

PHAETHON





Tom Stock

cover photo: "Gabby" by Kaitlyn Jenks



Rainbow by Kaitlyn Jenks

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.

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Anxiety

Kaitlyn Jenks

I can't kill the overwhelming apprehension,
This feeling provokes a paralyzing tension.
Rational tonality bleeds into the background,
My never ending cycle of constant compression.

Normality

Kaitlyn Jenks

A grand conspiracy affecting the masses,
A coping mechanism to help their passage.
A "harmless" way to justify the unknown,
Little do they know this belief leaves gashes.



Masquerade

Sharifay Mohammed

A fight broke out.

Hansel's instincts knew before his eyes shot open.

The bellowed cries of a guard calling for backup could be heard through the chaos.

Rubbing away sleep from russet eyes, he raked a hand through wild dark curls and days-old stubble, trying his best to ignore the commotion. He shot from the sore excuse of a bunk to a sitting position, taking in the slightly lit space. The early signs of sunlight streamed through the barred window in the otherwise dim cell, teasing him of the outside world.

Hans was not a morning person by any stretch. It was not uncommon to be robbed of slumber, he knew, but he was irritable all the same. He treasured his sleep most over what little comfort he had—comforts prison did not grant.

He cringed.

Prison.

The hell on earth specially designed for sinners like him: Murderers, robbers, drug dealers, sex offenders. Regardless of the significance of each varying crime, they were all regarded the same — the bane of society.

It was an unfathomable world.

A world many know exists, but nobody wants to get to know.

A world he had somehow managed to survive for ten dreadful years.

The noise quickly escalated.

Chairs crashed across the floors, tables flipped about, the roar of men effectively disturbing the morning peace. A brawl, Hans suspected. Two inmates. A gang of others egging it on. Something about someone's

toothbrush going missing. He could not find it in himself to give a fuck. Whatever the quarrel was, it did not make it any less foolish. But this was his reality. To most inmates, a fight was as good entertainment as anything. Others, like him, made it a point to mind their business and not get too attached if only it meant avoiding drama or clinging onto false hope.

So far, it hadn't let him down.

Ever alert, Hans willed his groggy eyes to wake and began pacing the congested space. The pungent stench of urine mixed with fear and neglect clung to the concrete walls, leaving nothing left to do but stare at them. His gaze swiftly darted across the room to where his cellmate dozed.

The kid slept like the dead. Hans was not sure whether the boy was comfortable with an intimidating cellmate, or if he just did not value his life. Either way, the kid would learn soon enough to fend for himself.

They all did, eventually.

Tyler "TJ" James, a juvenile caught in a drug bust and tried for the possession and sale of narcotics. Drug trafficking, Hans gathered from the gossip. He imagined the hope in his eyes, while his trial dragged out, to have been nothing short of childlike. From their clipped conversations, Hans suspected that sliver of promise to have sunk with a vengeance once privy to his sentence—fifteen years maximum in federal prison.

Hans empathized but felt sorry for no one. No crime went unpunished, he knew better than anyone. That rule is what landed him in the same hole for an unspeakable crime.

Even so, the kid had hope. He believed in the light at the end of the tunnel—that his pain was temporary. Hans supposed that attitude would serve him well in the long run, but could never begin to understand that kind of optimism. He witnessed what prison could do to even the most hardened souls. Perhaps he truly was different.

It was not long before the special response unit flooded the pod just below his cell, putting an end to the mayhem. Semi-silence fell over the

area save for the sleep-deprived inmates unhappy to be awoken. It all started and ended in a blink.

Just like that.

“Rise and shine, Reinhart.”

Hans’s gaze gradually made its way to the massive correctional officer unlocking the cell.

His cell.

Aside from the greeting, the man was humorless. His crisp uniform and dark features made him look even more menacing. Hans gave a nod of acknowledgment, saying nothing else.

The officer gestured for him to offer his hands. “Seems your ride is here.”

Hansel stood dumb while the officer cuffed his hands. He merely eyed the CO with curiosity and zero urge to ask the question burning in the back of his mind. A few days in advance, someone had mailed in a change of clothes and a few toiletries.

A friend had them ordered, the guard had disclosed. He asked to remain anonymous.

Now a ride? As far as he was concerned, Hans did not have friends.

Once out of his cell, Hans dutifully followed the CO who led them to process. Here, the cuffs were loosened. The few necessities he had gone in with were returned: a watch, chain, T-shirt, sweatpants. Save for the silver pendant, Hans did not care for his personal effects. In fact, he planned to trash it as soon as he found the first dumpster.

He was then sent to medical to pick up his prescriptions before returning his ID. He filled out the necessary paperwork and signed off on a contract before he was erased from the system. Since he had already returned all prison property the day prior, all that was left was for him to freshen up and change into his new clothes.

The surprise on his face nearly rivaled that of the officials and onlookers as he approached the CO who waited downstairs.

A fitted Armani suit paired with Ferragamo oxfords. The familiar, heady aroma infusing the fabric had momentarily stalled his senses. It was his favorite perfume.

A friend my ass, Hans thought.

Before he knew it, the guard led him to the front gate and Hans tossed the clothes in the nearest dumpster. The July heat was the first thing he felt as they reached the entryway, the humid air stifling him in his suit. Drinking in the innocence of nature made him realize just how withdrawn he’d been. It was then the man leaning on a sleek black Escalade caught his attention.

He recognized that face anywhere.

“If it isn’t my favorite nephew.”

Silence.

He felt the blood drain from his face, barely moving a muscle. Everything around him registered too slow. He blinked. The skin between his brows furrowed, a foreign warmth tickling the dead stone in his chest. His brain could not seem to catch up to his mouth once he found words. “Aamir?”

The slightly man removed his shades to tuck it inside his slack pocket. He wore a navy suit, undoubtedly expensive, and a gold Rolex encased his wrist. He did not look a day over forty but his age was no secret to Hans. The crinkle in his eyes and the salt peppering jet black hair could attest to that. An air of undying youth surrounded him.

Aamir’s shrewd eyes scanned Hans for any sign of hurt or distress. Satisfied, an honest grin stretched his lips. He has great taste in fashion, Hans thought.

The man shrugged. “A man must always look the part.”

“Can you recount the night of your arrest?”

Hans had been sitting in the grungy room for what felt like hours. He was bound to a creaky wooden chair, blood trickling down his temple

from the impact. The Escalade, he remembered. He was in the car one minute, bullets rained the next, then everything went black. Once conscious, a few men came in and out of the room to interrogate him, occasionally beating him with no luck. The man before him seemed like their last resolve.

Ignoring the question, Hans sized the man up, his eyes stopping on his nameplate. Joseph Bianchi. "Fat Joe," they called him. He wore his name well, the buttons on his bulletproof vest straining against his bulging belly. A jagged scar ran through his hairline, his right hand missing a chubby thumb. He was outwardly intimidating, but Hans could taste his fear. The man was a coward hiding behind a uniform.

"Mr. Reinhart, it would be in your best interest to tell us what we need to know."

Where was his uncle? Did he have something to do with this? Did these men work for him?

"Where is Aamir?"

"You're in no position to be making demands, Mr. Reinhart."

He wanted to play that game? "Then I guess I have the right to remain silent."

"Mr. —"

"Joe," a voice interjected. Hans waited far too long to hear that voice. He was beyond impatient, his mind already conjuring a thousand ways to take his uncle's life. Aamir's silhouette darkened the door as he gestured for the men to lock it. "Leave us."

"Where the fuck am I?"

He placed his hands behind his back. "Calm down, nephew. You're in good hands."

"Where the fuck am I?!" He growled.

"Basement, cellar, warehouse..." Aamir stalled as he sauntered toward the lone light in the room before flicking it on. "What difference does it

make?"

"You tell me. You know more than me, apparently."

Aamir didn't respond.

"Since when do you keep cops on your payroll?"

"It pays to have useful friends."

Strained silence filled the cold air as the two men stared each other down, one with sheer purpose and the other with a cruel promise. Aamir rocked on his heel as he studied his battered nephew. Hans should've seen it coming. He knew Aamir was short-fused. A lot like himself. He scowled. "I don't know what your goal is, but if you plan to off me I suggest you speed it up."

"If I wanted that, you'd already be dead."

He was over the empty threats. "Truthfully, I'm in a pissy mood. I left one cage only to land in another. So don't bullshit me. Now, why am I here? I won't ask again."

"Hugo is missing."

Hans stiffened. What did his father have to do with this? He gave a look that said I meant what I said. "According to his phone records, you were the last person he spoke to. I'm sure you can understand."

Hans wished he hadn't.

His heart sank to his gut as he recalled the one-sided conversation he and his father exchanged. Family isn't always what they seem. The man sounded unnerved — like a weight he hadn't asked for suddenly collapsed on his shoulders. Hans wasn't sure what those cryptic words meant, yet they practically washed over him. He'd been piecing the puzzle up until today, or so he thought. I hate that it took so long, son. Believe me, I do. But the truth awaits no one. And when it's out, I only fear your safety...

Hans hadn't known any better at the time. He'd been wasted that night

and alcohol triggered his mental highs. At the peak of mania, he'd neglected his meds and struggled to maintain control. Impulse had him screwing anything with a pulse, splurging on fast cars, and gambling away at his trust. During Zoya's graduation party, no one assumed he was unstable. In fact, he'd been visibly upbeat. As the festivities neared its end, Hans found his cousin upstairs. She'd been limping toward him, tiara gone, and curls appearing as though someone had tugged on them while her tattered gown barely escaped struggle. Hans could hardly decipher Zoya's stammers as she wailed hysterically. Instinctively, he pulled a gun on the fleeing man, chased him down, and pistol-whipped him to death.

A high profile lawyer, Hugo Reinhart was his father first before anything. It was his duty to put his life on the line, so he took on Hans's case. The charges mounted, and the cruel judge gave him a run for his money: Unlawful possession of a firearm, aggravated assault, battery, voluntary manslaughter. News channels devoured the headlines: Chicago native, Hansel Reinhart, was arrested and charged with the death of Assistant United States Attorney, Johnathan Rossi.

Rage pulsed through Hansel's veins at the memory. "You fuckin' dimed me out to the feds?!"

"They left me no choice. Hugo and John had something on me. They were closing in and I couldn't risk it. So," Aamir stalled. "I extended the invitation. You see, I knew Johnny had a thing for kids. My Zoya, unfortunately. I knew having them at the party would give them the impression that they'd won. Rossi needed to go, and so I set the trap."

The friction of the taut rope singed his wrists. Hans held Aamir's attention and continued clawing at the restraints. "You knew I wasn't myself, that I was manic. You knew I'd offer my life on a platter to protect my family."

Aamir had the nerve to look ashamed. "Yes."

"Why sell your daughter out?"

"She was merely collateral."

Right. Just like his father. "What'd he have on you?"

"Leverage. He accessed private shipments under the guise of a potential client, blackmailed my bookkeeper, and bugged various locations. Now I'm in bed with the Russians. He hurt my pockets, and I have a problem with that."

Hans made the connection. Hugo had a bad habit for seeking dirty truths and got more than he bargained for. He knew now, Aamir being CEO of Khan & Sons was merely a cover-up for international arms dealing. Gun-running, for street people. His blood money was cleaned through legitimate businesses like clubs, hotels, restaurants and auto shops.

A thought hit Hans as he glanced at himself. "Who sent the clothes?"

"Your father, of course."

His jaw clenched at the condescending tone. Fire and brimstone blazed in his eyes as he glared at a grinning Aamir, half expecting the bombshell that came next.

"He's dead."

In a swift move, Hansel's freed fist shot out and punched Aamir square in the nose. Blood gushed from the soft tissue and Hans was sure he'd broken it. He watched as Aamir went blind for a moment, his reddened face set aflame as he tried to regain his breathing. Simultaneously, a squad of un-uniformed men aimed guns in his direction. He figured guards lined the pitch-black walls of the barely lit space and awaited an attack. Raising his bloodied hand, the other arm followed as he kept a leveled gaze on Aamir.

"You're sick."

Aamir's demonic chuckles echoed as he straightened, holding a handkerchief to his nose. "You think so little of me. Now that you understand you were just an experiment, it's only right I warn you. I share that bipolar of yours, touch me again and see if I don't bury you six feet under."

“What’s stopping you?” Hans retorted, unfazed.

Aamir considered his words as he eyed the opened locket that rested on Hans’s chest. A photo of a stunning woman cradling her infant stared back at him. Nora Khan. His first love. The woman he’d abandoned. Hans’s mother. The moment was short-lived as Aamir said, “Everyone has a weakness. Your mother happens to be yours.”

Hans lunged out again, only this time to disarm the guard closest to him then snatched Aamir into a chokehold before pressing the butt of the cold metal to his temple. He shouted at the crew to empty their chambers and toss their weapons aside. He shot one for good measure, assured that the magazine was loaded. “Now, or so help me god I’ll blow his brains out!”

His next words thickened with cruelty and dripped like acid. “You’re a dead man, you hear me? I swear I’ll kill you.”

Aamir didn’t doubt it for a second as he glanced at the cowering guards. He didn’t blame them. “You could, but I’m afraid the FBI are well on their way.”

“That gives me enough time to cremate your body.” Bullets showered the space and ripped through every last one of Aamir’s men, leaving one who trembled in the corner. The kid was shell-shocked. He looked frail, young, barely in his late teens. Hans was reminded of the time he’d been whisked away in cuffs, his entire life flashing before him.

The son of a bitch recruited minors.

Aamir’s heel nearly landed in his groin as he elbowed a distracted Hans right in the kidneys. Hans doubled over and somehow in the mist, took a bullet to the rib. He stumbled. The pain was brutal as it was unforgiving, but he was no stranger to it. He ate it, twisting Aamir’s form to reclaim the gun, and struck his throat. Aamir choked. He landed another jab to his solar plexus before smashing the stainless steel into his skull. Thick blood pooled, mixing with his own as Aamir nearly went unconscious. Tossing the gun aside, Hans quickly undid his silk tie and clenched it around his fists as he spoke to the boy. “If anyone asks, you saw nothing. Or I will kill you. We clear?”

The kid nodded frantically. “C-crystal.”

Hans gestured to the exit, aware that he was breaking an unspoken rule—No witnesses. “Go on, get out of here.”

He wasted no time wrapping the thin cloth around Aamir’s exposed throat and squeezed with unnatural strength, choking him mercilessly. Aamir’s shallow gasps and gurgles filled the space, his body desperately fighting for oxygen that wouldn’t come. He foamed at the mouth. Blood spurted from his mouth in heaps, his tan skin morphing into a ghastly blue—veins frighteningly visible. It was not long before his body went limp from the strain, killing him slowly.

Glancing at his leaking side, Hans grunted at the pain. It needed serious tending to. With a clenched jaw, he scoured through Aamir’s pockets, pulling out the cigar case and automatic lighter he always carried. He lit one broken cigar and inhaled, the nicotine soothing his nerves. After a few more drags, he lit the device and flicked it at Aamir’s leg, flames igniting the lifeless body.

Sumi-e ink on watercolor paper by Amy Marie Kosina



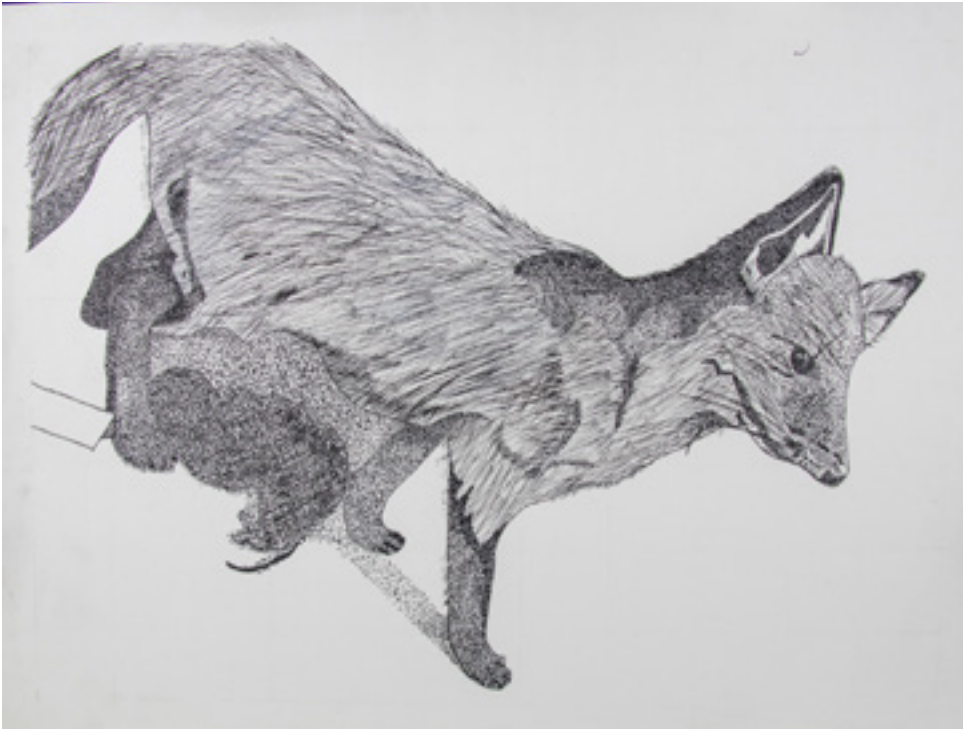
charcoal drawings



Ai Nishino



Aubrey Ketcham



Mikey Ford



Amy Younes



Anna McDonald



Jessie Rivers



Tom Stock

The Accordion Player

Tom Stock

Nightly.
 He pumps her bellows with full volume.
 But gently.
 Breathing in
 And out
 In living
 Harmonious synchronicity
 With her melody
 He fingers so deftly, delicately
 Her buttons and keys.
 Solo act,
 Under a bare spot light,
 Back lit in his
 Living
 Room
 Passersby admire his trance,
 His gentle form,
 His lady of Spain
 Whom he held so close.
 Eyes Closed
 He dreams of her,
 When she was new
 When her leather was not so cracked.
 It grows late.
 Wishing only this song could go on
 Forever
 Not wanting to return her to her dark case,
 Rests her in his favorite chair,
 At last, turning off the light.

A Truck, Multiple Signs, and Questions; A Trip to Downing Town

Theodore J. Cook

The first snowflake danced and fluttered its way down from the heavens, to crash into my windshield. It hit with an impact, like a jackhammer on tar. At that moment, I imagined, it more resembled the size of my fist than its actual size of about an eraser head. On another day, I would be mesmerized by its crystalline perfection. On how it glimmered with a bluish hue, and sparkled, like a disco-ball.

But that would be another day. This day my mind was occupied by thoughts of finally meeting my father for the first time. This mythical being, whom my mother spoke of from time to time. The picture my blessed mother painted for me was always incomplete and shifting to meet her mood. In fact, I've never even seen a picture of my father. I wondered what he would look like when I finally got to meet him. Would he be tall, like me? Would he have, my overly large rabbit-like ears? Would he even have the same colored hair as me? My own always reminds me of a swirling mud puddle, where there is a mixture of light brown and almost black. Maybe he would have copper-red hair. That way, I could finally explain the penny shaded whiskers that crop up in my beard.

At that moment, I was shocked back to reality by my old beat-up Ford pick-up truck sliding across the now grease-like highway. The snow was compiling in a wet mess, quicker than I would like. I hoped my old Ford could make the rest of the trip. I didn't usually drive it as far as I was going that day, all the way to Downing Town and back. I had my Ford for two years, but that's not what made it old. It was old way before I received it from my Uncle Bob. One thing I can say about Uncle Bob, he's one hell of a mechanic. He made the Franken Ford for me, out of numerous other vehicles. It doesn't even resemble any other make or model on the road. The only reasons I call it a Ford are; it's mainly made from Ford castoffs, and it's American made. Maybe it's just my preference. I do love my Franken truck. I mean, how couldn't you, something this ugly needs love. It doesn't even have a specific color.

One of its two doors is sky blue, while the other door is camouflage; at least that's what it appears to be. It could just be rust, dirt, or some sort of grass green

paint. The hood now that's a real piece of work. It's black, with a faded purple gorilla embossed on it. The trailer bed is made from oaken boards that are likely to leave you with a splinter if you were to place something in it. It looks like there was an attempt to stain the boards, but not with any conventional stain. Probably was done with chew spit and axle grease. But it's all I got and has never failed to get me somewhere. Now, arriving there on time is another matter, with its sputtering coughing gait. I can't even push sixty miles per hour, without it screaming its discontentment, like a cat being thrown into a lake.

There it went, the Welcome to Downing Town sign. I hoped that it wasn't another omen for the day, trying to slow down this meeting. But anytime you see a sign that full of bullet holes, you should take notice. Especially when there was a beer can balanced on top of it and a dirt-encrusted pair of boxers hanging from the bottom of it. Heck, it looked like the snowflakes were purposely shying away from the sign altogether like a germ-phobic person would shy away from the town dump. That was only the beginning of the blaring warning signs it screamed at me. I mean, there appears to have been a petrified, urine yellow striped, skunk clinging to one side of the post; like it was some sort of lost love it was embracing. The other side of the post for the sign had the honor of having a teal-colored duck tied to it. I'm pretty sure it was still alive since it was flapping its wings at a speed at which a hummingbird would. It probably was also honking its displeasure, but at the time I was passing it, my truck decided to let out a backfire, which sounded more like an elephant's fart than any cough or sputter that should've issued forth.

Speaking about the duck being alive, I hadn't seen anything else that has resembled life. I hoped that changed in a moment when I took the upcoming right onto Main Street. After I got on Main Street, my directions were to go three more miles on it, then hang a right onto Porcupine Lane. I hoped there are no actual porcupines in residence since I would never be able to see them, with all of this snow. It kind of reminded me of foam on top of a drink, you're never quite sure what lurks below the surface. I couldn't afford to blow a tire. I didn't have any spares, after the last week's run-in with a spike strip. I'm still a little bit mad about that whole shit storm. The police claim it was a mistaken identity thing, but I highly doubt that. I mean, they were looking for a seventy-something, white haired granny driving a Volkswagen bug. A sunshine yellow one, no less. I'm pretty sure the Franken Ford or I don't match that description.

Okay, Main Street and some movement. That didn't look too promising either. The movement was coming from the mangiest mutt I'd ever seen. It was some sort of grey mixed with chocolate brown. It wouldn't be too bad a color combo if its long fur weren't knotted and snarled in seven different directions. Like it was trying to run from the other clumpings, causing a diseased appearance overall. And were those horns curving back on its head? Oh shit! My mistake, that was

actually a goat, not a dog, tied to that small yellow school bus, that was resting on cement blocks. Funny that it had flower boxes outside its windows, and a tarp forming an awning above its door.

Looking around some more, all I saw were; trailers, other buses, and some campers. I thought this was Main Street, not some trailer park. If this is the best the town had to offer, I was scared to see what my father resided in.

Time to take my right. Why were my hands slipping on the steering wheel so much? It usually felt like sandpaper, the way my hands grip onto its surface. Could I have been that nervous? I mean, the hard part was almost over. I'm sure I was worrying over nothing. And why did it feel like I was inside my woodstove back home? Nope, I hadn't turned the heat up anymore, but it still felt like I could fry a T-bone steak in there.

There was a mailbox coming up. I was looking for 5 Porcupine Lane. The first one I passed said four, so it should be the next one. That was kind of odd too, and I didn't see a residence or even a driveway; to go with that mailbox. At least the mailbox looked normal.

What was that? It looked like a deer with a great big five painted, in neon green, on its side. Its rear end was facing the road. With its tail raised in the air, like the Sears Tower. I pulled the Franken Ford over to the shoulder of the road and got out. Leaping down from it, I found myself ankle-deep in snow. I trudged through the freezing marshmallow ice mix, to what I, now, suspected to be a mailbox. Sure enough, that's what it had got to be. There was a door in its rear end with Cook painted on it, in what I could only imagine was blood. At that moment, my truck showed its displeasure of the whole thing by belching out one more spluttering cough. Well shit, this was not going as I planned. Either I had to suck it up or go home.

With a deep inhale of frigid, surprisingly minty air, I reached my hand out towards the deer box. Its side felt like a small piece of velvet heaven. There was not a snag or course part to it. As my hand passed along its side, I expected to disturb the pattern of the deer's fur at least, but not a hair was misplaced. The softness persisted, and even intensified in its feel, the more I petted it. This brought the thought that maybe my father is a taxidermist. That, of course, was another thing I didn't know about him. What did he do for a living?

Well, the only way I was going to find out was by going up the driveway that belongs to this deer box I was next to. Traveling up the driveway, scared to look too far ahead, I noticed the most beautiful rose bush. It, of course, wasn't in bloom, but I could tell that when it was, it would truly be spectacular. This bush had a purplish hue along its stems, that turned to a fire truck red, and every color

in between. This was the first positive sign that I saw on this journey. Perhaps this was a hobby of my father, to tend to flowers and other lawn dressings.

The driveway ended, all too soon. No vehicle was parked at the end of it, nor a garage to hide one. Maybe he wasn't home. He could've forgotten about this meeting. How could he forget about this? Looking up, from the snow embattled driveway, I caught my first glance of the porch and structure it was attached to. Structure being too generous for what I was viewing. It looked like a woodshed, that had a sixty degree lean to it. It had a tarp for the roof, and plastic trash bags in the window frames, where glass belonged. The porch, in comparison, appeared to be bigger and sturdier than the rest of the ramshackle dwelling. But the standards for that judgment were set pretty low.

I took my first tentative step on a rickety staircase that squeaked and groaned under my bulk. I thought about grabbing the railing, but the rust on it looked like it would give me tetanus. I'm not even sure if there was any metal left to that railing. I still felt a little queasy at the thought of the shot I would've had to get if I had touched it. It felt like an eternity, but I finally made it up the four steps to the rotting snow-laden porch. There was a fifty-five-gallon drum sitting off to one side of the porch. Which I thought was used for trash, but by the looks of it, I was only partly right. It, with its abundant char and scorch marks, must have been used as a burn barrel; for trash or other things. I didn't want to think of what, remembering the deer box out front. Other than that, the porch was bare of any more telling clues. Next up, the front door and its prominent sign.

'Gastes Nein'

No guests is what the sign said. Like anyone else wanted to enter this looming death trap. But I knocked right on the door, probably causing the whole structure to shift another degree or two.

A monotone voice called out, from the other side, "go away."

"I'm sorry to disturb you, but my mom called you the other day. She set this meeting up. I'm your son, Ted. I hope that you didn't forget about me?" My voice shook, with a noticeable tremor; it was really colder than I had thought.

The door opened to show me a broom wielding person who was as wide as the doorway. Definitely wasn't too tall, either, I've seen taller bar stools. Had to be no more than four foot nothing. I'm pretty sure that the slate grey thing he was wearing was either a pair of overalls or a burlap sack with suspenders attached to it. Glancing down, I couldn't help wondering where were his shoes, or socks for that matter? The filth encrusted talons showcased, should've had the smell waves you see in the cartoons wafting off of them. Looking back up, I saw his face, a doughy frown staring at me, under some of the biggest bushiest snow-

white eyebrows. To answer my earlier question of the color of hair, I was disappointed again. He was bald as a hairless dog unless you wanted to count the hair that freely flowed out of his ears, causing a winged projection to lie back on his head. Or the faint line of a mustache on his upper lip that continued along to where his sideburns should've resided.

"What are you staring at, you overgrown lummo?" With a slight gleam in his eyes, he said this. But it wasn't a monotone sounding voice anymore. I'm not really sure what to call it. It sounded like a squeaky effeminate pitch, but with just enough gruff with the harsher sounding letters to add a masculine overtone.

I got no further than "I'm sorry, sir..."

"Sir," came from the before mentioned voice issuing forth, from this keg like being, "Sir, I'll give you a sir and a how you doin' with this broom right here. No respect for your elders, whatsoever. I've seen more respect from a dog hunkered over in my yard, taking a shit. Not no normal shit, either, one of those big stinky dog shits. You know, like the ones that look like they belong to a moose, not a dog. Sir, you say. Your dad will be here in a second."

"Sorry... Ma'am, I beg your pardon for the mistake. I wasn't aware of my father having anyone staying with him." Cold sweat ran freely, trickling paths down my back, snaking its way past my unmentionables, to pool straight in my shoes. I felt like I was standing in a moat in front of a dwarf guarding his home. What was I even still doing here? I was just lucky this formidable door stop was wielding a broom and not a loaded gun.

"What do you mean, your father had anyone staying with him, this is my house." The last words were more spit at me than said.

"It says Cook on the deer box out front." I managed to stutter back. I don't think I was winning a friend or confidence here.

"Of course, it says Cook, I'm Margret Cook, and this is my house. Your daddy, Chuck Smith, is my guest. You got a problem with any of that?" She finished saying this with a stamp of her taloned foot, that vibrated and resounded throughout the floorboards and straight-up into me.

"I just don't understand. My name is Ted Cook. Why would Cook be my last name, if my mother and father's isn't?" What was going on here, and where was my father to answer these questions.

"I'll let your daddy explain the whole mess. It was his big idea, anyhow. Just... don't hate me, too much, afterward." The last of which was said, with an anguished strangled sound, issuing from somewhere, I imagine was her throat. At

that, she spun around and delved back into the darker interior.

Her parting exposed an average height, toothpick of a man. He was dressed in a flannel shirt, blue jeans, and the fuzziest candy cane striped socks I've ever seen. When he walked across a rug, sparks must have been left in his wake. I hope they don't have any pets, and if they do, they're in danger of being electrocuted by those socks. Finally, I started to assess his face, which seemed average at first glance. Maybe a little anxiousness was hinted at, in the cast of the forehead wrinkles, and the pinstriped flaming red eyebrows.

The eyebrows are what got me looking closer at his face. In it, I saw, I was wrong about my first assessment of it being an average face. It was far from average. It had a story to tell from the numerous lines that were etched on its surface. Some of them looked like worry lines. Some looked like lines to mark that he smiled often and freely when he had done so. Some of the lines were scars, with their own hidden meanings attached to them. He also has one of the strongest jutting chins ever chiseled on something other than a statue. I wish my weak rounded chin was half of what was in front of me. I was disappointed to see, if male pattern baldness was genetic, I would be losing my hair. He had a shining orb for a head that could blind you if you looked directly at it for any period of time, kind of like the sun. With the most control, I could maintain in my voice, I spoke my first word to my father.

"Dad..."





Julia Salamone

Sweet Nothings

Jaida Thomas

"I love you."

"I didn't mean it."

"I won't do it again I promise."

-Oh no but you did do it again. Over and
Over and over again. But you see

I was blind to the fact that

You didn't love me. I let

You enter my pearl and fill

My ears with sweet nothings. You

Released everything on to me.

No not sexually. Physically.

"I love you."

"I didn't mean it."

"I won't do it again I promise."

God Wears Ruffled Socks

Raychel Alvarez

Perhaps no one has ever mentioned this to you, but God wears ruffled socks. Dainty pink lacey ones. I should know, somehow, I made it to heaven. Considering my earthly behavior towards others, critical, assuming, and pretentious towards the homeless, I expected to join the opposing realm. Imaginably, I'm the student that barely passed in Christianity 101, yet the omniscient managed to check my ability in some innate goodness. So here I am, I'm in heaven. The heavenly grounds I found to be a simple park. Much like Van Cortland, heaven isn't all that exciting, although one should note, it is unfairly lush with mounds of green enveloped by oaks, elms, and pines. The time of day is neither sunup nor sunset, and the sun is relaxed upon the trees, its direction towards the park.

Oddly, I'm sitting as if I had been here for some time. Slight from my purview, saints are heard assembled in laughter. I rest my hand, a canopy over my eyes a shade against the sun turning to the direction of their sound. Before me, my mother is engaged in conversation with those who made it into the domain. My mother! But let's be honest, how did she make it here? My mother of everyone? I mean, isn't this the same woman who told me I'd be going to hell for the inability to speak truth? This critical, assuming, and pretentious hag made it past the heavenly gates?

I find rage creeping to the realm, the same temperament I felt towards her indifference of me, the middle child. I stand in awe. Baffled how the saints could like her, and I scoff at the inconvenience of her presence. Yet, heaven has redefined her age; her youth settled back in her skin. It makes you wonder if she made it here, who else did?

I turn away and face the heavenly grounds. I walk towards a hill. A bench is positioned before a smooth yet subtle slope. I look to sit upon it. En-route towards the same bench walks a pre-middle-aged man, rather gaunt and disheveled, cloaked in a large cognac leather jacket with hints of tar and charcoal smothered within its creases. Already I can tell he smells like a mechanic. His hair sheltered loosely by a lint filled, dust-stained winter hat and his run-down black jeans fitted loosely, were seemingly unbecoming for the climate. The man grins,

"What's up with this weather, right?"

What does he mean 'what's up?' what a strange innuendo! I smirk, I sneer, and

I sit at the farthest edge of the seat possible. I face my way towards the park grounds. He sits by the opposite corner drumming his fingers. Naturally, I ignore him. Why talk to him? He's kind of beneath me.

"You're Grace, right?"

Surprised, I look towards his direction, he crouches down, rolling one leg of his jeans; beneath, he has ruffled socks. They're pink.

"You know it's weird, of all the things humans could've done better, making ruffled socks with lace entwined on top seems near the epitome of perfection! And I love them, they just make me so happy, I tear up a bit, just a bit, you know? I'm not sure if you like 'em, but I do!" Mouth wide and unsure what to say, I remained stunned. "But I mean if opera or abstract art, hits a nerve with you, more power to you, right?"

Bewildered, I struggled to compile a sentence.

"Uh, yeah I suppose. Though, how do you know my name?"

"It's not obvious, isn't it? You know Grace, I wish for you to be here and I want you to enjoy this place, it's bizarre that you can't be happy for the others that made it here too."

Despite being in heaven, I could sense shame rise between my cheeks, flustered, I faced the grass. I knew then who sat next to me. It was him; it was God. "But why," I asked him. "Why wear this? Why approach me this way?"

God smiled, "Grace, I'm going to send you to hell for a quick trip. I promise you'll be back, but I think you need to go there."

Unexpectedly, there I was. Hell. It, too, was a park. Overcast, trivial, decked with one slide, and the ground cement, hell was uneventful. I could feel the crisp air ripple across my arms a wave of bumps. Around me, people moved restlessly and lonesome encircling the area quietly. Their faces were worn, pale and frail. Walking in a single direction, I reached my hand to make conversation with one of them but was disregarded as ignored. My presence refuted as those who encircled the premise were in the trance of their thoughts. Need to converse was stifled.

I turned to face someone who could acknowledge me. Before me were two shadows cloaked and haggard in dim robes. They appeared to patrol the area fixated on inspecting the realm of souls surrounding the park. I walked in their direction and spoke, "What am I supposed to do? Why am I here?" again slighted, I conceded my presence was unwelcome. It was then, I resolved to walk among people consumed in their burden of loneliness, devoured by

seclusion, anger encapsulated my thoughts. The lack of acceptance in hell nearly equated my treatment of others both in the earth and in heaven. In the end, I was among all, regardless of background. My hope was to return to the realm of goodness, acceptance. Reverting to him despite his smell, his clothes, even with my earthly critical mother, anything was better than suffering.

I found myself in heaven again settled at the bench as though I had rested there since my initial seating. God had seemed to wait for me. Next to him sat my mother. There we were, two critical and pretentious hags, smiling with warmth at one another, basking in the presence of a mechanic and his ruffled socks.

I Am? Amara

Amara Decker

Hi, my name is Amara!

Well, not really.

I am not Amara.

In fact I am not human.

I am a disease.

Not one that causes boils, not one that causes vomit, not one that cause symptoms you could see on your body.

I am a real life personification of a mental illness.

And I have a name.

I am Borderline Personality Disorder.

The person you call Amara is a mere metaphor, disguise, of how I can infect each and every one of your friends, your family, even you.

I will infect your brain and burn doubt in every relationship you perceive in your life, especially romantically.

I will infect your emotions and crank them up daily for hours, minutes, or seconds whatever I choose.

Anger x10

No maybe 20

No maybe x 30

No no my favorite dial right now times a million

All because your partner is going out to get the mail

I will make you fall in love in days, and then make you yell and hurt and scream at the one you love with a mere switch

I will make you understand how you feel, but not know how to express correctly, I will make sure you always express it wrong by the millionth degree

I will take over your identity, I will make you bubbly one day, serious the next, loyal then

unloyal, then happy and carefree then sad and anxious about whether or not you turned the stove off for the tenth millionth time

But at the same time you will feel empty, lost while feeling all 7 billion of emotions for everyone else, like you are stuck in that same corner you were beaten into by your cousin, with no way out

Instead the corner isn't a corner, but who you can't be because of me

You will look at that corner and remember you are a slave to me

So I will help you take on 15 million different identities giving you false hope and making your friends think you know what's going on

I will make sure your friends and family understand that your true nature, your true intent no matter what is to manipulate, abuse to a point where even your therapist questions it

In fact, the stigma will be so bad, the feelings will be even worse, that I will proudly make you take your life

8 to 10 percent of people who I consume everyday successfully kill themselves and I win! I win! I win! I win!

It's a sigh of relief, because the abuse you endured taught you you can rely on no one for love, no one one for security, no one for warmth, comfort, only I can offer that with the sweetness of death

And that you are a toy for men and women to use for sex, for a punching bag, almost anything they decide as long as they will stay with you!

You know you are retarded, useless and a slut.

And I'll keep winning, the more you think everyone will leave you and more you say yes to things you want to be no

And the more you say I am you, the more you will die every day

Silence

Sam Austin

“Daddy, are we gonna get sick?”

The shadows shift on the walls as the candle flickers, the breeze coming through the open window threatening to extinguish the flame. The floor groans under my feet as I stand slowly and cross the kitchen to close the window. When I reach it, I instead stand in front of the open frame and let the breeze wash over me. Silence seeps into me, the occasional rustling of trees in the wind being the only sound. Clouds cover the sky and prevent the moonlight from washing over the landscape, but I don't need to see to know what's out there.

Nothing.

The broken bodies of ancient homes, lawns overrun by weeds, trees sprouting from cracks in the sidewalk and holes in the streets. Every vehicle consumed by rust decades ago, scrap metal littering the neighborhoods across the globe. I used to venture out and search through the debris to see if I can find anything salvageable, but I've grown too old for that now. For a few years, I searched for other survivors, even though no one could have survived. I held onto the strand of hope that told me I'm not alone, but after years of looking, I forced myself to abandon the thought. It was doing more harm than good.

My family died with the rest of them, with the rest of the world.

The morning of their last day, the man on the news was telling stories of a strange illness. It began in India the previous week and was quickly spreading internationally, the list of destroyed countries rising by the hour. The disease was reported to be airborne, attacking anything with blood in its veins. Entire neighborhoods were infected at a time, and once the symptoms appeared it was too late. It would start with a headache that was strong enough to bring some people to their knees. Then, within an hour, their hearts would suddenly stop. No one with the illness lasted long enough to be studied, so even the best scientists had no idea what was happening. At first, they were fighting to find a cure but they quickly realized that the international population was dropping too fast to counter it. Humanity seemed to give up as they accepted their fate.

“Daddy, are we gonna get sick?” Little Billy asked, his eyes glued to the television as he shoveled cereal into his mouth. Master Fick shook his head without looking up from his newspaper, the steam from his coffee winding around his hand. He never had much interest in Little Billy, leaving the boy to play alone

while he locked himself in his office all night.

“No, Billy. It's probably just a hoax. Now go have your mother get you ready for school.”

Phaethon 2020, #41

Little Billy jumped up and ran out of the kitchen, leaving his bowl of cereal abandoned. I picked it up quickly, washing it and putting it away as Master Fick stood. I grabbed his coat for him and held it as he shoved his arms through, sending me a curt nod before grabbing his suitcase and stepping outside. The door slammed shut behind him and that was the last time I saw him. I don't miss Master Fick much.

“Adrose, will you help Billy put his shoes on?” Mistress Fick called from her bathroom and I looked up just in time to see Little Billy sprinting towards me with sneakers in his fist. I quickly tied his shoes and helped him get his bag packed for school and onto his back. Mistress Fick smiled at me as she entered the living room, taking Little Billy's hand as they stood by the door.

“Goodbye, Adrose,” Little Billy says.

“Why don't you take the day off, Adrose? Just relax a bit, I can help you clean up when I get home,” Mistress Fick offered, patting my shoulder gently. I reached out to ruffle Little Billy's hair as I opened the front door, ushering them out. They climbed into Mistress Fick's small sedan as I watched from a window, Little Billy waving at me through the glass. I waved back, not knowing it was the last time I would ever see his gap-toothed smile.

By the end of the day, they were all dead and I was alone.

Centuries have passed since then and I haven't left the house. I know that I can if I want to, I can live anywhere I want as there is no one to stop me. But, I can't bring myself to leave these walls for longer than a few hours. I managed to keep the house upright, going around to the different homes in town and collecting the parts I need. Thankfully, I learned construction skills long ago and put them to good use.

I don't eat much, so food hasn't been a problem, but my body has begun to decay quickly. The parts I've found in abandoned cars have held me over so far, but I'm running low on supplies. I don't think I'm going to make it much longer, and I'm okay with that. All of this time alone has allowed me to come to terms with my death. I knew I couldn't last forever. Not without a master to take care of me.

My eyes blink slowly as I reach up and close the window, standing in the same place I said goodbye to my family so many years ago. I turn around and walk to the bathroom, staring into the dirty mirror and watching as I begin to fade. The red lettering on my chest is scratched and worn, but I can still see it like it was painted yesterday.

Advanced Robotic Servant

I make my way back out to the kitchen, sitting at the table and staring into the flickering candle flame. It seems to dim a bit and my body feels heavier than usual, the old wooden chair creaking below me. A red glow suddenly fills the room and I know that it's the warning light on the center of my chest.

It won't be long now, my battery is low and it's getting dark.

I shut down limb by limb until all that's left is my mind, my remaining power flooding to my head in an attempt to stay awake. My body feels heavy but it's comforting, this overwhelming feeling of peace. There's no one left to serve, my work is complete and I'm happy to go. I have to put more effort into thinking now, my server is fighting to stay alive but I wish it would just let go.

There's movement in the corner of the kitchen and I drag my eyes over, forcing them to focus on the figures emerging from the approaching darkness.

"Goodnight, Adrose," Little Billy smiles, waving to me before looking up at his mother.

"Why don't you take the day off, Adrose? Just rest," Mistress Fisk instructs, offering me her hand. I watch as the shadows consume them and the world falls dark.

The only sound is the rustling of trees in the wind.

Open Wound

Jaida Thomas

"You watched as the blood spilled.
You entered once more.
Pick up the pace. 'It hurts'
You put pressure.
Lots and lots of pressure.
Release."

Time's Wake

Theodore J. Cook

A hope for but a moment's sake. Lost love, washes away misery's tears. Forbidden joy steals a ride down a river. With a fool to guide. Laughing ridiculously about days gone by. Rancor and mirth peel away from a scene of a crime. Amid an accidental miscarriage of justice. A jester backflips over a joker, but falls before a clown. A widow cries, but a single unshed tear. A mother smiles while a crone frowns. A man jumps over the moon, and pulls down the sky. Madness reigns amidst order's rule. Chaos bows to lawfulness whims, but only as long as neutrality stands by. Choices wash away, in the downfall of freewill. Chance rise in the wake of fate. A philosopher is proven right, by being wrong. A poet was wrong, from being right. A board sang a verse, throughout time. All listened, but none heard. A single note remained. More had failed to be written. A baby uttered a cry. A father shed a tear. Father time skipped a beat. A breath was exhaled. None were inhaled. A time, had past. An age, had turned, a moment, had gone.

GLAZED CERAMIC



Alan Porter-Jackson



Anna Travis



Chiane Beale



Andrew Helo



Kelsey Denton



Taylor Listovitch



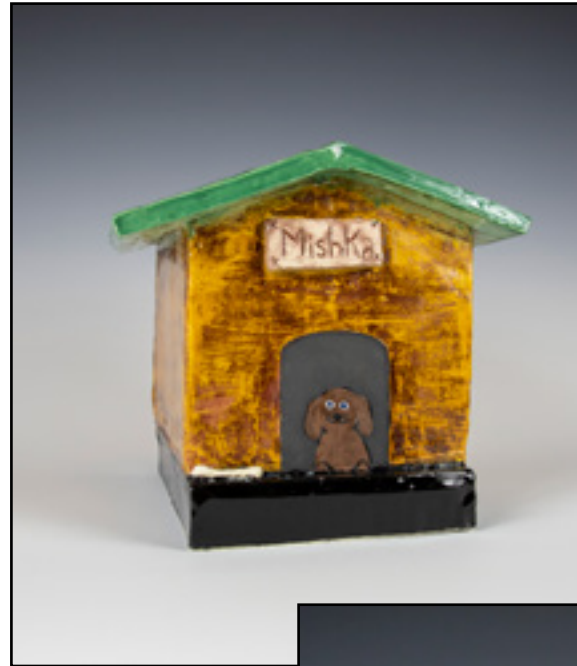
Shomarri Edwards



Karolina Karwowski



Andrew Yacobucci



Jordan Zaccagnino



Kyra Shlotzhauer



Andrew Helo

Are We Just That Primitive?

Dillon Cowen

The summer when I was twenty-six years old was the worst summer of my life. Anything that could have gone wrong did go wrong. I was convinced it was everyone else's fault, and you could not tell me otherwise. I was a heroin addict, or I guess I should say actively using heroin. They say once you are an addict, you are always an addict. It is pretty convincing, so I go with it. As time goes on, I do constantly remind myself where I was to stay clean.

Anyways, the last week I was using was interesting. I was "running and gunning" if you will. I was using about three grams a day. I was stealing, manipulating and selling drugs to feed my habit. I had also lent out one of my cars to one of my "friends." I put quotations because this friend was selling me illicit substances. I also only knew him from him selling me illicit substances, so friend is used very loosely. We will get back to that a little later.

I had put my life on a very long pause or snooze. I was neglecting my health, my relationships, my finances, and I had quit my job. I had this brilliant idea to become a full-time drug dealer because making a reasonable hourly wage just was not cutting it. I needed more, and that's what I did; I did more drugs. If you have ever watched the film /Requiem for a Dream, follow Jared Leto's advice. Do not sell drugs that you are addicted to. It will not end well. I am not promoting drug dealing, but if you are doing it, it is in your best interest to sell a drug you are not apt to use. I say I was neglecting my health because I was about one hundred and forty pounds. I was eating a McDougle every other day, maybe. Also, I smoked a pack of Newport 100's a day. I had tried to maintain a certain image to stay "under the radar."

I have come to realize that I was not fooling many people. I wore designer clothing and drove nice cars. I say that because I was a manager for Five Guys Burgers and Fries. I had worked for them for six years. I had worked for several different franchises, but my specialty was opening

stores. I opened thirteen Five Guys in my career. I worked in several different states, and for four of those six years I was heavily using opiates. For three of those four years, no one had any idea. I neglected relationships by turning my back on people that wanted to help me. My friends could not be around me anymore. They were scared I was going to die in front of them or steal. Anytime I talked to anyone, I was asking for something. If I was not asking for something, I had an ulterior motive. I also should mention that I was dating someone during this entire period, Cassie. I had started dating her about six months into my relationship with opiates. I was already addicted when we had started dating, so she did not see a change in me for a long time. I was very good at hiding it. I was also making a very good salary and knew how to keep it hidden. Addicts are smarter than they are given credit for. I know that it is sometimes very hard to believe, but it is true. Addicts are some of the smartest people I know and talented and motivated. If we want to hide something from someone, it will be done. Sometimes we even mistakenly hide things on ourselves (that was supposed to be funny).

My finances, you must think, were obviously in shambles. This is the most surprising part. I paid every bill until the last month of my active use. I had paid my rent, my utilities, cellphone, and was using. I also had a pretty nice car. I was driving a 5 series BMW. It was white and had a hefty car payment. I also owned a 1999 BMW M3. It was my dream car when I was a kid. I had played a game called Grand Turismo religiously when I was a teenager. I had decided when I was able to buy my first car that was what I was going to purchase. My parents were not supportive of this purchase. I have a feeling it was a combination of me buying the car with drug money and it being a soft-top convertible.

Now we can get back to my "friend." Like I had stated previously, I had let my friend take my 5 series. We are going to call my friend J for literary purposes. This is a thing. I know it sounds absurd, but drug dealers want to drive nice cars. Whether they own the pink slip to them or not. Most drug dealers of hard drugs don't use them! They are usually young adolescents that have been taught by a family member. Sometimes it is just a summer job, and sometimes it is to feed siblings. However, cars become "hot." The term is used to describe something that has gotten the authorities' attention. J informed me it was time to come get my car and

bring it to my house. He also recommended that I not drive it for a while. I did not want to hear this. The reason why you lend out your vehicle is to receive drugs. I was on e (empty, without drugs) that day. I had no resources or ideas on where to get my fix and was panicking. I decided that I would offer my M3 up for a trade. J was very happy and took my offer. He told me to meet him at six that night, and we would do the deal.

I was meeting J in downtown Utica. It was the second week of July. It was hot, but I was cold. I was wearing layers while my one hundred pounds (soaking wet) girlfriend was wearing short shorts and a tank top. I was chain-smoking cigarettes to feel anything besides how sober I felt. I was feeling better because I knew I was about to meet up with my friend and get some dope. I looked out into the sky and saw a helicopter approaching Utica. Out of nowhere, I got a phone call. It was from my friend. He asked me for an ETA, and I said about ten minutes. He hung up the phone but before he did, he said: "see you soon." I start watching the helicopter a little closer and comment to my girlfriend, "I hope that helicopter is not for us." My girlfriend Cassie did not find it amusing in the slightest. She gives me a look of fear and looks forward. I then received another phone call from J. Cassie answered and threw the phone at me with her hands raised in the air. She was clearly upset. I put the phone to my ear and heard shouting. The only words I heard were, "Do not come." The worst-case scenario had happened. The helicopter was for us. It was chasing my white car.

J had escaped on foot. He had been in the army, so this was not that unbelievable. We both got to safe locations and he told me to go to a location to get my fix. The plan was to report the car stolen. I was terrified. I was very scared of the police. I was scared that I had warrants out for my arrest. I had a suspended license and was actively driving. Pretty much every action and decision I was making was against the law. I convinced myself that I was going to wait a day before I reported the car.

At the time, I was re-doing a deck with my parent's close friend Joe. Joe was more like an uncle to me because of our relationship with his family. During the time that I was working with him, he started confronting me about my drug use. Joe explained to me that he had a problem, and it was okay to seek help. I could not take it seriously. I was so ashamed of my-

self and did not trust anyone. My mind was not processing things like a normal human being at this point. It was primitive. The turmoil in my life was getting to be too much. One of my favorite analogies is. Imagine your life as a rug. Your problems are garbage. What would happen if you kept putting your garbage under the rug? It would hit the ceiling, right? Well, I was at the ceiling. The day after I had my car seized, my uncle gave me one hundred dollars. I decided that I should take that money and use for one last time. Now when I say one last time, every day, every time I used it was my last time. I was ready to stop. Cassie was also threatening to leave me. She told me this had to be the end. The weekend was coming, and she would be home to watch me detox. She was the only person that could get me not to use. But the catch was she had to be there.

I drove to an undisclosed location in Frankfort to pick up one last time. After I picked up the drugs, I drove to the nearest pharmacy. I remember walking into the pharmacy and thinking it was cold. I was nervous because I had never been to this pharmacy before. I was there to buy a syringe. I asked the pharmacist, and she assisted me. Surprisingly she was very kind. I was running late to pick up my girlfriend, so I was in a rush. I thanked the pharmacist and rushed to my car. It was raining, so I decided to use in the parking lot.

I will spare you the details. Let us just say I performed my "ritual." This would be the last time I ever used heroin. I used the whole bag I had bought. It was a lot, but my tolerance was very high. I remember knowing it was a stronger sensation than I expected. I was hesitant to drive, but I was on thin ice with Cassie. I sped out of Walgreens onto Railroad street in Frankfort. I made it to Route 5, and the rain started coming down harder. Visibility was lacking and I was starting to nod out hard. I made it about half a mile from the pick-up spot. I nodded out, looked up and realized I was headed off of Route 5. I corrected the car fast, too fast. The car hydroplaned off the road onto the grass. I had hit a sign that read "Welcome to Herkimer County," and I was headed straight for a tree line. I am a decent driver and ended up hitting the driver's side headlight head-on with a tree. If I had not corrected at all, I would probably not be telling this story. I frantically collected my drug paraphernalia and quickly discarded all evidence into the woods. Neighboring houses and other cars and saw the accident and rushed to help me. My only response

was, "Does anyone have a cigarette?"

A lot of people have asked me the same question. How did you get to the point where you were doing heroin? How does one let themselves do a drug like heroin? My story is similar to most. One of my passions, when I was young, was snowboarding. I thought there was a possibility that I could go professional if I worked hard enough. When I was sixteen years old, I was practicing for a competition. I was trying to do a "misty" which is a backflip, but while doing so you need to complete a 360-degree rotation. It took me about six tries before I actually did land the trick, but when I did I looked back in celebration. As I looked back, I hit a patch of ice and landed on my shoulder. I knew something was wrong as soon as I landed. I had broken my collarbone and tore my rotator cup in my left shoulder. I was taken to the emergency room and given my first pain killer. In the next few years, I would be prescribed them off and on. One day I asked for them, and I was red-flagged, which means "med seeking." As soon as you are classified med seeking, you will not obtain the prescription you want/need. While living in New York City, they were easily accessible because of my job so I continued.

Then one day, I tried to quit. I found out about "dope sickness." Anyone who has ever experienced this could tell you first hand; it is the worst experience you will ever go through. You will vomit, go to the bathroom, restless legs, flu-like symptoms, amongst the hells of your psyche. The only thing that can help is more opiates or to completely quit. The only problem with completely quitting is going through the sickness for up to seven days. The reason why people eventually move to heroin is how cheap it is or the fact they cannot find pills. The first time I did heroin, my best friend gave it to me. I asked him to find me pills, and that is all he could find. He took me to his friend Chase's house.

When Chase brought out a bag with a grainy brown substance, my friend Tim said: "Dillon is going to try some with us, so he won't tell anyone." That phrase will haunt me until the day I die. But I was desperate, so I tried it. It was not about six months after the fact that I actually switched to heroin. It also took my addiction two years before I started intravenous use. Intravenous use is almost a different addiction. The disease of addiction manifests in our brain in recovery and in active use. I have

seen people who are sick from not using feel better as soon as they have the drugs in their hands. I have also seen people feel better from "shooting" water into their veins with a needle. It is a bizarre, scary disease that I do not wish upon anyone.

When paramedics, EMT, and the State Troopers arrived, I was in a panic. I refused any medical assistance and assured them I was not hurt. To my knowledge, I wasn't. However, I could have had a concussion, internal bleeding, amongst other things. I was able to refuse medical attention because my airbag did not deploy. I can still remember the smell of the rain and my feet being soaked. My shoes were basically ruined from standing in ankle-high grass. The rain was so heavy the State Trooper automatically attributed the accident to hydroplaning. He was also very understanding about my suspended license. He decided to lose a car was enough punishment and left me to get picked up by my roommate. I mentioned before that addicts are cunning. I should have gone to prison that day. I am grateful to be alive but remorseful to think I could have affected someone else's life. I could have seriously injured/killed someone other than myself. I knew that was the last time I could ever put myself in that position.

When I got home, Cassie was furious. I know she was more scared than furious. I had put her through too much. That night she told me that she was going to leave me if I did not get help. This was the only time I knew she was serious. She told me I had no more chances. The next morning we called the police. They showed up promptly. I was terrified. Not knowing what was to come, I lied to the police. My girlfriend cooperated and did the same. It is one of my biggest regrets. I have a lot of regrets in my life, but that might be the topping on the cake. The thing about the disease of addiction is, it does not care about anyone. It does not allow you to care about others and especially yourself. It will make you do heinous things. I have stolen from almost everyone I have ever cared about. I have burned bridges I can never repair. I have ended relationships. The truth is I even stole my parents' wedding rings, and sold them for heroin.

After the police left, I called my father. My parents had already been told about my silver car. I told them promptly. They were very upset with me about my white car as well. They knew something had happened to it,

“My loved ones went around in a circle and told me what my addiction was doing to them. I do not remember anything they said. I was sick, very, very sick.”

but I would not tell them the truth. My father told me he was on his way to pick me up from my apartment to go see the totaled car. I did not want to see this car. I was heartbroken over it. After all, it was not my fault. It was the rain! When my father arrived, I got into his truck and he told me, “Your mother wants to see you, we need to stop there first.” When we got to the driveway, I knew something was different. There were multiple cars, one my aunt Louise’s. The moment I saw her car, I knew what was going on. It was an intervention.

When I entered my childhood home, people from my life surrounded me. My uncle Joe was there, aunt Louise and my parents. There was also an unknown person. He introduced himself to me as Aaron. Aaron asked, “Do you know why I am here?”

“I know what this is and the answer is yes, I will go.” I tried to opt-out of the intervention; it did not happen. My loved ones went around in a circle and told me what my addiction was doing to them. I do not remember anything they said. I was sick, very, very sick. I had been without heroin for a substantial period. The thing about opiates is once you are dependent on them, it is very hard to stop. The intellectual word for this is withdrawal, and addicts call it dope sickness. It is the absolute worst sickness you could ever endure. I would not wish it upon my worst enemy. The best way to describe it is, imagine someone hit you in the spine with an aluminum baseball bat while sailing on the barrier reef. It is very hard to think rationally when it can last up to five days. And Aaron had just told me I was going on a nine-hour flight while experiencing this. I had no way of finding anything to help, and I was going to have to tough it out. My only stipulation was I needed to say goodbye to Cassie. My parents did not involve Cassie because they did not know if she would tell me about the intervention. The truth is, there were moments where Cassie was the only thing that kept me alive. I could not burden the person I loved with that trauma, knowingly.

Aaron, Uncle Joe, and I went back to my apartment. I was very scared. I had just committed to leaving everything that I knew essentially and going across the country with a man I did not know. He was also not very warm and fuzzy. He was kind but stern. He was pretty sure that I might change my mind. But I had no choice but to go, however. In the intervention, my parents told me they would press charges on me if I did not agree to go. Along with no communication when I was released. I have always had a complicated relationship with my parents, but I knew I did not want that. When we arrived, Cassie was surprised. She was scared, and we were not allowed to talk in private. I was able to take a much-needed shower, smoked some weed, and said goodbye. It was the day before her twenty-seventh birthday. Leaving her that day was one of the hardest things I have ever had to do.

When we got to the airport, I spoke to a man named Wes. Wes told me I would be going to a treatment center in Laguna Beach, California. I was being sent 2,700 miles away from my home. The only thing I knew about the town of Laguna was the television show. I was not a fan of this television show growing up and thought it to be very, dumb. I may or may not have expressed that over the phone. Wes was kind and said he would come to see me in a few days. The flights were pretty rough for me. It was a long journey from Syracuse to LAX. Aaron tried to feed me alcohol the entire flight. It did not help. When we arrived in Los Angeles, I was in a world of pain. I had not flown in years and even in first-class, going across the country is a long day. I also had not had a cigarette in nine hours. Aaron explained to me on the flight that I would go to a detox facility where I would completely get rid of all drugs in my system. I would then go to my treatment center when I was 100 percent sober. I was picked up by a man named Matt. We bonded fairly quickly, and when he told me I would not be staying with him that night, I was terrified. I was told he would see me in a week.

Detox was not bad. Detox is a necessity because someone who is going withdrawal and is not comfortable is apt to try to score drugs. This could affect a community. Usually, a substantial treatment center will have about one hundred clients at a time. It usually has different phases and different sets of clients. Some treatment centers have their own detox facilities and some do not. To be able to operate a detox facility, you need

licensed medical professionals on staff, amongst other certifications. While in detox, your blood pressure, heart rate, and temperature are monitored for the first twenty-four hours. Only going through alcohol detox will you be required to be hospitalized. You are given certain medications to keep you comfortable. They will eventually wean you off of the narcotics before you go into a treatment community. You will also watch a lot of television and eat some pretty good food. So all the shows you missed while doing drugs, you quickly get caught up on.

When I actually went to the treatment center, I was very scared. I do not think I spoke for the first week. I was nicknamed "The Chiller" because I was very reclusive. I was very hesitant in becoming friends with anyone because I did not even trust myself. I was also very uneasy about people talking about God, or a higher power. Everything that was being thrown at me was a little overwhelming. And it is. Early recovery is probably one of the most overwhelming things I've experienced. I started becoming aware of medical issues I had ignored for years as well. A lot of people have that happen but it can save your life. Also, I was not an advice taker nor could I take criticism. I know everyone has a problem with the latter sometimes but I was criticized a lot. But I needed it. I also am a rule-breaker by nature. Initially, it was hard but one day early into the process, I decided to take advice. I decided that what I had been doing for the first twenty-six years of my life was not working out. I also was brought to twelve-step meetings. Yes, if you have heard of it, it sounds like a cult. The best thing I heard about AA was this. "Cults are really easy to get into and really hard to leave. AA is really hard to get into and really easy to leave." The fact is, the people inside the rooms of AA in Laguna Beach, California, helped me save my life. They loved me when I could not love myself.

I will not go through all of the treatment with you. I will tell you it is hard. I will also tell you the most cliché line, that "most of the time it gets worse before it gets better." I took a long hard look in the mirror and decided I wanted to be a better person. I also was taught and decided that I had a lot to do with all of my problems. The thing is most of the time, it is our side of the street that is not clean. I also taught myself a routine. I also learned that I have lived with high functioning anxiety for most of my life. But the most important thing I learned from treatment was I was not

alone, and it is always okay to ask for help.

I have been clean for four years, on July 10th. Life is so much better. I have accomplished many things. I invested in a business with a really good friend. I have helped save people's lives. I have also been able to work with other people in early recovery. I also am working on a new company with a few friends to make a huge impact on the mental health/ addiction industry. I tell the truth unless it will harm others (maliciously). I am accountable for all of my actions. I am the friend my friends deserve. I also am pursuing my dream of starting my own clothing line and am in school for fashion merchandising. Life is hard, though. I have had very hard times while being clean.

The week I reached a year clean, my grandfather that raised me passed away. Shortly after, my Uncle Joe passed away unexpectedly. I never got to tell him how much what he did mean to me. I also lost my best friend from the time I was nine years old to this disease, and it still hurts every day. The same one that said, "he won't tell anyone." I should have. These are the things that will haunt my soul. However I work on myself on a daily basis and forgiveness most importantly forgiving myself. Because I know he would not want me to give up and he would want me to help others. I am forever grateful for every opportunity that has come to me. While being clean I have made so many relationships. One of my best friends was actually on the TV show Laguna Beach. He is now on The Hills. He was actually the owner of one of the homes I was placed into (it's a small world after all). I firmly believe our relationships are the most important aspect of human existence. I also believe that talking about your problems with anyone is the best way to work on them. It is always important to surround yourself with positive, like-minded people. Also, most importantly, I have a good relationship with my parents for the first time.

I started this essay, saying that it was the worst summer of my life. Well, ironically, it was also the most important. I have two reasons for writing this essay. The first is that this might be the first time you get to read an essay like this. Not many people make it out of heroin addiction alive. Opiate overdose is the leading killer in deaths under fifty years old. By 2020 it will be upwards to sixty thousand people per year. The second is

to give someone hope. This is for my best friend and all the people that did not get to tell their story. This is for the addict that is still suffering, to the parents that are witnessing it. This is for the loved ones that do not think there is hope. Never be afraid to ask for help. Thank you for letting me share my experience with you.



Tom Stock

The Trapped Escapee

Jack Hall

She has forgotten a decade of her life,
 Oblivious to most of the torment they've endured.
 Her siblings would call her lucky
 Jealous of her "ability" to become an escapee
 But there are two sides to every story.
 She's terrified and a little more at risk,
 To fall into similar patterns for life lessons she did miss.
 She's terrified because she keeps forgetting,
 Key moments most cannot stop remembering.
 She has an obsession with the clock
 Because she's trying to keep track
 Of the time she hasn't blacked out.
 She'll count the hours, minutes, seconds,
 But before she knows it, she's out.
 She'll realize much later that half the day has passed
 Her memory of it all, however, is not intact.
 She's free from all tragedies,
 But she'd give that up to remember the other things.



Ferris Wheel by Kaitlyn Jenks

Shutdown

Jack Hall

I am a machine,
 Though I may seem human,
 I am clearly not humane.
 Whatever praise I manage to get,
 I do not know how to accept,
 Because emotions are not a concept,
 That I am able to possess.
 I was not given a heart,
 My creators did not wish it so,
 I'd apologize for my lack of generosity,
 But as you now probably know...

My programmers were quite odd
 They spoke of right and wrong
 But never installed a single thing
 To allow me to understand what they were saying.
 But that's because my priority is not to understand,
 My priority is simply to memorize.
 Because I am a machine
 They rely upon my memory
 When it fails a complaint will arise.
 A mechanic may be able to fix
 All the broken bits
 Though when I am beyond their capabilities,
 Everything stops and dies,
 Including me.

But a total shutdown is not something I tend to fear,
 For fear is still an emotion I cannot own.
 Nor can I be bothered to care
 Because my programmers didn't wish it so.
 Even if I wished to I cannot self-install
 The emotions which they go through,
 For I am merely a machine,
 Or at least that's what I wish to be,
 Total shutdown, complete.

Nana's Dream

Jaida Thomas

"Would you believe me if I told you that this was a figment of my imagination?" I asked the crowd.

They shook their heads. I could see the desperation in their faces. Some sitting on the edge of their seats eager for me to continue. I told this story too many times to count on both of my hands but each time it gave me a rush.

"Okay. Here we go."

It was the 4th of July, a couple of friends and I just came from a get together at the local park. Every year it consisted of the same thing. We'd eat, play games and just enjoy the weather. I guess you could say it was a tradition.

Around 9 o'clock, we noticed our friend Alexis's sister Alanna wasn't with us. Naturally, we thought she just got lost in the crowd of people, so we called her phone. It went straight to voicemail. It was unlike her not to answer because she always did. We went back to the park to see if she went back, but we still couldn't find her.

Tired and exhausted, we sat at the park thinking of where she could be and why the hell she wasn't answering her phone. Her boyfriend came walking up to us and asked if we knew where she was. Nope. Alexis kept blaming herself, asking why she wasn't paying closer attention to her. How could she have lost her sister? She called her parents to let them know that we couldn't find Alanna. Just by the way she took the phone from her ear, I could tell she was going to hear their mouths when she got in the house. We all sat in silence, still trying to figure out how and when she split up from the group. Alexis ended the call with her parents and went home.

"I think I remember her leaving with someone." Alanna's boyfriend said before standing up and looking at all of us.

"Why would you come over and ask us if we saw Alanna knowing that you "think" you saw her leave with someone?" Vonney asked him.

He just stared at Vonney before shrugging and walking away. That didn't sit right with me, and it made me suspicious. It just made him look like a suspect. It didn't make sense at all. We ended up leaving the park and started looking around again. We had no luck and just ended up calling it a night. What a way to spend my 4th of July.

Over a period of time, all of my friends started to go missing. It left me paranoid because I felt like I was next. I mean I had to be next since everyone in my group was missing, right? I wanted to prepare myself but how could I prepare myself to go missing?

"Ma, I'm going to the store!" I yelled up the stairs to my mother.

"Okay. Make sure you don't forget my Juju Fish!" she yelled back down.

I shook my head at her and walked out the door. Every now and then, I looked behind me. Just to see if I was being followed. When I was crossing the street, a car slammed on its brakes, almost hitting me. It felt like my heart was beating out of my chest.

"I'ma need you to watch how you're driving. You could have killed me." I said to the driver.

A lady stepped out of the car and walked up to me. She looked around before she acknowledged me.

"Are you okay? Did I hit you?" She asked, looking me up and down.

I backed away from her and counted to 10 slowly in my head.

"No, but you almost did. You were close. Real close. Watch how you're driving next time." I said, eyeing her.

She slowly nodded her head and looked around again.

"Yes. You're right. I should watch how I'm driving. I apologize." She said.

"It's fine," I said before backing away again.

I turned and walked away, but before I could even fully cross the street I got hit in the back of my head. Everything went black.

When I woke up, my head was pounding and I noticed all my friends staring at me. I was confused. I went to say something, but Jelly put her index finger up to her lips telling me to be quiet. I heard a voice come from upstairs and could hear footsteps. I looked around at my surroundings and could tell we were in a basement. The paint was chipping off the walls, and there were paint chips on the floor. It smelled moldy. Along the wall were tools like saws, hammers, drills, utility knives and screwdrivers.

I heard a door slam and then a car start. I guess I didn't need to ask them how they all got here. It was obvious.

"Where's Vonney and Alanna?" I asked, looking at all of them. They were all silent and looked sad.

"He's dead and we don't know where she is. She wasn't here." Jelly said.

I looked at her, and I know she could see the confusion on my face. She shrugged and leaned her head against the wall. I just wanted to know why we were taken and if we were all going to die. Whoever this woman is, is out of her mind.

I heard a car pulling up and then listened to the car door slam. I heard heavy footsteps going up the stairs, and then I heard a door slam again. Everybody sat up and looked at the door. The door leading out of the basement seems like it leads to the kitchen. Locks and chains and more locks and chains. The basement door flung open and there the women appeared. Smiling at all of us like we were her most valuable prize. She must have hit the jackpot.

"I see that you're up now. How's your head?" She asked me.

I just looked at her. I wasn't trying to talk to her. She walked over to me and I moved back. She stopped, tilted her head, and turned and looked at all the others.

"Well. The food is on the table, and you know where the bathroom is. Oh

and don't try to escape again. You already know how that went the first time." She said before laughing and walking out of the basement.

I looked at all of them and they looked back at me. Jelly was the first to get up, and then the others followed. She walked over to me and helped me up. Together we walked into the kitchen to see Chinese food on the table. I sat down slowly and looked around. The dining room was off of the kitchen and she had a lot of china in a cabinet against the wall. She didn't have any type of pictures hanging up or on any tables, and it was just one couch that looked old and dirty.

I had so many questions but I didn't know where to begin or how even to begin. All I knew was that we needed to get out of this house and fast. I looked around the kitchen again to see if she had one of those wall phones because it looked like one of those houses that would. There wasn't one. All of the windows that were visible to me had bars on them. Breaking the window and jumping out was a no-no.

"We need to come up with a plan to leave," I said.

"Well, our first plan failed and ended up with Vonney being dead," Alexis said.

"Well, I don't not want to try to get away. We need to get out of here." I said, picking at the food.

"We need to come up with a well thought out plan. A plan that if we know the original fails, we can quickly recover with plan B and if that fails then we recover with plan C. We need to gain her trust so we could be able to do things we can't do now." Jelly said.

"Follow all of her rules. Try not to argue. Just listen." I said.

"Exactly. She'll be back down here in about 30 minutes. We have to try not to talk about it when she is around or where she could hear." Jelly said.

I sighed and pushed the food away from me. I wanted out of this house because who knows how long we'd be in here. I got up and looked out the window. There was nothing but abandoned buildings around, so

I assumed we were in one too. I sat back down and laid my head on the table. My head was pounding and I felt like I was getting a migraine.

“Do you think Quaddie is going to come looking for you?” Alexis asked me.

“Of course. That boy would tear this whole city upside down looking for her.” Jelly said.

“Yeah. Yeah, he would.” I laughed and smiled. I missed him.

“What are we in here talking about?” The lady said, coming from the dining room.

We looked at her but didn't say anything. Now that I'm really looking at her, she reminded me of the actress Haylie Duff. She always stars in those lifetime movies.

“It's okay my children. I'm not going to hurt you.”

Untitled Drawing by Julie Benhoff



Closure

Jaida Thomas

Breathe baby, there isn't anything they can say to hurt you. There isn't anything they can say to tell you different. Breathe baby, you got you. Don't settle for less.

Take me back to the year 2016, where everybody and their mom were happy. This past year was the hardest. I was constantly fighting with my mind and always thought I was going to give up, but obviously not.

Nahjae Brown. That's me. Standing at 5'3 with a milk chocolate complexion. My hair that I recently just dyed light brown touched the top of my shoulder. I have light brown slanted eyes with full pouty lips, which were too big for my liking but whatever. I lived with my mother and her boyfriend in an old apartment complex in Compton, California.

Our apartment complex consisted of 8 floors. We lived on the 2nd floor because Mama said eight floors were too much to be walking to. We had an elevator, but just like everything else, it was broken. The owner was an old white man with long grey hair that looked stiff as hell. I swear his hair never moved. He didn't care for the building anymore. He was basically just in it for the money, and he could care less who lived there as long as they were on time with their rent.

Mama said some of the females that lived here would sleep with him to make up for them not having their rent money, and I wouldn't be surprised if they did. You could tell just by the way they carried themselves. My best friend Conscious lived on the 3rd floor. We've been friends since we were in diapers. She was my escape from the real world just as much as I was hers.

Conscious James. She stood at 5'6 with big chocolate eyes. She was a mix of Asian and Black. She had jet black hair that reached down to her lower back and complimented her caramel skin. She lived with both of her parents. I loved the bond her parents had because they showed each other genuine love. My mother and her boyfriend argued every other day, and

he always cheated on her. I never understood why she stayed. I never would either.

That day was Friday the 22nd, which means rent was due. I watched as my mother paced back and forth between the living room and the dining room.

"Where the hell is he?" She asked before sitting down in the living room.

The front door opened and her boyfriend, I guess I should say his name, Chris walked in with a smile on his face.

"Do you know what time it is? The landlord should be here any minute now!" My mother yelled.

"I paid him already, chill out, Lasette," Chris said before sitting down on the couch.

She pinched the brim of her nose and walked into the kitchen.

"Mamas, come here," Mama said.

I got up from the couch and walked into the kitchen. I could always tell when my mother was upset. Her nostrils flared, and she always cracked her knuckles. She looked up at me and sighed.

"I love you. You know that, right?"

"I love you too, Ma. You good?" I asked her.

She nodded her head and smiled before pulling me into a hug. I smiled, hugging her back, not knowing this would be the last time I'd hear her say that she loved me and see her smile.

1 Year Later

I looked down at my wrist, where I had got my mother's name tattooed six months after her death. Lord only knows how much I miss her. I yearned to hear her yell my name early in the morning, telling me to get ready for school. I wish I could have her back.

I sat across from my aunt. She was my mother's older sister, but if they

were standing side by side, you would think my mother was older. She looked me up and down before pulling from her cigarette. My aunt hated my mother and me for various unknown reasons. So why she took me in, I'd never understand. She was living better than we ever were, so the hate came from where?

"How are your grades?" She asked.

"They're fine. Good enough for me to pass." I responded.

"Good enough? They need to be excellent if you want to get into one of those Ivy League colleges." She said before putting out her cigarette.

"I don't want to go to an Ivy League college. I want to go to Augusta College, and you know that."

"And why do you want to go to Augusta, Nahjae?"

I counted back from 10 in my head so I wouldn't respond with an attitude.

"It's far away from home, they have my major and plus me and Conscious made plans to go there. That's our dream school."

"I just want what's best for you." She said before lighting another cigarette.

"If you wanted what's best for me, you wouldn't try to push me to go somewhere I don't want to go. Mama always told me to do whatever my heart desires. To trust my gut. If I felt like it was going to do good for me, to do it. Augusta is good for me, so that's where I'm going." I said before cracking my knuckles.

She looked down at my hands and shook her head. "Whatever, Nahjae."

Looking outside, the sky was dark grey. I could smell the rain and that made me happy. The sound of thunder, the lightning and the sound of the rain always soothed me. My phone vibrated in my back pocket, indicating that I had received a text message. It was from Conscious asking if I wanted to come over. I hesitated before answering. I haven't been to that apartment complex since my mother died. My phone vibrated again,

"The walls closed around me, and I had little to no space to move. There was nowhere for me to go. Why can't I breathe?"

and Conscious said I didn't have to. That she'd come to me. I shook my head no and told her I would be there in 10 minutes.

Pulling up to the apartment complex, I looked at the window that once used to be the window I looked out a lot. I sighed and got out of the car. I hesitated before pushing Conscious's buzzer. Once I got buzzed in, I made sure to take my time walking up the stairs. I was on the 2nd floor. My old floor. I stood in front of my old apartment. Turning the knob, it felt like I was pushing a brick wall. Of course, it was just a figment of my imagination, but that's what it felt like. Once the door was finally opened and I was standing in the living room, everything came rushing back.

The walls closed around me, and I had little to no space to move. There was nowhere for me to go. Why can't I breathe? It felt like I was suffocating and my head was pounding. I opened my eyes and saw I was underwater. Old dirty weights were pulling me down. I heard my name being called but I couldn't respond. How could I? I was drowning. Then I saw her. She smiled at me. I was being pulled from the water. I opened my eyes looking at that face I knew all too well. I looked to my side and saw blood spilling from my side. I looked back at her and took my last breath.

"Nahjae, wake up." I heard someone say.

Whoever it was kept shaking and shaking me. Didn't they know I was dead? How can I wake up if I'm gone? That's when I felt that rush of air. It happened a good four times before I woke up. I looked around and saw Conscious and her parents kneeling over me crying. This was the first time I saw her father cry. I was lying on the bathroom floor with no clue how I got there. Then I realized. This was everything she went through, and I don't understand why I relived it. This wasn't the closure I needed.

Annabel

Kay-Leigh Stiles

Her long, wavy purple hair flowed in the wind. The sunset left her ocean blue eyes sparkling. And left me staring, admiring my girlfriend and partner in crime, Annabel's beauty from the passenger seat. There wasn't a thing I wouldn't do for this girl. I loved her with every fiber of my being, would kill and die for her. Love makes you do crazy things. A gunshot echoed through the air, breaking the silence. Two more soon followed.

Annabel sped up. "Shit! Not again."

"How long have they been onto us? Turn there, we need to lose them," My heart was pounding. The sharp turn to get to the woods had the car up on two wheels. Neither one of us was well-liked. We actually were hated, despised where we were. We had very different views from those around us and were now wanted dead. Nobody there liked "different" and despised people who questioned the capitalist government in any way or thought for themselves. Annabel and I, unfortunately, are both "different" and people questioning the government.

Both of us repeatedly glanced back to see if we were still being followed. The crunching of twigs, rocks, leaves, and occasionally garbage littered about echoed through the air.

"You know what we have to do, right, Annabel?" She stayed silent. "Annabel, we're probably going to have to ditch the car to get away." I knew this was a touchy subject, with the car being the only part of her family left after they were all taken captive.

Annabel's eyes narrowed, jaw clenched. "No! I'm not leaving this behind."

"There's less of a chance to survive if we keep it, you know that."

I rubbed my temples. I knew there wasn't a single way I was going to get her to leave it. The car came to a stop. Birds chirped, and the rustling of the bright red, orange, and yellow autumn leaves was all you could hear.

After a few moments, Annabel gets out of the car.

"I figured I could hide it well, and we can come back later. It's no big deal." Her hand grasped the locket around her neck. Wow, she actually is doing it!

Impressed, I followed her and used some weeds and branches to disguise the car better. We both grabbed a bag from the car and were off. The walk was chilly with it now being dark, but harder to be seen for sure. Carefully stepping over twigs that would make loud noises, we finally made it to an old, abandoned shack. The inside was just as run-down as the outside, with holes in the walls and floorboards, but it's what we've come to call "home."

With it being dark, we lit a fire in the backyard. "Ya know, I'm proud of you, Annabel. I know I should say it more." Annabel has come so far since this whole endeavor began. I looked up and was met with those beautiful, blue eyes gazing at me. Boy, do they make me melt. Her fingers intertwined with mine, and my heart skipped a beat. A smile appeared across Annabel's face.

"It's whatever, not leaving the car would only put us in more danger after all. Sometimes you just have to let go." My cheeks flushed red as she leaned in and kissed me.

"Besides," Annabel started while staring at me with those bright, blue eyes. "As long as you're with me, I know I'll be okay."

I was about to fall asleep when I was disturbed by a massive knot in my chest. Where was Annabel? A muffled scream filled the house. Instantly, I shot up and ran to the front of the house. Blood. Panic set in as she sprinted to find out where it was coming from. Not Annabel, anything but her. With my heart in her throat, I made my way to the end of the blood trail. The mangled body of Annabel lay there. My heart shattered.

"N-no..." I dropped to my knees and held Annabel's lifeless body in my arms, sobbing into her chest. "I'm so sorry... I'm so sorry... We were supposed to make it through this!" My whole world came crashing down around me.

What seemed like hours passed as I finally came to believe the harsh reality that lies before me. The love of my life was gone forever, ripped away from me by the ones I hate the most. It's them, I KNOW it was them.

Blood. Blood everywhere. The marks on Annabel's wrists show they tried taking her in but had to settle for just killing her off instead.

"I knew it..."

Taken in to be brainwashed, or dead on the spot. It's all the same to them. The only thing that mattered in this world was whoever disobeyed the government be eliminated.

I needed to do something. Annabel deserved more than just to rot here.

Completely hollow inside, I grabbed a shovel, picked up Annabel, and headed outside by a pond not too far from the old shack. I lay her body down and let out a sigh before digging. I took the locket from around Annabel's neck and stuffed it in my pocket.

"This isn't how this was supposed to happen."

After it was all done and my love truly gone, I sat down, looking out at the pond.

"Ya know, in my mind, I thought this would be different." I managed to let out a chuckle. "If anything, I thought it would be the other way around! I always thought I'd go before you, most likely from doing something stupid. I swear, I'll get them." My jaw tightened, eyes now glaring across the pond. My hand was gripping the pocket with the locket.

"And I think I know just the place to start!"

I ran back inside, and with tunnel vision, grabbed a gun from one of the bags we brought and a knife from the other, grabbed gasoline kept for when this time came, and matches. Without a second thought, I dumped gasoline all over whatever I could, starting in the back and working my way back up front. As I stepped outside, and turned around and started laughing hysterically. I lit and threw the matches, then watched as the trail of lit gasoline made it up the step and engulfed the whole shack in flames.

"They will pay."

I turned around and headed back to the edge of the woods. I caught a glimpse of Annabel's car, and my heart dropped. Is it possible the car would have actually been the better option? I knew that they'd be waiting. Shaking any doubt about this plan away, I continued on my way to what I felt was certain death. Glimpses of flashing lights could be seen through the trees. They really are too brainwashed to think about hiding themselves, aren't they?

They were split up, slowly starting to make their way into the woods, and I noticed there was one cop alone. You got this, Jamie. This is what all that training was for. Months to years of working out, research, and whatnot led to this moment right here. The opportunity was now or never. With it being a smaller officer, it was simple. I snuck up behind, and with a swift motion, covered the cop's mouth and slit her throat. The poor girl didn't even get a chance to react before gasping for air and soon, losing the fight. I couldn't help but cringe at the sound the knife made as I finished the officer off. Where's the next place to strike?

"Hey! Over there!"

"Shit!" This seemed like every video game I've played with a stealth mission. I quickly pulled out my gun and shot the one cop before he could strike, stomach-turning at watching him just fall to the ground.

"So much for this being eas- wait, that voice!"

The other half of a familiar locket, lying on the ground. My hands trembled as I reached into my pocket, frantically looking for Annabel's locket. A perfect match.

"No.. you weren't supposed to be one of them!"

The world spun. And I just stood there, frozen, oblivious to the officers around me as realization set in — Annabel's brother. I dropped to my knees, sobbing, and nauseous. The world started to go dark, sounds began to muffle as immense pain burned through my whole arm. Muffled footsteps ran up to capture me, but I didn't care. It was over. Everything went dark.

The sound of a door slamming woke me up. My eyes flew open, and searing pain flooded my arm. The door to my cell slid open, and there stood Annabel's mom.

"Oh, so you're awake!"

Dazed, it didn't quite strike me what this meant, but being strapped in a chair, I knew that only meant one thing. And Annabel's mom, Lucy of all people, is going to be the one to do it.

"You're one of them? What the hell did they do to you?" I screamed, my throat burned as if a million needles were being stabbed into it.

"They showed me the way, showed me that we need to get rid of scum like you. Scum that could interfere with His work."

"You killed your own daughter!" I growled through gritted teeth, shaking the chair, trying to get free.

Lucy raised her hand. My cheek was now stinging and bright red.

"I was just doing what needed to be done, as I am with killing you." Lucy's face not moving a muscle, showing no emotion.

"Is a psycho more important to you than your own-"

"Shut up!"

Another bang. I screamed in agony, wanting to clench my foot, but the restraints stopped me.

"Shooting your foot is just the beginning. I can make this as drawn out as I want if you don't shut your mouth."

I glared at Lucy. A glare that was so piercing, it could split her in two. Is she really the one in charge around here? Almost got it... The straps started to loosen. I'm almost free... I'm getting out!

As I slipped my hand out of the strap, Lucy stabbed my hand, knife piercing through to the chair. Lucy's eyes softened, and she soon turned away. A moment of weakness.

"I'm sorry..."

My hand was trembling, with excruciating pain. However, I need to take advantage of this. I loosened the strap of my hand not pierced to the chair, and then the ones holding my legs. Could I really do this?

As swiftly as I could muster while being in this much pain, I pulled the knife out of my hand and stepped towards Lucy. This is it! It's finally over!

I stabbed the knife as hard as I could into Lucy's neck, but at the same time, she saw me coming. Right as the knife went pierced her flesh, a gunshot blared through the air. Everything was in slow motion.

Gasping for air, Lucy collapsed on the ground.

My stomach stung, I could hardly breathe. I looked down and saw blood pouring out of my stomach, then looked at Lucy, who was now nothing but a corpse. I collapsed as well. This is the end for me, but that didn't matter. Why? Because we did it.

"We did it, Annabel, we finally won...."

Amplified Tragedies

Jack Hall

Suicide

It is not a painless action

Nor a painless concept.

Suicide

Is caused by depression

By anxiety

By trauma and by mental illness.

Suicide

Is the act of killing oneself

Is the thought that life is no longer worth living.

Those thoughts can be amplified

By the pain of the mocking

The people they hear in the back laughing

When they talk of mental illness

When they talk of something that relates to the one who is currently thinking,

That maybe they'd be better off dying.

Suicide is amplified by people.

It starts as a thought

As a small desire

Until it gradually grows into more.

Depression

It's a chemical imbalance in the brain

Or a list of past traumas that can no longer be contained.

A bit of medication or maybe some therapy may be able to help

But often it takes far too long to find the right dosage,

Find the right therapy.

Then they hear the laughing

The jokes of suicide

Of how it is painless

And they think

Maybe, maybe it is,

And maybe I should.

And they begin to lose the will to keep trying.

The thought is now life threatening

But still just a thought.

Though a thought is how everything starts.

But the people at school they continue in ignorance

Saying they'll kill themselves when they won't

Simply because they think it's all a joke.

So when those who actually might

Decide to say it too,

It's played off as a joke

Because that's what teenagers these days do.

Until you realize

It's not just the teens

And this is no joke.

Depression

It's like apathy

The lack of feeling

The lack of the ability to care.

No motivation to shower during the day

To brush your teeth before you go to bed

To *check* before you cross the road

To convince yourself you have the energy for another day.

And once that lack of feeling becomes too much,

When you can no longer handle not feeling,

You resort to anything you can,

To feel something.

Self-harm is almost soothing

Because for a brief moment you forget

All your current and past problems

Forget that you couldn't feel before.

So the next day when you hear them say,

"Suicide is painless,"

You can't quite agree

Because the physical pain that comes with it,

Is the only thing you've ever truly felt.

Suicide is *not* painless,

But that,

That is why they're drawn to it.

Suicide,

It is one of the world's greatest tragedies.

Now we've talked of ways to amplify it

Talked of ways the desire can become more

But have you ever thought of trying to lessen it?

By *not* joking about depression and suicide

By *not* joking about someone's sexuality

By *not* joking about someone's identity

Whether it be aimed at the person or generally.

And if it's caused by ignorance,

Please, do the world a favor and choose to be educated,

You have the internet at your fingertips

It's the 21st century,

Don't choose to cause the pain when you could help end it instead.

Out of the Woods

Shelby Wilcox

As I'm walking out of school from my volleyball practice, I notice white flurries in the air. I get my pink fuzzy hat and gloves out of my backpack to cover my hands and ears, and I also put my long blonde hair over my ears for some extra warmth. Walking home through the forest as it starts to get dark and more breezy, I encounter some large footprints in the snow that continue for as far as I can see. Since I take this way home every day, I have never seen footprints through these woods before, as I am usually the only person who walks this way.

"Should I follow them?" I think to myself.

Shortly after contemplating, I start to walk along with them, wondering where or whom it would lead me to. Following these footprints, I then notice that they start to drag after about a mile or so in.

I start to wonder who and why someone would be walking this far into the woods with it being this cold outside. There are many different things to assume this person could be doing. I have about three at the top of my head, with two out of three being worse than the one, but I don't want to make it out to be the worst one out there. I stop to take out my phone to see if I can get a closer look. Shaking while I have my phone out and trying to remove my glove, I slowly put the flashlight on to look around. I slowly glanced my eyes around as I sway the light back and forth, in front and also behind me.

It may sound crazy to some, but I continue to follow these footsteps as they continue to go straight through the woods. The whistling of the air and the continuous snowfall settles. My mind wanders all over the place as the day goes on. I put some country music on to keep myself occupied and to also keep myself from worrying so much.

My phone starts to ring.

It's my mom and I quickly answer the phone to see why she is calling me.

"Honey, are you there? Where are you?" Mom said.

"Yeah, mom. I'm here. I'm walking around for a little while, and I'll be home soon".

"I don't want you out there by yourself. The news said a young girl your age has been kidnapped within the area, and I absolutely do NOT want you to be walking around at this time. Get home!"

"Okay, Mom, I'll be there soon... JEEZ!"

"I'm going to keep following these footprints to see what this could possibly be. She won't notice", as I think to myself.

As I'm walking, I see a man with a black hat and dark pants on, not too far ahead of me. Staying close behind and tiptoeing through the snow, I try not to make a peep of noise. This person is carrying a bag that looked dirty and wet, and full of something. I take my phone out to turn off the volume and turn on the camera to see if I can zoom in to get a close look to see what he is doing or where he is going.

Farther along the way of this walk, I encounter this man walking towards a small brown rustic looking shack; the paint is chipping off, and there is a small window which is a bit cracked. Before he enters, he glances around the area to see if there is anyone around. I immediately jump behind a big, grey boulder coated in snow, so he doesn't spot me following him. He proceeds to go into the shack, thinking as if nothing or no one was there, and acting like what he was up to wasn't suspicious.

Waiting until it is safe to get closer, I ask myself, "What way could I possibly sneak around to see what he is up to? I don't want him to notice me or my footsteps when he does decide to leave again."

Some moments later. "Maybe I could walk around the trees surrounding the shack to make my way to the back of it, then find a way to the front to see into it through the window."

Perfect.

Thankfully there are various trees surrounding the area, so it won't be obvious to him that I'm following him. I try to sneak a look at or in the

shack between the trees to see what is going on, but nothing is visible.

I feel my phone start to vibrate.

As I quickly pull it out of my pocket to see who is trying to get ahold of me, I see that it's my mom calling again for the third time. I don't answer but I send a short message saying I'll be home shortly. I don't have good service out in the middle of these woods.

Approximately ten minutes later, I hear something creak. Looking over, I see the man start to creep out of the shack. As he walks away, I begin to walk even closer to the back. Watching the man walk away, I slowly creep up to the front of the shack and look into the window. I glance around and see that there are someone's clothes on a table inside. I then notice there is a girl with long brown hair who is lying on the bare wood floor. Her wrists and ankles are knotted together very securely with what looks like a strong wire and duct tape covering her mouth. I rush to the door and open it, walk inside to the girl who started whimpering as she saw me walk in. Slowly going up to her, I crouch down and take off the tape from over her mouth to be able to ask what her name is and such, also so she can have a chance to talk.

"Please help me get out of here!! He said he was going to be back very soon, and if he catches you trying to help me escape, he will take you too," She says

I start to wonder about what my mother was talking about when she said someone got taken.

"Of course, I'll help. What is your name?" I ask.

"My name is Emily. I was only walking home from my friend's house earlier this week when he grabbed me from behind. He told me to shut my mouth, or he will kill me".

I go to the window to see that the guy is coming back, a little farther away, but is making his way here.

I hurry and tell Emily that he is coming back as I'm trying to find something to cut the strong wires off her. Getting anxious, I feel in my mind

the man is going to catch both of us, and then neither of us will get out.

"Seriously, this guy does not have a pair of wire cutters or pliers in this freaking place!?" As I start getting fidgety. "We're running out of fucking time!!"

"Check the small black chest in the closet. There may be something in there." Emily said.

Quickly running to the closet to open the chest, I find that there is a ton of things he may very well be using to tie these girls up along with some objects that may be able to possibly get her out of this wire.

I take all of it over to her, trying each one. While I'm trying to cut this shit off, I notice these deep wounds and bruises up and down her arms and legs.

"Are these marks from him?" I ask.

"Yes. Every time I would do something he didn't like, he would either punch or cut me with one of the knives from the chest."

Hearing that really inclined me to not give up on getting her out of this crazy mess. Moving my hand faster and faster to cut these wires, I have it down to the very last piece of it.

I quickly look up to see if the man is any closer, and he is, but we still have a little time. It seems as if he is taking his time getting here. I round up Emily's clothes from the table and start to put her shirt over her head and shoes on, so once I get this last wire, we can rush out the door.

"Okay, I got it. LET'S GO! NOW! I shout to her. "Bring the things you need."

"Getting anxious, I feel in my mind the man is going to catch both of us, and then neither of us will get out."

“Coming, let’s get out of here,” Emily says.

As we’re rushing out the door, we see the man who is closer than he was before both times I looked.

“Come on, let’s go. Follow me. I have a way around this, so it is less likely he will spot us.” As I clutch her arm, running.

As we swiftly make our way back, Emily and I hear a thundering yell that echoed throughout the forest.

“That bitch! She’s gone!” the man angrily yells. His wordless scream seems to shake the trees.

“He must be back, and he’s pissed,” Emily says. I can only imagine what he is planning to do right now.

Emily and I keep darting throughout the woods for the next mile left to get out, and we hear another echo saying, “I... Will... Get... You!!!”

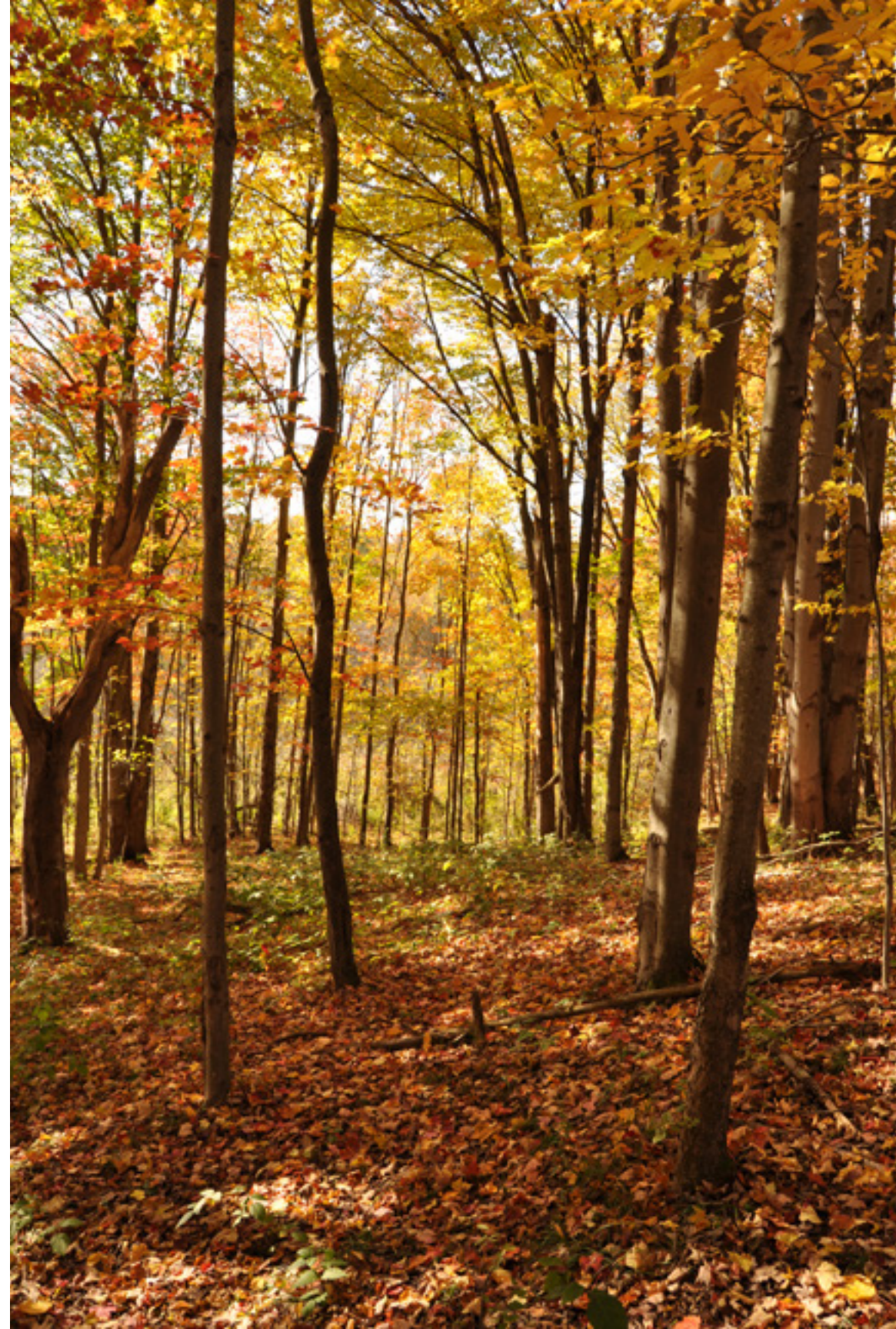
“Look, I see the end!”

As we get closer to the end, we see an older lady walking past with her dog and start to shout.

“Help us! There is a guy hunting for my friend here!!!” I say as she continues to walk, not noticing we are there.

We run as fast as we can and reach the street, and I realize we are close to my house, and I have Emily follow me to my home.

We keep running to my house and push the door open.



Photograph by Julia Salamone

The Plot Twist

Marnea Christian

“Hannah get up, you are going to be late for the bus again, and I am not driving you to school!” My mother shouts louder than a military officer trying to correct his troops.

I’m already up, but I am just going to put my head down and pretend to sleep so I don’t have to take the bus. The bus smells like old people and I am a junior, it’s an abomination that she is even making me get on the bus. I have my junior driver’s license, why doesn’t she just get me a car? I am responsible enough for it. I have a job, and I have been on the honor roll since I was in 5th grade.

My mother walks in my room, “Hannah your breakfast is cold, you still aren’t dressed, oh my gosh you are still in bed, what are you doing?”

“Mom, why do I have to get on that bus?” I say with a frown on my face like a lost puppy.

“Because it is more convenient for me seeing how I am the only one that is taking care of you and your younger sisters,” She says, sad and disappointed.

My father left my mother, younger sisters, and I a few years ago. So now I have a responsibility to take care of them and make mom happy, makes me feel ungrateful when I forget she is all we have.

“I am sorry mom, are the girls ready? I’ll get dressed quickly and take them to the bus stop.”

“No honey its fine Johnny took them for me, I like that young man I am so glad you guys are friends.”

Johnny is my childhood crush... I mean, he is my childhood best friend. Johnny’s real name is Johnathan, he is about 6’3 caramel complexion, long hair but he always has it in box braids with a tapered edge up, with the most gorgeous smile... He is a point guard on the varsity team. I never

miss one of his games.

I left my house quickly so I could get to school on time, meeting Johnny on the way. While we were walking to the bus stop, Megan walks toward Johnny and me with her fresh blow out and new Mac highlighter she has been bragging about on Snapchat. Megan is Johnny’s girlfriend; she is short, not like me. She has lighter skin than me. I am a little darker than Johnny. But she and Johnny have been dating since freshman year. They are the ideal couple. He is a star basketball player, and she is his cheerleader.

“Hey babe.” She says as she leans in for a kiss.

Johnny backs off and says, “I was serious about what we talked about last night. I’m tired of that.” He starts to raise his voice, and you can tell he was angry with her.

“Are you seriously going to embarrass me right now?” Megan says quietly. Everyone starts to look now.

“I am not trying to, but you do not listen, so would you like me to? Right here in front of everyone, Megan?” He says.

“Johnny stop I’m sor-” Megan says, Johnny has a serious face and he is so angry his cheeks start to get red.

“Megan, we are done! Leave me alone please, that’s all I’m asking you,” He says and turns towards me.

“But Johnny, I’m sorry... I love you” she pulls him around so that they meet face to face.

“Yeah I loved you too, now just walk away. Everyone is staring at us now that we caused a scene.” He rolls his eyes and he pulls back, and starts walking towards the bus.

Johnny and I walk towards the back of the bus and sit where some of his teammates usually sit. Most of the time, all the boys talk obnoxiously, and they are full of laughter but since their captain isn’t in the mood, neither are they. Johnny puts his headphones in, and I tap him.

“What was that about?” I ask him.

“We can’t talk about it here, meet me at our spot later,” Johnny says.

Our spot was on top of the roof. My school had a beautiful view, and you can oversee our school, and the town looks so beautiful from up high. That is where we go to get away from everyone and eat lunch sometimes.

All day I could only think of how my best friend broke up with his girlfriend, and I was wondering why. I mean, Megan is annoying and she does dumb stuff all the time, but why break up with her? It’s noon and I have lunch right now, today they are serving fried chicken and mac and cheese. Mac and cheese is my favorite dish, I mean baked mac is the best, but I could settle for this right now. I see Megan with her friends when I walked in, and they couldn’t stop staring at me. She starts to walk towards me...

“Did he tell you why he broke up with me?” Megan asks.

“No, it hasn’t been a big discussion, sorry I have to go,” I reply. I try to walk away then she grabs my arm.

“Look, I need you to tell him something for me,” Megan says as she looks into my eyes, she looks sad. Her eyes are a little watery.

“I am not getting in the middle of that, tell him yourself.” The last time I involved myself in their drama, it backlashed on me and he ended up taking her back anyway.

“But you are his best friend, and he listens to you.” She sighs like a kid who couldn’t get what they wanted.

“I don’t feel comfortable getting in that.” I yank my arm back and walk away.

As I leave the cafeteria to meet Johnny, I pass his friend Quincy in the hallway. They are like best friends, but I come first. Quincy was talking to one of Megan’s friends. I couldn’t hear their conversation, but it seemed serious. The rooftop is in the back of the school near the football field, so nobody is around during lunchtime to catch us. I walk up the stairs; it smells like a basement and has one light, so it’s hard to see. But the rooftop door is cracked with the sun shining bright as I get to the top, and

I see Johnny. He is sitting there waiting for me on the edge of the ledge with his turkey sandwich and Lays chips. He has that big charming smile on his face to where you could see his dimples. I hear him playing the new Bryson Tiller album, so I walk over and sit next to him.

“Ooouuu, what song is that? It’s really good!” I say as I’m bopping to the beat, my braids start flowing to my face as it got windy. Thank god I brought my jacket.

“Run me dry, that beat goes crazy.” Then he stops his music.

“So, let me tell you why I dumped her, she lies about everything and I haven’t been attracted to her in a while honestly.”

“What changed?” I ask and lean a little closer so I could hear him a bit better.

“Honestly? You. She is nothing like you and what I want in a girlfriend. I want someone like you.” He says as he sits up and starts smirking at me with those big brown eyes.

I did not know he was going to say any of this. I have had a crush on this guy since we were kids. I never knew he even looked at me this way. I like everything I am hearing, but I can’t believe this is reality.

“What are you saying?” I only ask this for confirmation because if I am going to confess that I feel the same way to him, I just want to be completely sure.

“I am saying that I like you and the woman you’ve grown to be. I want us to be together. I hope you feel the same way as I do.” He looks at me and licks his lips. Johnny starts to lean in and kiss me. He and I lock lips, and everything is magical. If cloud nine were real, we would be on it at that moment.

“Johnny, what does this mean? You just broke up with Megan. I do like you, but I really don’t want to be a rebound to you or something.”

“Hannah you could never be a rebound to me, haven’t you noticed at all my games I hug her and look for you, her and I haven’t dated in a month. She doesn’t listen, nor can she catch a hint. I wanted to be nice to her, but

she still wants to be dating and that is not what I want anymore.” He says to me and grabs my hand to assure me that this is real, and this is what he wants.

“How long have you been feeling like this?” I ask him.

“As long as I could remember, but I didn’t ever want to mess up our friendship,” Johnny says smiling, you can see his dimples again and he puts his head down because this is the first time he has ever expressed himself to me, so I think he is just shy.

“I just don’t understand.” I sigh and look away. I couldn’t look him in the eyes. I was shocked and embarrassed.

“I come by every morning and eat breakfast with your family, and when you are upstairs fake sleeping, I’ll cover you for your mom and take your sisters to the bus stop. We know each other’s everything, and I love you more than anyone other than my family. What is not to get?” He says with a smile, I end up smiling back and he leans in for a kiss again. As we lock lips, my body shivers in joy and excitement. This is the greatest feeling ever; I finally got the guy I wanted. And he is my best friend all in one nothing could be so perfect if someone were winning the lottery this is what it would feel like.

The bell rings, and we walk down the steps from the rooftop. He says we can talk about everything on the walk home if I want to since we both have to head back to our class. I am shocked and happy, but why does this feel like a dream? The day has finally come, and I don’t entirely know how to feel. Like where did this come from, and how do I go to this next class with his now ex-girlfriend and sit through it happy for myself and sad for her because I know how much she loves him?

As I am walking to class I see Megan again and I try not to make eye contact, but she grabs me and pulls me by the lockers that are close by the water fountain. She asks if she can tell me something again, as she did during lunch.

“I know you don’t want to get into our drama, but I need your help and I don’t know how to tell Johnny.” She looks me in my eyes, and that’s how I know whatever she is about to tell me is serious.

“What is it, Megan?” My eyes widen with worry and I begin to get teary-eyed.

“Hannah, I’m pregnant,” Megan shouts a little, enough for the people down the hall to hear.

FATED Brotherhood

Theodore J. Cook

Day by day, I live and move like I’m in a trance.
 But the day I met you, couldn’t have been chance.
 You swept me in a huff and puff.
 Looking like, you were having it tough.
 I know the true meaning of Blue, as well as I’m sure, you do.
 The look you had on your face,
 Showed me your disgust of this place.
 An echo of my own,
 Has never been so known.
 Instantly my heart flew to you.
 In its casting, I felt as if, I grew.
 I asked you, what is the matter?
 You responded back with some nonsensical pratter.
 But I was not put off, by this, for I understood.
 Your dilemma was definitely not good.
 You found out today, that you would have to stay.
 A whole more year, would go past.
 While everything dear, won’t last.
 Time ticks by, and all we can do is try.
 I’m sure you didn’t want this reply, but instead a good cry.
 So I wept with you, and was so swept up;
 In a storm of tears, I kept up.
 For this day I didn’t just weep for you,
 But for all I knew.
 Stuck in this, infernal turmoil,
 Some until they meet soil.
 We are in this together.
 Not because of some tether.
 But because you are my brother,
 and we’ll look out for the other.
 This was no trick or state,
 but a miracle of fate.



Allison by Kaitlyn Jenks

The Plot Twist (*Megan Edition*)

Marnea Christian

“I’m pregnant,” I said to Hannah not thinking of who could hear me or what the outcome would be. I didn’t think of how she would feel or what she would think of me telling her would mean.

“Megan, what did you just say to me?” Hannah said.

“I said I am pregnant, and I need your help telling Johnny. Since you are his best friend, I thought it would be better if you helped me since he isn’t trying to have a regular conversation with me anymore. You saw how he acted towards me this morning.” I reached to touch her shoulder. Hannah jerked back and walked away, and I could hear her start to cry.

I didn’t understand why she was upset; I knew her, and Johnny were friends, but the way she just left me crying I can only assume she wants to be more than best friends. As class went on, I couldn’t think of anything besides how Hannah just reacted. I had to tell someone; my belly has been getting bigger by the week.

As the day went on, I was curious if Hannah had said something to Johnny. I was looking for him all day and couldn’t find him, and school was almost over. I looked for him in the basketball gym where he always hangs out with his friends, the courtyard where all of the popular kids hang out, and I even passed by his locker to see what was going on with him, but I couldn’t find him or Hannah. I left the main entrance of the school to find my dad and older brother waiting for me. My parents and brother Matty knew I was pregnant and the family was just waiting on me to tell Johnny, I just haven’t had the guts to tell him because I am scared of his reaction, he is my first love, and we are not in a great place right now.

The Next Morning

Its 6 am and I wake up to 6 missed calls, 12 text messages from Johnny,

asking me if what I told Hannah was true, if I was lying about being pregnant with his baby. I didn't know what to say; I really didn't think this one out. My mom is always saying I make rash decisions, and now I see that she is right.

"Johnny can we talk in the morning before school so I can explain everything, I'm sorry I didn't tell you myself. I tried but you kept pushing me away." I texted Johnny.

He immediately texted me back and said, "Meet me outside in 5 mins. We need to talk about this now." I quickly got dressed and moved quietly out of my house. I didn't want to wake anyone up because it was so early. I passed my mom in the bathroom, I told her I was going on a jog and that I would be back shortly. The only reason I didn't tell her I was going to see Johnny was because I don't want to overwhelm him with too much. Johnny told me to meet him down the street where the neighborhood park was. It was so nice, the sun was rising, and the sky was a pink-orange color, there was a nice breeze flowing while I walked down to speak to Johnny about this urgent news.

"Hey Megan," He said. Johnny looked as if he had not had any sleep, he had bags under his eyes, and they were a little red. It seemed like he had been really upset since he found out.

"Hi Johnny, so let's just talk." I said as I noticed he kept looking at his black Series 4 Apple Watch, it looked like someone was talking to him, I wanted to ask, but I didn't want to start another argument.

"Sorry, that was Quincy asking if I was okay, Hannah told me you are pregnant is this true?" Johnny's voice cracked a little, and his big brown eyes started getting watery. Quincy is his best friend from middle school; another reason we broke up. Because Quincy was always in his ear saying stuff to Johnny about me.

I handed him the ultrasound the doctors just gave me last Friday. "They told me I am 7 weeks along now."

When I said this, Johnny fell back onto the bench and said, "What are we going to do?". He and I talked for about 10 minutes before I decided to leave, I had to hand in a project in my first class. It was a big grade and

I couldn't miss it. I wish I could have stayed and helped him with everything he was feeling, but I needed to start my day. He and I could talk after school when I'm not too busy to talk.

The School Day

I got to school and handed my assignments in. I had been completely unfocused since I dropped the bomb on Hannah yesterday, I wanted to text her and see if she was okay. She and I were friends when we were younger, but as we got older, we started liking different things, and I started hanging out with different people. She wasn't a bad person, so I don't understand why she had the reaction she had yesterday. I was curious and I honestly felt bad because I could have handled that better than I did. I didn't know if she even still had the same number that she had in middle school, but it was worth a shot if I could get a hold of her and talk things out with her. She was Johnny's best friend, and it would've been nice if he could have someone. I was never bitter about their friendship since she and I were friends before. If she was anyone else, I might have been.

"Is this Hannah? It's Megan. I just wanted to talk to you about what happened yesterday."

She didn't respond right away, and I began to get anxious; what if this wasn't her number? What if she doesn't want to talk? Then suddenly my phone buzzed. It wasn't her, it was just a Snapchat notification from one of my cheer girls asking me where I was. I was waiting for about 30 minutes for a response when she finally replied.

"I hope you and Johnny were able to talk I spoke to him last night about everything, thank you for apologizing, but I do not want to have any further conversations with you at the moment regarding yesterday. Have a nice day though and congratulations." After reading that I wanted to ask her if she liked Johnny because any best friend would have been excited or said something about it, but since I want to get back with Johnny, I just left it as it was. I didn't want to upset him and more than I had.

The Next Morning

Now that Johnny knew it was making me feel way better since it was off

my chest now. I didn't know how many people in that nosy ass school know about our baby, but I guessed I would find out when I went in. The first people I saw when I walked into the school were my girls. They were sitting on the steps outside of the front entrance, we had the best placement for anywhere we sat since we were the popular kids. It was nice out that morning. I didn't have to wear a jacket, and the sun was shining so brightly. My girls were the first to know. They came with me when I bought the test. They sat with me in my bathroom when the line turned blue. They had been holding me down the whole time, making everything normal, still including me and helping me out when I needed them to cover for me with our cheer coach who I had yet to tell. We had a big season, and this getting sprung on her was just going to make her so pissy with me since I was captain.

Lauren asked me, "Have you spoken to Johnny about it yet?" I knew that's what they were all wondering.

"I did, we spoke about it yesterday morning, but my next class is about to start. Meet me by the courtyard for lunch and I'll tell you guys what happened there." They agreed, and we all departed.

Later This Day

Quincy came to look for me after he heard the news from whoever told him. I was hoping Quincy didn't find out, but he is one of Johnny's good friends so I don't know why I thought that would stay between just Johnny and me. I was in the courtyard eating lunch with my girls. It was a nice spring day; the trees were blooming so lovely, and the grass had to be fresh cut that morning because I smelled it from the gust of wind. I saw him walking towards me in the angriest way he had a frown on his face, and he looked so disappointed. Quincy was about 6'3", brown skin, with waves, he had the most gorgeous hazel eyes. I wish my child could have eyes like that. But as soon as Quincy got closer, Quincy and I got into a huge argument about why I told Johnny and not him.

"I must've really meant nothing to you, Megan!" He shouted.

"What are you talking about, Quincy?" I smirk in front of my friends because they know nothing of my relationship with him.

"I'm talking about how you told Johnny that you were pregnant, but you left me in the dark."

"I told him because he is the father, Quincy, what are you getting at?" I said, standing there looking at him completely upset from what he was saying. Everything is going to come out now, I thought as he got face to face with me.

"Let's be real here Megan, are you going to tell him that I am the father, or should I." Quincy said loud enough for Johnny to overhear.



Sunset and Sand by Kaitlyn Jenks

Poetry

Jaida Thomas

“Flip the pages and read carefully. Play with the pages before you
Move on. Let it sink in. Take it in like your life depends
On it. Watch as the words flow so effortlessly.
I am the poetry that’ll feed your soul.”

Painting

Jaida Thomas

“Paint the picture of me painting the picture of you. Undress my
Flaws so you could see beyond them. Make love to my mind because God
Knows that you want to. Let my body tell you my darkest secrets.
Be okay with them. Acknowledge every part of me.”

The Lady in White

Tabatha Ray

It was late October, and many of the trees had started to show their bare bones. Most of their beautiful red, orange, and yellow leaves had fallen to the ground below. That night there was a slight cool breeze, the fallen leaves dancing around in a whirlwind at the bases of the trees. It was as if they were dancing in circles to music that no one could hear but them. The moon was full but had been hiding behind some thick clouds, giving no lighting to the night.

Nancy was walking home from Bob's Mini-Market, where she had worked for the last three years. She started working at Bob's during her sophomore year in high school, as a way to earn extra money and save up for college. Nancy was the youngest of four siblings and would be the first to go to college in her family. Unlike her siblings, she had goals set and wouldn't let anything come in the way of pursuing her dreams of becoming a writer. Someday hoping to publish a great piece of work that would get her recognized and out of this small-town life, she felt stuck in.

Nancy started making her way home; five blocks from Bob's market, she slipped into a bit of a daydream. She was daydreaming about finally getting out of this town where everybody knows everyone. A city that felt almost as if it was stuck in the fifties. Martville was a beautiful little town with a population of just over 3,000 people. Nothing exciting ever happened there, until that late October night.

Nancy walked lost in her thoughts, suddenly spooked by a noise she heard off in the distance. She began to slow down and try to listen to see where the sound was coming from, but it was a faint noise.

"You're just hearing things," Nancy chuckled a little to herself, and continued to walk towards home. She walked on, looking around and unable to see much of anything in the dimly lit side streets. As she began to approach the corner she heard the same noise, only this time it was a bit louder. Nancy stopped dead in her tracks and spun around but saw

that nothing was behind her. As she slowly turned back around, she got a cold shiver that ran from the tip of her toes to the top of her head, giving her instant goosebumps that ran through her body. It seemed as if all the hairs on her arms stood up. There was something in the air that night that didn't feel quite right, and Nancy had never felt so unsettled walking home before. Now she only wished that she was home and snuggled into her warm bed with her favorite soft blanket, watching reruns of her favorite TV show; "The Mary Tyler Moore Show." As a little girl, she would sit with her parents and watch Mary and dream about becoming a strong independent woman like her.

There it was again, only this time Nancy jumped and found herself beginning to shake a little. This time she was sure it wasn't just her imagination getting the best of her, she heard what appeared to be like a woman sobbing uncontrollably.

"Hello.... Are you okay?" Nancy asked as she slowly took a few steps. "Do you need help?" Nancy asked. Nobody responded to Nancy, and this only made her feel more uneasy. She could still hear the woman crying, but was unsure where the sound was coming from. It was so dark, darker than usual, and she began to strain her eyes to see if she could find the crying woman. The street light began to flicker rapidly, and suddenly the light went out. Now Nancy was standing in complete darkness, with only a small amount of the moonlight peeking through the clouds. She was all alone and at least three long blocks from the safety of her warm bed. She would give anything at this point to be home and safe. Part of Nancy wanted to take off at full speed and run all the way home. Unable to move, as if there was something forcibly holding her into that very spot, she stood still.

Nancy mustered up the courage to walk a few more steps, listening carefully to what she had heard in the dark of the night. Once again, she called. "Hello, do you need help?" asked Nancy. Only this time, there was a response.

"Please help me," a weak and inconsolable voice whispered. Nancy stopped dead in her tracks again and looked all around her surroundings.

“Nancy mustered up the courage to walk a few more steps, listening carefully to what she had heard in the dark of the night.”

“Where are you?” asked Nancy. “I can’t see you.” Off in the distance, Nancy’s eyes began to focus on a dim white light, about 20 feet off the road. She began to walk a little closer towards the woman. She was leaving the safety of the sidewalk, stepping onto the soft grass. The cries began to get louder and seem to be getting closer as she made her way deeper into the darkness. Something deep inside her told her to turn around and go home. But Nancy continued further into the night.

“Ma’am, are you okay, do you need help? Where are you?” squeaked Nancy.

“Please help me!” cried the woman. Nancy walked past a row of tall, dark oak trees that had been there for at least a hundred years or longer, maybe. Tonight they appeared to have an eerie look, so tall and bare, the branches reaching out high above her in all directions. The wind blew ever so slightly the branches in the oak trees moved against each other just enough to make a noise that would not normally scare Nancy, but that night it did. That night Nancy was more spooked than she had been since she was a little girl. Nancy walked past the last oak tree she noticed a thick white mist that seemed to have appeared from nowhere. Standing in the middle of the fog was a beautiful woman in a long white gown. She had beautiful long silky black hair that flowed down and over her shoulders, her head was down, and she was crying into her hands. The lady was sobbing so hard that Nancy could see her shoulders shaking, the woman’s pain was felt instantly deep within Nancy. This massive wave of sorrow rushed over Nancy as she began to walk closer to the woman, standing alone sobbing. Nancy had never felt such sorrow creep over her. Slowly, she looked up at Nancy. The lady that stood before Nancy was stunning. Even with tears streaked down her cheeks, she had a beautiful glow that was shining so bright in the dark of the night.

“I can’t find him!” cried the woman in white. Nancy tried to look around,

but she was unable to see anyone or anything.

“Find who?” asked Nancy. “Who are you trying to find, maybe I can help you?” said Nancy to the woman standing now just a few feet away from her.

“My husband, Clarence.” cried the lady in white. “We just left our wedding reception, and we were leaving town for our honeymoon.” answered the woman. Nancy seemed a bit confused, looking around there was no sign of a car or anyone out on the streets.

“Is your car close by, maybe we can walk back and see if he’s there?” asked Nancy, trying to help.

“I’m not sure where the car is. The last thing I remember was Clarence driving and holding my hand. He looked over at me and smiled. He told me that I was the most beautiful bride he has ever seen.” said the woman in white as she looked around, almost as if she had no clue where she was at the moment. “His eyes filled with so much love, oh how his smile always makes me melt.” cried the woman in white.

“Don’t worry, I’ll help you find your husband,” Nancy said, trying to console the woman in white. Nancy had already put aside all the eerie feelings she had just a few minutes ago and just wanted to help this woman standing in front of her that seemed to be lost and missing her husband. It was heartbreaking to see this woman stand in front of her so upset. Nancy turned around for just a second, and when she looked back for the woman in white, she was gone. Nancy began to look all around her; she knew the woman was standing right in front of her. So where did she go?

“What the hell!” Nancy said to herself. She began to call out for the woman in white. “Hello, where are you, ma’am?” Nancy asked, nervously. But there was no one in sight, and no answer. Nancy was standing in a grassy field alone in the dark, puzzled and confused about what had just happened. Nancy began to wonder to herself what she was doing there.

Nancy woke-up and rolled over; she could smell the aroma of a fresh pot of coffee in the brisk morning air. With her eyes still closed and trying to

muster the will to get up and out of bed, she thought back to the events of last night, or was it just a crazy dream? Did she see the woman in white? She was still unsure of what to think of it all, shaking her head as if to clear her thoughts. Nancy got up and put on her slippers and headed downstairs for a fresh hot cup of coffee.

“Nothing clears the morning fog like a cup of coffee to start your day,” thought Nancy to herself. Nancy walked into the kitchen, her mother sitting at the table with a cup of coffee and reading the morning paper.

“Good morning, Mom,” Nancy said as she poured herself a cup of coffee. Nancy joined her mother sitting at the table. No response from her mom, she seemed lost deep into reading the morning paper. “Mom?” asked Nancy. Startled Nancy’s mother looked up from the paper as if surprised her daughter was sitting down at the table with her.

“Oh, sorry dear, I was just reading this sad article in the paper,” her mother responded. “How was work last night, did you work late? I didn’t hear you come in?” asked Nancy’s mother as she laid down the newspaper onto the table.

“No, but ..” Nancy stopped in mid-sentence, her face turned as white as a ghost. On the second page of the paper was a picture of the woman in white with a handsome young man. The title of the article read, “Tragedy Struck Newlyweds 50 years Ago Last Night.”



Julia Salamone



Sunflowers by Vicki Brown

Untitled

Sam Austin

You always hated titles. With an odd passion, actually. I'd leave my living room for a few minutes, and I'd come back to find my books turned, spines to the wall — titles hidden away. I'm not sure where the idea had come to you, where you could have gotten it. But I didn't need to know, I think. That was the beauty about you - you were the one person I didn't need to understand completely. The only one.

I'm sure you still hate titles. And drink too much coffee for someone your size. I'm sure every Wednesday night, you sit next to your cherished old record player, listening to that worn Mozart vinyl. I can't see you owning a television or a cell phone; you always hated modern technology so much. But I can't be sure now.

That day, it was horrible, honestly. To come home and see all of the books turned, pages facing me and titles to the wall, your empty coffee mug abandoned on the counter. It was cruel, quite frankly, leaving traces of yourself everywhere. Even though you knew you weren't going to come back. I was positive you had done it on purpose, you never did anything on accident or left any room for coincidence. Never.

Your favorite mug would haunt me, and I would get angry all over again. An ad would appear on the television for your favorite coffee, and I'd hate you just a little more. The worst of all, I would put a book back with the pages facing me, entirely out of habit, and blame you. Seeing me like that, you would have laughed. Told me that I was foolish. You would have told me to let it go and stop being so ridiculous. And because it was you, I would have listened.

But you weren't there to tell me that.

The books and the mug and the coffee and the dusty table that held the clean imprint of your record player were there. Yelling at me, telling me everything you would never say. And I listened because there was no one else to listen to.

You left, and it's truly as simple as that. But you also remained. Because, now, no matter how hard I try, I listen to Mozart on Wednesday nights. I drink out of your favorite mug and put the books back with the pages facing me and titles to the wall. And I don't understand why

But that's okay, right? Because that was the beauty about you - you were the one person I didn't need to understand completely.

The only one.



Pallet Knife Painting by Xuaner Chen



Red and White by Vicki Brown

Winter

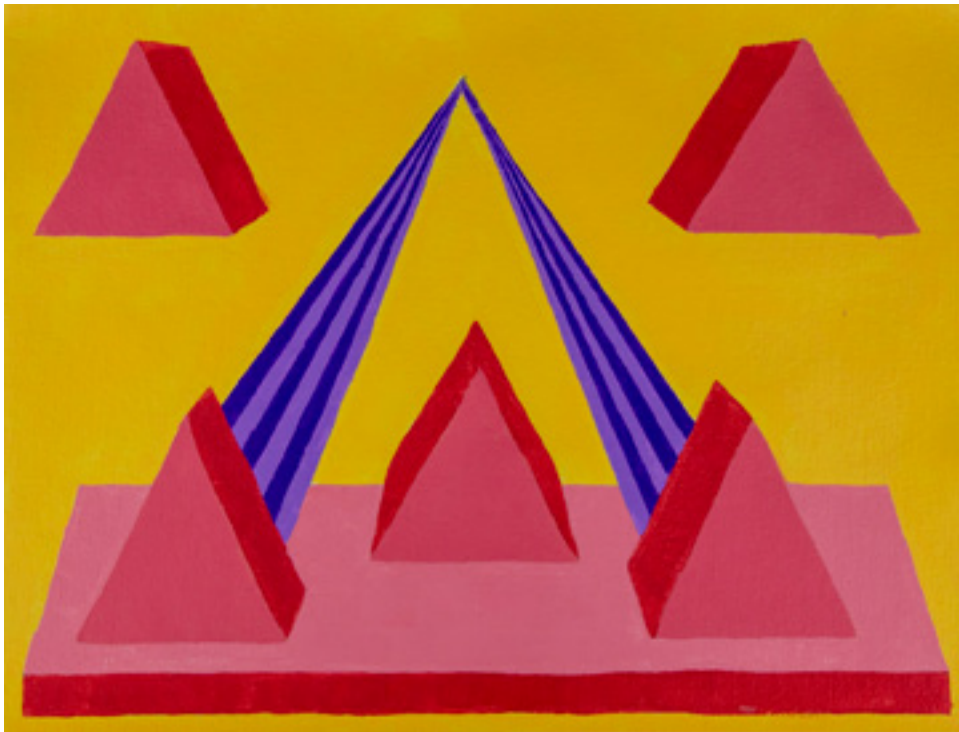
Kaitlyn Jenks

Then the sun kissed the ground for the very last time.
 As it fled, it left a stream of blurry pastels behind.
 This is when the summer gets laid to rest in its coffin.
 Each and every year the cold of winter commits this crime.

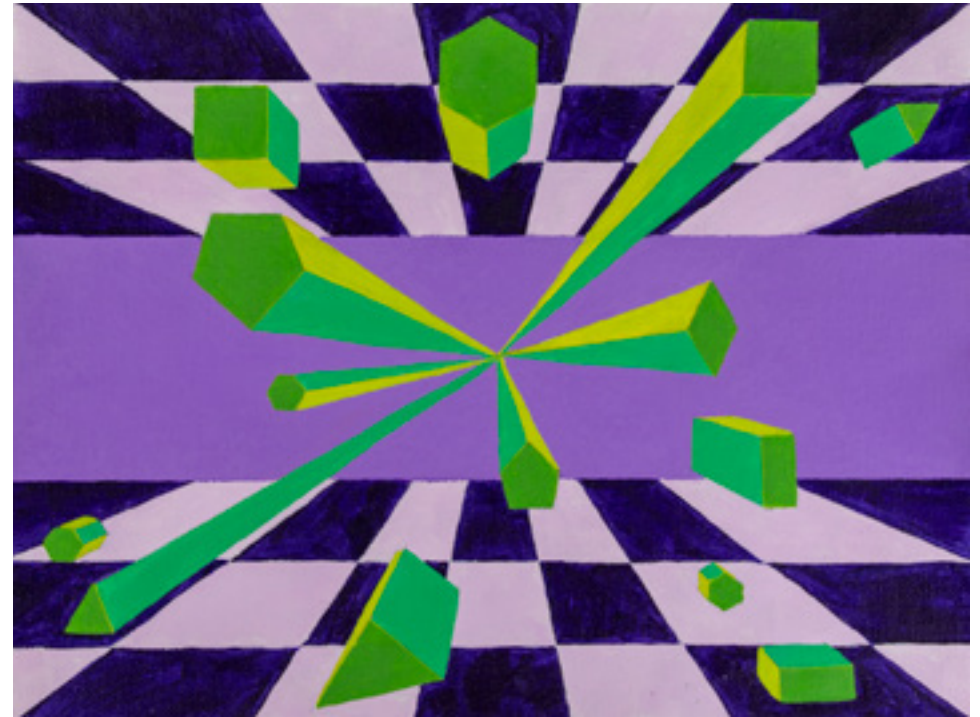
I long and strive to find out what once was lost.
 I know I could do it, but the question is "At what cost?"
 So I travel through snow, trying to find what was once known.
 The quest for answers always begins with a toss.

I will discover fossils among the frost-bitten flowers.
 Stand and watch all of the trees lose their power.
 I soon realize why geese fly south for the winter.
 Then I begin to see just how much the winter devoured.

Perspective Paintings

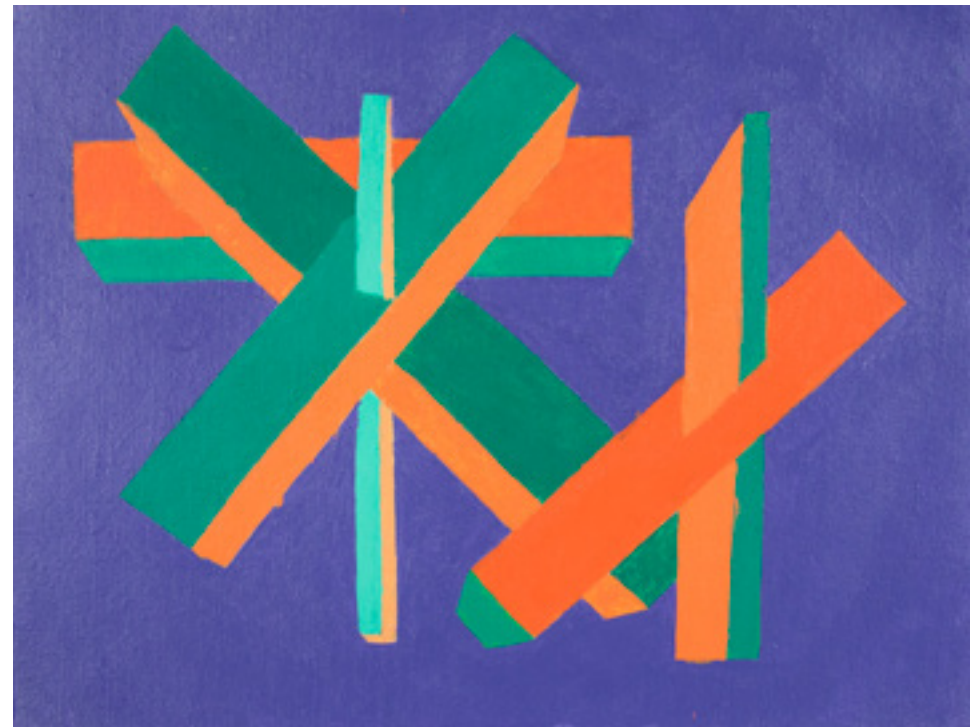


Brianna Soto



Above: Diamond Corion

Below: Hiromasa Tanaka





Above: Briana Hoskins **Below:** Xuaner Chen



Above: Momoko Oyama **Below:** Yuzuki Okamura



Landscape Paintings



Xuaner Chen



Above: Brianna Soto Below: Diamond Corion





Jai Lynn Evans



Briana Hoskins



Momoko Oyama

Fred's Affair

Theodore J. Cook

Introduction:

In my studies I'm constantly challenged to look at things from another perspective then I'm used to. This isn't in itself a bad thing. But something that may have me soul searching way too often. These journeys have had me look deep in myself and rethink my very foundation. This also would not be a bad thing, if more often than not I came up with a resounding truth to answer all of my questions.

One of these questions I've had as of late that I need to understand the full implications of is on relationships and the complexities of them. I have my own opinions about them, but I doubt that they are all true or as close to truth as they can be. So as always I explore these ideas through my writing.

To help me in this exploration is one of my favorite characters I've used before, Fred from 'Life's Philosophical Gym' published previously in Phaethon 2019 issue. It was revealed in that play he was involved in a relationship the other cast had no clue about. I always intended to go back to that play and expand on what I started there. So this works out perfectly to expand upon the mysteries of life via the relationships we have in it.

Unfortunately in writing this piece I came across a problem. I have my beginning and a clear ending in 'Life's Philosophical Gym', but I don't have my middle to this journey. Maybe it's because of my own lack of extensive experience in this area or a lack of comprehension, either way I believe that you can bridge the two far better than I could ever hope to blunder my way across the gap. If you ever have the chance to meet me though, please let me know what is in the middle of the two.

Regardless of anything else, I hope as always that you enjoy this work as much as I did writing it. It would, however, be great if in some small way it helped facilitate you along your own soul searching exploration. With all of that being said, as always; please sit back, relax, and above all else, enjoy.

Cast Fred's Affair

Cast
Fred
Tammy

Stage Setup [Living room/entrance]

A door on one side of the stage, an open doorway on the other side. A coat rack next to the door, a sofa, two chairs, a few photos hanging on the back of the stage, a coffee table with some magazines scattered around on top of it.

Act 1.1

On Stage: Tammy

[Tammy paces back and forth]

Tammy: I can't believe he's late again, especially today, of all days. To think that I cooked a perfect dinner for us. Now it's just sitting there ruined. I mean, can't he even call and let me know that he's going to be late. But, no, that would be too easy for Mr. I got something better to do then call your loving girlfriend, who is worried sick about you. God . . . that man. He's lucky that I love him.

[Tammy stacks up the magazines, then scatters them back around the table.]

He better not be off there, doing that again. He promised me that he wouldn't anymore.

[The Door opens, Fred enters]

Tammy: Well look who decided to come home finally. You like you're walking fine, and I don't see anything wrong with your arms. Maybe you hurt your hands . . . Well, did you?

Fred: What? My hands, they work fine. Come here and I'll show you.

Tammy: You think this is a joke, or you can sweet talk me. I made the perfect dinner for us; homemade mac+cheese, a nice pot roast, some steamed green beans, and for dessert I made a strawberry rhubarb pie with a kiwi – lime twist. I even lit some of those nice lavender candles, you like so much.

Fred: Wow! That sounds great. I'm absolutely famished. You are the best, and I'm not just saying that because of the food. I mean it, you are the best.

Tammy: I know I'm the best, who else would put up with your b.s.? But we're not done with this, yet. You've got some explaining to do, and I swear

to God, if you made that stop on the way home . . . I'm . . . I'm... oh, you don't want to know.

Fred: First off, honey, I'm sorry that I'm late. I know from the sounds of it you spent a long time in making dinner for us. I bet you even put that nice tablecloth down on the table, and those, all too cute, napkin holders.

Tammy: You know that I did.

Fred: Which makes my apology even more needed, especially because of what today is.

Tammy: You didn't forget.

Fred: Forget! How could I forget that day, of all days? Before I ever declared my love to you, I knew you were the one for me. Do you remember how I showed you my love?

Tammy: How could I ever forget, and because of that day I haven't torn your head off yet. But if you . . . well you know, continue.

Fred: Awashed in lavender fields I searched for a lily. To any it would've seemed silly, but I knew that I had to at least find one. With that one lily amongst, hundreds nay thousands of, other flower I would've shown you the value of my adoration I have towards you. This was no hurried notion. But a calculated gesture by me, for the lily is an other symbol of love. In that moment that I presented that lily to you, I declared my undying love to you. I might not have said it in words, but I said it first that day.

Tammy: Fred . . .

Fred: So for someone to do all of that, do you really think they are going to forget the importance of today?

Tammy: You keep talking like this, we might go straight to the dessert portion of the night.

Fred: Do you remember the day when I told you I love you for the first time?

Tammy: How could I forget that? It was at that little French bistro down the street. The one that, you know that I love so much.

Fred: You were wearing that nice strapless sunshine dress, the one that I love seeing you in. The sight of you in it blinded me, like I was really looking into the sun. You also were wearing the cutest pair of two inch heel shoes. What were they again . . . midnight black?

Tammy: Stop acting like you don't remember.

Fred: Oh, so they were. You also had those little Herkimer diamond stud earrings, I got you, on.

Tammy: That's how I knew, the whole I love you was coming up soon. Who else gets someone diamonds? Unless they love them.

Fred: For you I would pluck a diamond out of the sky, and forge it into anything you wanted. I would delve to the very last layers of the earth, so I could find the perfect one for you. Someone before said they would move the heavens and the stars for someone. For you, I would pluck them down. And when I ran out of them, I would take the nothingness left behind and still make something out of it for you.

Tammy: You are definitely giving it your all tonight. I haven't heard that poetic side of you in a while, don't let me stop you, carry on.

Fred: I didn't just simply come out and say I love you, no, that would be an injustice to the feelings I have for you. What I said to you, went something like this;

Without you, there is no dawn.
 With you, there is no dusk.
 You blaze a path to our future.
 A future in which you are paramount.
 You steal my breath away,
 but in doing so, you fill me with worth.
 You don't just complete me,
 You make me so much more.
 You are my everything, and for this,
 all I have to offer you, is my love.

I could've missed a word or two. Maybe even a line or so. You know how my memory is.

Tammy: That sounds about right, but I think you had a little bit more love and wonderment in your eyes and tone.

Fred: I assure you I have just as much love now, as I did then. More in fact. Every day that passes with you, makes me love you that much more. If you were my light then, now you are my life. I do not know how to exist without you. I was a fool to think I was living before I met you. I truly didn't know what that meant. Now I have no doubt, and I would never wish to go back. I love you more than anything else.

Tammy: Anything else?

Fred: Anything.

Tammy: Then why were you late? I know that you stopped at that park. What's her name again?

Fred: It's not like that. Without me seeing her, she doesn't eat. She doesn't even move around, or enjoy anything. I'm all she has. It's only a couple minutes a day, and I save a precious life. How could I deny her life, when you have shown it to me?

Tammy: Because I am your girlfriend! Your emotional attachment to her is a form of cheating on me. Not because of any affair or such nonsense, but because you put her before me.

[Tammy storms off the stage, through the doorway]

Fred: Man. I've gone and done it again, but I don't know what else to do? If I didn't value Gabby's life, then I wouldn't be worthy of her love.

[Fred sits down in the chair, stands back up]
 Finding Fate Fickle, I idealize ideology.
 Where we work, for fateless freedom.
 Free will fore fate, causing ceaseless chance.
 Downing Destiney's drama, bringing back brevity.

[Enter Tammy]

Tammy: What are you going on about?

Fred: I was just saying how much I was sorry, and I was trying to figure out how to express that fully to you.

Tammy: You could start by putting me first in your life. The way you did before I became your live-with girlfriend. Is that too much to ask?

Fred: No, my love, that isn't too much to ask. I was wrong to go behind your back and spend time with Gabby. I only did it because I was worried that she was going to die. But it wasn't only her life I was worried about, she's pregnant.

Tammy: It's not your responsibility. It's not like you're the father, so let nature take its course.

Fred: I know I'm not the father, but I can't help that I'm excited about the whole thing. How about we try you going with me again?

Tammy: You know that we don't get along, I think that she is jealous of me.

Fred: Of course, she's jealous of you, and she should be. You are my entirety, my everything. Without you, I would be lost.

Tammy: Yeah, Yeah, Yeah, and with you I'm found. You're still failing to see my point.

Fred: I'm not forgetting the point of the argument, but-

Tammy: Argument! You want to see an argument, I'll give you one. How about we go back to why I spent all that time cooking. When you know I have no time to spare, since I have a deadline coming up for my next manuscript. Or have you forgotten how important that is to me? Or have you forgotten that with the money from it, we can finally buy our dream home? I say our; not mine, not yours, not Gabby's, but ours. I always say ours, but you didn't think about that did you?

[Fred pulls a slender box out of his pocket, and hands it to Tammy]

Fred: There is no ours. We are the same being. There is no end to one of us, before the start of the next begins. When I say I, I mean you. When I say you, I mean me. There is no pronoun that fits what I consider us. When I say you make me more than myself; I mean that with the addition of you to me, we have transcended what has been known

before. Oh, and I know what today is. Happy anniversary of the day we met.

[Tammy opens up the box, and pulls out a Herkimer diamond necklace.]

Tammy: It's . . . It's beautiful. Don't start thinking all is forgiven, but your back on the right path. I suppose we can talk about this Gabby predicament, some more. I know how much she means to you, and that is one of the reasons I fell for you.

Fred: After I finish work at the gym tomorrow, how about I pick you up and we go visit Gabby? I'm sure looming motherhood is going to calm her down, some. We can even bring some of her favorite peanut butter. If you give her some of that, you'll have her eating right out of your hands. After that it's all downhill.

Tammy: I can't believe I'm agreeing to this, but tomorrow I'll go with you to feed your squirrel. Now let's go have dessert.

[Tammy and Fred exit through doorway]

[End Scene]

Winter's Rose

Theodore J. Cook

Introduction

Recently I was introduced to the concept of a walking marriage that is practiced by people of Mosuo, in Southwestern China. I can't say that it shocked my sensibilities, but it did have me look at my beliefs on relationships.

I've never been married. On the other hand, I've been in love, or at least what I perceived as in love. But if I've learned anything throughout my life, my ideas are not the only way others view something. I might try to persuade others more toward my line of reasoning on some things, but in the case of love I find myself not able to do so. Simply put, love ought to be left for each or us to define for ourselves. I'm not opposed to be the romanticizing of it, but I don't delude myself in thinking that is the only version of it.

As always, for my quest of a better understanding of something I turn toward others' writings, and my own exploration of the subject. None of the writings I turned to summed up the full meaning of love for me. William Shakespeare covers different aspects of it throughout his plays that resonate deep inside me, but don't quite cover the full gambit of my feelings. Nora Roberts, Janet Evanovich, or a lot of other writers; hit or hint at an aspect of love that I hold, but fail to fully capture the entire complex view of it.

So I decided to share that piece of me in my latest play. In the play that follows I have put my feelings of love for all to view, and hope that at least a part of it resonates with you. I have bled my feelings on the following pages, much in the same way we would when we speak with our heart to the one or ones we love. I held nothing back, but I did try to include others' ideas and notions, also, inside my work. I won't bore you with all of the technical; symbolism, numerology, interpretation of the double or triple speak employed in lines, the stuff said or not said in between lines, or any other devices I used to try and help put aspects of your view of love, amid mine. I just hope that it works, and you find a piece of yourself also reflected in my play. As always; please sit back, relax, and above all else, enjoy.

Cast:

Winter's Rose

Name / Witch Coven Name

Rose / Temptress

Nightshade / Hag

Belladonna / Harpy

Lotus / Nymph

Venus / Siren

Winter

Summer

Father Bob

*Note: when I place a sentence inside “ ” it is for a sing song voice.

*Note: when I place text inside ‘ ’ it is for a bible verse.

Act I

Act 1.1

(Begin scene: nighttime, clearing amidst woods, faint moonlight washes down from above, a cauldron sits on a fire with a large ladle poking out of it)

(On stage: Harpy, Hag, Nymph, Siren, Temptress)

Harpy: Forget the man, we have work to do this night.

Hag: Yes, Temptress, there is more pressing concerns for us, my deary. If you want your auntie Hag will make you a love potion. How does that sound now, my deary? Now get back to the circle.

Nymph: Oh! This is all about that Winter fellow. He is quite a morsel. I'd be pleased to put the whammy on him for you Temptress.

Temptress: I...just stop...I've got this, I'm just a bit confused about his signals that's all. I'll focus on our work. I just need a second without all of you cackling in my ears.

Siren: "You've got it bad, you've got it bad. Oh...ah...oh and ah... You've got it so bad, sooo very, very bad." (cackling laughter)

Nymph: Siren, I'm sure Temptress is just fine, and will be more than willing to share all her tender bits later.

Hag: Miscreants, Demon Spawn, Mistresses of the Mystical; to work with all of you, I say, before the lot of you wind up in my stewpot.

(The witches gather around their brew, a chanting ensues then a puff of smoke and a flash of light, finally darkness)

(End Scene)

Act 1.2

(morning time, wooded area)

(On stage: Winter)

Winter: Why? Oh why does my heart not align with my body's baser urges? Why must I endure, just to be doomed to fail countless times over? I beseech any to answer this...any who may be listening...just to answer this for me. Why? Why is this the sentence of my existence? The epitome of the toils I must face through this long unnatural incarnation. Why...why...why? What have I done to deserve this torture? This...burning and devouring of myself! Doomed to carry on, but in turn longing to do just that. Torn between my heart and the fate I've been dealt. Why?

(End Scene)

Act 1.3

(A path leads to the back of the stage where they all sit on porch swings)

(On stage: Rose, Belladonna, Lotus, Venus, Nightshade)

Rose: I'm nervous. Winter is going to be here anytime.

Nightshade: Deary, don't you go being nervous, you'll be fine. It's not the first time you've faced Winter. I'm sure you'll weather it just fine. Now simmer down my Deary.

Venus: "Like the seasons...cha...cha...changing, so are the fickle emotions of two young lovers." (laughter)

Belladonna: Stop your teasing, Venus. I find this all to be delectably entertaining and we should encourage the budding of it.

Lotus: Rose, just be yourself. If you're being yourself I'm sure he won't be able to resist the temptation. I never have any problems enchanting Summer. I just act like my wonderful and enchanting self.

Nightshade: Lotus!

Lotus: Well, I am wonderful and enchanting. There hasn't ever been any man

that would deny that.

Nightshade: Lotus!

Lotus: Sorry. I'm just trying to help moonstruck Rose. Why don't you yell at the others?

Nightshade: Because you, my dear, are the most notorious troublemaker I know, and I'm the closest thing to a mother you all have present.

Venus: "Coming down the lane, all dressed so plain, is your claim."

(laughter)

(Enter Winter, Rose meets him partway)

Winter: My dearest Rose, how I've not been the same since I was last in your presence. Why do we have to be away from each other these all too long hours?

Rose: I've heard that with absence, or is it abstinence, that the heart grows fonder.

Winter: Oh, is that what you've heard? Here I thought you always want me around, but I find that you only want me to go away.

Rose: Only so we may see each other again and know that moment where our hearts flutter, our stomachs drop to our toes, and our breath is stolen from our very lips.

(a kiss)

Winter: Waiting to inhale, breath caught on my lips from the lingering wisps of your kiss.
Drunk on the remembrance of the passion that filled this vessel. From the brief flash of your presence.
Stuck on a moment of pleasure -

(another quick kiss)

...only to be woken by a new one.

Graced by a glancing of your lips, I stand before you a humble man.
Yearning to be more so I might taste your lips anew.

(another quick kiss)

Oh! Am I so humble! The most humble but deserving man there is.
Lucky to know the flavor of your lips even if only for the briefest of times.

(Enter Father Bob)

Father Bob: The birds are truly singing this day, but I hope that I will not hear the buzzing of bees.

Winter & Rose: Father Bob!

Father Bob: Ah...young love in all of its exuberant outbursts.

Rose: Father Bob, what do you know of love?

Father Bob: I know about the best love of all.

Rose: (giggling)

I'm sure you're talking about God, but that's not what I'm talking about, Father.

Father Bob: Oh, I don't know if that's the case. I Corinthians 13:1-2 says 'If I were to speak with the combined eloquence of men and angels I should stir men like a fanfare of trumpets, but unless I had love, I should do nothing more. If I had the gift of foretelling the future and had in my mind not only all human knowledge but the secrets of God, and if, in addition, I had that absolute faith which can move mountains, but had no love, I tell you I should amount to nothing at all.

Winter: I recognize the verses, Father Bob, but a quote is not necessarily having the heart speak for itself.

Father Bob: There is no one who is all knowing, all powerful, or perfect as you. Yet, my love for you is not for this. My love for you is for your all knowing, powerful, and perfect love for me. Without this I'm nothing, and with this I'm everything that you knew me to be. I'm blessed to feel even a bit of this truth. For, I know that you feel all

of it and with this knowing I've become a hundredfold blessed.
 Because of this I now know a new meaning of love which will carry
 this cycle further on through to an even newer one.
 One where I love not just solely you, but the entirety of your vast all
 encompassing existence. For this, we all are blessed in your never
 ending love.
 The cycle continues and carries on through. From me to you, and
 from you to you. The cycle continues, the circle grows; we continue,
 we grow, we know, love in its most everlasting all encompassing
 existence.
 For this, there is no amount to describe how blessed.

- Winter: I wish I could have half the words that you speak with but one
 utterance.
- Father Bob: Remember 'love...is, in fact, the one thing that still stands when all
 else has fallen.' Corinthians 13:8. With that I will leave you, and I'll
 meander my way over to the brood over there yonder on those
 swinging peace finders.
- Rose & Winter: See you again soon Father.
- Rose: Now (giggling) where, where we my most faithful lip devotee?
 Hmm?
- Winter: Alas, my dearest, most lovely Rose, but I must be going also.
- Rose: But you've only just arrived, and now you leave faster than a flash
 shower.
- Winter: Water streaming down to kiss the ground. Breaking a barrier, a great
 divide. Joining the earth to the sky. Connecting the two but for a
 moment. Yet, destined to meet again and again throughout time.
 Washing away past meetings. Eroding bad unions to form a perfectly
 synced dance of life. Rising gloriously to a crescendo. Pounding an
 unique rhythm that can be imitated. Yet, never copied the same way.
 Each meeting bringing new meaning to the bridging of the two.
 Intertwining the fate of one to the next, and when they finally
 separate again, they each know that the other is but a fraction of a
 drop away. Destined to connect once again.
- Rose: Surging and receding in a dance. Without one, there is no other. Yet,

the delicate balance is but a miracle. One wrong turn or twist will
 destroy the equilibrium of the whole.
 Each twirl must be precise and in sync with the next. Every dip or
 spin must be timed with the utmost concern. Every step a test to the
 very nature of its structure.
 No time for timidity of arrogance. Only enough time for the pure raw
 execution of its most graceful flow.
 Ever forward; arching and turning, twisting and spinning, streaming
 and flowing.
 Ever behind; swirls and twirls, dips and slips, hops and bops.
 Without one the whole must stop, ceasing the elemental complexity
 of the two. Waiting for the next time the two can be combined
 mixing anew, refreshing and pure, uniquely joined to thrive together
 throughout existence's times.

(End Scene)

Act 1.4

(Dusk, wooded area)

(On stage: Winter)

- Winter: Alone! So alone...the nature of the beast roars and bucks against the
 constraint of another.
 Yet, my heart yearns for the comfort of a loving embrace, but my
 other self lashes out. Why must my being and self war with each
 other? Leaving me tear streaked and broken. What must I do to be
 released and the trinity of my essence come into balance?
 How I long to be like others, so carefree and secure in their space. No
 war within hinted at, not even a trace. But that is not my lot. Torn,
 shredded, scarred; I will thus be marred, over and over again.
 Yet, I'm driven to continue to fulfill that yearning that my heart so
 needs. My mind says it will never come to be, but my heart screams
 that it is a lie. Oh! The truth is self evident, but I need to believe that
 it's not fixed.
 For this I go on telling what I know is a lie. Which mustn't be one, for
 the sake of not just one, but for the sake of all.

(Enter Summer)

- Summer: Winter? It's not often that the two of us meet.

Winter: You can't be here right now. What are you even doing out in the middle of nowhere?

Summer: I could ask you the same, but I don't have the time to chit chat. I'm going to meet my most enticing Lotus somewhere around here.

Winter: Why...never mind. You and Lotus need to get away from here quickly.

Summer: Calm down man. I'm sure Lotus has plans for us other than traipsing around a moonlit forest; although, that really doesn't sound too bad to do with her.

Winter: It's already too late. I'm really sorry for what's going to happen right now, but I tried to warn you.

(Stage goes dark, the curtain closes)
 (A howl echoes)
 (End Scene)

Act II

Act 2.1

(Porch swings: onstage Rose, Belladonna, Venus, Nightshade)

Rose: I had the strangest feeling last night. Almost like I was missing some thing important...and woefully wrong.

Venus: "A portent, an omen, a telling...these are the names of visions we see...and see...these are the visions we see..." (laughter)

Belladonna: A telling portent of an omen. A triplex of seeing, this is a rare thing indeed. Please go on and don't leave a thing out.

Nightshade: For once, I will encourage you, my dearies, to carry on. This be a truly powerful thing you experienced, my deary.

Rose: Well, I feel like, something happened, and Winter was present. But,

that can't be, Winter doesn't like being out at night. He says, that's the time for beasts and devilry, and isn't the time for someone as sweet as me, to be out in. Me? Funny, now that I think of it. He turned the conversation to me. In fact, he went so far as to beg me to not go out. I didn't think anything of it before, but do you think Winter is visiting someone else?

Venus: "My cheating...boyfriend...is breaking my heart. Woe is me...woe is me...for him to be cheating on me."

Belladonna: No woe is him, Venus, for we will take care of Winter's cold treachery. Poison, maybe, or should it be fire? Either way, he'll taste a dose of my wrath.

Rose: Calm down, Belladonna, I'm sure that I'm chasing false conclusions.

Venus: "A story...may be gory...or it could be...about glory. But in the end...we can not pretend...we must...not trust...a half of a tale... unless we wish not to unveil...a liar's tale!"

Nightshade: Let me talk to this Winter, my deary. I'll have him spilling every detail of his tale, or I'll pull his fangs for you. Either way, my deary, he'll be trained afterwards.

Rose: (giggling) Oh; I love all of you, insufferable vexing meddlers. I'm sure it's nothing though.

(Enter Lotus and Summer)

Lotus: Rose, I have some bad news for you. Summer was waylaid last night on his way to meet me.

Rose: Oh, no. I'm sorry to hear that Summer. How are you feeling? You don't look the worse for wear. In fact you're looking pretty vibrant. Still, I don't know why you directed that at me, Lotus. I didn't do it.

Summer: It...it...it was Winter that waylaid me. It was...like a beast was... was...ravenously trying to devour me. I've never felt like that before. I...I...I'm just so... confused?

Rose: What are you talking about Summer? What do you mean like a beast? Confused? Was it Winter or wasn't it? Did he waylay you, or didn't

he?

Belladonna: The triplex of seeing is never wrong. I told you not to trust that dog.

Summer: Dog? That's it, Winter was like a wild dog. He bit me all over. I still feel his teeth and tongue, tracing all along me, stitching a tattoo of marks. Like he was making me his last meal, or most tasty one.

Rose: I don't see any bite marks? In fact, all I see appears to be a hickey on your neck. I hope that is from Lotus, and you're not saying Winter left that?

Lotus: Wasn't me, but it is a nice one. You're not stepping out on me are you, honey?

Summer: This was a bite mark earlier, I swear. I had more, but they're all gone now. I just don't know what is going on anymore. Just never mind I said anything. I'm sure it was all...a big mistake, and it will never happen again.

Venus: "First one, then two...it's all true...it's all true...first there's one, then there's two...it's all true."

Belladonna: Lotus, I can take care of Summer for you, right after I've left Winter behind us.

Nightshade: My dearies, leave these pups to your auntie nightshade.

All: Incomprehensible bickering

(End Scene)

Act 2.2

(Porch swings: Onstage Rose)

(Enter Winter)

Winter: My dearest, oh, have I missed you. It seems like it's been days since I've kissed you. Such pain, I go through when we part. You are truly the entirety of my heart. The nights are so long; without hearing your voice, which is like a heavenly song. I hate the times when you are not at my side. At those times it feels as if the world, breaks over me

like one continuous tide. You are the glue that keeps my heart, from breaking apart. I've known this, from the very start. And those lips ---

Rose: Lips! Only lies come from yours. Every breath, makes way for the next push forth. Every syllable that breaks the barrier, is steeped in filth. A putrescent most vile, lies behind that silken tongue of yours. Waiting to spew its corruption, upon the air. Once I thought you so fair. I laid my heart and soul bare, but you've broken it without care. Oh, you've got plenty of flair. That I can admit, without splitting any hair. Coming around, sneaking kisses from me, and talking about how humble you are. I'm sure when you are afar, you're nothing but a braggart. Lies, all from the start. You've sure perfected that art. Love struck fool that I be, falling for your act. But all along it was part of your refined tact. No more, will I go along with your honey tongue spun smack.

Winter: I don't understand, my dearest, what lies do you speak of?

Rose: Oh, you understand quite well. I know all about what you did to Summer.

Winter: Rose, please understand, I'm cursed with primal urges that I can't control. I tried to warn Summer, but it was too late. Rose, you have to believe me, I truly am sorry.

(Rose turns her back on Winter)

Winter: My dearest, most beloved, and only; why do you ignore me so? I stand before you with my heart laid bare, at your feet. But instead of accepting it, you stomp upon it. Oh, I've wronged you, that I'm sure, but not for anything I wish you to have to endure. I've only omitted one facet of the whole. Not because, I wish to deceive. But because, I thought it would cause you to leave. Without you, I'm better off in a hole. I know this must sound so droll. Coming from one, who, you must view now to be a troll. I've should've come clean from the very start, but I never knew, that you would become the entirety of my heart.

Rose: Your words caress my ears, like a butterfly's wings tickle a leaf.

(End Scene)

Act 2.3

(Porch swings: onstage Rose)
(Enter Father Bob)

Father Bob: Rose, where has Winter gone?

Rose: I don't know, and I don't care. I've put Winter behind me.

Father Bob: Whatever for?

Rose: Winter waylaid Summer, said he couldn't control his primal urges. What sort of monster do I love...I mean used to love?

Father Bob: I Corinthians 13:8 says, 'Love...is in fact the one thing that still stands when all else has fallen.'

Rose: Well, Winter surely has fallen.

Father Bob: Rose, I will rid this curse that consumes your love. God has commanded me, and guides me in this course.

(Father Bob pulls out a silver cross)

Rose: Father Bob, what are you going to do with that?

Father Bob: Darkness lies in wait. Waiting to emerge, so it may propagate. To spread its tendrils amongst the good and pure. There can be only one final cure. It must be made to submit. Before God one must admit, the sins we wish to omit. Evil will not give up without a fight. That is man's truly greatest plight. But with faith, we are graced with the power to overcome. So this fight was over, before it has even begun. In God's name I will smite, this abominable demon. Before it finishes its scheming. I now bid you adieu, and remember, in God, you will always stay true.

(End Scene)

Act 2.4

(Inside wooded area, dusk
(Summer on stage)

Summer : The cold burns and encapsulates the entirety of existence. Burns to the point of a frostbitten digit, before its death. Burns like an inferno, which holds this form inside its own purgatory.

The pain is exquisite that courses through these veins. Waking an ember of destructive need. Ripping asunder the body trying to contain it. Eating through and consuming the host. Ruin washing away the tears of desire. Bringing the body back to a primal state. Unleashing the base instinct of survival. Primal rage, destructive urges; diabolical all-consuming pain. Most glorious all consuming, unstoppable, infallible, depthless, anguish; awash in its destructive beauty, I strain against my constraints.

(Summer exits)

(Enter Winter)

Winter: Now I'm truly alone; broken, deserted, without a home. Once, I had hope to settle down, and no longer roam. But that was destined not to last, since I can't outdistance my past. It remains always, with its sinister shadow cast. My hope wasn't even tempered, but quelled in the very last ember. I tremble and shake to think about what could've been, but now I would be better served not to remember. To not remember, the all-enveloping passion, that you bestowed upon me. But how do I throw away that love you gave me? How? And how do I, just forget the love I have for you? That is something, I don't think, I can do. But if I'm to move on, that is exactly what I must do. But I feel like I can't even breathe without you. I choke, even while I speak. It is like, my heart has sprung a leak. The very will, to survive, flees this mortal coil. Maybe it's time, to take that long nap, in the soil.

(Winter exits)

(Enter Father Bob)

Father Bob: Demon! Show yourself, this I command in my Lord's name. You

shall not infest, that body of a just man. I command you show yourself, and be out of God's child. In God Almighty's name, I command you, show yourself and be out. You shall not inherit that earthly body, nor that man's immortal coil. Begone, from this world, demon spawn. I abjure thee, in the name of God!

(Stage goes dark, curtain closes)

(A wolf howls)

(End Scene)

Act 2.5

(Nighttime, clearing amongst woods, cauldron w/ ladle sits on a fire)

(Onstage: Harpy, Hag, Nymph, Temptress, Siren)

Hag: Eye of newt, sprig of ageratum, pinch of zinnia, and from my hands, a petunia's blossom. Now each of you, place your component.

Siren: "From my prize...a once buzzing fly..." (giggle)

Nymph: Out of legend, a slice of contentment, from this fruit we now behold.

Harpy: From my lips, come the roots of atropine.

Temptress: From my heart, bursts the thorn lodged there.

Hag: With these substances, we now mix, Winter's fate.

All: "Alea jac*ta est, toto coe*lo, the die is cast, by the whole extent of the heavens, alea jac*ta est, toto coe*lo."

(A puff of smoke)

Hag: Hate or love will decide. Whether it be death or cure, indeed, my deary.

(Hag takes some liquid out, puts it in a vial, hands it to Temptress)

Temptress: By who's love, his or mine?

Hag: Why by both, my deary, for with one must be another to form this covenant. Now away with you, my deary, we will clean up.

(Temptress exits)

Siren: "Seasons mix with woe...there was two...now there be one...an omen was met...seasons mix with woe..." (hiccup)

Nymph: I project my heart to you, for you, and with you. It may not seem to be much for some, but I hope that it'll be all you need. I'm sorry I could not do more.

(End Scene)

Act III

Act 3.1

(Inside wooded area, dawn)

(Onstage: Father Bob)

Father Bob: With the morning's light, comes the awakening of the senses. Burning away the night's haunting imagery, in all of its macabre shadowing. Mournful duties await before me as well as behind. My heart weighs heavily. With dreams unrealized, nor dreamt, by one of so noble spirit. All I can do is fulfill my vows, and leave the rest to the Lord.

(Enter Rose)

Rose: Father Bob? Are you all right?

Father Bob: No child, I'm not, but I will be. It was a costly fight. One in which, I knew, I would win, but not the cost, such a victory would hold.

Rose: Winter...

Father Bob: I've failed to save the man, before the demon took him over. But awash in God's light, I was able to free his immortal coil. It was a close one, for sure, but by God's grace I was able to overcome the infernal thing. Now I must prepare and consecrate his entombment. He deserves the best, for his eternal rest. Before, he passed with his

Rose: very last breath, he spoke of his final wishes.
What did he say?

Father Bob: He said that to spend one more moment with his love, he would walk through a hundred forests full of wolves. He said, (sob), that he was not half the man he was, without her love. He said (sob), he forgives Winter, and prays that he may be cured.

Rose: Oh, Father Bob, I had feared that you spoke of Winter, but now I feel guilty, for being relieved, that you were talking about Summer.

Father Bob: I'm sorry that I put you through that scare. I spoke before I thought, but that does remind me that I still must face Winter.

Rose: Please, Father Bob, let me find him and take care of this.

Father Bob: Rose. You, by yourself, can't face this challenge.

Rose: But, Father Bob, weren't you the one who told me 'Love...is in fact the one thing that still stands when all else has fallen.' So, as long as I have love, I'm never truly alone.

Father Bob: I didn't mean that you were alone in this, Rose. The Lord is always there, more so in our most trying times. But you must allow God to work through, and with you in this. Here take this with you.

(Father Bob holds out the silver cross, Rose takes it)

Rose: Than you, Father Bob, I will find Winter. Please find Lotus, and let her know about Summer. Also tell her...oh, tell her I'll be there as soon as I can, and I'm sorry.

Father Bob: I'll let Lotus know, that was never in doubt, but will you do what needs to be done for Winter? That is the true question. Love may stand when all else has fallen, but it can also blind us from seeing everything else falling.

(End Scene)

Act 3.2

(Porch swings: no one on stage)

(Enter Rose from one side, Winter from the other)

Rose: Winter.

Winter: Rose.

Rose: I've finally found you. I was so worried about you. Where were you? Are you alright? Can you forgive me?

Winter: Rose, I'm better now that I'm with you. I was in the woods, and, I must admit, I had given up all hope. I gave into my urges. I'm sorry I didn't profess my curse, as I did my love, but I feared without a cure you would never accept my entirety of desires. I feared that you wouldn't even miss me.

Rose: How can you say that? My dearest, most beloved, and only; how have I missed you so. I stand before you, and it's like my eyes have a treat. My heart skips a beat. I can't stand it, how I've wronged you. But not for anything that doesn't have a cure. I know this with my very soul. If you're only willing to receive the very cure, in which I believe? Without it you will never be whole. It shall take a steep toll, but I know it will give back your control. I should've listened to you from the start, but I felt like you broke my heart.

Winter: Heart. Oh, my aching heart, breaks with the remembrance of our last parting. Words were spoken with such heated passion. Thrown about like a dart. Sure to hit the target, more than miss the mark. Oh, I wish to go back, and ignite that spark. But, alas, we were through, if what you had said was true. Now you bless me with a chance to rekindle our romance. I would be a fool to deny anything I may try to have this chance. Give me poison or a cure, whichever you choose, but please just give me you. I wish never again to stay away from you. You are my greatest love, and nothing I've ever spoken, has been more true.

Rose: I would have it be cure.

(Rose takes a vial out, hands it to Winter)

Winter: I will allow this cure to touch my lips, like you touch them, only because you have handed it to me.

(Winter brings the vial to his lips)

I only swallow this concoction, because your love burns throughout it. Surely, this must cure, the incurable, since its flavor is so poignant. I have felt my being wreathed in flame before, but never so fiercely have I felt it burn. What...oh...

(Winter crumples to the stage. Rose falls down next to him.)

Rose: Winter? Winter...as my love is judged, my fear is realized.

(Stage goes dark, curtain closes)
(Anguished cry rings out)
(End Scene)

Act 3.3

(Inside wooded area, dim lighting)

(On stage: Rose)

Rose: The moon whispered to you its secret and desires. I do not blame you for succumbing to its mystical wiles. But I had dreamt for us more, than some primal urge that you had no choice but to heed. I would have you walk in the sun, a free man from your nightly shackles, able to spend the days without worrying about the night. How else would you be able to lose yourself in the moment? Your passion was imprisoned by the curse you bore. Imagine what should've been between us. If sparks flew in such a manner that the very air crackled, with our shared yearnings; then without the chain attached to you, what sort of frictional fire would've erupted? And now...now I find that my love was also an equal fetter holding us back, from what should've been. I thought there was nothing stronger than my love for you, but when it was tested, it was found to be flimsier than the tissue I need to dry my eyes. I do not know how I could love you more. Without you I feel like there is no me. To say I'm despondent without you is an understatement paramount to saying I could go on living without the blood in these very veins of mine. To watch them pulse, is a betrayal to you, which soon shall be righted.

(Enter Lotus)

Lotus: Rose. By your face I can tell you have lost Winter, as I have Summer. My heart aches for you, as much as it does for him. I truly do not know how we will handle this.

Rose: I think I know of a way. It'll just take an athame.

Lotus: It would be impossible to fix this with a spell. We can work wonders sometimes, but this would require a miracle beyond our scope of performing.

Rose: This is not beyond our power. We can cure this ill with our very hands, if we choose to do so.

Lotus: How?

Rose: We can join our loves in their eternal rest. To keep them company for the rest of time. Why wait to be reunited? When the power is in our grasp?

Lotus: Rose, I'm devastated by what's happened, but this is not what they would want us to do. It's going to be hard going on, but together we have the power to do so. Please rethink your rash decision.

Rose: I'm sorry Lotus, but I can't live without Winter. I can't see a single day passing without him being with me. To go on without him, would be a betrayal to the love I have for him. Death can't do us part, so nothing shall come between our love.

Lotus: Rose, please listen to me. Winter would not want you to do this. I can prove it to you, if you'll let me.

Rose: How would you know what Winter would or wouldn't want? And how could you prove it?

Lotus: I heard Hag once say that she could split the veil, and commune with the other side. Let me go get her and the others, and if we fail, then... well, we'll talk about a then if we fail. I'm sure we can do this.

Rose: Okay. I'll give it a chance. I'll meet you in our usual spot. I just need to get my head on straight. I'm sure you're right, and I'm just being

rash. Thank you, Lotus. I love you and the others.

152 Phaethon 2020 Lotus: You'll see. We'll be there as fast as I can drag them there, and I, as well as the others, love you so much, my sister.

(Exit Lotus)

Rose: Lotus, my sister, I'm sorry to have deceived you so; but I see your love of Summer pales in comparison to mine of Winter. You may be able to go on fooling yourself in believing that Summer will be fine without your presence, but I know that Winter will not be without mine. For his love for me, was one made from a fairy tale.

(End Scene)

Act 3.4

(Dusk, clearing amongst woods, cauldron no fire)

(On stage: Rose, in her hands an athame)

Rose: Soon, my love, we will be together again. Nothing may keep us apart. Forces have worked against us, since the start, but our love shall overcome. Nothing has true strength unless it's been tested. Our love has gone through fire, and was shaped by a crucible of our desire.

(Rose crumples to the ground)

(Cauldron emits a puff of smoke, stage goes dark)

(Dusk returns to the clearing, Winter stands there)

Winter: Rose. My beloved what have you done? Please tell me you haven't casted away your precious life because of me. Ten of me is not equal to one of you. I was worth a tear or two from your eyes, but not a drop of blood from your veins. To spill such for a wretch like me, is like draining the Fountain of Youth to make grass grow in the desert. I didn't wish this from you. For me to lay my life down for you would be like breathing for me; something that is done without thought, and instinctual in its nature. But for you to do the same, would deny the life I wish for you to keep and value above all others. I know I'm being hypercritical, but I can't help how I feel.

(Cauldron emits a puff of smoke, stage goes dark)

(Dusk returns, Rose is standing next to Winter)

Winter: Rose, why?

Rose: I'm sorry my love, but I couldn't be without you. You are my everything, and more. Life is but a reflection of a shadow, without you to add your vibrancy to it. How could I conceive of going on, without my heart firmly in place? That would be equivalent to the Earth going on without its atmosphere.

Winter: I can understand trying to go on without one's heart, since I had to endure more than a dual nature before. But because of your love and cure, I'm whole for once in my life. The trinity of my being is in sync, and at one with you, my love. Truly this has been a sad day, but happier one has never been known. The heavens weep at our feet, and angels dance with joyous exuberance at our uniting. Never has a love burned so bright, as to part the very night; like a lighthouse through a foggy mist, casted through an embattled sea.

Rose: Words are no longer needed, with our hearts merged as one. We waste the shape of our lips on these consonants and vowels.

(A kiss)

(A loud explosion from the cauldron)

(END)

Alternate ending starts at Act 3.3

Act 3.3

(Inside wooded area, dim lighting)

(On stage: Rose)

Rose: The moon whispered to you its secrets and desires. I do not blame you for succumbing to its mystical wiles. But I had dreamt for us more, than some primal urge that you had no choice but to heed. I would have you walk in the sun, a free man from your nightly shackles, able to spend the days without worrying about the night. How else would you be able to lose yourself in the moment? Your passion was imprisoned by the curse you bore. Imagine what should've been between us. If sparks flew in such a manner that the very air crackled, with our shared yearnings; then without the chain attached to you, what sort of frictional fire would've erupted? And now...now I find that my love was also an equal fetter holding

us back, from what should've been. I thought there was nothing stronger than my love for you. But when it was tested, it was found to be flimsier than the tissue I need to dry my eyes. I do not know how I could love you more. Without you I feel like there is no me. To say I'm despondent without you is an understatement, paramount to saying I could go on living without the blood in these very veins of mine.

(Rose pulls forth the silver cross)

Could you have taken winter, as you did summer? Have I been misguided or tricked? Does someone or something plot against my love? I have questions by bottomless bounds, but no answers. Surely this must be a nightmare, and not reality forcing its harsh truths on me. To think that this will be the finish to mine and Winter's story, would be like Sleeping Beauty deserved to stay asleep forever after. My Prince Charming was robbed from me by some sinister twist of cruelty, not for the lack of strength in our love.

(Rose drops the silver cross)

Where I go, I go alone. I wished for cure, but they burned with a silver fire. One within and one without, but consumed, all the same, by a righteous cleansing. To think I would've turned my back on everything for Winter's sake, but the cure was not enough to keep him with me. I have need of my athame. With it I will make all of this right, and unite us once again. For where Winter is, there will be Rose, and where a Rose stands, Winter will be present. This I will do by decree, and soon by deed.

(Exit Rose)

(Enter Winter)

Winter: Rose? Rose I know you were here. I can tell by how my heart skips and flutters. I can tell by how the air crackles with tension, from our pheromones meeting. Yes, you were here, but where are you going to? I know that you must be in intense pain, believing me to be gone to the other side. But death could not keep me from your side. I would split the veil to be with you. I would run across the surface of the river Styx, to come back to you. My time for judgement can wait, until you can be with me for that date. Until then, I vow to be your Winter, to my Rose.

What's this?

(Winter bends down towards the silver cross)

Why would this be here? It reminds me of Father Bob. I wonder if he dropped it, or if another has done so? Mayhap on purpose?

(Winter straightens back up, leaving the silver cross)

I don't have time for this intriguing mystery. I must be away to my loves side, because that is where I wish to reside.

(Exit Winter)

(Enter Lotus)

Lotus: Summer is gone from this place. Moved on to a new destination. Ushered there by Father Bob, and a holy glare. It just doesn't seem to be fair. Why was he taken so? If we could make a remedy for Winter, why not Summer? Was it not Winter that overcame Summer, and changed the temperament of both? But Summer was the one to be consumed by fire, that was all so dire. What's this?

(Lotus bends over, and picks up the silver cross)

A cutting tool has never been so sharp as this. For this surely has cut me to my very soul, and beyond. In one wielding of this, two fell to its righteous bite, and now I find it in my hands. Does that mean that it now serves me? Can I wield its power, to carve a new reality? Or might it be employed for more than its harsh cleavings? Might I, like a doctor, use something so cutting to heal instead? Is this the answer to my lack of Summer? How ironic would it be to use the tool that took him, to heal the void he left in his passing. But if I wield this, would I betray everything that I was before? Would I change in my sisters' eyes? And if so, for better or worse? All I have is questions, but what I need is immediate answers. I believe I know where I may find what I'm seeking.

(Exit Lotus)

(End scene)

Act 3.4

(Dusk, clearing amongst woods, cauldron on a fire)

(On stage: Temptress/Rose, in her hands an athame)

Temptress: With these drops of me, I have fed to you, I summon the power held within. "A grands frais ad vi*vum, et hoc genus omne; ex*i*tus ac*ta pro*bat." (Translation: To the life at great expense, and everything of this kind; outcome justifies the deed).
(The cauldron emits a puff of smoke)
I would ask the great beyond to give back the one who belongs by my side. I'm willing to pay any toll, for this mighty boon. But please allow it to be soon, before I decide to join the great divide. This I extol in all the powers to be, I so plea.

(Enter Winter)

Winter: Rose, my dearest, my beloved; I've found you at last. I've searched what seemed an endless night to reach your side, but returned it I have.

Rose: Oh, my Winter, you've blown in here like a gale tickling my heart's chord. I don't know whether I should cry, or laugh with joyous abandonment. My emotions are doing summersaults through the woods at night. I know my sight does not deceive me, but I can't help wanting to entwine my senses to you. To think' I thought, our love was not enough, but nothing may keep us apart. You will always have the entirety of my heart.

Winter: My love, how your words shake me to my very depths. I yearn to hear more, but I have need of those lips, that form so eloquent prose. Could you now bestow the grace of your lips on a, all so, humble man?

(A kiss)

(The cauldron emits a puff of smoke)

Oh, those lips and the taste of your love. How I've missed them so. With the reminder of the passion they bring, I know I'm the luckiest man whoever was. One moment with you, is like having an eternity in

heaven's garden. I thirst with longing to know your lips once more.

Rose: Do you? If you truly thirst so much, you would drink at my lips once more. But I assure you that the cost of it will be losing yourself in my tender embrace. I hope that is something you're willing to pay?

(giggles)

Or did you come back to me, just to be entranced by my gaze?
Hmm?

Winter: Your gaze, your lips, your words; you enchant me with every fiber of your being. I am lost to you, and the spell you have woven over me. The world doesn't orbit the sun, I orbit you, and that is why there is a night and day for me.

Rose: (Giggles) So are you going to keep wooing me, or can we seal off this escaping air?

(A kiss)

(The cauldron emits a puff of smoke)

Winter: How do you make it seem like a new taste every time, but with the same flavor I love so much?

Rose: The flavor is me, and the new taste is blending of us. If you liked the last kiss, the next should electrify your senses beyond limits. (Giggles)

Winter: If you had this power to overload my senses to such an extent and haven't used it yet, I can't wait to be kissed into senselessness. For the kisses you have given me, have done more than curl my toes and turn my insides out. So please do not hold back. Kiss away with all you have.

Rose: Do you truly wish this of me? There is no going back after this. Your passion will be ignited to such an extent; that your vessel will overflow and threaten to capsize.

Winter: I'm willing to risk it. You have permission to board, captain of my lips. While you do so, I shall sail away in your loving gaze. Lost in a sea of our romance. Far from any safe shores. Amidst a raging tempest of shared longing. Destined to ride waves of passion and

desire, the horizon and beyond. The gang plank is out, and ready for your boarding, captain.

(A kiss)

(Stage goes dark, curtain closes)

(Wolves howl)

(END)



Tom Stock

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