

mixed media cover mask by

Rafael Guzman

About Phaethon

The myth of Phaethon is simple. He seeks to know his father. So he asks his mother Clymene, and she tells him his father is none other than Apollo, the god of the sun. Phaethon goes to Apollo and asks for some proof of their relationship, and Apollo says he will grant him one wish. Phaethon wishes to drive Apollo's chariot that pulls the sun across the sky. The only being that can do this successfully is Apollo himself. Not even Zeus can pull the sun across the sky. Knowing this, Apollo tries to dissuade Phaethon from this task. This does not work, and Phaethon is placed in charge of the chariot and its horses that breathe fire. Doomed from the start, Phaethon loses control of the chariot and nearly burns up the Earth. The Earth cries out to Zeus for help, and Zeus strikes Phaethon dead with a thunderbolt. Phaethon, now a falling star, plunged into the river Eridanos still ablaze. His epitaph reads:

*Here Phaethon lies who in the sun-god's chariot fared.
And though he greatly failed, more greatly he dared.*

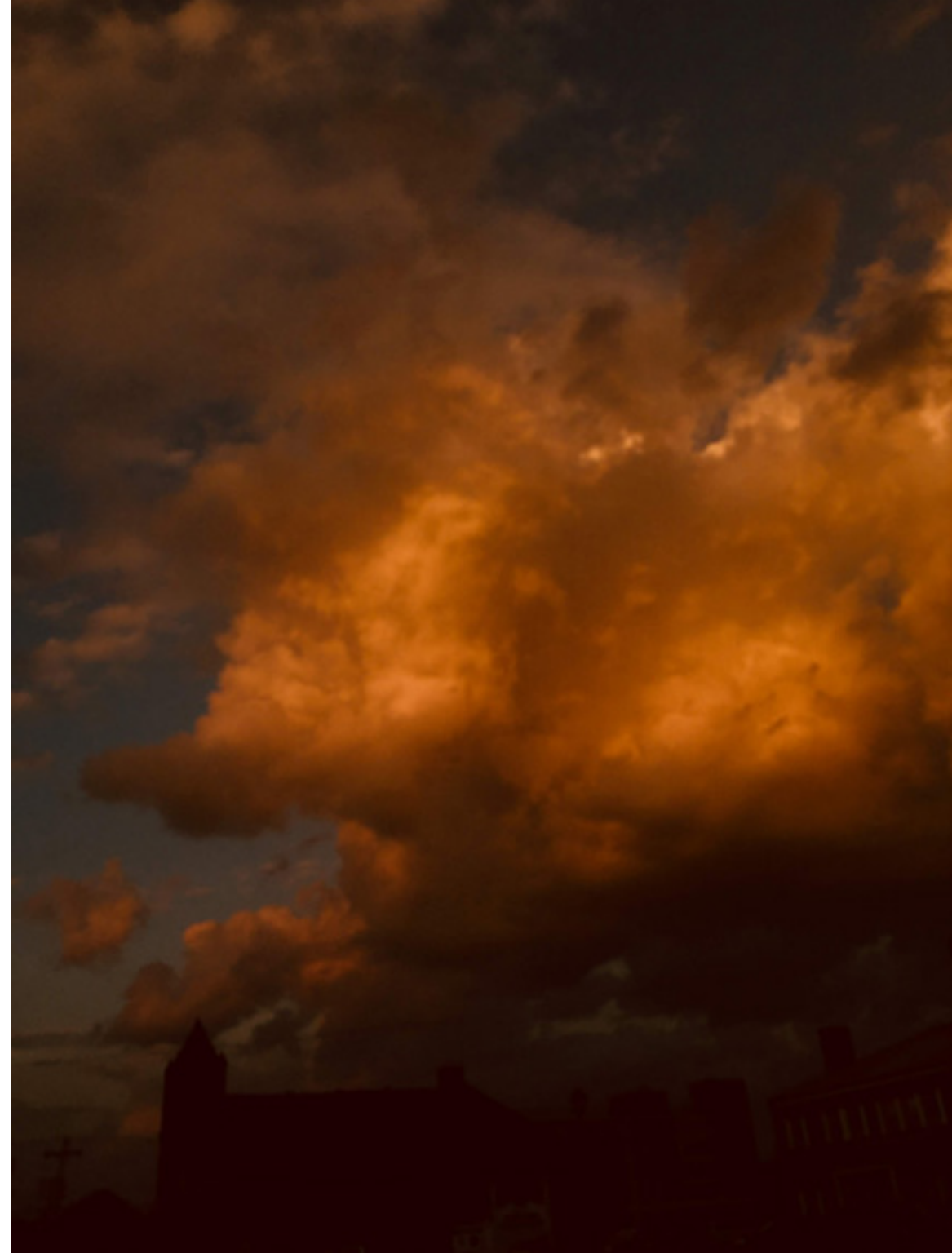
In the spirit of this figure, we at the Phaethon value bold, confident, daring, courageous, and risky fiction, poetry, and art. Phaethon is not a tragic figure. His actions, that of a mere mortal, for a brief moment of time are equal to an immortal. He did something no other mortal, or immortal for that matter, could ever do. His confidence, courage, and daring are an inspiration to all of us. We too, if we risk our very lives, can be gods.

So we want pieces that challenge, inspire, stump, and move us. We crave new expression. New ideas. New connections. We do not value art that tests the boundaries of expression. We value art that obliterates them.

Faculty Advisors

Matthew Powers
Andrew Devitt
Blake Pitcher

All content within is the property of the
respective author.



Elizabeth McDonald

FICTION EDITOR
SCIENCE

Ronald West

VISUAL EDITOR
COMMUNICATION ARTS: NEW MEDIA

Andrew Gaillard

VISUAL EDITOR
GENERAL STUDIES

Shaun McGraw

VISUAL EDITOR
COMMUNICATION ARTS: NEW MEDIA

Julianna Finnerty

VISUAL EDITOR
BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION

Contributors

MALERIE BELLES, Fashion Buying & Merchandising
 SKYELER BRODKORB, Music Industry
 VICKI BROWN, Director of Student Activities
 BAILEY COFFEY, General Studies
 JUSTIN COMO, Assistant Professor of Studio Art
 THEODORE J. COOK, General Studies
 CEDES DOHERTY, Humanities
 JULIANNA FINNERTY, Business Administration
 ANDREW GAILLARD, General Studies
 RAFAEL GUZMAN, Fine Arts
 DUSTIN HUNTER, General Studies
 AUBREY KETCHAM, General Studies
 MATTHEW KLOSNER, General Studies
 JILL LOVENHEIM, Non-Matriculated
 ELIZABETH McDONALD, Science
 SAVANNAH MCFARLAND, Fine Arts
 SHAUN MCGRAW, New Media
 ALYSSA PATTERSON, Social Science
 JERRY PLOWS, Social Science
 JUSTIN RIDDLE, General Studies
 KOTOMI SHIMOTANAKA, General Studies
 SAJAY SINGH, General Studies
 NER SOE, General Studies
 TOM STOCK, Active Day Dreamer & Theorist
 JAIDA THOMAS, Social Science
 ANAMARIA TORRES, Social Science
 WILLIAM TRAVIS, General Studies
 HUNTER VANARNUM, General Studies
 RONALD WEST, New Media
 DANIELLE WASHBURN, General Studies
 PHOENIX ZINCK, General Studies

CONTENTS

fiction

- 18
Between Sunsets
 Matthew Klosner
- 24
One More Monster Hunt
 Justin Riddle
- 34
Talking to Myself
 Elizabeth McDonald
- 46
Blood Rose
 Cedes Doherty
- 56
Small Talk
 Aubrey Ketcham
- 60
Sara Kali
 Jaida Thomas
- 76
Number 9
 Bailey Coffey
- 84
The Hillside's Secret
 Jerry Plows
- 94
Untitled
 Phoenix Zinck
- 98
Body2Soul
 Jill Lovenheim

poetry

- 17
Building a Still
 Shaun McGraw
- 17
Rooftop
 Shaun McGraw
- 119
Haiku
 Tom Stock
- 121
S L U M B E R
 Tom Stock
- 59, 83, 119
Photos
 Tom Stock
- 75, 118
Photos
 Julianna Finnerty
- 107
Painted Ceramic
 Rafael Guzman
- 108
Logo Concepts
 Various Contributors
- 112
Glazed Ceramic
 Various Contributors
- 124
Mixed Media Mask
 Savannah McFarland
- artwork*
- 3, 54, 66, 93, 97
Photos
 Anamaria Torres
- 8
Various Artwork
 Justin Como
- 12
Charcoal Drawings
 Various Artists
- 23
Photo
 Vicki Brown
- 33
Painted Ceramic
 Dustin Hunter
- 44
Photos
 Shaun McGraw
- creative nonfiction*
- 68
Mistakes & Mischief
 Skyeler Brodkorb
- script*
- 125
Life's Philosophical Gym
 Theodore J. Cook



Nascent
CNC Routed Acrylic
Justin Como



Histogenesis
Glazed Ceramic
Justin Como



Corporeal Drift
Plaster Cast
Justin Como

CHARCOAL DRAWINGS



Alyssa Patterson



Alyssa Patterson



William Travis



Sajay Singh



Ner Soe

Rooftop

Shaun McGraw

Everyday surroundings are not to be ignored
The peak of the house is the base of my destiny
I will then ascend northward
All that resides within is love
From the roof top to the floor
Family too, shall never be ignored
But rather adored tirelessly

Building a Still

Shaun McGraw

As he lays his head to rest
“My poor baby” falls graciously from his lips
Into the damp creation
His hands are placed over his ears
Until nothing is heard
Tears slip through the cracks of his fingers
Into his ear, it feels cool
The sense of feeling makes him glad he’s alive

Between Sunsets

Matthew Klosner

“Why is the sunset so beautiful? Can’t the sky look like this all the time?” The little girl said while her mother drove her yellow Volkswagen Beetle across the Golden Gate Bridge.

“I imagine if it looked like this all the time then you wouldn’t appreciate it as much, Ella,” her mom said pressing on the breaks to a stop. There was a traffic jam, but they didn’t mind.

“Oh.” Ella took a bite of her cotton candy. “What’s that man doing, mama?”

“Oh my god! Wait here, hunny. Please stay in the car. Momma will be right back for you.”

“Okay,” Ella said taking another bite of her cotton candy, watching her mom run out of the car. The wind tunneled her wavy hair back as she weaved through traffic and the onslaught of beeps.

“Excuse me, sir. Isn’t it a little windy to be out here enjoying the view?” Ella’s mom said brushing her hair back behind her ears to the man wearing a grey suit with a black tie; his hair a perfect ivy league.

The man didn’t turn around. He gazed longingly into the Pacific Ocean. It seemed to be call-ing his name.

She stepped closer. “I’m an officer at the Sausalito Police Department.” She flashed her badge, but again the man didn’t turn around.

“I don’t want to be in this world. The world is impure. It’s filled with hate, violence, and cruelty. It’s filled with betrayal.”

She stepped closer. She could see the beads of sweat on the back of his neck. “My name is Mariah Johnson. I’m willing to listen. What is your name?”

“It doesn’t matter. I’m not meant for this world. All it is is pain. I’ve giv-

en everything. I’ve loved without abandon and it was treated as if it were nothing. What is it for? Nothing matters, this is all meaningless anyway.”

“Your life matters —.”

“No! People wouldn’t treat me like garbage if I mattered!” He said turning to look her in the eyes.

That’s when he fell back. For that split second, he saw the most beautiful woman he’s ever seen.

“No, stop!” She reached for him.

It was too late. He was falling and falling fast. The concrete ocean awaited him.

Fuck. Why did I do this? He thought.

Then it went black.

The man woke up.

Am I in heaven? He thought blinking his eyes into focus.

There was a man, and woman eating dinner inside a cozy apartment.

Is that me? Am I dead? There’s Leah. Yeah, I remember this. This is before everything went to hell.

“Wow, Arryn. I’m honestly impressed.” Leah swallowed the spoonful of chili.

“I’ve been getting pretty good at cooking since I have moved out.”

Leah swallowed another bite of chili. Then she put down her spoon. After a moment, her eyes met Arryn’s.

“Why haven’t you painted anything? Before we dated you showed me all these beautiful paintings. I fell in love with you — and your paintings. But now you haven’t painted anything since we’ve been together?”

Arryn choked a bit on his chili. “Ungh, excuse me. Uh, I think I painted

when I was in pain. To me, it was therapy, an outlet. With you, life is a cloud. I'm so high, I'm so intoxicated on your mind. Anything else is a distraction. You're what matters. You're real. You're here. Painting is a reflection of beauty, but you in front of me — now that is real art. Nothing can compare to you love bug."

"Aww baby, you're so sweet. I love you. You should keep painting though. You're so good at it." Leah crinkled her nose and smiled.

Arryn looked away to the window; furrowing his brow. "My best work has come after a breakup. It's pretty pathetic. I don't want to lose you. I think I'll start painting again if that is what makes you happy."

"Don't worry, I'll never leave you, baby."

Fucking liar! Don't believe her! You fucking idiot." Arryn reached out but the memory just faded away into the distance leaving him alone again.

Arryn saw two figures standing in front of him. He recognized the voices — the yelling. "What is this some cruel joke? Get me outta here!"

"Tell me!" Arryn yelled grabbing Leah's shoulders.

"No, you don't know him." Leah was shaking.

Arryn ripped her phone from her hands.

"Hey! Give me my phone! You have no right!"

Arryn turned around to shield the phone from her grasping hands.

"Give it back!" She punched him in the back.

Arryn pushed her away and locked himself in the bathroom. He scrolled through her phone, looking through her messages. One name popped out frequently. On her social media's. On her messages. Even in her pictures. It made him sick.

I had to know... Arryn thought watching himself. It still hurt. It never

stopped hurting.

Arryn burst out of the bathroom, his face beet red.

"What the fuck! Joe! I work with him. How could you lie to me? I thought you were differ-ent." Arryn dropped her phone to the floor of the bedroom, it landed with a thud.

Arryn walked out. When he was reaching for the front-door, Leah came running down the stairs, tears streaming down her face.

"I can't tell you anything! You just flip the fuck out just like what you're doing right now! This is exactly why I have to keep things from you."

"Everything feels like a lie. Nothing feels real anymore. You lied about this. You lied before. I don't trust a thing you say!" Arryn slammed the door behind him.

Arryn didn't know where he was walking. He just walked toward the lights of the Golden Gate Bridge in the distance.

I was humiliated. The one person I thought would never hurt me did the worst thing imaginable and lied for weeks, pretending everything was fine. I couldn't stay there. I had no one. I was alone. I couldn't start over and go through it again. I was thirty-three. My art career didn't pan out. I was working a mundane bank position at AmeriCu. I didn't want anyone else. I was tired of life. It has been nothing but constant suffering. Random chaos. There is no god. We are mere specs of dust in the universe pretending to be important. When we die, no one will care or remember the polluting parasites, plaguing the tiny planet of Earth. Arryn walked in time with his other self toward the railing of the Golden Gate Bridge. He stopped and watched as Arryn stepped onto the edge's railing.

Then it went black.

There was a crevice of light emitting at the far end of Arryn's vision. He walked toward it. The black was soon swallowed by the light the closer he got. Then it was all light, blinding light. It forced him to open his eyes.

At first, Arryn saw nothing but white. Then it was an operating room. A light fixture hanging overhead. Doctors and nurses in white scrubs.

He felt someone lean over him, pressing buttons above his head, and then adjusting several of the wires connected to his chest and arms.

"Arryn? Welcome back."

Arryn forced his eyelids open to see the older man standing to his right. He felt like he was still underwater. Everything felt slow and he was so tired.

"I'm Dr. Brandon Louis and you're in Zuckerberg Hospital's intensive care unit."

"What?" Arryn struggled to get up.

"Hold on, try and relax. You've been in a coma for 2 weeks. Everything is going to feel very strange for a while. We're going to run some more tests now, but you need to just rest for now. You're very lucky to be alive."

Arryn tried to nod as more nurses flooded inside. His head rolled to the bright flowers displayed all around the room.

Dr. Louis smiled. "Those are from Mariah Johnson. She wrote herself down as your emergency contact. She and her little girl were always here visiting you. It's good that you have a strong support system through the recovery process. If you haven't noticed the flowers and cards already. People care about you, son. A nurse will be in shortly to go over your injuries and the recovery time." Dr. Louis turned to a brunette nurse, "I'll be back in later to check on, Mr. Sable." Then he walked out.

A woman with wavy hair, tied into a bun waited at the door, holding her daughter's hand. She smiled.

Mariah, Arryn thought. Perhaps there is a god.



Vicki Brown

One More Monster Hunt

Justin Riddle

A two-horse drawn, wooden carriage moved briskly down a dirt road as sunset draws near. To the right of the carriage is an expansive forest. On the left, fields of wheat sway in the light breeze. Inside the covered cabin of the carriage, a lone man sits on the velvet upholstered bench, arms folded, one leg crossed the other and head nodded down asleep, long salt and pepper grey hair forming a curtain to the sides of his eyes. Next to him is a leather sack and a haphazardly tossed duster. A silver longsword with a wolf's head shaped pommel leans against his leg from the floor, lightly knocking against him as the carriage rocks from stones and bumps on the road. The old driver shakes along with the carriage, his face sagging with boredom from the long trip. A wheel hits a particularly large rock, sending the carriage into a violent, yet brief, fit of rocking. The longsword is caught by its owner before falling to the ground.

Undoing the clasp to door's window, the man shouts in a gruff voice, "Hey, driver! If you're going to take the scenic route at least make it a smooth ride!"

The driver responds as if just waking up himself. "Good morning to you too, Brother Bosque. I've driven well enough to let you sleep THIS long, haven't I? Besides, we are nearly there."

"Fine. What was the name of this town again?"

"Valensfield is what it's called. A little backwoods town noted for nothing except being noted for nothing."

"And they call ME in to investigate sightings of Rots in the area?"

"Alleged sightings, Brother Bosque." The driver replied with a knowing smirk.

"Alleged?! The guild sends me out here to check on some villagers jump-

ing at shadows and a stiff wind!" Bosque thumped his scabbard on the floor indignantly. "Hey Geoffrey, I'm gonna take inventory. Do me a favor and keep an eye out for anything as we approach."

"Will do, Brother Bosque."

Bosque opened his leather sack, sighing. "Alright then. Waterskins. A few days light rations. Torch. Fire starters. Set of throwing knives. Couple of daggers." Bosque tossed the bandoleer of knives over to the duster and sheaths the daggers into both of his boot scabbards, "And a fresh bottle of whiskey."

The carriage stops as Bosque straps the bandoleer around his torso. Opening the carriage door and stepping out, Bosque instinctively began buckling his sword to his belt and fastening his duster's clasps. Immediately, a foul odor hits him. Squinting into the nearly set sun and down the road, his gaze is met with a grizzly scene. Only a short distance from the cobblestone walls before the town lies the top half of a torso, entrails spilled out across the edge of the woods. Crows have clearly been picking off it for a while, as well as who knows what other animals.

"It looks like the sightings may have been a bit more than alleged after all, eh Bosque?"

"Yeah...I'm going to find out if anyone here is still living. Meet me back here in a couple days. If it's just Rots, I should have it cleaned up by then...Getting real tired of monsters, Geoff."

"Aren't we all? Good luck and stay well, Brother Bosque." Geoffrey turned the carriage around and began his trip back to the nearest crossroads inn.

Bosque approached the torso before headed into town. Upon further inspection, it seemed there was little to no blood; the clothes were ragged and dirty. The legs seemed to have dragged off. In a flash, Bosque drew his blade and in one swing hacked thru the neck. The head rolled a short distance leaving behind a trail of insect larva.

"There's one down." Bosque sheathed his blade and proceeded into town.

The town was silent. All that could be heard were the caws of crows, the creaks of wooden signs swinging on their hinges, and the occasional slam of shutters. As daylight started to fade, he made his way into the town square. Not a single one of the cobblestone houses had firelight coming thru the windows. Nobody peeking out any windows or walking thru town. The only constant was the odor of decay. Even the houses seemed to be threatening to fall into themselves despite their sound build. At last, he spotted a much larger house sitting at the end of the main street, elevated slightly higher than the rest of the town. As Bosque approached the large house, he spotted a window that had a faint light pouring thru a cracked shutter.

Any survivors must be holed up in here, Bosque thought knocking on the door and announced himself. After a moment of silence, footsteps could be heard and a thin, lanky man answered the door. His eyes looked heavy sleeplessness and worry. He seemed on edge and twitchy.

Nervously looking around, the man beckoned Bosque in, "Quickly. At night the fog rolls in and those things walk amongst it."

Bosque leisurely stepped into the large well-decorated reception room and ushered into a cozy sitting room. A fire had been started for warmth and light. "It's about time the guild sent somebody here. I think I'm the only survivor here! We must depart from here as soon as morning breaks!"

Bosque rested his hand on the pommel of his sword. He didn't think it had been that long since the request had come in.

"First of all, nobody is leaving here for at least a couple days. Secondly, it's my job hunt down the cause of all this. And finally, who are you?"

The thin man shifted nervously before walking towards a liqueur cabinet. "I am, or was, mayor of this town. My name is Vardin Reinbach. If we really have to wait that long, we can just stay holed up in here. As long as we don't make any noise, we..."

Bosque cut him off "Listen. Just tell me where the things seem to be coming from."

The mayor grabbed a bottle from the cabinet along with a small glass, then walked towards Bosque with a sigh. "Well, the earliest cases of people disappearing seemed to be nearer to the graveyard. It's to the west. About a 15-minute hike from town." He filled the glass and started handing it to Bosque. "Really, you shouldn't go out there. It's much safer here."

Bosque quickly polished off his drink, set his glass on a table and headed out towards the door. "Stay here, lock the doors, and stay quiet." Shutting the door behind him Bosque muttered, "One way or another, this is my last hunt..."

A fog had indeed rolled in. It was wafting around in odd waves. Some places seemed hazy, and others near impossible to see thru. Regardless, it had a strange almost damp quality to it. This couldn't be a normal fog. Bosque briskly made his way back to the town square in order to head towards the graveyard. The hairs on his arms and neck stood up as he walked thru the town. Somehow it was even more silent than when he had arrived. His every step felt like a shout to the world around him. Finally, he was at the road towards the cemetery. A sound from the fog stopped him in his tracks. Shuffling. Something being dragged. Then a form appeared in the fog, and another, and another. Shambling bodies moved towards him as puppets being dragged across the ground.

Bosque's muscles tensed. These Rots seemed to be very late in decomposition. Some had broken or missing limbs. It shouldn't be hard to hack thru these. As long as the heads are severed the bodies shouldn't be an issue. With a quick step and swing, he removed the first head, then recoiled back to resume his stance, watching. Sure enough, as soon as the head was lost, the body lost its direction and fell twitching into another Rot, grasping at whatever it made contact with. Whoever dug these things up must have been a novice. Fresher bodies always made for harder swings to get the job done.

Slash by slash, Bosque slowly made his way thru the small mob of Rots. While easy enough to dismember, the quick movements and hard-swinging would wear on him. Every deep breath was met with a wave of decayed stench, enough to turn even the most hardened stomach. He had to

keep moving onward. The villagers were being dragged off somewhere. Rots normally just attack whatever they find, to actually take something or someone is not normal. Maybe the villagers could be saved. If that were to happen, he had to find the heart of this tonight. After encountering several smaller groups of Rots, he found himself in front of the cemetery gates, flung wide open. Taking a drink from his waterskin, he caught his breath and headed inside.

The grassy cemetery ground muffled his boot steps, thankfully. At the edge of what he could see, more Rots shambled around. They seemed to be headed in all different directions, not just towards town. Many of the graves were upturned, coffins opened to the air and empty. Some still housed the skeletal remains of bodies apparently too far gone to reanimate. Sneaking around the headstones, he finally found the heart of the cemetery. A mausoleum stood alone, fog bellowing thru its open doorway. He really hoped that there weren't any Rots on the staircase down. Quietly, Bosque lit his torch and proceeded down. Fortunately, there wasn't. As a matter of fact, there wasn't even the sound of Rot shambling down here. The stench of decay was replaced by the musty scent of centuries-old stale air. Unopened sarcophagi lined the halls. Carved marble decorations of gargoyles and other protective spirits watched over the tombs. Fog still laid across the floor and curled around toward the exit. After minutes of descending the winding stairways and paths of the cavernous halls, a light was glowing from around the corner. Snuffing the light of his own torch, Bosque silently made his way to the source.

A small room with a lit candle sitting on a table. Used shovels and dirty rags sat on some crates in the corner. There was an opening into the next room in another corner. As Bosque approached the door, the sounds of boiling liquid could be heard, and in the distance, voices. The room was a laboratory of some kind. Beakers, burners, tubes, medical books, and all manner of strange apparatus lined the room's long tables. In the center sat a large black cauldron, fire stoked underneath. The fog was bellowing out and then wafted out from this. In his gut, he was sure this was animating the Rots. He had never seen anything like this before. He made his way closer to where the voices were coming from. The next room had a huge operating slab with a massive body lying on it. Dried blood stained the floor everywhere. Various medical tools were laid out near

the slab. At the farthest end of the room was another doorway. There wasn't time to inspect the room further as the voices seemed to be in just the next room over.

Bosque turned the corner to see several cells and cages, full of people. Whole families locked behind bars, trying their best to comfort one another. He quickly rushed to the nearest cage, a look of panic and hope in the eyes on its inhabitants.

"I'm with the guild. What's going on here? Who is doing this to you?"

"Quick! You have to get us out of here before he comes back! He's doing terrible experiments on people. Everyone that gets dragged away doesn't come back. Their screams, oh god their screams..."

A sharp joyful whistling is suddenly heard getting closer. The loud steps of a person without a care in the world echo thru the lab. "All right my little guinea pigs, who wants to volunteer for science today?! I just know we're gonna have a break thru tonight!"

Bosque turned the corner to confront this jovial, mad scientist. Standing in surprise next to the operating table, was Mayor Vardin. "So, you're the one behind this whole thing. Let these people go and come quietly. Or else I'll be forced to destroy you along with your lab!" Bosque pointed his sword at Vardin.

"Oh no, you don't! I've come too far to be stopped now! I found a way to control the Rots! I'll be a hero once my research is complete! Think of it. We can use these monsters for something great! One less monster to worry about. And maybe we can learn to control others too! My research may seem twisted now, but I'll save more lives than it will cost."

"I'm not going to ask you again. Let the villagers go."

"Whole families locked behind bars, trying their best to comfort one another..."

“Fine! If you won’t listen to reason, then I’ll just have to...” Vardin produced a glass beaker from inside his coat pockets and popped the cork, “...prove my methods.” Just as the last word is leaving his lips, a throwing knife strikes him in the shoulder causing the liquid to splash all over himself and the body lying on the table. In shock and pain, Vardin gritted his teeth, “You’re going to pay for that...”

Almost as if on cue, the heap of flesh on the slab began to shudder. Vardin watched on with excited interest, while Bosque watched on in horror. The massive figure was made up of stitching of multiple faces, bodies, limbs, and skin, not all of it human. Tufts of fur and fanged snouts sprouted from odd places as if they were puzzle pieces smashed into place by an impatient child. It had a roughly humanoid shape, but that was more a mass of meat than anything. Each face wailed in a different voice. Each cry pained at its own existence. Vardin pointed one long finger at Bosque, a fiery look of vengeance in his eye.

“That potion was a hundred more times potent than any of my previous concoctions! Now you will see the fruits of my labor! Crush him! Tear him apart for me!”

In response to his shouting, the fleshy golem turned to face its creator. Vardin’s face turned to terror as the monster lifted one giant muscled arm and let out a blood-curdling wail. A cacophony of man and woman shrieking, dogs barking and growling, and cats hissing and screeching all at once. In an instant, Vardin was crushed under the might of his own creation’s strength. It’s every move tugging at the stitching and revealed muscle. The vestigial limbs hanging from its arms were being broken by its own pounding force. Its screams continued as it repeatedly smashed the lifeless pile that was Vardin.

Bosque ran into the prison room to search for keys, hopefully, they were left here. The villagers hearing the sounds from the other room were all too terrified to move. Many of them covering their ears and closing their eyes. After a quick search of the room, a hook in the corner of the room, far away from anyone’s reach, revealed a set of keys. Quickly trying every key to each of the cells, the villagers were set free.

“Stay behind me, and don’t go until I say so!” Bosque instructed them.

One villager shakily replied, “If you can get us to the hallway of that room we can escape. It leads back to his basement. That’s how he got most of us here. H-he said it was a safe...”

Bosque lifted one hand to stifle the man, “Alright. I’ll get you there. Just get ready to run on my word.”

Bosque took out his torch once more and lit it. The wailing from the other room was dying down and the wet slamming sound of the monster’s attacks had stopped. It must have lost interest. Handing one man a dagger from his boot, Bosque took a deep breath, prepared his blade, dropped his pack, and ran into the room swinging the torch and shouting.

“Hey! Hey, gruesome! Over here!” The mountain of tainted flesh swung around to face Bosque, it had broken some of its stitches in its frenzy. Bits of its innards hung out from the openings around its mitt-like hands and a few spots around its waist. Potent as Vardin’s potion may have been, it wasn’t helping to hold the beast together. Bosque circled the monster, waving the torch to keep its interest.

“Go! Now!” As if in response to Bosque’s yelling, the monster’s faces contorted once more and began its wailing. The villagers easily and quickly ran around the corner and into the hallway. The flesh golem was more interested in Bosque.

Without hesitation, the monster raised its arms and slammed them into the ground. Bosque had leaped out of the way of the strike and quickly struck back with his sword. The tip of the blade ripped down the mitt hand of the beast, sending the meat slopping to the ground like a sausage that had ripped its casing. Undisturbed and angrier than ever the beast slid its arms across the ground to crash into Bosque. The giant lumps were too large to try and jump over, he had to brace for the hit. The blow launched Bosque across the floor onto his back and into the alchemical room with the cauldron. Sore from the hit, he rolled over before standing. Halfway standing again, the beast tried smashing itself thru the too small stone arch into the room, reaching and flailing as hard as it could. Bosque had an idea.

Quickly running behind the cauldron, he sheathed his blade and readied

his knives. The first throwing knife sent the beast reeling in surprise for the slightest moment. The second one multiplied its anger tenfold. The arch was starting to break with every slam of the beast's unbridled fury as Bosque threw every knife into the monster. With one colossal push more, the graceless beast scrambled towards Bosque, little care for the bubbling pot between them. Bosque darted quickly to the side as the creature careened into the cauldron, spilling its boiling contents all over the ground and tripping into it. The hard fall had ripped more of the stitching on the beast's waist, spilling more of its mixed innards out and leaving the lower torso as dead weight. The smell of boiling flesh quickly filled the air as it thrashed around, breaking many of the potions on the tables. As some of the droplets met with the fire previously heating the cauldron, it flared up. Whatever was in these things, they were flammable. At least some of them were.

Bosque quickly threw as many beakers onto the monster as possible, hoping more of it might be able to catch. In one final strike, he lunged forward and plunged his torch into the monster, lighting it ablaze. The smell of burning flesh began to fill the air, and the monster's flailing caught the table ablaze as well. From the next room, shirt covering his nose, Bosque watched as the monster slowly ceased to move, its coherency lost, and finally reduced to a pile of viscera.

Bosque went back for his pack and followed the path that the villagers had taken out. It was a shorter walk from here to the basement than it was to get to the cemetery. Clearly, Vardin thought Bosque wouldn't be able to reach his lab, that a few shambling corpses would deter him. Perhaps he thought to try and trick Bosque into his lab just like the villagers, had he stayed. It didn't matter now. Bruised and beaten, he emerged back in the house. A villager holding his dagger greeted him nervously. "Did you kill it? Are we safe? Is it ov--"

Bosque interrupted him with one hand raised, and the other reaching for his pack. "It's dead. We'll have tomorrow to start cleaning up. From there it's on you. But now, I drink."



Talking to Myself

Elizabeth McDonald

My head bumped against the window as the bus swung around the corner of Elm and Kinsley Street. I didn't care enough to sit up, I just continued to stare out the bus window. Even with heavy rain outside, the sidewalks were still crowded with people. They kept their heads down with their hoods up. Everything blended together, the sky, the pavement, the people, all grey and dirty.

Stop. Get off here. Open the window and jump out the fucking bus. Stop here. What the hell are you doing?

Rainwater sprayed against the window. I blinked at my reflection. It wasn't like I was much better to look at. I'm not ugly; I'm just not worth a second glance. I still had a baby face and only 5'5". Most guys my age actually have muscle and facial hair. I only have freckles and acne. Puberty screwed me over. I closed my eyes, turning up the volume in my earbuds. The music acted as white noise to drown out the voices. I tried not to focus on the words. It was I Built a Friend, but the voices started intertwining with the words again.

Everybody body knows. They talk about it when you're not around. They want to get rid of you. They're lying to you. Kill yourself before they do. Just kill yourself. Don't.

I tried focusing on the other sounds around me. The hissing of the bus doors. A newborn crying. A woman yelling over the phone. A girl with very clicky heels. Cell phone notifications. The doors hissed shut again. The clicky heels getting closer.

"Hi."

I could tell she was standing in front of me, staring, but I refused to open my eyes and acknowledge her in hopes she would find another seat. It didn't work. I glanced over at her. Long blonde hair glowing from what little light was coming through the clouds, warm, honey-colored eyes, and freckles scattered all over her cheeks. Her chest stretched out the

front of her Def Leopard shirt allowing the edges of her black bra to peek over. Her freckles continued way past her face. She tossed her hair over her shoulder, put earbuds in, and looked out the opposite window. She's fucking gorgeous and of course, I had to be a complete dick and ignore her. Karama's a bitch that way. I stared down at the pastry box in my lap, nervously picking at the tape curling up on the edges. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed a small tattoo on her wrist; two small triangles stacked on top of each other. It suited her perfectly on her delicate wrist

Way to fuck up! She knows. They all know. They're all looking at him. What's wrong with you? She knows there's something wrong with you. She won't even look at you.

I didn't know what to do. She's cute and I wanted her to pay attention to me, but now she's not even looking at me. Pick-up lines always suck, all the conversation starters I could come up with sounded pathetic, and at this point, she probably hates me.

Great job, asshole. Run. Run. Run. Just shut up for once. We hate you. She hates you. Shut the fuck up. Get off the bus. Don't.

"I like your tattoo."

God, that was literally the lamest thing I could have possibly said. I could feel the blood pulsing in my face and body. Great.

She smiled. "Thank you, It's new."

I liked her smile. Okay, she's at least talking to me. Just gotta play it cool.

Is that even possible for you? Just stop. Stop. Stop. Why is he doing this?

"Does it mean something special?"

"Create your own reality." She looked down, rubbing her thumb over it as if to make sure it wasn't going to come off

"That's really cool."

Shit. I didn't know what to say now.

The blonde girl twisted in her seat, "So, what's in the box?"

I forgot I was even holding it. "Cannolis."

"Cool. I love cannolis. My grandmother made the best homemade cannolis with oranges and chocolate chips."

"My Nana always makes them Christmas and it drives her insane when I don't eat them."

"You don't like cannolis?"

I shook my head smiling. The look on her face was priceless.

"I'm Rose, by the way."

"Leo."

"Gemini."

I laughed. Not because it was that funny. I hear that joke way too often for it to be funny anymore. She just made me happy.

bing bing "Brighten."

"Um. This is my stop." I didn't want to leave. I knew I probably wouldn't see her again.

"It was nice to meet you, Leo," Rose said, smiling.

I tightened my grip on the seat, trying to think of a witty response. There was an uncomfortable pause now. "Bye." I gave a quick wave before hurrying to the door. Rose smirked but waved back.

Fuck! It wasn't like I could have asked for her number or some shit like that, but still. I wanted to get back on the bus, but how would I explain that without looking like a stalker. I stood there in front of the bus stop for God knows how long. I didn't want to go back home. Mom was having one of her episodes again and demanded cannolis. It was weird, but it helped her.

A blue, Jeep Wrangler sped by drenching a good half of the pastry box, not to mention me.

"Jesus!" I tried to protect the box from the rain with the corner of my

hoodie, but at this point, it really didn't help much.

2-2-7-6. 2-2-7-6. I bet you wish you forgot that code. It'll be for the best. Listen. He hears us. 2-2-7-6. 2-2-7-6! I know you hear us! Do it! Don't.

I blasted My Name is Human in my earbuds, ignoring my danger notification on my phone. It was only background noise to me. All the same, maybe it would help if I went deaf.

"Hey!"

I looked up to see Rose standing in the middle of the sidewalk. She was drenched from the rain and her thin t-shirt clung to her body, concealing nothing. Of course, on the other hand, I didn't see the bench in front of me until I tripped over the damn thing and dropping the cannolis everywhere.

"Shit!"

"Oh my God! I'm sorry!"

"It's not your fault."

"Were they really important?" She wiped back the hair sticking to her face and tried to pick up the box, but it just broke more.

"It's fine. They were for my mom."

Rose wiped her hands off on her jeans. "I'm sure she'll understand."

Yeah," I said watching the cannoli filling melt into the cement. My mom was actually going to have an actual mental breakdown.

"Hey. If you want, there is a little Italian bakery a block away from here. They sell cannolis. We could get more there," she said, hugging her arms around herself. "If anything, it'll be dry."

"Sure."

Rose smiled, hugging her arms around her waist. She had to be freezing. I shrugged out of my hoodie, offering it to her.

"Thank you!" She wrapped it around herself quickly. "Ok, let's go,"

Rose said, grabbing my hand. I let her pull me. I wasn't going to miss another opportunity to be with her and at least I wouldn't have to go home just yet.

Rose insisted on a sitting at this small table at the front of the diner with a little fern centerpiece. I really wasn't a fan of sitting out in the open like this, but I didn't feel like arguing with her. I could at least stare out the window and watch cars go by.

If you stood in the middle of the road, they probably wouldn't stop. Listen. Let us help you. Listen! You could be done with this. You know it's only going to get worse. Be exactly like your mom. Trust us, you don't want that. He's going to die.

I looked back at Rose who was chewing her lip as she scanned the laminated menu. Her hair was almost dry now. She hugged my hoodie tighter around her when the front door opened again. Her shirt still hadn't dried yet. Rose caught me staring and made a face.

"What will you be having today, sweetie?"

I stiffened at the name. A middle-aged waitress with a bad dye job and long, fake nails was looking directly at me. I knew I looked young for my age, so getting called "sweetie" just rubbed it in. I glanced over at Rose, still embarrassed. She was staring at out the window, ignoring the waitress.

"Two coffees and a cannoli."

"Two cannolis!"

"Two cannolis."

"Sure thing, honey."

"Thank you, Katie." The waitress flicked her eyes up at me and frowned before walking away. Rose and I looked at each other and burst out laughing.

"If you stood in the middle of the road, they probably wouldn't stop. Listen. Let us help you. Listen! You could be done with this."

Rose devoured her cannoli as soon as we got them. It was almost comical watching her choose the one with the most chocolate chips and filling. I sat back with my coffee, smiling as she licked the filling off her lips.

"Hungry?" I teased.

"Hey! These are amazing! How have you not eaten yours already?"

I pushed mine plate over to her.

"Aren't you hungry?"

"I don't like cannolis," I said taking another sip of my coffee.

"You know, I really didn't believe you when you said that. How can you not like cannolis?" Rose was already halfway through mine now, sucking some extra filling off her thumb.

"It's sugar wrapped in sugar sprinkled with sugar."

"Sugar is brain food."

I'll keep that in mind."

My phone buzzed. It was St. Elizabeth's Hospital. I hesitated.

Don't answer it. They're coming to get you. They know. You already know what they're going to say. You'll ruin this. Stop! They can't help you. They'll put you on meds. Turn you into your mom.

"Go ahead. It's fine," Rose said, tracing her fingers around her plate.

"Hello?"

"Leo McCallan?"

"Yes."

"Hi, this is Dr. Jonathan Blackman. Your test results from this morning are all in. I already scheduled an appointment in my office at 9:15 a.m. to go over the results. If you want to bring someone with you, family member or friends, you can, that's totally up to you. Do you have any questions for me?"

"No."

"Okay. Well, if you do, feel free to call me at this number."

"Okay."

I hung up and closed my eyes.

Run. Run now! They'll put you on meds. Why the fuck did you even bother? You knew this would happen. He's going to die. You're another experiment to them. They'll break you like they did your mom. No one will help you. Just kill yourself or they will.

"You ok?" Rose was studying my face.

"Yeah, just the hospital calling."

"Is everything ok? Do you need to go?"

My eyes burned. I tried to ignore the voices, the things I saw in the corner of my eye, and all the crazy assumptions. Telling myself they weren't real. But I mean, Jesus, did I honestly think that they would just go away?

He's so scared. And alone. Always alone. It's okay. Even she hates him. Watching him. It'll be over soon.

"Leo?"

You know where it is. 2-2-7-6. No one will even miss you. He's going to do it. You will do it.

"I'm fine." My throat hurt too much to say more.

"Look, you don't have to tell me. I mean, we're practically strangers, but please don't lie to me or feel like you have to act like everything's ok."

"I'm fine, really."

Rose pushed her seat back and walked around to my side of the booth.

"Skootch over."

I moved against the wall. Rose slide next to me and pressing her cheek into my shoulder. She interlocked her fingers with mine and pulled my other arm around her, so it rested right against her chest. Her hair made a curtain around her face, revealing her slender neck and collarbone. My breath hitched a little. I leaned into her, closing my eyes, focusing on her. She smelled like vanilla and lavender.

"It's going to be okay," she whispered, breath tickling my neck. If she was trying to be distracting, it was working almost perfectly. Almost.

"You know, you say that, but it won't be."

Rose curled up closer, squeezing my hand tighter. "Tell me."

Don't tell her. She knows. Why do you ruin everything? Stop. Stop. Don't tell her. Everyone's looking.

"I have schizophrenia. The doctors will probably be putting me on meds soon, but those will do shit. So, yeah, it's not going to be okay."

She turned her face towards mine, tears brimming. I looked at down at my coffee. It looked all wavy and unfocused.

"I'm so sorry, Leo. I had no idea." Her voiced cracked at the end.

Shit! Rose was crying. Why did I have to say that? I just had to ruin this.

"Really, it's okay. It's not all that bad. I don't even know why I'm telling you this."

Rose circled her thumb around the back of my hand, breathing getting steady again.

"You're lonely. Sometimes it's easier to talk to strangers."

"Yeah."

"Talk to me."

"I'm scared. My mom has it too. She can't function on her own anymore. I don't remember her not on meds. Growing up, my biggest fear was becoming like her. I somehow always I knew I was going to have schizophrenia too."

Get used to it. No one will understand. We only understand. Everyone else hates you. Just shut up! Shut up! She will leave you. They all do.

"What can I do?"

I cut my thumbnail into the fake fern leaf. My eyes burning from holding back tears. I turned to the window blinking them away. "I just need someone to talk to. Honestly, you've done more than enough. Thank you."

"You know, I could use a friend and you're lonely and clinically depressed. I know all your biggest secret and you know my favorite food, so we could be like friends or something. We aren't really strangers anymore now."

I laughed, not really processing what was happening. "Sounds a little one-sided."

"Hey, do you want my number or not?"

"Yes."

Rose sat up a little, wiping her eyes with the palm of her hand. "Ok then. Tell me about yourself. What are you into, your favorite color, the name of your childhood pet, social security number, and ect.?"

"Blue, Max, and no," I said, unable to keep from smiling. "I listen to a lot of music. I was a drummer in a band for a while."

"There's an old music store just down from here. They sell old records and shit. Maybe, we could find you some better music."

"My taste in music is just fine!"

"Are you kidding? It sucks!" She held up my phone. "You're listening

to Justin Timberlake. You need help. Thankfully for you, I have fantastic taste in music."

She stood, still holding my hand.

"Wow. So humble," I tease, gently pulling her closer.

"It's one of my best qualities," she said smirking, tugging the one earbud from her ear.

"Oh, I left my phone." I let go of her hand, turning back to the table to grab it. I stopped mid-reach. Next to my phone were two untouched canolis.

"Rose?" I turned around. I was alone.

He's alone. You've always been alone. No one is here you. They all leave. But we're here. We're always here. Why is he even alive still?

I sat back down in the booth, holding the coffee mug in my hands. It was cold now. I'm not sure how long I sat there before I noticed Rose sitting across the table from me.

"You coming?"

I didn't look at her. It happened again.

"Hello?"

"Shut up! You're not real. You're just another fucked up hallucination."

"I can be real if you want me to be."

I laughed, but it almost sounded like crying.

"I'm just saying. I'm better than the alternative." She sat down across from me looking defeated. "I want to stay here with you."

We stared at each other. I ran my hands through my hair and exhaled. I noticed her tattoo poking out from under my sweatshirt.

"Fine, but you'll have to pay the tip then."

"Jerk."



Party Like It's 2018 by Shaun McGraw



Words Are Power by Shaun McGraw

GLOW by Shaun McGraw



Blood Rose

Cedes Doherty

Every inch of my skin is coated in sweat, my heart pounds in my chest relentlessly trying to escape the torment I now face. I almost hope it will if it were only my life, I was running for I would give in to the pains in my legs and cramps in my stomach urging me to stop, to rest just for a moment. Instead, I use all of my fading strength to force my legs faster, my lungs strain against the exertion. My normally straight, fiery hair is matted in wet clumps, plastered to my head, neck, and back, yet somehow it still manages to fall in front of my eyes obscuring my vision. Stumbling on a root, curses fly from my mouth as it causes me to slow. I clench my teeth as I fight the growing pain, forcing myself to move faster still, faster than I have ever run in my life.

It feels as if I have been running for hours, and maybe I have, leading them deeper into the woods than anyone has a right to be. Away from the only thing that matters to me anymore. The only thing that has mattered for four years now. A memory from before starts to surface. With strength from years of practice, I shove it back where it belongs. Out of mind. I cannot afford distractions, not now.

Despair starts to weaken my resolve. Surely, I should have lost them by now, I think to myself. No one knows these woods as well as I, yet I can still hear them crashing through the forest. They do not bother with stealth anymore as they steadily close in on me.

There are three men on my trail each spread out as if hoping to outrun me and box me in. Which, given the state I'm in, is very possible. Knowing I can't go on much longer and hoping with every bit of my soul that I have led them far enough from her, that she is safe, I make a plan. A plan that is likely to get me killed or at the very least seriously injured if it does not go perfectly. Fortunately, I have little reason to doubt my skills, present exhaustion aside.

I put on a burst of speed until I'm sure they can't see me through the

dense, green foliage and find a giant of a tree with a sturdy branch fifteen feet off the ground. I quickly scale the tree, easily finding hand and foot holds to support my petite frame, and carefully inch out on the branch so I'm directly over the path that the far-left man is currently on. People rarely think to look up.

I slowly ease Sorrow from her sheath at my waist. My dagger rests comfortably in my hand as I watch their approach with cautious eyes. The man I'm waiting for is easily three times my weight and at least a foot and a half taller. Even though I know I'm an excellent fighter, perhaps one of the best there is, the odds are heavily against me. Just as I predicted the mountainous man is on a path the leads directly under my hiding place. As long as he does not veer off course my plan should work. Or it will go horribly wrong and I'll be crushed in his massive arms.

"Eridesia, come out, come out wherever you are," he calls in a sing-song voice at odds with his deep tenor. He smiles a malicious grin as he continues towards me. He is definitely overdoing the creepy henchman. I shake my head slightly. I look to the others and see they are walking almost completely parallel to each other, which makes my job a hell of a lot easier.

Adrenaline pours through my body in anticipation. A small smile graces my lips as my stalker approaches. At least this part I'll enjoy. I ignore the voice in the back of my head reminding me how small my chances of success are and what my failure would mean. I focus solely on my objective. The men had slowed when my erratic fleeing was silenced. They now move cautiously through the spongy undergrowth. My first target is only four steps away from being directly under my perch. My body quivers in exhilaration.

Three.

His foot comes down heavily on a fallen stick leaving a resounding crack in the air.

Two.

He glances around slowly, studying bushes and peering at the trees looking for any place I might be hiding. Not once does he look up.

One.

I don't think, letting instinct and years of training guide me, as I drop down Sorrow in hand aiming for his heart.

I crash into him sending him sprawling to the ground with a muffled thud as I plunge my beloved dagger deep into his chest. The momentum of our fall gave me the strength I needed. Sorrow finds her home in his heart willingly. Crimson blood soaks his shirt, spreading out from his wound like a gruesome flower. I turn my head to my right, waiting for his comrades to come charging through the forest. Only they are still moving forward. The fight, if it could be called that, must have only been thunderously loud in my head.

Barely daring to breathe a sigh of relief I remove Sorrow from the dead man's chest and sprint towards the next minion, my next victim. My haphazard and harried approach alerts him to my presence. He turns toward me while calling to his remaining partner over his shoulder. I bring my hand back over my shoulder and fling it forward releasing my dagger. She soars end over end until her flight is arrested, burying herself hilt deep in my would-be assailant's throat. Blood, black in the fading light of early twilight, pours forth around the dagger. His hands feebly rise to his throat from which a bubbling gurgle is rising and crumples to the forest floor in a heap as the life leaves his body. I dash forward to remove my dagger and notice my final aggressor charging. I run towards him. Right before we collide, I grab a branch above me and swing myself forward, kicking him squarely in the chest with both feet. He grunts as his back slams into the ground, air knocked from his lungs. I quickly drop to the ground, intending to backtrack for my weapon. I take in my enemy's features and freeze.

Dirty blonde hair, kelly green eyes, pale white skin covered in light brown freckles. The face of my childhood. Nicholas had been my best and only friend since our births, which occurred within hours of each other. My eyes meet his and I see pain and guilt there but also a darkness that shakes me to my core.

"Nick-"

I start not knowing what to say. He saves me from figuring it out by tackling me to the ground and pinning me beneath him. He pulls a knife from his boot and brings it to my throat preparing to end my life. I struggle beneath him knowing it's useless I could never overpower him. I feel tears fill my eyes and spill over my cheeks. This is not how I imagined my end. Recognition and fear flash across Nick's face. The knife presses closer and I flinch instinctively. As though my movement startled him, his grip relaxes slightly. Taking my chance, I bring my leg up between our bodies and knee him in the stomach as hard as I can. Nicholas rolls to the side in pain and I quickly straddle his hips slamming the hilt of my dagger into his head and rendering him unconscious. I look down into his face and know that the only way to protect her is to leave no witnesses. Leaning down I gently press my lips to his, barely a whisper of a kiss as tears stream down my face.

"I'm sorry," I whisper as though he can hear me. "But I must protect her."

I bring Sorrow to his throat and close my eyes. Without opening them I drag my dagger through his flesh. Ignoring the hot blood that sprays from his neck and coats my chest. I stay with him a moment longer. For the first time the sorrow I caused was my own. Remembering my purpose, I clean his and his comrades' blood from my dagger and brush the tears from my face.

A thought flits around the edges of my mind. I struggle to grasp it. A sharp gasp escapes me. I realize something that should have been clear to me as soon as I recognized Nicholas. As soon as the hunt started really. My pulse pounds like never before as my heart is squeezed by the icy hand of terror. Before I even make the conscious decision to move, I'm fleeing back to the place I have used all my energy left behind. I finally understand who had sent those men after me, only my terror can explain my lapse. No one else would have known to look for me here. No one else has lackeys that know these woods well enough to track me.

There is only one person in the world that could get Nicholas Dunning to fight me. One person that could turn my kind-hearted friend, that could not kill a rabbit without shedding a tear, into an assassin.

*“Leaning down I gently press my lips to his,
barely a whisper of a kiss as tears stream
down my face.”*

Alexander Valentine.

I run as fast as I can manage. It seems my life has been naught but running. But I do not care, I would run an eternity for her. I slow to a light jog when my breath comes too quick and hard to keep up my pace. Black dots dance on the edge of my vision, but I refuse to stop. I continue at full speed once my breathing has evened out. I stumble over exposed roots when normally not even the pitch black of a new moon could slow me down. My clumsiness infuriates me. Exhausted from turning hours' worth of journeying into an hour I nearly collapse. I have never pushed my stamina to such a dangerous limit.

The sun has long since set, bathing the forest in darkness but for the thin beams of moonlight that pass through the canopy of branches above. Straining my eyes, I breathe a sigh of relief when I see the branches covering the secret den, we discovered earlier are undisturbed. I hurriedly brush them aside and crawl into the hide-a-hole calling out as I do.

“Cressida? Cressida!”

I frantically search the small space, my fear spiking when there is no answer. Hopelessly I sweep my hands over the ground, searching for some sign of her. My little sister, not yet ten summers, is gone and in her place is a rose. Which I know that if I were to examine it in light would be snow white but for a splattering of red blood. Valentine's perverse calling card, so his enemies know that whatever atrocity has occurred was his doing. Despair consumes me as I realize that I was too late, that I have failed in carrying out my mother's dying wish. My entire purpose in life. Protect Cressida, no matter what.

Heaving sobs rack my body as I hug my knees to my chest pressing my

face to them. I drown in my misery knowing that what remained of my family was ripped away from me. No! I cannot think like that! She is not lost to me until her lifeless body is resting in my arms. I clench my jaw in renewed determination, bite my lower lip and squeeze my eyes shut, attempting to put an end to my tears, and force myself to think through the waves of agony.

Valentine may be evil, but his mind for tactics cannot be denied. He never does something without reason. Why would Valentine take Cressida? Why not just kill her and leave her body for me to find? I wince at the thought. After all, it is me he's been trying to capture all these years not her.

My entire being freezes at that. My sister is being held by a madman in order to get to me. To force me to come to him after he had failed in his attempts to trap me. His plan will be a success too, for there is no way I could ever leave Cressida in danger. I must save my sister, without her there is nothing left worth living for. The only upside is the shock of my horrid discovery stopped my gut-wrenching sobs.

Opening my eyes, I see what I have been too distracted to notice before, a gleaming silver short-sword with an intricately carved hilt and a piece of parchment next to it. Grabbing both, I crawl from my temporary safe haven to inspect them in the moonlight. I gasp in equal parts horror and wonder when I bring the hilt of the sword into the light, there in curling letters is my name just as it was ten years ago when it was given to me on my birthday. I run fingers over the hilt before securing it on my belt as well as I can without a proper sheath. I turn my attention to the parchment and immediately wish I had not.

My Dearest Eridesia,

I seem to have found myself in possession of something very dear to you and while I will do my best to make sure it remains in pristine condition, I can make no promises. I am looking forward to our meeting as I am sure you are.

Sincerely,

Valentine

Droplets of dried blood, that I can only assume came from Cressida, dot the bottom of the parchment. I tighten my hand into a fist clumping the parchment before throwing it on the ground. I resist the juvenile urge to stomp on it and set about looking for signs of passage. Every minute it takes me to find them is another minute that Cressida is at his mercy. And although he prides himself on being a man of honor, I do not trust that he will stop his underlings from doing untold things to her.

I easily find the path he took, even someone who had never before entered a forest would be able to discern his trail. Clearly, he wants to be found. I set out on the fluorescent path left in Valentine's wake in search of my little sister. Desperation covers my body like a wicked coat of arms.

It does not take long to find them. I have not been searching a quarter of an hour when I reach a clearing. Cressida and I had found it earlier in the day and remarked on its beauty. Almost perfectly circular, surrounded by tall evergreens and filled with bright yellow, blue and pink wildflowers. In the middle of the paradise turned horror scene, Cressida's arm is being held in the vise tight grip of a thick set, barrel-chested man.

From my place at the edge of the clearing, hidden among the underbrush, I watch as Cressida squirms against his hold. Her raven curls matted with dirt and twigs swing about her face as she pulls her leg back and brings it forward, kicking him in the groin. If not for the dire circumstances I would laugh in approval.

"You little bitch," he grunts. A movement to my right draws my attention and I

painstakingly turn away from my sister. On the far side of the clearing is a broad-shouldered

man, with jet-black hair and handsome, if plain features. The moment I lay eyes on him my vision goes red and an animalistic growl builds in my throat. I straighten and take a step forward ready to launch Sorrow straight into his chest when Cressida yelps in pain. I whip my head to the side to see a scarlet line running from the knife at her throat to the bodice of her dress. I adjust my aim and shout.

"Now, Cressida!"

She does not hesitate, and pride fills my chest as she rears back breaking his nose and his hold when she headbutts him. I release my dagger and just as Cressida slips away into the woods Sorrow pierces his forehead. His body falls lifelessly to the ground.

"Ah, Eridesia darling, I was beginning to think you would not make it," Valentine drawls in his deep voice turning to face me.

I snarl a round of curses that would make most girls my age blush in horror as I make my way further into the clearing meeting his eyes for the first time in years. A testament to how well he trained me. He stares coldly back at me.

"You look just like your mother." He does not say it as a compliment but an accusation.

My heart clenches and I barely resist the urge to scream at him for mentioning her.

"Let's just get this over with," I growl.

"As you wish," he bows.

Walking forward he pulls the sword from the scabbard at his hip. I hurriedly free mine from the makeshift sheath at my side. As soon as the sword is in my hands Valentine charges forward bringing his own down in a deadly arc. I scramble backward

barely managing to parry the blow. I regain my footing and strike back unsuccessfully.

Strike. Parry. Lunge. Retreat.

On and on it goes. My exhaustion shows as he gains the advantage. I should not have worn myself out like I did. I feint to the left, knowing the only way to get a break in his defenses is to make him believe he has a shot to kill me. He takes the bait with a manic glint in his eyes. I lunge forward dropping down on one knee and slice through his thigh, blood immediately spurts from the wound and he falls. I rush forward and knock the sword from his grasp before he can recover enough to stand. I stand above him the tip of my sword at his neck, if he so much as takes a

full breath his carotid artery will be cut and his life over.

“You’re not going to kill me are you, Eri?” he whispers. The use of my old nickname pulls at my heart. I tense my arm to make the cut and make the mistake of looking in his eyes.

Staring into his cobalt orbs, the exact same shade as Cressida’s, I know I will not be able to do it. This man threatened my sister’s life, tore my family apart, killed my mother, turned my friend into a killer and forced me to kill him, yet I cannot bring myself to kill Valentine.

I shake my head in regret and turn around. I start towards the place where Cressida disappeared into the forest but do not make it. I feel a flash of white-hot pain. I look down to see Valentine’s sword, wet with blood, my blood, sticking out of my chest. I fall to my knees and the last thing I hear before the darkness engulfs me is Valentine’s whisper in my ear.

“Goodbye, my daughter.”



Photos by Anamaria Torres

Small Talk

Aubrey Ketcham

The lights in the coffee shop were bright, but he sat in the darkest corner he could find. He didn't go to the bar anymore because his previous career brought him there too often — on and off the clock. It'd brought back a time in his life that wasn't necessarily bad, just different. He'd only been retired for a few years, so when he saw the blue and red lights flashing above a black and white Dodge Charger and heard the unmistakable piercing siren, he'd associated with crime. He couldn't help but turn toward the giant glass window in the front of the café. The car was headed south, and for a moment he put himself behind the wheel calling for backup on his radio because gunshots had been heard.

"More coffee?"

His head snapped up from his hands propped up by his elbows as he looked at the young waitress. He blinked a few times and cleared his throat, replacing his glasses on his face.

"Please," he said in his deep voice, pushing the mustard-yellow mug with the back of his hand toward her. A drop of coffee landed on the table as she pulled the steaming pot away from pouring.

"You just started workin'?" he asked, still not removing his stare from the mug.

"How could you tell?" her eyes grew wide as she looked at him.

"I been coming here a long time," he replied, and after a few seconds he added, "and don't reply to a question with another question."

"Sorry, mister," she replied shortly. She started back to the counter, but before she got far, he'd cut her off.

"Why don't you sit down for a little bit?" he called to her, his stare still on the mug. As expected, she was a bit hesitant, but despite her doubts,

she started walking back to where he sat.

"My boss doesn't let us —"

"I know your boss well. He ain't gonna give you no problems."

"How do you know him?" she asked, eyebrow cocked.

"He was a cop before he opened this place," his stare finally broke from the mug as he looked at her.

"You were arrested?" her brows furrowed. "I'm sorry, I don't like cops either."

He chuckled under his breath before answering. "We worked together ten years. I'd say you get to know a guy pretty well in that time span."

Her face turned a bright red as he spoke. "Oh, I — I'm sorry sir... it's just —"

"No worries. I get that a lot. Take it with a grain of salt." His reassurance made her blush fade and the corners of her lips tugged into a small grin for the first time.

"What's your reasoning?" he broke the silence of a few seconds.

"Reasoning?"

"Behind hating cops," he clarified.

"Oh..." her voice trailed off a bit. "It's a lot to get into..."

He glanced at his watch. "I've got time."

Before speaking, she drew in a deep breath. She'd never met this man in her life, but that was part of the reason she felt she could talk to him. "My brother used to go to the bar a lot. He was a bit of an alcoholic, but I could never get through to him. He denied he had a problem, which I guess is normal."

He nodded his head slowly to show his interest in her story but returned his gaze to the coffee mug rather than her.

“He liked to fight a lot, too.”

“He liked to fight a lot, too. Ever since we were kids, there were always calls coming home from school saying that Donny had gotten into another fight...”

He raised his head once more so that his eyes met hers and he lowered his brows as if trying to remember something. He was put back into the police car of his day-dream before, rushing to the scene at the bar.

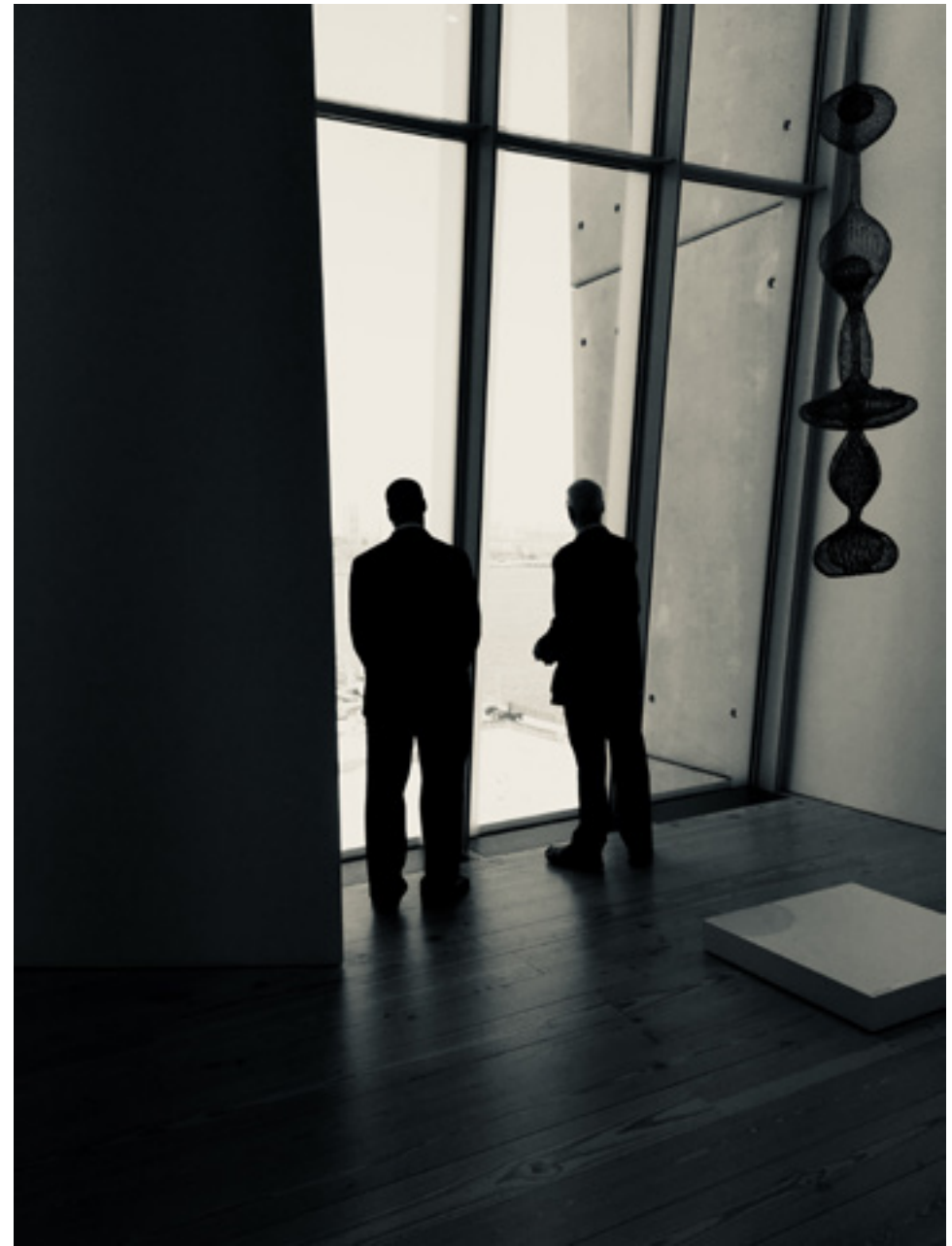
“There was one night—I guess he must have had more alcohol than usual—that had gotten a little out of hand. Dad says he was looking for trouble and he got what he deserved, but I don’t like to think that way. His girlfriend of two years had broken up with him that night, so of course, he was upset. And of course, he didn’t come home. The bar was where he ended up, and he had a gun on him. I don’t know where he got it from, but I know it wasn’t his. He didn’t own one,” she shuffled in her seat uncomfortably before continuing. “There was a fight that had started between my brother and another man. They say my brother initiated it, which I guess isn’t too hard to believe, but I don’t think he’s the one who fired the first shot,” she paused a moment to collect herself.

“There were shots fired?” he asked, cut short from his day-dream again.

“Yeah,” her voice cracked as she spoke. She cleared her throat before continuing. “That’s when the police were called, and a few minutes later they showed up with guns pointed at my brother. The last words he ever heard were from a man in a police uniform with a deep voice... —”

“Drop your weapon,” he interrupted.

Her eyes met his, and for a moment they were locked. He broke his stare, finished his coffee, left a dollar on the table, and before she could say another word, he was out of the café.



Whitney Museum, April 2018 by Tom Stock

Sara Kali

Jaida Thomas

“You’re acting like you don’t have people who love you!” He yelled back at me. I was crying and I was frustrated, and I just wanted this day to end. “I know that, but you don’t understand, and I feel like nobody ever will! I feel like all I have is myself because I can’t talk to anybody about it without looking crazy...”

Earlier that day:

It was the start of senior year and to say I was ready to graduate was an understatement. Sashaying down the hall to my locker, I saw my long-lost ex-boyfriend leaning against the locker next to mine. I was not beat for the drama and I definitely didn’t have time for birds. Ignoring him, I opened my locker and placed my bag in there, only taking out one notebook and a pen, and closed my locker.

“I know you see me standing her,” he said. I closed my eyes and counted back from ten in my head. Once I got to one, I gave him a fake smile and walked around him to my fourth-period class. No drama.

Walking into the bathroom, I stood in front of the mirror, looked at my appearance and took a deep breath. Fixing my clothes, I slowly closed my eyes and opened them. I was dark skin with slanted hazel eyes and full pouty lips. I was thick. Not the slim waist, big hips and big thighs thick. (Which I figured every girl wanted to look like.) The big stomach, big hips and big, high thighs thick. At this point, I didn’t know what people talked about more. Me being “fat” or me being dark as hell. I didn’t have low self-esteem but there were days when I thought I could look better. One thing my mother told me was to never give people the satisfaction of letting them know they hurt my feelings. They’d use it against me. I swallowed my tears and smiled.

After leaving out the bathroom, I made my way to the cafeteria. I looked around at all the faces and spotted my friends sitting at our usual table.

I instantly got happy. I greeted each one before sitting down. There was Zenobia, Isis, Sierra, Gevontae, Damien and Torrence. They’ve been my friends since I moved here. Out of all my friends, well the girls, I should say I was the strong friend. I never shed one tear in front of them, no nothing. I was the one they would come to with all their problems.

“Mamas, you good?” Gevontae asked me.

I smiled and nodded my head even though I felt like I was close to having a mental breakdown. I was having an inner battle with my mental and I slowly felt like I was losing. He hesitated and it seemed like he wanted to say something but decided against it which I was grateful for.

After school, we all decided to go to the basketball court. There was supposed to be a game today and I was looking forward to it. Sitting down on the bleachers, I watched all the kids play around the park. They looked so happy and carefree.

“We should all go get matching tattoos this weekend,” Sierra said.

Isis looked at her like she was crazy, and I couldn’t help but laugh. “First of all, you know my parents don’t play that. If I come home with a tattoo, the next time y’all see me is going to be at my funeral,” she said before shaking her head.

Sierra sucked her teeth. “So, get it somewhere they can’t see. You always covered up anyways,” she said before rolling her eyes.

“Not everyone wants to show their body Sierra, but I mean you wouldn’t know that.” she said before eyeing her attire.

These two would argue every day about the same thing. “You know what? Ima let that slide, sis,” Sierra said before focusing on the crowd in front of her.

“I’m down to get a tattoo. I need some new ink anyway.” Torrence said before looking at both his arms. Everybody else agreed and we left it at that.

It was now the third quarter and the west side was beating the south side by 10 points. I heard Damien talking to some guys below us saying how

the west side better win because he put money on them. I shook my head at him and focused my attention back on the game. One of the boys on the west side was getting ready to take a shot when the ball got stolen and then this continued for a good two minutes before someone on the south side actually got a point.

"Where are we going after this?" Zenobia asked.

Isis looked down at her phone.

"Let's go to the chicken joint across the way. On me," Damien said.

Sierra snorted. "That's if you actually win that money," she said.

Damien looked at her and nodded his head. "See your mouth is what be getting you in trouble. I was going to pay regardless if I got the money or not. You could pay for yourself now though," he said before texting away on his phone.

"Damien, I don't need you to pay for me anyway. You act like you're the only who's ballin'," she said.

He cheesed at her. "That's because I am baby. Now be quiet I'm trynna watch the rest of the game."

The west side ended up beating the south side 60 to 54. I watched as Damien stepped down off of the bleachers and collected his money.

Gevontae wrapped his arm around me and looked out at the people. "You good?" he asked me.

I nodded my head and texted my mother back.

"Are you sure?" he asked turning to face me.

Gevontae was never the type of person to keep asking you the same question. Once you gave him an answer he was off the subject. So, for him to keep asking me if I was good low-key shocked me.

"I'm straight," I said.

He looked at me for a minute before nodding his head. "My crew, lets

go," Damien said.

"Son out here sounding like somebody mother," Torrence said laughing.

"Yup and while y'all with me I am your mother, so let's go!" He yelled before walking towards the parking lot.

We were all sitting in a both just talking away, waiting for our food to come. I excused myself and went to the bathroom. There were four females standing in front of the mirror putting on makeup. One looked at me and rolled her eyes. I shook my head and went into a stall to use the bathroom.

"Did you just see her?" I heard one girl asked. "Mmhmm." Another responded.

I closed my eyes and counted back from 10. I wasn't about to waste my time on no female who wasn't benefiting me. When I was done using the bathroom, I stepped out the stall and moved one of the girls to the side so I could wash my hands.

"Did you just push me?" she asked. I rolled my eyes at her and didn't respond.

"She touched you?" One of her friends asked.

I dried my hands and looked at them. "Y'all not about that so please don't try it," I said before walking out the door.

The girls decided to sit in the booth behind us and I could feel something about to happen. I noticed that Torrence would occasionally look behind us and I seen Sierra do the same thing too. We all had no filter but those two couldn't keep their mouths shut for nothing.

"Y'all good? Y'all need something?" Torrence asked them. We all turned around and looked at them. "You good? You need something?"

The girl that rolled her eyes at me asked him. Torrence clicked his tongue against his tooth and nodded. Before he could stand up, Isis pulled on his arm and shook her head. "They not even worth it so don't even say nothing," she said.

“Okay,” he said.

Nothing else was said between Torrence and the girl for the rest of the night. Before the girls left, the one that was sitting directly in the back of me, slid me a note between the sides of the booth. I wasn’t going to read it until I was by myself because if everyone read it, whatever the note even said, they would start a problem.

It was going on 9:30 and we were getting ready to leave. I stepped outside and took the note out of my pocket. Reading it, I felt a pain in my chest. They would stoop that low. I took a deep breath and swallowed the lump I had in my throat and placed the note back in my pocket.

“Come on we’re leaving,” Zenobia said while intertwining her arm with mine. I smiled at her and we walked towards the car.

I was currently sitting in my bed thinking about the letter. I was trying to figure out how they knew and most importantly who told them. It happened a couple of years ago and no matter how hard I tried to forget it and move on, I couldn’t. The lump in my throat came back and I was sitting here fighting back tears. No matter how high I build this wall up to protect me, it always keeps crumbling down. I try to be so strong and not let things get to me, but I see that I’m failing. So, I just let them spill.

There was a knock at my door. Wiping my tears away and trying to remain calm, I pushed myself off of the bed and opened my door. There stood Gevontae with an annoyed look on his face. I moved to the side and let him in. Watching his every move, I went and sat down on my bed. He didn’t say nothing, he just placed a piece of paper on my lap. Opening it, I seen it was the note. I closed my eyes and counted back slowly from 10. If you couldn’t tell by now, that was my way of calming myself down.

It felt like a long time before we said anything to each other. “Why didn’t you show me this at the diner?” he asked me.

I shrugged and looked out the window. “I didn’t want to bother anyone with my problems. It’s better if I keep it to myself,” I replied.

“You know how dumb that sounds? You know you could come to me,

any of us, and we would be there for you,” he said looking down at me.

I shrugged again. “I don’t want to bother anyone with my problems,” I repeated. I could tell from his body language that he was getting mad.

“I don’t even see you right now. If anything, why would you hide that from me?” he asked. I felt the lump in my throat and at this point, I didn’t care about the tears.

“You’re acting like you don’t have people who love you!” he yelled at me.

By this time, I was crying, and I was frustrated, and I just wanted this day to end.

“I know that, but you don’t understand, and I feel like nobody ever will! I feel like all I have is myself because I can’t talk to anybody about it without looking crazy!” I yelled back at him. “You don’t understand what goes on in my head. You don’t understand what I have to go through on a day to day basis. I’m tired of always being the strong one.” I said while wiping my tears.

“So why don’t you stop trying to be strong all the time? Why can’t you let someone help you for once? You tell me you’re always fine and I see that you’re not so why don’t you say anything?” he asked.

“I just told you why,” I said. He sat down on the bed and pulled me into a hug.

Twenty minutes passed before we said anything. We sat in a comfortable silence or at least I felt like it was a comfortable silence.

“Do you know why your mom named you Sara Kali?” he asked me.

“It’s supposed to mean ‘Black Princess’ or something like that,” I said.

He nodded his head. “That is what it means. She was of noble birth and was chief of her tribe on the banks of the Rhone. I think that’s somewhere in France. Anyways, you’re a beautiful black princess Sara Kali and don’t let nobody tell you otherwise. Okay?” he asked.

I nodded my head.

“We’re not going to entertain this little note. What they say shouldn’t matter. Don’t let what happened define you.”

I took his words into consideration and my whole mindset on him changed. I needed to find myself and I knew just how to do that.



Photos by Anamaria Torres

Mistakes & Mischief

Skyeler Brodkorb

In 2010, I was in my sophomore year at Little Falls High School. Things were going pretty well. I didn't have an amazing grade point average or anything, but I was surviving. I had a lot of friends, and most of my classmates liked me. My teachers always said I had "so much potential" but "needed to apply myself more."

My friends and I sat at the only big, long, rectangular table in the cafeteria. If you've ever watched Game of Thrones or anything medieval, our cafeteria was set up somewhat like a royal dining hall: one huge table where most of the athletes sat, and then the rest of the room was filled with small, circular tables.

Our table was split pretty evenly between two of the classic high school archetypes: "preps" and "skater kids." There was a lot of crossover in those days between these two cliques. Since I'm twenty-four years old, I use the term "in those days" loosely, but...things change, sometimes more rapidly than we realize.

Anyway, I belonged to the second of these two groups of people. I had at various points in time played sports for my school but was not currently doing so. I had fallen in love with music and the whole counter-culture vibe of skateboarding. I had long hair, wore skinny jeans, and probably said "dude" about twenty times a day. I also smoked a ton of weed, but that's not exactly relevant to this story.

There was a particular day during that year that I will always remember, because it profoundly impacted my life, and affected everything that has happened since. You know the whole "ripple effect" thing everyone harps on about? Well, looking back on it, this was my pebble.

Three days after my sixteenth birthday, the day of the pep rally for the basketball team, I was having lunch in the school cafeteria. Same as always. What wasn't the same was the quality of my food that day.

I was having a ham sandwich. Only it wasn't a ham sandwich. It couldn't be. This piece of faded purple rubber placed between two slices of stale bread, being caressed by a slice of cheese-shaped plastic? Surely this was not the sustenance being lovingly provided to me by my school- a representative of The Higher Learning and Education in New York State?

I decided I had enough. I had heard a rumor that the school cheese had enough elasticity in it that if you threw it at the ground, it would bounce back into your hand. I thought I would trust this hypothesis.

I scrunched my cheese slice up into a ball and threw it at the ground. It bounced, but not enough. I wasn't satisfied. I desired more. So, I took another cheese slice, squashed it around the first, and made myself a bigger ball. I took this larger sphere of cheese and threw it, too, at the ground. It made the sort of sound you hear when you step in mud with a new pair of rubber boots, but it did not bounce.

Frustrated, I grabbed the hackysack-sized object and threw it at the nearest wall. To my surprise, it stuck. Aha! I thought to myself, Now, we can have some proper fun.

My childish antics had drawn the attention of the rest of my table. One of my friends, Cale, came over and said, "You need some help with that?"

I replied that I could, indeed, use some assistance, so we both went back into the lunch line and bought three more sandwiches apiece.

We arrived back at our table, unwrapped our artisan delicacies, then proceeded to dismantle them, as if taking apart a few AR-15's.

Cale and I took turns throwing ham and cheese at the wall by our table. We did full MLB-style pitching windups and releases. Without discussing it, we were making a giant smiley face. We were almost finished with this work of modern art when Cale said, "I wonder what would happen if this food was actually cooked."

He grabbed half a sandwich (what was left of it), went over to the microwave (yes, our high school cafeteria possessed one of those for common use) and slammed the food inside it, wrapper and all. Cale came back seeming a little too happy, so I asked him, "What's up man?"

“I set the mic for half an hour.”

“Oh?”

“I wanna see what happens.”

He then proceeded to tell the rest of our table and asked them not to interrupt his science experiment by cooking their own food during this thirty-minute time slot.

I thought the microwave thing was funny. I had put tin foil in the school’s last mic, to see what would happen. So, I understood my fellow traveler’s quest for knowledge. (For the record, it was like a tiny little lightning storm; I highly recommend it.)

Not to be outdone by Cale’s dauntlessness, I ran around the entire cafeteria asking every table for cheese donations. I only needed a few pieces for my half-baked plan, but my supply had already been used on our Michel-angelesque Mural. My fellow diners were for the most part generous in allowing me the use of their uneaten plastic, so I went to work.

There were four cameras in our dining hall, one for each corner. It was my intention to befuddle whoever was on the other end of the security monitor attached to these cameras. First, I needed a distraction.

My friends and I would usually play hackysack after we were done eating, in the room next to the cafeteria, which also housed the bathrooms. However, the school authorities had decided that to do this, we must be accompanied by a lunch monitor.

“Not to be outdone by Cale’s dauntlessness, I ran around the entire cafeteria asking every table for cheese donations.”

Cheese slices in hand, I went to my friend Alec and suggested that it was time for hackysack. He said all right and went to go ask a lunch monitor if she would mind coming next door for a bit. While he was doing this, I informed the rest of the table that it was time for our game. They cleared the remaining food and garbage off our table and walked over to Alec and the lunch monitor. I held back, watching. I noticed Cale was sitting over at another table with a clear view of the microwave.

As soon as the first lunch monitor was preoccupied with the hackysack game, I figured it was time. One monitor was still in the main cafeteria, but I thought there were enough people around that I could just hide in plain sight. I dragged a chair under the camera closest to our table, next to an emergency exit in the corner of the room. I hopped up on the chair, stuck a piece of cheese on the camera, and stepped back down; all under less than five seconds.

Looking around slowly, I saw that no one had noticed, except for Cale, who sat there grinning at me.

I repeated this procedure with the other three cameras, timing my moves to match when the lunch monitor had her back to me. It seemed like about half the other students had seen me messing with at least one of the cameras, but no one had said anything. If they had asked me why I was doing it, I wouldn’t have really had an answer anyway. I would have just said something like, “It’s a metaphorical middle finger to the establishment,” like the raging anarchist that I was.

In reality, that’s how I felt. I thought that school was pointless, and I should have been able to take some kind of test to get out of it. I tried to distract myself from the depressing reality of high school by playing jokes on people, talking back to my teachers, drinking beer out of my locker... basically, anything I could think of to get through the 8 hours a day that I was required to be there. I’ve never had less than a 90% test average for any class in my life, so the rest of the “learning process” seemed like a complete and utter waste of time. If I can literally sleep through your classes and ace your tests, why should I care?

I had a lot of built-up resentment inside of me, I suppose.

I was standing there in the middle of the cafeteria, contemplating these sorts of things, when I heard yelling, and spun around to see Cale and this girl Destiny having an extremely heated discussion. This snapped me out of my reverie, and I hurried over to see what was going on.

“You beautiful fellow, the microwave is going to explode!” Destiny screamed at Cale.

“Oh yeah? Well, I hope it does, you lovely woman!” Cale exclaimed.

(I tried to clean this conversation up a bit for you readers, but if you take those compliments and replace them with some foul insults, you’ll get a better feel for the actual conversation).

Cale was physically blocking Destiny from getting to the microwave. She shoved him, which caught him by surprise, and he stumbled backward a couple steps. This gave her an opening to get to the microwave. She opened the door, grabbed the steaming, partially blackened, sandwich, spun towards the garbage can, dropped the food on the floor, and started screaming.

Apparently, if you take something out of a heating device such as a microwave after it has been in there a substantial amount of time, it is likely that said item is rather...hot. Poor Destiny, having never been introduced to a microwave before in her life, was sadly uninformed of its primary function.

The lunch monitor finally decided to waddle over and inspect what all the fuss was about. Destiny was in the middle of yelling more expletives at my friend, the rest of us were gathered around showing a wide range of emotions –tears of laughter, anger, pity- depending on who you were friends with and how much you cared about (possible) 4th-degree burns.

The lunch monitor (a great, beastly, ogre of a woman who looked as though she spent her free time collecting tolls from unsuspecting travelers attempting to cross her bridge) ascertained that what Destiny should be doing is running her hands under cold water. She then proceeded to escort her there personally.

This was great timing, as the period was about to end anyway. In one last act of defiance, I crouched down on the floor. I picked apart the shriveled sandwich that had just been taken out of the microwave (now that it was safe to touch) and grabbed the burnt, warped, bubbled piece of ham out of it.

I ran over to the big clock hanging on the main wall of the cafeteria, and just as the bell was ringing, jumped up; slapping the ham on the clock. I didn’t do it full force, but just enough to make sure it would stick.

I turned around and saw everyone staring at me. I shrugged my shoulders and said, “Go Mounties?” Exasperated eye-rolls abounded.

I went to the pep rally, sat with my guys, watched my beautiful best friend Andrea, a cheerleader, sing the national anthem, and life was good.

The following day, I came to school and was immediately hauled to the principal’s office, practically straight off the bus. Two police officers were there. They were looking at security footage on my principal’s computer. From the cafeteria. They asked me to point to which person on the screen was me. So, I did.

I got charged with Criminal Mischief, a misdemeanor, and expelled from school. My crime? Cracking the cafeteria clock. Since I had just turned 16, I was charged as an adult. I was put on House Arrest during my court proceedings, which dragged on for four months. Ankle bracelet and all. I applied to every other high school in the Mohawk Valley, but none would accept me.

When I finally went before a judge for sentencing on my criminal charge, he literally laughed at the case, right in the courtroom, and dismissed it. By this time, the school year was over. I had a hearing with the Little Falls School District’s board of directors to plead my case. I asked to be readmitted the following year. They denied the appeal.

Over the summer, I moved back to Pittsburgh, PA, to live with my father and attend school there. After I enrolled, I found out that only two of

my credits from New York transferred, so instead of repeating my sophomore year, I was shunted back to freshman status. I wanted to drop out. My dad made me stick out the rest of that year, but then I did drop out and got my G.E.D. literally two weeks later. I had wanted a way to test out of school...I guess I ended up finding it.

I'm telling this story to illustrate the point that every little, stupid, seemingly pointless, random, drunken, boring, mundane, exhilarating...everything you or I have ever done in our lives has made an impact. Every single thing we do changes our lives.

Putting ham on the clock was one of the dumbest, most nonsensical things I have ever done. It was also something that shaped my life in unforeseen ways. For better or worse, I am here. Now. In this moment. And I've "grown up a bit."

"Human life occurs only once, and the reason we cannot determine which of our decisions are good and which bad is that in a given situation we can make only one decision; we are not granted a second, third, or fourth life in which to compare various decisions."

~Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*



Photos by Julianna Finnerty



Number 9

Bailey Coffey

My name is Nevaeh Calinsky. I would do the typical introduction; tell you a little bit about my life like my age and what I am going to be when I grow up, but there is no point because I have no future and my age is just an alarm clock getting closer to going off. My age is my death sentence. On my sixteenth birthday, the doctors discovered that I had a brain tumor that was not operable. I had a seizure right in the middle of blowing out my candles. I've always been one to be big on dramatic endings. At least that's what I've been told.

Six months later after having yet again another seizure, I returned for a checkup in which they did an MRI to see how enlarged my tumor had gotten. The doctor told my dad and me that I probably wouldn't survive another month with the amount of pressure it was putting on my brain. He said it would probably cause a brain bleed and that they still couldn't see themselves operating on it due to its unlikely hood that I would survive. Dad thinks it's really because they don't want to mess up and paralyze me or make me a vegetable because it will look bad on them, and they are worried about him suing the hospital.

It's three weeks later and I am writing this story to tell you about my last few weeks because I don't know how much longer I have. When I first found out about my tumor and that it was un-operable dad suggested I started making a bucket list.

Dad said, "Sweetie, let's start doing things you want to do just in case, make a bucket list."

Week number one on the bucket list was to write a short story. I figured what's easier than writing a "short" story about the very "short" time I have left. I didn't want to make this story about my life growing up, but what I did with the time I have left so I decided to make the plot about my bucket list.

Number two on my list was going to a football game. I know that doesn't

seem like much of a wish, but I hadn't ever been to one and I heard they get pretty rambunctious. I thought who knows maybe I'll find a boy to make out with under the bleachers since I still haven't had my first kiss yet. My high school football team played their rivals, so it was an interactive game to go to; to say the least. My high school team ended up winning twenty-eight to thirteen. I sat behind the preppy cheerleaders chanting "Let's go Rams," and although I didn't get to kiss a handsome boy whom I could fall in love within a month like every romance movie, I got asked out on my very first date. I said no because I'm on a strict bucket list schedule, I don't have time to be going on dates. It was nice I hung out with my friends and I acted like I wasn't being invaded by a massive tumor and like I was a teenager for once in my life. For once people weren't checking my vitals and invading my space "making sure I'm okay." Don't they know that's highly annoying?

Bucket list number three was to get a job. I know this sounds crazy, but I feel as though the experience would be good for my resume to get into heaven. I wanted to be a grown up and know what it is to work for what I have. Plus, I could give the money to dad to help pay off the medical bills I stacked up. I got a job at the local library, for a day. I hated it so I quit and began looking for other opportunities to work; a job that would better suit me. I then decided I wanted to volunteer at the local pet groomers where I could give dogs baths, and get to spend my time with the animals. I loved going there, it helped me forget that I would soon be gone from this world and that getting this job was just a number on some stupid death wish list. The animals didn't judge me or treat me like I had fragile written on my forehead.

The next week I had talked my dad into driving to Long Island so I could swim in the ocean and have my feet in real sand. I sunbathed for hours soaking up the sun that beat down on the sand. It was like the sun and the ocean had a connection and I was the piece that connected them. I was meant to be there that day.

Dad was swimming in the ocean and yelled across the beach "Vaeh come on you wanted to see the ocean you gotta come swim."

I got in the ocean for the first time. The iced water froze my feet, but I was not going to back out. This may be the only chance I have to do this before I go to heaven. That was bucket list number four.

Number five, learning how to surf. That didn't go as planned. Apparently, you have to be somewhat balanced inclined for that, but at least I can say I tried. I also kept getting scared because I felt like a shark was gonna pop up out of nowhere thinking I was tuna or something. How ironic I was scared of dying from a shark attack when I'm technically dying anyway. I guess surfing isn't that common in Long Island because I was the only one attempting. I guess it's more common in Hawaii and tropical places, but we don't have the money or the time to be able to do that, so I settled. In this case, settling was the best option because dad and I laughed as people were giving me looks for trying to surf. I watched a YouTube video, so I figure I'd be a pro.

I once watched a movie called Amityville Horror and that was based on a house in Long Island. I made dad drive by, I wanted to go in but dad said, "Are you trying to get possessed and get yourself killed."

I giggled and said, "I didn't try to get a tumor."

"It was like the sun and the ocean had a connection and I was the piece that connected them. I was meant to be there that day."

The next week, I begged dad to take me for a hike. It's hard for dad to get time because he's always working trying to pay the medical bills, house bills, and giving me what I need for a good rest of my life. Sometimes I wish he would just stop thinking about me and be selfish for once. He is always working, he has no friends anymore, and everyday devotes his life to me. Dad told me that we could go for a hike that Saturday. We hiked Sleeping Beauty Mountain. That day was the best day I've had in a long time, at least since I found out about the alien invading my head. It

was just nature, dad, and I. No hospitals, no doctors, no machines, and no work for dad. He told me stories about me when I was little and told me about the old stories of mom. I miss her so much. When I was seven my mom passed away from liver cancer. She suffered from alcohol addiction and just couldn't escape its grasp. I wish everyday mom was still here. I wish dad didn't have to go through losing someone important to him twice and that he wouldn't be alone. He told me a story of how mom used to push me super high on the swing and how I use to jump into his arms. I laughed as he told me about one time when I forgot he wasn't there, and I went flying off the swing with no one to catch me. That really hit me because dad has always been there to catch me. When I've fallen off my first bike, jumping off the swing, and right now when a tumor is taking me over. He also told me a story of when it was just him, mom, and I, I asked them for a little sister. He said that I was convinced I could have a dog as a little sister and when they told me that that wasn't possible, I wasn't taking no for an answer. I love my dad he's my very best friend, don't get me wrong, but sometimes I wish mom was here to braid my hair and sing me to sleep. I wish I had her here to talk about boys and about drama at school. I wish she was here, so dad didn't have to go through this alone. I mean I'll see her in heaven but I'd rather her be here with dad. Dad and I when coming down the mountain contemplated rolling down. Neither of us being the most athletic people practically were crawling to the car at the bottom. It took us three hours round trip. Believe it or not, I don't do much hiking in between my doctor appointments. That was bucket list number six.

Bucket list number seven I did that week too. I have always wanted to go to New York City. Dad took me that same Sunday and we walked around Times Square. We also ate at a pizza shop and went shopping to get him some new clothes. Let's face it the man can't dress himself, and he needs to look handsome so he can find someone. We also later that night went and saw Little Mermaid the Broadway show. It was amazing. The Little Mermaid growing up was always my favorite Disney movie. It taught me to never take for granted who I am and to embrace it. Disney taught a great lesson with that one. After dad and I walked around the city admiring the lights that made us feel like we were in the spotlight, I felt like I was in a movie. I've never seen anything more beautiful than

New York City at night. I got dad to ice skate with me at Rockefeller Center. Mom taught me how to ice skate when I was little, so I've always been good at it. Dad on the other hand, not so good. He fell so many times, I tried not to laugh it was just too funny. He was like a baby learning how to walk. Then it was time to go.

Now the slowdown of my life, or what they call the "climax" of the story. This current week that I am writing this has not been so well, it started off with me donating my stuff as my bucket list number eight states "act of kindness." I donated all my clothes to those in need and I chopped off my hair to give it to cancer patients, so they feel beautiful again. After all, I wouldn't be needing it.

When it was time for bucket list number nine is when things went way south. My life began to go down the drain. I was feeling very faint and had an excruciating headache. I suffered from a massive seizure, so dad took me to the emergency room. They did an MRI to see if my tumor had worsened and why I was barely capable of talking and stuttering my sentences. That's when they told me, it was over. My life was at its ends. My brain had started to bleed. Slowly but it was definitely bleeding. They informed dad and I that the longest they could see me living is forty-eight hours and that they could try the surgery but the chances of them extracting the tumor without causing further damage was unlikely. While he was arguing with the hospital staff on how they weren't doing their job good enough and how they were just scared to perform the surgery because of their reputation, I decided that I would just die. Just be happy with what I have done in my life and just die with a smile. Not for myself, but for dad.

Later that day I fell into a coma due to the pressure on my brain. I could hear dad talking to me the whole time. I always thought people lied in movies when they said they could hear people talking while in a coma. I could feel him holding and squeezing my hand to his lips, feeling his lips quiver while tears streamed down his face. I heard him whisper and his lips move against the back of my hand.

He said, "Please princess, I can't lose you too."

As he begged God to help me, I just wanted to tell him I'd be okay in Heaven and to squeeze his hand back, so he knew I was okay. I tried and tried, but no matter how much energy I put into it, I had no life. I was just a soul stuck inside a lifeless body. I was in pain and at this point, the pressure in my head was so extreme, I just wanted for it to be over. Every time doctors came in to talk to dad, I wanted them to leave, their useless words to dad were causing a pulsation in my head from the noise. I could slowly feel myself slipping away and I wanted it to be in peace and quiet with just my dad.

There comes a time when you're about to die that you're ready to give up. I was at that point, I was ready. The next day the unexpected happened. I heard a woman's voice enter the room introducing herself to my dad and telling him that she is a brain surgeon who is good friends with my doctor whom she went to college with and that she was from London, England. The surgeon apologized to my dad saying she hates to barge in at such late times, but that she thinks she can save me. She explained to my dad that my original doctor called her and asked her to fly out and take a look at my case and she came immediately. My dad ecstatic hugs these women and asks her how and if she is sure. That is where I don't recall the rest of the conversation between my dad and this woman. My heart had stopped, and I was dead.

Days later I woke up in a different room with a white bandage wrapped around my head and I was a little foggy at times. My dad was smiling and yelled "NURSES!" A ton of people came rushing in my room. I was a little overwhelmed. At first, I thought this was all a dream, but then I heard a familiar voice that seemed all too real, it caught my attention. I recognized it as the woman that was introducing herself to my dad while I was in my coma. She came over and shook my hand and explained that she had saved my life and that she had another case similar to mine where a young man that she had saved had a similarly sized tumor and other surgeons refused to remove his too. She insisted that she removed the boy's tumor when others would not and since then has been studying ways to extract large tumors without causing further damage. She told me how lucky I was to be alive and that I have some test to go through to make sure I still have all my senses and such.

She said, "I'm not leaving till I know you're truly okay Nevaeh, don't worry." Her name was Adaline Sharp.

Adaline Sharp is my hero. Six days later I had all my test done to make sure that nothing was damaged during the surgery. It was miraculous how I lived with no other complications. I ordered Adaline flowers to which were sent to her at the hospital. She stayed for a while as she promised even when her whole life was in London. When she came in to thank me for the flowers, I remembered I didn't finish number nine on my bucket list. I had to change it up a little because on my list it said, "find someone to take care of my dad and make him happy again while I'm gone." I'm no longer leaving him alone, but I still decided that I must finish my bucket list because I may not be dying now or a month from now but someday, I will die and I'm going to live every day of my life like I only have a month left. Dad deserves someone regardless of if I didn't die or not. He devoted his life to taking care of me and now he deserved to relax and live his bucket list life.

Adaline Sharp was my hero for more than one reason in my life. Not only did she save my life, but she saved my dad's too. Dad soon became smitten with Adaline after my visits with her. It's months later and dad and Adaline ended up getting married, and Adaline became my second mom. How extraordinary is it that I get to have two moms and an awesome dad none of which ever second guessed my strength?

Tomorrow mom, dad, and I are going to pick up our present as a new family. Her name is Lilah and she is the newest addition to the Calinskys. We adopted her from West Africa, she's my new baby sister. Adaline is infertile and that's why we adopted. My family clearly has a lot of health issues. This time I'd prefer a little sister over a dog.

Lilah is two and I can't wait to help raise her and tell her mom and dad's love story, and how mom saved my life months ago. So, you could say my last few months were eventful. I managed to not die, get my dad a wife, get a sister, complete a bucket list, and to become a teenager all over again. The only thing I'd take back is donating all my clothes. I no longer have any cute things to wear and that just cannot happen now that I'm almost seventeen. So, I finally said my age. I usually don't tell my age,

but I guess it's not a ticking time bomb now. I now have a new ticking time bomb a much longer one.

I start school again next week I'll be finishing up my junior year. The teachers and mom offered to help me catch up on all the work I've missed. I plan to finish up school and go to college to be a neurosurgeon. With mom as my leader. It's weird planning my life for more than a months' time. I also decided to join the cheerleading team since I really got into cheering along with them at the football game. The cute boy that asked me on a date at the first football game I went to also asked me on another when I cheered at the game. This time I could say yes and go on a date for the first time. It's this Saturday, I'm a little nervous but I can't wait to talk to my new mom about it while she braids my hair. Anyway, that is the story of how Number Nine saved my life.



Barn 1 by Tom Stock

The Hillside's Secret

Jerry Plows

My vision was so clouded. Not just blurred, but as if the depths I used to see had been placed into a jar and vigorously shaken. Why can't I move? Or breathe? I attempt to take in a deep breath, but my chest has no room to expand. I've watched Animal Planet as a python constricts the life out of its victim, is this what that feels like? The soft hands on my cheek puzzle me amidst this chaos and discomfort.

"Leeland. Lee, it's Beverly. Remember me? You came to my home not long ago and played with the horses."

I do recall this visit, but when I attempt to answer Beverly, the stinging pain on my lips feels like a swarm of angry bees is attacking my face. Blood. Is that blood I taste? Now the rhythm of my breath quickens and as it does I can hear what sounds like the crunching of stones as a car pulls into a pebble driveway.

"Leeland, it's Beverly again. We are going to move you, but you have to be very still. I'm not going to lie to you: this is going to hurt."

I now realize that the soft hands I feel on my face in this makeshift cocoon I'm in are Beverly's.

"Okay Lee," Beverly says in a motherly tone filled with love and a demand to be heard, "when you start to move try to stay still. Cry out if you must, but stay still. Ok, here we go... 1...2...3..."

The crunching I heard now becomes very apparent as the glass of the windshield holds onto my clothes and flesh as the firemen attempt to peel me from its clutches.

"AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH..."

My pain vocalizes at this moment as my entire body ignites with a fury that I can only compare to the time a piece of flaming plastic landed upon my arm from garbage burning my Dad was doing. He seems to be

gifted with causing me pain as I recall the tenth beer he drank before we left in this car. The pain is so strong. It sears into my soul and takes home in a corner to be called upon later. I quickly lose consciousness and come to as I now presently sit on the hillside breathing through the fear and anxiety of this memory.

This memory that likes to frequently creep into my mind like a thief in the night. Only this thief looks to steal what little piece of joy I have left. I so dislike how this makes me feel. I guess it's a panic attack, but I'm not quite sure. I just turned sixteen in April, so I am not that well versed in this stuff. Plus, no one in my house or family talks about things like this. That happens often with all of them. Well my six sisters, five brothers, Mom, and Dad that is. Just like the reason my parents are divorced. They don't know I know, but I overheard a conversation once with my Mom and Aunt. You would think it was the difficulty of raising a mixed family. With my mom's six kids and my dad's five, I used to think that I just wasn't enough glue to hold us all together. Nope, I know it was because of the night my mom found my dad's son Joe in her daughter Stephanie's room. I recall the anger and sadness in her voice as she told my aunt of the rage that overtook her as she pulled him off Steph and held her tightly in her arms. Anyway, we hide away our hurt to make the outer impression to others seem one of pure bliss.

"Ha ha ha ha ha." I made myself laugh there with that thought.

Pure bliss is far from what I've been through, but I find my escape here on the hillside. My place to come and hideaway from it all. It's one of the many reasons I enjoy living here in the country. Mom thinks I am going for a walk but nope. I climb under the barbed wire fence that outlines our yard, walk through the pasture being sure to pay attention to where the neighbors seven horses have done their business and walk up the hillside to my hidden home here next to the willow tree. Something about this willow tree comforts me and is eerily familiar. It reminds me of the talking one in Pocahontas that helps guide her with difficult decisions. I mean at least I don't think it talks as I've never tried to have a conversation with it like, "Hello, Madam Willow Tree how are you today?"

"LEEEEEEEEEEEEE!"

Holy crap that scared the bejeezum out of me. For a quick second there I thought, oh never mind what I thought. I better get moving if Mom is yelling. On my way down, I am going to be sure to grab an apple off the tree at the bottom. Those apples are so sweet and crisp. It's like biting into nature's candy as my grandpa used to say. He was such a philosophical man. I loved going to their home in Chesterville. It always reminded me of Charlotte's Web. With the barn, and farmhouse with the wrap around porch. And their serene catfish pond with the large willow tree next to it. It was my favorite place to sit and watch the geese swim across the water as their bodies left ripples that almost seemed to write messages to me.

"LEEEEEEEEEEE!"

"I'm coming, Mom!"

You know I often wonder if we annoy our neighbors. I mean we live on three acres, so it's not like we're on top of each other. But if I can hear her loud mouth all the way up here, I'm sure they can to. I mean she doesn't have a loud mouth its just that- Who am I kidding? She has a loud mouth.

Ok, let's grab a stick and test the electric fence as it is that time of day they usually turn it on. Just a quick tap here, and nope, I'm good.

"Where were you?" Mom snaps.

"I told you I went for a walk," I respond adding a hint of teenage attitude to my voice.

"Stay out of the Jones' pasture; it's their property, not yours," she says sternly as if to think this will be the time I finally choose to listen. "Get inside, wash up, and set the table. It's time for dinner."

I decide to soften as she has so that the evening will go better. "Yes, Mom."

Dinner was very good tonight. My mom's mac and cheese is one of my absolute favorites. She gets a bit perturbed with me slathering it with pools of ketchup, but I don't care it is so good! And the fact that she made

it special for me makes it even better. I am so excited to start my junior year in high school tomorrow. At last! Two more years and I am done. Oh, I almost forgot to put my sneakers next to my backpack, I want everything to be just right for tomorrow morning.

"Mom!" I yell from my room. "Where are my new sneakers?"

"Where you left them, next to the coat closet," she yells back.

You know, as much as she annoys me sometimes, I don't know what I would do without her. I mean my dad rarely picks me up for his weekend. Even though the court ordered the visitation, it is still hit or miss, and my mom never says a bad word about that jerk. I know I shouldn't call him that, but you have no idea. The car accident alone is enough reason to dislike that drunk. And with all my siblings have grown and moved out. It's just me, my mom, and my stepdad, Donnie. Well, he isn't really my stepdad as they aren't married, but living here for 11 years pretty much makes him that.

"Bye, Mom. I'm off to choir practice," I say as I kiss her on the cheek. "Love you."

"I love you too," she says as her gentle hand rests upon my cheek and the warmth of her caring kiss will be a memory I cherish forever.

You see it's all a memory really isn't it? I mean each moment of each day is just another memory that is etched into our minds. Some like an etch-a-sketch that can be shaken and erased and others like a carving into the side of a tree telling others the confession of your love. Yup, it's all a memory now as I sit here one last time on the hillside. I will never forget that last kiss she gave me. If only I had chosen to stay home and not go to choir practice if only I asked her if she was feeling okay if only I had listened more and not been so difficult sometimes. The doctor says even if I was there no one could have saved her from the, oh what did he call it, pulmonary embolism. How strange that a life lived well with strength and grace can be taken away in a heartbeat, literally, with something the size of a pea. But it doesn't matter anyway. Nothing seems to matter anymore really.

“Some like an etch-a-sketch that can be shaken and erased and others like a carving into the side of a tree telling others the confession of your love.”

The food I keep eating makes me feel better in the moment, but the good feeling doesn't last. Now five months into school, I am so sick and tired of hearing everyone ask me, "How are you doing?" or "I'm sorry to hear about your mom!". God, could they all just shut up and let me try to bury it deeper than the hole they put her in? Why can't everyone just leave me alone? All I know is I can't do this anymore. I've got no reason to. None of my brothers and sisters give a crap about me. Tonya doesn't know it, but I picked up the phone while she was talking to Tracy and heard her say that she didn't care that mom left me everything in her will. I wasn't their full blood brother anyway. You know what, screw them. That's why I bought my car, so I could escape here to the hillside even though I'm trapped living in town with my sister Tracy. Well, I won't be trapped anymore. I'm going to see mom again. At least I hope I am as I was never fully sure about this heaven thing. And I think this whole bottle of hydros will do the trick. Yup, I am! I'm just going lean against my willow tree, put these headphones on, play some music, and end this miserable life on earth. I'll play Celine Dion, she was my mom's favorite singer. Oooooooooo I love this song.

"For all those times you stood by me, for all the truth that you made me see. For all the joy you brought to my life, for all the wrongs that you made right. For every wish you made come true, for all the love I found in you. I'll be forever thankful because you loved me."

Mom did love me. I used to love me, but it all just feels so empty now. She would want me to live on. I know that, but who will tell me not to give up? Who will tell me I can be a teacher? Who will love me? Breathe, Leeland.

The breeze feels so warm today as if it's holding me in its arms. How I wish she could hold me once again. What am I doing? I can't go through with this. I must be strong as she used to say! I must love me! Maybe this hurt is more than just Mom dying? Maybe there is more to why I feel this way? Maybe that's why the hillside feels so eerily familiar? Maybe the hillside is no longer a place of comfort, but rather a reminder of what was done to me? Maybe my brokenness began here and its buried too deep to let it see the light of day? Perhaps the hunting camp just over the next knoll holds the secret to my deep sadness?

16-year-old Leeland has lived a tumultuous life. From a severe car accident at the age of 10 to losing his mother less than 3 months ago, Lee finds himself on the hillside questioning why he is even living and if he should just end it all. Quickly, Lee realizes he must live on, no matter how difficult it may feel. But then begins to wonder, what other hurt may exist deep within him? Perhaps the hunting camp just over the next knoll holds the secret to his deep sadness?

Why did that old hunting camp just pop into my head? I recall going there many times, but I never became a fan of hunting. Just another disappointment to add to my dad's list of reasons not to love me. There's that warm breeze again. It feels as though it wants me to walk towards the camp. This all feels so strange yet so familiar. It's as if it is a dream.

I get up from the ground leaving the pill bottle and portable CD player behind as I begin to walk towards the line of trees in front of me. Why am I feeling so anxious about this? I hope to God this isn't another panic attack coming on. Why must I have to endure those on top of everything else that I am going through? These branches of pine feel like long nails scraping against my skin. The fear seems to intensify as I walk forward and start to see the opening that leads into the meadow. Birds chirp around me but sound more like small voices pleading with me to go back. But something within me tells me that I must face this reality if I hope to carry on.

I pause for a moment as I stand at the very edge of the pines. They are extremely thick with no clear path through to the meadow. I poke my arm through and feel the sunlight of the clearing hit my skin and take

hold as if to gently pull me into the open field. As I step through the needles clawing at my face and clothes; I instantly enter a world I've experienced before and did not know until now that it was this meadow. I've had this dream before, but this isn't a dream. I know I'm standing in the tall grassed field, but the grass is giant reeds of shiny copper that glimmer as the sun hits each one. As the wind blows, they make soft music like that of a wind chime. They are so welcoming and yet seem to warn me of what's to come. Regardless, I breathe deeply and step forward into them, letting their soft music guide me to the camp.

My long walk to the corner of the meadow where the camp sits is filled with wonder. The birds are filled with color and seem to sing human-like as they soar above me and the reeds of copper. It has an ethereal feel to it and brings me gentle comfort as I approach the next clearing. I once again pause and this time place my arm through the copper reeds. As I pull my arm back, it is covered in black soot and stings a bit. This must be from the crackling fire I hear now instead of the soft wind chimes of the reeds. I breathe deeply and step through.

I'm instantly met with blackened winds that make it difficult to breathe. The roaring campfire sends off heat so strong, it feels as if my clothes begin to melt to my body. I know I can't stay out here long, so I place my hand over my eyes like a visor and stare through the ashy air to look for the old school bus that has been made into a hunting camp. As I look to the right I see it and begin to sprint towards it. But as I run it distances itself from me as if it is running away. Am I not ready to see what is inside? Will it be too much for me to take? I stop running, throwing my hands up toward the sky and scream angrily "Stop!"

Suddenly everything is in a freeze frame as if someone hit the pause button during a movie. I stand still for a moment taking in the scene. Specks of ash fill the air and the fire has ceased its flicker. I begin to walk through the thickened air toward the bus. It sits crooked on the ground in a rusted heap. The appearance of it is so ominous that I begin to weep. I can't decide if this is fear or if it is sadness, but I continue my walk towards it just the same. As I take one final step forward I am now at the closed door of the wretched place that was a hunting camp.

"Lee, be brave," a voice says softly as I prepare to push the door open.

Quickly I turn around to find no one there which causes my anxiety and fear to increase. As I turn back towards the bus, I fall backward onto the ground and crab crawl backward in utter shock as my mother stands at the door. She glides towards me, angelic like and leans over to place a soft hand against my cheek.

"My wounded, little baby," she says with a comforting smile upon her face, "You are about to learn something that will shake you to your core. Be not afraid for on the other side of this is healing." I close my wet eyes as she warmly kisses me upon my forehead. And like the warm breeze I felt earlier, disappears into the air around me.

"I love you, Mommy," I say out loud as I get up from the ground brushing off my clothes and wiping my eyes. I suddenly realize they are different than before and as I look once more at the shattered bus door; a reflection of my younger self looks back at me. Without hesitation, I push hard and make my way into the cavern like body of the bus.

It was an invention of my brother, Joe. They towed it up here with the tractor, parked it and gutted it out. It was filled with old furniture and a pop belly wood stove. It had the perfect view of the meadow and surrounding woods which always made for good hunting according to them. As I walked past the cobwebbed, mildewed furniture, a claw-like hand snagged my shirt from underneath the couch. I fell face first onto the floor of the bus, tasting blood right away from the blow to my head. As I reached for anything to hold onto, I was flung upward, spun around and slammed back to the floor now facing the ceiling. The ash from outside the bus was pouring in through the window and forming a monster of a creature before my eyes. It stretched its bone like hand out towards me and gently stroked my cheek as if to comfort me. I jolted away and attempted to crawl from it, but the bone like finger had ahold of my pant leg and slowly pulled me to the couch once again. With one hand still ahold of me, it flung the couch towards the back of the bus revealing a handled door in the floor. It grabbed the handle, yanked the door open and tossed me into it like one tosses trash into a garbage can. The metal door slammed shut and left me in a pitch-black place where I now laid

quietly, breathing heavily and fearful of what was to come.

My fear was interrupted by the soft touch of a new hand. This one with a familiar feel to it. Too afraid to open my eyes, I laid still and pondered who or what this could be. Quickly, I realized it was my brother Joe and could hear the giggle of friends in the background.

“This is going to be fun,” Joe said in a way that immediately took my fear and threw it over me like a hurricane wave from the deepest ocean. I swam upward in hopes of breaking through to capture much-needed air. I swam, and I swam, and I swam and when I thought I couldn’t swim anymore, my body broke through the surface of the water and my lungs expanding with a deep inhale.

“We have a pulse” yelled a nurse at the bedside as I frantically reached towards the lighted ceiling.

“Leeland, relax,” said another nurse sternly. “You’re at Baldwin hospital.”

At this moment I calmed slightly and closed my eyes. The touch of the nurse’s hand against my forehead was relaxing along with whatever medication was being pushed through my IV. Through the frantic conversation from those working on me, I learn that I did take the pills on the hillside. So, it was a dream I thought to myself. But a dream that explained a reality I had dealt with so long ago and suppressed deeply into my psyche.

Now three days later and finally able to eat, I was enjoying their mac and cheese. Maybe it’s more of the creamy familiarity of it from when Mom made it, but nonetheless, it is yummy. As I chew my next bite there is a knock at the door.

“Come in,” I say muffled through the mouthful of lunch

“Hey there, Bud!” says my brother Joe excitedly as he puts a box of Mike and Ike candy on my bedside table. I swallow abruptly causing me to choke a bit which prompts him to reach for me. I pull back suddenly and sink my head into my pillow as I feel my breath rapidly increase.

“You alright, Bud?” he asks as he swipes my hair from my eyes. “I took some time off from work so that I could be with you for a bit.”

Tears find their way to my eyes as I try to comprehend this all. I now know it wasn’t a dream. The reality was all too real and I now feel trapped in this moment of terror.

“Aww don’t cry, Bud,” Joe says with an eerily familiar grin.
“This is going to be fun.”



Anamaria Torres

Untitled

Phoenix Zinck

As we were driving down the old country road, miles away from the airport. I took my last glance at her blue eyes. Those eyes had a shine like the waters on Hinckley. Her smile was infectious, it kept drawing me in for more.

That's when it happened. Out of my peripherals, I saw a majestic buck. As I tried to avoid it I could feel the tail end of the car lift up.

one-one thousand

I thought of my mother, I thought of her warm inviting hugs.

two-one thousand

I thought of my fiancée. How she left her comfortable life to be with me.

three-one thousand

I thought of the promise I had made to her parents. That I would never let anything bad happen to her. A promise I always intended to keep.

I could no longer see her beautiful smile. As my cheap rental Sedan from the airport performed its last barrel roll into the ditch.

I couldn't hear anything over the crunching of metal.

Then I woke up... ears ringing...

As I tried to get to my feet I could feel every contusion. My adrenaline pumped throughout my body as if it were a factory worker in fear of being laid off. I was no longer in the car... I wasn't wearing my seatbelt. However, she was still in the car. I could hear her calling my name. I hobbled as quickly as I could to her aide. Those beautiful pools that I could once see so vividly in her eyes were clouded with a red sky.

"I'm here!" I exclaimed. "Don't panic, I'm going to get you out of here!"

"I'm scared! ... ple- please hurry!" she cried in obvious pain.

My mind raced. As I reached desperately into my pocket for my phone I felt nothing but wetness... as I pulled my hand out I could feel my warm blood meet the cold air. The metallic smell.

The sun was setting through the trees. The air was crisp and cold. My breathing was frequent as panic set in. Just as the thought came to my mind, I immediately removed my shirt and wrapped it around my hand.

Babe!" I shouted.

"Use my jacket to cover your face!" I instructed, trying not to let her hear the panic in my voice.

I brushed the glass off of her and used my pocket knife to cut her seatbelt off. I then pulled her out of the car.

While checking her for serious injuries I asked "Are you okay? Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine," she said.

I could tell she was lying. She was coughing forcefully. Wheezing, gasping in hopes to catch her breath.

The car has about 150 feet from the main road lying in some brush and undergrowth. As I limped to the road to see if there was anyone who could help I could hardly see a thing. The sun had set. The temperature dropped; I could now see my breath steaming in front of my face. The moon was the only light. It illuminated the country road in such a way... it appeared almost as if it was a scene from a movie. It was too peaceful. My phone was gone, so there was no chance of calling 9-1-1.

In the distance, I could see headlights.

As the truck pulled up an older gentleman and his wife stepped out. The man wore a flannel with old faded jeans, which were held up by a rather large belt. His face was clean shaven. His eyes were kind. His wife wore a grey wrap around sweater with a pair of jeans and boots. Her eyes were sympathetic.

“Are you alright?” the woman asked.

“I am okay, but my fiancée, she is in rough shape.”

“I told you that I’m fine.”

Just as she said that I noticed the color leave her face. Her lips were pale and had a bluish hue. She fell to the ground.

“Babe!” I rushed to her.

She was lying on her back. No longer fighting for her breath, but only because it appeared that she wasn’t breathing at all.

I shouted to the older couple. “Call 9-1-1 now! Tell them there is a car accident victim early twenties who has collapsed and stopped breathing!”

I immediately lowered my head to her chest to check for breathing.

*one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten. *

Her chest did not rise, so I immediately began compressions. With my dominant hand placed on the middle of her chest and my other hand laid over top, I pressed down.

one and two and three and four and five

I thought of her mother. I thought of how she cried tears of joy when I asked for her permission to ask her daughter for her hand in marriage.

eleven and twelve and thirteen, fourteen, fifteen

I thought of her father, how he became like a father to me. I thought of how his daughter meant the world to him, and how he would be destroyed if anything happened to her.

twenty-six, twenty-seven, twenty-eight, twenty-nine, thirty

I tilted her head and gave breathes, her chest still wasn’t rising after the second breath, so I went into my second round of compressions.

one and two and three and four and five

I thought of the way her face would blush whenever I’d tell her how

beautiful she looked.

I began to feel her ribs crack under my hands. Truly heartbreaking. The tears streamed down my face.

“Come on!”

“Don’t you quit on me!”

twenty-six, twenty-seven, twenty-eight, twenty-nine, thirty

I went in for my second set of rescue breathes. They took. The color began to return to her face. She gasped for breath. Her eyes lit up.

I held her in my arms until the paramedics arrived. The safest place she could ever be was in my arms.

Anamaria Torres



Body2Soul

Jill Lovenheim

It doesn't take a lot of skill to spin horseshit into rainbow fairy dust. That's what I had been doing for the past year. I thought that I had finally figured out how to be happy and successful. But eventually, the dust starts to smell. It was on a cold winter day that I realized how true that was.

The doorbell rang and I heard the soft thud of a package hit the floor from the mail slot. I was huddled in bed binge-watching House Hunters on Netflix, wrapped up in two blankets. Winter in Buffalo is serious business, especially in February when it is gloomy, gray, and all the Christmas cheer is gone. The tree branches were bare, and the snow was dirty and muddy. An empty bird feeder I forgot about was swaying in the wind, probably empty and looking forlorn out there. I untangled myself from the blankets, shoved my cats to the side and padded over to the door to see what arrived.

I glanced down and saw the Body2Soul logo stamped on the back and a sharp pain began to form like an ice pick behind my left eye. I shuffled over to my couch and sat on my hands to steady them while breathing in through my mouth and out my nose. Body2Soul is an online network marketing company and everything is by email, Facebook, or Instant message. There is only one reason an environmentally conscious green company like Body2Soul would sacrifice part of a tree to send a letter. The only reason you get a letter is when you reach top seller status and are invited to the annual Pinnacle meeting.

The pain behind my eye was pulsing and with shaking hands, I opened the letter. I knew what it is going to say but I still had to read it three times to process it.

Dear Stephanie,

We want to recognize you as a top seller for Body2Soul. Enclosed is a ticket to our annual Pinnacle Meeting to be held in Fresno, California from June 10-14th. Body2Soul embraces exercise, personal development, and good nutrition. We will be having an exciting team building activity hiking in Yosemite National Park. As a top seller, you have been selected to speak at our Champion Panel.

I slumped back onto the couch and tried to figure out my options. I'm divorced, no kids, overweight, and on the wrong side of 35. I wear leggings and an oversize hoodie almost every day. I have agoraphobia, talk to my cats, have only one real friend, and detest the latest juice craze. Yet even with these obstacles, I am a top-selling coach for Body2Soul.

I used to have a job I hated, as a customer sales representative. I was sitting in my home office last winter half listening to a customer complain about her stay at the Marriott. I had a blanket around my shoulders because there seemed to be a constant chill in my house. Drafty windows, another project on the to-do list that I never seemed to have the motivation to tackle. As my customer rattled on and on about the skin rash, she got using the complimentary lotion, I mindlessly scrolled through my Facebook feed. There was one of Maggie's annoying posts yet again:

Two years ago, I took a chance and partnered with this awesome company which is now heading toward a BILLION dollars in revenue, a billion dollars people. I got healthy and get to help you be healthy. The best part is I have made lifelong friends on this incredible journey. So, if you are living to work and working to live, we should talk.

This is, of course, was accompanied by Maggie in her requisite workout gear of capri leggings, sports bra, headband, and tank top with the oh so inspiring phrase "Perfectly Imperfect."

This time though something caught in my brain. A speck of an idea flitted along in my head, twirled and spun but could not catch on anything. I told my customer we would send her a fifty-dollar voucher for her troubles and clocked out for lunch. I wanted to see more of what Maggie was doing. I wasn't friends with Maggie, she was married to Victor who

was one of the 75 kids I graduated high school with. Victor and I weren't close and hadn't spoken in years, I chickened out of going to the 20-year reunion, but since Maggie had gotten healthy and learned to be perfectly imperfect, she decided to hijack Victor's yearbook and try to make us all see the light. It started with a fake friendly overture, with a friend request sent through Facebook. Once accepted then came the Instant message.

Hi Stephanie,

I'm sorry I missed you at the reunion. I feel so bad you were sick and wanted to share with you that I am now a body2soul Coach and sell this amazing shake pack called Great Greens. It is full of antioxidants, packed with vitamins, and has your daily dose of green veggies. The best part is it tastes yummy along with boosting your immune system. Would you like me to send you a sample?

-Maggie

Of course, I had told her I was sorry I didn't get to meet her and ignored her offer of samples. But when I sat at my desk and scrolled through her feed, I wondered how it is she managed to make enough money off this racket to be able to redo her kitchen, take her family on a trip to Disney, and buy a Cadillac SUV all with her side hustle.

I started to think, why couldn't I have that all? The whole concept of Facebook was one big fallacy so why couldn't I get in on the action. But I needed a cover, someone who fit the ridiculous mold these ladies pretend to be. I always wake up looking like this, I love working out, this green veggie juice is the best thing ever-so filling.

Then that speck became a solid mass as I realized my one real friend Lisa would fit the bill. Lisa who liked yoga, had two adorable kids, loved fashion, and was slim. I invited Lisa out for sushi and by the time she polished off her third glass of wine, Body2Soul Steph was born. I had lots of friends on Facebook, people from high school, friends of friends. They weren't really friends but when you are alone at night scrolling through their photos and drama it makes you feel less alone. I never post pictures of me, only my cats, so who would know that I no longer look like I did

20 years ago. Lisa had dark hair and was my height. I told her all she had to do was pose for photos once a week in cute workout gear and for her troubles, I would give her a 20% cut of my commissions.

"Stephanie this is silly, why don't you just do the workouts and the shakes yourself and then become a coach," she said at the time.

"Because that is the beauty of the internet, I can be anyone I want to be. It's all an illusion," I said my voice starting to ramp up with anger.

"Okay Stephanie, I'll do it, but I don't see how this will help you get out of the house more and eventually someone is going to figure it out. I don't want to have to say I told you so in a year."

And now as I sit here with my head in my hands our conversation from a year ago is coming back to haunt me. I have a team of 150 coaches who are my best friends. They send messages to me about how amazing I am, so inspiring, and a great leader. They tag me in Facebook posts thanking me for changing their lives, helping them to stay home with their kids and still earn money. Now Lisa's words ring in my ears, would any of these women be my friend if they knew I was a phony, that I had never chugged down the new Pumpkin Spice shake mix even though I raved about how delicious and creamy it was. Would they still think I was amazing and inspiring if they knew that I never did a single Body-2Soul workout?

What was even more crushing about my letter was that one of my dream goals was to visit a National Park. I have never been out of New York State, unless Ohio counts, which it shouldn't. On the top of my list was Yosemite. It had everything: pristine waterfalls, an incredible meadow with a lake, and Sequoia trees. I had even bought a travel book and was now absentmindedly flipping through the photos. The Tuolumne Meadow looked so peaceful with the small ponds among the wildflowers and views of glacier formations in the distance. I could almost picture myself sitting there on a blanket taking it all in, writing in my journal about all the colors and wildlife.

I tossed the book to the floor and threw on a pair of jeans, boots, and my jacket and decided to head over to Lisa's house. She would know what to

do.

“Stephanie, I told you, the bottom was going to fall out of this,” Lisa said while she hung up my coat and brought me a steaming mug of cider.

“Look maybe you should go on the trip. I don’t think there will be anyone I have met in real life at the conference. I could give you a crash course in Body2Soul, it’s easy. I will make you flash cards and write your speech for the Champion panel.

“Weren’t you just saying the other day you needed a break from the kids?” I was talking fast hoping to get out the words before I lost my courage.

Lisa brought her own mug of cider over and sank down into her creamy leather couch. She had on a multicolored shawl with velvet leggings and a black and silver chunky necklace that looked perfect on her. “Look I’ve been meaning to talk to you about all this. I can’t do it anymore, it just doesn’t feel right. People look up to you Stephanie, they strive to be you. You either need to be the person you claim to be or retire this gig. I know this isn’t who you are,” she said in such a kind voice, my eyes started to tear up.

I trudged home from Lisa’s house feeling defeated. I kicked piles of gray slush as I circled around the long way home to clear my thoughts.

When I got home, I went straight to my laptop and checked my Body2Soul Facebook page with a sinking feeling of dread knowing what I would find. There were my coaches, they had tagged and congratulated me on being chosen to speak at the Pinnacle Meeting.

One of the best choices I made was joining Body2Soul as a coach for this amazing, fearless leader who was chosen to be a speaker at the Pinnacle Meeting. So, honored to call this inspiring woman a boss babe and a friend. Steph has been my rock, my ride or die chick, and I can’t wait to finally meet you in person. #FresnoCA #Body2Soulrocks #Yosemiteor-bust -Jessica G.

All these accolades were of course accompanied by a photo of me (Lisa). I picked up my phone and called Lisa.

“Have you seen my page?”

“Yep, you are quite the boss babe it seems,” Lisa said with what I thought was a hint of sarcasm.

“You sure you won’t go? If the tables were turned I would do it for you.”

“Stephanie the tables would never be turned. I like being myself.”

I let out a deep breath, “You told me to meet more people, to make some friends. I did that plus make some money. I’m a top-selling coach.”

“Stephanie, these people aren’t your friends, you haven’t even met them in real life. They really don’t know anything about you. A few hashtags and that over the top inspiration crap doesn’t make them your friends.

I stifled a sob deep in my chest, “You don’t understand, Lisa. Look at you, you always look put together and you have an amazing body. People gravitate to you, they want to talk to you.”

“We keep going round and round with this. I work out because I like how it makes me feel. People gravitate to me because I try to have a positive outlook, which only comes from being confident in who I am. I look put together because I love to shop. It makes me happy. I keep telling you that if you are just yourself you will be happier.”

I couldn’t control my tears, snot poured out my nose, and I had a tremor in my voice. “Lisa what am I going to do? I can’t even think straight.”

“You can either throw your work out gear and bathing suit in your suitcase and own up to who you really are, or just quit and your ride or die chicks will have to hitchhike to Yosemite,” Lisa said with an exasperated tone. “Look you are going to figure this out. You have a way with words, you always have. But maybe it’s time to do something true to you. Be with people who like you just as you are. I keep telling you the animal shelter needs help with their website and fundraising. You could use your gift of words for some good. Plus, they desperately need dog walkers.”

“You know that would mean talking to people face to face. I can’t handle that,” I said with mounting frustration.

“So, take it slow and start with dog walking. Dogs don’t talk they bark. You have to start somewhere. Look I have to go pick up the kids. I will check in on you later. You’re going to be ok.”

I took a deep breath, blew my nose, and went to my closet where I dug out my bag of summer clothes. I rooted around the bottom and pulled out my brown and white striped tankini. I peeled off my layers and shimmied into my bathing suit. I shivered in front of my full-length mirror and took stock of how I really looked without being covered up. My face was streaked with tears and red splotches that made my deep dark brown eyes look puffy. My skin had the pasty white appearance of having been covered up for months and in need of a tan. My dark brown hair was a mess and hung in a pile of corkscrew curls past my shoulders. If I carefully sucked my stomach in and stood straight in front of the mirror, I could almost pretend I had a semi-flat stomach. As I stood there, I thought my body looked a lot like a plus size out of shape model. I did not look like a top-selling Body2Soul coach invited to speak at the Pinnacle Meeting. I was a fraud who could lose 25 pounds, and no one would worry she was anorexic.

I shucked off the tankini, tossed it under the bed, yanked open my bottom dresser drawer and threw on flannel pajamas. I crawled under the covers and burrowed deep into my bed. It was the only way I could cope with the mounting tension I felt. My cat, Laura jumped up on the bed and as I absentmindedly stroked her fur. I realized that in my panic about how my body looked I forgot about my biggest obstacle to the Pinnacle meeting; the people. All the women that would be there crowded into auditoriums, spilling out to the pool at the resort, and crammed onto the buses that would take us to Yosemite for the team building activity. All those women gabbing nonstop about the workouts, the juices, the yoga, and their kids.

Thinking back to what Lisa said reminded me of a theory I came up with in college, “The Jane Theory”. Jane was a classmate at college but then became a symbol of the type of person I knew I could never be. Jane was average looking, not striking in any particular type of way. Everything about her was average from her athletic 5’5 frame to her mousy brown shoulder length hair, but there was something about Jane. She wasn’t

beautiful in the conventional sense, but she had this aura that was almost electric. Jane was completely at ease with herself and both men and women would flock to her.

I was the opposite of Jane in every way: shy and understated. But I also had long brown wavy hair, curves in all the right places, and sizeable breasts. Men were attracted to me, but nothing ever worked out, their interest always fizzled. It was hard for me to make friends. It was then I decided the world was made up of Janes and Non-Janes.

That’s when the panic attacks started. It seemed everywhere I went there was Jane or a Jane wannabe. I would be in the dining hall and start to feel pinpricks in my hands, my heart would race, and I would get light headed. I would feel a pressing need to get out of the dining hall, but at the same time felt frozen in my seat. The feeling of panic and being trapped always stayed with me. At times I could shove it down and pull out my best Jane, but eventually, it always bubbled to the surface and I would retreat deeper than before.

I reached over to my night table and grabbed two Benadryl tablets. Deep sleep is what I needed, it was the only thing that would calm my racing heart and allow me to think clearly. As my eyelids started to feel heavy my mind drifted to my favorite photo in my Yosemite travel book. It was the photo of the Mist Trail, where there was a natural staircase that took you right next to the Vernal Falls. Maybe one day I would get there.

I woke up 16 hours later feeling groggy and sad. I knew what I had to do, but I felt like a little kid crying because a wave washed away her sand castle. Sandcastles aren’t meant to last, and neither was this Body2Soul gig.

I plugged in my laptop and logged onto the body2soul portal. I messaged my upline and told her I could no longer commit to this for personal reasons. She didn’t need to know and more importantly, she didn’t really care. I was just a percentage of her sales easily replaced by the next willing participant that wanted to be part of the magic. I logged on to Facebook and Instagram and disabled my accounts. I didn’t need the onslaught of posts that would send my thoughts and prayers. I wasn’t ready to face the world yet, but it was time to stop hiding behind a Jane I

created.

3 weeks later

At the entrance to the park I looked at my map and decided the Orange Trail was going to be my route, it overlooked the gorge. I adjusted my hat and wound a scarf around my neck. It was the middle of March, almost spring, but Buffalo hadn't gotten the memo yet. I made sure the leash was wrapped tight in my hand.

"Are you ready Boscoe? This is going to be a brisk walk."

Boscoe was a Bernese mountain dog mix. The shelter said he needed more exercise and asked if I would be willing to take him to a park at off hours for a hike. Boscoe was surrendered due to his anxiety issues and he couldn't be around a lot of people, it made him jumpy. Hunter's Creek Park was deserted first thing in the morning, and there was still snow on the ground, so we didn't have to worry about the mountain bikers. I gave a firm tug on Boscoe's leash and off we went. The gorge wasn't the waterfall at Yosemite, but if you don't take that first step you will only stay in place.



Painted Ceramic by Rafael Guzman

Logo Concepts





GLAZED CERAMIC



Danielle Washburn



Hunter VanArnum



Kotomi Shimotanaka



Kotomi Shimotanaka



Malerie Belles



Malerie Belles



Julianna Finnerty

Spring

Spontaneously,
March sun springs like jack-in-box.
Snow acquiesces.

Summer

Fireflies still blink in
Jar of summer memories
Where I once left them

Fall

Setting sun spot lights
Roosting crows in bare fall trees.
Night black fruit to pick.

Winter

Winter white corn field
Shattered in shards of red,
Cardinal flies thru.

-Tom Stock

SLUMBER

Tom Stock

September saunters in.

Uninvited with silent stealth,

Stealing away to enter the slip stream

As summer days rush past the gate of state fair dreams.

Dreams of empty Ferris wheels which will soon deconstruct

And slowly rust in stored slumber until next spring.

As evening sunsets dawdle on the horizon,

Lengthening shadows,

Distorted fun house exaggerations,

Cling to their owners like a silhouetted Siamese twin

Coming Winter sings its siren song,

Seducing with its soft September incantations

Which will grow louder each passing, shorter day

As it shoves it way onto Augusts' porch

And lets slam the screen door one last time.

It serenades while mocking those silly late summer lovers

Wanting to crash their hopes of eternal solar refuge

Onto November's wet gray rocks.

The Cicadas work in earnest

To keep their rhythm up tempo, metered in prime numbers

Tom Stock

As a sleepier sun loses its resolve to motivate them.
 Fruit, not too long ago mere blossoms,
 Souvenirs of another season,
 Drops to the ground
 Tired of vacation on the branch
 And now just wishes to go back home to the Earth.
 Drowsy days of cotton cumulus clouds nail the eye skyward
 Which in turn segue into crystal clear starscape nights
 That confound any sense of finite.

Frost waits like an assassin
 To pounce, to fill each night with deadly white threat.
 Harvest moon pumpkins,
 Sure of their fate,
 Work in nervous concentration to turn full orange
 Before they are called upon to complete their mission.
 Dark clouds of bird murmurations, fractals, appear out of Nowhere.
 Transient migrant frequent flyers,
 Hitch hikers on last March's jet stream to work Northern wild berries,
 Now head home, hobo like on the next southbound.
 Becoming part bird, part plant,
 They light upon undulating seas of golden waving corn which awaits the blade;
 The air is filled with their exhalations and rising cry to describe their impending Diaspora.
 They refuse to buy autumn's opium dreams floating on late season camp fire smoke
 And will leave their dull cousins
 Who refuse migration, choosing Winter's struggle instead.

Swarming against a cobalt blue backdrop
 Hurried bees,
 Who fully understand what Sun's angle portends,
 Dance a frenetic map pointing the direction of the golden rod field
 Now fully flush with summer sun captured in its bloom.
 Yellow school buses return from summer hibernation
 With their jerky stop and start,
 Their exasperating traffic slowing regularity,
 To swallow and expel school children
 Who are bent over with knowledge filled back packs
 Like so much day labor.

The grasshopper and the ant sit and visit,
 Drowsy in the afternoon sun.
 They talk of summer's fleeting nature,
 Of seasonal affective disorder,
 Of the pennant race.
 Getting up,
 The serious, stolid ant resumes his noon idled labor
 With a sigh of resignation.
 Taking a long pull on his beer,
 The Grasshopper closes his eyes and smiles.
 A nap now, his work will wait,
 Where summer did not.
 A paradox, an equinox.
 Half awake, half asleep.

Life's Philosophical Gym

A Play by Theodore J. Cook

Introduction

Have you ever wondered about the mysteries of the universe? Did you feel like you were on the edge of figuring it all out, but were just missing that one piece? Have you ever felt like you were a pawn in a cosmic chess game, you don't even know the rules of? More than likely you have on all accounts at one time or another. These are some of the questions I wanted to explore with this play, and I choose to use the setting of a gym to do so; since that is the place, unlikely as it seems, that I have thought or talked about these questions the most.

In the explorations of this theme I wanted to call upon of the notions others have explored before me. For this I looked to, some deep thinkers, the philosophers like; Immanuel Kant, James Rachels, Jonathan Wolf, and many more. These deep thinkers have dug into the mysteries of life and broke them open for others to see. In doing so, they have tried to translate their findings to us, but unfortunately it isn't always a clear-cut thing. In turn, they have done their best, and even illuminated some other things; because of the sometimes-confusing complexity of their translations, that they may not have meant in the first place. This is also what playwrights do.

For this I look to William Shakespeare, amongst so many others, who has conveyed vast meanings through their works. Playwrights and philosophers utilize a medium to speak about something they feel is important. One of my favorite style of plays throughout history to convey a message, whether it be on: morals, politics, religion, life's mysteries, or anything else; has been the tragic comedy. Fundamentally we all know something bad or tragic is going to happen in this style of play, to the hero or lead character, and from this; some epiphany is going to come about. The comedy portion is worth just as much to the play as the tragic portion, since it puts the audience at ease; allowing us to digest the content with a relish and simplicity which does not always go with its counterpart.

That is why I knew that philosophy and tragic comedy mashed together would be the perfect union; to help explore those questions we all ask about life, the universe, and our roles in both. I do not pretend I've an answer for those questions, but I hope to be a step in the exploration of the answer. I lead off each act posing a philosophical question, then through the split in the act I explore it further, and finally I try to weave it into the full work; so, we may test how each concept works with the larger picture. In doing this I hoped to convey the full complexity of the questions we ask. In fact, I'm probably only scratching the surface of a life long journey to the answers.

Whatever the final result of my second play may be, whether it be in the answering of life's mysteries or anything else it may reveal to you; I hope that you can enjoy it. It is great to be able to have the opportunity to explore these ideas with all of you, but it be something special to know that you enjoyed my play, half as much as I did write it for all of you. With all of that being said, please sit back, relax, and enjoy.



Mixed Media Mask by Savannah McFarland

Act One

Cast

Life's Philosophical Gym

<u>Cast</u>	<u>Role</u>
Fred	Blue collar worker/ Test subject
Ken	Workout enthusiast
Henry	Philosopher
Doug	Physicist
Ward	Religious ping pong junkie
Saldon	Zen like dude
Boss	Typical hardnose boss

Stage Setup

Scattered around in no particular arrangement

3 workout benches

7 dumbbells

1 punching bag

1 pair of boxing gloves

*Note- I will use the term [aside]. Afterwards Fred will speak directly to the audience only. Then normal dialog will continue as if nothing had occurred.

[On stage-Henry, Ken]

Henry: You want big muscles, right?

Ken: I already have big muscles. I want bigger muscles.

Henry: Then have you have considered treating the weights as an end, instead of the means to an end?

Ken: What is that supposed to mean? The weights are to be lifted, so I get bigger muscles.

Henry: How does the weights feel?

Ken: What? Are they alive now?

Henry: No...well maybe, but that's not what I mean. I mean that the weights are big, solid, and symmetrical.

Ken: Exactly like how I want my muscles to be.

Henry: So, think of it this way then. The weights are the end result, and your muscles are the means to obtain them.

Ken: Oh! ...I don't think I totally get it, but are you trying to say I should use my muscles to lift the weights? That's exactly what I do.

Henry: Not really, but sure; go that. My reasoning is lost, once again.

[Enter Fred, Doug, Ward, Saldon]

Ken: Here comes the guys. What's up?

Ward: Fred was late.

Henry: Why so late Fred?

Fred: Well, funny story there. In the summer I like to go to the park, before coming to work, to feed the swans. So, I go today and while feeding the swans this squirrel comes out of nowhere, runs up my leg, and bites my hand. It's just my luck, I guess.

Doug: Wow, the odds of that are probably 1 in 1.43 billion.

Saldon: That's a real bummer Fred, but it could be worse.

[Enter Boss]

Boss: Fred, you're late again. I told you about this before, like what... six, seven times. I'm docking you a day's wage.

Fred: Boss, this is the first time I've been late, and I had to go to the hospital for a rabies shot; after I got bit by a crazed squirrel.

Boss: Don't make matters worse. Try to be more like Ward.

[Exit Boss]

Fred: Ward...Ward, you were just late yesterday, and I don't even know what you do here. I have no luck whatsoever.

Ward: Sorry, Fred, can't stay to chat. I got a big ping pong match to go to, but I'm sure the Lord has a plan for all this.

[Exit Ward]

Ken: Come on Fred, let's do a couple sets on the new machine. It'll make you feel better.

Fred: I'm not really up for it.

[Exit Ken]

Saldon: Well, I'm going to the steam room, and I promise that it's going to be extra steamy when I'm done. Anyone want to partake with me?

Doug: No, I'm good.

Fred: Sorry, Saldon, I'm just going to hang around here.

[Exit Saldon]

Henry: I don't like seeing you like this Fred. You're someone, who, I feel has real character worth.

Doug: He's just saying that because you're the only one who listens to him.

Henry: No, he isn't, and I mean what I said. In the end, no matter how much of a bad day, week, month, Fred has; he still treats others fair and just. That's just not something everyone does.

Doug: I was only lightening the mood, Henry. We all think Fred is the best. I'm sorry that you're having a rough day Fred. I'm going to run some data I'm working on for a new idea, but I'll stay if you need me to?

Fred: Go on Doug, I'll be fine. I think I'll just go and hit the bag to let out a little bit of frustration.

Doug: All right, Fred, I'll see you later. Oh, watch out for your squirrel bite.

[Exit Doug]

Henry: I just had an idea I have to write down, so I'll see you later Fred. Remember when we are our lowest; our character is tested the most.

[Exit Henry]

[Fred puts on a pair of boxing gloves, walks toward the punching bag, and before he reaches it; it falls from its hooks onto the floor.]

[Aside]

Fred: What a frivolous floundering creature life be, to toil and play on this universal tapestry. To be set adrift, in this celestial rift. To not even be a twinkle, inside of that wrinkle. A spot, amongst that blot. Does not even compare to my state, amongst fate. What plan may be in store, has no concern toward my implore. I must be sedate, in my wretched fate.

[End Act One]

Act Two

[On stage- Henry, Ward]

Henry: I've been meaning to ask you about something I've been thinking about a lot lately.

Ward: Go ahead. I'll try my best to help. Just make it quick I've got a big ping pong match.

Henry: Does God write the script of everything, or does he just read from a pre-written one?

Ward: My father created the Heavens and the earth; and all that there is. What script would he follow if he made everything?

Henry: Let me ask it slightly different, so that we both may understand. A director guides a movie being made, but only once and awhile actually writes the script. The director will interpret and put his vision to the movie, but it was not originally his plan.

Ward: So, you're saying that God, got someone or something else's plan, and put it in motion?

Henry: No, that's not what I'm saying, but it is sort of what I'm asking.

Ward: Well that is just crazy! There is only one God. We owe all to the most high and all knowing God.

Henry: I can see that you are set in your beliefs. Sorry I asked. My reasoning is lost, once again.

[Enter Saldon, Ken, Doug]

[Exit Ward]

Ken: Nice talking to you, Ward. Maybe one day, when you become serious, we can work out together.

Henry: Don't waste your time calling after him. He's got a big ping pong game.

Doug: I find him odd. All he does is whack balls, watch them being whacked, and prays. I mean the praying part isn't bad or even the ping pong, but not if that's all you do.

Saldon: He's happy with his allotment in life. There's nothing wrong with that. You know; just go with what makes you happy.

Henry: Happy according to who?

Saldon: Does it matter at the end of the day?

Doug: It would make me happy, if I could figure out how to break the speed of light. You think if we were to: take a person, put him into a one-man pod, then use the earth's gravitational force to slingshot him; that we could break the light barrier?

Ken: On that note; where is Fred?

Saldon: Here he comes now, and he looks he's got a story to tell.

[Enter Fred]

Fred: I know it's the beginning of Fall, but I started it by taking one; not willingly either.

ALL: What happened Fred?

Fred: There I was walking to work, and this woman in her car; comes out of nowhere drives right up on the sidewalk and hits me with it.

Henry: Do you think she planned it? Or was she just the instrument of some universal

plan?

Fred: It's just my lot in life, to be fate, to be fate's playboy.

Doug: Don't say that Fred. We each are the masters of our own destinies.

Fred: It gets even worse.

Ken: There isn't any way it could get worse.

Fred: After I got examined at the hospital, they gave me a prescription to what I thought was a pain medication...it turned out to be an extra strength laxative.

Ken: I was wrong; it could get worse.

[Enter Boss]

Boss: Fred, I'm tired of you being late. I don't want to hear any of your excuses either. This is the last time I'm going to tell you, next time you're fired. Also, I'm docking you a weeks pay, for this time. Now get to work, I'm not paying you for nothing.

[Exit Boss]

Ken: And there goes insult on top of injury.

[Aside]

Fred: What a cruel thing fate be. They say that she's a woman, but I say she's a devil with her cruelty and trickery...trickery maybe she's more like a witch. With that I am sure I'm destined to be a mere morsel in her spell pot. To be broken down and simmered to almost nothingness. To be left floating inside of the roiling brew. Until it is either dumped to start anew, or until I fly from it in an insubstantial form; to hover above or to be dashed below. That is my fate, for she has her eye on me.

Henry: I'm now leaning towards a universal plan.

Saldon: Bummer. Maybe, you should come to the steam room with me Fred.

[Exit Saldon]

Fred: Well you all heard the boss. I got to get to work. I'll see you guys later.

[Exit Fred]

Ken: I'm really worried about Fred. You know he doesn't even work out anymore.

Doug: I'm going to check on him.

[Exit Doug]

Henry : We each have struggles to endure, and from this we get our worth. Fred is already worth much.

Ken : Yeah, he's my friend also. You know, Henry, you can just say what you mean sometimes.

[End Act Two]

Act Three

[On stage - Henry, Saldon]

Henry: Why do you think we preserve our lives? Is it from self-love or duty to one self?

Saldon: I'm glad you seek enlightenment. I don't know if I have all the answers you may want. I'm just beginning my path to enlightenment, but I'll help as I may.

Henry: I've always sought enlightenment, but don't always agree on other's path. Yet, I like to know every turn I may take or explore.

Saldon: As you should. As you should.

Henry: So what light may you shed on this subject?

Saldon: The universe is made of energy, and everything in it gives and receives energy. An ebb and flow; if you follow me?

Henry: Perfectly; please continue.

Saldon: Whatever energy we put forth will be returned in like form. When we try to alter this river by changing our energy; we alter the energy we get from it.

Henry: So, for my question, how does it affect it?

Saldon: If we interrupt the natural flow by trying to remove ourselves from it; we in fact only submerge ourselves deeper in it, and flounder with inability to change our future course.

Henry: Oh...you're talking about reincarnation, and how if you mess up the natural cycle; you could come back as a slug or something like it.

Saldon: That really isn't what I said, but if it's what you got from it; sure, go with that. My reasoning is lost, once again.

[Enter Fred, Ward, Ken, Doug]

Ward: No ping pong for me today. I have a lot of the good word to study. I'm looking at sins and putting them into context of why, I think, we are failing as a society today.

Saldon: Ward, I didn't even know that you knew so many words, but maybe you should ease up on the doom and gloom. We could go to the steam room?

Ward: This is why I never hang out. You guys don't take your immortal souls seriously and are more than willing to cast them down.

[Exit Ward]

Doug: It's not that I don't believe. It's that I don't always find it practical.

Henry: For our soul's sake?

Saldon: Don't you go and get started on that again.

Henry: What? It's a good question.

[Exit Saldon]

Ken: What's up with Saldon?

Henry: Overthinking; he probably went to the steam room to vent some.

Doug: A Saldon in motion, stays in motion; unless acted upon by an outside force. In this case, that would be the steam room.

Ken: Fred you're really quiet. What's going on?

Doug: Yeah Fred, what gives?

Fred: My girlfriend leaves me a couple of weeks before Christmas. That's what gives. Ken, Doug, Henry: Girlfriend?

Fred: On top of that; on the way out of my driveway, she goes and runs over my pet squirrel.

Ken: Dude...I'm like your best friend, and I didn't know that you had a girlfriend or a pet squirrel. What's up with that?

[Exit Ken]

Fred: I told you guys...I'm sure I told you guys. I finally thought I wasn't a punching dummy for the universe. I guess I was wrong.

Doug: Don't be so hard on yourself, Fred. I got this science show to go to later, but after that why don't we talk about all this I'm sure we'll figure it out, but I got to go now.

[Exit Doug]

Henry: Remember Fred that self-love is the thing that sustains us, and it would be irrational to look at it differently.

Fred: What happens when you run out of self-love?

Henry: Well...

[Enter Boss]

Boss: Fred, there is a flood in the women's locker room. Get in there and clean it up.

[Aside]

Fred: Nothing but a broken urge, through a toxic surge. I yearn to be more, yet I am destined to a chore. To tarry on, even when I rather ferry on. This life is only filled with strife. Held together, with only a loose tether. We try, to soar and fly. Only to crash below, down some dirt filled hole. Such may be my lot, in this dastardly plot. To never prevail, until I walk through the veil.

[Exit Fred, Boss, Henry]

[Pause on scene]

[Light flicker on and off]

[Pause on scene]

[Enter Henry, Ken]

Henry: I can't believe that a blow dryer, that happened to still be plugged in, fell into the water Fred was cleaning up; killing him.

Ken: My friend is gone...and all you care about is the moral worth. Who cares! You can chalk it up to incredibly bad luck, or a universal plan. Whatever, you want, you don't have the right to question his moral worth.

[Exit Ken]

Henry: I guess he listens to me too much. I will miss Fred also. I only question his intentions, so I might remember him how he truly was. Not some misconception of an invalid reasoning. That is the reason I question the whys and hows, so I might better understand the whos.

[End]