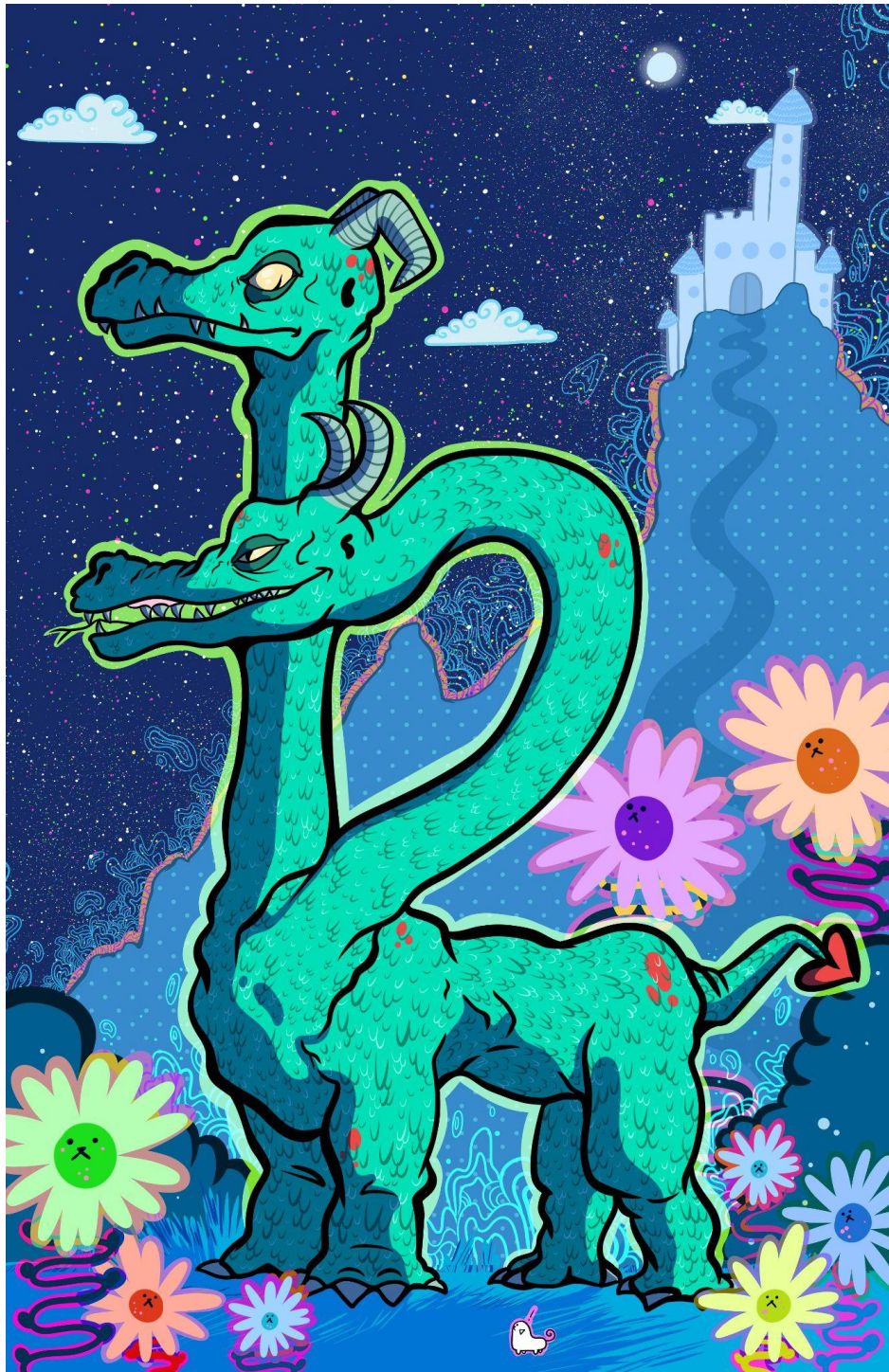


HIVE AVENUE LITERARY JOURNAL



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HIVE AVENUE



A LITERARY JOURNAL

Hive Avenue Literary Journal

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MISSION STATEMENT

Hive Avenue is rooted in the belief that art is vital for the sustenance of life and has the strength to unite a community.

Our mission is to foster the professional development of writers, poets, and visual artists, to promote communication, connection, and the feeling of kinship.

Here at Hive Avenue, we aim to showcase the tastes and talents of both established and emerging writers in the global community – dare we say, hive?

Hive Avenue strives to cultivate an environment of appreciation; a sanctified space for all to be able to breathe and to read.

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THERE IS THAT ONE NAGGING DETAIL

by ROBERT DETMAN

My arms feel like Atlas's after carrying the world
around and then up some narrow stairs where
I place it carefully in my living room. I bumped

it a few times but my arms were so sore
and I had to watch my steps. Now the phrase
"The elephant in the room" takes on new significance.

You don't get to choose your own problems, after all.
But I can't ignore it. It is picturesque from this vantage
though carrying it left a waxy residue on my hands

and arms. And I can't just leave it there as it gently rolls
like a bowling ball on my unlevel floors. Its problems
are too much for me, but as they say it's the only world

we've got. I want to get back outside so I will carry
it back out. There is a group of kids out there
joyously running around and I wonder if they

will be tempted to kick it, the urge I always get when
I see a ball. This would probably register as an earthquake
in Alaska, or maybe a meteor near Christmas Island.

That has a way of taking your mind off your problems.
At least I'm getting a workout. But I think I'll rig it up
to the oak tree so no one can bother it. It could do

worse with becoming a perch for the birds flying south
this season. Or maybe that squirrel will give it a whirl
until he becomes puzzled with it and runs off to torment

the tomato plants. I look forward to sitting down beside
it with cocktails and watching the sun set and then we can
make a toast to the future. I was kidding about kicking it.

MY FRIEND ROPER

by MATT DUBE

I didn't think much about my friend Roper until the cave goat story went viral, even though I was living in Ukraine and he was in Poland, practically next door. But then his story about the Orphic goat ritual he observed outside Warsaw got picked up by *Vice* and reposted all over social media, I felt like I was seeing that goat's face everywhere I looked. The way it first blinked fiercely against the bright sun after living in a dark cave for a week, and then its look of put-upon astonishment as people cheered what must have seemed like a perfectly ordinary action—see the light, walk toward it—seemed to sum up something. I'll admit it, I went on Café Press and bought a "Cave-Goat" t-shirt. Roper was having a moment, finally, at the cusp of middle age, and I felt proud of him. And then Lucy used the group chat a bunch of us logged on to a dozen times a day to tell us that she'd heard Roper had had a heart attack. We were too young for heart attacks. Jill asked what kind of medical care could he get in Poland, and I wondered if this meant he'd move back to the States. Roper would have been embarrassed to know we were talking about him. Then, a couple months went by and I'd decided it was time to leave Ukraine. I messaged him privately and asked if we could meet up before I flew home. Instead of flying from Kyiv to Amsterdam to NYC, I'd take a train to Warsaw, stay with Roper for a night, and fly home from there. I packed everything, even my Cave-Goat t-shirt, and shipped it home. All I took with me on the train was my satchel with a couple notebooks, a spy novel, and a change of clothes.

I assumed he'd be easy to spot in the train station—Americans always were, walking, talking, and even standing with a kind of naïve swagger that made them stand out. But I walked the arrivals platform three times before I identified Roper, sitting on a low metal bench in a track suit, reading a paper like he was waiting for a train to depart instead of picking up a friend of twenty years who was going to be staying at his place. He didn't act surprised when I found him, or relieved, or anything. He just patted me, weakly, on the arm and asked perfectly boring questions about my trip and what I knew about Warsaw. I'd been a couple times since I'd been in Ukraine, but how could I explain that I never visited with Roper before now? So I played it cool, told him it was all new to me and that I was in his hands. I imagined we'd walk through the old city, he'd take me to some brewery or other, and that would be that. "Nothing here you wanted to see?" he responded suspiciously, and looked me over like I was a fool.

"Except you," I said, and smiled, and he looked away.

"This way's the tram," he said. "It'll take us to my office. It's cheap and faster than a taxi." I followed him up a flight of stairs and down a short corridor to another set of stairs going down, and then somehow we were standing on the side of the street. He crossed and I followed, and before I knew it we were standing at a city bus stop with Warsaw natives. He moved slowly, like a guy ten years older than we were, but his faculties seemed intact. He struck up a conversation with a local waiting with us and managed to change some bills for other bills and a handful of coins. "It's better to have exact change," he said, and counted out some of the coins and handed me the requisite amount.

The bus was crowded with the smells of sauerkraut and cabbage and when I looked away and then back, Roper had blended so completely into the steaming mass of run-of-the-mill Cold War characters in his track suit that I had to concentrate to pick him out again. After a few stops, Roper stood and led me to the street. We walked a block to a door between an old watch repair shop and another that sold mobile phones and sneakers and then up a narrow flight of stairs to the third floor, through the fire door onto a hallway of old carpet and cracked and repaired glass office doors. He stopped in front of the one where someone—maybe Roper himself, the workmanship was that crude—had painted his name, over the words “Dateline Correspondent.” “Like the TV show,” I said, but he ignored me and walked into the office.

There was a high counter covered in wood paneling, and behind it a door recessed into the wall with a tarnished brass knob. “Put your bag behind the counter,” Roper said, and then opened the door and walked through to an inner room. There was a desk there, small but still official looking and with a brass lamp with a green plastic shade. He didn’t turn it on, so what light there was came in from a small streaked window. The walls were lined with gray metal shelves, the kind you’d expect to hold up janitorial supplies, hand soap and bleach, but Roper had filled them with fat black binders. He fell into the chair behind the desk and gestured to me to sit in the one in front of it and pulled a bottle from one of the desk’s drawers. “Want a drink?” he asked, and walked across the room to pick up two glass tumblers. He rinsed them, quickly, in a small sink, and then poured himself a few fingers from the bottle. “Sure,” I said, and he repeated the gesture with my glass. He walked over and handed it to me. Still standing, he asked, “So you want to give me the fifth degree, put it all in the report?”

“There’s no report,” I said, and took the glass without drinking from it. “I’m here because I wanted to see you. I thought maybe you can introduce me to Cave-Goat.”

“No jokes!” Roper thundered. “This is such bullshit.” He walked back and forth behind my back, till I had to turn my neck to follow him. “Such bullshit,” he repeated. “My work has been solid. I am sure of that. No one can complain about my work. My work has been exemplary.”

“I don’t know anything about a report,” I said. “I just wanted to see my friend, to have a little fun. I didn’t know you’re so sensitive about the goat thing.” But already, I was starting to write a report in my head: Roper was always pretty tightly wound but he was fun and always a sharp dresser. Self-possessed, even. But here he was, paranoid and living like a private eye from a dime novel, dressed in dulled track suits, drinking rot gut in the middle of the day. And his skin looked gray, like grocery store brand ham or chicken. “Who’s paying your bills now, anyhow? You always had such a cushy set up here. I’m between things lately, maybe there’s room for me here.”

“Oh no,” he said. “You wouldn’t like it, the kind of work I do. It’s not the kind of thing anyone can do.” I doubted that was true, but it looked like he was calming down a little and I didn’t want to set him off again. Some tension in Roper ran down when I talked, and he stopped pacing. He returned to the far side of the desk. “How long were you there for?” he asked, waving his hand dismissively in the air. “In the Ukraine.”

“Twenty months,” I said. “It was supposed to be two years, but something happened with the funding so I had to wrap it up early.” But I could tell by the look on his face he wasn’t even listening so I didn’t put much effort into lying.

"I've lived here six years," he said. "And no one has ever asked about the work I'm doing, let alone come to see me. You remember Lucy? She turned up here six weeks ago, out of the blue, asked me to recommend a day spa." He paused. "And now you. If they don't trust me, you're going to have to tell me what I'm doing wrong," he said, and threw back his glass, draining it. "Because I don't know how much more of this I can stand."

"I'm not here for that," I said. "No one sent me. I wouldn't know who to report on you to. That's the truth." And Roper seemed settled, ready to believe me, a balloon nearly out of gas, deflating in his wingback chair.

...

"Did you see my chair back at the office," Roper said, speaking to me even as he walked briskly ahead of me. "Did you like it?" I raced to keep up as he walked down the street till we reached a corner, where he brusquely turned his face first one way, then the other, before stomping off down the street again. "I know where you can get one just like it, cheap. You can get anything here cheap," he said, and stopped at a corner till I caught up, and then we both crossed. "Of course it's all fake shit. But you can't tell. It's very high quality."

"I don't know," I said. "I don't even know where I'm going to be living when I'm back in the States. I was seeing this woman who's working at a non-profit in DC, Kristy, but we broke up a couple months ago. I'm thinking of looking for a place in Brooklyn." Roper had stopped on the sidewalk to listen to me, the first time he'd stopped moving, it felt like, since I made contact with him at the train station.

"Brooklyn!" he said with violence, and then stopped himself. "Breakups can be hard," he said, and touched my wrist. "And you were overseas when it ended," He looked into my face like he could read my story there. I nodded. "That can really hurt. It can make you feel like you're alone in the world."

But we weren't alone; people jostled us as Roper held us steady on the sidewalk. And it felt surreal to be having this conversation a block from the Vistula; my problems, my subterfuge with Roper, it all felt so petty alongside all this history. "It wasn't a problem with my funding that made me leave. I just woke up one day and I could remember why I was doing it anymore, where it was supposed to get me to. What's that?" I asked because Roper was staring at me and I needed a distraction. We appraised the three brick gates, built together and topped with concrete. "That's Brama Straceń," Roper said. "They used to shoot people there."

"So if you were a goat, which hole do you think you'd come through?" I asked as calmly as I could, and Roper laughed.

Roper took a deep breath. "The thing no one understands, it's not even the goat. It's that it's a Bulgarian festival, so why are people doing it here? But damn if I can get anyone to understand that. Otherwise, it's just a standard spring festival, no different than Easter." I was being lectured, but that was better than the alternative. We weren't talking about my life. He stalked off again, not even looking back to be sure I followed. We turned down two more streets, and I worried for a minute that we were walking in a circle, or that Roper was trying to make me lost. But then he stopped at the entrance to a broad plaza, at least as wide as two streets, with a row of shops on either side, and another crowding a median between them. "This is the Rynok," he said to me. "You'll love this," and plunged in.

I'd known Rynoks in Ukraine, the crowded rows of small booths and kiosks, the racks hung with bootleg plastic bags, and every kind of mass produced crap you could ever want, piled so high you had to spear stuff with a hook. But this Rynok was different, small shops, like a mini-mall back home, maybe, with glass display windows and actual doors, two crowded alleys of shops that ran beside other shops. Roper stopped in front of one where a giant Polish flag and a FIFA World Cup 2012 banner were hanging. "This is where I got my suit," he said, and patted his vinyl pant leg. "I think of it as my official uniform. It's perfect for wearing in the field. You can clean it with a bottle of windex and a paper towel. You never need to do laundry." He paused to reflect for a second.

"Does it repel goat shit?" I asked, and he just cut me with a nasty look.

"I don't think so," I said, afraid to hurt his feelings, but he took it like he'd heard it all before. "I've just got to get a couple things for dinner," he said, and stomped off again. I followed him to a small butcher shop where he got a couple cleaned chickens and some root vegetables I could taste with my eyes even though I couldn't quite identify them. A couple large bottles of bubbly water joined these in his sack, and we were off again, not stopping till we reached another bus stop.

...

Roper bullied his way onto the bus and took up two seats with his canvas grocery sack, and we rode outside the city center to a dusty ring of tall, nearly identical apartment buildings. The bus let us off with a shake of exhaust, and Roper stopped for a minute, the two of us standing in its wake. "What I'm going to show you," he said, "doesn't go into any report you make. It has nothing to do with my job performance. Which is exemplary," he said, and shook his finger at me before he put it away. I wondered if he was going to show me his torture room, or maybe a massive grow operation that supplied half of the former Warsaw Pact nations with weed. I just nodded, and I think Roper realized we'd come too far to go back now, so as the sun hid behind the apartment complexes, he led me up a flight of cement stairs.

We climbed landing to landing, tuna cans and empty plastic bottles pushed into cobwebbed corners, Roper's breathing getting more labored at each floor and I was sure I'd need to carry him the rest of the way to his apartment until finally we stopped in front of a padded leather door that muffled his knocks. I was about to ask why he was knocking on his own door. And then, the door opened and a short pigeon-blonde haired woman built like a teapot opened the door and Roper pushed into her with a big hug and kiss.

This was Roper's big secret, what I needed to keep out of the report, I thought, and stepped into the book lined apartment, which was tidy and warm. Marta, it turned out her name was Marta, was a university researcher, attached to the Faculty of Economics at a local Warsaw business college. They'd married a year ago. And when she was with him, Roper tried so hard, but instead let her speak for him. Over dinner, a cold green borscht, and the chicken, and a spice cake she kept trying to get Roper to eat less of, I could tell she protected him.

I understood why he hesitated to introduce me to her. When you work overseas, people who don't know you are always on the lookout for signs you're going native, as if that's the worst thing in the world. And to marry a local when you're living overseas is somehow the greatest sin of all. People act like you've totally lost your bearings and they can second guess every decision you make. People who hadn't lived overseas didn't

know how lonely it can be, how strong the impulse was to cash in whatever prestige you had as an American in exchange for an ally. And some of the women were just too hot to refuse. That's what happened with me and Kristy. I started seeing my own Marta, a young woman named Olesha, and that was what it took for me to see that Kristy and I weren't ever going to go in together on a pied-a-terre in Georgetown.

After dinner, Marta excused herself, saying she had to prepare her classes for the next day, and Roper got up and found a bottle in one of the cabinets and set it in the center of the table beside the spice cake and put a couple glasses in front of us. "What's your preference, apple or orange?" he asked me, pulling two fruit juice cartons from the fridge. "Apple," I said, and he filled up a glass. He poured orange for himself, and then gave us each a shot from the bottle on the table. I drank it down when he lifted his, and it burned my throat with a smoky sting, and I followed it with the crisp sweetness of the apple juice.

"Life is strange," he said with the darkness from the window over the kitchen sink wanting to creep into the room with us. He'd been subdued since we entered his apartment; I couldn't tell if it was because he didn't have to fight so hard when he was here, or if he was just exhausted. "You do everything you're supposed to do," he started again. "And sometimes it works out." We drank, and he filled my glass again and I drank it quickly because I couldn't bear to get dragged into this. "And you don't want to fight for it anymore."

"I'm wiped out," I said. "And I need to get moving tomorrow."

"Of course," he said. "I'm not used to having people like you in my house. It's making me weird. I'm sorry." He stood slowly from his chair. I was tottering a little, too. "Let's see what Marta has done for you."

I followed him out into the main room, and there was a short pile of blankets and a quilt, hand-tied, on the edge of the couch. "If you get uncomfortable or the couch is too short, just sleep on the floor," Roper said. "I've done that enough times, when I was working on a story and kept waking Marta up with my thoughts. We won't disturb you, just let me know what time you need to be out of here in the morning." I told him about my flight, and he reassured me that we had plenty of time. And then he left me there to make myself ready for bed.

The couch was short and lumpy, so I spread myself out on the floor and shortly thereafter I must have fallen asleep. I woke up when something nudged me in the ribs. It was Marta's foot. My eyes adjusted to the dark and I saw her sitting on the edge of the couch. "I need to tell you about what to put in the report," she said.

"There's no report," I said. "I'm here because I heard Roper was sick. I wanted to see if he was all right. We've been friends for a lot of years."

"Roper is sick," she said, not even leaning forward on the couch. "He is not all right. That is what you must say in your report."

"But there's no report," I repeated. "I'm just here as a friend."

"Roper will never believe that," she said, calmly. "You must write in the report he is sick. Tell them he has married a native woman. That will end this." She leaned back against the couch. "You must do this, you must make it so that Roper, he needs to go back to the United States, or he will die. You can do this for me, for him."

"What?" I was waking up more and she still wasn't making any sense.

“His contract,” she explained. “He cannot marry and have his own objectivity. He is compromised. Always he tells me this, no one must know we are married or he will be forced to leave this country and return to America. Where they will care for him. His drinking. His eating. His heart.” She handed me a manila envelope. “Inside is everything you need. Our marriage certificate. Medical records. Everything that is needed for a report. The address where to deliver it is on the outside. You must include it all in your report. Or else simply this, it can be your report. He is your friend, and you must do this for him.”

“But he’ll hate me,” I said. “He’ll know it was me.”

“Better he hates you than he is dead and it is your fault,” Marta said, and forced the envelope into my hand. “In the morning, you leave and when you get to New York, you must deliver the report.”

...

Roper woke me up in the morning with a gentle shake of my shoulder and a cup of coffee. “Wakey-wake, little prince,” he said, and it was like he was already putting on his armor for the outside world. “It’s time to get up if you’re going to be flying back to the Magic Kingdom.”

I had this moment of dread that Roper would make me ride the bus with him to the airport and see me off. But he surprised me, and while I was cleaning myself up, he called a taxi to drive me, and patted me on the shoulder when I left. “I don’t think I’ll be seeing your candy-ass around here for a while,” he said. “But that’s no reason to be a stranger. We’ve got the internet, after all. Even here.” And he laughed and slammed the taxi door shut in my face.

I’d read the last Len Deighton novel I owned on the train to Warsaw and left it in the bathroom there without ever getting a chance to find something new to read on my flight. All I had was the envelope Marta had given me, and I looked left and right to be sure no one was reading over my shoulder before I opened it in my seat in coach. It looked like it was a complete dossier of Roper’s life in Warsaw. There was a copy of the marriage certificate, with a variety of raised seals, and also the deed to the apartment where I’d spent the night. There were medical records, lots of them from Roper’s heart attack, print-outs of echocardiograms and lots of scrawled notes, even what looked like a pencil drawing of a human heart, lanced through with curved arrows to show blockage and cleared passages. And then more. I spent an hour looking through a series of documents that I finally decided must show a sequence of fertility treatments. My Polish was non-existent, and my Ukrainian was only a little bit better, and the languages were related but not the same, so I was guessing, but that’s what it looked like to me: hormones and cryo-something, implantation. Most medical terms are cognates, except when they’re not. I folded all the forms together again when I figured that out and slid them back into the manila envelope. I didn’t know what to do with it when we landed at JFK.

Though there were a couple Slavic-looking toughs in beetle-black leather jackets in the arrivals gate to make me feel like I was still abroad, and even a guy in a windex-shiny blue track suit, no one in the arrivals lounge was there to greet me. I adjusted my satchel and headed to my friend Marx’s place. He worked stupid hours at a financial reporting start-up, but told me where to find the key, and I flopped on his couch and tried to sleep off my restlessness.

When I woke up, I couldn't figure out Marx's wifi password, so I looked for a café where I could check my email. It was so quiet on the streets compared to what I was used to, a dusty light and these empty-seeming apartment buildings and warehouses, like I was in a Western. And everyone in the café was so polite I think I almost got thrown out because I was being so pushy, like you need to be in Ukraine. I bet everyone was glad when I got my drink, sat down, and powered up my laptop to connect to the internet. I was hoping for an email from Kristy, but instead, there was a notification from Roper. I clicked to open it, and read "How's that report coming?" and a winky-face emoticon. It seemed so off-brand for Roper that I wondered for a second if Marta had sent the message, but it didn't seem like her style, either. Not that I knew her. Not that I really knew Roper, either, after all these years. And the report? I was carrying it in my satchel. I pulled out the envelope and looked at the address. It wasn't far away, near a subway station where Kristy and I used to get drinks. I didn't know when Marx would be back; I probably needed to find someone to talk to who I could trust before I did anything stupid. I folded my laptop back into my carry-on and left the café.

I came up from the subway under the shadow of the Manhattan Bridge Overpass and tried to find the address on the envelope among the small bodegas and cocktail bars. I walked past the three most famous pizzerias in the world and went around the block twice before I realized I was standing in front of it, the Bulkhead, the sprawling complex of the most well-funded fringe church in America. It looked like a giant hotel complex, dusty rose stone blocks with the huge Bulkhead sign hanging over it all like it said Hilton. I'd heard that they funded journalists overseas but I never guessed they were behind Roper's position. But if they paid his bills, I'd be as paranoid as Roper was about them sending someone to write a report about me.

I walked up to the public entrance and talked, briefly, to a receptionist in a spotless white blouse and headset who made me wait before waving me past a security guard and up a set of stairs into another lobby one level higher up. Another receptionist, nearly identical to the first, seemed to know I was coming and asked to see the report, and then handed me off to a security guard whose uniform looked more military than civil to lead me to a bank of elevators where floors were labeled with symbols instead of numbers. He escorted me to a room that was completely white and completely soundproof, furnished only with a metal table that didn't reflect the overhead light at all, like it was pewter or lead. While I waited, I told myself that I'd done the right thing, that it wasn't healthy for Roper to be overseas any longer, that he needed the kind of care, even the kind of life, he could only have in the United States. And I'd known, hadn't I, when I first saw him at the train station that there was something wrong with him? So what if what brought him home was some stupid clause in a contract that was probably unenforceable from a legal standpoint. I tried to convince myself that I was doing the right thing when a woman at least ten years younger than me, in a bespoke business suit, came into the room and sat opposite me. She set the manila envelope on the table between us.

"We appreciate the report you've provided," she said. "We very much value having input on the performance of our network in faraway places. So often, things happen at a distance and it would be hard to keep track of the details without help like what you've given us."

“But I wasn’t sent there to write a report for you,” I said. “I just wanted to visit my friend, to see if he was all right.”

“And yet, you were concerned about what you saw there so you presented this report to us,” she continued, smooth and undisturbed. I didn’t write the report, I felt like telling her; Marta had. But I had delivered it.

“So this is it? You’re bringing him back now, I guess,” I said, thinking of Roper packing up all his books and his track suits and taking the bus to the airport outside Warsaw.

“Why should we do that?” the young woman opposite me asked, intent on my answer.

“Well, he’s married. Quite clearly he’s gone native there. And well, the contract. He can’t really be considered reliable, from a journalistic point of view. He’s drank the kool-aid, right?”

The young woman leaned back from the table and her nostrils flared. “We don’t use that phrase here,” she said. “And what you mention, there’s been a change in our philosophy, from objectivity to desiring correspondents who are embedded, who really feel like they are part of the culture. We feel it invests their reporting with a level of commitment that our readers appreciate.” She paused and flipped pages of the report. “We’ve also discovered that when correspondents are motivated to stay, as Mr. Roper obviously is, we can sometimes arrange a change in their salary-structure.”

“You mean you can pay him less because he wants to be there?” I asked, but I knew the answer.

“We appreciate your diligence in bringing us this information,” the young woman said, and stood from the table. “There’s a small honorarium due you for your efforts. You can pick it up from the reception desk on your way out. Meanwhile, I apologize, but I have other obligations today.” She left, and when I walked out of the conference room, the security guard walked me back to the elevator bay. “Have a blessed day,” he said to me as I walked through the lobby.

I stepped out into late morning sunshine and stood frozen for a minute, unsure what to do next. But I knew in New York City I couldn’t stand still for long, so I walked back to the subway station. I let myself down the stairs, thinking I could decide on a destination when I arrived. I wished Roper were being recalled. I needed a roommate; I wanted to ask him if he wondered how the goat decided it was time to come back to the land of the living.

A LIGHT FLICKERS IN THE WAITING ROOM

by TAYLOR HOYT

We clasp our hands, close our eyes,
and pray our children never grow up.
God puts them away in a cubby hole;
we watch the world spin by in horror.
I want my mother, but I can't find her,
gone out against the blank
cement slate we make for ourselves,
laying against it in the summer
when the sun has soaked it warm,
giving ourselves permission to call it God.
My brother's brain has been swelling for three days
We wade out into the gulf and
let the water beat at our necks,
letting the foam into our mouths,
pretending to taste, and it's warm
bobbing along the water,
thinking we dissipate and expand
evaporate, assimilate along the coast-
Limitless Man-
The hot cement is a make believe.
They won't send me pictures of my brother's face.
His steel beam collapsed
on a hot July midday breeze.
The hit makes your breath go by,
the sky is orange and blinding,
the buildings simmer,
the trees in mild sway,
and time banks slow.
You're thinking of getting a coffee
to help with the afternoon lull.
You've never been more boring;
your loser body run by your loser brain,
unconnected, self-severed from the great chain.
No moon to reach us,
No ground to sink us.
He wasn't wearing his seatbelt.
Doctors make him hold a stuffed bear,
so he won't rip out his chords in his sleep.
He grew up in front of me,
but the frame froze somewhere;
you touch its frosted glass-

and there's your baby in the cubby
hole where God put him.
You can't stop weeping.
You can't disturb other patients.
You continue to work, to smile,
to burn and turn red at your aloneness
and others' ignorance to their own.
You believed in fairies, small magics,
dashes of rings and flickering lights.
I would watch you chase nothing,
run through trees, whip your arms
through thorns in overreaching branches,
eyes red and watery, fighting sleep,
waiting for the fairy trap to spring
and we would smile at the memory,
charmed when we should've been furious.
They won't send me pictures of my brother's face.
They privatize probability,
dangle us on maybes,
swaying in the dark, the constant wedding.
The life we lead, what little you feel
in the weight of your pocket change
is so stiff and ungrudging,
how you can slide off her and around her
without your own choice, your own volition.
This strange beauty in the face of your bride;
how you exhaust her,
how her arms wrap over and close
on the nape of your neck.
You're tired, you're yawning.
You're holding her waist in one hand
and your stuffed bear in the next.
You want your mother to find you now,
to carry you off and put you to bed.
I'm confusing nurses with some story, some memory
about light rays and Mason jars strategically placed next
to cracked doorways, and waiting anxiously in the dark.

HAIR

by SHANTA LEE GANDER

I took my first vow at 14.

I take the vows to fry, dye, lay to the side my strands. My offering to the Gods of Good Hair. The Gods in charge of giving me the hair like all the girls popular girls at school. That would be the ultimate Black girl beautiful.

Excited and giddy that Mama said I could have a relaxer. Excited and giddy, I bought a box relaxer with my own money. She never gave any instructions or warning. The warning about this long road of addiction in the search for the good hair.

Mama never warned about the comfort of this cocoon of dysfunction that surpassed shade, age, socioeconomics, everythang as we all participated in praying to the Gods of Good Hair. A prayer that started long before now. And at 14, the prayer to the Gods for the outcome was the same kind of goal we had at 24, 44, 54, and beyond. Good hair to get a man. Good hair for admiration. Good hair for a new job.

Mama never warned about that fact that within a hair salon, this ritual could last from the chilled air of morning until late supper time. It was all about the wait and anticipation. The space that filled with bodies, gossip, and anythang as silence wrapped our individual wonder, *Will my hair look exactly like the picture I showed her?*

Mama never talks about this as a sisterhood. Maybe she just didn't know how. Maybe she did not know how to say that this was an initiation into the kind of sisterhood that agreed on a main principle: In pain, in struggle, but together.

Mama didn't say anything about how the boxed relaxer and the hair dye trained me for the texturizer. Said nothing about how I'd go on to summon the water wave, the Brazilian wave, the Yaky.

She didn't warn about how I'd get bored with all versions of human hair and go in search for any product that would give me the good shit. Mixed Chicks, DevaCurl, Kinky-Curly, Miss Jessie's Curly Buttercream, frotologists, and twist-out bibles. As small investment growing upon my scalp.

Maybe we all got it from Mama's Mama's Mama, but then again, maybe Mama's Mama's Mama had that good hair. From what I hear, she was, well...somethin...mixed. And papa's grandmother and great-grandmother? Why couldn't *those* genes land upon my scalp. From what I heard, it was the kind of hair that would be good with a wash and go. Off and on, each time I heard each of these stories, I stood staring at myself in the mirror pulling each strand as if performing an interrogation. They knew what answers I was looking for but refused to give them to me each time.

Mama said nothin' about going everywhere to look for all these things within any one of those places that went without the actual names printed on the front of the building or in the telephone books. Universally, they are all *The Hair Store*.

Mama warns nothing about the cost of punishment for each and every one of us trying to ask silently about all the ways that we wanted our crown of glory to be blessed good. All us – sisters, mothers, cousins, daughters, familiars, and strangers – huddled at hair store counters, in salons, or sometimes, sometimes in houses. If in houses, we'd be

in kitchens, bathrooms, basements, sitting on porches, living rooms, dining rooms, we made a space out of any space.

That day, maybe it was just before the start of 8th grade, Mama figured it was time as she said nothing of none of this. That day, she stuffs all her never-saids into her scrambled brain and figured it was just time because after all, she ain't got time to keep tending to me, my growing breasts, or my hair.

Like the specifics of going to get a bra, these details of what it was like to have my hair handed over is missing. Instead, like a lot of things, one day, all my tresses belonged to Mama in terms of what I could and could not do. The next, all untamed roots to ends of all of it was mines.

...

Like a kitchen or food, not every pair of hands can have access.

It was a chant that we just knew that needed no explanation, *there are the hands that take it out and the hands that grow it*. No need to know ahead of time whose hands can do what. You just know. We all whisper about it.

It's not restriction but a lullaby of sameness. We know that when others say it around us, that us not crazy for hearing the same message. *Not all hands...well, you get it.*

We don't know what kind we are except, maybe we are the kind that can grow it...
we never took Kim's hair out by playin with it.

...

All us remember the choreography that came with no instructions:

1. Sit still. By still, we mean don't cough. Don't move. Don't itch. Well, if you have to itch, you better say something or else you might get burned.
2. Turn when you are told to turn or you will get yanked.
3. Bend each ear when it is time. Not their fault, but they are in the way. We know she doesn't want her ears to be kissed by the hot comb.

Us? We don't wanna be kissed by that thang either. We didn't like the heat so much, but when *Blue Magic* was put on us, well, we kind of liked it until...until hot comb came on the scene. Black Girl, well she had to yield to the hot comb too. She had rules to follow too. Black Girl had to be ready to be burned alongside all us.

And her Mama, well, her Mama wasn't the type to really sacrifice her fingers, her finger tips, parts of her hand... it was us and the skin, our skin right beneath us that got it. Got it real good.

Our cry was the sizzle that was mis-taken for us complying. But our screams, well, our screams were without mistake.

Our screams were each of us shedding, retreating, disappearing down drains when we could. We figured if we was gone, no one could try to yank, stretch, and burn us.

...

You don't think about the discomfort,

Beauty is sacrifice. You don't think about the fact that you are going to sleep with your head on top of your hands with this hairstyle-piled-high-pin-curls...shit, will you be able to drive home? Will you risk bumping this fancy pony as you get into the car?

Flyness is discomfort. Everyone knows that but they don't want to talk about it. If it's a weave, do not scratch. With those new braids, those new twists, with all of that, you better just pat your head. Do not scratch. Do like this if it bothers you so much.

As for the dance floor, allowing your man to touch your hair, allowing your child to tug on it, or anyone else...

DON'T EVEN TRY IT.

...

Speaking of no warning,

There is also no warning about the way that hair equals control over all of us along with her body. Why? Somehow, we belong to them, their hands, and anything they wanted to do to us. We do not seem to belong to Black Girl.

Why?

We became the space for Black Mama's experiment. We told Black Girl what we wanted to look like. How we wanted to swing, shine, and bounce like Ebony, Tory, Myra, and 'dem. Black Girl wanted that too, but Black Mama, she was not going to let us have it.

Why?

Black Mama liked to force us into her favorite hairstyle, a braided beehive. What was she thinkin'? We were so embarrassed and of course, we could not hide when she started to braid going up into one damned direction. Then she would leave that one braid sticking up leaving Black Girl looking like one of those damned Snorks from the cartoons back in the day.

We had to listen too as the kids at school would laugh and shout, *SNORK, SNORK, You look like a SNORK!*

Well, we could run. Hide if we plotted to just fall out...maybe we could...if Black Girl can't control her own body, and if *we* aren't even safe, then, what real choice did we have?

...

But some things can't be fixed.

Like that time you get the maxim mixed up, *You can dye a perm but you can't perm a dye?* Or was it, *You can perm a dye but you can't dye a perm?* See, if there was only that one hair dresser passed down in the family, this bootleg broke-shit would not be happening—a boxed perm? I bet that would be an abomination within a Black elite family. And if you were a mixed chick, you wouldn't need any of this. I'd already have good hair.

You waited two weeks. Cause that was what the rule said, right? Wait two weeks, then do the process. Remember, don't scratch your scalp because it makes the relaxer burn. And if you must wash the chemicals out early, then you won't get that swing. That shine.

It is the night before you are moving onto campus to start freshman year at Trinity College. You must have fly hair. You have to look good. This should be no problem and now, well, now your hair will stretch past your shoulder blades.

But that does not happen.

You are moving onto campus tomorrow and must put your hair into a French roll to cover up the big bald spot in the center of your head. You must think fast. The crying

is covered by the water running in the tub. They won't hear you anyway because the television is always on.

Tonight, loud television is a good thing. Tonight, you look in the mirror and the mirror could care less about consoling. It just shows you what you already know. Shows you what you saw washing down the drain. And don't bother tellin' Mama, she can't tell you anything because she is already pissed that you are moving onto campus.

Your hair fell out and now, you need to decide. Go a whole semester covering it up or cutting it off. But go to who? Who will you go to?

There was no hairdresser ever passed down in the family.

...

When you cut your hair, like your locs, you save them.

You never want to just give your hair away. You can't trust what folks will do with your hair. Just like your food, not everyone can have access to your hair like that. This includes the hair no longer on your head.

Your hair is you. And thus, your hair can be used against you.

...

I am brought home the day after a sleep over at Tasha's house.

I forget what was previously upon my head but all I knew was this: Lisa, Tasha's older sister, wanted to do my hair. She is older, and given that I am 7, I can't say no. Anything with older people is always about saying yes to whatever they say. Well, maybe strangers are an exception.

That night at Tasha's house, I assume the position. Sitting on the ground between her open legs with my small arms occasionally dangling over her legs for balance. It was different with Lisa, at least Lisa, unlike Mama, also lets me use her legs as an elbow rest for support.

Getting my hair done isn't an ass beating. The yank, the tug, the pull is worth it. Because maybe, maybe it will help me look cute. Look cute at school. Look cute for the boys.

But it's more than this. It'll take another 11 years before I will learn about the fact that beauticians are licensed for a reason. Another 20 years before I will understand: Getting one's hair done as an act of ritual, self-care, bonding, sometimes sisterhood. Those all-women spaces will be one of the rare places where we can just be raw in our becoming. We can swap stories. We can yell through a phone about getting a different side of the same story. It is the one place where no one is asking any questions that you don't have to answer.

All they will want to know at this place is, *How do you want it?* or you just show them a picture.

But this ain't that place. This is Lisa and Tasha's house. And here, at their house, I can't tell Lisa what Mama says about letting people do your hair. She's older, so I stay between her legs while the experiment ensues.

For Lisa, I become the living and breathing Barbie Styling Head that I never get as a Christmas present. I was her present in this moment as my hair became gripped by her fingers creating cornrow patterns. It is the same as mom doing my hair because I don't have a say in what she is doing to my hair. It doesn't take long because I forget that it happened as soon as she is done.

Now, I am home and I never see the hairstyle, but I feel like Lisa made me cute. Now, I am excited to show Mama what Lisa did with my hair. It is still morning. I climb in bed with Mama smiling. I close my eyes to mimic her sleeping with a smile still stretched across my face. Mama opens her eyes. No hello, but a scream. A demand, *WHO BRAIDED YOUR HAIR!*

I am still smiling and answer, *Lisa*. Mama must be excited because Lisa must've done a good job, but maybe not. Mama's bed became a battleground as I get knocked and kicked out of the bed between the screams, *YOU DON'T EVER LET ANYONE TOUCH YOUR HAIR!*

The force of her feet and arms push me out of the bed. I go to my pink bedroom. I don't know whether to take the hairstyle out or leave it in because that is another rule. I can't do what I want to my hair when I want. My body belongs to the adult people.

Lisa, that hairstyle, and any conversation of it, evaporate along with the day. And as for that rule, Mama never told me anything about it. It is another thing I am supposed to just know.

...

No one explains that the road to creamy crack is paved with scalp wounds, split ends, hair damage, and a hair bill that needs to be paid every 4-6 weeks.

In between the joy of the swing and the borrowed good hair, it will feel like your hair turns against you. It will feel like it betrays you. Yet you know that you must pay the price. People will talk about your ass if your hair ain't right. So it is worth those moments of the hair dresser sayin', *You sound like you are giving birth in the chair*, as the water to rinse out the relaxer emphasizes the scabs that will be left from the burn.

It is worth the moments of praying that the wind does not blow too hard while standing at a bus stop because instead of a welcome breeze, the breeze became a co-conspirator in torturing your scalp.

The road to staying in this dysfunctional relationship with the creamy crack that promises to grant good hair will demand anything that will cause excessive sweat: No clubin. No bumpin. No excessive grindin.

It will demand that you know how to tightly wrap your hair around your head. It will demand painstakingly brushing and combing it until it appears to be hugging itself around your skull. And you know exactly what *that*, the hair hugging around your skull, is supposed to look like. It seduced you because it looked like an answer to getting the hair like Myra, Ebony, and all 'dem.

It demands a silk scarf to protect the hair hugging itself around your skull.

It demands that you do not twist and turn too wildly while sleeping.

It demands the right hair products. Does that mean the *Luster's Pink Lotion*?

It demands...

...

No one warns you about how to navigate the questions.

Some that are stupid like, *Do you re-use the hair that you take out?*, that another brown person asks you leaving you to feel like she is one of *them* if she has to ask *that* question in front of a white co-worker. How you instantly become hair expert when people want the details as if they are gripped by the words,

So they start off braiding and...

'Wait. Do they add hair? Is that all your hair? How long does it take?

You can't avoid this one just by saying you got the receipt. There is also the commentary that can't have an answer. The comments where one says, *That looks like it hurts, I feel sorry for you.*

Of course, the best part is dodging the hands that reach out to touch with no permission. Not friends. Not family members. But the hands of strangers. The hands that touch first then say, *I just had to.*

Then there are the hands that grip, the hands that pulled are white hands. That moment it happened, it was a stranger on the dance floor. The grip of your hair in her white fingers brought you both back to that place where she gets to remind you how she can touch you without permission.

But familiar hands...they can touch. They can touch because, after all, isn't that why you went natural?

Then again, no one warned about the bigger thing. The woolly mammoth in the middle of your life:

No one warns you about all the ways the hair becomes a bridge to your Black body.

...

You won't admit it and maybe this is the first time you admit it.

You didn't go natural on your own. You wanted to give your man the ability to run his fingers through your hair, but isn't that the beauty of it? Is it acculturation? Must this be lumped in with white supremacy?

That even in its natural state, nobody was going to be able to straight up just run their fingers through, it was going to demand more. This going all-natural shit wanted more.

No, the original march towards natural didn't happen that way. It started with a white man. A white man who told you all the ways you had to be. Having natural hair with no chemicals was just the beginning.

And this white man, well, *this* white man, you looked up to him for the way he was older than you. You looked up to him for the way he was somehow enlightened. And somehow, this, *this* felt soooooo much different than anything that had a stench of ghettotfabulous.

And if it means sacrificing parts of your Black self? You were willing.

...

And that is the dangerous proposition,

the fact that this path started with a white man. Maybe I will give myself a little credit. I was too tired of the dyed, fried, laid on the side. Weaves never made much sense. And the texturizer? The Wash n' Fro? Still tempting, but not worth the burn.

I give myself a little credit for taking the baby steps. A little credit for the way I knew I was tired of jerking away from my man's hands. If I let my hands tell the story, they would say I am not the one with the problem, for chasing the creamy crack a.k.a. the texturizer a.k.a. the straightener. They would blame Kim and blame my parents for letting me play in Kim's hair.

Kim was our very own version of Chrystal Gail, hair down to her ass. Kim, the white girlfriend of Bob Burt. It was all about Kim and given that Kim was a family friend, no one stopped me from playing in her hair. For years, I always wondered why

Mama never let me play in her hair like that. Why when I saw Mama's hair, her hair without the braids, it was always at a distance when she was taking them out only to serve the purpose of putting more braids back in.

If I tell it, then I will tell you this, ain't shit was ever wrong with my hair. My hair was never good, bad or anything. No one's is. But we all know the truth, they never tell you that. You know the unspoken rule each time you go to the job interview. Each time you flip through a magazine. Your whole childhood narrated, dictated by a lot of different kinds of *they*.

White *they*, parental *they*, other-kids-at-school-*they*, Black *they*. And if *they* happened to be the Ebony-Essence-or-even-JET-of-the-1980's-*they*, you knew hot comb, it is. Straightened, it is. A fro' only when it could be controlled. So. It. Is.

...

I don't remember what exactly we did, but I remember how it felt to be the first one to do her hair.

I was in my 20's and remember her name as being as quiet and different as she was. Yet, she picked me to be the one to do it. We lived in the same apartment building. She stopped me one day at Trinity College. I worked on campus. In those days, it was the questions that came often, *Excuse me, do you do hair?* A question that 20 years later in a mostly white state will become, *Who did your hair? What is the number?*

When she came to my apartment that day, the oversized windows gave us both an uninterrupted view of the Trinity College chapel. The sun bathed the hardwood floors and our bodies as she sat in a chair. A variation from the ways I knew that hairstyles happened while sitting on the floor between someone's legs. Grown men seemed to still do it. But as women, we elevated to chairs. Or one in a chair and one sitting on a stool that was several inches higher.

Hers was the kind of hair that reminded me of my longing when I was a little girl. It was thick. It swung. It was well past her shoulders. As I used the wing tip comb to part it, my hands were triggered. In this moment, if my hands were my tongue, they'd be drenched in saliva.

They, my hands, were reminded of how nice it felt to play in Kim's hair. I fought my renewed hunger to stroke her hair and let it fall from my hands with the body that it had as she broke silence, *You feel warmer, cozier. You feel like the South, you sure you not from the South?*

On that day, I did know how to say that the South was stitched in my blood. In those days, I only knew how to claim the North. Somehow, on that day, saying North was better than saying South. White Magnolias, Weeping Willows, and witness trees started slow, then bloomed full out of her throat when she said, *This is the first time I ever let anyone touch my hair. I was raised to never let anyone touch my hair.* There was something in the way the South sprouted reminded me of my Great Aunts and Great Uncles in a way I couldn't name.

I laughed while holding the words, *why me*, hostage in my throat. I excitedly responded trying to bridge the silence and strangled questions allowing, *You too? I was taught the same thing*, to escape from my mouth into her ears.

Maybe she too heard Weeping Willows in my voice when I said this. This lesson more found than spoken, and when spoken, well, it might be followed by an ass whoopin in my house, which was this: *Don't let anyone touch your hair.* More like an edict with

no context or extras. For years, I always wondered about this in relationship to finding a hairdresser. After all, how do you fix your face to ask someone, Excuse me. *Do you have good ju or bad ju on your hands?* Thus, finding a hairdresser will often feel like the underground network for Black women—only take referrals from those you trust. And if you take advice from a stranger, make sure you look closely at their hair.

We laugh at our knowing as she asks again with more of a firmness in her voice, like she needed to know, *Seriously, where did you grow up, you sure you not from the South?*

She needed to be certain for the way I just knew: There are the hands that cause hair to fall out and the hands that grow hair. Don't ever just let anyone near your hair.

Kind of like food. Kind of like letting someone in your kitchen—you don't do it.

...

She ever gonna say sorry to us?

She ever gonna fix her mouth to apologize for each yank, pull, continued twist, twirl....no words can cover it, actually.

No words can cover all of us from root to end. No words.

No words for the exhaustion to loosen our natural for all of them to relax. And by them...we mean them who look like her, and all them who don't look like her.

All of them, they can't seem to relax unless we put in some kinda tidy place. Still.

MYRA SHONEN

by ERIC GERSHMAN

No one was hiring me. Not with my notoriety. So, when Naomi asked if I would cover her class while she went on sabbatical, I jumped at the gig.

On the first day of class, a dozen or so sleepy students sauntered into the room. I had arranged the chairs in a semicircle, then switched it to a long row, then back again. The sun shone brightly in the Jerusalem sky.

I began by asking everyone to introduce themselves and briefly explain what drove them to this class, *Writing Your Story*, English 100-217.

No one spoke, so I began.

"I'm Myra Shonen, adjunct professor," I said, feeling brave. "Professor Hasna is on sabbatical and I'll be covering this class for her."

I saw a lot of blinking eyes and disappointment. Naomi was working on a book in Australia focused on marriages between Aborigine and white citizens. I almost dreaded seeing how well the book would do, while my own writing collected emojis from high school friends.

I offered my credentials. "I've published a few essays on my experiences in the IDF and the army's impact on our environment." No one was impressed.

Of course, the only real credential I have is that I am a 28-year-old struggling writer with an MFA that I obtained pass/fail. But I'm more widely known in Israel as the woman whose love affair with a soldier contributed to his death, as well as those of four of his colleagues.

An ultra-orthodox student sat amongst the class, his black clothing in accordance with Haredi Jewish law. Opposite the circle sat a squat woman with short hair and a powerful physique. She wore army pants and thick boots.

The ultra-orthodox student fixed his eyes on me. His side curls hung from his shorn head where a thick skullcap lay.

"What unit were you in?" he asked.

"Northern Command," I said. A normal question.

"Combat?" he asked.

"Crisis negotiation, if you must know." I paused. "Ben, is it?"

"Ben." He pointed to himself.

"Well, Ben, as I mentioned, the focus of my writings was the environmental impact of the IDF. I published three works on the army's impact on Egyptian fruit bats that I hope to..."

"Positive or negative?" Ben interrupted.

"Positive or negative what?" I asked. "There was nothing positive or negative about the bats. I wasn't putting electric lights in the caves."

A few students laughed.

"She's not freakin' Batgirl," the woman in army pants said in English. Her hair was cropped short. A white T-shirt was tucked into army pants with a thick black belt and boots. Her name was Chaya.

"Why are you asking? *People* like you are exempt from service and you don't pay taxes. You got us all serving you. Want me to get you lunch also?"

Ben looked at her like an uninvited guest at Shabbat dinner. "I taught Torah to soldiers, lady" he said.

"He taught Torah..." Chaya said, throwing a thumb his way... "while we all did three years of combat training, or worse." She shot a look at Ben. "And by the way, friend, I'm a dude now, not a lady. That in Torah too?"

Sides were taken in the class, but Chaya's calm delivery won the skirmish. Young people were tired of serving years in the IDF while the Haredim were excused.

"Well, enough with the introductions," I said. "Let's leave the war of words to the page."

Chaya gave me a thin smile. Ben looked away.

"Professor Hasna has called this class *Writing Your Story*, emphasis on *Your*, so let's get into the muck." The class began to fumble with notebooks and pens. A few strands of my long curly hair fell out of the bun on my head into my eyes.

"Let's start with a writing prompt," I said. "The prompt is...kitchen table. We will take ten minutes and then read our work aloud."

"Begin." I hit the timer on my watch.

I gazed outside the classroom where the east wall dividing Jerusalem was visible from the Mount Scopus hilltop. Arab homes sat on the downside, Jewish on the other, both sharing the same sunshine and satellite TV waves.

I decided to try my hand at my own assignment.

'Arik and I sat across the breakfast table. He had gotten up early and cooked for me. There were eggs, jam and coffee, and there were scents from all three. We often did not speak. Attraction is a word that describes so many relationships, but ours was more a compulsion to touch. As we sat on opposite sides of the table, I noticed that the grain of the wood went in opposite directions. Maybe if I had just taken a cue from the table, I would have gone my way and let him go his before it ended up so....'

I knew where this was going of course. Like my endless memoir writing, mostly about him, it was going to end in his real-life death by ambush, along with four other soldiers at his base in Har Dov. All of Israel now knows that he had been writing a love letter to a woman who was not his wife when they were attacked. I was and will always be that other woman, the whore. The media reported that the five Israeli deaths were due to the distraction caused by one soldier's illicit affair. Somehow, the Jerusalem Post had obtained a photo of us together at a bar last summer. The hate mail still finds me.

My watch buzzed and I stopped writing.

"Who wants to start?" I asked.

A half hand went up from Chaya. She began to read.

'We had sex on the kitchen table, but she thought it was making love.'

She looked up as if she were at a table read of a script, and she got the stares she wanted, or didn't. I couldn't tell.

'But it was really a war. I didn't want to be there, and neither did she. It was my idea. I was Jack Nicholson, and she was Jessica Lange, but I am not even sure she saw the movie.'

Ben got up and stood by the door. He actually covered his ears, and Chaya finished.

Comments followed, polite, appreciative.

"Who's next?" I asked.

"Kitchen table," Ben began without asking. There was a cut of sunlight across his scalp that gave his face a light and a dark side. He went back to his seat.

'Our kitchen table was a place to avoid. It was where my father and mother ended their conversations and where the bitterness and anger and violence started against me and my brothers. We only found peace in shul.'

It seemed to me that even the cars passing outside stopped.

'The front door opened with my father's familiar whistling when he returned from the seminary where he taught. My five brothers and I all looked at one another as if an intruder had stepped into the foyer and was coming to the kitchen to find us and do what he would with our bodies.'

The discomfort in the class had no sound, only weight as the story went on to its raw conclusion.

'But when my father was not there, the kitchen table felt safe. I could be among the others in my family who understood. So that this place became our detente where we would wade together in a pool of uncertainty.'

"Powerful stuff," I offered. "I felt like I was right there at the table with your family. Honest writing, Ben."

Many of the other students nodded and made comments as well. His writing had captured the attention of the moment, no cell phones buzzed, no pens danced on pages.

"Let's take a ten-minute break and then we will continue. Please be back here at 9:05. Ten minutes," I went outside to smoke a cigarette

"Don't believe everything you read," someone said. I whirled around and inadvertently blew smoke into his face. It was Ben.

"Menthol," he said flatly.

"Sorry."

"It was just something I made up. You know, the kitchen table writing prompt. It just came up."

I took another drag of my cigarette, put it out on the wood railing and extinguished the residue with my manicured pointer finger.

"Blood red, huh?" Ben observed. "Hardly modest for a Jewish woman."

I ignored his comment. "Why would you write fiction in a memoir class, Ben?"

"This is a memoir class? That's rotten! Where does it say memoir? I thought it was called *Writing Your Story*." His thick glasses were smudged.

With each statement, his voice grew louder and I found myself backing away.

"It's a memoir class, Mister..."

"Pelzig." I offered my hand, but he pulled his back. I remembered that Haredim cannot touch members of the opposite sex, except wives and children.

"But if you are writing fiction, then I think it would be helpful for the class to know," I said.

"The lines between fact and fiction, fantasy and reality," he said to no one. He looked at me as if he were an officer at passport control. "I. Know. You," he said, swirling a finger around at my body.

The break could not end soon enough.

...

The class regrouped.

"Before we begin again, I'd like to make an announcement." Feet tapped on the tiled floor.

"During the break," I began, "a class member mentioned that he was unaware that this was a memoir class, and..." I looked at Ben for further permission to speak, and he nodded. "It was Mr. Pelzig, whose passionate story that appeared to be about his father was not necessarily a piece reflecting his own experiences, but rather..."

"I didn't say it wasn't my experience," Ben interrupted. "I said I didn't know it was a memoir class." He put out his hands in mock surrender. "Nowhere in the course description did it *specify* memoir. It simply said, *Writing Your Story*." His fingers made air quotes as he spoke. The strands of his prayer shawl peeked out from his shirt.

"Well, do you want to tell us whether your story was true, or just some made up shit?" Chaya challenged Ben.

"I don't answer to dogs," Ben shot back. The two traded laser-beam stares. She seemed on the verge of making a physical move toward him, but then thought better.

"Mr. Pelzig!" I called out. But the infighting in Israel was part of our culture. It was a miracle we didn't kill each other before our enemies did it for us.

"I signed up for this class to tell my story," he said, pulling out his Talmud. "And to right the wrongs of sin."

"Synagogues down the street, buddy," Chaya said.

No one spoke. Ben was beginning to rock his body in prayer.

I broke the silence.

"True, false, accurate, or invented...our memoirs--and this is primarily a memoir class, Mr. Pelzig--are our stories, and we are here to bravely share on the public page some of what has long been kept hidden away in our personal journals and private thoughts. It's helpful for the class to be informed whether your work is real or imagined."

The last of the students read their stories aloud.

"For Friday's class, I would like for you all to give me 1,000 words in response to a new prompt, and I will give you a choice. Choose the theme 'house' or 'secret.'"

A series of questions followed. Could we change place and time? Do the memories have to be about us?

"I will be working late in my office on Thursday night, so please drop off a hard copy by 7 p.m., Room 4503, Humanities Building. I'd like a chance to review them prior to class discussion on Friday morning. Any questions?"

"What if we don't want to remember?" It was Ben.

"Remember what?" I asked, gathering my belongings.

"The details," he said. The question held weight for me.

He gave his head a full neck roll. I didn't know what would come out on the other side.

"Then make it up, creep," Chaya said, "like you did before," and she slammed her notebook.

"Please," I said. I could feel my crisis negotiation skills getting ready to kick in, but the two students ignored one another and headed toward the door, comfortably spaced apart.

The only crisis I couldn't solve was
my own.

...

It was Thursday evening and I sat in Naomi's office getting ready to read through the manuscripts for class the next morning. I flipped through all of them and found that a few were missing. It was going to be a long night.

In the empty hallways, huge air conditioning ducts kicked in. The door of the office was still half closed from Chaya's departure. On the desk was a photo of Naomi with her husband and new baby taken on the beach in front of the Sheraton Tel Aviv.

I turned back to the manuscripts. I placed Ben's at the bottom, knowing I would have to deal with it eventually.

They were all competent writers, some heavy on adjectives, others more on adverbs. Undergrad writing reminded me of homegrown fireworks, heavy with booms and fizzles.

I found myself breaking into a sweat as I drew closer to Ben's piece and I didn't know why. I was just hoping for calm prose about a house he grew up in, or maybe a secret crush on a girl.

But what I encountered in Ben's piece I could never have prepared myself for, and I live with it to this day. I read slowly, picking up speed and slowing down to catch my breath, like I was driving in a school zone at night.

He titled the piece "Burnt House." I began to read.

"Three Yeshiva students were shot and killed after being picked up hitchhiking, so we hatched a plan to avenge the crime according to the Talmud and Jewish law. A Palestinian boy of similar age would fit the bill and we chose our target over several days, observing, calculating, and tracking him. On the designated night, we entered the house two by two. I was elected commander of the operation, but I chose to stay outside as a lookout. If all was to go as planned, the operation would take a total of ninety seconds. If confronted by anyone inside, we would kill the enemy with the M16s a few of us had managed to obtain from friends in the IDF. If we were merely noticed, we would neutralize the subjects in their chairs, beds, or wherever they were confronted."

I knew this story. Everyone in Israel knew...this story. I did a quick search on my computer and felt the air in my lungs collapse.

Palestinian Teen Abducted and Killed in Suspected
Revenge Attack by Hard-liner Israelis*

I dug further, now remembering where I was when the story broke.

*The bodies of three missing Israeli teenage Yeshiva students who disappeared almost three weeks ago have been found buried in a shallow grave under rocks in a valley close to the southern West Bank city of Hebron.***

I continued to read Ben's piece, holding it like it was a scorching pot.

'We chose the boy Abu Khdeir's home in Shuafat at random, mainly because it bordered Pisgat Ze'ev, where we lived. We entered the house in full military gear and one of us opened the door of the boy's bedroom. The boy was blindfolded, gagged, and delivered to our vehicle. When he was inside the car, I questioned him in Arabic. 'Did your family know them?' 'No. I don't know anybody.' 'The teenagers you dog people abducted and killed! Did you know them?' I knew the answer, but the questions felt good coming from my lips. Revenge is a cloudy pool of emotion that sends out uncontrollable waves in all directions. We drove past closed-up falafel stands in the silence of early morning, heading toward the Jerusalem forest.'

I put aside the paper and clicked on the next link in all of its horrifying detail:

Palestinian Kidnap Victim Was Burned Alive,
Autopsy Showed, in Revenge Killing

'We all watched as the grave was dug. I don't remember who poured the gasoline over the boy, but I do remember who lit the match. The passage of time dulls the facts so that all that is left are the handpicked memories that serve our purposes. Our lives are full of mistakes, misdeeds, and correct behavior. It is only over time that we learn to tell the difference. I leave it to Adonai to judge me for my crime. I am just not sure that I can live with it.'

I put down the pages of the story, sickened and dizzy. Across the room, an antique mirror caught my frozen image. I felt a strange itchiness on my neck, with sweat creeping down. The university building clicked with odd sounds in the night. All I knew, and that most people in Israel knew, was that the perpetrators of this famous and hideous crime were still at large.

I called my twin sister. Leah answered on the first ring, probably by accident.

"Do you remember a year ago when that Palestinian boy was burned alive by some maniacs after the three Yeshiva students were murdered on the highway near Gush Etzion?" I asked. My body was kinetic.

“No,” she said, then, “Wait, yes, why?”

“Well, I think one of my students may have been involved in that horror story.”

“Then why are you calling me?” I heard her boyfriend playing guitar in the background, and he grabbed the phone.

“*Ma kore*, Myra,” he said. Laughing

“*Kore*, Elazar,” I said.

Leah grabbed the phone back. “Wait, what?” she asked. “What the hell, Myra, are you some kind of Mossad bitch in super training? You are probably mistaken,” she said, laughing. “How do you know he’s involved?”

“I think I am reading his confession in the memoir class I’m teaching.”

“No one is that dumb. Check it out and, I don’t know, call the Dean or something. That can’t be true. I love you but I gotta go.” And she hung up with the sound of Elazar strumming in the background.

Outside, streetlights illuminated parts of the city no one wanted to see. A dumpster, a highway overpass. An Arab grocer.

I heard a knock on my door.

“How do you like my story?” the voice said.

I continued to look out the window, not wanting to seem alarmed, not wanting to ignore the voice, a voice that I now knew.

I whirled my chair around and found Ben standing in my office. His pudgy frame was supported by thick black shoes.

“Ben,” I said. It was all I could say.

“Fact or fiction. Memoir or made up. What’s the difference really, hey?”

“Can I help you with something Ben? I was just finishing up.”

“I know who you are, Myra Shonen.”

I felt a surge of panic and quietly hit ‘redial’ on my phone, then coughed loudly when Leah answered to cover what I knew would be a loud response. It worked.

“Who am I, Ben?” I spoke as loud as I could.

“You are the shiksa who was the cause of the deaths of five Israeli soldiers, one of whom I knew...very well.” His voice rose with each word and his eyes glistened with tears.

“Ben, please...this is not the place for this kind of conversation,” I said, pointing out the door, toward, I don’t know where. “Security makes rounds,” I said, hoping Leah could hear the words and call someone.

“I read yours. Ben, is what you wrote...true?” I picked up his manuscript.

His eyes averted mine. He took out an item that was wrapped in felt, like the covering for a traveling Torah. He cradled the item, and I was praying it was not what I thought it was.

“Why are you here? You’re scaring me, Ben,” I said.

I could only hope that Leah could hear my desperate tone.

“You want to know if what I wrote is true, don’t you? You want to call the police, don’t you? Well go ahead, because the answer is...I’m writing my story, in your class, Myra Shonen, and while I was doing that, I came across your story, and now...our stories are linked.” He clasped his hand together violently and sat down opposite me.

I was pinned in my office by body, and however this situation was going to end, it was going to have to go through him.

“Did you know that my brother was one of the soldiers killed when your boyfriend was supposed to be guarding the base? Did you know that, Myra Shonen?”

I looked at him with both sympathy and terror.

“Now we both have blood on our hands.” He pulled out his Talmud and began leafing through the pages.

I began to move out of my seat, getting ready to break for the door.

Ben was lost in the pages but when he noticed my movement, he dropped the book in his lap, and started to unwrap what was hidden in the small felt blanket.

“We are together in sin,” he said. His hand shook as he uncovered a small pistol from beneath its hiding place.

I heard more footsteps and looked up to see a security officer poking his head in the door. He was an old man whose wrinkled face was lost under his blue cap.

“I saw some lights and just wanted to check in. Everything OK here?” he asked. I saw that his only weapons were his walkie-talkie and a blue shirt.

Ben’s back was to the door. He gripped the pistol firmly and pointed it directly at me. His eyes told me not to scream. I was the one trapped in this situation, and it was mine to get out of.

“Fine. We were just going over some work,” I said evenly. “Thank you.” I looked down on the floor and could see that my phone was still connected to Leah. The seconds clicked by on the phone timer. I could only pray she was calling the police.

“Ben, I am not your enemy,” I said. “What happened in my life is the story of Israel itself. Our people...” I thought back to my training in crisis negotiation, but it lay in my mind like useless fractions memorized in high school.

“Shut up, shiksa!” he screamed and stood up. “Reform Jews! Affairs with married men! Arabs allowed to vote in the Knesset! Your life is as ruined as mine, Myra Shonen!” He looked behind him to see if the security guard heard his shout. He was sweating. I had no doubt he would shoot me.

“Ben...please.” I was strangely calm, but I spoke loudly, hoping that Leah could also hear the words coming from my killer. I thought of the key phrase--BATNA--which was my training, *the best alternative to a negotiated situation*. I tried to remember everything else--listening, mirroring, all the techniques, but nothing could prepare me for the eyes of my own killer sitting less than a meter away.

I began to realize that I would die in this academic office, with the personal photos of families I would never have myself. I began to hyperventilate and shake.

Ben put a hand on my shoulder. “Calm down, Myra Shonen. You told us to write our stories, and I wrote mine. I don’t regret what I did, but I know that I can’t live with its memory. My confession is now written down, so I can go in peace. And so can you.”

My face began to twitch, and I could feel sweat moving along my legs.

“Is this why you came to this class?” I muttered.

“I came to this class to confess my story. To let all of Israel know that...I believed what I did was right under Jewish law before I die.” He was no longer speaking to me. His body rocked back and forth. I was not sure if he was praying. I moved to stand, but his eyes flew open, and he stepped away from me, his outstretched arm pointing the pistol at my neck.

“We will die together. I for murder, and you for killing. The Talmud makes a difference. It is the only way. Start praying, Myra Shonen.”

I could feel my body go into spasms, my eyes fluttering uncontrollably. My mind spun through the training exercise I was taught to defuse situations. The mirror across the room reminded me of a key technique. Recite back the words to the distressed person. It shows you are listening, understanding.

"The Talmud distinguishes the difference," I said, not understanding the words that I repeated. But people in crisis need to be heard and understood, however bizarre and nonsensical they are. It is the only way out.

Ben's eyes sprung open, and he became excited. "Yes! The Talmud distinguishes a difference!"

"But why take me with you Ben?" In this moment, I had a sudden clarity that if I were able to stall, to get out of here, to live my life one more day, I would throw off the bags of guilt and anger and self-loathing that had become my life. I was not to blame.

"You..." he said, pointing his other finger at me like he did when we were on break in class. "You are what is wrong with Israel! There is so much wrong! I never meant to meet you, but now that I did, the book of Genesis says...I shall stand guilty before you forever. Now WE shall stand guilty before you. You and I, Myra Shonen!"

I saw his mouth forming the words and the wrinkles on his forehead growing agitated. The training I was given was now nothing but old rules on a whiteboard I had once memorized. I instinctively raised my arms to cover my eyes.

Ben mistook my gesture.

"This is not the Shema prayer, Myra," he said, referencing the traditional Shabbat gesture of Jewish women. "You do not need to fear G-d." He reached out and touched my arm in a soothing manner. I felt the sweat of his fingers.

I saw the office door slowly open.

Chaya.

Papers in hand.

As she took in the situation, her eyes grew wide, and her stance became rigid.

"I do not need to fear G-d," I mirrored, trembling, looking at Chaya.

"Yes! Yes! Pray!" Ben screamed. He now held the gun at my abdomen and reached out for my hand with the other. I took it.

"*Yitgadal v'yitkadash sh'mei raba b'alma di-v'ra*," he began, rocking his body. The Mourners' Kaddish, said before death.

To my horror, I saw Chaya silently close the door, leaving me to die. I looked down at the phone. The call was still going. Four minutes thirty-five seconds, thirty-six, thirty-seven...

"Ben, tell me... how you feel about what happened?" I managed to say. *Ask open-ended questions*. It was my last chance.

And in that moment, in that instant, I heard the bang.

At first, I didn't know what had transpired, who was hit and who was still living, but the seconds gave way to a clear outcome.

The door of the office had flown open with the strength of a powerful military kick together with a powerful command.

"Halt!" she yelled.

In an instant, Chaya had rushed Ben, and, in the chaos, I instinctively fell to the floor. While they struggled, I made my way around them and out of the office. The

security guard was now running toward the scene, calling for backup on his walkie-talkie.

Chaya had flipped Ben over on his back and held his wrist, but the gun remained locked in his hand. He pointed it toward her, but she flattened his wrist against the floor. Through it all, he continued to recite the prayer, but he was laughing in between the Hebrew words.

“Psycho people! Bane of our country!” Chaya yelled out, but her restraint slipped, and the gun was again held firmly in Ben’s hand. “You taught Torah? I was Military Police in the Hamas terror tunnels, buddy!” She raised a fist and hit him squarely in his nose. Blood spurted from his face.

And then I heard Ben's final words.

The very end of the Kaddish, words I had heard my entire life. It ended simply.

Amen.

I heard the shot and watched Chaya fall onto her back. I closed my eyes for what felt like ten thousand years.

When I opened them, I saw Chaya was now sitting up, and Ben lying dead from a gunshot wound to his head, the weapon still in his own hand.

HYPOCRISY IN RHODONITE

by Екатерина Кузьмина



MOURNING CHORES

by VERONICA NATION

When the snow makes the world silent,
and the windless winter begs for movement,
I picture you in the navy blue sweater
you didn't get a chance to wear.

After you died, I floated into your room
feeling out of my body, and pulled
the neatly-folded knit into my arms,
hoping some scent of you might be there lingering,
perfumed by the air you were once a part of.

When Ma washed your clothes,
she sobbed into each shirt.
It took days to empty the hamper.

I found the missing pair of your
banana-patterned socks
and tucked them away in a box I hid so well
I now am not sure where to find it.

Later, your friends sent me pictures of you
wearing the wool-knit beanie I gave you
the Christmas before

and I felt my brow
furrow as I closed my eyes and breathed

and felt the shiver of my skin in response
to the chill of outside air making its way

into my room, through a crack in the window,
like a ghost circling its arms around my body.

JOURNAL FRAGMENTS: LOVING IN CERULEAN BLUE AND ALIZARIN CRIMSON

by SYD LANG

JANUARY 15: SOUR BEER

His hair looks different tonight. Bold curls, eyes that dart to and from with excitement. His inviting grin shooting towards me under the green lights of the pool table. My beer is leaving a ring on the stained wood. I hear my shoes squeaking against the concrete floors. The smell of old cigars permeates the whole place. We are well into pool game three now, and I am interested in winning. He keeps moving closer. I can smell rosemary and old spice, an odd combination, but one that seems fitting for a 26 year old. Wow I feel young. He looks over, and with a boyish charm says, "I am so glad I get to be with you outside of work". All the long glances, office banter, flirtatious smirks and I'm finally here. I stand there, in direct juxtaposition between how I am supposed to be feeling, how I want to be feeling, versus reality. I want to smile, lean closer, breathe him in and revel in the excitement of it all. Yet, I stand there swallowing what I wish I felt and chasing it with the final sip of my beer. It all tastes like sour disappointment. Maybe I should have picked a better beer?

FEBRUARY 18: GREY LIGHT

We are sitting at Oly Taproom, the rain soaked light is pouring through the windows, pooling on our table. The grey light makes me want to draw towards him. It's James. It's been James for a while now. I see the way he looks at me. How his laugh seems to take over his whole being, yet is contained into that simple, animated bob of his head. Sometimes, in moments like this, it feels like I am writing. Crafting the experiences in my mind to say what I want, with the image of telling them to another person. I imagine myself lighting up, talking to a stranger on the streets reminiscing about this space in time. I would tell them "this is how it all began. That date: In that moment I knew". I weave this story of love and becoming with him, and I almost get it right. I get so close to convincing myself. Push forward, I tell myself. Just keep trying.

We leave and I feel the smoothness of his silver coat, one I had imagined feeling for weeks, as his arm is suddenly around me. The rain is coming down hard now, the kind that soaks you before you even make it to your car. We duck behind the awning of the old port building, and he is looking at me differently now. His face calm, his eyes unwavering. He leans forward and kisses me. I pretend it's fireworks, it's butterflies, it's beautiful, all those things I am supposed to feel, yet I never seem to be able to. To me, it feels like checking a box. A box in this list of "experiences" for my story with him. It always goes on like that. Next on the list is to meet his family, to have him over for dinner, to take a trip.

FEBRUARY 27: THAT GODDAMN STORY

We are on a trip now. The trains squeeks in every 30 minutes and we keep convincing ourselves that we will get on the next one home. Just a few more minutes.

The fifth train comes through, and I see an old woman in a purple sweater looking out the window at us. I am sitting on a train station bench with my legs up, leaning against his body as he holds me under the yellow glow of the Seattle street lights. The woman turns to the man next to her, her husband I imagine, and she points to us. Their faces look out with a loving awe. I realize in that moment that as I sit here, they are seeing something so very different than what I am feeling. They see a young couple, like they once were. They imagine our wide eyed excitement towards each other and what the future holds. They imagine how the world must fade away, and all that we can see, can feel, is each other. They imagine themselves experiencing that body tingling, intoxicating type love that makes the whole world a few shades brighter. They imagine us years from now, just like they were, eager, young and hopeful. So I sit here at 1 am on a Thursday night with this boy and all I can do is feel everyone else's feelings. Theirs are right and wonderful and yet I sit here with this nagging feeling of guilt in my stomach. I'm feeling all wrong. I am wrong. I am bad. I am angry at myself that my story isn't working. That goddamn story of budding love I keep telling myself this is. Sometimes with him it feels like I am watching from the outside. We are in a room and I am outside, like looking into a neighbor's apartment window. I peer in, eager eyed and imagine all their energy, all of their feelings. I experience it, or at least try to, for a moment and then I move back into myself. I feel so far away and yet he is so close, so present. I spend the rest of the night drawing into myself, further from him until I close completely.

MARCH 9: HOVERING

We are at Bierworks and he can't take his eyes off of me. I watch as they glow a little brighter when they meet mine, just when I thought they couldn't get any greener. He leans forward. He asks if we will write letters when I go? Plan our adventures together? I see his smile spread into his eyes, that same smile I have been seeing everyday for a month now. I am envious. I watch that smile towards me and I wish I could give it back.

I reach for a chip and accidentally dive my hand into our vat of salsa, then there's that laugh again. The one I envy. His head falls back effortlessly, with a subtle tilt to the right and his eyes are still glowing. At first I am smiling back, and then something changes. I am upset, annoyed. I want to go home. I feel that same feeling I did a few weeks prior in Seattle. I am watching us again, hovering in the opposing chair. I can't give him any words, because they are all being used towards myself. They're meaner this time. *You aren't good enough, you push people away who care for you, why can't you like him, just smile and let the feelings happen.* It goes on like this, an incessant poking feeling, one I feel deep in my bones, it's poking my marrow this time. Hitting deeper and deeper. *Just push harder, Syd. Keep trying.*

It doesn't work this time. I feel tears welling up inside me, my eyes feel heavy like one wrong movement and it will launch that dreaded tear from my eye, let it slide down my face and that will be the end.

APRIL 10: VANISHED WORDS & FRAGMENTED SENTENCES

I'm pacing the street as the pebbles on the concrete dig into the bottoms of my bare feet. The water from the Puget Sound is reflecting the light in paint-like ripples. The first nice day we have had in awhile. I am on pins and needles. I've been anxious all

day. My breath is shaky and my blood is running fast. I can feel the anxiety zap us both through the invisible lines that connect our phones as he picks up. I start to talk and my voice waivers in a way that my lungs feel full of rocks. All I can hear is the sound. It is loud and ringing and unrelenting. We ignore it for a while and then all of a sudden I can't stand it. I've hit my break. I cannot try any longer. No amount of pushing or story telling or "just one more date" will do. I speak the words, simply, with no more explanation. "I can't do this". I can hear that laugh fade away over the phone. His head un-tilts and his eyes don't glow the same. I wish I had more words, but I am empty. They have all vanished as if the April sun itself evaporated them up.

JUNE 25: CREEPING ORANGE

The days have elapsed and I've been in Washington State now since January. Tomorrow, I head back to Missoula. I am anxious. Afraid of what it will be like. One final night at 2037 Berry. I am watching my parents cooking dinner together. They way they effortlessly flow. The way that they look at each other with that "there's no place I would rather be" look. The way they laugh still and love harder each day. We sit around the outside table tonight. I am filled with this overwhelming sense of gratitude as the sun slowly creeps across our dinner table. It illuminates all the parts of our wooden table, making it glow orange. We are glowing. Our forks dig into apple pie made with apples from grandma and baba's trees. I soak it all in. All this love they have cultivated. This community. Our unit, together, now 5 months into quarantine. The fantastic five. My people. I am dreading tomorrow morning, when my tires pull out of the driveway and I head towards the unknown. I look around, soaking it all up. My mind buzzes with anxious energy, moments pass like molasses on a cold day. Slowly, painfully, as I wait and watch with anticipation. Unknowing.

JUNE 26: LIKE BREAKING

I'm in the car now, passing through the town of Wallace, Idaho. The trees are slowly fading from evergreen to the familiar brown of a summer scorched pine. Washington is now officially in the rearview mirror and Missoula is ahead. Phoebe Bridger's new album plays over my small Subaru radio. Her voice waivers through, saying "I've been running around in circles, pretending to be myself. Why would somebody do this on purpose, when they could do something else?"

I am anxious. I haven't lived in Missoula for a year now, and it feels foreign. He hasn't texted me, and yet I don't want him to. Why don't I want him to? I am not angry at him. I miss his laugh, his head tilt, his sweet voice and the way he loses every game of cribbage we play.

I fucked up. I guess I wasn't a good enough story teller. Should I have tried harder? I feel it in my stomach, this bug that's been there all along. This idea. This dread. This liberation? It feels like breaking. I am breaking.

Over the past 400 miles, I have thoroughly analyzed every relationship I have had. The movie of my mind is just wrapping up my Junior year of college, getting ready to reflect on the past year. The scene change comes with a bold transition and then, suddenly, I turn the movie off. I know the answer. Girls. That's the problem. Or at least I think it is. Or are they the answer?

JULY 4: IVY

The Missoula sun makes the pavement a treacherous place for bare feet and my body is sluggish in the early July heat. I'm enthusiastically eating french toast while swallowing my words along with every bite. I've been trying to tell Becca about James for 30 minutes now, about it all, but the words aren't coming. I convince myself I've left the words in Wallace.

Then, she walks up. Ivy. Curly brown hair that flows effortlessly down her shoulders. An elegant air about her. She smiles at me, saying, "good to see you again" in a velvety, light voice. Suddenly, I can't eat my french toast. Her smile is all-too-friendly. Her eyes, intentional and tempting, glance over to me. Wallace, Idaho Sydney slaps me in the face and I wake up again. I can't seem to think after seeing her. My hands shake and my body feels alive.

Becca says, "I hope you know we are not leaving here until you ask her on a date". My finger hovers over that little blue arrow as I panic, but I don't have another moment to think because it's already sent.

JULY 7: EVERYTHING FEELS BLURRY

We are laying on a little patch of rocks now by the Clark Fork as a gap in the clouds allows the sun to reach us. My body drunkenly adjusts to the uneven surface and I can't feel the rocks anymore. The water laps up and the sun caresses my body. She is lovely. Everything feels blurry. My brain. My body. My identity. All of a sudden, I am kissing her. I feel like I could yell. I am intoxicated with myself!

JULY 10: GLITTER

I ride my bike home from Van Buren and I can hardly pedal fast enough. My feet are moving faster than the bike and the size of my smile is surely alarming the passing cars. I can barely keep my handle bars going straight. God damn! I feel alive. I arrive home at Hastings and I rush downstairs to my room. Except I don't open the door. Instead, I fling open Emily's door. She just moved back to Montana last week and it feels like we flowed effortlessly from acquaintances to friends in one big swing. She is playing guitar in bed, and instantly puts it down when I walk in. I drunkenly fling myself onto her blue comforter, bury my face in the pillow and then slowly peek out and look at her. "You're covered in glitter?" she says with a curious laugh. An enthusiastic smile spreads across her face as she asks, "I assume date two went well?".

JULY 23: I LET IT

Emily is stoking the fire as Ruth is dancing in the red streaks of the setting sun. Ivy has been in California for a week now and the three of us are sleeping above Lake Como tonight. I can't stop thinking about her. Talking about her. I worry that Emily and Ruth will want to push me off the cliff if they have to hear another word. Whether she likes me. What this means. Will we be together? I am preoccupied. Frantic. Consumed by her. It's eating at me. I let it.

Instead of frustration, Emily meets all of this with a breath. She hears every word and responds with more enthusiasm than I could have even imagined. Her endearing smile meets mine from across the fire. It's almost like a pact. An "I hear you", smile that I didn't even realize I needed. She goes on to say, "Syd you are the only girl in this whole

world that has ever made me question my sexuality”. I laugh with delighted glee, Ivy must totally be enthralled with me! It continues all night, she is stoking the fire and my confidence all in one. If Emily sees me that way, there is no way Ivy doesn’t.

JULY 25: CHEERS TO NEW

The champagne cork flies off the bottle and bounces down to Roosevelt Street with an excited “pop”. Foam is spewing everywhere and we both try to sneak in a sip before the outdoor rug on the rooftop has guzzled it all. Emily moved into her new apartment today, 408 Roosevelt, and we are celebrating. I realize that my arms are tired from lifting furniture up those stairs all day as we both slump down onto the roof. She splits the remaining drops of champagne into two glasses, handing me one. “Cheers to new”, we say as our glasses clink together.

JULY 27: MUST BE THE SONG

Ivy comes back in two days and I can barely wait. I’ve been thinking about her all day. It’s 8 pm now and Emily knocks on my door. She and Ruth are going for a drive and want to know if I will join. I grab my worn summer sweatshirt that seems to always smell of campfire, and I run out the door with them. We meander the streets of Missoula and all of a sudden we are driving over the bridge on Scott Street. Phoebe Bridgers is playing over the radio and suddenly I am not thinking about Ivy. For the first time in days, it’s as if she has vanished. I am looking ahead as the street lights blur by. Ruth is in the back seat talking about someone, something, but I can’t hear a word. I keep forcing my eyes straight ahead, but time and time again they move. Emily. She is captivating. I can’t tell if she can see that I am watching her. I can’t even decide if I am watching her. “Must be the song” I convince myself and pinch back into the real world.

JULY 30: FUN SYD

She calls my name from below and Ruth and I both turn as we are walking across the bridge over the Clark Fork. My body is hit with a rush of adrenaline. I feel like I have catapulted myself off the bridge, slammed onto the water stomach first, and am now just coming up for air. We walk down to the riverfront and Ivy approaches, “I could tell that was you from those overalls, they’re good ones!” she says to me. I nervously thank her and invite her to come slacklining with us. Ivy and her friends enthusiastically follow along, while my whole body quivers with nerves. I hadn’t planned to see her tonight. How do I talk to her? This is surely more than I felt when I would see James. Must be a good sign?

The slackline is up now and Ivy is helping Abby walk across. I sit there watching them as my hands start to sweat with anxiety. I am trying to practice “box breathing” as my therapist recommends but I am simply not having it tonight. I hear a noise and glance over my left shoulder. Emily! She walks up with that classic little bounce, as if she is on a mission and couldn’t be more excited. The “fever walk” I call it. Her hair is in braids today, gray tank top and black shorts and she has little freckles on her shoulders and nose now. I haven’t noticed those before. She sits down right next to me and the world resumes, slowly. I have forgotten to be nervous. My hands stop sweating and I can feel the ground again. I breathe for the first time in an hour. I can draw air into my lungs now and it doesn’t shake back out. She throws down her dark brown canvas backpack

and hands me a beer. Her hand meets my back, warm and smooth, as she says, “dude, Ivy is here hanging out with all of us. If she didn’t like you she totally wouldn’t have come. Believe in yourself. Everyone wants to be around you. You’re fun, Syd.” I smile, get up and can suddenly talk to Ivy again. Emily is right, I totally am Fun Syd! Thank god she came tonight.

AUGUST 1: LIKE WE CAN

The air is cooler this morning and we laugh as goosebumps spread across our legs. Her black dress ripples with the early morning wind. We are sitting at the river today, eating a huckleberry cinnamon roll and taking a picture with a fresh bouquet of flowers she bought at the market. I saw Ivy yesterday and I am rolling in confusion. “I feel like something so big is missing from our relationship” I explain to Emily. “I wish I could have conversations with Ivy like I can have with you”. She listens to every word, as if she’s on the edge of her seat, and I’m the storyteller. She’s in this with me. “Give her time and grace” she says, “not everyone has the ability to dive right into the hard stuff like we can together”. The conversation carries on for a while longer, each of us completely captivated by the words rushing from our mouths. My legs are actively shivering now and we chuckle as we realize that we have been sitting here talking for so long, the flowers may as well have already started wilting. I’ve never noticed how blue her eyes are. They match the water perfectly today.

AUGUST 3: SOMETHING STUPID

The three of us are sitting in the grass outside of Draught Works tonight. Ruth, Emily and I. It’s been the three of us for a while now, everyday. The unexpected trio. We are running barefoot in the dry grass. We can see the sun setting over Chapaquin Peak and we all let the freedom of the summer air rush through our bodies. We walk over to our bikes, freeing them from the railing. Emily struggles for a while and finally I reach over, fiddle with the key, and free hers as well. I look up and her demeanor has changed. Her eyes are cautious, alive and tempting. “I shouldn’t get drunk around you anymore”, she says nervously. I shoot her a puzzled look and she says, “I worry I will do something stupid”. I am not really sure what she means, but I am now distracted as I realize Ruth is already 4 blocks away from us. I hop on my bike and start to pedal away. “Come on slowpoke,” I yell back to Emily, “I’ll race you”. We tear off into the thick summer air as the stars slowly come into view.

AUGUST 4: A LITTLE LAUGH

I watch Ruth drive up outside and cross the street to her car. It’s rush hour and the whole world is alive with noise. I’ve been with Ivy for the last hour, but we both felt off. I keep remembering last night, Emily’s comment. After a few moments of silence in the car, I timidly try to bring it up. I can’t show that I care too much, Ruth might think it is weird. I might sound crazy. Emily meant nothing. Definitely. “Did last night feel weird between Emily and I?” I say nonchalantly, or at least as well as I can muster. Ruth slowly looks over to me, and lets out a little laugh paired with an accusatory smirk. After a moment, she returns her eyes to the road. I feel embarrassed that I asked.

AUGUST 5: LET IT BE FREE

I ride my bike to 408 that night, as I do most nights now. I run upstairs, as I imagine her listening to the creaks of my footsteps on those wooden steps getting louder and louder as I approach her chipped white door with the loose gold handle. I fling the door open and she is out on the roof. I grab my phone, ready to show her a “confusing” text from Ivy. I’m pretty sure she’s breaking up with me. My head is alive with noise.

I join her on the roof and we sit there together. The air has a lingering thickness of August, met with the crisp bite of September. I am holding my phone, its glow illuminating my face as we sit, looking at the stars. My eyes meander over to her and something feels different. I lock my phone and put it away. To her confusion, she looks at me saying “what did she say? Didn’t you come here to talk about Ivy?” To my surprise, almost as if words jump out of my mouth before I am able to understand what I am saying, I reply. “I don’t think I want to talk about Ivy anymore, it’s over”. It’s the first time in a while I haven’t thought. I am not thinking. We sit for a moment that feels like years together. The string lights illuminate our bodies under the stars.

I am intoxicated with the way the light dances and falls off her face. She is intoxicating. I am not thinking.

Moments pass and then it happens. Maybe the wind picked up in the right way. Or maybe the little kid inside of me woke up and screamed “let it be free”. I woke up. We kiss under the stars. It isn’t a box to check. It isn’t a box I had ever even considered checking. It is raw. The world falls silent. For the first time in months there isn’t a single buzz or hum or prod or poke. There isn’t anything. My head is silent.

NOVEMBER 27: LOVING IN CERULEAN BLUE & ALIZARIN CRIMSON

We have been in Washington with my family now for a whole week. We’re laying on the beach by Ellis Cove as the city lights wander over from the other side of the bay. She’s tracing my face like a painting now under the shadows the full moon is creating. “Cerulean Blue” she says as she brushes my cheeks. “Alizarin Crimson” as she moves towards my smile lines. It’s as if with each pretend brush stroke she is healing me. Teaching me to love. To be loved.

It feels funny being back on this same beach I was with James a little under a year ago. I realize I have words for him now. So many words. I can pluck and choose from a whole ocean of words to give him. The words in my head aren’t angry anymore, either. They’re calm. I am calm. The whole world feels calm.

A GRAY AND WET DAY IN LA

by RAMON JIMENEZ

Here,
it is easy to confuse smog for overcast
until the smell of rain clashes with cement.
In the middle of clashing cars and cloudy skies
the California lifestyle of extreme hustle
and party seems to tone down.
Kids ditch school,
coworkers call out sick
and a paradise converts
into a horror of flooding streets
and landslides on the hills.

Downtown LA on a rainy day
is never a night of hipsters and dive bars
or high class roof top parties.
The neo noir doorways
of Spring Street feel Blade Runner like.
The plight of Skid Row,
visible through those weary souls
hiding from pouring droplets of screaming sky.

A rainy LA afternoon full of dark clouds
can illuminate those edges of the city
that the camera either ignores or over emphasizes.
On such days the violent and hyper competitive
realities of this urban juggernaut
are served up raw and unseasoned.

Hotel Cecil with its Richard Ramirez
and Jack Unterweger stories are just small crumbs
in a larger universe of chaos and terror.

TAKE IT BACK

by NANCY WHITE

Darling failure, you
couldn't break me.
I was soaked in lye and
Peeled to my thinnest skin,
but not to worry. Our cloak

of stories slid away, my
ignorance sharp like a gaspy
fish flip-flapping on the shore.
I looked and looked for
my part, my helping it

happen, and at the bottom of
the river found a love
of the broken, the worn.
Of savoring what suffering
is. Was that bad? I love

the gash and wretched past.
All the embroidery there,
stately windows holding
us in, the walls of smoky
faded green and blue.

MAFIA DONS, DAD, AND SEVERED HEADS

by VICTORIA SMITH

2021

My nine-year-old granddaughter yanks open the backdoor and says, “There’s part of a dead animal in your yard.”

“What kind?” I’m cooking applesauce, but stop. The fractured carcass has to go.

“I don’t know. There’s just a head.” She’s discovered the remains while rolling a ball of snow through the yard, purity and death colliding. Rabbit head is my first thought, but only because last week I shoveled up the hindquarters of one. I grab a plastic grocery bag, a coffin for a hasty burial in the garbage bin.

Her finger points in a grim-reaper pose as she leads me to a squirrel’s head that’s nearly picked clean. I slip the shovel under it. Three frames play in my mind. *The Godfather*. Bloody horse head in a bed. Dad asking me to the movies.

1972

Dad asks, *You want to see The Godfather?*

Yes! I know about the horse’s head, the brutal killings. (Adults talk, kids eavesdrop.)

My parents saw it last week. Dad wants to see it again.

Mom says, *It’s too violent*.

She can handle it, Dad says.

It’s gory, Mom says.

Dad says, *She’s mature for her age*.

She’s just thirteen, Mom says.

Mom wins, but Dad’s asked me to the movies. He’s obligated. We see *Chariots of the Gods*, a movie asking me to believe extraterrestrials helped build the pyramids and a bunch of other wonders of the world. He falls asleep and snores. I’m scarcely embarrassed. Dad’s snoring is *the* only answer to the narrator’s bullshit. I don’t believe a word. I believe a bloody horse head in a man’s bed. I believe men gunning each other down. I believe Michael Corleone’s bride being blown up in a car.

I don’t know what to believe about Dad wanting to take me to *The Godfather*.

2021

On and off, for the rest of the day, *The Godfather* and Dad popcorn in my head. He never invited me to the movies. Why this movie? Perhaps a moral lesson—don’t marry a Mafia don, don’t take up a life of crime. The moral explanation is iffy. Dad had two explicit lessons, neither about morality. One: don’t give your social security number to anyone but the bank, the IRS, and your employer. Two: when you sell a car, keep the license plates; in Wisconsin plates are issued to a person, not the vehicle. Whenever Dad felt all *Father Knows Best*, he’d tell us again.

Dad excelled at implicit lessons. Don’t argue with an intoxicated man or an angry man or a tired man. Don’t screw up. Don’t talk back. Don’t ask how much longer.

I finally saw *The Godfather* in 1980. A Greek tragedy set in New York. Murder, deceit, betrayal, an attempt to cheat one's fate. Crime navigated the Corleone family to power and wealth, then sunk them with fear and bullets.

By the time my grandkids leave for the day, I'm convinced Dad intended a moral lesson. One he couldn't put into words, but could take me to see. Dad's dead, but if I could ask, *Jesus Christ, I don't know*, is the best answer I'd get. Dad didn't share his feelings.

I pick up toys and wash dishes, tasks allowing *The Godfather* and Dad to percolate. I can't reconcile the books, can't make Dad's invitation to a movie about the mafia balance with a moral lesson. Dad was an enigma, skirting the edges of my childhood—present but never able to engage with me as a child or teenager. We were two countries, speaking two languages, without a diplomat to reach across the void. We judged each other's actions by our interpretations of one another rather than an understanding of each other.

1980

I'm twenty-one. Dad wants to buy a car stereo. He asks, *You want to go with?* I decline.

He asks my siblings, who decline. We'll be stranded, waiting while he examines each stereo, interrogating the sales staff. We've had a lifetime of waiting for Dad—in stores, at junkyards, at the airport hangar.

Jesus Christ. Doesn't anyone want to go with their old man?

I relent. For nearly two hours, he quizzes the salesperson. I orbit the displays. I have no role in the buying of the stereo. I'm space debris.

2021

Son-of-a-gun! I laugh out loud.

He asked me to see *The Godfather* because he wanted to see it again. And Mom didn't. He's dead, so I can't verify this, but if I could, *Jesus Christ, I don't remember*, is what I'd hear. I don't have to ask. I know. Dad loved movies with violence, movies with anti-heroes, movies where the establishment got punched in the face.

All day long I've wondered what was so important about *The Godfather* that compelled Dad to think his thirteen-year-old daughter should see it. The answer is nothing. Dad just didn't want to go alone. I mark this in my mental ledger. The books balance. But only for this entry.

These days Dad is an enigma skirting the edges of my childhood memories—present but unknowable. We are two separate worlds with no common language and no winged messenger to span the void between the living and the dead.

Most of my mental ledger will remain unreconciled.

WEINING WANG - 2 UNTITLED

by WEINING WANG



SEPIA

by ERIN JAMIESON

Unlike most children, I always knew when rent was due. The second to last week of the month, my mother would serve pasta in every form imaginable, so long as it didn't include meat. Stale spaghetti noodles swimming in off brand marinara sauce, doused with Italian dressing, pan fried in a skillet with cinnamon and brown sugar. Penne marinated in olive oil, sprinkled with free to-go packets of hot pepper flakes and parmesan cheese she collected for free at the end of her shift at La Rosa's. We drank tap water that tasted mildly, of rotting eggs, the taste not so offensive as long as we pinched our noses. It was the water I minded most, and I'd beg to get a soda pop from Mallery's.

"Next week," she'd promise. "And once I get a better job, we'll be able to have meet every week of the month. We just have to be patient and trust God.

Over and over again, I believed her. But the years passed and that day, a day where we no longer would be behind on our electricity bill, when rent didn't mean rationing—it never came.

...

I suppose my life was a typical sob story: a father I never met, who left a month before I was born, a mother who worked at least two, sometimes three jobs, a deteriorating two bedroom apartment only a few blocks from Over-the Rhine, the most dangerous nook in an already dangerous city. Without any siblings—my mom had never so much as dated a man in my life—I was often lonely, coming home after school to a darkened kitchen, a note telling me my mom was sorry, but I'd have to fix my own dinner.

Dinner, which more often than not meant soaking black beans and rice, dicing a few overly ripe peppers. I'd eat alone, listening to a radio with poor reception, its antenna duct taped but unable to relay a clear sound, to the degree I favored purely instrumental music over popular songs. You could argue that's why I was always drawn to classical music, or maybe it was something else, the soothing strum of violins, the mellifluous symphony of soprano piano and flute. Maybe, most likely, that was the first sign there was something wrong with me, that something about me did not and would never fit the mold of the chaos and violence I saw far too often.

I never thought of my life as a tragedy, and to my knowledge, my mother didn't either. It was the life I'd always known, and I didn't miss things like a TV set, watching Lucille Ball gobble up candy as it sped up down the conveyer belt. I don't think I would have found that sort of thing amusing, either: before my mom applied as a waitress at the pizzeria, she worked on assembly lines, for automobiles and jeans, and, memorably, pencils. I remember how hunched her back would be after those days, how she sliced melon and put it on her swollen feet, swearing the cool fruit brought the pain down. When I saw *I Love Lucy* for the first time, nearly ten years after the original episode aired, I only watched a few minutes before it became too painful for me to watch, knowing that if my mother had Lucille's life, maybe she could have afforded such trivial worries.

We had nothing extra: no dishwasher, a very modest fridge, a stove older than I was—all inclusive, I suppose, in the apartment my mother signed before I was born.

Everything was the same, the first ten years of my memory. The cracked cream tiled kitchen, windows narrow slits like a snake's eye, stained carpet that, despite my mother's best efforts, smelled like cat urine from the previous tenants. Forbidden from painting by our ostentatious landlady, the walls remained a muted yellow that reminded me of sunflowers dried up in the sun, left to die. We were equally forbidden from decorating the walls, which suited us fine, because we had nothing to hang, no landscape paintings I saw once at the art museum, no photos of family.

The only photos we had at all were a few of me, growing up: me as a five year old with pigtails and pink bows, my hair smooth and silky as a white girl's, me as a seven year old, dressed in overalls as I played in amber and scarlet leaves. My mother never appeared in those photos. "I'm not photogenic," she always said when I asked why. "Besides, I'd rather have photos of you getting prettier, not me getting older."

In my mind, my mother never aged, She was the same vibrant woman grinning in the wedding photo she tucked under a desk, a modest wedding gown she'd bought from a thrift store, pleasant but plain, not even lace adorning the collar. It was the only reminder that my father existed, at all: tall, lanky, as if unaccustomed to his own body, his skin as dark as mine, an obvious contrast to my mother's pale complexion. Both of them, in that photo, seeming as if they would be happy forever. His eyes soft and warm, radiating kindness, handsomely dressed in a afternoon gray flannel suit with narrow lapels, seemingly extravagant next to my mother's dress. I wondered if he was stingy, how he had come by that suit, if, once, we had been rich.

The one time I asked my mother about the photo, what happened to my father, she set the frame face down, shoved it in a high drawer I couldn't reach. "Nothing important. He's not a part of my life anymore."

But my mother underestimated my will, and one day after first grade, while she was working her shift at the clothing factory, I pulled up a chair from our kitchen, stacking it high with the few books we owned: a weathered Oxford dictionary, a set of dusty histories, a novel she read religiously year in and out.

My balance was faulty at best, and I teetered as I reached for the top drawer, nearly falling twice. My disappointment was no small one when I discovered she moved the frame to the other drawer, and I had to start the process over, By the time I managed to climb down from the chair, move it, and restack the books, I could hear the front door click open, and I was forced to shove the chair into the kitchen and take up the same endeavor the following day. This time, I favored speed over safety, stacking the books with a brazen haphazardness. I managed to retrieve the frame, but I also managed to whack my knee against one of the drawers, beginning a bruise that would blossom and remain for the coming weeks.

I planned on looking at the photo and placing it back in the drawer. Instead I slid it under my shirt, moving stealthily as if worried my mother would come home any minute, decisively tucking it under my pillow. I worried she would notice and accuse me, but she never did. Maybe she never noticed its absence; I never had the indication she looked at it often. If anything, before I'd asked, it had remained in the same position for most of my life, the dust collected on the photo like a fine snow. In time I would stop anticipating her discovering my theft, and move the frame to an old pair of boots, where it remained, for many years.

I didn't need a father--I had a mother who loved me more than she loved herself, who would subside on peanuts for lunch she I could have the occasional steak for dinner, who diligently read to my every night, even if only from a newspaper scrap someone had discarded, or a Bible passage I was too young to comprehend. She was the type of mother who stayed up in the early hours of the morning, holding me as I vomited, her own hair beginning to reek, one of her only dresses splattered with half digested noodle soup. As a single mother, the decision was always difficult: was I well enough to stay home by myself? Given the choice, I knew, as she always told me, she would pick staying with me over a work shift a thousand times over.

But things weren't that simple. From the ages of six to eight, my stomach was upset often--something Mr. Greeson, the only doctor we could afford, whose education and degree seemed specious at best, always summarized as "nerves". Knowing we couldn't afford his ensemble of nostrums, my mother concocted remedies of her own: fresh ginger root tea, brewed four hours over the stove; fresh mint leaves, when we could get them; milk toast, sprinkled with nutmeg. She massaged my stomach, prepared hot water bottles, sang me hymns she'd learned from her own mother. And while I still lingered in nausea, the feeling was abated enough that I could manage to keep down a bowl of soup and oyster crackers, and my mother would feel that she could, in some good conscience, leave me home.

Not that she had a choice, or took to the idea well. At that time, as a factory shift worker, she had little to no rights. Labor union aside, she didn't dare complain, fearing she would be asked for background information, fearing revealing who--what, as she said--she was. So she came tirelessly to work, taking on overtime, while I stayed home and tried to rest. But resting was hard.

The tenants above us were a combative couple, who grew increasingly acrimonious, knowing their neighbors below were black. Mr. Nickleson was a failed businessman, having a reputation, even in the complex, even in his acquired state of poverty, as a spendthrift. The story went that he'd opened up a pawn shop of sorts, buying and selling second hand goods at inflated prices, often not being bothered to ensure the products were in working order, or even cleaned. For a time he made handsome lucre, but eventually his antics caught up with him, and, exposed by a rich buyer, was forced to close his shop. The money he had made, it seemed he had spent extravagantly: on a new suits and little trinkets for his life, trinkets that later would loiter in the narrow confines of the dingy apartment above us.

Now, he spend his money on liquor, and on those sick days as a child, I would listen to him berate his wife for "losing" the tie he sold the week before. Sometimes the arguments would be muffled, like our radio when the reception was poor. Other times, mid slumber, I'd wake with a start as screaming erupted, dishes clattered. And then I'd curl myself in a tight ball on our fraying couch, too frightened to move until my mother returned.

"Why are you cowering?" she'd ask. And I would tell her they'd been fighting again, to which she took a broom and would rap loudly on the ceiling, when, finally ashamed, even by someone they held utter contempt, they'd fall silent.

Those moments, my mother was all I needed. But there was something--a dark curiosity, a secret too ugly for me to express, that I kept with me. It was the reason why, at seven, I'd stolen the wedding photo and sequestered it in my boots. My mother, as

much as I loved her, looked nothing like me; my father was, cliché to say, my spitting image. As I looked at other families, browsed newspaper clippings, watched a mother and son take a stroll in the park, I noticed how they looked alike: the way their eyes crinkled when they laughed, the way their hair parted or their eyes turned darker on a nebulous day. They looked like they belonged together.

...

Just before I turned seven, I was walking home on a cool winter day, from the grocer's with my mother and we came across a flier for a father-daughter dance. The word dance, since a very young age, stirred an irrepressible excitement. I danced to classical music, swayed to hymns in church, danced sometimes to no music at all. Dancing was blissful, a feeling that my body was completely unbounded, a way to feel as though I could escape the confines of our two room apartment. I asked my mother if we could go, imagining myself donning a fur collared cape, a cream crepe dress, my natural hair styled in precise curls, lips colored pink, a little Shirley Temple, dancing as others looked on with envy.

"Hon," my mother told me, "I can't take you."

I asked her why as we crossed the slushy streets.

"For one thing, we can't afford it right now. For another..." She jerked me back so I narrowly missed being hit by a four wheel jeep driving fifteen or twenty over the speed limit. "For another, it's a father-daughter dance."

My feet were aching, my shoes a size too small, my toes bleeding inside. I hadn't told my mother, thinking I could bear tight shoes until we were able to pay our bills.

She told me everyone would bring their fathers.

"Why don't you come?" I offered. We were almost home, always evident by the way the trees became more sparse, the air harder to breathe, the sidewalks becoming more and more eroded, creviced like cavities on teeth, until they fell in complete disrepair and wound into the side alley where our apartment lay.

"It's called a Father-Daughter dance," my mother said gently. "Maybe we can find something else."

But we didn't find anything else. There was a ballet shop in the heart of Cincinnati, in the more prosperous Hyde Park, the windows lined with advertisements for petal pink leotards and matching shoes, headbands with ostentatious fuschia and lilac bows. But I knew better than to ask. This dance had given me hope that, if I couldn't take dance lessons, I could at least have a night to dance publicly, a night where I danced to music crisp as the music that played in the department stores, a night where I had ample room to dance and didn't have to worry about banging my knee against the kitchen table or the sofa in a single movement. A night where I could be with other girls my age, where I drank punch instead of sulfurous tap water.

But I was seven and I still believed in dreams. I persuaded my mother to take me past the Father-Daughter dance. She looked at me from her plate of buttered noodles with a doleful expression. "I told you--"

"I just want to see," I told her.

"Ruth. Why do this? It'll only make you upset."

But Mr. Nickleson's belligerence decided for us: he decided at that moment to begin a harangue that would last the next two hours, something about his wife putting the salt away in the wrong place. My mother set aside a newspaper scrap she'd been

trying to read, sighed. "Okay," she said. "But get your coat. I don't want you catching something. Heaven knows we don't need that."

I was excited enough I grabbed a blanket instead of my jacket, then was forced to look for my gloves, despite my protests. It was well after nine when we set out, a flashlight trained at my mother's side, her grip on my hand firm. The slush had further melted, resolidified, and the uneven walks were treacherous, both of us sliding and almost falling several times before we found the main sidewalk that took us to the outskirts of Over-the-Rhine, where the boxy slums gradually diminished and gave way to better kept apartments, apartments, at the very least, with fresh paint and new shutters. Even the smell was different, away from the intoxicating stench of rotting meat and cigarette ashes, I could smell the impending snow in the winter sky. It was a brilliant, almost ethereal night, and I felt, then, that we lived in a beautiful city, a beautiful world, the skyline like a thousand colored lanterns, touched with the iridescence of the half moon, the smattering of stars that so often were not visibly under the haze of factory smoke.

The dance was held in what had once been an Italian restaurant, since converted into a community center, dismal with boarded windows and peeling paint, but it was the only thing we had, a place our church used for its food pantry, used for evening vocational lessons for those who couldn't afford the time or expense of a formal education, for seasonal parties, though these were pallid affairs at best, a single streamer and a plate of stale cookies sufficing for the Christmas celebration, a crackly radio playing as people stood to the sides, unwilling to talk with anyone else.

But that night the center seemed transformed, warm embers in paper lanterns twinkling in the main room, what appeared to be a series of circular tables, handsomely dressed in eyelet blue table cloths, the normally austere walls adorned with a coat of periwinkle paint, celebratory navy streamers hanging from industrial rafters, Little girls, bows in their hair, threadbare shifts that nonetheless were enlivened by the soft light, fake pearls strung around their slender necks. They danced with their fathers, an awkward sway more than anything, some girls eventually abandoning their fathers and dancing with each other, their cheeks flushed, the timor of Jazz reaching the sidewalk outside. I felt longing, longing unlike any I had ever known or imagined, a sort of stabbing in my chest, as if I were were being prodded by icicles, my ribs slowly fracturing and collapsing.

"It's getting cold," my mother said, breaking the spell of reverie. "We should get home."

STONES FOR FLOWERS

by BRIAN YAPKO

Strange – I thought it would be awful to
kneel under a harsh sun, surrounded by
carved stones -- sentinels for the bones
of the dead. It's not. The ghosts outnumber
the living, as is true everywhere. The only
difference is: here they stare. I don't mind.
I whisper their names and dates, I tiptoe
over their memories. The same clouds
hover over us just as the same earth supports
us. Only a few negligible inches separate
flesh from decay. Only a few.

I did not bring lilies, irises or marigolds. I
come to you poor and broken, wearing
frayed jeans. In my pocket are pebbles of
granite which I picked up off the sidewalk. I
want a piece of me to remain here with you.
I am ignorant but still trying to follow our
tradition and so I leave stones on your graves.
Stone will never fade or wilt or thirst. They
simply are. As I am cleaved from you, they
come from boulders, someday to be no
more than sand. As I will someday be dust.

I speak in low murmurs. You hear without
ears. You see without eyes. Cloaked in the
fragrant mantle of fresh grass you excuse my
worn-out clothes knowing they are the best I
can do. From death you speak to me through
the wind and whisper of a better future through
the beating of my heart. You kiss me lightly
with the tears I shed. These tears may count for
little but they are what a poor man can afford
to give. I leave them with you along with
two little pebbles from near where I live.

REACHING THE NADIR

by VERONICA NATION

We are but shells of people
hollow bodies and hollow bones
sitting in the mouth of America
a cavernous mouth
picking leather flowers
clematis
watching birds scatter
pepper-sky
climbing dead trees
and falling out of them
hoping to be loved
in that specific way we want to be loved.

LOST IN THE WOODS

by EDIE MEADE

The first argument of my first marriage unfolded in an illegal dump site we found after getting lost for hours in the woods. Josh led the way along a limestone creekbed like a conquistador, as confident as he was delusional. I followed along dutifully, hoping the creek would lead us to a slab bridge on the road that ran alongside our newly rented house. Instead, we happened into a mound of still-stinking garbage. The argument exploded when I stooped to inspect the trash and discovered spectacular fossils spilling out of the limestone. I can still hear Josh gasp. “Are you trying to get us shot?” This was private property, not like the vast tracts of national forest we’d left behind in Eastern Kentucky. Out here we were trespassing.

It was a moment so freighted with all the elements that would sour our marriage that when I recall it now, two decades later, I text Josh to ask about it. “Remember arguing in that dump?”

He responds within the minute, seemingly just as headstrong as ever: “I have no idea how that happened, lol,” he writes. “I very rarely get lost.”

...

It was a landslide spring. Josh and I were finishing up our undergrad programs and had just gotten engaged. Everything was going well until his mother Mary committed suicide. She died the first week of May in 2000 and it was as if our new world collapsed around us.

Josh was inconsolable, but I tried to console him anyway. We skipped final exams together, camped on the fishy mud beside a lake in the Daniel Boone National Forest. We drank heavily, made desperate love, played guitar all night. We lost our jobs and friends almost like we forgot about them. He spent hours picking the shoreline clean to perfect his cartoonishly exaggerated rock-skipping technique. In the midst of it all, I got pregnant.

So Josh and I did what many young people in Eastern Kentucky do when troubles come: we ran away. Or: we ran as far as we could get on the money we had, which was two hours to the north.

We rented a converted garage outside Burlington, Kentucky, a tiny town minutes from the Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky International Airport near the Ohio River. We lied to the religious landlady and said we were already married, and I signed the lease with my future name. It wasn’t lying, it was time travel. We dropped by a pawn shop that same afternoon and bought a pair of wedding bands with a history of God knew what. The gleam of the rings on our entwined fingers both exhilarated and scared me.

My mother cried when we tethered my mattress to the top of Josh’s station wagon. She followed us to the driveway and hugged me helplessly. When she hugged Josh, too, he burst into great shuddering sobs. It was the closest to a mother’s hug he would ever have again. “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times,” she said, smiling through her own tears at the two of us. Then she pressed a Betty Crocker cookbook into my hands and, leaning in conspiratorially, whispered that her dumpling recipe was tucked into the back. We were on our way.

The following week we returned to finish the move and my mother convinced her Baptist preacher to open his church for us the morning of his own wedding anniversary. We were married with my mother standing as bridesmaid and Josh's father, Roger – in a flannel shirt and steel-toed work boots – our best man on the shortest of notice. I recited the standard Baptist vows just as they were dictated to me, my face burning at “to honor and obey.” The preacher's wife cried in the front pew. After our brief ceremony I gave her the irises my mother cut from the yard and wished her happy thirtieth anniversary. “Harold never does this,” she told me. “I've got a good feeling about you two.” Although I wasn't religious, I took the unearned optimism of these Baptists as a kind of parting mountain blessing.

We skidded into married life. Josh pawned his video games to buy a suit for job interviews. A sharp computer science grad, he soon landed a night job working at a technology company in downtown Cincinnati.

I found myself spending a lot of time alone, contending with a most unwelcome morning sickness. I had no idea how far along I was when I finally realized I was pregnant, since I'd never had regular periods. I was painfully aware of my bumpkin ignorance as I took the first pregnancy test of my life. I stared in disbelief as the blue line appeared, even I knew all along that it would.

Realization sinks in spinning, skipped across a lake like a rock that's not quite ready to drop when it slices through the water's surface. Never quite ready for the drop. If Josh's mother hadn't died, this wouldn't have happened. If I'd been less reckless, more responsible, healthier. If I'd listened to my mother and finished up my school work instead of camping, instead of indulging my boyfriend's incendiary grief, or guilt, or mental breakdown. If Josh had maintained a better relationship with his mother, checked in with her more, gotten her the meds she needed. So many ifs, spinning that rock into the murk.

All I knew was I weighed barely a hundred pounds, couldn't keep food down, and I was afraid of what all that drinking and crying had done to the baby. I was disappearing. I needed more time. Grief took up all our time and space.

Along with my morning sickness, the third shift grind exerted a new stress. If Josh wasn't working, he was sleeping. I went from a house full of siblings and playing guitar in a band to spending my days barely speaking. At all hours, the rumble of jumbo jets shook the house as if to remind me of a busy world out there, moving on without me.

We had no phone, no internet, just a television that picked up the Cincinnati stations. Network TV was new to me, having come from a hilljack town with precisely two channels: PBS and the local public access station. The television began keeping me company while I ate crackers and vomited them right back out and into a bucket.

Gradually, gradually, gradually, it dawned on me: I didn't have to have this baby. We were living far from home. No one even knew. There would be no witnesses.

I stopped Josh at the door on his way to the car one evening. If we were going to have a child, let us do it consciously, I said. Let us try again later, when we're in a better situation. Relief flashed over his face, but then he said we'd have to talk about it more and he had to get to work. “Whatever you want to do,” he told me over his shoulder. He didn't want to weigh in on the decision. He wanted it to be mine. I felt less empowered than isolated with an awful responsibility.

The next day, we went to the library to access the internet. Since there were no abortion providers in the eastern half of Kentucky, we researched providers in Ohio. At a payphone outside a Dollar General, Josh dialed the number for a Cincinnati abortion clinic. A woman answered and, in a gruff voice, told him to hand the phone to me and get out earshot.

"Are you alone?" the woman asked me.

I turned away from Josh's insulted expression. "Yes, ma'am."

"Are you talking of your own free will?"

"Yes, ma'am," I said again, and made an appointment for a preliminary visit.

Exactly one week later, Josh and I pulled up to a tiny wood-shingled building that resembled a dentist's office in a residential Cincinnati neighborhood. A group of religious protesters bearing brimstone signs began praying loudly over me and trying to touch my stomach. "Don't do it!" a woman cried, her voice cracking.

We clambered up the steps and pressed a button beside a reinforced door. A slot slid open and I was asked my appointment number like it was a secret password. A series of deadbolts chunked and we were ushered in. Josh asked, "Can't you call the cops?"

"*Don't* acknowledge them," a woman scowled, addressing me instead of him. Josh crossed his arms and huffed into a metal folding chair by the door.

I filled out paperwork, then submitted to legally mandated psychological counseling. "Religious beliefs? Do you have a support system? Are you being abused or neglected? Any thoughts of self-harm?" The questions were more difficult to answer than I anticipated. My new husband was not beside me to tell me the right things to say.

Afterward, I had an ultrasound on a stretcher in a hallway. "I have to offer to show you this," the clinician apologized, her hand hesitating on the monitor. "Would you like to see?" When I nodded, she turned the grainy screen toward me. It was difficult to make out anything resembling a baby.

"Can you tell if it's a boy or girl?" I asked, naïve about fetal development.

"It's too early to tell that. You're only nine or ten weeks," she said. With a flicker of a smile, she added, "Good timing for you." I did the math, backdating conception to one of our wild whisky nights at the lake. Our poor baby, not yet a boy or girl – just a heart bubbling away on the monitor like an air pocket in brackish water.

We were to return the next day for the procedure. At the front desk, we were issued a handwritten bill for \$589 with no description of the services being provided. Costs were out-of-pocket, though we had no health insurance anyway. Josh pulled out his Discover card and the woman shook her head. "Bring a check or cash tomorrow," she said. That night we pawned our guitars.

The second visit moved more swiftly under the weight of a decision made. We pushed through the religious zealots, sat with several other patients whose eyes flicked pityingly, questioningly over my face – I was the only woman accompanied by a man – and then I went alone into a gynecological exam room for the procedure. An elderly male doctor introduced himself. He briefly explained what he was going to do with a small tube that he swiveled between his thumb and forefinger. Then he inserted a speculum into my vagina and cranked me open. The pain was brief, a moment to forget.

"You have a yeast infection," he informed me as he helped me sit up.

"I'm sorry," I said, ashamed.

“It’s common if you eat a lot of candy or drink a lot of alcohol, you understand.” He raised his eyebrows over his glasses and spoke slowly, the way people tended to do once they heard my hillbilly drawl. “I’ll write you a prescription for that along with the birth control, but please take care of yourself and don’t ignore a fever or bad bleeding. Listen to your body. You will be feeling a lot better soon.” I nodded, feeling every bit as meek and ignorant as I must have appeared to him.

My morning sickness vanished instantly. In fact, my appetite raged so hot that we stopped at a grocery store as soon as we crossed back into Kentucky. We bought ingredients for all the foods I had been missing from home. And although I barely knew how to cook, for the first time since the move I pulled out the cookbook my mother gave me, determined to make her special chicken and dumplings for dinner that night.

I wished I could talk to my mother, but we had a good two hours and a hard new secret between us. Now my family was my marriage, and home was a converted garage under the flight paths of jumbo jets.

...

The night of Josh’s mother’s memorial, I drank beer with his father in the church parking lot instead of comforting my future husband. Josh’s brother Doug had sneered at my presence since I’d only met their mother Mary a few times. Tomorrow they were going, without me, to scatter Mary’s ashes in the Daniel Boone National Forest. I may have been about to change my last name to his, but I didn’t *know* Doug’s family. I was not welcome. Josh pulled me aside and asked if I could wait out in the car for a bit. “Doug’s a mess because he’s mourning and he’s in withdrawal,” he said. It wasn’t personal. He got clean to say goodbye to his mother, and either one of those acts were hard enough on their own. I felt selfish, not empathetic.

Seeing my hurt, Roger offered to hang back with me. Roger knew how Doug could be. Josh’s dad seemed to me a benevolent, tragic figure. Mary had left him when her mental illness overcame her. She racked up catastrophic credit card debt, wrecked the car while battling the devil, told her sons wild tales of abuse. She accused Roger of cheating on her, which he’d always denied. He lost his wife to demons, as he put it.

Maybe Roger didn’t try hard enough to save Mary, as Josh had once insinuated. Or maybe he really had been unfaithful, as both of his sons believed. They’d been distant so long the hurt dulled into habit. Coming from a big close family into this dysfunction, I wanted Josh to reconcile.

Roger lived a monkish life. He worked his way out of the family’s bankruptcy in a highway construction job, then bought a little cabin in a holler outside of town. His only pleasures in life seemed to be baked potatoes and Budweiser. On warm evenings, Josh and I would bring some ground beef and grill out over a tiny charcoal-fired saucer on Roger’s porch. Then he’d take us fossil hunting in construction job roadcuts. He knew all about the geology of the hills, what was under them and why.

Roger enjoyed nurturing my obsession with fossils. Josh affected indifference and boredom during our roadcut adventures. I dug through the crumbling shale until my fingernails were ragged and my pockets were full. In my mother’s spider-plant pots back home, I had a sizable collection of pristine brachiopod scallops and coral from when the region was the bed of a prehistoric ocean. Roger pulled out the best specimens and always handed them over to me, “for the lady and her mother.”

There was an old-fashioned simplicity to the man that I found charming, as if there wasn't much to know about him beyond the smile lines on his work-tanned face. He was very like Josh in his physical appearance – which, I hoped, was a pleasant glimpse into my spousal future – but he lacked the temper, ego, and flights of fancy his son could sometimes manifest. I secretly allowed myself the thought that all the things I loved most about Josh had come from Roger, and all the negatives had come from Mary.

...

After my abortion, Josh wanted to celebrate our marriage, new home, his new job, all the good things that had come to pass since that horrible spring. I felt well again, could hold down a beverage, why not have a housewarming of some sort to mark our new chapter? He invited his brother up on a Saturday night. Doug showed up with a new girlfriend, Lori, and a grocery bag full of liquor.

Lori met him at the bar where Doug had gotten on as a bartender. She only drank clear alcohol, she told me, and stayed away from corn syrup. Although it was only three in the afternoon, I found myself nursing a gin and tonic. "For the malaria," Doug said, elbowing Josh and foisting a drink into his hand, too.

Lori was a chatty, cross-wearing Catholic into astrology and the paranormal. She was so complimentary about our house that I wondered how she lived. I told her the place wasn't that great with all the airport noise, and that being alone at night had made me jumpy. "Do you sometimes feel a presence?" she asked me.

"A presence?" I asked.

"Because maybe somebody died in here." She cleaned rental units for a living, she said, and the first thing landlords did after a death was get new carpeting. She could smell the carpet as soon as she walked in here and knew it was brand new. "It happens more than you think." She cast a glance over the living room floor. "Everybody's got to die somewhere, you know."

"Lori!" Doug yelled from the kitchen. I could tell he was already tired of her, but I imagined Roger would get a kick out of her company. He would take Lori out to the roadcuts and tell her stories about the ancient ocean. She would find miracles in the fossil deposits.

Josh gave them a tour of our garage-house, our new grill and patio table out back. I put on some steaks and Josh pointed a stereo speaker out the window. We were doing well for ourselves up here in Burlington. Josh turned up the music and spent a good hour arguing with his brother about the working class pedigree of country musicians and who was a better guitarist. Then Lori announced that she wanted to dance, so Doug retrieved an '80s love-song compilation from his car and we watched her sway, eyes closed, with a drink in her hand. She seemed to experience a spiritual ecstasy at these frothy songs, and I felt envious at her ability to let go. "Come dance," she said between tracks, beckoning first at Doug, then me.

Although I was a musician I had never danced much in my life, a deficit I attributed to Baptist culture. But I imitated Lori's languid writhing and Josh soon joined me with a hand on my waist.

After a few more drinks, Josh impulsively announced that we had a secret. My stomach turned when he paused the music. "It's not good news," he said. On my waist, his hand felt hot, tense. "We were expecting. But we miscarried." We hadn't told anyone

because of the timing with Mary's death, he said, and this had to stay between us. Doug wrapped him in a hug and sobbed.

Tears sprang into Lori's eyes and she clasped my hand. She offered condolences with a battery of questions. How far along had I been? Was it a girl? Not far enough to know the sex of the baby? How had my morning sickness been? Mountain wisdom had it that bad morning sickness meant it was a girl, she told us. "Who knows, maybe it was Mary trying to reincarnate." Josh's face blanched like he'd seen a ghost.

...

Josh and I found ourselves the following afternoon alone, agitated and hung over, taking a walk into the parcel of woods owned by our landlady.

The walk had been my idea. I hadn't been in the woods since we'd moved away from the national forest. The last time Josh had been for a hike was to scatter his mother's ashes.

We hadn't intended to go far, just get our blood moving and have some fresh air. But after passing through a narrow stand of trees, we came to a utility easement full of chamomile and decided to collect some blooms, maybe walk a while longer to clear our heads.

Almost like an arrow pointing us to a good view a gigantic plane shadow passed over us, mounted the hillside, and disappeared. We wondered if the airport, or possibly the Ohio River, was visible from the top of the ridge. I held my shirt bottom out like an apron and filled it with flower heads the way my mother used to do when she wanted some tea.

As we climbed the easement, the land seemed to lengthen and the sun intensified. We decided to cut into the shade of the woods and walk along at a diagonal instead. But we soon ran against brambles and had to reroute again. We walked down the slope, diverted around downed trees, washouts and sinkholes.

Never much of an outdoorsman, Josh postured as though he had a natural sense of direction in these unknown woods. Another jet roared over, glinting like a compass needle. I peered into the treetops without catching another glimpse. "*Trust* me," Josh said, offense creeping into his voice when he saw me searching the sky. He had been a pizza delivery driver in college; he knew how to get around without asking for directions. I desperately hoped he knew where he was going.

I nearly stepped on a fawn curled into a freckled ball in the ferns. When it leaped away, I smacked my face against a tree. Josh cackled. My face reddened with rage. "I could tell you weren't really hurt. That's the only reason I laughed," he said. "Lighten up!" For a while, I pretended my nose did hurt because I wanted him to be sorry for laughing. But he walked in front of me and didn't even look back at me for a long time. His confident, straight-shouldered posture seemed so intentionally antagonizing that I wished he would trip and fall.

...

After twenty years, it's easier to see how inexperienced we both were when we married. Josh may have thought he had things all figured out, but he was barely an adult leading his newlywed bride around in the woods. I text him again a few days after my initial message. "Do you remember what we were fighting about?"

"Fighting?"

"In the dump."

A minute goes by. "Remember the baby deer lol," he texts.

"Yes," I reply. "It startled me."

"You needed glasses a long time before you caved in lol."

"I don't think glasses would have helped that day," I type, then delete, think some more. I start again: "It was a crazy time." The word *crazy* makes me feel bad, so I backtrack again. Finally, I just text "lol" and let the conversation go to seed. I realize how grasping it is for me to expect my ex-husband to reflect on this incident. Within three months, he lost his mother and a baby he may have wanted to keep, and I'm asking him to reconcile with me about a single unpleasant afternoon in the woods.

How we explained the fight away that night, when we knew we needed to make amends: We were overheating, dehydrated, and disoriented by the newness of our surroundings. All true. And for the duration of our marriage, we never again argued about those six full hours we spent wandering in the woods.

At the bottom of a hill, we found a small creek. Let us, I suggested, follow this in the direction of the water's flow to reach the slab bridge not far from our landlady's road-front. I conjured the weather-beaten eyes of Roger in my mind, and appealed to his son with my best mountain logic. The water would lead us downhill and toward a larger creek. We knew that all the streams in the area served as tributaries to the Ohio River watershed. They would ultimately point us north, where we knew our road laid.

"The moss is growing on the side you think is north," Josh countered. "That's not possible." The smart thing to do, he said, would be to walk the opposite direction. We were close to the easement, he could sense it. Hell, if I dropped my flower heads, we would probably start smelling the chamomile growing there.

I spilled the blooms from my shirt and watched them pirouette downstream. It felt almost like an act of faith.

For the next hour, we followed the creekbed without talking much. Josh led the way, bracing himself unnecessarily with a stick, and my gall rose every time I saw him stop to inspect the angle of the daylight or lichens on a tree trunk.

A stench alerted us to human activity before we saw its source. Josh turned back to make eye contact with me, and we rounded a bend to find a truckload of garbage clogging the stream. Car batteries and tires, wads of clothing, diapers, food waste, paint cans, waterlogged junk mail – some was bagged, some was loose on the ground. All of it was illegal to dump into the woods.

I plucked an envelope from the pile and read off the address for the next town over. "What are you doing?" Josh hissed.

"Seeing where we are."

"Are you trying to get us shot? If anybody sees us messing around back here, we're going to be in trouble."

"We must be close to this town," I said. He rolled his eyes and leaned to run his hand over the bark of a sycamore tree. I nearly lost it. "Josh, this isn't the movies. You can't orient by tree moss!" I half expected him to lick his finger and hold it in the air.

"You can," he insisted. "And actually I'm surprised you don't know how to navigate in the woods, coming from your family."

"What is that supposed to mean?" I asked, knowing very well he meant my family were hilljacks. "You've been leading the way all day because you didn't want to just turn around, and now we're in a different zip code."

“We’re not in a different zip code,” he said, and walked up a small hill to where the woods thinned. “Hey,” he called back. “There’s a corn field up here.”

I ignored him and kicked around at the trash like it would reveal some new way to humble him. It was then that I spotted a cache of immaculate fossils in the edge of the creek. They sat right out on the top of the limestone almost as if they’d flitted there with the dragonflies to get a drink. I began filling my shirt-apron with rocks.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Josh asked, stumbling back down the embankment.

“Collecting brachiopods,” I said, holding one up. “Look how huge! Roger would love these.”

“*Roger* has enough already,” he said, and knocked the bottom of my hand. The fossil popped out and splashed into the water.

“Don’t hit me!” I shrieked.

“Stop screaming, you idiot!” he snapped, mouth twisted into a grimace. “I didn’t hit you. Jesus.”

I could see, in the furrows of his frown, a strong resemblance to his mother. Gathering all the spite I had in me, I hissed, “You’re just like your mother.”

He looked like I’d just slapped him. “Don’t you ever say one more word about my mother!” he bellowed, and stormed up the hill.

I watched his shoulder blades catch the evening sun and disappear off to the right, and then I stooped to collect a few more fossils and cry. Maybe I’d see if he had a bluff to call. Maybe he was as sorry as I was. Maybe I would sit right down here and die of dehydration, lost in a pile of garbage.

He didn’t come back. I sat on a protruding root of the sycamore tree, launching rocks into the creek.

When we were camping at the lake, Josh liked to show off by skipping rocks over the calm surface. He always overcounted the number of skips and inflated them even more in his retellings. But there was something about the way he told people about his rock-skipping skills – wide-eyed, sincere, as if he believed it himself – that kept it from looking like a brag. Who would brag about a rock on the water? I let him have it.

His personal record was seventeen skips, he told his father one evening over the grill. Roger let him have it, too.

Here in the creek the bits of shale and limestone were light as wafers; Josh could claim a good twenty skips. I threw the rocks blunt against the water. The rocks made violent splashes and I sobbed indulgently, bitterly.

I sat for perhaps another fifteen minutes after I was all cried out, then climbed up toward the corn field with my secret harvest of brachiopods. When I emerged from the underbrush, I stumbled into a gravel lane that led down to a farmhouse where the illegal dumpers lived.

Several strangers were sitting in the evening light on their porch waiting for me, their holdout trespasser. Josh was with them, drinking a glass of water. The triumphant smirk on his face made me wish I could turn to stone and sink directly into the ground. But I kept walking toward my new husband. Into the gravel, I spilled my fossils.

MABELY'S POTTERY

by GRANT CAMPBELL

Mabely laid her hands
against the spinning pot,
trying to quiet
the way it swung
its uneven hips—
self-inflicted dizziness.
Every attack
on the pot's asymmetry
was an overcorrection,
as had been the last 7 Monday nights
of this 10 week adult class,
having lacked
the balanced even-pressured chat
and general symmetry
to make a friend.

Mabely watched Naomi
put her palm in the small
of the pot's back,
effortlessly leading the clay
where it unknowingly wanted to be.
Into those beautiful
looping voluptuous
curves, lips curled
like question marks.
Unnecessarily sexual, really.
Irresponsible parenting, maybe—
how quickly Naomi would
stick stuff in the kiln.
Such a casual kind of loving,
as if perfection was something
she couldn't help but stub
her toe on.

The somewhat circular piece of earth
looked up at Mabely
with its lop-sided, accusatory
single-eyed droop.
Its thin pursed lips
didn't need to say anything,
Mabely knew it hated her.

She set her hand down
to steady herself
and was spun off the wheel:

She pictured Naomi dipping
her hands in the soiled water
and running them over
Mabely's cracked adobe body.
To have Naomi place her sure palm
on the small of Mabely's back,
sliding Mabely's loose
slimy clay anatomy across
the spinning dance floor.
In this dizziness
Naomi placed
her in a kiln, kintsugi
to be paralyzed in perfection.
And she felt preordered
so practical so essential.
Built to the exact specification
of when the spinning would stop
and of what a someone
needed Mabely to be.

A PIPA! JUST FOR YOU!

by RIGATONI GARRIDO



THE GIRL FROM YESTERDAY

by JEFF ADAMS

There are two days in my life, having to do with that envelope, that I shall never forget. The first was when my mother tossed my father out of the house. Tossed, as in she expelled from the place not just him, but all his clothing and physical possessions and whatever else she could get her hands on that was remotely associated with him. If she could have expelled his fingerprints, or his scent, or any other trace of his being, she would have done so. Into the front yard things flew, onto the carpet of grass that he had so diligently maintained, there to be soaked by sheets of water fanning out from the irrigation system. We stood by as a small mountain of personal items, and the goodwill of a grossly imperfect man, melted slowly into the lawn. It was a delicious day of revenge for her, and I suppose for me. But, as it turned out, it was incomplete.

"There is an envelope," she said to me. "You will find it in the top drawer of your father's desk. I want you to go find it – *don't show it to me!* – and get it out of the house. I don't want to see it, or even touch it again. Right now, Jordan. And don't open it. I don't care what you do with it. Take it to the dump. Burn it. Or, I don't know, destroy it somehow. I don't want anyone else to see it. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, mother," I said. I ran back into the house to retrieve the envelope. It was from my father's medical office, with his name and business address printed in the upper left corner. It was large enough to hold legal-size documents and sealed tight. The word "CONFIDENTIAL" was stamped boldly on one side. I could tell that it held several items. The contents shuffled loosely within as I ran it down the street, tucked under my arm. I stopped at my friend Doug's house, snuck into his backyard, and slipped it behind a woodpile that stood next to the garage.

The second memorable time, having to do with that envelope, was two years later to the day, when my mother remarried. That was the day I snuck again into Doug's back yard, recovered the envelope from behind that woodpile, and examined its unholy contents. In it were some photographs: a few shots of a young girl; then two or three other images, presumably of that girl as a teenager; and then one large color picture of a very pretty adult woman looking playfully into the camera. She had auburn hair, strikingly beautiful brown eyes, a lightly freckled face, and a beguiling smile. She was wearing my father's monogrammed white medical jacket. Tubes of a stethoscope protruded from her ears. Her right arm extended forward and disappeared beyond the lower edge of the photo. I imagined that she held the bell of the stethoscope against the chest of the person taking the photograph, listening to his heartbeat. Also in the envelope was a scientific article, apparently ripped out of some medical journal, describing the causes and potential outcomes of postpartum infections that can harm, or even kill, a mother after childbirth. I put it all back into the envelope, dumped it into the recycle bin next to Doug's house, and forgot about it. Except that I couldn't forget about it. Especially the photograph of that woman with a stethoscope. Ever

since then, despite any evidence to the contrary, I have wondered whether I would grow into another version of my father.

In some ways I wish I had kept that envelope. Not as a kind of rebellion against my mother's wishes. Maybe more as a constant rebuke to my father's legacy, a continuing assertion to his memory that yes, of course I knew. And I disapproved. But in all honesty I wanted to see what kind of woman my father would fall for.

On the day of the incident, when I went over to Doug's house to tell him what had happened on our front lawn, he already knew. Our mothers had talked in advance, I suppose for moral support but also as a backup should something go amiss. It turned out that Doug was the backup. I didn't see him sitting in his mother's car across the street from our house, a half a block down. And I don't know if he was still there when I went running out of our house, towards his, with the envelope under my arm.

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It is a Friday night, some years later, when Doug and I are at a bar close to the university. We fall into a bit of role play. He is my occasional wingman, a good drinking buddy. He's also a likable, easy going guy with effective woman skills. Tonight, he squints to focus on a young lady standing alone on the other side of the room. He smiles at her. Then he turns to me and drops himself onto a bar stool. He tells me to go for it, wave to her, go over and say something to her. Be friendly, just as you are. I will do nothing of the kind. This annoys Doug, who asks me how I expect to find a female companion if I don't put myself out there. Doug is an assistant professor of statistics. He is fascinated with probabilities. I tell him that no matter how many bars we may visit on a given night, our chances do not improve. He says he appreciates the application of academic principles, but that I can go take a long walk off a short pier. That he's going to call me "Mister Inertia" from now on.

"Hi, gentlemen." The voice is soft, the tone purposeful. I turn to face her. It is the woman from the other side of the room. She has closed the distance between us with the speed of thought. She is quite attractive, a wholesome female presence, if you will. Her reddish hair, unfussy and fulsome, falls gently to her shoulders. Her eyes are an effervescent version of brown, a value of the color that holds your attention a beat longer, time enough for you to contemplate the refreshing flavor of root beer. Her smile is friendly and warm. Tiny freckles dapple her cheeks, giving her face an aura of eternal youthfulness. Her bearing is one of incorruptible determination, a look familiar to me in ways that I cannot yet put my finger on. She is of medium height and slight of build. She is dressed in sensible, casual attire, fitted tastefully in stylish tribute to the mysterious ways of the great Mother Nature. I judge her to be a few years younger than I am. I like her before she can utter a word. She reaches out to shake my hand. "Having a good time?" she asks. If not yet, I think, then I am about to. "I'm the new general manager. My name is Leigh." I introduce myself, and then Doug, to our evening's host. We chat for a while, until something across the room catches her attention and she politely drifts away to address it.

It is the simplest beginning to summer recess, a new acquaintance. One that easily evolves, over the following weeks, into a casual three-way friendship. It is a season of transition, the time of year when the college town empties of its students and Doug can take a breather. When Leigh's promotional skills come into play. She creates happy hours and foodie specials that populate her place with locals and faculty members who typically steer clear of it when school is in session. Doug and I become faithful customers, eager to support the enterprise and to enjoy intermittent small talk with the new general manager during the brief moments of freedom that Leigh can grab during business hours, and sometimes after closing. I feel a strong and natural ease of being with Leigh, as though I already know her. I don't tell this to Doug. What could he possibly do with that kind of information?

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Summer rolls smoothly into September. The bar is closed after a slow night just before matriculation weekend. Doug has departed to put the finishing touches on a new lecture. It is just Leigh and me. We sit facing one another in her office off the main floor. "A doctor's shift can be lengthy, often unpredictable, and even as dull as a box of rocks. I've heard it all in here," Leigh tells me. "Who do they think I am, their confessor? You know what I'm saying?" Leigh's observation comes after I casually mention that I am the son of a doctor, my mother the widow. And then she tells me she someday wants to find out who her real father was. All she knows is that he was somehow associated with the university, like the doctors who patronize her bar. We have this in common, I tell her. My father was a regular.

Leigh is now ramping up preparations for the return of her student customers, especially the energetically new ones who just attained legal drinking age, some to whom Doug will teach the virtues of regression analysis. Some will succumb to overindulgence, either alcoholic or academic, or both. A much smaller cohort will become patients at the university's teaching hospital. It is a place where people not much older than they are practice their diagnostic skills, bedside manners, and professional objectivity. And where young patients can experience being sick or injured absent a reassuring parent at their bedside. Sometimes an older physician will take a young medical student under his wing. If the older physician is my father, the young medical student will be female. Like the one who set Doug's broken leg, and then applied a cast so tight that he almost lost it and then was forced to walk for years with a cane. My father will offer this young medical student his counsel over morning coffee, with reassurances that her career is not finished before it has started. Sometime later, if things progress as he schemes, it will be conversations over fine wine. Ultimately, when flattery gives way to lust, and common sense gives way to total abandon, regret sets in. Later, it gets real: the young woman misses her period. Then, on the worst day of her life, my mother plays the young woman's voicemail for my father, announcing that she is leaving medical school, and revealing that she does not believe in abortion. There it is, I tell Leigh, my entire boyhood drama. But I withhold the matter of the envelope.

"There's plenty of awful in your dad's behavior," Leigh says across the chasm of silence that had ballooned between us. Her tone is matter of fact.

"And tragedy for my mom," I answer.

"And then there's you. Innocent you." I am drawn to her words, which suggest compassion, but which strike me, oddly, as skepticism. I feel like calling her on it. I hold back. I do not know if she is ready. I don't know if I am ready. "It happens. Must be because of what I do," Leigh continues, shuffling a pile of papers on her desk. "It's the running a bar thing. People tell me stuff they would never tell anyone else. What am I supposed to do with that? Believe me, Jordan, you're no burden. I appreciate the fact that you can relate." She says all of this without looking up. Her mind is on her work. I sense that our conversation has come to an end, that she would like to lock up.

"Or you just have that talent," I say. Which is most probably the truth. She has a kind of personal gravitas.

Leigh looks up. Her eyes narrow. Then she leans in. "Don't think bad of me when I say this to you, Jordan, but at least you have a past that you know of."

"Is one better than the other?" I ask.

"What, knowing or not knowing?" she replies.

"Having or not having," I say, wary of her comment, which seems more a challenge than a question. A way to probe whether in fact I have any compassion.

"If you had the choice, which would you choose?" she continues. I get her point. I get that there is no difference when the pain is the same. She settles back into her chair and looks up in the air, as though getting ready to add a thought but she lacks a key word. We are at odds and ends over something neither of us can control but each of us must endure. I assume that would be the corruption of the family unit. "I never knew my mom," Leigh says. "She died giving birth to me. I was raised by her parents." Oh Jesus, I think, how can I possibly tell her how much she means to me. And then, apropos of nothing, "Doug doesn't need that cane, does he?"

"It's a prop," I answer. I see no harm in admitting the truth, even if it is without his permission.

"It's his crutch," Leigh says. "It is his metaphor," she adds with a laugh.

"Worthy of a professor," I offer, somewhat in defense of Doug's habit to carry it wherever he goes.

"Did they sue?" Leigh asks.

"You mean, did a single mom take on an entire university system?"

"Yes."

"No, they settled right away. No admission of negligence. No malpractice. No *nolo contendere*."

"As though nothing ever happened. Except for, you know," Leigh adds, all but retelling the story of the beginning of my father's professional downfall. And the eventual end of his life, which none of us witnessed but all of us had to deal with.

And then, I cannot resist. "Doug is heading up a project that may be of help to you," I tell her. "It's for the university, in cooperation with a genetics firm."

“Spooky ancestral stuff?” she asks. “No thanks.”

“Maybe it will give you a lead.”

“Maybe you should do it,” she answers, her tone firm enough to warn me not to reply. If she only knew my truth. Yes, I want her to participate. As I already have. Leigh focuses on the ham sandwich and glass of iced tea in front of her. “Actually, maybe nobody should do it.” She swallows the final bite of the sandwich, drains the rest of her iced tea, and runs the napkin slowly and carefully across her mouth, completely removing her lipstick. She excuses herself for a moment to use the bathroom next to her office. I take her dirty dish, empty glass and used napkin to the bar’s kitchen area. A young man is busy rinsing plates, which will go into the commercial dishwasher for a thorough cleaning. Before he takes the items from me, I grab the napkin and place it into a plastic bag. Then I put the bag in my pocket and return to the office to bid Leigh a good night. On my way home, I go straight to the lab and ask for Doug. He refuses to take the bag from me and tells me to go away. “Get a good night’s sleep. Better yet, get a life.”

Yeah, sure, like he isn’t as curious as I am. “What’s your problem?” I ask.

“Not even close, my friend. Not the right way to do this, and you know it.” You could say that, today, Doug is still playing backup - but now, to my own risky inclinations. He leans heavily on his cane. “Are you nuts? Where is this coming from?”

“From a need to know,” I answer.

“Forget about it, Jordan. It’s an invasion of her privacy.”

“Only if we – if you – share it beyond me.”

“Nope,” he answers. “Once in the database, always in the database.”

“Okay but use a fictitious name.”

“No can do. Not allowed. All kinds of ethical traps, awkward outcomes. Suppose, for example, she voluntarily comes to me. What do I say: ‘Oh, no worries, Leigh, you’re already in the database’? Then what?”

“Or maybe we just suggest it to her now, up front,” I say.

“Don’t drag me into this, Jordan. If you have a need to know why not just tell her? Get her involved. But of course, you can’t do that, can you? You hardly know her, and you’re obsessed. What’s up with that?”

“Something about her,” I say. “Dumb, isn’t it?”

“Dumber than shit, if you ask me.”

“There are resemblances, and familiar mannerisms. A being-ness. In a photograph, and in her, and from him. I can feel it. You met her. Can you feel it? Huh? Can you?”

“And there are probabilities, Mister Inertia,” he says, ignoring my question. “Billions of them. They are overwhelmingly against you.”

“They are, aren’t they. I suppose I am overreacting.” I get his logic, but I am not convinced. The pull is just too strong.

“Throw that thing out. I don’t want to touch it,” he says. I drop the plastic bag and napkin into the wastebasket next to his desk. I want to tell him that the last woman I saw my father with had auburn hair, a spray of freckles on her face, a welcoming smile, and eyes the color of root beer. Like the woman in the picture, if not the same person. I am ashamed to wonder if Leigh and I are related. “Look,

it's not like you aren't attracted to her, Jordan. Why not leave it at that? The coincidence, if it is a coincidence, is that she awakens something in you. If you ask me, you should explore that. That feeling, I mean. Stop acting like a dick and start using the one you have," he says. The crude but accurate shock of advice from my good friend – a friend who seeks out the facts as they are, not as he suspects, and acts upon them - brings an awakening of a different kind in me. That I am a hopeless wimp. "I'm sorry, Jordan," he adds. "I meant no disrespect."

"None taken, Doug. You have a point. I should give it a try."

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The mountain of my father's possessions, which my mother had created in her singular fury, lay soaked to its core on our front lawn for the rest of the day and into the night. I found it late the next morning, undisturbed and steaming like a fetid heap of compost festering under a blazing sun. It seemed odd that no person, not even the larcenous raccoons that infested our neighborhood, had rearranged or walked off with anything. Not the merest curiosity, not even the tabloid suspicion that it hid a freshly dead body, attracted the slightest inspection. What remained for me, however, was how to dispose of it. And that's when Doug stopped by.

"I have something to ask you," he said. And then he looked down at the cane he was learning to use, as though to compose himself. "We got a call at the house. I answered the phone. It was your father. First thing he said was not to mention his name out loud, and not to give the phone to my mom. 'Okay,' I said to him. 'What do you want?' And he asked – well, and it sounded like he was pretty desperate – he asked me if I would help him get his things."

"And of course you refused," I said, turning around to see if my mother was within earshot. When I was confident she could not hear us, I continued, "Never in a million years, right?"

"Well," Doug answered, with a hesitation that made my heart race. No way, you asshole, I thought. No way. "Well, yes," he said.

"Damn you, Doug."

"Now wait a minute, Jordan," he said. "He wants to pay me. I mean us. I mean me. And I want to give the money to your mother."

"Damn you," I said again. "How could you?"

"Jordan, you can't keep that stuff in your yard. You know that. You don't want to touch it, either. Am I right?" he asked.

He had a point. "Right," I answered. "But why you? Why not some guys from the other side of town?"

"I thought all night about that, Jordan. I don't really know. The only reason I came up with was, well, that I had met her."

"Met who? What the hell are you talking about."

"When she set my leg. In the cast."

"Oh, shit. So what?"

"I don't really know," Doug said. "I think it's something he wants that might be in that pile of stuff. He thinks I might, I don't know, be able to get it for him. Or at least tell him if it was in the pile. I don't know. I don't know what it might be. He didn't say."

“So you met her?” I asked again, thinking of the mess of photographs in that envelope, tucked between the woodpile and the garage in Doug’s back yard. What else could my father have so desperately wanted?

“You know, as a doctor. I mean as her patient.”

“She was no doctor,” I said. “She was a student.”

“I mean, she was in his office. She worked on my leg. He was there.”

“So what?”

“Like I said, I don’t know.”

“What was she *like*?” I demanded. I wanted to hear the sound of her voice, if only as reported by Doug. I wanted to know how she was, as a person, in front of him. In the presence of my father.

“She was really nice. Real professional, and yeah, I know,” he added before I could correct him. “She was really careful with my leg. A little nervous maybe. She had a funny kind of giggle when her fingers messed up. Like she would hear about it later. But I was more worried about my leg, Jordan, so that’s all I could tell you about her. Oh, and one other thing. She did have really beautiful brown eyes.”

So I held my nose and agreed that he could help my father by clearing the front yard. But only without him, at night, and without my mother finding out. And he should ask for double the payment being offered. Which he did. And that evening around suppertime I noticed a pickup truck parked in front of our house. The next morning, the yard was clear, the truck was gone. There was a small envelope in our mailbox. It was fat with fifty dollars in a combination of ones and fives. That afternoon I handed the cash to my mother. I told her that it came from a consignment store in the next county, which also agreed to haul away everything for free.

Doug and I never spoke another word about the episode, which I recalled two years later, when my mother remarried. The day before the ceremony, I returned to the recycle bin in Doug’s back yard, into which I had dropped the legal-size envelope, the one with the incriminating photographs of my father’s lover and the seemingly irrelevant medical article. But when I looked in, I saw that the envelope was gone.

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It’s a busy Friday night at the bar. Doug and I have our beers, and Leigh is nowhere to be seen. She should be here, I think. It’s the start of her peak season. We go to the bartender, crazy with drink orders, and ask about her. He shrugs his shoulders and gets back to his business. So the two of us go directly to her office. Her desk is clear, and the room is eerily quiet.

“She lied to me,” Doug says. “She was supposed to stay.” He sits in her chair behind the desk and lays his cane across the top. “One more day, that’s all it would have taken.”

“To do what?” I ask. “What are you talking about?”

“To explain it to you. Now I have to do that all by myself.”

“What’s going on, Doug? This is feeling a bit weird.”

“Yeah, I know. Like the day she came to me to get a name. She had heard about the study. After all these years living in the area, she had a possible opening

to her past. We got her data from her, just like we got yours early on and, after you, many thousands of other people. The new reports are a little more complex, and they tell you if there are any hits. She wanted a name.”

“Hits?”

“People who share your profile, significant parts of it. Could be anywhere. Could be everywhere. Could be in the thousands. It’s a gross indicator. But it also drills down to relatives, like cousins, or siblings.”

“Brother or sister?”

“Yes. Among the people who have contributed to the study. It’s a closed database, not a criminal justice universe. But no names.”

“So she would know, for example, that she had a brother.”

“Full-blooded yes, or a person with enough data from a common parent between the two of them. Either would be considered a brother.”

“And she came to you for a name?”

“The system doesn’t give out names. Only the relationship and general geographic location. Like a cousin in Northern California.”

“Or like a brother in some region surrounding a university town like ours.” The coincidence that he had so vehemently shamed me for was exactly the truth of the situation. The night of our first meeting was a set up. The rest of it was Leigh getting to know me. Getting to know precisely who her father was. And what kind of a man he was. And then deciding her next steps.

“You could have asked about her grandparents, Jordan. Whether they had photographs of their daughter. Of their granddaughter. It could have been that simple. That could have brought it all out in the open.”

“You didn’t give her the information she wanted.”

“Of course not. But I did figure it out.”

“Figure what out, Doug?”

“From the photos in your father’s envelope. I found them around the time of your mother’s wedding. My job, my kid job, was always to take out the garbage. And the recycling. Only me, so only I know what I put in the bins. I didn’t know how the envelope got in there, but I knew that it wasn’t by me. It blew me away. *They* blew me away.”

“Why didn’t you – ?”

“No way I was going to give them to you, and certainly not to your mom. It would be incredibly insensitive, I thought. But, at the same time, I thought the stuff was terribly important. Or might be important for some reason, at some time. It could have been what your father was after. So I held onto everything.”

“And you showed them to Leigh?”

“And then I gave them to Leigh.”

“What!?”

“It could be evidence,” he says. “Propinquity, they call it. The stuff in your father’s business envelope. It goes to their association.”

“But she died,” I tell him. “Evidence for what?”

“They named her after her mother. One life for another.”

“She told you that?”

“Toxoplasmosis, Jordan. It happens. And it can be devastating,” he says to me, as though he is giving me my own diagnosis. “Do you know that the people in hospitals who have the worst reputation for not washing their hands are actually the doctors?”

“He was there, wasn’t he?” I ask, the question that none of us will ever be able to answer. “It was an accident,” I continue, an assertion without support, because I could not bear to consider the alternative. “And, after she was gone, he took himself out of life,” I say, because that is the only fact in the whole matter.

“The hospital could still be liable. I don’t know about statutes of limitation around malpractice, especially where deaths are involved.”

And then it hits me like a ton of bricks. “You told me to go sleep with her, Doug. And after you knew all of this?”

“I knew you would never do it, Mister Inertia,” he answers. “And she wouldn’t allow you to, my friend.” I could see that, yes. I could imagine the awkwardness on her part, the embarrassments on my side, the shared regrets.

“We both saw her mother,” I say to him. “Me in a photograph. You up close in person. You heard her voice, felt her breath. Didn’t it ever dawn on you about Leigh like it did to me? Didn’t it make you see it the way I saw it?”

“It did, Jordan, a little, only after I saw the data. But I am a scientist. I am trained to respect someone’s privacy, to resist those impulses.”

“How about the impulses of a friend? Or the idea of being a friend? Doesn’t that count in your universe? Or am I just data?”

“She will be back,” he answers. “I truly believe that. This isn’t forever.”

“Oh yes it is, Doug. Yes it is.” I drain my beer. Then I grab his cane, his professional crutch, and smash it to pieces against the side of Leigh’s desk. “How is this for overcoming inertia?”

ONE DAY, ALEX ANDERSON WENT MISSING

by AUSTIN HOEFT

Today is the fifth anniversary and the snow is falling slowly. Hayes Anderson is whistling ‘April Come She Will’ and replaces an old missing poster with the newest edition. As he does every year. Most of the old posters have graffiti on Alex’s picture anyways. He hears something and turns to see a girl putting up a lost dog sign on the back of a bench standing a few feet away to his right. She must be in her twenties, he thinks. The hood on her heavy turquoise jacket covers all of her head except her face and protects it from the snow. I wonder how worried she is, thinks Hayes. He puts a fresh piece of Nicorette gum in his mouth and gets back to hanging up lost signs of his own.

“December 15, 5 years ago, Alex Anderson went missing after school. Last seen in the school forest. Please phone with information.”

There’s a photo of Alex standing in front of his bus on the last first day of elementary school as he was entering fifth grade. Hayes remembers how much Alex wanted to get on the bus to talk with his friends, but Hayes wanted the photo of his son. To remember the moment. His short brown hair is spiked up and he wears a green and purple striped shirt with green cargo shorts. Kid was always happy to dress himself, remembers Hayes. He took the photo and then Alex ran into the bus without saying goodbye. Hayes smiles at the memory.

“What’ve you got missing?” a voice asks Hayes.

“Oh! It’s uh. Well.”

The girl with missing dog signs approaches a startled Hayes and pulls her hood back to reveal curly black hair and green eyes. She looks at his signs.

“Oh. I’m so sorry.” says the girl.

“It happens.”

The girl takes in Hayes as Hayes stares at her sneakers. Hayes looks like a man that subsists on two hours of sleep a night. He has a predominately black mustache with some grey hairs. There’s peppered scruff on the rest of his face. His short black hair holds gray at the ends of his curls and looks as though it gets a minute’s attention every morning and hasn’t had a brush put through it in weeks. His long face seems empty somehow and his eyes occasionally twitch. He smells of coffee and late nights. There is ‘West Texas High School’ printed on his grey sweater and a heavy black coat over it.

“Mr. Anderson?” ponders the girl.

Hayes looks up and focuses on the girl standing before him.

“Lucy?” queries Hayes.

Yes, that’s the Lucy I taught years ago, thinks Hayes. It was College Algebra senior year. Six years ago.

“So, what’s missing for you?” asks Hayes.

“Just uh, my dog... Mr. Anderson I-”

“Don’t worry about it. It happened the year after you graduated I think.”

Lucy nods. As Hayes looks at Lucy he thinks back to teaching and the type of normalcy that had existed for that time. He got that job right out of college and married his girlfriend, Annabelle, not long after. Alex came years later. And not on purpose. Annabelle had thought her whole life she was incapable of carrying a child because of

oddities within her own body. Hayes had always dreamed of raising a kid. They were ready to adopt until Annabelle kept throwing up in the mornings. Hayes was having a cigarette he didn't realize would be his last when Annabelle came into their living room with tears in her eyes and a stick with two lines on it.

"I'm so sorry. I remember you talking about him in class all the time. And I remember my parents telling me about what happened while I was at college," says Lucy.

"Yup..." nods Hayes.

"Five years... Didn't- Well, wasn't there someone in custody?" questions Lucy.

"There was."

"And?"

"He was cleared."

"Oh..."

Hayes gives his best little smile to Lucy as she begins to look down at his grey New Balances. How sad, thinks Lucy. She remembers that Mrs. Anderson died while birthing Alex. Alex was all there was for Mr. Anderson.

"But. I'm still here aren't I? As long as someone keeps hanging these up there's hope," says Hayes.

There's a pause as Lucy contemplates what to say next.

"It's a good picture of him," says Lucy.

Hayes nods. "You know, I change the picture each year. I don't really know why. Maybe it'll ring a bell in someone's head that wasn't rung with last year's picture. Who knows."

Hayes looks at Lucy's missing signs.

"A snow-white retriever. Can't say I envy you. He's certainly got lots of camouflage this time of year," jokes Hayes.

Lucy gives a smile. "Yeah, Trapper's been gone for a few days. The gate was left open and out he went. Can't even remember leaving the thing open. But I guess that's how it is. You never remember that part of it. But now I can't stop checking to make sure it's closed."

"Well, I'll be driving around today, so I'll keep my eyes open for him."

"Thanks Mr. Anderson. If I- Well, if I see him anywhere I'll give you a call."

Hayes purses his lips and nods. Lucy hands Hayes her iPhone to put in his number and Hayes hands Lucy his flip phone to put in hers. They return their phones to one another and look into each other's tired eyes. Hayes tries at a smile and his eyes continue to twitch.

"Trapper's out there somewhere. I'll let you know."

And the two continue, advancing in opposite directions while continuing to put up posters.

Hayes is nearing the end of Main Street when he sees the police department's little grey building across the street. Chief Price is standing in front with a large mustached officer. Price drinks her coffee with her black hair in a ponytail and a white top knot headband on. She offers a wave. Hayes sees this and looks back to the wall as he continues to hang up posters.

"Fifth time's a charm," says the mustached officer.

Price returns her waving hand to her coffee cup, holding the cup with both hands and sighs.

“It just gets sadder,” says Price.

“Whatever Alex he’s looking for is long gone.”

Price sighs and nods.

Hayes puts the remaining posters into his truck and begins to drive. He sees families pass his signs without hesitation as he drives down Main Street. An older man is staring at one of the posters but as Hayes passes him he realizes it is actually one of Lucy’s. Hayes takes a deep breath through his nose and sighs. Next stop, the school.

Hayes parks in the visitor’s parking and makes his way to the playground as the snow continues to fall. It just has to do this every year, thinks Hayes. Snow on December 15th. However, it wasn’t snowing on the day when Alex went missing. Sure, there was snow on the ground, but none fell from the sky on that day. Nor the day after, and not even the day after that. Maybe God was trying to say something, thinks Hayes.

School wasn’t in session on December 15th anymore. They ended a day earlier, on the 14th, the first year after the disappearance. That’s how people remembered him now. The kid that gets us out a day early. Still missing. A few kids are at the playground spinning on the roundabout, singing, “The Wheels on the Bus”. They keep screeching for more as one of their father’s, the chaperone for the day, complies. Hayes stands watching as the father slows them down. Their wide-open mouths start to close as they are taken out of their euphoria, and their eyebrows come down as they look at the tired father. They start asking for more but the father is bent over gasping for air. Soon they grow impatient and begin jumping up and down, demanding their spinning to return. After a moment, the father obeys and spins them at about half the speed he was giving earlier and they won’t stop screeching for more.

That’s not how Alex was, thinks Hayes. No, Alex would’ve been pushing himself on that roundabout until Hayes noticed and would start to push for him. And Alex would insist he had been doing just fine. Alex was an old soul trapped in a child’s body, capable of independence even at such a young age. One of Hayes’s favorite memories was when Alex forgot his keys in fourth grade. Alex always took the bus home and always had his keys. But he couldn’t get his hair spiked up the way he liked that morning, and forgot to grab his keys as he rushed to get to the bus. As he came to the front door after school, he reached inside his front backpack pocket, and realized his mistake. Most boys would run to a neighbor for help, or go to a friend’s house, or just stay outside. But not Alex. Alex went through the gate and into the backyard. Hayes always left his window unlocked. However, it was on the second story. Alex stacked two chairs on top of each other, and climbed on top of the roof, through Hayes’s window, and made it inside the house. As Hayes came home from work, he saw Alex’s keys were still on the table by the front door and started to worry. But he heard something in the kitchen. Hayes entered and saw Alex eating a peanut butter and jelly sandwich he’d made, with no cut or bruise from the climb and subsequent entrance.

Alex told him what happened and then asked, “Well, what was I supposed to do? Sit outside and be hungry till you came home?”

Hayes shrugged, laughed, and kissed the top of his spiky head.

The kids scream for faster and faster, and Hayes turns his attention towards the grandiose woods that stand behind the playground. That’s where Alex was last spotted.

He was just walking into it. The kid that saw him didn't think anything of it at the time. Hayes always thought that was unusual, but that was the last time someone saw him. Hayes walks into the forest and the excited yelps begin to disappear until the only noise is the crunching ground he walks on. The snow-covered trees reach for the sky and further still. There's a tree, carved long ago, with 'James & Suzie forever' and a heart surrounding the lover's names. I hope so, thinks Hayes. But James & Suzie are probably faint images within one another's memories. Maybe she was his first girlfriend. Maybe he was her first boyfriend. Maybe they both cherish the memory of the day they snuck off from recess and carved each other's names into this tree. Maybe it all worked out and they're sitting by the fire telling their son about how they first met and he can't help but smile because of how warm everything feels. Hayes puts his hands over his ears to bring them warmth and treks further into the woods.

They never found any signs he was in the woods. No clothes, no backpack, and no body. On the second year, they found bones they thought could've been Alex's in the woods. Hayes couldn't talk to anybody for a couple of days while they tested the bones to see if they really were Alex's. His chin would shake as he kept his lips firmly together and he looked at his students with the eyes of a lost dog. They didn't turn out to be Alex's bones and Hayes experienced the scarce feeling of relief. For just a moment.

Hayes is growing tired and stops to catch his breath. Once he feels better, he decides to turn around and make the return walk back. As he begins to walk back, he licks his lips and puts them together to whistle 'April Come She Will'.

"What is that song?" asked Alex.

"An old one called 'April Come She Will'."

"Why do you always whistle it?" wondered Alex.

"Your mom used to always sing it in the shower. I thought it was the strangest thing at first but after a month I started to whistle along while she sang. I remember she used to sing it to you at least once a day because she thought it soothed you."

Alex had been looking up to his father as he stood in front of the bathroom sink applying shaving cream to his cheeks and neck but leaving the mustache. Hayes pulled his razor from the steaming water and began to shave. Alex shot a puff of shaving cream into his left hand and poked at it with his right index finger while staring into it.

"Do you think she would've loved me?"

Hayes stopped his razor and looked down at Alex. He squatted to Alex's level and looked him in the eyes with his half-shaven face.

"I know she did. She used to talk to you all the time. Especially when you would kick. She would laugh and say, 'You won't get me this time Alex!' and narrate your kicks as if it was an actual fight. 'Boom! Pow! Whack!' And then her tummy would shake a little and the kicking would stop. She swore the shake was you laughing, and she used to imagine what your laugh would be like once she could hold you. She used to tell me how connected she felt to you and how she knew we had a smart one. She loved you just as much as I love you."

Alex smiled and Hayes put a little shaving cream on his index finger from Alex's hand. He smudged the cream onto Alex's nose and they smiled to one another and giggled. Alex spread the shaving cream onto his face like his father, while Hayes continued to shave. Hayes began to whistle again and Alex puckered his lips and hummed along. Kid never quite figured out how to whistle, thinks Hayes. He likes to

think that when he finds Alex, he'll be whistling the tune and then he'll hear whistling from far away that mirrors his. And they'll run to each other through the snow.

As Hayes leaves the forest he sees Chief Price's car in the parking lot parked next to his. Price stands in front of her car with arms folded as Hayes approaches.

"Got a call about a suspicious man walking into the woods. Figured it'd be you."

Hayes's eyes twitch as he looks at Price.

"Come on. The car's warm and we can talk."

Hayes and Price sit in the front seats of her car as she turns it on and quickly puts the heat to scalding. They both look ahead for a moment and ponder how to start.

"Don't try it." says Hayes.

"Try what?" asks Price.

"It started the third year and has come every year since. The give-up talk from Chief Price."

Chief Price sighs and turns to Hayes.

"You know Henry's technically been missing for longer. It'll be ten years in a couple months. Yup. Last thing I told him was to wait for me outside of the bathroom while we were at the old waterpark. I remember looking at him and he motioned for me to hurry up so that he could get back to the rides. I chuckled and then turned my attention to the bathroom, leaving Henry for the last time. Nobody seemed to know anything. He wasn't spotted anywhere in the park. There were no screams. No blood. Nothing. How could a boy just vanish?"

Hayes stares forward.

"The truth is I don't know."

"But he's still out there. Just like Alex," says Hayes.

"I like to imagine he is sometimes. But I don't believe it. I can't believe in that sort of thing anymore. I used to be so obsessed with finding who did it and then finding Henry and being able to pick up right where we left off. One time I was walking around the mall and I saw a boy that looked just like my Henry from behind. I couldn't believe it. I covered my open mouth with my hands and began to breathe quickly as I approached. But it wasn't him. His mother picked him up and gave me a funny look as she walked away. I realized that he was gone from me then. There was no one to find. It's just how it is."

"You have to listen to me Hayes. I know it takes a long time for everybody and no case is the same. But five years is just too long to not accept things for what they are. Sometimes... Well, sometimes a boy goes missing. And nobody, not you, I, or the stars in the sky can understand why."

"I can't just stop," says Hayes slowly.

"Nobody will think less of you."

"That's not why," says Hayes.

"Alex is it. What am I supposed to do? Give up on the last thing I have. Give up on my son. We were both what the other needed, and I'm supposed to forget him and keep living like he was never there. I just- I just know he's out there waiting for me. Waiting for his dad to save him. And you can't change my mind about that."

Price takes a deep breath through her nose as she turns to look at Hayes. His eyes stop twitching for a moment as they look into each other's sad eyes. Eyes that know what it is to lose something.

“He’s gone, Hayes.”

Hayes’s eyes begin to twitch again and he turns his face forward.

Hayes leaves the playground and drives around town searching. Alex wasn’t in the white bushes, the leafless trees, or just beyond the falling snow. One of Alex’s new posters has been drawn on crudely and someone has written “Alex currently resides with Jimmy Hoffa.” Hayes sighs and replaces the poster with a new one. Hayes walks past the townspeople that act as though he was quite sick and remain as distant from him as possible. After the third year, that’s what it becomes, thinks Hayes. Everyone is happy to help and search, but only for so long. Alex was just the boy with the funny clothes and spiky hair to them.

“I mean, it’s not like he cured cancer,” says a passerby to her husband.

What do they know? thinks Hayes. But it wasn’t easy to be the lone believer in a cause deemed lost by everyone else. Hayes gets tired of walking around the small town and returns to his truck. No luck. No surprise. But he has to be somewhere. Hayes opens his phone to no voicemails and an email about a new dating site. Hayes starts the car and drives on.

The sun has set and the snow falls slower. Hayes has driven through every nook and cranny of the town to no avail. The shadows of trees cover the snow infested ground as Hayes drives. There is brightness within the dark as he sees a 7-Eleven and pulls in for dinner. He buys a hot dog, soda, and chips. The old cashier looks at his hand that shakes a little while he offers her money for his meal. She grabs the money and refills his hand with change.

“Still missing?”

Hayes looks down and slowly nods.

“Hm.”

Hayes snatches his food up and begins to walk out. He stops in his steps and turns to look at the woman. Her eyes are on her computer, playing solitaire.

Hayes leaves and walks to his truck. He turns on the radio but can’t find a good station so he turns it off and scarfs down his meal. As he sips on his soda, he sees a snow-white lab nudging the remains of an open trash bag.

“Well shit,” says Hayes.

Hayes pulls in front of the apartment complex and brings out the dog. He spits out his Nicorette gum and knocks on #101. The snow has stopped but every breath can be seen. Lucy opens the door and her eyes grow at the sight of Trapper. She kneels down and pets his head.

“Trapper! Hey buddy! Don’t run off on me like that again. Crazy dog.”

Trapper rushes into the apartment and takes his spot on the brown suede couch. Lucy laughs and stands up.

“Thank you so much! I can’t believe he was that far away. You know, I put up signs everywhere today. Guess I’ll have to take ‘em down tomorrow!”

Hayes presses his lips together and nods, trying to smile as wide as he can but his eyes are red. Lucy looks at him and remembers.

“I’m- Well. I’m so sorry.”

Hayes keeps his lips together and slows his nodding.

“I know he’s out there,” says Lucy.

Hayes stops his nodding and slowly looks up at Lucy.

"You know, there's been three times since Alex went missing that I felt more scared than I ever thought I could. The first was five years ago. Not knowing where he was, was the scariest feeling I thought I could ever feel. But it went away after a few hours because I began to believe that he was out there. Waiting for me. Within that first year, they had a suspect. Some sex offender that lived in a neighborhood close by and had been spotted on school grounds that day. Well, then I had a moment of elation. Maybe he had Alex hidden away in a cabin and he'd give him over. But the second time I got real scared came right after they arrested him and were starting to question him. You see, he'd been known to have been violent with kids. When I got the call that they were questioning him, I got the thought that maybe I didn't want the answer he had. Maybe Alex had been-" Hayes pauses for a moment.

"But the guy checked out. And I felt normal again. Normal in my waiting to find Alex. And the last time I got real scared was when they found bones in his elementary school's woods during the second year. But it faded once they discovered the bones weren't Alex's."

Lucy places a hand on Hayes's shoulder.

"He can't not be out there," says Hayes.

Snow begins to fall again. Lucy holds Hayes in her arms and he begins to shake a little while his jaw quivers. They retract from one another and she looks into his broken face with warmth in her eyes.

"You'll find each other Mr. Anderson. I just know it."

Hayes slowly nods as Trapper returns to his owner and lays down, turning over for a belly rub.

Alex was about a year old when he first started to walk. It happened while Hayes was making breakfast. Once the bacon was done, he looked to the couch and saw no Alex. Hayes's eyes opened wide as they searched the room for Alex. He searched everywhere in the apartment but couldn't find him. His heart beat quicker than a jump rope and he heard every beat in his ears. The sweat was coming and his face was bright red. He looked under everything and his anxiety grew further as he found nothing. He tried hard to keep his lips together as his teeth shook and a tear fell down his face. But then he saw the balcony door was open a little. He rushed to the balcony and looked down to see his boy standing, looking at the sunrise. Alex turned to his father and his mouth opened wide as he laughed with purity at his dad's worried face. Hayes breathed out his biggest breath of relief and Alex turned back to the sunrise laughing.

"Sun!" exclaimed little Alex.

Hayes picked him up and looked at the pink clouds that surrounded the rising sun and kissed Alex's head.

"Don't do that again," whispered Hayes.

Alex snickered and stared at the golden clouds.

Hayes walks down main street, checking that all of his posters are still up and unmarked. He replaces one that had been torn down and continues on. Chief Price locks the station up and sees Hayes across the street. He doesn't look to her but she stares at him, sighs, and walks to her car. There's a sign marked by a sharpie saying, "What's the point?". Hayes stares at this. Then he looks at the last first day of school picture he'd taken of Alex. He imagines the photo he would've taken a few months ago for Alex's first

day of sophomore year. Alex is older but still dresses himself in bright colors. He wears the same purple and green striped shirt but with black jeans and black vans. His hair still has gel, but he doesn't spike it up anymore. Now it's more of a comb over. He stands in front of Hayes's truck, his first car. Alex smiles, and everything in the photo feels warm. Maybe I'll get one for junior year, thinks Hayes as he replaces the poster.

CODE

by ACE BOGGESS

To speak of youth & think *despair*
when there was love
& I was none the better for it.

These glitches, human code
corrupted by a steady fear—
why are kids not beta-tested?

Anger, too: my parents
wrote that in
with their sacred arguments—

I listened through a vent
in my room. I get it:
I because they. But why

the sadness of terror?
Why isolation, silence?
What's the use

of a frustrated robot?
What of a child
who has no story to tell?

MENTOR

by John Tavares

Even though it was a hot and humid summer day and the beach was our destination, it was the first time I dressed immodestly for work, the first time I ever showed up for work not wearing intimate things, and I wanted Mullen to notice. When I arrived at the ferry terminal, clutching my camera, notebooks, pens, voice recorder, smartphone, and handbag, he gulped, and sighed, and barely resisted giving me elevator eyes. During this long weekend, I was forced to spend the holiday with Mullen, but I opted to shadow him to learn the trade.

I slept with many guys when I was a younger woman. Then I liked older men, as perverse as that may sound, as offensive as that may be to my wiser, smarter female friends. In my younger years, I naively and foolishly liked to brag, without exaggeration, to my peers and friends about sleeping with older men; they sometimes verified my stories and were impressed. The knowledge seemed to endow me with a special or privileged status. When I remember the many men I have known, I like to think my affinity to Mullen was different. It certainly wasn't a physical attraction, because I found him hideous looking, ugly, and even grotesque. He was naturally well-build, muscular, lean, seemingly without a layer of body fat, but his head was misshapen, his facial features were distorted and ill-proportioned. His teeth were clean and white, but he had a broken front tooth, a conspicuous and distinctive facial feature, an eyesore, which he didn't bother to repair. Maybe I felt a spiritual attraction or pity for him because he seemed alone and friendless.

Although his co-workers admired him from a distance, and respected him, nobody liked him. They complained he was intimidating, aloof. They tried to warn me that, while he was the newspaper veteran from whom I would learn valuable lessons, management was ready to fire him. His problem wasn't incompetence, laziness, but the relentless pursuit of the truth and the unexpected and uncomfortable places where that quest led him. Meanwhile, the big daily was cutting back; advertising revenue had declined drastically; newspaper readership was dramatically down due to intense competition from the Internet. Mullen's lack of popularity among the newsroom staff translated into his demise, and he ranked high on management's hit list—employees in line to receive layoff notices—or so I was informed, by a reliable source, the managing editor, no less. The managing editor also told me confidentially and strictly off the record, if I wanted to learn journalism, I should shadow Mullen. She even gave me her blessing, permission to shadow Mullen.

Since Mullen had seniority he also received a higher salary, which was motivation for management to find any reason to lay him off. I was told his last big scoop was when he captured on film the police shooting of a suspect holding a hostage on a busy street downtown, during which the police allowed him to interview the perpetrator. He had good relations with the police, since they remembered him from his crime beat, although I was told some officers never forgave him, but I never learned for what reason. Moreover, he had taken courses in crisis intervention and social work, during what he told me was a misguided effort at career change. His relentless pursuit of the

truth in cold case files helped lead detectives to finally convict suspects for unsolved murders many years and even decades after. Now, though, his passion was gone, since his relentless, ruthless, and frenzied pursuit of the truth in cold cases and forgotten homicides and in investigative journalism cost him friends and relationships he nurtured and developed with organizations like the police union and even within the ranks of middle level and senior executives at the newspaper, with whom, in previous times, he had been friends.

Mullen asked how I landed the internship. Even though I had been warned and advised to keep quiet, I told him the truth; my mother was a college friend and girlfriend of the executive editor, whom she claimed was her first true love.

After I finished my master's degree in library science I got the photography bug. I was hoping to turn that phase of my life as a shutterbug, that addiction, into a career. I was warned against pursuing that goal since the competition in journalism was so intense and news media companies were notorious for finding ways to avoid adequately compensating their contributors, aside from front page and marquee names. Those negative sentiments, though, didn't discourage me.

Mullen told me to show up at the Jack Layton ferry terminal on Canada Day. Dressed in a halter top, short shorts, sandals, with my gear, camera, smartphone, notebook, in tow, I found him in the vast crowd of day-trippers and holiday revelers, standing, reading *The New York Times*, alongside those posing beside the statue of Jack Layton astride a tandem bicycle. I worried about looking unprofessional, but he, wearing a T-shirt that said "Assume Nothing, Everybody Lies," asked me if I brought a swimsuit. When I inquired about the origin of the T-shirt he, laughing, said he bought the novelty shirt from another intern, who worked part-time in a stag shop, which stocked the T-shirt, along with similar novelty items.

"Why are we going to Centre Island on Canada Day?"

"We're in the middle of a heat wave and a temperature warning from Environment Canada, so we'll probably do a weather story, and tie it in with climate change. But I'm hoping we can get pictures of a drowning."

"A drowning?"

"Precisely. Anyway, we're not going to Centre Island exactly—we're going to Hanlan's Point Beach, the party beach. Twenty-four party people go there to drink, fornicate, carouse and celebrate. Oops. I guess I shouldn't use the F-word around an intern, but it's true."

If he expected me to blush like a teenage virgin, he was in for disappointment, because he could have used any taboo word—for all I cared. We took the ferry to Hanlan's Point Beach, a storied place I had heard about but which I never bothered to visit in the time I lived in the city of Toronto. The beach was narrow but long, and part of it was clothing optional. The long stretch of sand was crowded with an immense number of people, tanning, swimming, wading, nude, dancing, chatting, partying, drinking, and, offshore, people in bikinis and board shorts and assorted swimsuits partied aboard boats, canoes, kayaks, yachts, and jet skis. We sat on a huge log near the sand dunes and bushes that straddled a point midway between the clothing optional beach and the mandatory clothing part of the beach. I marveled at the crowds of physically attractive men in Speedos, thongs, and G-strings. Meanwhile, he tried to get the black-market police scanner he carried in his backpack to work. The rechargeable

battery on the scanner didn't work and appeared dead. He said we would have to work without that source of information. He took out some hard seltzers from his backpack. The drinks felt cold and wet to the touch. The mango spiked seltzer looked fresh and appetizing, so how could I resist, at the party beach, on a hot sunny day, for which meteorologists issued heat warnings.

"I brought these for you. The girls I see seem to enjoy them."

Girls? I thought, as I glared at him. Surely, he meant women, but I didn't bother to correct him, even though I was in that mood momentarily. He handed me a second drink, cranberry flavored. I gladly opened the can and drank both cans simultaneously, even though I usually carefully monitored and controlled my sugar consumption. Meanwhile, he sipped warm coffee from a thermos bottle, like some underground miner.

Then he, thirsty and dehydrated as well from the heat, opened a can of sugar free cola and sipped the beverage. "I had an alcoholic roommate. She convinced me through her habit or madness, not to drink." I glanced at him quizzically. He must have sensed my state of mind. "I'm not trying to guilt you. She lived a messed-up life—I think mostly because of alcohol." With the perspiration pouring seemingly from every pore in his body, he said he'd swim in Lake Ontario to cool off and bring down his body temperature. I thought it unprofessional to take a swim while we worked, but I said nothing, since I was only an intern. Still, I unbuttoned my halter top, and uncovered my breasts, in an attempt to impress him with my body and cleavage. I watched as he swam skillfully and effortlessly between the buoys until he reached the lifeguard stand, where an attractive lifeguard, looking enamoured with him, chatted with him enthusiastically. Afterwards, he concealed himself in the bushes, behind the sandy beach, donned his khaki cargo pants, and tossed his wet briefs in his backpack. Then he noticed the blue flashing lights from police and rescue boats further down the shoreline, near the westernmost tip of the runway of the island airport.

"Something dramatic is happening over there," he said.

"Let's go check it out."

We hurried down the shoreline, walking fast and then jogging, while he prepared his camera equipment, changing to a long zoom lens, and inserting a fresh memory card.

"What's going on here?" he asked a few spectators milling around the crowd of first responders.

"There's been a drowning."

"A woman drowned trying to save a child who also drowned."

Camera ready, he pushed through the crowd of gawkers in bikinis and speedos, breaking through to the retinue of lakefront marine police and paramedics attempting to resuscitate the woman and child.

"I cannot believe this," Mullen said, as he zoomed in the lens, focussed, and pressed the shutter, capturing a burst of images. "I guess the law of large numbers is working in our favour."

Mullen took plenty of pictures and attempted to obtain quotes and information from a police officer. Then, a handsome, high, narrow, dark-haired man pushed through the crowd of beach goers, lunged towards him, grabbed his camera, and snatched it from his hands.

“This is disgusting and an abomination. Intruding on a family’s privacy at its darkest, most intimate moments! Have you no sense of shame?” the tall slender man demanded.

“Give me back my camera.”

With the camera clenched in his grip, the righteous assailant bolted and ran. Mullen chased him along the beach, kicking up sand, through the throng of bikinis and board shorts, along the long narrow strip of shoreline. I lost sight of Mullen pursuing his nemesis on foot, along the long stretch of sand, as he chased him through the crowds and then, at the other end, along a trail into the bush, the sand dunes, and the shoreline, lined with rocks and driftwood. Eventually, he returned to the spot on the beach where I, amazed at the spectacle of two middle-aged men, in excellent physical condition, behaving childishly, chasing each other, stood helpless. Between gasps and spitting, sweaty, short of breath, Mullen asked, “Did you manage to get any pictures?”

How could I take pictures of a drowned mother and her drowned child? At the beach, even in the clothing mandatory part, I felt acutely conscious of my camera and the direction I pointed the lens. I still had the lens, covered with its caps, pressed against my belly, near my navel, which was pierced, with a Catholic Saint Medal, St. Francis De Sales, who was not only the patron saint of writers and journalists, but the namesake of my first girlfriends’ Catholic school, and I was disappointed nobody noticed. “I was too shocked.” He had already warned me I shouldn’t be so shy with my camera, stressing I was a journalist and photography, even on a beach, was not a crime. “But there’s a sign prohibiting photography.”

“That’s a city bylaw, and I wonder if that local ordinance would withstand a constitutional challenge. There’s this thing a free society has called freedom of speech. You’re a journalist, and your job is to practice it, not shy away.”

Already distracted with emotion, needing a break, I took a short walk from the scene. By the time I calmed down and returned it was too late; the only remnants of the carnage was police tape and discarded accessories for medical devices, tape, gel, bandages, biomedical debris. He cursed and told me he couldn’t recover his camera, a digital SLR, with a large digital sensor, and a zoom lens, worth a few thousand dollars, he bought himself for work. As I started sobbing, he put his arm around me and attempted to comfort and console me. Then he recoiled and stood back awkwardly. I realized he feared he transgressed—went over a line or boundary by touching me.\

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be hard on you. I know it’s traumatic, but I have a job to do.”

“I have a job to do, too,” I sobbed. He reminded me I was an intern, and he was ultimately responsible. “Responsible for what?” I demanded testily.

We returned along the beach pathway, and roadway back to the ferry docks on Hanlan Point. He told me he thought he recognized his assailant. He looked like a former college roommate in a student housing co-op, many years ago, with whom he clashed. “Kent! The guy’s a gadfly. He shows up at demonstrations and makes vocal his very liberal opinions and progressive views in the loudest voice. I respect his opinion, and even agree sometimes, but he went way over the line.”

I felt pouty as we rode the ferry from the docks across the harbour, crowded with yachts, sailboats, and recreational watercraft, to the cage-like terminal at the foot of Bay Street. I never expected I’d spend Canada Day pursuing leads and sources for an article,

based on a melodramatic incident, pictures of which my mentor intended to splash across the front page of Canada's largest daily.

"We're going to go to my apartment," Mullen said. "I'm going to make a few phone calls." We raced to his apartment, a large red brick house he owned near Eglinton Avenue and Dufferin Street. Long ago, after he discovered his cozy Toronto house was too large for him, alone, he rented the ground floor and the upper floor to separate tenants, so he thought of his own living quarters as merely another apartment unit. "I'm going to make a few phone calls and find where this gadfly lives."

He offered me a homemade iced coffee. Sipping the surprisingly tasty drink I perused his library, crammed with books by journalists about the news media and the accomplished careers or legendary lives of its practitioners. "I got his address. Let's roll."

A suspicious object bulged out of his backpack. I had an ominous feeling, a sensation of dread. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm getting my camera and images back."

I didn't believe that was possible, but I went along in his compact car anyway, while he explained the passionate anger Kent provoked—having the verve to steal his camera and photojournalism, his intellectual property. We drove to an apartment building in a public housing project, in the inner city of the east end, and he knocked on the door on the first floor, like an indignant proprietor with unpaid rent. Nobody answered, so he peered into the peephole, trying to gaze into the apartment interior. Then he started pounding the scratched, painted steel door harder. When Kent asked who it was he replied, "Police." I gasped, and pulled back, when Mullen drew from a holster in his backpack what appeared a genuine stun gun. "We have a warrant."

When Kent opened the door a wedge, Mullen aimed the stun gun and fired the prongs into him. Having struck his target, he squeezed the trigger, delivering a burst of conducted electrical energy. He jolted Kent, who shrieked like an animal and grimaced, the air filling with cackling, the smell of burning flesh. "Where's my camera?" Mullen stunned Kent again and showed him the collapsible baton he carried in the backpack.

Kent howled while he lay in a pool of his own urine, where he collapsed beside his muddy bicycle and smelly running shoes in his studio apartment, cluttered, untidy, inside the doorway. Mullen's camera was tethered to a laptop on a computer desk. Mullen untethered the USB cords from his camera, and they headed out the door, into the dark hallway.

"I've lived with him in a campus co-op back when we were students. He went to University of Toronto and I took journalism at Centennial College. I believe he thought he was a superior person as a consequence."

"Most of the community college students I met in university were, well, appreciated; they had already learned trades and had better job prospects."

"He was a scholarship student, at a top university, and I went to a community college. Afterwards, I encountered him at various demonstrations I covered as a journalist over the years in Toronto. I don't think he was ever able to parlay his psychology into a conventional career, assuming he even earned his degree. Once I had to do a story about a person with AIDS, in the Rainbow Village. He was working there as a barista at Second Cup. And, yes, he definitely still doesn't like me as you can see."

"Looks like the feeling is mutual," I said.

As Mullen drove us back to the newspaper offices, he scrolled through the files and metadata on the memory card for his camera, but virtually the entire storage device was blank of images. “Looks like he deleted the pictures from the data card. He might have downloaded the set to his laptop.”

“Why would he delete the images?”

“Out of malice, but it could be a default setting on whatever app he used. Why would he take my camera in the first place?”

“Sounds like you guys have history.”

“Let’s go back there.”

“What if he calls the police?”

“I tell them the truth, but he’s not going to call the police; he’s a renegade, a rogue.”

I started to sob, but concealed my tears and covered my mouth when I remembered the scene of carnage, bathos, and tragedy I witnessed at the beach. “I can’t believe I saw a mother and child drown before my eyes—”

“They were already dead by then.”

“Then you launch a home invasion against some guy to steal back your camera.”

Sunburnt, tired, I stared at my camera, like it was some hideous monster, in my lap.

“Why don’t you ask me how I knew there would be a drowning at Hanlan’s Point?” He explained that not only was part of the beach a clothing optional beach, but it was also a party beach, which attracted the yachting crowd, with their boat parties, and an incredibly diverse group of younger city residents and tourists, who liked to engage in heavy drinking and drug consumption, and had virtual police immunity because of the LGBTQ crowd. I started sobbing again.

“Let me drive you home,” Mullen said.

I was so relieved I stopped crying. I calmed down and tried to apologize. I didn’t see what kind of future I had as a young journalist; his discourses on his work experiences shattered my dreams. I invited him inside my apartment. After I insisted he settle on the leather sofa, he said I had a better apartment than he ever lived in within Toronto.

“But you own your own house,” I countered.

“Living on a journalist’s wages I can hardly afford to live in my own Toronto house. That’s why I live in the basement and rent out the other two floors. How can you afford this place?”

“My father pays the rent.”

Mullen looked around the apartment, the wide screen television, the dish washer, the shiny stainless-steel espresso and cappuccino maker, the wine rack.

“You’re a pretty young lady and a fine person, but you don’t belong in print journalism.”

“Because I’m a woman you don’t think I’d be a good journalist.”

“Don’t go putting words in my mouth and drawing the wrong conclusions. They were just two observations I randomly made together. The best journalists are usually geeks or misfits, who spent days poring over boring government documents and files, and you’re a sensitive soul.” He told me most successful local journalists, especially in

eyewitness news, secretly salivated over something like a drowning, murder, or gruesome car accident.

“You have good looks, you’re telegenic, photogenic, you’d probably do very well in television news.”

“But I’d get panic attacks, and every morning I’d be miserable because I’d face the day knowing I’d have to do something that scares me to death. Trust me: I tried broadcasting on campus community TV, as a volunteer.”

“What about radio?”

“Ditto. I choked, I hyperventilated. People thought: she’s having a heart attack or seizure.”

“Wow. So now you know my life story.”

“For real?”

“I’m sorry, but this conversation is getting too personal.”

Still, he continued to lecture while I brewed strong coffee. He advised I’d never earn enough money to afford an apartment like this if I continued to work in journalism, especially local print journalism. The kind of reportage that provided a public service and made a difference didn’t pay well—maybe a living wage, but not much else.

“Besides, the Internet is taking revenue from newspapers, which used to be cash cows.”

I appreciated his lecture on the economics of the newspaper business, but I wasn’t in the mood. I ground the coffee and put the coarse grinds in the reusable coffee filter.

“That’s my opinion, anyway. I always wanted to be a stockbroker when I was a teenager, but then I had an existential crisis when my mother died.” He said he always loved reading journalism, ever since he delivered newspapers in his Northern Ontario hometown when he was a kid. “The New York Times practically made me hard, and I managed to read it whenever I visited Toronto, which became my destination when I graduated from high school and left my hometown. I wanted to contribute to society, provide a public service. I should have pursued my original dreams to become a stock broker; it was a realistic goal.”

“I think I understand.”

“You can be happy in this work, but you won’t be in a position to afford a comfortable lifestyle.”

Needing to be tranquilised, I took Irish Cream liqueur from the liquor cabinet and poured a dash into the coffee and gulped when I usually sipped liqueur.

“You should teach, or work in a library. What we did today was journalism and it made you cry.”

“Teach storybooks, collect overdue fines, shelves books in the lonely stacks, where students have sex...?”

“I don’t remember students having sex in the stacks when I was a student.”

“Remember you went to community college. Those students probably worked after school—didn’t winnow away their time in a library or dorm room.” I started to feel frustrated—like I was speaking with my father about unrealistic dreams: moving to Los Angeles and pursuing acting, despite my public speaking phobia, possibly because of it. Dad convinced me acting was a horrible life choice—and I declined my offer of admission to the theater and drama department at University of Southern California.

“Anyway, teacher—librarian—they are union jobs. They pay relatively well, especially once you include the pension and benefits. Or you could take pictures of drowning victims, and worry about your next paycheck. People will hate you because you’re doing your job. People in positions of influence will try to destroy your career and reputation because you sought the truth.”

I gazed intently into his eyes.

“You know, I’ve had people who wanted to kill me for the questions I asked, for things I wrote, for the pictures I took.” He touched his broken tooth and opened his mouth to show me closely. “You know how I broke my incisor? I did a feature story on the tow truck industry. The day it was published the tow truck operator who drove me around, took me on a grand tour of the freeways and expressways around the Golden Horseshoe, showed up at the newsroom, unannounced. I thought he’d be happy with the piece. But, without telling me what was wrong with the article, without saying a word, he strode purposefully to my desk, slapped me in the face with the folded newspaper. Then he slugged me in the mouth, breaking my tooth. He stormed out, stomping his work boots noisily. And this happened in the biggest newsroom in North America. The journalists, editors, and staffers at their desks around me stopped for a second, dead silent, except a few couldn’t resist snickering and laughing. Then they went back to clacking at word processors like nothing happened. Nobody cared. It was as if I had gotten my comeuppance, exactly what I deserved.”

My eyes watered up again and, instead of rousing me and inspiring me to take up the mantle, his words only succeeded in stoking a simmering fire, a longing and yearning, which I thought I buried. He reminded me of the frozen pints of pricey premium gourmet ice cream I wasted, tossing them into the garbage because I would occasionally lose control of my appetite and, famished, wake in the middle of the night from sleep to binge on my favorite food after starving myself on my latest diet. I felt a strong bond and affinity to him, even though he was more than twice my age. I sat in his lap and put my arm around him. I wanted him to be a friend with benefits. I wanted him inside me, I wanted to taste him in my mouth. I could feel him getting hard against my backside. When I reached for his midsection to grope at the lump beneath the crotch of his cargo pants, he touched my hips. I pressed my backside hard against his groin and clasped his hands with my own. Then he started to rise. I slid off him as I was forced to stand but I could feel his erection beneath my short shorts in exactly the spot where I wanted him. He said he would head to the newspaper offices to see if he could find a technician in the IT department who might somehow manage to undelete the images from the data card.

Afterwards, I didn’t return to my work as an intern at the newspaper that day or any other day. I followed his advice. I applied for work at the Toronto public library and was immediately hired by a head librarian who remembered me from my elementary school days, when she worked as a librarian at our neighbourhood Forest Hills library. In the fall, I worked at an elementary school full-time as a teachers’ assistant.

I wanted to be creative, I had wanted to literally write headlines, but even there I discovered the inhouse practice at our big city daily was that the editor or copy editor wrote or rewrote the headlines. Eventually, I found an outlet for my creative instincts in landscape photography. Then, after a year of classroom work, I attended the faculty of

education at York University, a teacher's college, and acquired my professional degree and obtained my requisite teachers license.

The following year, Mullen was laid off from the newspaper, a victim of corporate reorganizing, downsizing, declining advertising revenues, and financial losses. He returned to college, took courses in investments, finance, economics. I passed him the odd time in a lecture hall, amphitheater, library or cafeteria at York University, but he still stirred my emotions so I did my best to avoid him. He got his brokers license, and found work in wealth management, at the investment branch of an insurance company, on which he had done some less than flattering reporting as a journalist in the past.

Now, ironically, he was living off those very same service fees and premiums customers had complained about in his series of award-winning newspaper articles. Somehow, he managed to find a woman with whom he shared mutual love. He had mentioned her before at work, telling me he could never be certain if they were friends or if they were dating, but I thought he was exaggerating, telling tales, someone he met by chance and distorted the nature or extent of their relationship, or someone he happened to meet while he was reporting another story. I thought she was far too beautiful for him. She was also a medical specialist, a surgeon, whose investment account and stock and bond portfolio he managed, which totally made sense to me. For some reason, I was invited to his wedding. I marvelled at the man whom I considered a helpless geek and nerd and a hopeless bachelor, with breath that sometimes smelled of coffee, who led a humble, modest life, but with the jaded attitude and cynicism of a hardened, journalist who had witnessed the worst of the big city—he had changed and was getting married. And it was the whitest of white weddings—another surprise, nay, shock. I kept rushing to the restroom and the privacy of the stalls, where I sobbed and cried on a toilet seat cover. The man towards whom I felt a quirky attraction was with a woman, in part, the stuff of dreams and fairy tales. He found happiness, at last, I figured. I was happy for him, although I never expected he'd play a fateful and instrumental role in my life, as I pursued a career in intermediate school education.

I wanted to make a splash in my life, pursue a creative endeavour. Now I was a teacher back at school, Terry Fox Middle School in suburban Toronto, which was all right, because, while school could be boring and routine, I loved the schoolyards, hallways, and classrooms of my youth.

TICKING CLOCK

by ZOË GAMMELL BROWN

We went out at five to watch the sunset
Only to see smoke on the horizon

Little did we know we'd wake up with
Ash in our armpits

Watching existence rain from the sky
Creates a particular kind of panic in a person

Rushing to compartmentalize our lives
What momentos mattered and what could be burned

I'd almost forgotten what the fear of flooding felt like
Until it was ever-present

For a moment I caught a glimpse of the past
While our future opened around us

WHITE RICE COVERED IN SOY SAUCE

by DESIREE HAROS

I am *anak* to my mother, her child. I'm six years old. Another first grader on the playground, a Native American boy, stands a few feet in front of me and says, "Chinese, Japanese, dirty knees look at these." I don't know what this chant means, but he says it over and over again. Each time he says it, he takes his index fingers on either side of his temples to make his eyes slant up and then down. I try to sidestep him, but he continues taunting me with those words. His shoes kick up dust as he circles me like prey. I stare at the ground. Tears begin to trickle down my cheeks. I don't want to be called a baby, so I swipe them away with the back of my hand before going back to the classroom.

On the way home from school, my mother asks how my day went. It's a longish walk that takes us about 30 minutes. The words keep looping in my head.

"Mommy, a boy said something to me."

"He say what to you?" She slows her stride.

I can feel her eyes on me, but I concentrate my eyes on the crunch of the gravel. "He said, 'Chinese, Japanese, dirty knees look at these.'" I am surprised at how easily the words come to me.

She frowns and takes a deep breath. "Oh no. We go see the principal in the morning." Her pace quickens and I follow.

The next day, I know it's coming, but I don't know when. I get called from my classroom and make my way to the principal's office. My mother is already seated, so I take the seat next to her and scoot back into the chair. She recounts the words I told her the day before. My feet dangle in the air. I do my best to sit still. I cross my ankles so that my white patent leather shoes make a tiny squeak as I settle into a position causing the least amount of disruption. I want to divert the attention far from me. I place my hands under my bottom and continue listening to the adults converse.

The principal turns his attention to me and asks, "Desiree, who said this to you?" I shrink in my chair and give him the boy's name. He says he will have a talk with the child and his parents. He scribbles something onto a notepad. Before we leave, he says, "Remember this, 'Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words will never hurt me.'" That is a lie. Those words prick me inside, but I don't have the right ones to explain it. I nod in agreement, and we leave. At recess, the teasing stops, and I let out a sigh of relief.

...

As I grow older, words take on a presence in my life, and I begin to listen with more intent. I hear other foreign words from my mother when she is annoyed or frustrated.

If my toys are spread out all over my bedroom floor, "*Hayop ka*." You are an animal, flies out of her mouth.

If I return home from school covered in dust, my hair tangled and unkempt from a game of tag at recess, I am a *buwisit* (pig).

If I do my homework incorrectly, in a stern voice, she says in a huff, "*Gago*, not like that. Do it again." I don't like to be called stupid.

In her life before me for 15 years, she had been a biology and home economics teacher in the Philippines. Schoolwork is where I am corrected the most. She vigorously

erases my mistakes and brushes the bits of eraser onto the floor. She points to where my blunder had been, now a faint grey line. I grip the pencil so hard with my left hand that the joint on my middle finger becomes flat and red for the hour I spent rewriting the alphabet in block lettering. She is a perfectionist, and I am not. My eyes become heavy, but I am not allowed to sleep until I am through. I carefully rewrite the letters with the ruler as my guide. She reminds me to use the *lou-ler*; I laugh and correct her.

"Mommy it's ruler, not loulér." She breaks out into a laugh. This correction removes her teacher's mask, so she is just my mother once again.

...

I'm seven years old. My parents and I take a road trip to visit my mother's distant relatives in Long Beach, California. She doesn't have a driver's license, so my father drives through the night with restroom breaks intermingled with what he calls cat naps. I take my place for the next eight to ten hours in the backseat of my father's four-door 1970 Chevy Impala. We begin our travels in the evening. The front seat windows are rolled all the way down as soon as we get into the car. On the highway, the thundering sound of the wind is deafening. Any conversation my parents have is muffled. My mother is the first to fall asleep facing the passenger window. Her head tilts back and bobs along with the bumps in the road.

I sit up for some time, with the air catching my long hair and whipping it into my eyes and mouth. I end up lying down, small enough to stretch my entire body out on the cracked white leather seat that catches my thick white tights. My mother makes me wear them under all my dresses. She is our small town's seamstress. I have an entire closet full of hand-sewn dresses. I own only one pair of jeans; she makes the rest. I want to change out of the dress, but everything is in the trunk. I scratch at my legs, careful not to make holes in the tights, and adjust my body so that I'm on my back. There's nothing to see in the blackness of the night.

The air chills, and my parents roll up the windows. I am grateful that the wind stops. I tug my blanket off my head to tuck it under my chin. My father turns on the AM radio, a sound catches, and he adjusts the dials until we hear the William Tell Overture. The fast-talking voice of Fred Foy exclaims, "A fiery horse with the speed of light, a cloud of dust and a hearty Hi-Yo Silver! The Lone Ranger!" The loud engine drones me into a deep sleep before I hear the end of the show.

By the time I wake up, the bright blue skies, sagebrush, and tumbleweeds are replaced with smog that hovers over the rows of homes adorned with wrought iron gates, windows, and doors. The fresh air I am used to is exchanged for heavy gas fumes. When we arrive at their home, my father mumbles something about finding a parking spot. There are cars up and down the street, and it's hard to tell which cars are here for the gathering. My mother and I walk in without knocking and follow a route through Auntie Aurora's front room on plastic floor mats, on top of floor rugs that cover her plush rose carpet. Her furniture is also enclosed with plastic, and not a single person is in the front room.

The chatter increases in volume towards the kitchen. Auntie stirs beef stew with tomato juice made thick with quartered potatoes and chunks of carrots. Freshly minced garlic and the salty fish sauce, and deep-fried things loom in the air. She gives my mother and me a quick hug. She tells us to go eat and continues to talk to the woman she was talking to before we came in. People occupy the kitchen and the living room. A

dozen or more conversations take place simultaneously. My Uncle Frank is in the backyard manning the grill, nodding in agreement to whatever the men surrounding him discuss.

In this gathering, I see a commonality. I look like them –round face, tan skin, dark brown eyes that slant upwards when I smile, thick dark brown hair that looks black, a small nose, and full lips. I use the bathroom and while I wash my hands, I look at my reflection. I cannot seem to reconcile the face I see in the mirror to the way I feel inside, and it is made more apparent at this visit. I am out of place once I open my mouth to speak.

My mother says hello to other relatives and their acquaintances while I stand slightly behind her, not wanting to be noticed. We've hardly eaten anything on the road and my stomach grumbles, betraying my need to be invisible. An array of foods fill the platters, bowls, and aluminum trays line every available flat surface.

"Anak, try this."

"What is it?" I asked.

"Just eat it."

The soup appears black. I am not a fan of cow tongue in blood soup. I shake my head with an affirmative no. We don't eat this at home. She shows me something wrapped in banana leaves like a burrito.

"Anak, try this. It's sticky rice. You like it." She motions me to come over to her. Using her pointer finger and middle finger with her palm down, she scrapes the air between us. Inside the tightly packed banana leaf is sticky rice with Chinese sausage, I will try it. I also fill my plate with lumpia shanghai and pancit, foods that are familiar. I take a seat next to my mother among strangers and nibble my food, sipping on a plastic cup filled with 7-Up, then wander off in search of my cousin, Norman. I don't understand how, but we are cousins. I find him in a spare room watching TV on a thirteen-inch screen, munching on a bag of chips in a bedroom. We don't talk much but take comfort in knowing that we will get through another get-together while eating an American snack. For the time being, the second generation fades into the background, while the first generation reminisces about life in the Philippines.

...

Back with the adults, their conversations are peppered with exchanges of *oo* or *hindi*. Those words and many others I say sound like an infant learning to speak and are made worse when I say them slowly. I stick to yes and no when they use my mother as the interpreter. Painfully shy and soft-spoken I nod and smile to please adults that smile back with toothy grins and continue to talk in a language I do not comprehend. Inevitably, an acquaintance or relative would look at my mother forlornly and say in English, "She don't speak Tagalog?" I am standing right there. I can answer for myself, but she speaks to them in a hushed tone like she is somehow embarrassed by me.

"No. I try, but she don't want to learn."

I want to speak up and say, "She doesn't try hard enough." But I am too young to say such bold things.

...

A visit to the relatives yields language lessons, sporadic at best. I sit at the table, alert, back straight, and eyes forward. I'm eager to learn the language that will be the key

to me fitting in with my relatives. My mother writes words out a couple of words in a notebook.

She points to the words and says, “Magandang umaga.”

“Mu-gun-duh uh-maga.”

“No, no. That's not how you say it.” She jabs the paper with a pencil, making tiny dots of lead underneath the words.

I repeat it. I think it sounds exactly how she says it.

“No, like this.” She opens her mouth a little wider so I can see how she pronounces the words. She presses her lips together *ma*, she opens it slightly with a hard g, *gun*, her tongue flattens *dung*, she shapes her lips like she's blowing a kiss, *ooh*, again with her lips pressed together, *ma*, she opens it slightly with another hard g, *gah*. She blends it together.

“Say the words how they sound.”

I try again, but it still sounds wrong to her. She takes a deep breath. She's losing her patience.

We move onto the Tagalog version of *Head, Shoulder's Knees, and Toes*.

Paa, tuhod, balikat, ulo

Paa, tuhod, balikat, ulo

Paa, tuhod, balikat, ulo

Paa, tuhod, balikat, ulo

Pumadyak tayo at magpalakpakan.

I stumble over the words. It's hard, much harder than I thought. This song does not prove to be any easier. I am *her* daughter. She makes me aware that I am capable of anything, but this? The words sound wrong and the more I try the more frustrated both of us get. As the minutes pass, my attention wanes. We go through the alphabet. I say them as much as I rewrite them. Ten times each. My head rests on my arm and my hand aches. My mother scoots her chair back.

“Time to eat,” she says. Lessons are over for now.

...

A week or two passes, before she sets her sights on teaching me a different language. She opens a red rectangular book with gold foil printed on the cover. The first line in English, the second in Mandarin. This book was filled with commonly used words and phrases. The word in English followed by columns translating it in all the languages my mother learned in school (Tagalog, Mandarin, and Spanish).

Mandarin is filled with complicated strokes. One wrong line can change a word's meaning. Numbers are not difficult. One stroke from left to right is the number one. Simple lines. They are easy to write in pen and pencil. Sometimes if she feels like it, she brings out her special set of calligraphy paintbrushes with India ink. A dragon carved out in the center disguises the solid black piece that is the length of a BIC lighter, but when rubbed into the inkwell with a few drops of water, the black ink comes to life. She teaches me about the elegant brushstrokes on rice paper. I am mesmerized by this sort of writing. I kneel at the coffee table where she tucks a kitchen towel under my neck to prevent the ink splashes from attaching to my clothing and permits me to use her special brush.

There are words I pick up when my parents speak in Mandarin, but I don't know more than *bīngqílín*, is ice cream, *gee quai* is how much, *xiè xiè* is thank you, *Zàijiàn*, is

goodbye, and their favorite comment when we are out in public. *Kàn nà gēn tóufǎ*, look at that hair. I am annoyed when they ridicule people right in front of them. My mother does this when we are in line at the grocery store or when my parents and I are at a restaurant. I ignore them, pretending I don't understand what they are talking about. I am ashamed that my parents could be so rude. I think they like the secret language they speak in front of me so that I can't always understand what they talk about. What is the real purpose of learning these languages, I wonder, especially when I hear them used as a tool for insults?

...

My mother is eager to show me pictures of her family. She opens up the maroon-covered album and the crinkly plastic pages begin to turn. "This is your Auntie Rosita. She owns a printing press she inherited from her husband." She stares blankly at the camera. It is a black and white photo of her taken years earlier wearing the Traje de Mestiza dress. The sleeves are flat and oversized, high-peaked, and rounded at the shoulders. There are embroidered designs along the sleeves and on the fitted bodice that flares out past her knees ending with a short train.

She turns a page, "This is your Auntie Rosalina and her husband Carl." It's another black and white picture from their wedding day, twenty years ago. She has my mother's nose, cheekbones, and hair. Then a picture in color, "This is your cousin Yvette, she is so pretty. She's sitting with her brother, Tiger. They are five and six years old, beaming at the camera. "He is my favorite nephew, so handsome. You know, I am his godmother." I imagine she has magical powers like Cinderella's, but that seems unlikely. She is in constant motion, cleaning, cooking, gardening, sewing, and teaching. If she were a magical godmother, her magic would take care of all that, and then she'd have time to play house with me or have a picnic outside.

She continues, "This is your Uncle Romeo and his wife." Another black and white." This is followed by more photos of my cousins in color. She points at each one of them as she says their names. "These are their children, Bing Bing, Jingle, and Boyette." These pictures are more recent. They have single portraits and are all smiles.

"This is your Auntie Rowena." She's wearing a pink dress seated in front of a piano. "You see that piano? I bought that for her." I nod my head in acknowledgment. With the exception of my Auntie Rosalinda and Uncle Wolfgang and their daughter Lilaine, who live in Germany, and my Auntie Rebecca who lives in Saudi Arabia, the rest of the family lives in or around Manila. She shuts the album.

"Dais." she says. Daisy is my childhood nickname, but my parents are the only ones who use it. "We are going to visit my family in the Philippines." She does not say the Philippines with the silent "ph." We are going to the "Pill-ippines" where I will meet the people from the pictures for the first time.

...

I never have to ask why she came to America because she never fails to tell me her reason. "I wanted a better life. That's why I came here. Imagine, being paid \$150 a month. She stares at me with unblinking eyes for a couple of beats to make sure I understand that is not a lot of money. "Here, you substitute for one day you get almost \$100. I gave all my money to my parents and from that, they would give me some spending money. The rest of the money went to care for my brothers and sisters. I told them I needed to have my own life and I was going to America. The land of opportunity.

Now, here I am.” She sits up a little straighter and continues the story. “Can you believe that Dais?” She says, recounting a time before I was born “Out of nine of us, I was the only one who was approved.” Her eyes widen and her eyebrows follow in astonishment. She says it like the moment has just occurred. At the age of 38, labeled a spinster by her family and her coworkers, she came to America alone.

...

It is the summer of 1989, my father unloads our baggage on the curb and gives my mother a hug and a peck on the cheek. I can tell her mind is far away from this moment. Her brows are knit together in a state of anxiety. The last time she had been home was nearly ten years ago. The palpability of it permeates my own nerves. Then again, I know my nerves have everything to do with the fact that I have never been on a plane, and now here we are about to embark on a trans-Pacific flight to a foreign country. My father gives me a brief hug with a few pats on the back and says, “I’ll see you later, kiddo.” In his eyes there is sadness, but I will find out later it is because he isn’t sure when he will see me again. We board a crowded plane. I thought I had to stay seated during the entire flight, but my mother allows me to sit on the floor where there is a decent amount of room to play with other children. There are stopovers in Honolulu and Seoul.

...

We arrive at the Manila International Airport a day later. Curbside, we climb aboard what I picture the Magic School Bus in real life would have looked like, but our journey will not take us on rides through the solar system. The jeepney is painted purple with a colorful mural of words spray-painted in a rainbow of colors. The seat is sticky with other people’s perspiration that mingles with my own. A warm breeze comes through the glassless windows and out through the back with no door, allowing passengers to get on and off the vehicle. My mother once told me a story where a woman was riding along in a jeepney. Her hand was dangling out of the window. A thief had cut off her finger because they wanted her gold ring. I remember to keep my hands far away from windows.

My eyes drink in what my mind cannot understand. I expected to see more vehicles on the road or pedestrians along the sidewalk, but instead, it’s a relatively quiet night. The jeepney rumbles along downtown, stirring up the stale air of rancid garbage that permeates my nostrils making my stomach turn. Heaps of refuse line the median. The piles are as tall as the vehicles that pass by. A naked girl no more than six is curled up on a street corner. Underneath her is a thin piece of cardboard. She appears asleep, but she suddenly stands up and starts running on the sidewalk beside the jeepney. Where are her parents? Why is she naked? The jeepney is too fast for her to keep up. I watch the girl fade out into the night. We get off the jeepney and walk past a few homes before stopping. My mother knocks on an imposing red metal door and a minute later the deadbolt on the other side is unlocked.

My Auntie Thelma leads us inside, she is married to my Uncle Roberto, who my mother calls the black sheep of the family. I don’t know what that means, but she doesn’t say it with a chuckle which means it must not be a good thing. We are met by my grandfather, who sits in an upright brown leather chair. His mouth is held in a straight line as he takes a second to observe us with his oversized, black-framed glasses that make his eyes small. He is wearing a pair of white and blue striped pajama bottoms and

a V-neck undershirt. His black hair has long since turned snow white. He wears it short, which makes his hair stand straight up. His feet are covered in a pair of white socks and house slippers. He speaks to my mother in hushed Mandarin. She turns to my grandmother, who speaks in Tagalog with my auntie. My grandmother looks at me approvingly and smiles. It seems right to hug her, but I refrain. I don't know what acceptable behavior is here. My mother has told me that my grandparents never hugged their children, so I stand waiting for further instruction. What I should find most intriguing is that my grandparents don't even speak the same language, but my eight-year-old self gives little thought to that. The most pressing issue is seeing a large bug crawling up the wall. Everyone is too wrapped up in conversation to notice. I follow it with my eyes. Once it nearly reaches the top of the wall, it flies off into a darkened room.

Just beyond the living room is the door to the bathroom, where Auntie and Grandma are filling a large basin with water. I timidly walk into the tiled room with a toilet and a drain in the center. I am told that in order to flush the toilet, I need to pour a bucket of water into it. To my horror, I point up at the wall where the same bug I saw in the living room has decided to land. It eyes me suspiciously with its antennae rotating in every direction, no doubt tracking my movements. My mother tells me not to worry about it and leaves me alone. My auntie comes in moments later with polite smiles, leads me out of the basin, fills a small bucket with water from the basin, hands it to me, and points to my head. I gasp from the shock of cold water. I soap up and keep a steady watch on the bug as I dump water over my head until the suds disappear.

We climb the stairs to my mother's old room that she once shared with her siblings. The walls are bare, and a few beds remain with thick netting that hangs from the ceiling over each bed that encases them like cocoons.

"What's this for?" I ask, fingering the netting.

"To protect us from the bugs." She tells me.

I immediately take my fingers away. My skin crawls at the thought of it, so I bury my face in the pillow, hoping I'll stop thinking about flying bugs. I am exhausted from traveling and fall asleep to the steady sound of my mother's breathing.

...

In the coming weeks, I spend a lot of time with my two youngest aunties, Ruby and Rowena are in their mid-20's. They look like twins. Their straight long black hair is worn half-up and half down, and they wear similar attire each day—dress pants with a short-sleeved top. While we are out, they take me to a pool. I don't have a swimsuit, and they say it's okay for me to go in a dress. It's much too hot for cotton tights, and I am grateful that my mother's rules do not apply in this climate.

No one seems to care that I'm not wearing a swimsuit. The people that surround me look like they happened to pass by and decided to hop in the pool too. I can't swim very well, so I grip onto the sides of the pool, too afraid to let go for fear of drowning. Leaves and dead bugs line the drains. The children and adults splash around with little concern for the things that I see. I'm only in there for a few minutes before I clamber up the ladder practically dragging my body out of the water from the weight of my dress. I have cooled off enough, and I'm ready to leave.

After a change of clothes, they take me to the mall and then the movie theater to see *Big* with Tom Hanks. I am caught off guard when they take me to these places. I

thought these structures would be different, but I am surrounded by the familiarity of all things American. I enjoy the film since it is all in English with Tagalog subtitles. For once, I feel like I belong. I'm laughing along with the people in the theater, and I forget that I'm in some far-off country. Once the movie is over, the credits run, and the lights turn on signaling everyone to get up and leave. I am left feeling like an outsider once again.

In the mornings I pass my grandfather in the living room after I come down the stairs. We don't speak. He sits in the same chair he greeted us in when we first arrived. He reads the morning paper, wearing nearly the same attire, but has on black trousers during the day. He merely smiles at me as I walk out of the room and into the kitchen where I find my grandmother chopping vegetables in a growing pile. I see where my mother gets her tenacity. She wears an ankle-length short-sleeved dress with her hair in a tight beehive bun. She beckons me to come and sit. Everyone else has eaten earlier, so it's just me at the wooden kitchen table that stretches to the other side of the kitchen. Unlike my friends who are in constant contact with their grandparents, I have been given the rare opportunity to be with mine, and I revel in it. I wonder if this is the same table my mother sat at during her childhood, but I cannot ask my grandmother this. We are unable to communicate with words. There is a plate with sliced processed cheese, a bowl full of soft white bread rolls, and a tall glass of orange juice. I take small bites of my food and listen to her wash what few dishes remain from breakfast. We communicate in a charade of sorts. She motions to my plate, asking if I am finished. I nod in reply. I don't know the words for thank you in Tagalog, but she nods in return and takes my plates.

One morning after breakfast, she tells my mother that I will go with her to the market. I have no idea what is going on. I follow her like a little shadow. Sliding the long bolt back, she opens the door. The instant we step outside, the humidity hangs in the air like a wool blanket. I can feel the stickiness in my armpits as we walk. We wind through a series of side streets and alleyways and abruptly arrive in a pavilion that houses a fish market. The pungent briny seafood assaults my senses. I scrunch up my nose in disgust, but I prevent my hands from covering my nose. I am not about to show her the universal sign of disgust. I am a Filipina. I can handle this. She selects a large white fish with the head still attached and takes my hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. With that simple loving gesture, we head back to the house.

...

My mother takes me to an elementary school, not far from where she taught school. We sit in the dean's office. An older Chinese-Filipina lady shakes my hand gently before we sit down. Her first question, "Do you have a desire to learn Chinese?"

I look to my mother for some direction, but she raises her eyebrows at me encouraging me to answer the woman like I should know how to respond. I tentatively nod my head and say, "Yes, I do."

The dean seems satisfied with my answer and turns her attention to my mother. They speak in Tagalog for the next ten minutes, and we leave. After the meeting, we go to the store where she pulls books from the shelf about learning Chinese. Next, she finds calligraphy brushes, notebooks, and wooden tiles with pictures on one side and Chinese characters on the other.

I'm thrilled to have notebooks and brushes to call my own, but what did my interest in the Chinese language have to do with the dean we met earlier? I do not understand what is going on until later that night. My cousin, Jingle, enlightens me.

"You are coming to live with us," she says.

"What do you mean?"

"You know, to learn Chinese and Tagalog at the school your mum took you to."

Jingle shows me the fundamentals. She flips over tiles and laughs at how I pronounce things. The harder I try, the worse the results. She opens up a book and begins writing in Chinese, showing me basic brush strokes.

"See? It's easy," she says. Where have I heard that before? I want to roll my eyes at her. I watch in awe as her brush sweeps along the blank page. Her strokes bloom into words that don't make sense. She turns the brush over to me. "Now you do it."

Why isn't it easy for me? I want to blurt out, but I sit in silence, trying to imitate the writing that is a supposedly easy language. I get lost in the idea of being the dutiful daughter, but the more I think about it, the less desire I have to do it for my mother's approval. I want to learn these languages, but not here in the Philippines. How could she do this to me? When we arrive back at my grandparents' house, I break out into a blistering rash all over my hands. The anxiety manifests itself. My mother is planning on leaving me in the Philippines in the care of my aunts and uncles until I am 18. By that time, I will be a graduate from a Chinese private school where I will have learned to write and speak perfect Mandarin and Tagalog.

She will go back to America to be with my father. I am fearful of what lies ahead. What will she look like when I see her again? Will she still be alive? I start to cry when I think about seeing her in the future. In my mind's eye, her hair changes from black to white, and her taut skin sags from age. I cry whenever I think about her leaving me here in this foreign country. When we sleep at night, I inhale my mother's face cream, a fresh powdery scent of roses and honeysuckle. This last piece of familiarity will vanish with her, which makes me cry harder until I fall asleep. The rash stays on my hands until my mother realizes that I do not want to stay in the Philippines. At the end of the month, we fly back to America together.

...

My family's roots are in the Philippines, but that's all. I realize that I will never really belong to the people who look like me. Sometimes when I'm out, I will meet a Filipina, with a glint in her eyes she will begin speaking to me in Tagalog. I stop her mid-sentence and tell her I do not know the language. There is a familiar stab of embarrassment. I almost want to apologize to that person. I'm sorry I don't speak the language I look like I should speak. I hold my tongue. I should not have to explain myself.

Some people in the United States—the country I was born in— see me as a foreigner. They are caught off guard when they realize I don't have an accent. Why would I? I want to respond in sarcasm but refrain. Strangers will try and effectively fail to relate by saying they have a friend or a coworker that is a Filipino and politely ask if I know them. Of course, I don't know them. I don't know what to say in response, so I smile and say, "Oh no." The confusion that I'm faced with makes me want to make a public announcement. I want to show people my credentials of being an American citizen. "I know the Pledge of Allegiance. I grew up singing the "Wheels on the Bus." My

favorite foods are grilled cheese sandwiches and pizza. I was born in California. I speak English perfectly, just like you.”

My mother still laughs at how I pronounce words in Tagalog and tells me that I have time to learn it. I do not tell her that I am no longer interested. She turned 80 years old this year, and now her grandchildren laugh at how she says *loulou*. I have lived my entire life in America, yet sometimes I don't feel like I belong, but there is one subtle reminder that keeps me in an unusual state of belonging, and it has been with me all along. My mother still calls me *anak*.

NUMBERS GAME

by CHAD LUTZ

orange roses
blossom in a vase
given as a gift
in 1933

Duane Allman (1946)
sets his guitar
in dream-like motion
while his brother Gregg (1947)
sings like a choir

this pen
made in France
traveled 3,928 miles
to fill the last forty
pages of my notebook

this house
built in 1925
has been through
world wars & great depressions
pandemics & assassinations
1,000 sqft of memories
old and new

it's a quarter to five
on the 21st October
bluebirds chirp in the yard
long shadows drape the floor
I have 250 pages to go
in my Stephen King novel
but the rain's stopped

& now
all I can think about
are the flowers
on the dining room
table

fresh roses
in a vase

given as a gift
in 1933

THE BATTLE OF FARTMOOR WOODS

by CYNTHIA MORITZ

When Albie turned into the housing development, he had to pull over to get a good look at the new sign. As was tradition since people first started moving into Dartmoor Woods, local taggers had changed the D in Dartmoor to an F. But the days of just making a hasty scrawl in the night were long gone. This latest creation was the most elaborate one so far. The D had been whited out completely and replaced by an elegant gold serifed F, such as one might find on the type of English pub whose name began with “Ye Olde.” Its lower stem even ended in a merry little toot of gas. Fartmoor lived and thrived.

Albie laughed. He had always liked to imagine the spray paint cans being handed down from older sibling to younger in a tearful coming-of-age ceremony every few years. But this version took more than spray paint.

Not much else had changed in the neighborhood in the two weeks he had been away visiting his mother in Florida. A For Sale sign had gone up two blocks down from his bungalow. JoEllen had mounted a new sculpture in her yard across the street. The kid who had agreed to mow his lawn had given it what looked like a bad haircut. And instead of holding Albie’s mail at the post office per the form he had filled out, the USPS had helpfully piled it all in front of his door, where it made a rain-soaked mountain, daring him to try to get by.

He kicked the pile. Welcome home.

Really, he was happy to be back. He had moved into this house at the age of 23, when the first forty houses in the development had come on the market. Back then, the houses still had that fresh wood smell, and the grass hadn’t yet come up in the lawns. There were plywood walkways leading from the road to the houses so your shoes didn’t sink into the mud on rainy days. All the houses were painted off-white, and alternated just four different facades and floor plans.

What Albie loved was that, though they started out looking the same, people made them their own by living in them. Fences, porches, and shutters were added, trees and hedges were planted. Fifteen years later it was getting hard to tell the neighborhood had sprung from designs in a box. To Albie, the imagination that allowed each homeowner to make their little piece of paradise individual was beautiful.

This wasn’t an upscale development. A lot of families bought these houses as just the first step on their road to prosperity. But Albie always thought of his little bungalow as his permanent home. He was one of a number of people who found this place good enough, and set about putting their own peculiar stamp on it. The Lesters hung their collection of hubcaps all over their garage. Jake and Maisie Clary put out barrels to catch the rain, which they used for washing their dishes and floors and sometimes even themselves; they claimed it helped keep down their water bills. Meyer Timm’s yard was completely filled with bird feeders. Someone—no one was sure who—built tiny little entrances at the foot of a few of the trees that grew up along the sidewalks, apparently for the elves or the fairy folk. Later on, actual fairies were added, flitting through trees throughout the neighborhood. It was that kind of place.

Albie had been able to afford his house at such a young age because he went to work right out of high school. Right before he graduated, he researched what jobs he could get without a college degree, and found out that being a garbage collector paid decently. So the day after graduation, he appeared at the Department of Public Works and applied. In six weeks, he had a job.

His family was horrified, but Albie had what he wanted, a job where he had a steady income and never had to think about work when he wasn't there. Plus, he was outside, which he liked. He started work at six and was done at two, which left him plenty of daylight to pursue his own interests. At eighteen, that included lots of partying, but once he bought his house, he got into home improvement projects. Then he bought a bike and started taking long rides through the nearby countryside a few times a week. When his bike broke down, he taught himself how to fix it. Gradually other people started bringing their bikes to him to have a gear shift repaired or a dented fender pounded out and now he had a nice little side gig, though he didn't make a lot of money at it. Many of his customers were kids, and he always fixed their bikes for free.

Albie put away his clothes, which were all clean since his mom always insisted on doing his laundry before he left her condo. He quickly sorted through the mail, mostly bills and ads. But one thing caught his eye. Carrying the single piece of yellow paper, he crossed the street to JoEllen's.

"Hey, Jelly Belly," he hailed her from halfway across the street, spotting her in her garage studio staring hard at a mass of wood and metal that didn't look like anything to him except, well, a pile of wood and metal. He knew that was part of her process, just studying something until it started to speak to her.

"Hi, Albs," she smiled. "How was the trip? How's your mom?"

"Oh, you know. Same song, different verse. How come I don't get a real job, contribute to the world, da da, da da, da da. What I don't get is how my sister is contributing more as a party planner than I am by cleaning up people's neighborhoods."

JoEllen started to answer, then chuckled. "I was going to say those genders aren't going to reveal themselves, but I guess they will eventually, huh?"

They both laughed, and moved into a big hug. This was the kind of moment Albie lived for. He had always been more than a little in love with his neighbor. They had slept together a few times, but JoEllen wasn't interested in loving one person; she was in love with the world, so he had stepped aside. But she remained his best friend.

"You know your family will never understand you, right? So just go and do your duty and leave it at that," she said.

"These pesky feelings just keep getting in the way," he answered.

"So let's drown 'em in beer!" Jo cried, and Albie grabbed two out of her garage fridge.

They sat on the decrepit couch against the wall, sipping their beers and catching up. Finally, Albie remembered the flier he had stuffed in his jeans pocket and held it out to her. "What the fuck?"

"Guess who?" she answered.

"Our favorite garden clubber?"

"None other."

"You going?"

"Wouldn't miss it."

The flyer read:

Take Back Dartmoor Woods!!!

Say No To Vandalism

Keep Our Properties Neat and Tidy

We Need an HOA!!!

The date given was the next day, Sunday, at 7 p.m. at the development's pocket park.

"What brought this on?" Albie asked.

"Who knows? Obviously 'vandalism' refers to the sign. And Candace has always hated my sculptures in the front yard, and my stuff scattered around. But there's no rule against it. Maybe she's hoping to make one."

"I can't believe she'd go to all the trouble of starting an HOA just to make you move your art work," Albie said. "She doesn't even live on this street."

"Yeah, but she's one of those people who think everybody's stuff is their business," JoEllen said. "She can't stand the mess and she won't rest until she's cleaned up every last inch of this development." Jo gazed around at her creative space. "Alb, I need this mess to create. It would kill me to clean it up."

"It would kill me if you moved," Albie admitted.

The two of them sat hand in hand for a minute, pondering such a future. Then Jo rolled down the garage door and rolled up some weed.

JoEllen had moved to Fartmoor seven years ago when it briefly became an artistic haven because of its low rents and lack of restrictions. When most of the artists moved on to the next hot area, she stayed. She visited her artist friends a few times a month, but had come to love Fartmoor's vibe.

"Candace probably also hates that the Lambs painted their house purple," Albie offered, once he was feeling mellow.

"They had to know that would tick her off," JoEllen laughed.

"I like it," Albie answered. "I mean, I'm not crazy about the color, but I think it's cool that they felt free to do it."

"It's like the spirit of Fartmoor," JoEllen proclaimed. "Who would want to live in one of those uptight developments where every house is the same color and you have to get every change approved by the HOA?"

"Plenty of people like to live in those places, I guess. But then, why don't they go live in those places and leave just this one for us?" Albie mused.

"You want another beer?" JoEllen asked. Albie nodded, and she grabbed another two out of the fridge. "You know, there are a lot of people like us here who just want to be left alone to live their lives. But if it comes down to a vote, that might be part of the problem. These are people who just want to be left alone—they don't want to have to sign petitions and go door to door. They just want to be left the fuck alone."

"Whereas Candace probably has a campaign all planned, with T-shirts and lawn signs and who knows, a band or something," Albie said. "What are we gonna do, Jo?"

“Don’t know yet,” she sighed, “except go tomorrow and check it out, then try to make some sort of a plan.”

Albie gulped his beer, then went for a long, meditative bike ride.

The next evening was dank and blowy, but about thirty people gathered around the small shelter to see what was up. Candace immediately took charge of the proceedings. Clad in turquoise slacks and matching short-sleeved sweater with a shade-lighter hoodie tied around her neck, she certainly looked like she should be in charge of the motley crowd.

“Must not have been able to find a turquoise one,” JoEllen whispered to Albie, pointing to the brown megaphone she carried. They giggled, and Albie was sure Candace frowned at them like they were unruly children. The small size of the crowd made amplification unnecessary, so she left it with her preteen daughter while she got started.

“A lot of you know me,” she said, “but for those of you who don’t, I’m Candace Cranston. I’ve lived here at Dartmoor Woods for going on four years now. I bought a house here because it seemed like a nice neighborhood, and for the most part, that’s turned out to be true. But I have some ongoing concerns, and I’m betting most of you share them. So I called this meeting hoping we could get together and agree on a plan to make this a better place to live for all of us!”

She paused, obviously expecting applause, and a few ragged claps followed.

She went on: “The first thing people see when they drive into our development is the sign. I don’t know about the rest of you, but I’m embarrassed to have guests see the way it’s continually defaced with a swear word!”

Chester Stein, a know-it-all who Albie normally avoided at all costs, moved to the front of the crowd and announced, in that pompous voice that normally made Albie want to punch him, “Oh Candace, please. There’s not a dictionary in the world that would define ‘fart’ as a swear word. Tasteless, maybe, but definitely not a swear.”

“And it’s funny,” somebody else yelled out. A few other voices chorused “Yeah!” to this, and some of the crowd giggled.

“Well, I think it’s disgusting!” Candace proclaimed. “Not all of the people who agree with me chose to come to this meeting tonight, but there are plenty, and we want the defacing of the sign to stop!” She took a moment to regain her composure.

“But let’s move on to the other item on my list. When you drive around other developments, they are neat. The yards are well-kept and tidy. The houses exude the pride the owners have in living there. That’s simply not the case here in Dartmoor Woods. I think, and others agree, that it would improve things around here if we had some rules to govern what is acceptable and what isn’t in the appearance of our homes.”

“What kind of rules?” someone asked.

Candace was ready to take up that gauntlet. “For example, acceptable colors for painting houses. Also, rules for what is and isn’t okay to display in one’s yard.”

JoEllen took a deep breath, but someone else beat her to the confrontation. “Sounds pretty draconian to me,” said a youngish guy Albie didn’t recognize.

Candace bristled. “Many of us like our neighborhoods to be presentable. I don’t like feeling like I live among a bunch of hippies.”

While Albie and JoEllen mouthed “Hippies?” to each other, a woman from the back of the crowd shouted, “I don’t feel like how I keep my yard is any of your business!”

“It is if it affects my property values!” a man yelled back.

The shouting went on like that, and pretty soon people started to drift away. But Albie and JoEllen knew this was just the first skirmish in the upcoming war.

A few days later they gathered some of their friends from the development in Albie's living room to talk about how they could counter Candace's campaign, which had already sprouted lawn signs.

Albie had made sure to introduce himself to the "draconian" guy when the Sunday meeting broke up. His name was Todd and he had joined today's group, along with Albie's biking buddies Chuck and Nate, the Lambs, the Lesters, and JoEllen with a few of the adult art students she taught.

"This is a pretty good group to get started with, I guess," Albie said. "I'm sure there are others who should be included, but I'm not sure how to go about finding them." He added with a smile, "If I knew who the kid is who currently tags the Fartmoor sign, I'd be sure to invite him or her."

Instead of getting the laugh he expected, that last line landed with a thump. He looked around to find pretty much everyone just staring at him.

"What?" he said.

JoEllen, reddening, said, "Albie, I thought you knew."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I thought everyone had figured it out by now. I do the sign."

Albie laughed. "Sure you do. Very funny."

"I've done it for the last three years."

"No you don't. You would have told me."

"Albie, I do. Remember that one time when they put up a new sign and nothing happened? It just stayed the way it was for like a month? The kid who was doing it, Tim Wambach, came to me because he knew I was an artist. His parents found out about it and they made him stop. They were afraid he'd get arrested. And none of the other kids wanted to take his place. So I started doing it instead. It's been me all this time."

Albie dropped into a chair. "That's why the Fs are so great now!" he realized.

"Well, yeah, maybe," she said. "The real difference is that if a kid got caught, the cops would probably just take them home and tell their parents. Whereas, I could get in trouble for vandalism."

Suddenly one of JoEllen's students jumped up from her seat. "But it's not you, it's me! I am Fartacus!" she cried.

Then Nate leapt to his feet. "No, I am Fartacus!"

Todd joined in. "No, I am Fartacus!" Person by person, the cry went around the room until they all collapsed laughing. A few people looked confused about what they were saying, so Todd explained to the clueless about the movie Spartacus.

"Well, let's keep moving. We need to come up with some great ideas to keep this from turning into Ken and Barbieville," Albie said. "So what are we gonna do to keep Candace and her stormtroopers from taking over, gang? Any ideas?"

The first thing, they realized, was that they needed to find out exactly how many votes were needed for an HOA. That would clarify how difficult this was going to be. Albie could take care of that with a call to the city the next day after work. Also, they needed to find out when the vote would take place. Jo's student Carly, who lived across from Candace, volunteered to find out the latest was on that.

After the others had cleared out, Albie and Jo sat out on his deck having a last beer, and he said to her, “How come you never told me?”

“I seriously thought you knew,” she answered, taking his hand. “You’ve always loved the Fartmoor sign so much, and you’re so in touch with the community, I figured you’d realize none of the kids around here were sophisticated enough to do the kind of artwork I’ve been doing, and who else could it be?”

“But why didn’t you just tell me?” he asked, pulling his hand away. He knew he was being a jerk, but he had always thought JoEllen felt as close to him as he did to her. This felt like a betrayal.

JoEllen hesitated. Then she said, “I thought if we actually talked about it, you would want to help.”

He started to say, “Of course I would.”

“See?” she said. “And I didn’t want to put you in danger of being hauled in by the police too. I’m an artist, an arrest or two on my record might actually look good, but it wouldn’t help you, especially with your family.”

He wrestled with this for a minute or two. Then he said, “Jo, fuck my family. You’re more important to me than them. They’re just the people who screw me up. You’re the one who makes me happy.”

She patted his face. “I know, Albs. And I really do love you too. That’s why I wanted to protect you.”

He sucked in a breath. It still hurt, but it was time to be a grownup. “Well, I know now. Along with everyone else, I guess,” he said with a wry grin.

The next day, Albie found out that when Dartmoor Woods was first being built, the builders could have started an HOA themselves, and made belonging to it a condition of buying one of the houses. But they didn’t. Starting one now would require that sixty percent of current homeowners had to agree, but the results would be binding on everyone.

“Shit. Sixty percent isn’t a lot,” JoEllen fretted. “I thought it would be more like eighty or ninety.”

“Yeah, I know. This is a very HOA-friendly town. But at least it’s the percentage of total owners, not just of those who vote,” Albie said hopefully. “That gives us a better chance.”

Carly emailed everyone to report the vote would be in three weeks. So the group met to figure out a strategy

“Okay, Fartmoor is still expanding but there are three hundred houses in the development right now,” JoEllen told the group. “So in order to establish an HOA, the Candacites need to get a hundred and eighty votes. The good news for us is, we only need to get a hundred and twenty-one votes to stop them. So how are we going to do that?”

“Let’s start by counting the votes we can be sure are on our side,” Todd suggested. They started with the people in the room, fourteen, and added those they had talked to who had expressed opposition to the HOA. That came to thirty-five. (It turned out supercilious Chester Stein actually supported the HOA, just as strongly as he supported correct word usage.)

Then a dismaying flash came to Albie. “Oh no, Jo, I don’t think you can vote!” he said. “And neither can any of the other renters. I’m sure they’re only going to count owners.”

JoEllen’s face fell. “Goddammit, that’s not fair! I care about this place way more than the guy who owns my house. To him it’s just an investment!”

“I know,” Albie said as he put his arm around her. “But the law doesn’t recognize you.”

JoEllen plopped into a chair, looking like a punctured balloon. The next time Albie glanced over, she was gone.

The group brainstormed, and came up with the usual: going door to door, planting lawn signs, making phone calls. They wrote up a flier that spun grim scenarios of houses all the same color, fines for hedges of the wrong height, cars being towed for parking on the street, and dogs being dragged to the pound for pooping on the wrong lawn. JoEllen rejoined the group and worked hard alongside the other nays.

Daily life in the development became tense in the weeks leading up to the vote. A pickup basketball game at the little park ended in a fistfight. Shouting matches broke out between formerly friendly neighbors over whose dog had produced what poop. Someone poured motor oil in the Clarys’ rain barrels. A teenager marched down Candace’s street dressed all in turquoise, shouting through a megaphone “Conformity is good. All heil Candace!” The Lambs’ house was egged.

On the day of the vote, a Saturday, the anti-group knocked on the doors of those they knew opposed the HOA to remind them to vote. Albie sat near the entrance of the pocket park where it was being held and kept an informal tally. He knew long before the poll closed that it was over for their side. The most optimistic count had them getting a hundred and ten votes. Not letting renters vote had probably killed them. And, as Jo had said all those weeks ago, there were those who just wanted to be left the fuck alone.

The day after the vote, a hundred eighty-seven to a hundred and five, Candace walked up and down Fartwood’s streets with a smug smile and a clipboard, apparently making notes of all the things she wanted to change. Through his living room window, Albie saw her pause for several minutes outside JoEllen’s house. A story, probably apocryphal, went around that had her grabbing a fairy out of a tree and crushing it under her heel.

Albie and JoEllen spent a lot of their time for the next few weeks in her garage getting high and dreaming up happy endings where they magically found another neighborhood to their liking that just happened to have places for both of them right next to each other. A month and a half later they both stood, arms crossed, among the crowd waiting for the developers to reveal Fartmoor’s new name, which the company had undertaken to celebrate the establishment of the HOA. The new handle had no doubt undergone weeks of vetting.

JoEllen had found an apartment in the city, with shared studio space nearby. It wasn’t ideal, but it would do for now. She would move in a week, and kept telling Albie if he didn’t sleep on her couch at least twice a month she would know he didn’t love her anymore. Albie felt like one of his limbs was being torn off. Until she was gone, he couldn’t even focus on what he wanted to do about his house.

Suddenly, down came the drape to reveal “Shole Farms”. The corporate honcho explained that it was a tribute to Orlando Shole, the farmer who had sold the land to the

developers originally. He took a few questions until Chester Stein stood, cleared his throat importantly, and asked, “Just to be clear, are the farms under this new scheme as metaphorical as the woods were in the previous one?”

Walking away, JoEllen gushed to Albie, “Oh my God, this is perfect!” Then she hurried home to plan.

The next morning the sign proclaimed “A-hole Farms.” The O resembled a big, well, you know.

REGGIE & ARGO

by MARS GIROLIMON

Part One: *A Day in The Life*

I thought Clarence Argo was cool from the moment I met him on our first day of the fourth grade. He had dark skin and curly hair and was wearing a Beatles t-shirt with ripped up jeans. He made everybody call him by his last name, which I thought was really rad. In the morning meeting we went around sharing what we wanted to be when we grew up, and when it was my turn I said I wanted to be a rockstar. Argo said he did, too. I think we were pretty much best friends from that moment on. I sat with him at lunch that day, and we got to talking about music.

“On the count of three, name your favorite Beatle,” I told him.

“Okay,” he said, and nodded. And after I counted and said go, he shouted out “LENNON” and I shouted out “JOHN.” And that’s when I couldn’t deny it anymore. Argo and I had a destiny.

“People get so stuck on whose fault it was that The Beatles split up. Why does it have to be anybody’s fault? Do you know what I mean?”

“I know what you mean!” he replied. Totally simpatico.

Since we both wanted to be musicians we figured we should start a band together. I had an electric guitar that my dad bought me from the flea market after I begged him for a month, and Argo had some drums that were sized for a kid. We called our band *Reggie & Argo*, with the ampersand sign to make us seem fancier. Not a very creative name, I guess, but we wanted to keep it simple and easy to leave room for our sound to be crazy and cool. I mean, John Lennon would have been famous if his name were Willie Schlong as long as he still wrote *Strawberry Fields*. We were all about the music. That’s what would get us places.

We never really practiced at my house because it wouldn’t have been any fun. My mom and dad were separated—and I don’t mean I had two houses and got twice the presents on Christmas—I mean one night when I was in the second grade my mom left and I never saw her again. So I lived with my dad, and I swear, he was the most boring guy in the world. I couldn’t even play my guitar until after my homework was finished, and even then he made me keep the volume down so low.

I remember the first day I told him about what I wanted to do when I grew up. I sat him down in a chair and said, “Dad, I need to tell you something important. I’m gonna be a rockstar when I’m old enough. I’ve been practicing that guitar, and one day I’m gonna be real great.” I felt so proud of myself, but he laughed right in my face.

“You think that’s what you want right now, but you’re just a kid, and that’s not a serious career choice,” he said. “Regina, look at me. I’ve got us this nice house because I worked hard in school and became an accountant. If you work hard in school, you can get a good job just like me.”

I felt like he smashed my heart like a Christmas ornament. “First of all, my name is Reggie. And I’d never want to be an accountant because I want to actually have a good time with my life. I was born to be a rockstar, Dad! It’s who I’m supposed to be. I can feel it,” I poured out my guts, but he didn’t understand. He just rolled his eyes and went back to his boring paperwork. I grabbed an old tobacco pipe from a bookcase and shoved it into my

pocket, then went to my room to dream about the future when I wouldn't ever have to be bored or alone because I would be famous instead.

So that's why I started going to Argo's house after school almost every single day. He didn't have to deal with an annoying parent telling him what he could and couldn't do. In fact, Argo's mom, Angela, might be the only person I knew who was cooler than Argo himself. She was a rock & roll journalist working for some magazine in Manhattan, which sounded so glamorous compared to where I lived in Brooklyn. I think she had the second most killer job I could imagine (after actually playing music), and when Argo told her about our band she said it was a great idea.

"I'd love to hear you two practice," Angela told us. "I could give you some pointers if you want."

"That would be amazing, Angela," I told her and beamed. She was being so much cooler about the whole thing than my dad was. I was already picturing practicing with her in my head.

"Yeah, but we don't have any songs put together yet," Argo sighed. But Angela knew what to do, of course.

"Why don't you cover a song? Play something by one of your favorite musicians to practice." I was absolutely flabbergasted by the idea that there were parents in the world as cool as her!

"What should we cover?" I asked her.

"Well," she said, "Who do you want to sound like?"

I hadn't really thought about it, but Angela had a solution. She started giving Argo and me different tapes and teaching us about the coolest acts, saying we needed to develop our tastes and decide what we liked. The Beatles were obviously our favorite group, but we were getting into The Ramones, Suzie Quatro, David Bowie, and Queen since they were all just getting big, and she even took us to see some shows.

We'd go crazy with our sweet dance moves, playing air guitar in the crowd with Joey Ramone or Brian May up on stage. I liked to shut my eyes and imagine I was one of them. I'd be whipping around my long dark hair and scrunching up my face in the middle of an ace solo, and I'd feel like I was on top of the world. Or you know what? It was like there was no world, then. There was only that room and that moment and that song. I figured the crowd would be going mental like that for me one day, too. You know, after I learned how to do chord changes and all that junk.

The Beatles were broken up by that point so we never got to see them live, but they were always extra special to us. The first song Argo and I tried to cover was *Twist & Shout*. It was written by John Lennon, whom Argo and I agreed was not only the best Beatle, but also probably also the best musician in the history of the universe. I tried to play the rhythm guitar part that John played on the track. I wasn't very good, and I don't think you could really tell what song it was if we hadn't been singing over it, but it was only my first real try at a song and I thought I definitely had potential. So we played the song to Angela, and she actually got really excited for us.

"You two really have John's spirit in the way you sing," she told us with a smile, then leaned in close. "I bet you'd like hearing some of the stuff he's been doing since The Beatles broke up."

"Right on!" Argo chirped, and I nodded, too. We were then bestowed with Angela's personal collection of John Lennon records, and I guess my life hasn't really ever been quite the same since then. *Imagine* became my favorite straight away. It really made me dream and

feel like anything was possible. You know, like I could fly—or better yet—prove my dad wrong and become a rockstar.

We listened to those records all the time. They'd be in the background while we'd do our homework, and they'd play in our heads as we tried to fall asleep at night. In school when we had to write, I always made up little stories about John because he was almost all I ever thought about. I even started parting my hair down the middle so I'd look like his wife, Yoko Ono. She was a Japanese artist and sometimes she performed on the records with John. She sang kind of funny, but I liked her a lot, and she and John were really in love. So in love they wrote whole songs about it.

We read somewhere that John Lennon and Yoko Ono lived in an apartment in Manhattan. Apparently John was taking a break from music, because he and Yoko had a son named Sean just a couple months before.

"Do you think you could take us to his house so we could try to meet him?" Argo begged Angela.

"That would be incredibly unprofessional, but maybe I'll be able to interview him when his next album comes out," she told us.

"But that could take forever, Angela!" I pleaded.

"I don't know what to tell you, kids. There's nothing I can do," she said, and then walked away as though that was the end of it.

Well it wasn't, because a couple days later I thought of the most brilliant idea ever: we could write a song. That way Angela would have a reason to take us to go visit John and Yoko, you know? We could give them our tape, and then they would listen to it... and I guess I figured it would totally blow their minds and they'd want to produce our album, I'd become a rockstar, and just hang out with other rockstars making music all the time and all my dreams would come true! Sounded easy enough.

When I told Argo my idea, he thought it was rad, too, so we got to work immediately on our first original song as Reggie & Argo. We named the track *School's Lame*. We wrote it one afternoon after a really boring day at school, and then practiced it a whole lot. You know, like how a real band practices their songs. After a few weeks we thought we finally had it down good, so we stole one of Angela's tape recorders that she used for interviews and spent an afternoon recording a couple takes of what we assumed was to be a hit. I chugged away on the three chords I knew at the time (I know almost eight now), Argo banged away on those kid-sized drums like a tiny maniac, and we both growled our way through the song's chorus:

*So sick of teachers bringing me down / Drop your pencil and get lost in the crowd
Sneak out the bathroom window, all right / Then go out to rock & roll all night
School's lame, school's lame / We wanna drop out
School's lame, school's lame / That's what we're singing about
School's lame, school's lame / Listen when I talk
School's lame, school's lame / School's lame, let's rock!*

There was even an instrumental break during which we made these dolphin-sounding noises that were supposed to be like Yoko Ono's in the background of John Lennon's songs from *Live Peace in Toronto 1969*. I threw my head back and froze, imagining my silhouette on stage. I thought it was a total masterpiece.

After finishing it completely, we played the song for Angela. She was bopping her head around and humming along like she really loved it, so when it was over I asked her if she could take us to John and Yoko's house so we could give them the tape. She didn't look so excited after that.

"Kids, the song was so much fun. And I really admire how hard you've worked on it... But I've told you already. We can't just show up at John and Yoko's house. That's not how it works."

Argo said we should just wait a couple years to see if Angela can interview John, but I wasn't ready to give up on my plan so quickly. "Argo, by then we might have missed our shot. We gotta get in there while we're still young, we're wasting time!" That's a line I remember using a lot, and ultimately it convinced him. I mean, it would be a couple more years that'd be spent in school learning math and junk, and a couple more years of living with my dad and having to be all quiet and studious. I couldn't wait that long! I had to get out now.

"Okay, Reggie... I guess you're right about that one. But if we're gonna do this, we've gotta be prepared."

"Don't even worry about that, Argo. I got this. We'll leave next Friday, real early in the morning before our parents are awake, okay? That way they won't be able to stop us," I explained to him.

"Do you think we'll even be able to find John's house without my mom with us? Reggie, I'm scared. I don't know if this is such a good idea, what if our parents worry about us?" Argo whined.

"Well, we can leave our parents notes telling them where we'll be," I said. "Why don't I take care of the maps and planning, and you... can pack snacks for us. Just come, okay? Don't let me down," I begged him. He eventually agreed, and then we set up a date and a meeting place. It was becoming real.

This was the kind of thing I had been waiting for my whole life. An actual adventure, you know? By the time the day of departure arrived, I was so excited I could hardly contain myself. It was a miracle my dad didn't notice something was funny when he tucked me in, because I was much more willing to go to my room for the night than I ever had been before. After he left I just lied there with my eyes closed thinking up how awesome the next morning was going to be. When you've got such an exciting day ahead of you, how do you sleep?

I finally dozed off eventually, but it wasn't for very long. My alarm rang at 4:00am to give me enough time to get ready to go and meet up with Argo at 4:30. I got dressed in my favorite jeans, a t-shirt, and black combat boots, then grabbed my backpack and favorite denim jacket and made sure my hair was parted perfectly. The only thing I had left to do was to write a note for my dad. I wrote a couple lengthy and dramatic drafts, before deciding on something simpler:

Dear Father,

I've left for the day. If I'm not back by supper,

John Lennon has probably decided to adopt me.

Yours truly,

Reggie Hernández

I placed it on top of my pillow, and assumed my dad would find it when he went to wake me up in the morning. I didn't really think about how he might be worried by it or anything like that. It wasn't the time for that kind of stuff, it was time for action. I tip-toed out my bedroom and shut the door so slow and careful behind me.

Part Two: *Across the Universe*

I headed down the fire escape and walked ten blocks to meet Argo at the street corner halfway between our houses. He was wearing this ridiculously oversized backpack and was rocking back and forth on his feet.

"How was sneaking out? You think your parents have a clue?" I asked Argo, pulling out the pipe I had stolen from my dad's office. I didn't know how to light it or anything, but I thought it looked cool hanging from my mouth.

"Nah, but I think I'm gonna puke," Argo replied. I rolled my eyes.

"Don't be so dramatic, Argo," I said to him with jaws latched around that pipe of mine.

"I never snuck out before." He looked like he was going to cry. I patted him on the back like a grown-up would, and put my pipe away so I could talk properly.

"There, there," I assured him. "It's going to be alright." He didn't stop sniffing, so I took a harder approach. "Argo, this is the most important day of our lives. You're either in, or you're out—what's it going to be?"

"I'm in, I guess," he told me with a small smile.

"Good! Now let's get going," I said to him, and we were on our way.

I was the leader, I think. I could keep my composure even when Argo was scared, and I was definitely more serious about this whole quest than he was. Not that I could blame him, really. I don't think I'd care so much about having to suffer through a few more years of school if I wasn't coming home every night to my dad telling me I'd never actually achieve my dreams. I mean this wasn't just a way to spend my time; it was a big career move for me. Which is why I did such a good job planning everything out.

I had this big map with me, and I circled where we were and where we were headed. I had the address of the apartments where John and Yoko lived circled—72nd Street and Central Park West. I figured it wouldn't be a very hard trip since it was only one subway ride each way. We had a few bucks on us, just enough to get us there and back.

We found the subway station pretty quickly. When we got down to where the trains were, it all became a little bit trickier. I mean I took the subway with dad sometimes and Argo and I took the subway with Angela, but it's a lot harder doing it on your own. I knew that John and Yoko lived near Central Park, which was north from where we were in Brooklyn, according to my map.

We each bought a ticket to ride, then snoopied around the station for a little while. We did a little bit of people watching, which is one of Argo's favorite things to do. There was this one lady sitting on a bench with her head down. She wasn't even looking at the trains that were pulling up, which I thought was weird.

After a little while, I got a good feeling about a certain train that pulled in. It said the word *CENTRAL* on the front of it, so I figured it had to be ours.

"Let's get on now," I said, nudging Argo.

“Are you sure this is the right one?” he asked.

“Yeah, I think it is. We’re going to miss it if we don’t hurry, come on!” I said, and we hopped on the train. Inside the car there were just a few teenagers smoking cigarettes and a little old man who looked half-asleep. It was almost empty since it wasn’t even 5:00am yet, so we could see all the graffiti really well. Most of it looked like scribbles, and I couldn’t really make out what they said, but some of it looked artistic and groovy. We sat down and I admired all of it for a while, feeling super cool and urban, basking in the pride that I felt from getting us on a train and sending us off on our big adventure.

After a few minutes, Argo asked me how much longer we had to stay on the train. I squinted at the worn out map hung up in front of us, but I couldn’t really read the names of the stops because of all the grime. I could feel the judgmental stare of one of the teenagers—a girl wearing a Knicks jacket. I think she knew I didn’t really know what I was doing.

“Well, it’s going to be a little while,” I said, “Because we have to get all the way to Central Park, which is in Manhattan...And I think that’s pretty far from here.” I really didn’t have a clue how long it would be, and was even starting to worry a bit.

But the girl in the Knicks jacket apparently heard me, and called out, “Kid, did you say Central Park? This train ain’t headed to Manhattan.”

I kind of felt like a fool in that moment, having her call me out in front of everybody like that. I couldn’t believe I messed up so badly—and finding out which subway to take was just about my only job. I was also kind of mad she called me a kid, but I really couldn’t complain about that because she seemed like she was going to help us, and we certainly needed it.

“Oh, uh, I thought this train said Central Park on it,” I tried to explain.

“Nah, it said Central Ave,” she told us. “This train goes Brooklyn to Queens, and then Queens back to Brooklyn. You wanna get off at the next stop, then take the D-line if you want to go to Central Park.”

“Thank you, we’ll do that,” Argo said. He seemed kind of relieved to have a relative adult helping us out.

“Yeah no problem,” the girl laughed. “Where are you going by Central Park? It’s a pretty big place, you know.”

I thought that felt a bit condescending, but we needed the help, so I swallowed my pride and asked her, “We’re going to 72nd Street and Central Park West, do you know where that is?”

“Yeah, I do. Once you’re on the D-line, you wanna get off at Columbus Circle. It’s gonna be about 45 minutes or so on the train,” she told us. “You sure you kids are gonna be okay?”

“Yes, Miss. We’re gonna be fine,” I said, gritting my teeth a bit. “Thank you so much for the help.” I then pulled my pipe out of my bag, and stuck it in my mouth so I wouldn’t have to feel like such a kid anymore. She smirked. I mean it was basically a miracle that she was there to help, but I couldn’t help but feel kind of mad anyway. I just wanted to be right all by myself on the first try. But that didn’t happen.

We got off at the next stop like the girl told us, and then had to leave the subway station so we could cross the street and get to the other side of the tracks where we needed to be. There might have been an easier way to do that so we wouldn’t have needed to pay again, but Argo and I couldn’t figure it out, so we spent the last of our money on the second train. Our spirits were still high despite that whole mess up. I made sure to mention John and Yoko in conversation a lot so Argo didn’t forget the point of why we were doing all this.

It was still pretty early in the morning when we got on that second train. I think it was around 6:00am, so all the people on the subway seemed to be people on the way to work at

boring office jobs, I assumed. They reminded me of my dad. They were all wearing gray suits and looked like they hadn't smiled in weeks. I remember thinking that I didn't want to be like them when I grew up. I didn't even want to be awake at 6:00am unless I hadn't gone to bed after performing some show the night before. I couldn't help but feel like if I messed up on this trip one more time, I'd be out of chances. The thought of it was making me depressed, so instead I focused on what was to come when the train stopped and we got off. When we'd get off the train, and look into the distance and see two people and a baby dressed all in white sitting in the grass outside the apartment. One would be John Lennon's son, Julian, the other would be Yoko Ono, and the baby would be Sean, of course. We would run over to them and they'd greet us with open arms.

"Lovely to meet you," Yoko would say, "I love the way you part your hair."

"Thank you, Yoko," I'd begin, "My name is Reggie, and this is my friend, Argo. He and I are in a band."

Yoko's eyes would widen in excitement, as she'd ask, "Are you really?"

And I'd say, "Yes! And we have a with us, if John and all of you would like to hear it."

In his English accent Julian would say that he wants to hear, maybe he'd say that he *fancied* me. He was only a few years older than I am, so it's not a crazy idea. Either way, Yoko would invite us inside their home. We would walk through a grand archway into an apartment lit entirely by sunlight. Everything wooden, everything crisp, a warm oaky smell lingering in the air. We'd see John sitting at a massive wooden desk where he'd be writing a song for his next album. And he would look up and smile like he'd been expecting us to arrive for some time now.

Part Three: *Come Together*

When we got off the train, we did about two hours of walking. It shouldn't have taken that long at all, but we didn't know which set of apartments John and Yoko lived in and ended up doing several laps around the block. Those boots gave me blisters that left scars for weeks.

We were joking around at first, but Argo and I stopped trying to make conversation eventually because we both ran out of anything encouraging to say. We had no money, and we'd been up all night. My heart was beating kind of funny in my chest. Each step didn't seem to bring us any closer. We finally found a row of buildings, but didn't know if they were the right ones. Didn't plan ahead enough, didn't bring a photograph of the outside so we could compare, should have brought Argo's mom or somebody, but we wanted to do it alone.

"Reg, look," Argo said, trying to summon up some enthusiasm. There was a skinny little man wearing a Beatles t-shirt and snapping pictures of one of the apartments. That was probably it—that was definitely it. I looked at Argo and then ran toward the man at full speed, Argo followed.

"Hey Mister!" I shouted wildly. The man stepped back. Looked kind of geeky and nervous up close.

"Hello... kids," he said, confused.

"Is this Lennon's house?" I asked.

He nodded. "He lives here. Don't know if he's in there now, though. I'm on vacation from Nebraska and just wanted to take a look."

"You know if he's coming back?" Argo squeaked. The guy shrugged his shoulders and said he'd be on his way.

I wasn't really paying very close attention to him until he said, "Do your parents know that you're here?" Now that made me mad. I'm not a little kid, you know what I mean? And how's that his business, anyway? I pulled my pipe back out of my bag and stuck it in my mouth. I guess I thought it might intimidate him.

"Yes of course our parents know we're here, sir," I said to him through gritted teeth, making the maddest eyes I could. It seemed to scare him off because he just nodded and then walked away. Good riddance, but at least we knew we'd made it thanks to him. That was exciting, and now there was just one last thing to do: wait for John and Yoko to go in or come out of the building.

I was sitting there on the steps trying to keep guard. Argo and I did a bit of people-watching, and played some of those games you're supposed to play in the car, but it was taking much longer than we had hoped.

"Reggie, we've been sitting here for like... an hour. I don't think they're coming. What if they're out of town?" Argo whined to me.

"Argo, they aren't out of town, they just had a baby. Someone's gotta go in or out eventually and we're not going to miss them just because we got bored and decided to go home, okay?" I was being kind of bossy, but I thought he deserved it.

We sat there in silence for a little while longer. We switched off on lookout duty before we both started getting tired. I'd occasionally scream into Argo's ear when he'd start to drift off, but eventually I gave up and just let him sleep. Then I was alone, spending what must have been the next few hours weaving in and out of consciousness. It felt like a really long time went by, but I can't remember much. Every time I looked up, the park looked less real and more twisted and warped like those graffiti letters. Finally, I gave up, leaned against Argo, and fell asleep. I don't know how long we were out, and I can't even remember having any dreams, I just remember a tap on my shoulder that almost gave me a heart attack, and sunlight burning through my eyelids. I opened my eyes to see a vision with long dark hair.

"Hello? Little girl, little boy, where are your parents?" Hearing the voice was having a bucket of ice water thrown in my face. I knew who it was immediately. I was awake. I slapped Argo awake, too. And when I looked up, there she was. Her long dark hair was parted down the middle as always, and she wore corduroy pants and a turtleneck. It was like seeing someone you thought only existed in your dreams. Argo and I started spewing out anything that came into our heads.

"We came all the way from Brooklyn to see you and John."

"We've been up almost all night."

"You're so beautiful, Yoko."

"We loved the last album."

"All your albums."

"Yoko, I heard you had a baby, congratulations on that."

"We're in a band together."

"We've got a song on tape, we brought it for you."

Not tired anymore. Adrenaline. Or something. I couldn't talk right and had lots of energy. I felt like a moth that couldn't fly straight. Poor Yoko was standing there smiling, not knowing what to do.

"Give her the tape!" Argo yelled in my face. I reached in my bag with shaking hands, and pulled it out, suddenly feeling embarrassed by the fact that we were asking a real artist to listen to a track called *School's Lame!* I handed it to her anyway.

“Oh my, thank you,” Yoko said. She was real quiet. I think my heartbeat was louder than her voice. “That’s so sweet, dears... Do your parents know you’re here?”

“No,” Argo said in a small voice. I nudged him.

“We left them notes,” I told her.

“Is John inside?” Argo asked. I nudged him again. I was kind of embarrassed. You don’t just invite yourself in, you know? But Yoko smiled anyway.

“He’s not in there now, I’m afraid. He’s out with our sons.” She still smiled. God, she was real nice to us. She wasn’t even mad or freaked out that we were essentially stalking them. Man, we must have seemed crazy. “Would you like to use my phone to let your parents know where you are?” she asked.

“That might be for the best,” Argo looked at me and shrugged. I felt my face get red hot. I couldn’t call my dad, he’d kill me. Maybe I’d just pretend to call him? But Argo would know. Argo would say something.

We went inside. Argo made his phone call first, and Yoko gave us both glasses of water. The apartment was huge and beautiful, it was weird being there. It wasn’t how I imagined. I thought I would feel right at home, but instead I felt like an invader. You know, you don’t expect Yoko Ono to be a real person until you meet her. Or John Lennon either, or Paul McCartney, George Harrison, Ringo Starr, Brian May, Joey Ramone, or any of them. You almost expect them to be wind up dolls that act the same way they do on stage in their real lives, but that’s not how it goes. Yoko walked around her house like anybody else, and seemed nervous to have found two weird little kids sleeping on her doorstep, just like anybody else would be.

Then it was my turn to use the phone. I was going to try that thing when you don’t dial any numbers and then do a voice like you’re talking to somebody when you really aren’t, but instead I made the real call. I was still wondering if that plan would have really worked when my thoughts were interrupted by a voice coming through the phone.

“Hello?” It was my dad. He sounded real out of breath and kind of hectic. I paused for a second. I was kind of scared of what he’d say, and I didn’t want Yoko to think that I was this awful, stupid kid if she heard my dad yelling at me.

“It’s Reggie,” I finally answered.

I heard silence for a second, then a breath released.

“Regina? It’s you? Are you okay?” He sounded like he was maybe going to cry, and suddenly I felt real bad about running away.

“Yeah, I’m fine, Dad. I just thought I should...I’m actually at Yoko Ono’s house.” Wow. Saying it out loud sounded really crazy.

“You’re at John Lennon and Yoko Ono’s house?” He asked me flatly. He sounded kind of sarcastic, so I don’t think he really believed me.

“Yeah, Argo and I took the subway,” I told him. “We gave Yoko a tape with our song on it. I know I shouldn’t have gone without asking, I just—”

“We’ll talk about it when I pick you up, Regina. I’m just glad to hear you’re all right. What’s the address?”

“72nd Street and Central Park West,” I told him. He laughed a bit.

“That sounds about right. I’ll see you in a little bit, okay?”

“Yeah, okay. I’ll see you soon,” I said.

“I love you, Regina.”

“I love you too, Dad.” I hung up the phone and felt the knots in my stomach come untied. I mean, that phone call could have been a lot worse. And now here I was hanging out at John Lennon and Yoko Ono’s house until my dad arrived. Yoko told us we could look around if we wanted, and we took her up on that—I had been itching to get a good look around since first walking inside. Yoko kept close to us, probably afraid we’d break something. There was crazy weird art all up on the walls. Some were cartoons and some shapes and things were made of wire. There were also lots of photos on the walls. Some were of Yoko’s art, some were of the family, and some were of John in the studio. Yoko told us a little bit about some of them when we’d ask.

After leaving the main area, the three of us wandered into a side room where we saw my favorite thing in the whole apartment: a white grand piano. The same one from the *Imagine* video, I assumed. I really wanted to sit down and play, but I didn’t know how and thought I’d be embarrassed. Just then I looked out the window and could see my dad’s car pulling up, so Yoko walked Argo and me outside. My dad’s jaw just about came unhinged when he saw that I was actually standing there with Yoko Ono. I gave her a hug goodbye, and Argo too since Angela hadn’t arrived yet. Lots of thank you’s poured from my mouth, then tears from my eyes.

I got into the car with my dad and pressed my face up against the glass and watched Yoko and Argo stand there on the corner as my dad’s car drove away.

“There will be disciplinary actions for this stunt, just so you know,” my dad told me.

“I know there will be, Dad,” I said with a sigh. I almost pulled out my pipe again before I remembered whose it really was.

“But, Reggie,” my dad said, “I just want you to know that I’m impressed.” He looked at me and smiled. And I smiled back.