sherlock! I can’t manage this problem anymore. Can you help? Everything’s gone downhill with the reconstruction since day one!” cried Mr. David, sweat glistening, his eyes bugged out from the iron grasp of stress and alarm.

He looked like he had gained ten years; wrinkles marked his face, he had hair like a rat’s nest, and a fearful glint shone in his eyes while he held onto his sweat-soaked handkerchief like a lifeline.

Perhaps, you may be wondering for yourselves how this all started. Well, it all began on Saturday morning; peace was our guest, and relaxation was the host in the Baker Apartment's quiet streets. Suddenly a harsh thunder echoed throughout the room, cutting us off our thoughts. Appearing at our doorstep, Mr. David looked utterly fatigued, recoiling at every little sound and trembling as if submerged in ice.

He begged us to retrieve our fathers because he needed assistance immediately; he was almost to tears when I told him they were on another case far from here and wouldn’t return until next week. Thus, Shelia and I decided, in her words, to ‘help the poor bloke before he had a breakdown on our doorstep.’ From what he told us, he recently saved enough pounds to renovate the ancient cathedral near our street; he wanted to preserve the history and memories stored inside the cathedral walls and share it with everyone in London.

“Did you know that this cathedral used to be a disguised camp for soldiers from the Germans during the war?” Mr. David said giddily - discussing history always brightened his mood. “It’s been rumored that the nuns and priests here created secret passageways and rooms to transport injured soldiers and safely hide war victims. And—”

“Mr. David, I’m sorry, but we don’t have all day,” snapped Shelia, her eye twitching in annoyance, “Would you kindly please

tell us the source of the problem?”

You may be wondering why Shelia was irritated during this case. This is peculiar behavior considering that she adores a good mystery; however, the answer resides in Mr. David’s beliefs of the culprit. Also, if I tell you the answer so soon, it's not a mystery!

“Sorry, Ms. Holmes. Since I started the renovation, problem upon problem has occurred since I started. It began with small setbacks like misplaced tools, vanishing lunches, and rickety walls. We blamed it on hoarding rats and the walls coming down due to age.”

“I still don’t understand, Mr. David,” I, Wendy Watson, stated as Shelia impatiently tapped her foot, “Missing lunches and tools aren’t considered a mystery. Couldn’t you have replaced the missing property?”

“I thought so too until more strange occurrences occurred; however, it started getting more dangerous. Rocks being thrown through the windows shattering the glass with messages written on them demanding we leave at once, an entire chair magically set ablaze when we were moving the furniture, and a chandelier crashing down, almost flattening half my men! Which leads me to the core of my belief in the culprit,” Mr. David deadpanned, looking us straight in the eyes.

“Blimey, here we go again....” Shelia sighed.

“It’s the work of ghosts!” cried Mr. David.

“Mr. David, you honestly believe that ghosts have been haunting you here these past couple of weeks?” exclaimed Shelia as she massaged her temple, “It’s probably some teenage delinquents messing with you.”

“Shelia, maybe we should hear him first before we jump to conclusions,” I replied, trying to ease my friend’s frustrations.

“Well, I’ve already concluded that Mr. David is a nut-case who’s as mad as a bag of ferrets after listening to far too many stories of demons and spirits,” muttered Shelia bitterly. I directed a swift stomp on her foot before giving Shelia a reprimanding expression.

Shelia considers herself a ‘woman of science and logic based upon reason and deduction,’ so any theories like ghosts are rubbish and silly. Honestly, I can’t even read a nursery rhyme to her without her stating how a cow can’t possibly jump 238,855

miles over the moon without dying from lack of oxygen first.

“It’s true; why else would my construction crew suddenly up and flee? Because they’ve been frightened away by the ghost! And there’s proof, blood writing on the wall saying, ‘LEAVE THIS PLACE AT ONCE OR FACE THE CONSEQUENCES,’ multiple sightings of a ghost floating through the halls seemingly everywhere, messages demanding we leave, the collapsing chandelier, and the chair on fire. I’m certain that it’s a ghost!”

“Are you kidding me?” Shelia exasperated and gave him a look, “You still—never mind, you want me to show you it’s not a ghost, I’ll show you.”

Shelia mumbled, “how barmy this whole investigation is,” as she marched towards one of the broken windows with Mr. David and me in tow.

“The ‘ghost’ started with throwing rocks through the window with messages, correct? Well, if it was your so-called ‘ghost,’ how could it leave tracks around the garden and riverbank?” Shelia gestured us towards the gardens and river outside.

“If you look towards the flower beds, you can see several spots of trampled grass, indicating that somebody’s been running around. On the riverbank, there are faint yet visible footprints if you look closely, as if somebody was grabbing rocks from the river.”

“These footprints don’t seem like ghosts; it looks like somebody’s been grabbing rocks and throwing them at the windows,” I commented.

“As for the ‘blood writing,’ it’s all paint,” clarified Shelia as she traced her fingers across the writing, “If you noticed, there are small traces of paint splatters, almost invisible to the naked eye.”

Shelia raised her magnifying glass and crouched near the ground below the writing. She tilted the magnifying glass towards us, revealing the paint splatters she spoke of; more observation showed us an extensive trail leading towards one of the rooms. As we slowly approached the mysterious room, Shelia entered shortly, returning with ‘blood’ paint and brushes in hand.

“Why would a ‘ghost’ need brushes and paint if it was magic? Because it’s not a ghost!” retorted Shelia.

“Then how about the falling chandelier and burning chair? A

bunch of teenagers couldn't possibly do that," inquired Mr. David.

"The chandelier must've been sabotaged because it's new. So, it couldn't have fallen from age," inspected Shelia crouching near the fallen chandelier and observing the loose rope. The string appeared frayed at the ends as if somebody had cut through it.

"Why would a ghost cut a rope? It would've loosened it, obviously another clue that it's an elaborate prank."

"Then how do you explain about the chair set on fire?" I implored.

"As for the chair, I can vaguely detect traces of oil," assessed Shelia as she leaned close to the chair before looking towards the left for another clue, "It's barely noticeable, but I can smell the same fragrance near the chair that creates a small trail."

Shelia pursued the trail leading behind the rows of never-ending pillars, revealing a hidden half-empty oil can and a burnt-out match, "My theory's that someone coated the chair with oil then made a trail before lighting it on fire using this match, thus creating the illusion of a chair magically burning ablaze."

"All these clues lead to the conclusion that it's just teenagers messing with you, Mr. David. Nothing to get worked up on and not a case worth investigating." Shelia mumbles, "You should get the police to help, and if the fools are still at it, I honestly can't believe I'm saying this, get the Scotland Yard to help."

"B-but the ghosts hovering around the are halls seemingly everywhere; how do you explain that?! Regular teenagers can't be in several places simultaneously, so it must be ghosts with teleportation powers."

"Probably them running around in different directions with the help of several friends. I—honestly, do you still believe the ghost theory? Wendy, please talk some sense into this man...."

"Sorry, Shelia, but something doesn't make sense...." I spoke.

"Oh, why's that?" questioned Shelia.

"Based on your deduction that it's merely some teenagers pranking Mr. David and his crew, why stoop so low to create such dangerous stunts like cutting the rope off the chandelier." I said thoughtfully, processing the information from Shelia and Mr. David, "Pranks are supposed to be harmless, not dangerous, but these messages seem too real to be a prank. Also, why keep doing



pranks when there isn't anybody here except for Mr. David? I'm sorry, Shelia, but I still think there's something wrong."

"You believe it's a ghost, too?" remarked Mr. David.

"I don't believe it's ghosts, but something's wrong. How can many people go unseen in the cathedral without being spotted? Several people couldn't pass Mr. David and his crew without being seen by at least one of them unless they knew of another way around..."

'It's been rumored that the nuns and priest here created secret passageways and rooms to transport injured soldiers and safely hide war victims.'

"Wait, that's it!" I cried, bolting towards the nearest wall, focused on a task.

"Wendy, what are you doing?" Shelia pondered.

"Mr. David said there were rumors that this place had secret passageways and rooms. What if the rumors are true? Think about it: if these people knew and found the secret passageways, they could sneak in and out the cathedral as they please."

I kept with my search, feeling around from the walls to the pillars; I almost gave up hope when I heard a satisfying click from pulling a curtain cord. A symphony of churns and clicks as the wall twirled synchronously, showing a series of once-concealed corridors.

"The rumors are true!" squealed Mr. David excitedly.

"Impossible; how did you know, Wendy?" comments Sheila, impressed.

"Perhaps if you were listening to Mr. David's history lesson, you would've known about this," I mused teasingly.

We explored the dreadfully endless maze of hallways and tunnels. I believe I went mad for a second because I was confident; we had passed that wall six times before! It felt like hours until we found a secret room housing a group of children in rags, huddled inside numerous piles of stolen food. They went on guard after noticing our immediate presence, backing up against the wall with fear-stricken expressions like deer cornered by hunters.

"So, you're the culprits behind Mr. David's problem," I said accusingly, pointing out the stolen lunches and tools, "This may seem funny, but it's a serious problem for Mr. David. So, if you would be so kind, apologize and go back to your parents-"

“They can’t, Wendy,” remarked Shelia.

“Why not?”

“Because they’re orphans,” whispered Shelia to me before looking back at the frightened children, “The ‘pranks’ you’ve done weren’t to scare Mr. David; it was to drive him out, wasn’t it?”

“Y-yes,” stuttered one of the children, “T-this is our home. When these people came by, we knew they’d kicked us out once they noticed us, and w-we’d be homeless.”

“That’s why we decided to scare them away so we could keep our home,” shouted one of the older kids daring us to go any further.

“Please don’t be mad at us!” sobbed a little girl, “We didn’t mean to hurt anyone, honest!”

“Of course, I’m not mad!” said Mr. David softly, “You just wanted to keep your home, but you didn’t need to go to extreme lengths to drive me out.”

“S-so you’ll let us stay?”

“Of course, the cathedral is open to all, and it’s meant as a safe place; there’s plenty of room for all of you!”

The children burst with joy as they surrounded Mr. David, jumping and hugging him.

“I’m glad this ended happily,” I stated with a smile.

“Yes, yes indeed,” Shelia waved away my comment indifferently. “Now, let’s go home.”

“Why?”

“Because if I hear one more word about ghosts, I’ll be haunted by the sheer ridiculousness for eternity.”

## Little Me

Seventeen-year-old Lila slammed her hand against her alarm clock, pushing it off her bedside table. Her eyes opened slowly to reveal her familiar violet-painted room. Band and movie posters in shiny black frames neatly lined the walls. A navy rectangular bulletin board with pictures of her boyfriend, Connor, and closest friends hung above her bed. Fairy lights and a vine curtain covered another wall of her room. On her bedside table, crystals of every color lay in a line, with a framed picture of her and Connor at homecoming, embracing in a tight hug.

Lila pushed herself off her messy bed and stumbled, half asleep, to her bathroom across the hall. Her bathroom was not nearly as clean as her bedroom. Makeup completely consumed the marble countertop. Blush gave the white sink a pink tint, nail polish stained the side of the wall, and sticky notes covered the mirror with to-do lists and doodles.

Exhausted, she brushed her dyed blue and black hair, pulled it back with a black flower hair claw, and began to put on her daily makeup. Everything went fine with the foundation, blush, and even the eyebrow pencil, which rarely happens. However, she was not as lucky with her eyeliner.

“Darn it!” she mumbled, noticing her far-from-symmetrical cat eyes. Already late, she quickly wiped off all the makeup and ‘decided that Monday was no day for all this effort anyway.

She got dressed in her favorite black t-shirt and jeans before heading downstairs for breakfast. She realized she didn’t have enough time for cereal, so Lila quickly grabbed a pop-tart, jumped in her Red 2000 Lexus, and stepped on it to school. She parked in her usual spot across the street and then walked to her first class, calculus.

“Hey, Lila!” her best friend Chloe called from across the classroom. Lila smiled at her and weaved expertly through the other students and 60-pound backpacks to sit beside Chloe.

“Want to go to the movies today after school?”  
Chloe asked hopefully.

“Sure!” Lila replied, “I have a date with Connor after school, though. He has a surprise plan for me, so can we do six?”

“Absolutely!” Chloe exclaimed, “There is a new horror movie we HAVE to see!”

The day went by as usual. Physics was a drag, and PE was even worse. But art class was fantastic because she finished her realism pencil art after a few months. Finally, the 2 o’clock bell rang, and Lila rushed to meet Connor at their usual spot.

Just as she arrived at the soda vending machine, Connor turned around and smiled.

“You ready?” he asked excitedly.

“Well, I’m not sure,” Lila teased. “I don’t know what we are doing!”

Connor put his hand around her shoulder and kissed her cheek. “You’ll love it!” he assured her.

Lila got in the passenger seat while Connor piled into the driver's seat and played music. Lila rolled down the window, singing at the top of her lungs, and admired the beautiful mountain view around them until they finally pulled up to a building that looked like a shed. Steel bits lined the walls; Lila swore she could see abandoned nails and screws on the ground.

Inside, it was a beautiful restaurant. Each wall was filled to the brim with original artwork of every kind. Paintings, watercolors, and charcoal lined the walls from top to bottom. Different styles of hand-crafted sculptures sat on every table. Connor and Lila sat in the far back at a table with a red tablecloth and a grey sculpture of a tall lady in a flowing dress.

“It’s beautiful!” Lila cried delicately, touching the sculpture, “where did you find this place?!”

“I know how much you love art,” Connor replied, “and I knew this would be the perfect spot.”

For dinner, they enjoyed a wonderful watermelon-feta salad and teriyaki chicken. Just then, the waiter came and asked if they would like anything for dessert. Before Lila could say she was way too full, Connor interrupted “YES! We would love dessert. Especially when I called earlier about a special dessert you had!”

he said with a laugh and a forced quirky smile. Lila gave Connor a strange look and laughed.

“What’s so special?” she asked once the waiter left.

“Umm... I heard the ice cream here is SUPER special. That’s it!” Lila laughed it off, and after about eight minutes, the waiter returned with a covered plate. He took off the lid to reveal vanilla pudding. Suddenly, the waiter pulled out a flame thrower and blew fierce flames onto the little dish. The fire illuminated the restaurant, so other customers looked toward the strong light. Once the light finally faded, the waiter took out a chocolate frosting piping bag and wrote carefully on top of the dessert, “Prom?”

Lila was so amazed at the whole show she barely noticed the words. When she did, she looked up, ran to the other side of the table, and gave Connor a bear hug.

“Of course!! You are the best boyfriend a girl could ever have!”

After enjoying their fantastic dessert, although Lila was not too keen on sharing, as it was her favorite, Connor dropped her at the movie theater. Chloe was standing next to the popcorn with two “Clown Carnival 3” tickets, a jumbo coke, and a large box of M&Ms in her hand.

“Come on, love bird! It’s going to start soon!”

“Ok! Ok!” Lila said. They hurried into the theater and sat down just as the movie began.

Suddenly, on the screen, a giant clown with bright red eyes and a twisted green smile glared at the audience and began to cackle. Lila felt as though he was looking right at her. The clown seemed to be getting closer and closer. Its blue glove was just about to grab Lila and steal her into the movie screen when...

Four-year-old Lila woke up from her bed with a start. She opened her eyes to her same pink room with her drawings of her favorite Disney characters covering the walls. Beside her, a little white bedside table held her favorite fairytale books and a picture of her and her mom.

“MOOOOOOMMMMMMMYYYYY!” she shrieked and ran out of her room. Lila barely noticed the rest of the house wiz by her as she ran and jumped in her mom’s bed, immediately hiding under the covers.

“What’s wrong, sweetheart?” her mother asked kindly,

opening her eyes to see her little girl shaking, “did you have a nightmare?”

“YES! The worst nightmare you can possibly imagine!”

“What happened, pumpkin? You can tell me.”

“I woke up in a dark room with vines growing out of the ceiling. Then, when I went to the potty, my hair was bright blue! And I nearly stabbed my eye with a marker named eyeliner too!”

“Is that so?” her mom said, a smile beginning to form on her face.

“Yes! And then I had a pop tart for breakfast, and you weren’t there to say anything about it being unhealthy.” she paused, “honestly, that was kind of fun. But then I had to drive in a car BY MYSELF!! I had to steer the wheel thingy alone! No one was there with me! It was the scariest thing that ever happened! But worst of all... I had to CROSS A STREET ALONE! No one was there to hold my hand! It was the longest street in the whole wide world, and you weren’t there, mommy!”

Her mom was just about to open her mouth to explain, but Lila wouldn’t let her get a word in.

“Then, I had some insane math class with letters! That was weird. But then, some guy kidnapped me! He took me to a shed to eat, and suddenly, there was FIRE!!!” Lila raised her arms under the covers and moved them quickly back and forth in an attempt to reenact the fire. “They set a little bowl of vanilla pudding on fire, but no one ran or tried to save themselves! I tried to tell myself to leave but ‘dream me’ wouldn’t move! She seemed to be happy about it; I almost died!”

“Honey...” her mother started.

“AND THEN, I went to the movies, but there were no princesses or animals. There was an evil, terrible clown! It tried to steal me away, I’m sure of it! It was awful!” Lila finally broke and began to cry. Her mother took Lila in her arms, rocked her back and forth to calm her down, and said, “That is what a teenager does every day.”

“A teenager gets kidnapped and almost burned every day! I never want to grow up!”

“No, sweetheart,” her mother laughed, “A teenager goes on dates, has hard classes, eats fancy food, and puts makeup on.

“What’s a date? Like... kissing? That sounds worse than being burnt!”

“A date is something you do when you want to get to know someone. You go out together and talk with them so you can grow closer.” her mom said kindly. “And your dark room with plastic vines must have been your bedroom,” her mom paused, wanting to explain everything about her daughter's dream, “and you were putting on makeup. You know what that is, honey! You watch me do mine in the morning.”

“Oh yeah...” Lila said, tilting her little head to the side, remembering sitting in her mom’s bathroom and seeing weird brushes and palettes.

“And driving is something you do when you are a big girl, and crossing the street alone is easy, I promise. Do you think I have someone to hold my hand when I walk into work?”

“I guess not. So can I cross the street now?”

“Without me? Absolutely not. Big girl privilege only!” her mother laughed.

“What about the letter math? There is no way that is normal!”

“Math gets harder and harder so you can learn new things, so do all your classes!”

“Harder!?” she exclaimed, “I still haven’t memorized my multiplication table!”

“But you will! That’s how you grow!” her mother said. “And what you watched is something called a horror movie. It made to make people feel scared.”

“Why would you want to be scared?” Lila screeched, “That clown was very scary!”

“Some people enjoy it like a thrill almost. Sweet girl, all this craziness will come to make sense to you. In fact, you stop thinking about it being weird at all. It’s a daily routine.”

“But what about the fire?!” Lila cried, “you still haven’t explained that. That can’t be real!”

“You know what, today we will make some crème brûlée as a treat. I will show you that growing up isn’t frightening.”

“Ok,” said Lila, finally confident enough to come out from under her mom’s covers, “but how do we make creamy brew lee?”

Her mother laughed and held her tight, relieved that she still had a long time to go with her baby girl before she grew up. It also

made her realize how much she takes for granted in her day-to-day life. Would her younger self be proud of the person she has become? The job she has or the beautiful child she raised? Even how she crosses the street by herself every day?

She looked down and saw Lila fast asleep in her arms and smiled because, for Lila, these were all things she had never seen before. These were experiences a four-year-old could only dream of.

“Someday,” her mother whispered, “that scary time will come, but we will get through it together.” Then, she slowly and carefully pulled out her phone, making sure not to wake up her sleeping daughter, and began the search for the best “creamy brew lee” recipe the world had to offer.



## Speculi Malediction

Poppy Perksmith had recently come into possession of an antique mirror buried behind a bunch of Latin books. She had to admit that it had a very nice lace-like appearance and complimented her features perfectly in the reflection. There were strange markings lining the mirror, but she paid it no mind at first. That is until a face different from hers appeared in the glass.

Poppy threw the mirror across the room as a young male figure apparated in her reflection. From the pile of pillows she had chucked it into, she heard a faint “Ow.” Poppy screamed for a good while before her voice gave out.

“ARE YOU DONE, MA’AM?”

“Yes?”

“Great.”

“You can talk?”

“No, this is your head speaking.”

“Stupid question. I got you. Anyway, more importantly, you can feel when I throw you across the room?”

“Well, not exactly, I guess I felt second-hand pain?”

Poppy snickered a little, “Yeah, I get it. Kinda like how you feel the pain of video game characters, right?”

The mirror boy met her smile with a puzzled look.

“Video games?”

Poppy gasped, “HOW OLD ARE YOU?”

Mirror boy motioned to his medieval dress.

“Do you have one of those drama masks for faces like in Shrek?”

“Obviously not.”

“So, are you like a mirror, mirror type of thing?”

“Well ---”

“OH OH OH, Can you tell me who...Nah I lost it.”

“Let me guess, who’s the fairest of them all?”

“No, that’s cliché. Wait, who is the fairest of them all?”

“I genuinely hope you don’t expect me to say you.”

Poppy procured the most offended look she could muster. “How dare you! Do you want me to chuck you into the pillows again?”

“Please don’t.”

“So, are you one of those mirrors?”

“No. I was just trapped here.”

“By what?”

“A witch.”

Poppy’s inner Potterhead was released. “WITCHES ARE REAL?!?! Is Hogwarts real?!”

“They were. In my time. According to your reaction, they aren’t anymore. I’m not sure about this Hogwarts thing you speak of.”

“So, you’re a muggle. Were the Salem trials viable?”

“What’s a muggle? Salem?”

“Right. Different period.”

“Okay? Will you let me explain now?”

“Yes. Okay. Sorry.”

“Believe it or not, I was once a prince----”

“And you were threatened by a witch who was the ex-love of your father. She eventually got to you and punished you on your wedding day, 18th birthday, or coronation. You were chained to this mirror, which is ERAS old, and you have endured the torture of many masters who have wanted to abuse your magical powers. And now you’re here. According to Disney logic, you’re either a princess or your last name is Charming?”

“Uhh...no.”

“Oh. Read the chapter wrong. Sorry.”

“I was a prince, and my kingdom was attacked when I was 20. I was not of age to take over my kingdom, and my parents knew this. We fought valiantly but eventually, the royal circle was overtaken. The castle was our last defense, but our fight was useless. I watched my kingdom fall and met the bane of my father’s existence, the enchantress, Ravenmoor. She bound me to this petty mirror, where I’ve stayed for so many years. It’s more like limbo, because I haven’t aged at all, but it was soooooo boring. Eventually, I found my way here.”

“I like my version better. But still, an epic story, buddy.”

“Thanks. What’s your name, m’lady?”

Poppy giggled a little, “Lady Poppy, and yours?”

“Prince Maximus. Pleasure.”

“Can I call you Max, please?”

“I’d rather---”

“Thanks, Max.”

Max sighed but smiled back at the girl who was now his host.

“This is the coolest thing that’s ever happened to me. You realize that right?”

“Cool?”

“Like awe-striking. That type of thing.”

“Ah. Cool.”

“See, you’re getting the hang of it.”

Maximus had a proud smirk on his face at this incredible accomplishment of understanding pop culture. Poppy only laughed, which made him lose said pride. “No! Why?! You looked so cute and dorky!”

Maximus flushed with embarrassment and turned away. He disappeared for a moment, making Poppy see herself. She noticed her flattered blush as a result. In a few seconds, Max was back.

“Sorry, m’lady.”

“It’s okay, Sir Maximus. Now...what do you want to know about the last 1,000 years?”

“Everything, if you can, Lady Poppy.”

“Challenge accepted. Hope you’re ready to sit and listen for a little longer?”

“What’re a few more hours compared to hundreds of years?”

\*

\*

\*

\*

“And that’s how we got the Covid vaccine.”

“All...of that...happened in a couple of millenniums.”

“Everything relevant to our time happened in the last 300 years, but pretty much!”

“Incredible.”

“You look like a little puppy who just discovered he had a tail.”

“Oddly specific.”

“Well, it’s what you look like. Anyway, am I supposed to leave

on some epic quest for you now or something?”

“I have no idea.”

Poppy was incredibly underwhelmed. Did his response have to be so anti-climactic? “I’m an unemployed 19-year-old living in their parents’ house. You have to give me something.”

“19?! And you haven’t found a husband?”

“Max...we talked about this. Women don’t have to be married as soon as they’re old enough to clean a house.”

“Right. Women’s Suffrage. 1920.”

“Correct. Moving on, where can we start to find a way out for you?”

“I suppose the best place would be my castle’s ruins.”

“So, the quest begins.”

Poppy and Max packed for their expedition, though Max wasn’t able to do much besides preparing her for any medieval threats that may come their way.

Once everything was ready, Poppy took a step out her apartment door, golden mirror in hand, prepared for monsters and goblins galore in the great region of Western Europe. Contextually, it would be very difficult to pinpoint the location of castle ruins from thousands of years ago. However, in a twist of fate, she’d found herself with a talking mirror. As such, Poppy could believe anything was possible at this point.

With her knowledge of King Arthur, Merlin, and all the good tales of medieval times, Poppy decided her best bet would be visiting a very common ground point in regard to tales such as these. Stonehenge was prominently featured in all the stories regarding magic, witches, wizards, and everything in between. Even so, standing at the center of a bunch of stone slabs stacked on top of each other in the dead of night wasn’t ideal. Regardless, it’s the circumstances in which Poppy found herself. Max had talked her ear off whenever he got the chance, which was rare since a talking mirror would attract unwanted attention in the crowded cities of Great Britain. The eerie stillness kept him quiet now, despite his significance in why they’d shoved themselves into the situation.

“Maximus,” she found herself whispering, “What am I supposed to do now?”

“How am I supposed to know?”

“You’re the one who was around when this was built!”

“No, it had been built before my time.”

“Whatever, you still have a better chance at knowing what to do than I do.”

“Fair, but I still haven’t the slightest idea.”

“For a prince stuck in a mirror, you seriously can’t see how dense you are?” Poppy shook her frustrations away, reminding herself that a few days ago he didn’t know what a car was. Then, she got an idea. “Max, how do you say, ‘Summon the renowned witch, Ravenmoor’ in Latin?”

“Why...NO!”

“Come on, it’s worth a shot!”

“You have no idea what you’re getting into. She’s dangerous.”

“And I’m determined to find your answers. Don’t mess with the power of determination.” Despite her speech of motivation, Max’s lips were sealed.

“Pleeeeeeaaasssseeee?” Poppy held her ground until he finally caved.

Swallowing, Max spoke, “Voca celebre veneficii, Ravenmoor...Poppy. Be careful.”

“Got it.”

Poppy placed Max’s mirror in the estimated center and stood a couple of paces away.

“Voca celebre veneficii, Ravenmoor.”

To her surprise, the stones started to shift. One fell from its pedestal, causing an enormous dust cloud and the ground shook beneath her feet. From the cloud, a dark figure rose. Poppy could eventually see an elegantly dressed, dark-haired woman with a smug smirk stretching across her youthful face.

“So, who dared summon the great Ravenmoor after so many years?”

“I wouldn’t say she’s so great considering she’s a jerk.”

The witch’s smirk turned foul. “How dare you come at me with such ignorance?! Have you no shame?”

“Nope. But I do have good reason to insult you. You put my friend in a mirror for longer than considerably desired.”

“You don’t speak of my ex-husband’s pathetic son, Maximus?”

Is he here?”

“Ex-husband?! THIS IS AN EXPANSION OF THE PLOT, MAX! COULD’VE TOLD ME THAT BEFORE!”

“Oh, he is here! Maxie, it’s been too long!”

“Be quiet, lady! I’m questioning my friend’s withholding of information!”

Ravenmoor looked severely offended, but Poppy had no regard for the feelings of a ghost, at least, not this ghost. Poppy scooped up Max’s mirror, who appeared to be avoiding showing his face.

“Oh, come on! She’s not scary, like, at all! She can’t do anything!”

The witch cackled to herself, “That’s where you’re wrong. One flick of my hand and my curse on Maxie is permanent. Or...”

“Or what?”

“Happily ever after won’t be so happy. Let’s just say that.”

“Well, I’m the one that summoned you. All I want are answers, and then you can go back to whatever afterlife you came from.”

“I don’t think so. You’re not in control here, foolish girl. You were naive to think I’d simply undo my curse or tell you how to do it.”

Poppy fumed with embarrassment, “I did not!” Max consoled her, “There’s no point in lying. Just...don’t do anything brash like that again.”

Ravenmoor scowled, “Oh...so I’m dealing with a love story? How cliché! Is my work of witchcraft obstructing you star-struck lovers?” Poppy snapped back, “We aren’t like that! Now, what are you even planning to do?”

“A lot of things. But first, I’ll finish off what’s left of that idiot’s bloodline! Goodbye, Maxie!”

“NO!”

In a spout of impulsiveness, Poppy flung the mirror into the air, crossing her fingers there would be time to catch it. Her efforts were meaningless as a shock of violet lightning shot from the enchantress’s fingertips, reaching the mirror in less than a second. She sprinted for the mirror as it fell toward the rocky ground.

Poppy somehow caught the mirror before it hit a single pebble. Even so, she saw that the glass had practically shattered to pieces. Maximus was nowhere to be seen in the reflection.

“No...what have I done...”

Ravenmoor stifled a snicker.

“He’s gone...and you find it amusing?”

“Of course, but that’s not even the best part!”

“Oh, and what would that be?”

“You know, it’s a lot more painful landing on a rocky surface outside the mirror. Anyway, what were you saying about the fairest of them all?” Poppy whipped her attention away from Ravenmoor and turned to face a young man around her age, strangely dressed in medieval attire.

“MAX! YOU’RE ALIVE!”

Poppy tackled him before he could speak again.

Ravenmoor smirked, “I like you, Poppy. Forcing a confident girl like yourself into misery would seem so disastrous. You remind me of myself, so I thought you deserved what I couldn’t have.”

Poppy turned to thank the mad woman, but she was nowhere to be seen.

“You know, in my time it wouldn’t be socially acceptable for a peasant to be with a prince, but seeing as it’s the 21st century, how’d you like to go on a...a date?” Poppy gazed into Max’s eyes with an amused smile, “How do you say, I’d love to, in Latin?”

“Well, that depends. There’s a slightly different phrase in Latin.”

“And what would that be?”

“Ego Amare.”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

Without another word, Poppy kissed her prince charming, or rather her Prince Maximus, and they lived happily ever after.

## Untitled

Kian looked up at the sound of his mother's voice, but he ignored her. He was in a new place and was busy discovering things about everything that surrounded him. He noticed the lady sitting to his right was nervous; she'd been chewing on her nails and tapping her foot. Kian knew that she was the kind of person who worried a lot. The tips of her nails did not make it to the tips of her fingers.

Kian looked to his left to see another woman reading a magazine. He knew that she was a strict, but kind businesswoman. Her fancy blouse, tight skirt, and high heels fit perfectly together as an outfit. Kian thought she was the boss at her company, which he guessed was a magazine company, as she was closely inspecting each page, each layout, each picture, each title. He noticed the few scratch marks of a small dog on her thin legs. That's how she knew she was goodhearted. The dog had been jumping up on her legs, happy to see her. At least that's what Kian believed. He also noticed that he was the only male in the waiting room. That couldn't have been a good sign.

"Kian! Come here! You're up." He looked back up to see his mother motioning for him. Kian walked through the large oak door and left his mother outside in the waiting room. He'd expected her to follow him inside. However, he didn't think much of it when she didn't. When he walked in, he noticed. Noticed everything from the shifty man behind the giant wooden desk to the tiny little scratch marks on the wall on the left side of the giant wood bookshelf.

"Hello, Kian! I'm Mr. Ford. How are you?" The man, Mr. Ford, interrupted Kian's thought process. Kian sat down at one of the two chairs in front of the therapist's desk.

"I'm fine." Kian decided not to mention the bookshelf. He looked at Mr. Ford and saw a small stain on his left shoulder, sort of moving toward his back. He also noticed the picture of a man



and a pregnant woman framed on the back wall. “How’s your baby? Is it a boy or a girl?”

Mr. Ford just stared. “Um.” Then he clicked back into place. “Oh yes! She’s doing just swell! How did you know? Oh, never mind that. Let’s get right into our session, shall we? You can sit right there on that couch if you like.”

“I’ll stay here.”

“Alrighty then. Let’s get started.”

“Why am I here? I’m in no need of a therapist.”

Mr. Ford made a face. “Oh. I thought your mother would have told you. I’m terribly sorry. I guess I’ll be the one to break it to you. Mrs. Adams contacted me and informed me that you are very attentive to detail, but it tends to distract you from your more important responsibilities. She wants me to help you be able to focus.”

“What?! I am focused. And I don’t need some fancy expensive therapist to try to change who I am. I’ll stick to keeping what I’ve got, thank you very much.” Kian jumped out of the chair, nearly knocking it over. He stormed out of the door, slamming it behind him. The women in the waiting room jumped at the sound. Kian didn’t wait for his mother. He kept walking straight to the car. She soon caught up to him though.

“Kian! Where are you going?”

“I can’t believe you signed me up for therapy without giving me a reason. Here I thought this was just another cheap session where we’d sit and drag on about our sad little lives since Dad left. Which I hate anyway. But now you’re trying to rip away the one good thing about me, the one thing that I can always count on to be there.”

“Kian it’s not like that! I just want what’s best for you! And this thing is distracting you from being your best, that’s all.”

“You know mom, maybe this is my best. Maybe this is just the way I’m supposed to be. Did you ever think of that? Did you?” Kian was practically yelling now.

“You know what? Never mind. Get back in there. I didn’t pay one hundred and fifty dollars for you to storm out in the first five minutes!”

Reluctantly, Kian walked back into the building, heading for Mr. Ford’s office. The door had been opened again, and Mr. Ford

stood in the doorway.

“Welcome back, Mr. Adams. Care to try this again?”

“Yeah, whatever,” Kian snapped. He walked back into the office, reseating himself into the chair he’d sat in before. “Okay, can we please just get this over with?”

“Of course.” But as soon as he was about to start, Mr. Ford’s secretary burst into the room. She looked panicked. “Mr. Ford! You better get out here!” The therapist rushed out. The nervous woman seemed to be having a panic attack. The secretary gave her a brown paper bag to breathe into. Kian figured Mr. Ford would be gone for at least ten minutes. And he most certainly wasn’t going to sit here doing nothing.

He decided to check out the bookshelf. Something had been off about it. There were scratch marks on the wall on the left side of the bookshelf. Kian wondered if there was a hidden room or something beyond the shelf. He began to pull out books, like they do in movies when there’s a secret room behind a bookshelf, but none of them worked. Only then did he notice how the shelf didn’t really touch the ground. Maybe because it was on wheels.

Kian went to the right side of the bookshelf and pushed. It moved easily, revealing a small, dark hallway. He pulled out his phone and turned on the flashlight. He quickly looked behind himself to make sure no one was watching, then slipped into the hallway. It was cold and dark and smelled musty. There was also another smell, an awful one that Kian couldn’t make out. He kept going until he came to a large opening. The smell suddenly became much, much worse.

He lifted his phone so that the flashlight shone on the room. He instantly regretted it, and the awful smell was explained. Laid out on small beds were ten corpses. Five male, five female, from what Kian could tell. Most of them wanted to bolt out of there and call the police. Mr. Ford must’ve been his small town’s never-caught serial killer. But a very small part of him wanted to snoop around a little more. Maybe find some evidence to prove that it was indeed Mr. Ford, just in case no one believed him.

But before he could make up his mind, an arm was around his neck. It pulled tighter and tighter. He tried to scream but all his air had left him. He clawed at the arm till his fingers hurt.

Then air.

His breath had returned to him. He fell to the ground, gasping.

When he looked up, he saw Mr. Ford, who now looked more terrifying than the lanky nervous guy he'd seen before. In a calm yet furious voice, Mr. Ford spoke. "What. Are. You. Doing?"

"N-nothing! I just got a little curious that's all! I didn't see anything I swear!" Mr. Ford grabbed Kian by the collar and dragged him up.

"This is never spoken of, you hear?"

Kian nodded. "Don't even bother going to the police; they'll never believe you." Mr. Ford pushed Kian back into the hallway towards the office. They re-entered the office and each took their seat. "Now how about that session? Seems like you've just been through a traumatic experience. Let's talk about it."

## Goodbye

That was the last word I heard before he walked away, and to my irritation, he didn't explain why.

We were high school sweethearts, easily the most shipped couple in school. He loved me, I loved him, everything was seemingly well.

However, right before the day we broke up, he started acting differently. He was mean and seemed to not care about me at all. And maybe I'm in the wrong for thinking that he should care about me, but it's like he was done.

Today was the day he broke up with me, and I feel a mix of anger and sadness. I'm sad because everything was perfect, but I'm angry because he didn't care about me in the end. Part of me wonders if I did something wrong, but I hated the thought of that. I always told him to tell me if anything was bothering him so we could work things out. If it were really my fault, he should've told me.

I decided that moving on was hard, so I needed to forget him. I took myself to different places, I took a nap, and I even tried listening to music. But the voice in my head kept telling me that it was all my fault. Exhausted, I finally fell asleep fully, unlike my little nap from earlier.

When I woke up and looked outside, the sun was bright. I wondered what time it was and looked at my clock. 7:45?! I was going to be late!!

I grabbed my backpack and ran out to my car, not caring to brush my hair. The drive there was filled with me panicking about being late, so I wasn't entirely focused. I still made it on time, to my surprise. I ran to my classroom and sat down, trying to calm my earlier anxiety.

A familiar face sat down next to me, and I suppressed a groan. Daniel. The same person who caused me to be spaced out was here. I was honestly hoping he wasn't, and I put my head down in

frustration.

“What do you want?” I ask. He had literally every other seat in existence that he could sit in, because we don’t have assigned seating.

“Are you... mad at me?” he asked, seeming to be hurt.

“Yes, I’m annoyed! You just left, and you won’t explain anything to me!”

The teacher saw everything and told me to move seats, shooting me a look telling me I wasn’t in trouble. I nodded and sat down in my new seat. Amethyst, who was my best friend, gave me a hug.

“You okay? What happened with your boyfriend?” she asked.

I was annoyed, but I shouldn’t have snapped at her. At the time, I couldn’t help it. “He’s NOT my boyfriend,” I spit.

Amethyst had never seen me annoyed before, so she was taken aback. “Woah, is everything okay between you and him?”

I sighed and explained everything to her. She listened patiently, shocked at what she heard. After I told her, she hugged me tighter and comforted me. I ended up crying into her shoulder while she stroked my hair. After a few minutes, I calmed down and just focused on the classwork. I felt someone watching me, but I didn’t care.

After class, I walked to the lunchroom, Amethyst trailing behind me. In my attempt to get away from class, I ran into someone. He turned around with an angry look. “Hey, watch where you’re-”

“I’m sorry... I didn’t mean to...” At that point, I was holding back tears, and he saw it.

“Hey, everything okay? You’re crying-”

“I’m fine...” I tried running off, but he grabbed my wrist and pulled me into a tight hug. I gave up and hugged back, leaning against him. He wrapped his arms around my waist, and I hugged back. Amethyst smiled softly before noticing Daniel. She shot him a look, but I didn’t care. Whoever this guy was, he was warm and comfortable.

“What about lunch?”

He snapped me out of my thoughts. “Right! Um... what’s your name?”

“Jonathon-”

“Nice to meet you!” I smiled warmly and he patted head.

“Nice to meet you too, shortie – ”

“I – hey!”

He laughed, a sweet laugh, like wind chimes hitting in the wind. His smile was like the sun, it was very bright. His hands were a blanket, warm and comfortable. Was I falling for him?

He picked me up and carried me to the lunchroom, where I got some food before sitting down. Jonathon sat next to me, and Daniel walked over.

“Hey, I just – “

I glared at him. “I don’t want to see you.”

He looked at me pitifully. “Can you let me – “

Jonathon kissed me on the lips and locked eyes with Daniel. I was shocked and flustered, but I kissed back. The glare we received from Daniel was worth it though, it felt good to me.

Daniel pulled me away from Jonathon and into another room. I tried struggling but he pulled me onto a chair and taped me to it. I tried screaming but tape was placed over my mouth. He was sick. I hated his guts even more.

“I don’t think you understand. You aren’t getting away from me. I tried putting up a kind act but no. Now, you ruined it. And now, I’m going to ruin your life until you come crawling back to me, begging for me back. I’m gonna make you wish you never were born. You’re gonna-” he stopped, smiling evilly before removing the tape. “I wouldn’t scream if I were you. Now, if you’d let me ex – ”

“You’re sick!!” I tried pulling away, but he sat on my lap and grabbed my hands to prevent me from pushing him away.

“Ah, I’d be quiet if I were you. Now, you’ve been so clingy, I can’t do anything! You always asked me what I’m doing, it’s not fair!” He sighed. “And I needed a break, but you took it to heart!”

I stayed silent but looked away. After a while of silence, I looked him dead in the eye. “You could’ve told me instead of pushing me away! It hurt me!”

He sighed. “I was planning on surprising you for your birthday, but no! You just HAD to know!”

I stayed silent again. I had completely forgotten about my birthday, and I had pushed him about it. It was my fault, and yet I

was blaming him for everything. I was a terrible person. He was trying to surprise me for my birthday, and I pushed him away.

It must've shown on my face, or maybe he could tell by my silence, but he rubbed my head. "It's alright though, I understand. You've always said for me to tell you everything, especially when it comes to stuff like this. I understand that you were just trying to understand where I was coming from, I could've explained that I wanted free roam to do stuff without you always knowing. I'm sorry."

"It's okay, I just... need to think..." I mumble.

"I understand, I should've expected. By the way, happy birthday." He got up and unbound me, but I was shocked. I didn't realize today was my birthday because I was too stressed to realize. He noticed and frowned slightly. "You forgot your birthday, huh?"

I shook my head, but he took my hand and brought me to the garden. Jonathon was there, and he grabbed my hand as well.

"Merith, you've brought us joy. We love you, and we understand if you don't feel the same way. But..."

I smiled. "I love both of you too."

They smiled and kissed me. And other than the misunderstanding that happened between Daniel and I, our relationship was stronger than ever.

## The Cliff

He was born on the cliff, but he would not die on it. This was a fact unknown to him.

In a remote corner of a world, a baby was born. It was born in shadow, at the bottom of the enormous wall. It was born to two lonely parents, one of whom died immediately after, while the other soon followed. However, this is not about them. Immediately after its birth, as if on instinct, the baby began to climb up the cliff.

Over time, it grew. It received sustenance from the cliff; every few feet, there was food that it could eat, and ledges for it to sleep. The distance between each ledge, however, kept increasing. In the beginning, it was a few feet; as it went up the cliff, this gradually increased until it had to climb up hundreds of feet to sleep or get more food. However, the baby did not stay a baby through this process. He grew and grew to the point where these distances weren't a struggle for him.

As he climbed up, he began to wonder: "Why?" Of course, he knew that if he stopped climbing, he wouldn't be able to eat. In the same instinctive manner, he knew that if he tried to go back down the cliff at any point, he would suffer the consequences. These didn't have to do with his question. Eventually, he decided that his goal was to eat as much as he could. After all, out of his 3 tasks of eating, sleeping, and climbing, eating was by far the most enjoyable to him.

He set off on this goal; as a consequence, he climbed significantly faster than he previously had. On average, he climbed twice as fast after his resolution compared to before it. He enjoyed his pursuit of his goal; since he was now more well fed, he could rest for longer periods of time, and he could climb with much more ease.



He continued at this task for an uncountable length of time. He kept climbing and climbing and climbing on, always trying to reach his next goal as quickly as possible.

Eventually, the unthinkable happened. He looked upwards, and in the distance saw an absence of stone. Curious, he raced towards this absence at breakneck speed. As he went up and up, it grew bigger and bigger, until eventually he reached the point where the cliff ended.

However, this wasn't something he knew; it wasn't something he could possibly know. Living his entire life upon the cliff led him to believe that it was a constant; that its existence was a fundamental law. As such, he equated the flat surface of the top of the cliff to the only other horizontal surface that he knew of; a ledge. He found it curious that this ledge seemed to stretch on forever; however, he thought that if he reached the end of it, he would be able to continue his journey up the cliff.

So, he walked. He walked and walked and ran and ran and yet there was no cliff and there was no food. At this point, he was tired and hungry, but with little other choice he kept moving forward; he knew that going back would only make him suffer more. He kept going until eventually, it was too much; he collapsed, and starved to death alone after completing the ascent.



Asia Kim-Failing  
High School

## Untitled

“DO NOT TALK ABOUT ██████. DO NOT WRITE ABOUT ██████. DO NOT REFER TO ██████ USING ANY NAME. THE MORE YOU KNOW ABOUT ██████, THE MORE ██████ KNOWS ABOUT YOU.”

Rhayla stared at the poster quizzically. How was one supposed to know what, or rather who, should remain in an unknowing silence? What if she brought this mystery thing up by accident? Through the coffee shop window Rhayla could see Leaf, the cashier that worked in the shop.

The shop's bell jingled when she walked in. “Hey Leaf, when did that weird poster appear?” Leaf looked up from the register and shrugged. Leaf didn't talk much, and Rhayla was debating on whether they could talk, or if they just chose silence.

“It just showed up last week.” A new voice sounded from behind Rhayla, and arms wrapped around her waist. “We didn't see who put it there.” An ominous pause, “Neither did the security cameras.”

“Uh huh. Sure Cyn.” Rhayla rolled her eyes, pulling herself from Cyn's embrace.

“I'm serious!” Cyn exclaimed, “Plus, it's the vaguest thing I've ever seen. Like, who are we not supposed to talk about? What if we accidentally say its name?” Rhayla was glad that someone else shared her worry about accidentally bringing up the creature's name.

Cyn sighed, “Whatever it is, it hasn't caused any problems.” She ran a hand through her short, choppy hair, “So I'll just let it be. What would you like today?” Cyn moved behind the counter.

“Just the usual.” Rhayla handed a five-dollar bill to Leaf as they punched in her order. “How's your day been?” Rhayla asked them. She got a thumbs up in response, then Leaf ducked into the back of the shop. Rhayla sat in the window seat of the shop. From

the seat she could see the poster, the light shining through reverse letters. 'DO NOT TALK ABOUT UMBRA' Rhayla's eyes grew wide. A strange feeling of dread filled her gut. Cyn brought her drink a few minutes later.

"Thanks" she took the Styrofoam cup. Cyn sat next to Rhayla.

"You, okay?" Cyn frowned, "You look like you've seen a ghost."

Rhayla pointed to the poster behind her. She watched Cyn read it, once, twice, then her eyes widened, 'Who's Um-' Rhayla clapped her hand over Cyn's mouth.

"Are you insane?" She hissed, 'Did you not read it? Don't talk about it, don't write about it, don't refer to it.'

"Oh please." Cyn scoffed, "If they didn't want us to say it, don't make it so it could be seen."

"It was redacted so we couldn't see it! And now that we know we're never using that word in a sentence, we can leave it alone."

"Umbra." Cyn stared in amusement at Rhayla's horrified expression. "Umbra, Umbra." She waited a beat before shrugging, "See? Nothing happened." Cyn moved to stand up before the shop started to shake.

"Look what you did!" Rhayla yelled. The lights above her flickered and swayed and she dropped her cup on the floor, spilling her drink everywhere. Then the shaking stopped as suddenly as it had started.

"You've angered it," Rhayla hissed. "I don't feel good about this Cyn. You know what that poster said. The more you know about it, the more it knows about you."

"You're telling me that you're not even a little curious? It's probably just some prank."

"Well maybe it is, but obviously I'm curious." Rhayla rolled her eyes, "What happened to 'letting it be'?"

"That was before you showed me the name!" Cyn was exasperated. "Besides, nothing interesting ever happens here. What's the worst that can happen?"

"Fine. I'll humor you. But if we die, I'm never going to forgive you."

Cyn grinned before pulling out her phone. "I'm going to start with seeing what an Umbra is and then-."

“You want to know about Umbra?” a quiet voice spoke up. The two girls jumped; Leaf stood with a mop. “Sorry, I saw the spill.” They motioned to the slowly spreading puddle of coffee on the floor, “But if you want to know about the Umbra, I can tell you.”

“Please do!” Cyn took the mop from Leaf, “You tell us everything and I’ll clean this up.”

Leaf shrugged, “The Umbra is a shadow. Literally. Scientifically it is an area where no light can exist. When you’re in an umbra you’re in an eclipse. Darkness. Now, ‘The Umbra’ I have little to no clue what it is. All I know is that The Umbra is a shadow, darkness, an eclipse. And someone doesn’t want us speaking about it. Maybe The Umbra itself doesn’t want us to speak of it or know about it. But I think it wants us to fear it. Thus, the really creepy posters around town that still have the creature’s name on it. I don’t think it’s necessarily bad. But the warning on the poster is certainly ominous. It’s apparently ancient. I don’t know much more than that.”

They seemed sheepish. Cyn stared at them, holding the mop, making little to no progress on the puddle of coffee. “So, for all we know this Umbra could be an interdimensional alien trying to drag our world into eternal darkness?”

“Yep.” Leaf nodded, taking the mop from Cyn and cleaning up the mess themselves.

“Why don’t we go to the library?” Rhayla looked up from her phone, where she had been taking notes.

“Oh, you’re into this.” Cyn seemed surprised. “Like you actually want to solve this. What if this is just some prank?”

Rhayla sighed, “Yeah, but you said that no one saw the poster appear, not even the cameras and that weird earthquake just happened. Like you said, what’s the worst that can happen?”

Leaf grinned, a strange yet warm look on their face. They opened the door out of the shop and motioned for the girls to follow them. As the group walked down the street Cyn blabbered her theories about Umbra. Every once in a while, Leaf would nod in agreement. Rhayla stayed behind in her thoughts.

As they neared the library a feeling of dread filled her gut once again. Leaf held open the door as Rhayla and Cyn looked into the library. A quiet gasp left Cyn’s lips. A metallic scent hit Rhayla in the face, and she could taste it in her mouth.

It took Rhayla a minute to adjust to the darkness, and when they did, she wished she could unsee the inside of the library.

“Oh god.” Leaf’s quiet voice cut through the silence. The darkness of the library was strange and ominous, matching the sight before Rhayla. Broken bodies littered the floor. The books on the shelves were shredded around on the floor, floating slowly down were pages. Cyn snatched one out of the air. The page crumpled into dust the moment she touched it. A low rumbling growl sounded from the back of the library. “W-we should go,” Leaf stuttered and Rhayla nodded in agreement.

The door clicked shut and Cyn yelped. The growl grew louder, till it stopped. The library was so silent Rhayla could hear Cyn’s heart racing and Leaf’s heavy breathing. That’s when she saw it. A large mass rushed past the shelf to the right of her. “Hello?” She called out. Cyn looked at her with a horrified look.

“Rhayla Hart.” A voice whispered. “Do you know who I am?” When Rhayla couldn’t force an answer out of her mouth the voice continued, “What about you? Cyn Barlowe. Do you know who I am?” Cyn only whimpered. “And Leaf Whitlock.” the voice chuckled, “You know who I am. A brave soul. I know the most about you.”

“You’re the Umbra.” Leaf whispered. They couldn’t hide the shake in their voice, but they had responded. “The darkness.”

A raspy laugh sounded through the library, echoing in the empty space. “I’m a personification of the darkness, young scholar. I’m thousands of years old. Drawn from the darkness of man’s thoughts. I am here to-”

“Stop.” Leaf croaked. “Stop telling us about you.” The poster’s warning flashed in Rhayla’s mind. ‘The more you know about Umbra, the more Umbra knows about you.’

The blur that had passed by Rhayla was now a little less than 100 feet from them. A large, dark mass. Cyn clutched onto Rhayla’s arm and Leaf placed a comforting hand on Cyn’s shoulder. The blob grew closer, but Rhayla still couldn’t see the creature’s features. It seemed that the Umbra was a large morphing mass of darkness. Somehow this formless mass had killed the inhabitants of the library.

“I’m The Umbra.” The creature’s whispers echoed through the

library. Its voice weighed heavy, dread and hopelessness filling Rhayla's body, she couldn't think about how to stop it. She was going to die in the library by Umbra. She should have left that poster alone. Leaf pulled themselves from Cyn's death grip and slowly backed towards the door.

The windows of the library were blocked by shelves and tables, letting almost no light in. The little light she could see was faint, like the day was fading. Which didn't make sense, it was almost noon when they walked in, it wouldn't be anywhere close to dusk.

"Don't open that door, scholar." Umbra hissed. Leaf's eyes lit up in realization. An Umbra was a darkness. Perhaps it would vanish with light.

The Umbra moved towards Rhayla, who had sunk onto the floor in despair. Cyn cried out, releasing Leaf's arm and throwing the nearest object towards the Umbra. A large book flew through its formless body. The book seemed to do nothing except annoy it, but that was all Cyn needed to drag Rhayla out of the way.

"Cyn, help!" Leaf was tipping tables and shelves over, clearing the way to the windows. Cyn seemed to understand, joining them to pull the rest of the tables down. Light hit the Umbra form. The Umbra screamed, a deathly wail that cracked the windows and left Rhayla and Leaf's ears bleeding. Cyn's hands were over her ears, but Leaf didn't stop at the windows, they pulled the doors open with a grunt. The light seemed to swallow the Umbra, dark swirling patterns, caged by the light. The formless darkness seemed to slowly fade into a sweet-smelling smoke, a poor mix with the metallic, rotting smell of the library. Leaf touched their ears tenderly, wincing at the blood, before looking over at Rhayla, who stared blankly at the floor, silent tears streaming down her face.

Outside the library, red and blue lights flashed, and officers began to flood in. Leaf let the officers lead them out of the library, looking back to make sure Cyn was with Rhayla.

The published story of 'The Library Incident' was about a bear that had gotten loose from the zoo. The three brave teens had tried to save the people in the library when they had heard the screams, but they were too late, and the bear had left. Leaf seriously

doubted that anyone believed the story, the casualty number was too high, too unbelievable, for a bear.

Cyn was sitting next to Rhayla in her hospital bed, waving her hands and saying something, Leaf's hand moved towards their ear, turning their hearing aid up till Cyn's annoyed voice registered. "They're still looking for a bear."

Rhayla looked at Leaf, "You don't think that... the thing could come back?"

Leaf shook their head, "No." And they meant it.

## An Old Man's Revenge: Tell Tale Heart Sequel

The narrator was finally taken away and sent to jail after he confessed to murdering the old man. He was taken away by two police officers who were the main officers in charge. In the car on the way to the prison, the narrator was going insane and would not stop repeating, "That eye. That eye cannot stare at me anymore."

"You have the right to remain silent," the main officer said.

When they arrived at the prison, he was put into his uniform and taken to his cell where he would be for the rest of his life. The prison he was taken to was very run down. It had a very eerie feeling of uneasiness and there had been rumors of people being killed there. You can even smell and taste death just walking in there. It lacked a lot of security with no barbed wire or anything and the real "security" is a stone wall around the yard that was very low, and people could easily climb on the wall. The roof was leaking oil which resulted in a very disgusting smell that reeked around the whole prison. "That eye. That eye cannot stare at me anymore." the narrator kept repeating.

Back at the old man's house, it has been pretty quiet since the narrator was sent to jail earlier in the morning. The house was a black house and was always cloudy just under his house and it was raining cats and dogs constantly. His neighbors were scared to go near that house after the old man was murdered because they thought that the house is cursed and might get killed if they go in there.

The silence broke a few hours later when the old man came back to life from inside the floor where he was kept hidden. He gathered his limbs, put himself back together, opened the door that led to the bottom of the floor, and escaped. "Where is that killer!?" the old man said. He thinks hard and believes he was taken away to the nearby prison. He then says aggressively, "Let's



give that man a taste of his own medicine.” He then grabbed his cane aggressively and bolted out the door to find the narrator.

When he got to the prison, he did not know how to get in since there were two security guards in the front. He then searched and searched and found a broken window that led inside the prison, so he jumped up to the window and snuck into the part of the prison where all of the prisoners were being kept.

He then tip-toed quietly to the narrator's cell where he had been sleeping. The narrator awoke when he heard the footsteps and asked, “Who's there?” There was no response.

Suddenly, the old man stopped walking and stood in front of the narrator. Then the narrator grabbed a random flashlight he found on the floor and was shocked to see the old man.

“Think you are so tough for killing me huh? I am immortal!” the old man shouted.

The narrator crouched down in a ball, crying a river. “What do you want from me?” the narrator cried.

“I want you to suffer as much as I did,” he said, very angry. He then forced open the narrator's cell door and stood over the narrator revealing his eye. “I thought you were so tough,” the old man said. Then, he opened up his odd eye and lit up all white, and shot a laser, killing the narrator at the speed of light with all of his limbs coming apart.

“That's karma for you.” the old man said, dusting off his hands. He then ran back to his house as fast as a cheetah before the police could catch him and made it home very out of breath and went to sleep.

The next morning, back at the prison, the police were waking up all the prisoners but, when they saw the narrator in his cell, they saw him dead. They all screamed in horror.

“Who killed this man?” said one of the officers. The prisoners all looked confused and shook their heads no. They then dashed to the security rooms to check the cameras and they saw the whole killing taking place. They were horrified at what they saw.

“Wait a minute.” one of the officers said. “That was the man who was killed a day ago.” All their jaws dropped to the floor.

“How did he come back to life?” the officer said.

“Doesn't matter.” the main officer said. “We need to find this

guy and arrest him immediately.”

They all got into the police car and drove to the old man's house. At the house, the old man was making breakfast when he heard a knock and opened the door to the two main officers. “Put your hands up!” said the main officer. He then put his hands up, was put in handcuffs, and was taken to prison. “I killed him for a reason!” the old man shouted.

“You have the right to remain silent,” the officers said. When they arrived at the prison, he was immediately put into the same cell the narrator was in and was told he was going to be put in prison for life.

The next morning, when the officers came to wake him up, the old man was nowhere to be found in his cell. “Where is he?” said the second main officer.

“No idea but we need to find him right away,” the main officer said. They dashed into a police car. They drove to the neighborhood where the old man's house was and asked if anyone had seen him running free. Every one of them said no. They then went to the old man's house.

“Police open up!” The main officer shouted. There was no answer, so the officers pried open the door and went into the house to search the house. They did not find anything. But, when they went up to his room, they found a note on the old man's bed that read, “I had a reason to kill him.” They found this note very strange so they just left it and drove away back into the prison. But outside the prison, they saw the old man with his eye all white ready to kill the officers. They then ran for their lives while the old man followed them. He was faster than the two officers. He shot the laser from his eye, killing the officers, then ran off and was never seen again.

## Clara's Promise

Observing has always been one of my few pastimes. Watching over that old barn and those inside of it, I feel a warmth that shouldn't be possible in my ragged, straw arms. Of course, I don't have much of a choice. I cannot move, nor speak, and though I have purpose, when all is said and done, there's plenty of time to kill. It should be stated that along with watching comes thinking, for one cannot simply view without pondering. That's just admiring scenery. By principle, thinking should become easier with practice, yet for nearly twenty years, the same question plagued my burlap skull. I did not come to the answer through mere cogitation, however. A situation like this one called for a far more eyes-on approach.

It began shortly after my creation, a year or so if I had to guess. At the time, the farmers had begun to get comfortable with their situation. Each and every day, I watched them trek out into the fields, tending to their crops with questionable proficiency. It all had a pleasant and warm charm to it.

The barn itself was getting comfortable as well. Initially, paint chipped off its walls

simply by touching them, but now, it was shaping up to be a real beauty. Of course, the renovations helped with this, but I attributed a large part to the purpose it had again. The couple were by no means aristocrats, but they made a steady living.

It wasn't long before an extra room was occupied. The schedule was changing slowly but surely, eventually coming to a full halt at the mercy of the painful wails of labor. I don't remember much of that day, but when the screams finally stopped, crying took its place. The moment I first saw her face, that question enveloped my mind.

What truly made a human a human? I found myself asking. Was it their skin, or their blood, or any sort of body part? No, no, that wasn't what I meant. What makes a human so special?

Unfortunately, the answer came to me far later than I had hoped, and it wasn't one mere event that gave it away.

They ended up naming their new occupant Clara, I suppose after a relative or something like that. None of it really mattered to me at the time, yet it was a name I would become very familiar with as the years went on. Considering my caretakers required time to tend to Clara, it was inevitable that production slowed that year.

I often look back to Clara's fourth birthday, a day of joyous celebration, but also one of great discovery. I had first caught wind of it a few days before when I overheard them discussing who would be invited. Clara hadn't taken part in any schooling, so friends were a scarce commodity, and all her relatives lived too far to bother with. While the festivities were limited, the family made the most of it, for that was all they knew. I recall seeing their shadows cheer through the yellow tinted window. It was truly fun to watch. Given how much work the family had to do, fun wasn't exactly something that came often.

One thing stood out to me at the time. As the party slowed down for the night, the little girl left with something tight in her grasp. A wondrous red orb tied to a string was at her side, bobbing in the air as she walked. The bright red balloon lit up her face, which had a large smile plastered on it. Such childlike wonder wasn't something I had seen before, and it wasn't something I would see often, so the moment stayed with me.

Unfortunately, with something so fragile yet so cherished, the maelstrom that would follow was rather unavoidable. The girl had continued to venture into the bushes, a choice that would prove to strip her of the newfound joy. Pop! That sound was enough to leave her in tears. She rushed back inside quickly and slammed the door behind her.

I did not see her anymore that day. How very strange it had been. Something so brittle was bound to break, anyone knew that. What was the source of this frustration? I asked myself once more. Was it some sort of intrinsic value to nurture frail things? Or perhaps it had just been the senseless tantrum of a young girl with no other outlet for her emotions. This seemed to be the case, for it would not be the last time an incident like this would occur.

Clara had begun her schooling shortly after her fifth birthday,

meaning the farmers could resume efforts to cultivate crops year-round. In fact, despite such a long break, they came back seemingly stronger than before. I suppose they were eager to work once again after being trapped so long. It was truly a beautiful sight to see, and I'd be lying if I said I didn't miss it. Though, strangely enough, the income didn't seem to increase much. It took me a long time of observing to understand the reason for this. The purchases began small, a baby doll or a harmless dessert, which is what made them so hard to track. Over time, however, it became clear that my creators had been giving their child too much.

As she advanced in her schooling, these purchases increased in both volume and frequency. It seemed as if anything Clara could wish for would arrive at the doorstep the next day. Of course, she was ecstatic, just as any other child would be, which increased the frequency more and more. At least, that was the case until second grade, when her parents first faced her wrath.

She had asked for a bike. Apparently, many of the kids in her class had been telling stories of their rides to school, which of course piqued her interest. She begged and begged for what seemed like hours, though my creators decided it would be a good time to put a foot down. Enraged by this sudden pushback, Clara went mad on her loving parents. I do not recall many words from that day, but there sure was a lot of noise. Screams, banging, punishment, it all emanated clearly from all crevices of the barn. It would be the first of many incidents just like it.

It seemed clear that the farmers were regretting their choices. While initially denial was a rare and unwelcome feeling, "No!" became a far more common response than their sweet daughter was accustomed to. Animosity became denser with each rejection. Eventually, it seemed like you could cut it from the air itself. As Clara aged into her teenage years, this ill-founded animosity would become the catalyst of an event that would answer the question that had eaten away at me. Despite their shaky rejection policy, my creators had a few small rules. They were nothing too severe, the usual restrictions a parent would have, which made it all the more surprising when they found their daughter with a cigarette.

She was sixteen years old at the time, an age where it wasn't too uncommon to keep a thing or two from your parents. Though,

considering their limited expectations, it was much more frustrating when they discovered the ash-covered relic in her nightstand. They brought it outside to inspect it in the sunlight, which allowed me to get a better look. It was in bad shape, as if it had dwelled in the drawer for a long while, and rays of sun peeked through its perforated body.

They waited outside that day eagerly to discuss it when she arrived home from school.

As she turned the corner and trekked across the field, an expression of pure anguish plastered itself on her face. Her distress was clear as day.

“Mind explaining this?” her mother had asked, tapping her foot furiously as she approached the porch. Clara began to speak but was promptly cut off. “No, there’s no excuses here! We give you one rule, and you can’t follow it?”

It had seemed like she had a lot more to say, but her spouse interrupted before she could finish. He took a more reluctant approach. “Is there something you would like to tell us? I know these things are fairly popular, did someone force you to do it?” The question was unfortunately a plausible one, but she nervously shook her head.

The girl attempted to explain herself, yet ultimately fell short. Voices were raised, and it wasn’t long before tears streamed down each of their faces. Eventually, after all went silent, Clara entered the house, followed by the farmers. An explosive thud shook the ground, I assume the sound of a door slamming, and a few minutes later, Clara’s bedroom window slid open. She carefully clambered through the opening and began to traipse towards me, a cargo bag resting on her shoulders. Once she passed my vision, the silence returned. For the first time since her birth, it was just the farmers and me.

Enveloped in their emotions, it took a few hours for her parents to discover what had happened. I heard the door creak open, a timid mother peeking in to talk with her daughter once again. Though, when she saw the window wide open, her shyness turned to panic. I watched from my stake as her husband walked in, echoing her distress rather quickly, yet another upsetting sight to add to the day. I heard a few beeps, then a ring, and without stopping for a breath, Clara’s mother told them everything.

Unfortunately, she eventually grew silent and placed the object back on the wall. Click!

“They said they can look,” she suddenly explained. “But we live far from the station, it will... be at least an hour.” The grim look on her face had put an uneasy feeling in my mind, one that I have not felt since that day.

“Are we going to look by ourselves?”

“No, I cannot possibly drive like this. Our daughter is a smart girl, she should be alright.” The woman did not seem very sure of herself. It was almost as if the statement was more of a wish than reality. The surrounding area was by no means comforting. Though, their patience paid off.

She returned home in an ambulance two days later. Her face was swollen from crying, and that malevolent, horrible shade of crimson marked the bandages on her legs. Her rescuers explained that she had been found in a rushing river, and according to her, it was of her own free will.

“The world. It’s so much harder than I could ever imagine. I-I tormented you for all those years, when you were the one shielding me from the horrors of it all along. I j-just couldn’t take the guilt,” she blurted suddenly, vast sincerity present in her voice. Her parents smiled at the remark.

“Please don’t worry about that, all that matters now is that you’re alive!”

“I’ve gone my entire life without worrying about it. The time has come for that to change.”

The family embraced, feeling the warmth of her sudden resolve. The hug was more than mere contact. It was a promise; one that would shape her remaining years.

She held herself to that standard for the rest of her time at the farm. Clara began to help out with chores more often, and even picked up a job at a local restaurant. When it was finally time to aid their daughter in the transition to college, her parents embraced her with satisfaction rather than regret. They smiled with eagerness rather than sighing with relief.

Watching their story, I realized what it means to be a human. It isn’t flesh, or blood, or habits. It isn’t someone’s character. What makes a human so special? It’s the power to look in a mirror and decide to change.

## Untitled

Once upon a time, there lived a 14-year-old girl, who was born on November 6, 2006, with Beautiful black hair and blue eyes named Luna. Luna was in her sophomore year of high school at Laurensin High School. Luna loves to play video games and likes to draw. Luna lives with her mother and sister in a 3-bedroom apartment in a small town with lush green trees. Each tree had a different fruit, like bright yellow lemons. They lived not too far from the middle of the town, and the Town is called Millennium Town.

Luna's mother, Sabrina, is 36 years old, was born on March 31, 1985, and has gorgeous brown hair and works as a marine biologist at Sea Park. Luna's sister, Olivia, is 13. Was born on November 3, 2007, and has incredible blonde hair and goes to Zzyzx Middle school. Olivia likes to draw with Luna.

"Luna, you should wake up, it is almost time for school, " said Sabrina.

"I'm tired, just five more minutes, " said Luna while yawning.

"You too, Olivia, wake up," said Sabrina.

"I don't want to," said Olivia.

"Well, you have to," said Sabrina

Luna started to get ready for school, and she realized that the singing contest was today after school. "Jeez, I almost forgot the singing contest was today at 4:30 PM," said Luna.

The singing contest is going to be at Inari-Blaze Plaza.

*Twenty minutes later...*

"Bye mom, I'm going to school now even though it's 7:50 AM," said Luna.

"Bye Luna, have a good day at school," said Sabrina.

"Ok mom, have a good day at work," said Luna.



On Luna's way to school, a crowd gathered around someone in the grass and Luna went to see what was going on, and Luna saw someone singing and dancing.

"Who is that person?" Luna asked.

"You don't know him!" said a stranger. "He is a famous singer named Alexander, and he is competing in the singing contest over at Inari-Blaze Plaza."

"I am also competing in the singing contest," said Luna.

"Is that so? Well then, sing with him right now," added the stranger. "Oh, and my name is Isabelle, but you can just call me Izzy."

So, Luna went up and asked Alexander if she could sing with him.

"Can I sing with you?" asked Luna.

"Yes, you can," said Alexander.

*Twenty minutes later...*

"Oh crap, I am late for school!" said Luna, "See you later, Alexander."

*Five minutes later...*

"Why are you always delayed 1 day of the week," said a voice.

"I am sorry Mrs. Wynn, I'll do better next time," said Luna.

"I hope so but, don't get my hopes up but, next time you won't be let off the hook so easily," said Mrs. Wynn.

"Yeah, I know but, I was singing with someone named Alexander, and he is actually one of the contestants at the singing contest at Spirit Park," said Luna.

"Well, get to Mrs. Azure's English Class before she marks you absent," said Mrs. Wynn. "Oh, and before I forget, here is your schedule for the 1st semester."

*50 minutes later ...*

"Hey Luna, fancy seeing you here," said a familiar voice. Luna

looked around her to see who said her name.

“Who said my name?” asked Luna.

“I am right behind you, Luna,” said the voice. Luna looked behind her. “Woah, where did you come from, Alexander?” asked Luna.

“I came through the doors, but I just wanted to see if Laurensin High School was the same as when I went here to school, sorry if I am talking too much.” said Alexander.

“You are all good but, it is amazing that I am going to a school where a famous singer went,” said Luna.

“Hey, I was wondering if you know is Mrs. Angelica is still teaching here at Laurensin High School?” asked Alexander.

“Yes, and actually I have Mrs. Angelica for my 2nd period class,” said Luna, “Well I’m going to go to my first class, so see you later.”

“Ok, bye Luna,” said Alexander, “Oh, and also you can call me Alex,”.

“Hey Luna, it has been a while,” said a familiar voice. Luna looked to her left and saw one of her friends. “Hey Mia, how have you been?” asked Luna.

“Good, but who was that you were talking to, did you get a new boyfriend?” asked Mia.

Luna started to blush.

“No, that is not it at all, that was Alex, ” said Luna.

“Who is Alex?” asked Mia.

“His full name is Alexander, and he is also a famous singer that is competing in the singing contest at Inari-Blaze Plaza,” said Luna.

“Alexander, that's you and him, got to meet each other first, this is just crazy, this has to be a dream, right?” asked Mia.

“But it is not a dream though, this is real, ” said Luna.

“Well, let's go to Mrs. Azure’s English class,” said both Luna and Mia.

Luna and Mia went to Mrs. Azure’s English class and heard a voice say, “Hey guys, over here.

“That sounded like Sophia, right, Mia?” asked Luna.

“That’s because it is Sophia,” said Mia, “look, see over there”. Luna looked over where Mia was pointing and said, “hi Sophia”.

“So, let me guess you were late on the first day of your sophomore year in high school,” said Sophia.

“I suppose you can say that,” Luna chuckled, “I sort of got in trouble with Mrs. Wynn for being late.”

Mrs. Azure walked into the classroom and said, “Please sit down and put your attention on me, now, we have a first-year freshman student coming on campus, and she will attend all given classes.”

“What’s the new kid's name?” Luna asked.

“Her name is Katie, and Luna you will be giving her a tour around the school and helping her find her classes,” said Mrs. Azure.

“May Mia and Sophia come too?” Luna asked.

“Yes, they can Luna, and the three of you can get to know Katie,” said Mrs. Azure.

Luna jumped in excitement.

“But on one condition,” said Mrs. Azure.

“Yeah,” said Luna.

“Don’t mess around,” said Mrs. Azure.

“Ok,” said Luna.

## The Blue Eyes

Blue like the ocean, the sky, and every tear that had escaped mine. Blue that was smooth and calm like the waters of a lake with not a single interruption in sight. A perfect combination of deep, alluring water and a light cloudless sky.

While staring, I caught myself dreaming of swimming in the calm. Just like the conversations held, the shallowness felt safe yet dull. Like the feelings between, the deep was exciting but risky. A wish for love only written about, yet not to be told outside of the pages.

I dreamt of jumping headfirst and holding my breath for as long as possible; to sleep in the ripples or fall deeper to see the bottom of the sea. The possibilities of the water were endless and desirable. But, breaking away from the eyes, I also felt like I had just nearly escaped drowning—a near-death experience caused by just one choice.

If I had learned to swim and exhausted myself of my strength, perhaps I would survive in the deep blue. But, to test the waters, I would risk falling in deep - suffocating into nothingness. I would risk voiceless screams and powerless flailing; no one would see or hear my cries for help.

I would be devoured whole by the waves and never see land again. Darkness would surround me as the light from the surface slowly shrunk away. Then, there would be complete silence. I would watch myself give in and drown farther within the deep. My body would fill with water in the places where the last of my air was escaping from. The precious bubbles would rush away to the top as I watched and begged to go with them.

Perhaps, I might survive that life as I was allowed to swim in those deep waters and possibly see the bottom of the ocean. Or, perhaps, I would only drown. And the ocean would consume another.

## Untitled

It was just a bet. At least, it was until I began to look forward to seeing her cloudy eye and gapped-tooth smile. It was until I began to like her soft voice. I regret the day I made her scream. I am a horrible person. I know. She knows, they know, everyone knows.

Day 1: Tuesday

I made a bet with David that I could get this girl. David is my best friend. He makes everything a joke and takes nothing seriously. You could call him the class clown, and this bet was his next use of entertainment. She is the kind of girl who no one looks at. The girl was rejected by her own twin. She is the definition of the ugly duckling, and I have seven days to make her fall for me and then drop her in front of the whole school.

It was morning time before the bell rang. She was walking with her head down in the school hallway with her earbuds in as always. The school hallways were the only place I could find her. She always found a way to slip through my grasp. I stepped into her pathway hoping for some sort of interaction.

“I am sorry,” she said timidly and walked around me towards her class. I stood in the middle of the hallway stunned. I pushed my hair out of my eyes as I watched her silky black coils sway as she walked away. That was a failure.

“You’re going to need to try harder than that, bud,” David said as he pushed against my shoulder lightly.

Day 2: Wednesday

It is lunchtime, and I haven’t seen her yet. She is a sneaky

mouse. Luckily, David texted me and said she was in the library. I headed to the library, where I saw her in the corner eating her lunch. She was sitting in one of the bean bag chairs. I went to sit down in the one next to her, but she sensed my appearance. She grabbed her stuff to stand up.

“Wait,” I said. I grabbed her arm.

“What are you doing?” She said in a soft whisper. I could barely hear her voice. I guess she is quiet like a mouse too.

“I am just here to eat my lunch as well. You don’t have to get up, so I promise I won’t bite. My name is Elias,” I said as I raised my hands defensively. The calluses on my fingers were showing.

“I know who you are,” she said as her round eyes looked at me skeptically, “Why are you sitting next to me? Did my sister put you up to this? Never mind that, it’s more surprising that you’re in the school library.

“Hey! I read!” I said defensively. I probably don’t read as much as her, but I am not a stupid jock. I am a music major.

Ignoring my outburst, she went back to listening to her music. My eye caught her phone screen before it went black.

“Wait, you listen to Ben Platt?” I said.

“Yeah, he’s literally my favorite artist,” she said. A smile slowly peaked up. The gap in between her teeth was showing.

“Oh, did you know he has a concert this Saturday?” I asked.

“Yeah, I know, but I have to do something with my sister,” she said. Her smile dropped, and then she stabbed her salad with her fork.

My dark bushy brows squished together. The garlicky dressing swarmed my nostrils. There was absolutely too much garlic in that salad.

“Well, have you heard of his album ‘Sing To Me Instead’? It is his --,”

“Best Album!” We both said excitedly. We blinked at each other, neither of us expecting that reaction.

“SHHHHHHH!” voices the librarian. Ding! Ding! Ding! goes the lunch dismissal bell.

“I’m Greer, by the way. I’ve got to go, but this was nice,” she said. She hit me with a soft smile. I took a sip of my water as she walked away. A bright yellow sticky note was on my water bottle. Her number was on it. A lightbulb lit in my brain. Ben Platt’s

concert was the perfect setting. I will take her to the concert and make her have the best time ever. This is too easy.

### Day 3: Thursday

After school, I teach guitar lessons. Teaching these lessons has made me enough money to buy the tickets. During my break, I went to the website.

“\$150 a piece! This bet is costing me more than I thought,” I said to no one.

“One hundred and fifty dollars! I didn’t know you were rich, Mr. Elias. Who are you spending it on? My mamá would never spend that much money unless it were for something special,” said Jimmy, one of my kids. Well, not my literal kid but one of the few I teach.

“Jimmy, get out of my phone! Go sit in the waiting room until your Abuela comes,” I said. Jimmy ran away to the waiting room, sticking his tongue out. That kid is a handful, but I guess he is right about this. She is someone special.

### Day 4: Friday

The following morning, I saw Greer in the hallway getting textbooks out of her locker. Before I turned the corner, Rebecca strode towards her. Greer closed her locker and started to walk to class.

“Hey, Freak, where do you think you’re going?” Rebecca said. Greer turned around to face her sister.

“I am just trying to go to class. Rebecca, can you give me a break?” Greer said desperately. Looking at them now, I didn’t realize how much they look alike. Only Rebecca didn’t have the cloudy eye and gapped tooth smile. They both had the same brown eyes with a beauty mark above their eyebrows.

“What? Are you going to cry? I already have to deal with your ugly face at home. Stay out of my way,” Rebecca said. She slams Greer into her locker. I have had enough, so I run to Greer's side.

“Hey! What is wrong with you?” I said.

“I’m not bullying her. I am just being honest,” Rebecca says. She rolls her eyes and walks away.

Ding Ding Ding! The morning bell rings. Students rush in like a crashing wave. Greer tries to speed walk in the other direction. She forgets all about her next class. I squished through the bodies of people trying to get to class. I felt like I was in a can of sardines. Before she could get too far, I caught her in the quad. I grabbed her arm.

“What are you doing?” She said in a soft whisper. Her head was down low, and I could barely hear her voice. I showed her the tickets and a smirk.

“Are those what I think it is?” She said. A smile was smacked onto her face. She rubbed the tears from her eyes and looked up at me.

“Yup, and I know we don’t know much about each other, but it is in a public area. We are both seniors, and we can take care of ourselves. The concert will not be over too late,” I said. I hand her the ticket.

“That would be nice,” she said.

“Okay. I’ll meet you there,” I said.

## Day 5: Saturday

Today is the day of the concert, and I’m nervous. I am never nervous. I’m always cool, calm, and collected. I don’t overly stress unless there is a reason. I am currently sitting at the concession stand waiting for Greer. Light feathery fingers tapped my shoulder, and I whipped myself around.

“Hey,” Greer said. Ba bump, ba bump, ba bump goes my heart. She looks stunning. All of her teeth were showing, and her cloudy eye sparkled in the light. Woah, I need to calm down. We got our snacks and went towards the stadium. Our spots luckily had chairs, so it did not turn into a mosh pit.

After the openers, Ben Platt walked onstage and started his song rotation. God, his voice was better live than in any music player. I was having the time of my life, but then I realized it. I realized where my eyes were going. It was Greer. My eyes were only on her.

She was out of her seat singing her heart out. Her bouncy



black coils go up and down. Her excitement was jumping out of her body. Her eyes lit up as she belted the lyrics, “You came out of nowhere, and you cut through all the noise. I make sense of the madness when listening to your voice. Oh, Darling, only you can ease my mind!” Her face has a tiny sheen of sweat on it. It gave her a golden glow while mine is tinged with pink making me look like a cherry. The song slowly came to an end. A twenty-minute intermission began.

“I have to go to the restroom, but I’ll be right back,” Greer said.

“Okay, I’ll wait at the concession stand,” I said. While she headed to the restroom, I texted David. I could not do this anymore. The lights were sporadic and dim. The loud voices of the other people were blasting in my ear. I typed, “I am tired of this joke. I am done messing with her feelings. This bet is over”. A guy bumped into my shoulder before I could look over the message. My thumb hit send. I put my phone in my pocket and started walking toward the concession stand. I went to the food stand and bought garlic fries for Greer. I took a bite and my eyebrows furrowed. The pungent taste is not my thing.

After a few moments, Greer pulled out of the restroom with tears in her eyes. She shoved her phone in my face.

“Of course, it was fake! How stupid could I be? How could someone like you ever like someone like me? I am the one who no one looks at. I am the one who gets rejected by her twin. I am the ugly duckling!” Greer yelled at me. She turned around to run away, but I was quick on her heels.

“Wait. Wait. Wait! Don’t go, listen to me for a sec,” I said. She quickly turned her head and faced me with venom in her eyes. Her voice was so loud I knew I would not be able to shake it for weeks.

“NO! You don’t get to do that. You don’t get to build me up just to tear me down! You don’t have the right,” Greer said. She ripped her arm away and walked away from me one last time.



Anushka Phen  
High School

## At the End of the World

White stretches as far as the eye can see, encompassing the plains, the mountains, the sky. Snow falls in constant streams from the barely noticeable cracks in Heaven. There is no shelter in this bright world, so I can only stand here, weighed down by the never-ending snow.

With each snowflake comes another mortal's wish; "save me; I hope there is good rain this season; I wish for a peaceful journey; please protect her; save me; save me; save me!" No matter how much time passes, the root of humanity's' desire remains the same- they long for salvation without knowing that Heaven has long ago closed its doors.

If I dig deeper, to the snow at my feet I can hear the curses of those who exiled me here. Their hatred keeps me warm, and it ensures that I won't forget. I had done nothing wrong. I only aided their King as they wanted. It was not my fault they had chosen that man to lead them, his hatred towards them was not my fault!

But it didn't matter.

Their King had to go down and I with him, forever branded as evil- a God of destruction. I remember faintly, that very long ago, before the Mad King, I had been hailed by mortals as a God of healing. So quickly did they turn on me: They called my medicine a poison.

Claimed my lies had cursed their King. They banished me here, to the end of the world.

I despise them for it. With each new snowflake my hatred only grows, each new desire serves only as a reminder of the ugly selfishness of humankind.

And that King who had caused this? I can never forget him. A man so weak compared to the Gods, yet with a darkness so deep I nearly fell in. I wanted to heal him, even as he had whispered words of worship with the most enticing smirk. "Let us destroy

this world together, my dear God.”

It is natural that a man like that would strike fear into the hearts of those around him. He was bound to raise everyone's ire and suspicion. Of course, he would attract those who wished to take his life.

I did not stretch that mortal's life. I did not succumb to his seductions. I did not join his campaign to end the world.

I did not.

The mortals have a saying: the mind may forget but the body does not.

It is probably why I nearly fall back when a human appears. A little black dot against the large expanse of white. The young man ambles towards me leisurely, unbothered by the snowfall and seemingly unfazed by my glare.

By the time he arrives directly before me his lips are blue from the cold. There is no point in killing him, the cold will do it for me very soon.

“Hello.” He says.

In a blink he is gone, dissolved into nothingness, not even ash left to show that there was once a mortal at the end of the world.

In another blank there is another mortal who introduces himself as Ardour. And there's another and another and another with the same dark hair and dark eyes. The same beautiful face, the same hollow provocation, the same darkness, except this time I cannot even try to heal him. I want to hate him. But it is hard to hate this boy; a fool who visits me lifetime after lifetime. Yet I do hate his kind. And I tell him as much, but he only smiles and says, “Me too.”

The twelfth Ardour is the one who changes things. There is something about him that strikes closer to home than the others. “I think that with the two of us we could do anything.”

The words ignite within me a desire I have not felt for a very long time- I wish to move. I want so badly to grab this mortal. Shake him, maybe. Punch him, definitely. Warm him before this cold can take him away again, obviously.

But he is gone before I can even attempt to shake off the snow. Perhaps it is an infectious madness. Perhaps it is the final release of the rage I have kept within for so long.

But the air wails and the ground trembles. If the mortals want a God of Destruction so badly, who am I to deny them?

Ardour was right all along; this world was forsaken long ago.

My limbs feel lighter, finally freed from the power I have kept chained up for so long. Black and red flames burst around me, destroying everything and bringing calamity in return for the calamitous pains I have endured.

And the final thought that remains before I am swallowed by my own powers to become nothing more than a ball of destructive energy—I really want to touch him.



Madeline Pojar  
High School



## Untitled

There is nothing but a dark abyss beyond the harsh ocean waves crashing against the shore. The stars are hidden by clouds, and the inky black sky is engulfed by a heavy fog. All secrets hide within the night; therefore, they are enemies to the day. Monsters come out of the shadows as the truth crawls out of the deep depths of our minds. During the day, we wear masks to hide our true selves, but of course, those masks will eventually fall. At night our nightmares become true, but that is only because they were real to begin with. Everything we fear waits for us wherever we go, waiting to strike. We can run and we can hide, but we will never escape. We can't run from ourselves, and we cannot run from the truth.

The ocean no longer has color, all it has is sound. It drowns out the screams, the cries, the laughs. In the distance there are footsteps pounding against concrete and a sharp, cold wind whistling through the town. Everyone is asleep in their beds or heading home, but the beach has a mind of its own. Crickets chirp in the grass and birds fly over the dimly lit pier. Everything is at peace. It's silent and calm until the Earth rumbles and the birds fly even faster away. A shrill metallic train screeches along its tracks right as a body hits the ground with a dull thud. Within peace, there is chaos; and within chaos, there is peace.

A single car sits parked on the side of the road with its trunk hanging open. A man yanks the girl up by the arm out of the passenger seat and lets her weight fall onto him. She stumbles as she walks, and her head hangs low. Her bright red lipstick is smudged, and her heels fill with warm, grainy sand. The man's dark brown hair is neatly combed back and there isn't a single wrinkle in his suit. He slams the black door shut and picks the woman up like a child. She smiles and giggles over his shoulder while her eyelids flutter shut. His whispers are inaudible, and

perhaps even the woman can't hear him. He carries her to the water and lays her down. Her flowing white dress absorbs in the water, becoming translucent as her blonde hair darkens. She rolls around, stretching out her arms and legs as she gazes into her fiancé's eyes. Her innocence shows underneath the moonlight. She is completely oblivious.

The man kneels down to her head and caresses her face with one hand. With the other hand he covers her sweet, small mouth with a single piece of duct tape. She jumps up and begins to shake her head aggressively, punching and kicking his arms as he squeezes her. He hugs her and with a single push, he throws her back into the water. He takes her wrist and drags her all the way until the salty sea reaches his knees. She pleads with her eyes but that does not matter; she is completely silent and helpless. He digs his fingernails into her skin until it draws blood.

"I'm sorry," he whispers, and with a single motion he knocks her over the head with a rock bigger than his fist and holds her under the water for several minutes. Her lifeless body floats to the surface as he finally lets go and cleans the blood off of his hands. Her green eyes remain open as he drags her back out. Not only does his perfect suit and tie have wrinkles, and is soaking wet, but it also has the blood of his dead lover.

He picks her up once again like a loving groom lifting his new bride over the threshold. He caresses her wet, dead body and pushes the hair away from her face. He cradles her but with no remorse. There isn't a single tear in his eye, or a single ounce of regret. He throws her in the trunk of his car and slams it shut. He takes a cigarette from his breast pocket and lights it; the smoke evaporating in the warm, humid air. As he turns to drive, he looks up to see a pair of eyes.

## Adventures on the Moon

“Why can’t I just find everyone?” I muttered. “Or at least see anything other than this red Martian dust?” As I walked, I fell into a daydream about the last day I was on Earth.

I woke up in my empty room to the sound of my alarm, blaring loud enough to wake the whole neighborhood. I looked out the window, and seeing the darkness, rolled over and went back to sleep. However, I barely laid down on the sleeping bag before my twin sister Astra jumped on me.

“Don’t you dare go back to sleep! Mom needed us downstairs twenty minutes ago!”

Groggily, I rolled up my sleeping bag and grabbed my big, clunky jumpsuit. As I hobbled down the stairs, I pulled it over my pjs. With my helmet under one arm and my sleeping bag on my back, I grabbed my boots and went outside.

I looked around, breathing in the cool air. I stared at the night sky, lost in the swirling colors of the Aurora Borealis. Even though I had seen it almost every night for my entire life, I was constantly amazed by it. Amidst the swirling colors, I saw a dark shape. As I heard my sister’s footprints coming to get me, I grabbed a fistful of dirt and put it in my pocket. It was grainy and cold, but wonderful too. As she pulled me away from the house, I heard the wolves howling at the moon, singing me a sad song of departure.

As we walked through our neighborhood, neither me nor Astra said anything. We were both getting our last look at the place we had spent our entire lives in. All of our friends, all of our memories, everything is here. I felt like I was leaving my entire life behind.

But our parents are renowned scientists, and they have gotten a new job. We were moving far, far away.

I fought back tears as we passed the last street. I knew I would love our new home, but such a big change was hard.

Just outside of our neighborhood, an enormous mass of metal

stood, ready for takeoff. All we needed were the passengers. As my family made our way up the ramp, we kept stopping. This would likely be the last time we would stand on Earth, and we didn't want to waste it. As I got to the door, I stopped and turned around. I looked out and memorized each and every detail. I want to remember this sky, this street, this town forever. Then I put my helmet on and strode inside. We were moving to the Moon.

I took another step, snapped out of my daydream and sighed. When we had moved to the moon over a year ago, no one had realized how crazy our lives would become. Or how much walking I would have to do. I went back to daydreaming.

The multi-world war all started because my class had an awesome teacher. That's why, when she was kidnapped and taken to Mars, we had to follow.

I shook my head. If my classmates, siblings, and I weren't such compassionate nerds, I might not be wandering all over the surface of Mars right now. I haven't seen anything but endless red dust in ages.

When we crash-landed on the surface of Mars, a group of astronauts called the Martians took us in. However, it turned out that they were behind our teacher's kidnapping. Unlike their devious predecessors, world domination wasn't quite their goal. No, they had loftier dreams. They wanted control of Earth, Mars, and the Moon. And they expected us to help. We escaped for a while, but when we did, the Moon was taken over and our family taken hostage.

Of course, we didn't go down without a fight. Or, at least, I didn't. My siblings, on the other hand, had their minds taken over by the Martians. They developed a way to gain access into someone's brain through the use of a helmet. Once they had access to the brain, they could control them and use them as slaves to prepare their robotic army.

They tried to get my mind as well, but somehow the helmets just broke. In doing this, I made an enemy of the Martian leaders. They trapped me in their bunker for over a year.

I made lots of very talented friends while in the bunker, including a bunch of ninjas and a very capable resistance force. I was constantly escaping the clutches of the Martians. For



acclaimed geniuses, they really aren't that smart. They didn't even realize how badly I had to mess up to save everyone else. At least, I really hope they didn't realize that they can control my mind without a helmet.

I shook my head and clenched my fists. No bad thoughts. Not right now. I took a deep breath, another step, and went to a better daydream. I smiled as I thought about the time when me and my twin sister led a prison revolt. The Martians played right into our hands on that one. I love outsmarting them. Let's just hope I can do it for good.

As I continued to walk over the rusty surface of Mars, my eyes were glued to my boots. I looked up when I felt the cool embrace of a shadow. I had arrived at Olympus Mons, the tallest mountain on Mars, where me, my friends, and my family crash landed.

As I walked closer, I thought more and more about the awful memories of this place. When I got to the foot of the mountain, I just looked up at it. Staring at the mound that had made this mess a whole lot messier, something snapped.

I felt anger at the Martians, for stealing my family and friends. I felt disappointment, because I hadn't found anyone yet.

But mostly, I felt regret. Regret that I didn't punch the Martian leaders in the face at least one of the times they kidnapped me.

I started to throw a temper tantrum and threw rocks at the sheer surface of the red stone. Somehow, one of the rocks hit a button or something that caused a giant bunker door to open.

Inside, behind bars, were the ninjas, freed children, resistance members, and past helmet-wearers of all ages. I even saw our teacher. No one was guarding them.

They all looked like they had given up. As they looked weakly to the door, I don't know who they expected to see. But when they saw me, they jumped up, rubbed their eyes, and clamored for space by the bars.

"It's Starry!!!"

An excited murmur raced through the crowd. I started to tear up when I saw my family, all together. I ran to them.

"How can I get you out of here?"

They all pointed to a wall outside the cage. Surprisingly, there was the key. I grabbed it, shoved it into the keyhole, and turned.

Suddenly, I was pushed back by a herd of people running into

the deep expanses of the cave. They were overjoyed with their newfound freedom. To stay upright I had to jump up onto the door and climb to a perch on the doorframe. I smiled as I saw some of the little kids whooping and cheering as they ran around. I enjoyed their happiness, but I had to cut it short.

“Hold on,” I shouted, straining to be heard over the crowd.

One of the astronauts heard me and nodded. Then, he took a great big breath, and whistled the loudest whistle I had ever heard. Everyone stopped talking and stared at me. I was then overwhelmed with the surprising nervousness that comes with a couple hundred eyes looking at you.

Who am I kidding! Of course, I knew I would be nervous. Mentally, I laughed a little at myself. Standing up to the evil Martian brothers and saving everyone’s lives was no big deal, but talking in front of people was hard. I took a deep breath, shook my hands, and started talking.

“I do not know where the Martians and their troops are, but I can assume that they are on the Moon.

“We must find them, and we must end this war once and for all!” Cheers erupted through the crowd. In a quieter voice, I added, “Anyone have any ideas?”

One astronaut raised her hand. She was short, with her brown hair coiled neatly in a bun and thick glasses on her face. “I was a tech for the Martians. Right before we evacuated the base, we were working on calibrating a whole fleet of supersonic rockets,” she straightened her glasses, “that according to my calculations would carry all of us and get us to the moon in less than a week, no matter the celestial positioning.”

Cheers erupted through the cavern as the tech lady showed them the bunker. Everyone began loading in as fast as possible.

After a few hours, we lifted off. With the help of some very advanced AI piloting, the ninjas were able to spend the whole flight briefing everyone on how to disable the robots and the helmets.

As soon as our ships landed, we were surrounded by the army of the Martian. Just as soon as we left the ships, every person was engaged in fighting the armies of the Martian. Most in their ranks

were robots, although there were a few helmeted people among them.

Using our identical faces to an advantage, me and my twin Astra darted around the robots and took turns confusing them so that the other could disable it.

“This reminds me of the prison revolt!” Astra said as she punched a robot.

I laughed. Then I snatched the helmet right off of the girl in front of me. She collapsed from exhaustion, and I jumped over her as I continued to fight our enemies.

And then finally, the army of the Martians was disabled, with no human casualties, and the worst injuries being a few bruises.

As I was surveying the battlefield, I saw astronauts quietly returning to their ships. I saw robot parts sparking and jolting everywhere. An eerie quiet settled upon the area. Just then, I spotted movement out of the corner of my eye. The Martian leaders.

I sprinted after them. They tried to escape, but my speed was too much for their adult bodies. There was no way I was letting them go.

“Misters Martian.”

“Miss Starry.”

It was down to the final showdown.

“You have no army. You have no helmets. Why won’t you two just give up?” Inside, I was seething. They had taken my family, my friends, and my home. It was time for some answers.

“Mars is superior. It will survive. Its people will survive!!!” The Martian leaders were full of rage, hate, and I’m sure there was some shame there as well. A little girl had foiled their plans yet again.

“Well, I wasn’t planning on you not surviving,” I began. Even though they may have messed with my life, I didn’t want to ruin theirs. They tried to come forward, but Astra protectively walked up behind me. They shrunk back, and I continued. “This war ended with no human casualties, and I am going to keep it that way. However, you two are going to be imprisoned for life.” I nodded, and Astra snapped handcuffs on the wrists of the Martians.

“As for Mars, we’ll see.”

After handing the Martians off to the ninjas, Astra and I went

off to find our parents. We found them, laughing with one of the astronauts.

“Mom. Dad.”

There were no words. We stood there and hugged, and hugged, and hugged. And that’s when we knew everything was right with the world. And its moon too.



Charlotte Swenson  
High School

## Of Love and Toilet Paper

It had been two months since the dawning of the Pandemic. Two months since the total lockdown, the closure of every nearby market, and the confinement of me and my husband, Kevin, to the home.

At first, everything was fine. We had all the supplies needed for survival and no shortage of money or love. We enjoyed the time working from home, getting to spend quality time with one another. The situation was almost ideal. And then, one fateful day, everything changed.

It was the day the illusion of our perfect lives shattered; the day I questioned, for the first time, if love was truly the panacea I thought it to be -- the cure for every ailment of the heart, body, mind and soul. It was the day of reckoning. The day our supplies had at last been reduced to one final roll of toilet paper.

I held the roll in my hand. It was soft and beautiful, besides being meager- reduced to only a few squares. Those remaining squares of toilet paper were the most precious possession I had ever laid hands on, and I didn't plan to relinquish that possession anytime soon. My husband, it seemed, had other ideas.

"Love," Kevin said, "A beautiful thing. A powerful thing."

He was approaching me, his voice soft and nostalgic. I saw the desperation in his eyes.

"We've come so far in so short a time...we've been through so much. Meeting each other. Dates. Fights, break ups, getting back together. Marriage. We've made it through a lot together. We can get through this too." He reached a hand towards me, caressing my cheek. It was caring. Reassuring. But...

"Can we get through this?" I took a step away. "I don't believe we can. Not when there is no we." I sighed, but I was more resigned than upset, "Every man and woman for themselves. It's the only way to survive this."

"That's not true. We can do this- together! Don't give up on

us.” Kevin’s eyes were filled with tears, but I was past caring. No memories, love, or pleading could reach me now. There was only one thing I could muster passion for, and it simply wasn’t my husband. His pleading set off the derisive side of me, shifting my resignation to determination. What cared I for my pitiful husband, with so much at stake?

I laughed as I dangled the last of the toilet paper in front of the eyes of my victim, ready to defend it at all costs. “There is no together.” I snorted, clutching my prized possession closer to me, “It’s mine, MINE!”

“Charlotte, please. Don’t do this!” He got down onto his knees, begging. “Let’s compromise-share it! Marriage is about compromise.”

“I’m sorry Kevin.” I apologized, though I wasn’t sorry, “The situation is too dire for compromise. You have left me no choice.” I took a step backward, towards the bathroom.

“Please!” His scream was wretched. Tortured. “Please, Charlotte. Don’t reduce yourself to a petty villain. You’re worth more than that!” He paused, growing sentimental, “Aren’t I worth more than that? Does all we’ve been through together mean nothing to you?”

I scoffed, “Oh Kevin, you’re a fool if you think this has anything to do with you.” I softened, “I love you, Kevin. You’re the best thing that’s -- well, I guess that’s the problem. You’re actually not the best thing that’s ever happened to me. I didn’t realize until the pandemic took it from me, but I know now that my true love is...” I cradled the toilet paper in my arm, “This.”

“You love the toilet paper more than your own husband?”

“I’m sorry Kevin. Don’t pretend you’re any different.”

Kevin laughed, a bitter sound. He stood up. He faced me. “Oh, Charlotte...” And then his voice grew menacing, “I’m not.” He flashed a gun out of his coat pocket and removed the safety. Click. He pointed it right at my forehead.

“I wish it didn’t have to come to this, darling. But you have left me no choice.”

“Wait!” I felt fear clutch my heart as I realized things had gotten serious. It was no longer a mere choice between toilet paper and love. It had come down to toilet paper, and death.

“Kevin, don’t do this.” I gripped my toilet paper for emotional

support.

“I’m sorry, Charlotte. You know I love you.” His voice grew heavy, “But I have to do this.”

“You wouldn’t kill me though, Kevin. A life should be worth more than toilet paper.”

“And so should a heart, yet you didn’t hesitate to abandon mine.”

“Just give me a chance, Kevin.” I was desperate, “We can figure something out-this can’t be the only option.”

Kevin, his eyes glistening with unshed tears, nodded, “You have ten seconds to convince me not to kill you. And trust that, if you fail, I will have no mercy. I will not hesitate.”

Despite his harsh words, I knew that he wanted me to convince him. And my heart ached for us. Fighting with Kevin was never pleasant...but this was far worse than any of the petty arguments we’d had in the past. This was a matter of life and death. Love, and toilet paper. How was I supposed to continue?

If I handed over the toilet paper, which was surely the only possible way to convince him, I would be giving up my last shred of humanity. But what choice did I have? With ten seconds to determine whether I would die, or live life without my toilet paper (which wasn’t really living at all) I had to make a fast decision, risky as it was.

“You have five seconds left.” He warned, his voice shaking. I was ready though.

“If I die, the toilet paper does too!”

Before he could stop me, I reached out my arm, hovering the toilet paper directly above the open toilet. I thanked heaven for my bad habits. If that toilet lid hadn’t been open, who knows what could have happened.

“No!” Kevin jumped forward, in a desperate attempt to save his toilet paper. As he moved, his finger brushed the trigger ever so slightly. But it was enough.

Bang. The gun fired. Splash. The toilet paper fell.

As I stumbled back, falling against the shower, I was overcome with pain. A squeezing, sinister pressure that felt like it was eating me alive from inside spread from my shoulder. Blood poured to the ground as Kevin sank to his knees.

“What have I done?” He cried. With trembling hands, he reached into the toilet, removing the ruined toilet paper.

“What have I done?” I rasped, seeing the sopping mess in his hand. Our eyes met.

“You should have just killed me,” I said.

“I didn’t actually mean to shoot.” Kevin claimed. Tears formed in his eyes. They began to spill over. Weakly, I reached my good arm towards him and grasped his hand. Kevin lowered his head, overcome with grief. “Oh, Charlotte. What have we become? Now you're injured, and...the toilet paper...”

“Shhh.” I did my best to console him, but overwhelming pain-more from the loss of the toilet paper than the hole in my shoulder-consumed me.

“You don’t blame me, do you? I did...I did what I-”

“Oh no, of course I don’t blame you,” I assured him. “You did what you had to.”

“I...I did.” He released a breath, running his hand over his face.

Maybe if I had been telling the truth things would have gone differently. Maybe if I had truly reached my heart out to him to understand, I wouldn’t have made the most devastating, life-shattering choice I’d ever made.

But I wasn’t telling the truth. I did blame him. It was his fault I was on the ground bleeding; his fault the precious toilet paper was destroyed. Fueled by my grief and anger for Kevin, I stretched out my bleeding arm, towards the gun lying on the floor. The pain was like nothing I had ever experienced, but I was driven by a consuming desire for revenge. I lifted the gun towards the startled, horrified head of my husband.

“I wish I could say I was sorry,” I said.

“C-charlotte?” He stammered, “What are you-”

My finger squeezed the trigger.

Bang.

Unlike Kevin, my aim was impeccable.



## Tetracapitpectoludensinfectusanguinibullaechis (Four-headed, Playing-card Stained, Bloody Snake Boss)

You can't escape him. He's everywhere. You're advertising for him.

No, I'm not, you would say. But you are. In the midst of corporate companies lurks a hankering creature looking for one thing: small businesses. This creature, *Tetracapitpectoludensinfectusanguinibullaechis*, or simply Bulla, is responsible for the economic gap between the rich and poor. But you can't blame Bulla. He's just hungry.

Bulla has a grotesquely cartoonish appearance: he is a green, scarred, venomous four-headed snake. Although all four heads have catlike ears, scars, venomous fangs, and swirl-like extremities that top their heads, each head has its own eccentricities. For starters, each head is patterned with a different playing card suit; additionally, one head has heterochromia, one has a cracked fang, one has a chunk of his ear missing, and one is blind.

Bulla's two hands are also very different; one hand is large and green, the other, with a green eye on the palm, is orange and has numerous poisonous barbs protruding from it. This second hand acts as another entirely different creature in cahoots with its larger, scarier owner. Bulla's subsequent appearance frightens potential entrepreneurs. But you can't blame Bulla for being so ugly. He's just hungry.

Bulla's favorite attire is Armani suits with red Nautica ties; since he typically gets them bloodstained, he has an entire wardrobe of these outfits. He also loves his black belt with a green eye in the center and a shudder-inducing engraving: "I'm ready to bite." He even likes to don fashionable sunglasses to look even more dashing. But you can't blame Bulla for being so stylish. He's just hungry.

He eats one thing only: small businesses. His poisonous fangs and dangerous barbs demolish many companies striving to

positively influence our lives. He loves to collect various micro-enterprises and blend them into a "business cocktail," as he likes to call it. To satisfy his hunger, he will do anything, even cut off one of his own heads. After all, Bulla becomes stronger with every meal. But you can't blame Bulla for being so gluttonous. He's just hungry.

Bulla lives in corporate companies such as Apple, Microsoft, and Amazon. One might believe that Bulla has many friends, because living in such large companies leads to interacting with millions of people. But he doesn't have any real friends. Actually, his only relationships are transactional. His friends must toil and suffer in order to satisfy his unlimited avarice. But you can't blame Bulla for being so manipulative. He's just hungry.

People commonly say Bulla is ambitious, clever, resourceful, and hypocritical. Each of his heads will prepare a different version of one story so that he can trick people into getting his food. His ears and eyes will hear and see everything and prepare for various possibilities. Bulla, therefore, is a very wily creature. But you can't blame Bulla for his wiliness. He's just hungry.

How can he be active everywhere at every moment? Scientists believe that Bulla is not just a monster but a phenomenon. Bulla is the embodiment of the greed of wealthy businessmen. He is everywhere. He should be, for these businessmen constantly open new locations for their companies across the world. With every minute, Bulla is conquering every inch and pixel for his own use. But you can't blame Bulla for being so omnipresent. He's just hungry.

Beware of Bulla. Be careful about what you see and buy. He is everywhere. You can't escape him, but you can irritate him. Buy groceries and other essentials at small businesses. Create a new good or service of your own. Boycott corporate companies from your budget. Do what you can, and do it right, or Bulla will come for you. Bulla seems like a brash, merciless creature, one that will obliterate anything and anyone to get what it wants. Sadly, this is true. But you can't blame Bulla for being so ostensibly evil, because he's just hungry, and everyone will just have to deal with it.



## Untitled

It stood there, alone and unthinking. It stood there in an unfathomable darkness, so black and velvet, suffocating. Gloriously standing there, it stood.

But why did it stay? Why did it stay in that darkness so hostile and unwelcoming? Head up, chin up, proudly standing there in the maddening darkness, why did it stay?

Maybe it wasn't the animosity of that darkness that possessed it to stay.

Perhaps it was the light that would eventually protrude from that darkness. A flicker of light, so minute, so small, it was comparable to a distant star in the night sky; a pinpoint of pure white-gold hallucinated at a far distance. Is that why it stayed? For some intangible light that couldn't possibly be real? Perhaps.

Perhaps it stood there, in the suffocating darkness, for this light.

The light, it thought, had meaning. The light, it thought, was more than just a light. It was something she called "hope."

It couldn't understand this "hope," but to her, hope was the drive to keep pushing forward, regardless. How silly.

Nonetheless, it stared, and stared, and stared at that distant pinprick of white-gold shimmer so-called hope. That one dot, that one tiny dot, was the reason she could hold on? That light too far for anyone and anything to reach in a lifetime, was the sole reason she could continue?

It couldn't understand. Maybe it would never understand. But it could hold on.

And there were more. More pinpoints of hope, of light. All shimmering and sparkling like some starry night. So many stars, so many hopes, all shining. Burning. Passionately burning.

It had another thought; this light isn't just hope, right? It couldn't be, could it?

Was it more? Was it?

Still, further still, it couldn't understand. It couldn't grasp the idea of such intangible, childish things. Such ideas! Pure child's play! All of it just whitewash for the cruelty of the world and all that encompasses it!

It was torn between logic and belief.

And those lights that shone mercilessly, gloriously, breaking through the velvety black death of night, those things they called hope, oh why did it stay?

It continued to just stare.

Stare, stare, stare.

It was torn.

Is hope really real? Or is it a mask over the face of unanswered prayers and bad endings?

An excuse to keep going, even when everything is long lost?

It was a being of logic and reason. But when hope was introduced as merely a word...

How could such a small thought wrack up such internal conflict?

It was a being of pure calculation, ensuring success and guaranteeing anything and everything anyone asked for, by calculating those exact means. Why now, does that feel so... wrong??

But it couldn't have morals. It didn't even have a personality. But looking up at that starry night-esque scenery... she stared back down at it.

It thought another thought...

Why was it that such concepts weren't brought to understanding before? Why was it that she hadn't done anything to prevent what had happened? Why did it happen? Why didn't I protect her from failure?

It turned around at last, away from the stars, away from the light, and toward the animosity that awaited it. It couldn't undo what it had done and not done. It couldn't go back in time and make things right. But if she could hold onto hope, this stupid, passionately burning fire for light... Maybe it can too.



Valerie Victor  
High School

## Untitled

Once upon a time, there was a young girl named Alice who lived in a small village at the foot of a great mountain. One day, while exploring the forest near her home, she stumbled upon a strange and mysterious cave. Without hesitation, she ventured inside and soon found herself transported to a fantastical world, unlike anything she had ever imagined.

As she explored this new land, she encountered all manner of strange and wonderful creatures, from talking animals to enchanted forests. She met a kind and wise old wizard who took her under his wing, and together they embarked on a quest to save the land from an evil sorcerer who threatened to enslave all its inhabitants.

Through her determination and courage, Alice was able to overcome the sorcerer's dark magic and restore peace to the land. As a reward for her bravery, the wizard granted her the power to return to her own world whenever she wished.

From that day forward, Alice made frequent trips to the magical land, and she became known as a hero and a savior among its people. And though she missed her family and home, she could not help but feel a sense of longing for the adventures and excitement that awaited her in that other world.



Carina Wang  
High School



## Untitled

“We are the last, Emrys,” Aspen had told him after Astra fell. “I shall hope that it will not stay that way, for both our sakes.”

But in the two thousand years since, there was never another star child born.

“You said we were the last,” Emrys muttered, standing beside Aspen’s chosen resting place. Aspen was lying in the shaded grass beneath the great oak, eyes closed, hands folded across his stomach. The rainbow strings of his power were faint but clear to Emrys, curling around his friend’s body as he prepared for his end.

Aspen cracked an eye open, and the threads of power faded. “So I did. And that has held true all these centuries later. I am sorry that you will be alone, but you will also be free.”

“Still... Don’t go,” Emrys muttered, a half-hearted plea. They had been in this stalemate for a good portion of these last few years, but he could feel Aspen tiring and starting to fade regardless. Even still, he didn’t want him to go. It was a foolish hope, to think that he could convince Aspen otherwise, but one he clung to nevertheless. “Stay with me.” But his hope was waning. He could see how much it was hurting his friend to hold on.

“You know as well as I do that all things come to an end. Even us star children are no exceptions.”

Indeed, no one was spared from the march of time. Not even their kind. Emrys was the first of them and had watched the rest of them burn out, much like the death of the stars they were born from.

“Then...” Emrys sat down, digging his fingers into the soft grass as the wind kissed his face. “Don’t leave me to be alone.”

“The world is a vast place. You will find others.”

“It’s not the same. You know that.” They were the last of the star children. All the others were gone, and even if he were to find other immortals, they would never understand. Except for one. But even then, he might never find her.

Aspen sat up, shaking grass and leaves from his black hair. “Even if they are mortal, does that make it any less real?”

Emrys looked down, tracing the shape of a bird in the grass. His one and only love had been mortal, too. “I suppose not.” He didn’t regret loving her. Not one bit, despite the centuries of heartbroken grief and pain afterwards. And Aspen knew that.

Aspen smiled sadly. “I do not wish to leave you alone, Emrys, but…” He looked to the sky, where the sparkling, distant stars were starting to emerge. He sighed. “You are the oldest of us. Surely you can understand.”

“Yet I have not faded just yet.” Perhaps it was because unlike the others, he had one last thing left to do. One last box to check off before he could go.

“You have something that keeps you going. I don’t. And my presence is only holding you back.”

“That’s—”

“Tell me, am I wrong?”

It was Emrys’ turn to sigh. “No,” he admitted quietly. “But that doesn’t mean I haven’t enjoyed these moments with you.”

“But you resent it all the same. Don’t try to deny it.”

“I wouldn’t bother,” Emrys muttered. All of the star children had the power to read souls, but Aspen’s ability was one of the strongest he had ever seen amongst them. “Are you truly ready to go?”

Aspen closed his eyes, smiling dreamily as he listened to a song only he could hear. “She is waiting for me. And you know my sister is not the most patient.” He turned to Emrys. “Her departure left a heavy hollow in my heart. Part of my soul is dark and will remain so until I see her again. And you, my friend, have been apart from your sister for far longer. There is a reason I have never read your soul. I would not be able to bear it.”

Their power grew naturally with time, and Emrys was the oldest of them all, with over ten thousand years between him and the next. Even Aspen, whose power had come the closest of all the others, was well aware of the immense power gap between them. To step into Emrys’ soul would be inviting madness. He had never met another being who could withstand a single moment inside without losing their mind.

Emrys closed his eyes. “She has long been lost to the space beyond. I wouldn’t even know where to begin.” His memories of her had all but faded. He didn’t even remember how they were separated, only that she once stood by his side. Now, only the echo of her warmth remained for him to use in any effort to find her. Perhaps that was his own fault, for waiting so long. But he could not bring himself to leave any of the star children to fend for themselves, as he’d had to do, so he’d taken it upon himself to raise each and every one of them until they were ready to set off on their own. Aspen was one of the few who had chosen to stay with him.

“I doubt she is so much as beyond them as she is between them,” Aspen muttered. “You will find her; she is your truest kin, after all. There is always a special connection between siblings for our kind, given how rare they are. With your power and will, I trust you will have no problem finding her.”

“So then come with me. You are one of the brightest minds I have ever met. Surely there is something more that you can question. Something more to study.”

Aspen sighed. “There is no end to the ocean of knowledge to be found in the world. But I am tired, and I am old, and you are my only company. I have no more reason to continue asking. No more reason to continue on, especially if it is holding you back.”

“And if I asked you to stay?” Emrys asked softly. He had spent almost his entire life caring for the other star children. It was all he’d ever known. And now, the last one was ready to go, and he did not know if he could handle being alone once Aspen was gone, even if it was temporary.

“You saved me all those centuries ago and raised me,” Aspen muttered. “And I owe you a great debt for that. But I beg of you: do not ask me to give you what I cannot. You know we would both be miserable. You would hate yourself for asking me and I would hate myself for listening. Besides, it is the end of my journey, but you have yet to begin yours.”

“I am many millennia older than you,” Emrys sighed. “I have journeyed through thousands more worlds than you and witnessed countless more stories.”

“Yet you have always been trapped. You never went after your sister because you were busy looking after the rest of us. And for



that, we all thank you,” Aspen said, fist to his chest as he inclined his head in a long-lost gesture of respect. Perhaps it would be the last time Emrys would see it. “Now, once I am gone, you will be free from that responsibility. Free to finally begin what you have been longing for.”

“I would think you managed a peek at my soul, since you said that,” Emrys muttered. It hit too close to home. He had not allowed himself to long or desire for far too long. He’d almost forgotten what it felt like, to be selfish and indulgent in his own wishes.

Aspen smiled softly. “My dearest friend, you have been my greatest teacher and the closest thing I and everyone else ever had to a parent. You did well in raising us, but it is time for you to move onto your own life. You’ve lived for us for so long, but please, do not be afraid. You will never be alone.” He held up a finger, a dying ribbon of power dancing over to Emrys and settling against his chest. “We will always be with you.”

The edges of Aspen’s form began to shimmer.

“Aspen,” Emrys whispered desperately, reaching for him helplessly. “Please...”

Aspen placed a warm hand on Emrys’ cheek, and he leaned into it. “You know this is for the best. Please do not hurt us both by trying to stop me.”

Emrys’ shoulders slumped and he pressed a hand against Aspen’s. “I know better than to interrupt the process once it’s begun.”

Aspen smiled a gentle smile, so tender and soft that Emrys’ heart clenched painfully in his chest. “Emrys, from the bottom of my heart, I thank you for showing me how to live. But everything comes to an end. Even you, one day, will meet yours. But until then, I wish for you to live selfishly and for yourself.”

Emrys closed his eyes, a single, shining tear falling. It was time. Who was he to stop his best friend from the peace and rest he deserved? “My dear Aspen... You are one of, if not my favorite. Thank you for keeping my company and coming back to me, even when the curiosities and wonders of the world called to you. Thank you for holding on for me.”

“No one is ever truly ready to say goodbye,” Aspen muttered, his form all but transparent now. “But it is a necessary part of the

cycle. After all, we know this best, we who were born from the death of a dying star. So... goodbye Emrys. Until we meet again.”

Emrys closed his eyes and backed away, tears falling freely once he opened them. He would not shield away. Not when it was his favorite child, not when this very well might be the last time he would ever witness the death of another of his kind. “Aspen, know that you leave loved and remembered. May you find peace and rest until the end of eternity.”

With a burst of light and power not unlike the death of a star, Aspen was gone, leaving only silver stardust behind.

A gentle, warm breeze whispered into Emrys’ ear in Aspen's voice as it brushed past and swept the stardust into the sky, twirling and spinning in faint mimicry of a long-gone dance that only existed in memory.

“We were a story chosen by the dust. Nothing more, nothing less.”

## Travel by Night

"Paul, you'll never guess what I found!" shouts Rita barging into my workshop.

"What is it, Another hive? I'm in the middle of repairing your goggles," I reply.

"No, I found it,"

"Found what?" I question, somewhat annoyed.

"The crashed Ubica ship, what else!"

"Really, you sure?"

"Yes! Look at the photos!"

"The ones from Google? It could just be some sort of smudge from the printer."

"It isn't, I checked the times that towns were hit by Ubica, and they all show that the closer they were to this scorch mark, the sooner they were hit!"

"So, this is the ship?"

"It has to be! This will be the greatest discovery in the history of Maco!"

"Alright, let me see the photos," I ask.

"Right here, look!" pointing to a small scorch mark in the plains. I have no idea how she found it. The mark is the size of a pen smudge against the grassland.

"Alright, I'll get everyone together; just don't get your hopes up," I say to Rita, more convinced.

I give her the night vision goggles back and walk over to my hand radio tuning it on to our private frequency; I call, "It's Paul; does everyone read?" The radio chirps as I release the mic key.

"Kyle, copies," says our newest member.

"Lloyd here," Replies the ex-military sniper.

"Ahoy!" The only response that our guide Sean ever gives whenever he is the last to check in.

"Alright, what's the call about?" Asks Lloyd.

"I believe Rita has found the Ubica ship," waiting for the shocked replies. Everyone replies with some variant of "are you sure?" all at once.

"She has some solid evidence. We've been hunting for things just off rumors, never anything as concrete as satellite photos." I assure the team.

"Alright, where is it?" Asks Sean.

"Can't exactly show you a map over the radio, but it's reachable. Bring your best gear; we'll set out tomorrow night". Everyone gives their affirmations, and I shut off my radio.

After a few hours, I hear two sets of four knocks at the door. I shut the basement lights off and let the team in.

"How do you always know it's us?" Asks Kyle, confused.

"Sean's got OCD. He always knocks the same way." Says, Rita.

"No, I don't!" snaps Sean. "I do it so I don't get shot whenever I open a door!"

"Alright, alright; just take your nods off and shut the door so we can turn on the lights," recoils Rita. I hear shuffling followed by the door's latch clicking shut. Feeling around the wall I find the light switch and turn it on. The light reveals everyone's faces and that Kyle had not yet taken off his night vision goggles. There was a grunt of mild pain followed by him flipping the goggles up; onto his forehead.

"Alright, first get settled, then we'll get the briefing underway," I tell the newly arrived team members.

Back in the basement, Rita convinces the team that the ship is where she believes. Sean adds that it would be about a three-night round trip. The briefing is short and could be concentrated into three items:

One -- Walk northeast for a night and a half.

Two -- Avoid Ghost Town and Dirt Hill.

Three -- Get what we need and get out.

We hang out for a few hours before everyone takes their rooms for the day.

Sean is always the first to get up out of all of us. I think he's insane for getting up so close to dusk. Walking downstairs, I can see the last rays of sunlight through the cracks in the window tape. It doesn't take long for the rest of the team to wake up and get

ready.

After the sun sets, we embark on our short journey toward the spaceship. After a few rests and hours of walking, we arrive at a small town. Kyle and Lloyd stay atop the grass hill while Rita, Sean, and I walk into the town. We are just about to start exploring the buildings when I begin to hear heavy shuffling coming from a few homes.

Sean tells us to go hide while he walks out and places a distractor gadget away from town. When he sets it off, the strobe light and speakers attract the attention of over a dozen Ubica Hunters. The light drives them crazy, and they all rush to destroy the device. Watching them run with single-minded fury, I feel my heart pounding and clutch my weapon tightly. When the hunters finish destroying the distractor, they lose interest and pace for a while before silently returning to the buildings they'd emerged from. Walking out from our hiding place, we see that two of the Ubica had been trampled in the stampede.

"No sense in letting them go to waste," I say, unsheathing my knife. While I begin the disgusting process of harvesting the pearls from the body. Rita does some brief searching for artifacts. All the while, Sean and Lloyd keep a vigilant lookout. I finish harvesting the pearls, and Rita detects an artifact, but we decide that it is too risky to try and grab it, so we opt to mark it on our map and keep moving.

We travel for many more hours through the grassland with no sign of shelter for the day. I start to become more and more uneasy as daybreak gets closer. Finally, just as the sun is on the horizon, we spot a small farm in the distance. We begin to run toward it but are stopped by Sean.

"Lloyd, check the farm with your thermal scope," he says. Lloyd lifts the large rifle and looks through its scope.

"I don't see anything; let's keep moving," replies Lloyd lowering the weapon as we resume running toward the farm. At the perimeter fence, I notice that the barbed wire had been kept up and that there is tape covering all the windows. I stop and signal everyone to be silent.

"There are other trespassers here," I whisper. Rita motions for everyone's attention before gesturing towards the barn. With our weapons ready, we walk toward the large barn door. We line up at

the door, and I peer through one of the cracks. I strain the early dawn light, but I don't make out anything.

"Seem's clear," I whisper, pushing open the door just wide enough for us to fit through. Inside the barn are piles of dry hay and old rusty equipment but most importantly a 1999 Chevy Silverado.

"It's a farm truck, looks like it still works," says Kyle.

With the sun coming up, we all hide around the barn and try and sleep for the day. I lay down in a stall behind some dried hay. With the sun coming further up on the horizon, I feel my heartbeat quicken. Humans have never been afraid of the day and never will unless they live on Maco.

After trying my hardest to fall asleep, I am awakened at dusk by Sean.

"Why do you get up this early?" I say groggily.

"Because no one else is ever up. Come on, get ready; we need to leave," replies Sean.

After checking that the area is safe, we slip out of the farm and continue toward the spaceship. The walk was not long or eventful and the moon was out and bright. I could see everything. Through my night vision, I began to make out a shape in the distance. Up close, there is no doubt that the shape is the spaceship. It is a flat cylinder squared off at one end and blackened from heat. There are also rectangular-shaped holes blasted from the hull that lay on the ground nearby.

"It looks like the ship blasted these hatches open after it crashed," comments Rita. We cautiously climb up through one of the hatches closest to the ground. The moonlight doesn't reach far into the ship, so we turn on our infrared flashlights.

"Look at this," says Rita, pointing to open sacks pinned to the walls. "These look almost like shark eggs,"

"Interesting, see what you can find. Kyle, stay with her and keep watch. We'll search the rest of the ship," I reply.

Exploring the ship, we find many artifacts with varying shapes, sizes, and rarity. Running out of time and carrying capacity, we grab the most valuable artifacts and make for the farm. Making extra sure that the farm is clear of other trespassers, we sneak back into the barn and hotwire the truck. "Just drive! just drive!" I shout to Sean from the bed of the truck.

He floors the gas and crashes through the wall. Out of the barn, he shuts off the headlights, and we put our night vision back on. It doesn't take long for the Ubica to start chasing us.

"Shoot the ones coming from ahead we can outrun the ones behind!" yells Lloyd from the passenger seat. Rita, Kyle, and I point our rifles ahead of the truck.

"One's coming from our 11!" yells Lloyd. I pivot myself and pull the trigger. Immediately I am temporarily blinded by the flash through my goggles, and I feel the kick into my shoulder.

"Good shot, but make sure to blink before shooting when wearing nods!" yells Lloyd again.

"Could have told us sooner!" replies Kyle.

We drive at 60 miles an hour toward the nearest hard shelter, looking behind us a few times to see hoards of these six-legged demons chasing after us.

"We're getting close to the hard shelter!" shouts Sean. Looking ahead, I see more bright flashes and Ubica falling behind us. Suddenly strobe lights traveling down the walls start drawing most of the Ubica away before a large concrete gate is opened ahead of us.

"Brace yourselves!" yells Sean before driving through the gates and slamming on the brakes. The massive door shuts behind us; we all get out of the truck and put our weapons on safe.

"I need to talk to the scientists," says Rita walking urgently towards their building.

"Why, what is going on?" I ask, walking after her.

"That didn't seem like an accidental crash; it looked like the Ubica were sent here," she says as I catch up to her. "Those eggs look more like full-body airbags and the doors look like they were meant to be opened after a crash, and the rows of those egg sacks. It seems like an invasion force!"

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, absolutely. I also picked up the ship broadcasting some sort of signal into space. Wait here, I have to talk with the scientists," she says, slipping through the doorway.

I find a bench nearby and flip up my night vision to stare at the stars. While I sit there, I can't help but worry aloud.

"Are there more coming?"

## Untitled

### Chapter 1 - Arlo

I heard feet pounding on the pavement somewhere behind me as I ran through the darkness. The sound stopped, only for a moment, then something hit me from behind, forcing me to the ground. I twisted and stared into the bright red eyes of a monster, long fangs dripping with drool, the proud owner of a shaggy fur coat. Strangely enough, the creature sparked no fear.

I jolted upright, stuck in the bed sheets that entangled me after a restless night. As I wiped the sweat from my brow, something that could only be described as furry brushed my face. I recoiled, then stared hard at my forearm. Sure enough, a light dusting of brownish reddish hair covered it.

I sighed in resignation. Something like this happened every night. Always either the fur or blackened fingertips. These... occurrences were always linked to my dreams. The monster dreams were accompanied by fur. The blackened fingertips were always caused by dreams of cloaked figures turning into bats.

These dreams had started happening around the time I turned sixteen. Every now and then, though, the dreams threw in a shadowed figure, a demon with uniquely spiraled horns and slightly tattered wings.

I rubbed the sleep from my eyes. Rolling out of the guest room bed of my latest foster home, I turned to my suitcase to grab some clothes. The first thing I caught sight of was the bracelet that the last foster parents had given me when I turned 17. They were nice, of course, until I got expelled from school for either too many write ups due to falling asleep during class or several suspensions for causing fights for no reason. That didn't happen until after I was sixteen, as well. I used to be the perfect little girl.

I picked up a dirty t-shirt and a pair of jeans. Bringing them to my nose, I sniffed cautiously and sighed in relief when I found



they didn't smell too bad. I was in no mood to do the laundry. All I wanted to do was take a warm shower to erase any traces of the dreams and go for a run to let out all the nervous energy that had built up.

After soaking in the bath for what was most likely far too long, I reluctantly climbed out and got dressed. As I walked into the living room of foster family number 42, I sighed and wrote a note: 'Gone running. Be back later.'

-Arlo Glassmith

The dreams always caused a huge energy buildup that made me jittery. If I didn't lose it quickly, it hurt. Really hurt. I hesitated then trotted back upstairs to grab my special necklace, the one that has been with me since I was found on the foster center's doorstep. The small pendant had an image that consisted of triangles, squares, and strange little rhombuses. I slipped it beneath my shirt so it wouldn't bounce onto my back. Finally, I laced up my sneakers and slipped out the front door.

I smiled a little as I took a deep breath of the fresh air. This particular family had the decency to live somewhere without too much pollution. I turned to my left. This neighborhood was in the shape of a rough circle, so as long as I stayed in the street, I couldn't get lost.

I started off at a nice, even pace. After a while, it just wasn't cutting the energy exorcism requirements. So, I broke into a full sprint.

About 20 miles later, with barely a burn in my calves or heaving lungs, I slowed to a stop. There was barely a dent in the energy. I sighed and started to run again.

When I reached the part of the path that spanned about a mile and a half of woodland to my right, I heard a slight rustle. My steps faltered a bit. I shook my head and steadied out my pace. I'm just paranoid. Then again, what if my dreams were real?

I shook my head again. Nothing would happen. I'd made sure of it...after the first few foster homes, and what happened to them...let's just say it isn't pleasant going home from second grade and opening up the door to find your foster family brutally slaughtered, their blood writing 'We're waiting for you' on the wall. I've run from home to home, just staying long enough for a couple of weeks of sleep and rest, before causing problems and getting shipped away so they would stay safe.

I ran at a comfortable speed for a little while longer, listening to the rhythmic patter of my feet on the pavement. It was enjoyable, and I could feel this stress starting to ebb. I checked my watch. 45 miles until cooldown? That's a new record.

I kept running for about another five minutes then started to circle back to the house when I heard another almost silent set of shoes fall into step behind me. I knew from experience that I couldn't glance back, so I simply sped my pace to a slightly faster jog. The footsteps behind me increased as well, and finally, I broke into an all-out sprint. I sped around a corner onto the only street that I knew had several broken lamplights, hoping the strange night vision I had somehow acquired would aid me in escaping whoever was behind me.

I heard the feet pounding on the pavement somewhere behind me. The blood rushing in my ears and the pounding beat of my heart made it difficult to gauge where my pursuer was. I finally reached the darkest part of the street, an intersection, when the sound stopped, only for a moment. Then something slammed into my back, roughly throwing me to the ground. I struggled and fought against the weight pinning me, until finally, I was able to roll over. But, when I did, it gave me pause.

The glowing red eyes of a monster. The snapping jaws and dripping fangs. The shaggy fur coat. From my dream.

The massive wolf, sensing my hesitation, went straight for my throat. Instinct acted and I tossed my head out of the way, freeing one of my arms and sending a nasty right hook straight to the side of its face. I heard a crunch and saw scarlet blood splatter on the pavement and my cheek. The wolf stumbled to the side, and I wiggled my lower half, freeing up my feet. I stepped on its tail, which had been lowered from the surprise, and it yipped and scampered a few feet away.

We saw the long, sharp canine, out from the root, laying on the pavement between us at about the same time. The wolf glared and ran its tongue over a gaping hole in its impressive jaws, and, when finding the space, let out a feral growl and launched itself at me. I lowered myself into a protective stance instinctually, watching as the shaggy beast flew through the air, its jaw agape as it aimed for my head.

I prepared for the fight, when all of the sudden, the vicious

animal was knocked out of the air by a red-winged human-shaped blur. A huge gust of air knocked me over and I scrambled back to my feet, backing out of danger to watch the fight. What seemed to be a demon tossed the wolf around as if it weighed as much as a teddy bear. The poor creature was just yipping and yipping, the demon so fast that the creature that had seemed so terrifying and strong before now reminded me of a harmless little puppy.

It was over before I could blink. The demon man had the beast pinned and whipped a metal bar out of his pocket. It lengthened into a staff, and with the click of a button, a serrated blade in the shape of a spearhead sprang from each end. He spun it in a circle before plunging it into the beast's heart. Its life bled onto the pavement, and with a final yowl, it shifted into a human form before fading into dust.

He spun his staff again as he turned to face me. At the first view of his face, I just stared and tried desperately to catch my breath. His messy brown-red hair fell in natural waves across his forehead. The red tinge across his bronze skin complemented his fiery orange eyes, and his strong jaw had a jagged scar running down to his neck, continuing under the neck of his black t-shirt. His combat boots and cargo pants covered the rest of him, and large, tattered wings and uniquely spiraled red horns gave him away.

It was him. The dream demon.

He moved, and in the blink of an eye, he was slamming the contracted, blunt end of the staff into the top of my head, and everything faded to black.



## Acknowledgments

### Henderson Libraries

#### Coordinators:

*Areli Diaz*

*Lenna Doctors*

*Sadie Hinson*

*Renee Hudacek*

*Sabrina Marks*

*Christina Terriquez*

### ThinkArt! Coordinators:

*Dinh Chau-Kieckhafer*

*Michael S. Harley*

### ThinkArt! Judges:

*Megan Gubler*

*Michael Harley*

*Stephanie Kalina-Metzger*

*Keala Kieckhafer*

*Aimee Lisiewski*

*Natalia Luthmann*

*Alex Phuong*

*Barbara Russel*

*Herb Russel*

*Paul Rundle*

*Eric Vintner*

*&*

*TextbookBroker.com*

*Rachel Knight*

### Magazine Design & Layout:

*ThinkArt!-Think & Wonder Inc*

## A Special Thank You

We would like to dedicate this publication to:

***The Friends of Henderson Libraries***

for their generous contribution to this project.



We would also like to thank

***ThinkArt! - Think & Wonder Inc.***

for judging, mentoring the participants,  
*Unlock Voices* logo creation and design,  
graphic layout and design of the digital  
magazine, reception artboard design,  
and for their continued contribution to this project.