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umbc creative arts journal

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An Honors University in Maryland

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CONTENTS

Editor's Preface | 9

Poetry

I Am Her (SECTION WINNER) | *Gabrielle Caggiano* | 14

The Spider's Dress | *Mark Benham* | 16

the air was out | *Tess McRae* | 17

phaethon takes the reins | *Tess McRae* | 18

ode to the Nigerian church | *Tiwa Topia* | 19

Nasonov | *Kelly McVicker* | 21

My Jewelry Dish | *Rehema Mwaisela* | 22

Metempsychosis | *Elizabeth Heppding* | 23

Joni | *Maxi Wardcantori* | 24

good citizen | *Marcus Lindsey* | 25

god why did you make me a moth | *Tiwa Topia* | 26

coves open | *Tess McRae* | 27

citrus x paradisi | *Stephen Goralski* | 28

Benevolent Trickery | *Maxi Wardcantori* | 29

african giant | *Tiwa Topia* | 30

Fiction

The Arsonist (Section Winner) | *Katie Todd* | 34

A Single Hair | *Mary Murphy* | 42

Counsel | *I.M.G.* | 49

The Crack | *Julian Ford* | 55

Perfectday | *Ryan Saladino* | 58

The Prince from Beauty and the Beast, the One Who's Cursed to Live a Life He Can Never Escape From, God, That Must Really Suck. | *Ryan Saladino* | 61

The Personal Logs of Captain Marleigh | *Eshna Kumar* | 73

Art

Primordial Beast (Section Winner) | *Tawakalitu Abiwa* | 84

On the Edge | *Ashley Troutman* | 85

Caution | *Raquel Hamner* | 86

Distant Memories | *Eliška Merchant-Dest* | 87

East Village | *Justin Cooper* | 88

Hot Head | *Raquel Hamner* | 89
It's Complicated | *Ceyda Baysal* | 90
Lagoon | *Raquel Hamner* | 91
Let Me Go | *Justin Cooper* | 92
Love Never Hurts | *Ceyda Baysal* | 93
Misty Mountains | *Eliška Merchant-Dest* | 94
Never Going Home | *Eliška Merchant-Dest* | 95
Obscured Observations | *Eliška Merchant-Dest* | 96
Oxidation | *Justin Cooper* | 97
Rainforest Sun | *Olivia Sola* | 98

Creative Nonfiction

Cakes of Significance (Section Winner) | *Lauren Gouin* | 100
The Matriarch | *Frances Grace Ghinger* | 103
Summer et. al | *Ann Weisgerber* | 106
A Memory from Long Ago and a Visit to an Unusual House | *Ray Digiondomenico* | 108
Stuff, Things, and Lifelong Regrets | *Ann Weisgerber* | 113
Blizzard of 2010 | *Marcus Lindsey* | 115

EDITOR'S PREFACE

Welcome to Bartleby's fortieth edition. On behalf of the Bartleby Staff, I must extend my deepest gratitude to the English Department, the SGA, and the Division of Undergraduate Academic Affairs, without whom this journal would not be possible. Many thanks as well to our Faculty Advisor, Kate Lashley Fischer, who seamlessly took up the role last May from Tanya Olson, and who has seen us through these incredibly difficult times. In 2009, Guenet Abraham volunteered to guide Graphic Design students through the intricacies of Book Design, a subject not offered in the Print Media curriculum. Thanks to her, our journal is looking more polished than ever, even as she was completing her Fulbright Scholarship in Ethiopia. I would also like to thank my Junior Managing Editor, Maryam Elhabashy, who has worked with me to clarify our editorial process, which as Co-Lead Copy Editors last year, we realized needed drastic change.

The one thing that resonated with me when I joined Bartleby in the fall of 2017 was that not only were we publishing student work, we had, for the past fifty years, been entirely student led. The journal has had some low points, loss of funding, changing our name to Soup and then Samizdat, but we have always returned to Bartleby, Melville's symbol of non-conformity. When the journal began, we published writing from professors and graduate students, but in the early 90's we decided to focus solely on the voice of our undergraduates. As Sally Shivnan, a former Faculty Advisor, said, "The magazine is a mirror of the times, and its job should be to faithfully reflect UMBC student society." It has been my desire, while working for the journal, to create a publication for our creative community which they can read with pride, knowing that they hold in their hands a polished time capsule of their thoughts and experiences at UMBC.

In celebration of our fortieth edition, we conducted a separate art competition, prompting our artists to recreate our very first cover in their own style. Our winner, "Thoughts in Transit" by Reese Reinert, perfectly encapsulates what I'm sure we have all been feeling this year. In February of this year, we learned of the outbreak of Covid-19. At the time, it seemed like it might not affect us, but it overtook the country like a tsunami wave. When campus closed in March, we were well underway to have our edition printed on schedule. But when it was clear that campuses would not reopen, we had to carefully reconsider our plan of action. In the absence

of in-person writing workshops, we set up a shared folder where writers could submit work and respond to prompts as a creative outlet and escape from the chaos of isolated academia. We also decided to release the journal online until such a time as we could celebrate its publication in person. While the transition was difficult, our staff was able to come together in a time marked by isolation and rise above the obstacles in order to create a publication that I am proud to share with you.

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POETRY

I AM HER

Gabrielle Caggiano | WINNER

my pills are lavender now as though
the pharmacist intuited my soul color the same way poet
 friends are rare finds,
my perennial search.

there you are in the recrudescence dream:
in a green room with cordiform eyes,
 you tell me this is it.
 you reach for my cheek like it's a teacup and you might crack
 its perfection.
we kiss with no tongue.
we're just not old enough for that yet. there we are after school
in the theatre attic so as not to be seen, but they see us anyway.
a 1960s Star Trek episode plays on TV and we pretend
that we're space cadets like you always wanted.
the dream bubble bursts: I spot you first in the hallway and scurry,
but you see me anyway.
if we're in the dream again, you kiss me the way
you were too afraid to when we were fifteen
like it's our last chance
at rewriting the cataclysm.
and then you as a phantom, as a poltergeist, inquire,
"why are you still writing of me?"

I wake to scour the dream dictionary I received the Christmas
 that I met you.
if I envisage your astral body, would you appear for me?
if I still dream of you, does that mean you are sleeping in Boston
and remembering me? "no,
it's just the pills," I say.
vivid dreams as a side effect of mood stabilizers.
the girl you loved died in the 2012 apocalypse.
the Mayan Calendar never ended,

but my world (pre-manic depression) did.
and now I am purple tablets and indie music,
road rage and root words, anxiety and unkempt hair.
you remember me daffodil but I've been blue all this time.
ignore the Facebook message I sent about your father's passing.
I sent it in my sleep.
I am someone you have never met.
whoever she is, I am her.

THE SPIDER'S DRESS

Mark Benham

With social plans upon her mind,
A spider spun a fancy dress;
One that's unique, yet still refined,
And would leave haughty crowds impressed.
Each dainty string shimmered divine
While through her skilled fingers' caress.
She weaved and stitched and darned and twined
A work of art with great finesse.
With dinner plates all set to dine,
The spider greeted bugs as guests.
If they embrace her threads' design,
She'll spin them up a fancy dress.

THE AIR WAS OUT

Tess McRae

well let's bite down to the hard bit:
i guess everything screams when you kill it,
i guess everything dies dancing closely.
i guess i go too deep in the weeds again,
or get pink with unbelonging, or
bust open at the borderlands.
but the bending just pushes me back — an
honest attack, a task and a half,
a love that stuck enough to snap
and snagged when it was speared to. well
let's dig through to the true grit. here
is real to me, here is what i know:
she makes herself tea while we talk.
tells me all about the ache, then pours
the milk in. she sips from the strain and i swirl
like a snowglobe: there is never something balming
i can say. i get to call the shots
but i'm not calm enough to do it
when my crooked spots drink up the depth:
i want to think im helpful but
all i can do is beg for breath.

PHAETHON TAKES THE REINS

Tess McRae

What this is
is Tremendous and
I Want In

white sparks for wings
at the kitchen sink
some bolt to my body

I am breathless with / I
can have everything even
the horses / I won't fall I'll only
falter / I'm prolific in the myth

Tossed through new bright air
I'm scared of but I never
lose my nerve — because maybe
I'm a square peg but I'll find
the crinkles in this curve. Listen. I will not

Be swept to amber. I have nothing left
To fear. Everything
the low-light touches has
a light touch from up here.

ODE TO THE NIGERIAN CHURCH

Tiwa Topia

there is no holier sanctuary
like the Nigerian church
a sunday oasis that
attracts the thirsty, displaced Nigerian folk
with songs & sound of familiar tongue in a foreign land
each man and woman arriving in their best attire
like so many brides
at their traditional wedding
a parade of gaudy and festive colour
meant to tempt the Nigerian sun
into gazing upon them
as they give praise in the form
of harmonies intertwined with the rhythm
& gyrations with the beats of the Nigerian drum
you could swear we worshipped a different god
by the way our prayers ride the winds
from our Nigerian lungs
in languages that oscillate & congregate
with the communion back home
the house of god made bigger
with warm reveries of a common culture
amidst the haze of praise
we're visited by the holy spirit & those of our ancestors
deceased & living
phantoms of our uncles & aunts
cousins & neighbours back home
fill the empty plastic seats
reminding us of our native earth
and serving up sweet nostalgia
as burnt offering to the greenwhitegreen
this weekly ritual generates enough heat
to melt away the unfamiliar snow
& at the end of the 2hrs...maybe longer
we've sufficiently warmed up our collective Nigerian soul

with a resounding *ami ami 'loruko jesu* <*amen, amen, in the name of jesus*>
we close and disperse
fearless into the american cold
it's no longer my sundays were always warm
god bless the heat of the Nigerian sun

NASONOV

Kelly McVicker

I wonder why they do
that, my dad says, peering
into his glass as he swirls
his red wine.

It is summer, and we are sitting
on the porch, looking out
over the stream away
from the point on the horizon
where the sun had set, soaking
in the dregs of joy –
of a good long day with family,
with love – from looking
for rocks studded with garnets
and macroinvertebrates
in the Gunpowder river.

He is referring to the honeybees
my stepmom keeps,
who congregate
in a mass at the entrance
of the hive
the hour of dusk when the sky
is orange and blue and violet –
when the breeze is beginning
to soften the evening
into something warm
and quiet and safe.

I don't wonder why we
do that.

MY JEWELRY DISH

Rehema Mwaisela

The dish itself is a saucer-sized souvenir
From the Würzburg residence,
The Versailles of Bavaria.
Home of the gaudy and the graceless to some,
Temple of the elegant and aesthetically pleasing to others.

Shiny things, gold-plated and gleaming
Patiently waiting for their moment,
As they lay remembering the past
And their moments in the sun.

Large dangly earrings, three stars on each
Rhinestones that command the eye

Glimmering artifacts of the night
I drank to inundate the barren landscape of my mind
And cried, and threw up,
Because I drowned in my shame.

The golden door knockers,
Lion-shaped, miniatures but still heavy
And the heavy silver hoops, engraved with black lines

Pieces of my mother's past I snatched up
For myself to treasure, and hope
For vicarious radiance.

A tiny golden hand on a threadlike chain
From my little sister
Palm outward, but too small to ever grasp
Anything, resigned to reaching
for my heart.

I wear my past, and as it dulls in my mind
All that glitters still remains
The metallic museum of my life
Catches the light, however dim it may be.

METEMPSYCHOSIS

Elizabeth Heppding

In my teeth I've stored ancient knowledge of old gods,
unconfined creatures with neither form nor thought,
and as each bone cracked and ripped
I grew closer and closer to knowing
the truth of our brutal mortality.
With each small pearl the blood flowed and carried
secrets out of my mouth.
The vulnerable flesh of my gums
open wounds waiting for the next step.
And with that last baby tooth there was no relief;
instead an overwhelming sense that
I will experience all of this again.

JONI

Maxi Wardcantori

From the far side of the hill she speaks
down to you from above.
You'll always ramble when you tell this story,
how she borrows the moon's voice to share her thoughts
and all her peace enters you. You are new now.

You think of her in midsummer,
and when you need the courage to behave badly,
out of your own body, being bold and magnetic.
It makes you do your homework, too,

and it always makes you want
the mouth that is open. You still
feel the sour stomach of apology, but you
don't let it plague you anymore.

You are new, and all that remained unsaid
is coming up fresh. You grow obsessed with
what you need to know and, then,
you teach yourself to ask.

Joni is on your voicemail. She visits you in hallucinogenic
stages, sits beside you like you sat with her. Joni is
a protective entity, maternal gossip sentient in
flickering candles. Joni crawled under your skin
while you were not looking.

GOOD CITIZEN

Marcus Lindsey

Good Citizen keeps watch over the neighborhood,
But only when I leave the house.
Cracks blinds like eggshells for me to stumble on.
Good citizen keeps his lawn tidy.
If he had to call the authorities for any reason,
He might end up on the news.
Good citizen wants to keep a good reputation.
Good citizen washes his car,
five times a week.
when my friends are over.
When I walk my sister home from school.
Good citizen stays up late.
Doesn't miss a thing.
Light leaks from his bedroom window.
His shadow plastered against the asphalt.
A vigilante keeper of justice.
Good citizen makes sure we know the laws
Of baseball,
Of football,
Of the land.
Good citizen knows his rights.
Good citizen has no issue exercising them.
Good citizens don't tolerate delinquents.
Good citizen might lose his temper.
I'll lose something too.
Good citizen doesn't face consequences.
Cause he's a good citizen,
And I was never one to begin with.

GOD WHY DID YOU MAKE ME A MOTH

Tiwa Topia

I want to be a butterfly
so bad!
I want
to bask in the daytime & let it burn all my scales until they
glow a velvety ember & fluorescent purple! want to commune
with the flowers. To bathe in their beauty as they envy mine. Fuck it I want
people to mistake me for a flower when I stand still. Instead of plucking
at my wings or chasing me away. I want the brightest light I see to be the
satisfied smiles of children & painters as I grace their imagination
canvas. I want to inspire French paintings and the crude infantile
scribbles. I want to live for longer than the night lasts. And I am so
tired of flying by moonlight. It does not do well for navigating.
Everything is a silent grey. Everyone speaks in subtitles.
Oh, how I wish I could see the sun, or colour, or a
rainbow. I bet they look loud. I want to live
to see the end of a sunrise. I want
to escape into the spectrum and
glide on the summer breeze.
I grow tired of seeking
out flames. They are
a cheap imitation.
And they burn.
God, Why Did
You Make
Me A
Moth.

COVES OPEN

Tess McRae

so maybe i got used to moving
wounded, too soft
with the sharp thing, too limp
for the wave. yet i kept my palms
pressed flat to fight the thrashing.
pushed up through the deep, unbent
but brave.

and there are no real islands
if it's hope that keeps them floating.

so on this shoreline i
can chase my beach dog thoughts
without the tether —
maybe i got used to wounds,

but i am on the move forever: paws that keep on
pounding on the high path. i rock through the water
with a good gasp, keeping close the broken glint
of bright glass and everything
it's always asking. and i go basking

in the golden light. because when i am lulled to love
it is only ever on purpose.

CITRUS X PARADISI

Stephen Goralski

For Mr. Brett Kavanaugh

The sweet roundness
of righteousness
rests heavy in your palms
like a ruby
grapefruit, its sunset
color curiously
the same shade
of indignation that
spasms across the cheeks
of a spoiled child
when, for the first time,
told no.

BENEVOLENT TRICKERY

Maxi Wardcantori

Your fingers are peeling
me like an orange, dipping into flesh first with a thumbnail
then, rendered into ribbons with a slow, deliberate tear.
It's your finest trickery,

having me cut your hair
with safety scissors late at night. I blow on your neck,
and your laughter and my shaky hands and your whispered exclamations
give rise to new creations.

I am always squinting to see you,
straining to parse your nonsensical whims and my own
coded complaining and our loud, round, whistling proclamations
are the ritual start of these cyclical stations.

Your fingers are prying into places they don't belong, the gaps of my
words,
then, returned to their speaker with a transfer of power,
together we outwait every hour,
consign each mode as truth between us,
traverse the inner cuts and bruises,
totaling ourselves until we are towed back
to where we're coming from, by some benevolent force,
and again, we begin, again.

AFRICAN GIANT

Tiwa Topia

*There's a giant sleeping under my African earth/
Her hair becomes the Sahara /
becomes the rainforest/
becomes the savannah/
becomes home for the crawling/
and flying beasts/
and food for Her caretakers/
so, we sing lullabies of thanksgiving/
for Kilimanjaro and Lake Victoria/
and nighttime tales of Zanzibar/
and great Zimbabwe /*

*She repays us /
with excess in yields/
with Her laughter/
like thunder and lightning/
the heralds of rains/
which multiplies the joy/
while Her snoring shifts the earth/*

but the pale ones do not fear tradition/
or death/
the blonde ones poke at Her ribs/
hoping to mine Her bones/
and harvest Her soul/
they do not know Her fury manifests/
as magma and fire/
and Her tears are hurricanes and floods/

*Don't worry/
when we're gone/
and the songs are done.../
the giant will wake up/
and She will be hungry/
don't say we didn't warn you/
even your guns & god won't save you/*

FICTION

THE ARSONIST

Katie Todd | WINNER

23 Dearborn Street was burning.

It was on the outskirts of the city, and the day hadn't yet released workers from their toil, but smoke, sirens, and worries all carried far. A crowd formed within minutes. They kept a careful distance, conversation running through the mass like nerve impulses: quick and bursting, then falling into silence. As the crowd grew, so the individuality of its members was lost, and soon they became an anxious, singular mass watching the fire.

The former occupants were a special case in the crowd: a mother and her two sons, teary but together. The crowd gave them space like a parted sea, with occasional neighbors and acquaintances breaking off to offer their condolences. Even when others held out bottles of water and toys to them, the sons' soot-stained hands never quite released their grip on the folds of their mother's dress. There was a rhythm to it all: the conversations, the condolences, and below it all the crackling fire. It was the bass and the backbeat to the drum-rhythm of the crowd.

The firefighters arrived in a whirl of sound and speed, slicing through the whispers of the crowd. They set to work, whipcord discipline driving their movements, hose to hydrant to hand. The fire had stretched high into the sky, but there was so little wood in the great stone building to burn, and soon the flames began to die even before the hose was switched on. The efforts of the firefighters extinguished the blaze almost laughably quickly. Soon, the building was returned to its former glory, although it had gained an ashen shroud in the process.

A man in a dark coat wove through the crowd. A firefighter picked up and studied a cigarette butt. The police didn't arrive. Not yet.

23 Dearborn Street really wasn't special. It was one of the old stonework buildings by the even older park, with similar neighbors up and down the street. Some of the most ancient stone buildings had since been replaced with more modern homes, and a row of townhouses had gone up a street down, but 23 stayed. Even with the changes happening around it for better or for worse, it was never really distinguished enough to earn more than a quick glance of appreciation.

The man in the dark coat lived one street over, but the heights of the buildings between them and the position of his window all converged to make sure 23 Dearborn Street was visible from his apartment. In the weeks following the fire, long after the smoke had stopped rising from the building's old roofs, it never let him forget it. It watched over him like a parent watching their child do homework, and it knew he was getting all of the problems wrong. He watched it back sometimes. Late in the evenings, he'd follow the shadows moving through the lit windows, and he'd watch them darken as sleep pressed on the occupants. After that, he'd imagine the space beyond the glass lighting up again in that symphony of orange and red he had come to know so well. It was cathartic, considering he wouldn't get to try the real thing again until at least a few months had passed. Suspicion traveled-- he always thought-- like wildfire.

The first evening since the fire, he had practically stormed home, tearing his apartment apart in frustration, shattering the mirror in the bathroom in his bloody-knuckled indignance. Afterwards, though, he sunk into a calming slough. He slumped into the threadbare armchair beside his bed and did nothing but feel for a while. The last fires had all given him the same reaction: that delicious high, followed by a plunge into monotony. Each time the high was a little less than the last. Yet this one brought *anticipation* with it. Failure had given him something to work towards, look forward to; it awakened new vibrations in his veins. He became aware of the buzz slowly but surely as he laid still, and when he arose it was with purpose.

He began to prepare. Over the course of months, matchbooks and stubbed cigarettes filled his apartment. He took a longer walk to work just to walk past 23 Dearborn St., examining the foundations and as much of the inner beams he could see. Whenever possible, he inspected the building like a surgeon preparing to operate, checking each of his tools in turn. The street was often devoid of people during the hours he took his night shift, and even moreso as the winter took hold and dragged people to the warmth of their homes.

On one cold evening, he bought an extra tank of gasoline at the gas station. On that colder night, carrying the tank concealed in a briefcase, he brought it forth to the battlefield, *his* battlefield. The briefcase brushed against his side like a sword in its scabbard. Only in his hands would it be capable of harm.

He ran from the fire as quickly as he could. Something in him was drawing him away from the blaze, and he couldn't possibly resist its call. It wasn't completely the fear of suspicion propelling him home, he knew that much.

Was it the anticipation again? He felt almost sick with it by the time he stepped through the door and ran to his window.

Smoke the same color as the clouded night sky rose from 23 Dearborn Street, its shape revealed only by the flashing red-white lights cast over it. The man scowled, tossing his briefcase to the side with a clatter. The firefighters had acted entirely too swiftly this time. His contempt quickly turned to fear-- had someone seen him as he laid the gasoline? Of course he hadn't been watching windows or passersby closely, he wasn't good enough, and now he'd have to move, and the fire was gone and the high wasn't coming...

He gripped his head as if he were trying to shatter his own skull, stomping on the discarded suitcase and the empty gasoline canister. With a sweep of his arm he knocked the contents of his nightstand to the floor. He drew his pocketknife and carved gashes in the wall, in his armchair, almost in himself, but he stopped, the flat of the knife cool against his skin.

There it was again, the anticipation. He would do better next time. Yes, that was a comforting way to think of it. The fire would be so grand, the greatest one he'd set yet. Even greater than the one that consumed his home all those years ago.

For now, the preparations had to continue.

Moving was simple. He had a decent sum saved, enough to get an apartment on the other side of the city, and whatever belongings he hadn't destroyed were easily packed up. Thankfully, it wasn't too far from his job either. Although 23 Dearborn Street wasn't visible, he still felt its presence every night just the same. He had watched it so many times he could summon its image from his mind effortlessly, breathless excitement following every imagined blaze.

He shook hands with the landlord outside of his apartment once everything had been set up.

"Why'd you move?" The landlord was an older man with rheumy eyes and a smug-looking squint.

"It's better for my job," the man said, his expression unchanging, "and my hobbies."

He sought solace in, of all places, the library. The man liked the silence, and the fact that it was difficult for anyone to ask him what he was doing. It was the perfect place to research uninterrupted. He loved to shuffle among the shelves, his eyes occluded by a book in his face and a hat on his head. He had learned long ago that hiding one's eyes could get you everywhere-- people like being looked at, and without the promise of a wayward glance, sightless bystanders are quickly ignored.

It was through this practiced dance of subtlety that he was able to make his way down to the archives of the library without being bothered. Inventing an excuse to satiate a librarian's curiosity was easy, but shaking off any further suspicion wasn't, and he knew how troublesome it was to be remembered. As he made his way among the shelves, he scowled at the memory of what had happened in the last city. One construction worker on a smoke break across the street was all it took to cast the eye of the law towards him, and thus he had to run. Lost in his grudges, he very nearly passed by the architectural records.

He shuffled between the shelves, scanning the mess of blueprints and binders. Although they were haphazardly thrown together and practically covered with dust, he noted that they were grouped roughly by street after reading a handful of blueprints. It took him only a few minutes to find Dearborn Street, and moments more to find 23. He held the blueprints with shaky hands, double- and triple-checking the address. It was the building.

He learned a number of things in the hours he spent examining every line of every blueprint of 23 Dearborn Street. One: it was originally a large house, but some walls were added in later to divide it up into apartments. Two: pipe gutters were installed later, and one of them ran down the corner of the building. Three: there was a window, next to the aforementioned gutter, into a small room on the second floor. While many of the windows were replaced following the conversion of the building to apartments, this one was not. It was a casement window, and due to an oversight of the installer, it was *latched from the outside*.

His heart beat faster and faster as he glanced from window to room to door to *inside*. He could get inside. He could be *inside of the house*. His harsh, fast breathing was the only sound in the archives besides the rustle of the blueprints and the buzz of the lights overhead. He let out a breathy exhale of a laugh. His mouth grew into a grin, a shape it hadn't taken in years. He forced his smile and his laughter back down his throat as he shoved the blueprints into his coat. As he rose, excitement thrumming in his mind, he heard the clack of heels coming down the stairs on the other side of the room.

He composed himself swiftly, rubbing most of the sweat off his face and taking a deep, silent breath. He stuffed his hands in his pockets and made his way to the end of the shelves, coming face to face with a librarian.

"Oh! I'm sorry, I didn't see you there. Here..." She moved aside to let him pass, a cart of binders in tow. "You look a bit warm," she said, glancing at his face. "Why don't you take that coat off? It gets hot down here easily, the ventilation is awful."

"I'm alright, thanks." The man nodded and turned to walk away. As he

did so, he shifted his hands in his pockets, and the distinct crinkle of paper sounded from within his coat. The man's heart jumped into his throat and he quickly shuffled past the cart, knocking it against a shelf with a bang. The librarian was too startled to say anything more, and the man hurried up the staircase as subtly as possible.

He cursed himself with every step that led him away from the library. He had such a wonderful opportunity in his hands and he had squeezed too hard, causing it to cry out in pain like a crushed songbird. But it's not like he could let it go, not when he had come so far.

A sense of finality suffused the man's apartment as he prepared his things. He stuffed bottles of cheap alcohol into his bag alongside matchboxes, rags, and a crowbar. He was excited, yes, excited beyond belief, but at the same time disappointment was beginning to creep up his spine. A nagging voice, living somewhere in the back of his head, began to grow in volume: *What if the payoff isn't as great as you think it will be? What if it'll just be another pile of ashes instead of the triumph you want? What if you're not good enough, like you always are? What if you're not good enough? What if you're--*

He silenced the voice with a quick swig from one of the bottles. Whisky, vodka, he wasn't sure what it was; all that mattered was that it was bitter and sharp enough to hurt. He carefully put his backpack on, the clink of the bottles and crowbar inside loud enough to be distinct against the silence of the apartment. With a sinking feeling, he realized that he didn't care if he got caught, as long as he managed to fulfill his dream.

He thought further as he walked down the stairs and down the sidewalk towards his destination. That's what he was calling it now, a dream? He couldn't recall the last time he had a pleasant dream, asleep or awake. It was a refreshing change of pace, and one that almost put a spring in his step as he continued along the midnight street.

An hour, two hours passed, of nothing but walking. In any other scenario he would have begun to regret moving so far away from his target, but he was too excited to care. The fervor in his heart had nearly boiled over. He almost wanted to run down the street like a child after the last day of school, papers and homework trailing behind him in the wind. He settled for a brisk pace under the streetlights, and only allowed himself to whistle occasionally. He didn't care about getting caught in the act, that much was true, but being caught before he even claimed his prize was unacceptable, unthinkable. Even the thought was like a splash of icy water to the face.

He continued to oscillate between silent sobriety and whistling glee until he reached Dearborn Street. 23's roof was visible further down the street, ever so slightly higher than the other buildings around it. Its windows were

darker than he had expected. Perhaps they hadn't had the time to wash the last of the soot from the outside of the windows. The scars of his previous work showed themselves in unlikely places: a spot under the siding where the pressure-wash missed, a measure of ash mixed in with the usual detritus of its alleyways, several windows obviously different in design--

Different. *Replaced.* The windows on the front of the building had been replaced. One of the fires before had melted the glass or covered them in soot or burnt their sashes and they had been replaced. The man's eyes widened as all of his thoughts converged, and it took all of his self-control not to dash down the alleyway towards his destination. He kept his eyes on the ground, on the broken glass and lingering ash of the alleyway, on the gutter at the corner of the house, until he turned the corner.

There, one floor up, was the window. Its square panels were divided into two columns of three. A white sash bordered it, the paint flaking with age. And on the outside of the window, tethering its two columns together, was a brass fastener.

The man allowed himself to sigh as the sweat slowly dried from his skin. He shifted his attention from the window to the gutter. It was attached to the house only at the roof, but it still looked sturdy enough to climb. The man readied himself before grasping the gutter and shuffling upwards. He had researched climbing techniques, and he grasped the pipe with his hands and thighs, locking all of his limbs around it. He ascended slowly, carefully; his foot slipped only once, and he caught himself quick as anything, clinging to the pipe for a full minute before he redoubled his ascent. Minutes later, he had reached the window, and the fastener was just within his arm's reach. He leaned off of the gutter, flicking the pin upwards, and the window slowly creaked open from the alley drafts.

The man was suddenly, abruptly aware that he was not entirely sure how to get inside of the window. He looked downward, something he had been resisting since he began the climb, and saw the ashen dirt of the alleyway two stories below. The fall wouldn't kill him if he failed, nor would it injure him that badly, but even if it didn't shatter the bottles in his pack it would alert anyone who happened to awaken. He breathed, tensing once, twice, before flinging himself off of the pipe towards the windowsill. His hands gripped the sash, and with a clatter he pulled himself up into the building.

For a moment, there was no sound but the wind outside and the man's labored breathing. The room he was in seemed to be a pantry, lined from wall to wall with cans, jars, and boxes. He sat on the tiled floor, feeling the cold of the tiles seep through his pants. The excitement had faded for a moment, but as he studied the plaster walls and wooden door around him, it was beginning to rise again. He busied himself by slowly removing

his backpack and extracting some of the contents. He grabbed a bottle of vodka and unscrewed it, taking a sip before stuffing a rag into its neck. Replacing his bag, he stood, crossing the room and testing the door.

The handle slid smoothly in its socket, and he pushed the door open with a quiet creak. The door opened out into a small kitchen, and beyond it was a hallway. The man knew the hallway, besides containing the front door, branched out into bedrooms and closets and bathrooms; nothing of interest would come from there. His thoughts turned back to the pantry. It was full of flammable goods, and the room next to it was a closet surely packed with flammable chemicals and towels. This time, he couldn't avoid a smile.

He crouched down behind the kitchen counter, placing his bag on the floor. From this angle, he would be unseen by anyone in the hallway. He set down his Molotov-in-progress and drew out a matchbox, and along with it another bottle and rag. As he assembled another Molotov, he slowly became more aware of the sounds around him. Even the slightest sound of his, like the clink as he carefully set a bottle cap on the floor, felt magnified in his mind's eye. His heart hammered in his throat as he prepared. He had never been this close to a building before the fire, not ever, and he wasn't sure if he ever wanted to leave.

When he assembled a third Molotov, he stopped for only a moment to confirm his course of action, then he rose. A bottle was clutched in one hand; the other held a match. He waited for only one heartbeat more before he struck the match, lit the rag, and flung the bottle back into the pantry. It shattered against one of the walls, and blue-orange flame blossomed around the impact, clinging to the wall. He waited only a second before dropping the burnt match and grabbing another, along with another bottle. He lit this one as he moved out into the hallway, tossing it down to the end of the hall past the apartment's front door. It ricocheted off of an end table and shattered in front of a door. As he ran back into the kitchen, crouching down beneath the counter again, he heard the stir of movement from various rooms off of the hallway, followed by shouts and screams as their occupants made their way out into the hallway. He was deafened to their words, listening only for their location. It wasn't as if their words ever mattered to him. They scurried up and down the hallway before pausing in one spot, arguing and pleading loudly. As he grasped the third bottle, he heard a door swing open against the wall close by, and that was all he needed.

Striking the match against the floor, he lit the third bottle before tossing it across the kitchen and the hallway, through the open door of the bedroom beyond. It shattered against the end of the bed, the flames quickly spreading up onto the covers as the sizeable lump underneath cried out. Its

cries were echoed by the other occupants as one-- the broad silhouette of a woman-- ran into the bedroom to help.

The man had never felt guilt before; not for anything, and certainly not for this. He grabbed another match, idly striking it against the wall as he moved out into the hallway. The flames from the second bottle had crawled up the wall and made their way onto the ceiling. He walked calmly down the hallway past the front door, holding the match to the other side of the hallway. The wallpaper blackened and burned slowly, spreading from the point of contact like an infection. He would have been well away from the fire by now in any other case, but here he felt like staying. He had never quite felt so calm, and his calm only abated slightly when he turned and saw the woman leave the bedroom.

She stared at him with her sweat-stained face, the body of her son cradled in her arms. Her entire body tensed at the sight of him, ready to defend herself, but her instinct propelled her out of the front door, out of the fire. He didn't run after her, instead turning to face the end of the hallway. Through the window he could see the red-flashing lights of some sort of emergency vehicle a few streets over. The screams of its siren were barely audible over the roar of the house around him. He hoped with every fiber of his being that it wasn't a fire engine.

There was a crack above him, like a shattered spine, and a timber came down on the man's back. He wasn't certain what bones had broken, but it felt as if every bone in his body was screaming out with pain. A silent cry escaped from the man's jaws. He didn't know whether to lie down or run away, and it felt impossible to do either. The flames that consumed the timber began to bite at his clothing. He reached up to the windowsill and his hand came away with half of his palm burned away. Still he grasped, the pain fading fast, and with the last of his strength he pulled himself up to look out of the window.

His vision was blurred with ash and tears and death, yet the fire illuminated the reflective stripes of the firefighters' uniforms like beacons. He could see nothing else; they shone too brightly against the dark.

The man died screaming.

A SINGLE HAIR

Mary Murphy

I sank into the window seat, sighing, and closed my eyes. Lacey curtains rustled around the freshly opened windows behind me, letting in a rush of cool air as Lucifer leaped up into my lap. He stretched the length of his body against the window screen to scout for prey. Children were laughing and dogs barking outside. Meat sizzled over burning coals as neighbors gathered for one last hurrah to summer, before winter whited out the landscape again. With no prey available, Lucifer curled up and droned hypnotically as I stroked his inky black fur.

The honeyed pine floors creaked. Screeching, Lucifer dove from my lap and hid under the threadbare chaise in the corner.

Slithering across the room on her narrow talon-like feet, Judith lifted two glasses from the sideboard and poured herself a drink. She sniffed the air, poured a second drink, and set the glasses down on the end table. I presented a smile in her general direction, but concentrated my attention on the wall of barren bookshelves wasting away with only a handful of tawdry knickknacks half-buried beneath mounds of gray and viscous dust.

The stench of mothballs, creams and medicines emanated from Judith like an airborne plague, as she leaned over the cushions of the couch to slam the window shut between us. Her face was jaw-heavy, like the head of a venomous snake and one single hair sprouted from her chin, ever threatening to pullulate. In my recurrent nightmares, that one hair swarmed, spinning a cocoon over Judith and I realized in my horror that she had been an enormous insect all along. If there was a God, and in his wisdom, he created wasps and mosquitos, perhaps there was a reason for Judith as well.

The grandfather clock in the hallway outside the parlor chimed three times. Reaching for the glass on the end table, I gulped it as if it was a shot of vodka, then slammed the empty glass down on the coaster. Judith ignored my insolence this time. She did not flinch.

Wrinkled sallow skin, spotted with age, glowed with an unearthly phosphorescence, as Judith sipped her drink in silence. I shuddered, staring at my knees, to avoid witnessing that corkscrew hair dripping from her chin into her glass as she drank. Amaretto, obviously. Alcoholics who consider

themselves genteel and cultured are among the worst. Those who sleep on park benches wrapped in newspapers have no choice but to recognize and accommodate themselves to their bad decisions, but alcoholics who have money labor under all sorts of delusions.

Jeweled faceted bottles of Disaronno and Chambord Amaretto lined the tops of the cabinets on the walls of the kitchen for as long as I could remember, and when one bottle emptied and got recycled, two more grew up in its place like the heads of a hydra.

“You said you’d never set foot in this house again after last month, Carolyn Estelle.” Judith clinked the rings on her twisted, knobby fingers against the glass in her hand, in time with the ticking of the clock in the hallway. “I sacrificed my life to care for you,” tap, tap, tap, tap. “I could have refused, sent you to an orphanage.” Tap-tap-tap-tap-tap. “My sister stole your father from me. I believed in waiting for marriage, while she couldn’t wait for water to boil.” Tap, tap, tap, tap, tap.

I shrugged. “I put your frozen meals away and brought you clean laundry and fresh fruit and milk. The vitamins the doctor said you should start taking are in the medicine cabinet. Do you need anything else?”

“No,” said Judith, slowly raising the glass to her bloodless lips. “I do not need anything from you. Good of you to come, all the same. Cheers!”

I glanced up at the water stained ceiling, then into my empty glass, as Judith set her glass beside mine. “Cheers.”

“Did you make up with Edmund? Your face looks much better than it did—I told you that the arnica would work. Fresh herbs are better than any concocted potions from the pharmacy. Modern medicine is a crock. I never take those vitamins you bring. The instant you leave, they go straight into the trash. Why do you think I’m still alive?”

The silence stretched on between us, until Judith snapped her head around, grasped a paperweight from the end table and hurled it at the cat, who launched himself back under the chaise. The sunken filmy eyes returned then to me and she lifted up her glass once more.

“Well? What did Edmund say?”

I watched the golden light filter through the drink in Judith’s glass like sunbeams through the surface of the sea. “He told me you called him yourself. That was why he beat me up. You told him everything.”

“Not everything. Only what he needed to know. Aren’t you ashamed of yourself? You ought to be ashamed, letting that man believe you were as pure as the driven snow... What an appalling little ungrateful mess you are, even now. Why did you refuse Edmund after I arranged it all and handed him to you on a silver platter? He could support us both and you could stop whoring.” Judith’s whole body trembled as she giggled like a shriveled little imp. The vile hair on her chin trembled most of all. “You told him you worked in

sales? Delightful metaphor! You don't even know how many lovers you've taken, do you?"

"Not lovers," I said. "A job. None of them loved--"

"Call it anything you like," said Judith. "People in love don't love any more than you have, and you're a fool if you believe otherwise. Edmund is a beastly swine with the intelligence of a box of rocks, but he comes from money, and he is the best you will ever get, and I daresay better than you deserve."

Judith's tone suggested my sins, like clumps of mud, stained my face. Did she not see her own face? There were mirrors in every room of the house. Like the amaretto and the heads of the hydra, they multiplied. Like mirrors in a funhouse, they distorted reality, at least for Judith. My whole life, I had watched her fawn and fret over her reflection, ordering mirrors of all shapes and sizes, as though one may finally show the reflection she wanted to see. "I didn't choose—"

"No one forced you, Carolyn Estelle. You were already selling your body when that holier-than-thou detective bathed in Old Spice coerced me into taking you in; how do you suppose he found you? He was trolling the back alleys out of the goodness of his heart, is that what you think? He wanted a piece of the action himself, only you were too young. You reminded him of his own child."

"I was a child," I said, rubbing my chin, as though I could telekinetically uproot that appalling hair from Judith's chin. "My parents--"

"My parents, my parents," said Judith, cackling like a witch. The hair on her chin cackled with her.

"I was starving," I said, forcing my eyes to my knees.

"Carolyn. Look at me."

Against my better judgement, I did look at Judith. Well, perhaps not at Judith as much as at the long, singularly hideous white hair still protruding from her chin. One single hair. There were mirrors, as I said, and tweezers are not hard to come by. Each time I saw her, I wanted to yank that hair from her chin. How could she not see it, the many hours she spent applying age-creams and makeup to her reptilian skin? Perhaps her eyesight was as poor as her diet. Was she expecting Rumpelstiltskin to appear to spin the hair on her chin into gold? True enough, straw was increasingly rare in the suburbs. I'll huff and I'll puff and I'll blow your house in, I mused, shaking with repressed laughter. Not by the hair of that chinny-chin-chin.

"—you have no idea."

"What? I stopped listening to you. What do I have no idea about?"

Judith's mirth ended in a fit of coughing, and she stood without excusing herself and fled to the bathroom, where I heard her vomiting. Good. When

I heard the water running, I knew she was brushing her teeth and still not doing anything about the outrageous hair. I reached into my purse and drew out the vial hidden in my cosmetics bag, removed the stopper, and tipped it slightly so just a few more drops cascaded down through Judith's drink. The toilet lid lifted again, and I poured a little bit more into her amaretto. Amaretto tastes like almonds, as does arsenic. Judith loves almonds.

By the time Judith returned, the vial was safely away. She apologized. "You haven't been here in a month, and I'm afraid I can't judge when food has spoiled as easily as once I could." She coughed again, clearing her throat. "I must have eaten something past its time."

"Apparently," I said. "Drink your amaretto; it will wash the taste out of your mouth."

"My, yes," said Judith, lifting her glass. "Cheers."

Warren Walton still wore Old Spice. His salt and pepper-colored hair desperately needed a cut and a net of wrinkles lined his face. He introduced his partner, Detective Simmons, and then himself only twenty-three minutes after I made the 911 call to report Judith dead. I wondered if he would recognize me. Perhaps he was too polite to say.

"We're sorry for your loss, Miss Genovese," said Walton, shaking my hand again. "When you called to report your aunt's death, you mentioned her death seemed suspicious. Did your aunt have any enemies?"

"What made you think her death was suspicious?" Detective Simmons paced the room in old, stained black sneakers. He reeked of unwashed socks. I did not like him.

"I don't think anyone cared that she was alive, much less wanted her dead," I said. "Maybe—maybe it's just she was just lying there when I came in to the room, lying there looking surprised, shocked even.... Do you think she didn't know herself that she was dying?"

Simmons stopped pacing and joined Walton at the table opposite me. "For argument's sake, what made you think your aunt might have died of anything other than natural causes?"

"I don't know."

"Who has access to your aunt's house?"

"I do, and the neighbors on both sides of the house. No one else that I know of."

"At least you made sure your aunt ate and drank and stayed clean," said Simmons. "You're better than most."

What was he implying?

"Of course, we stayed clean," I said. "We're fastidious people. The house is old, broken down, maybe even cursed...but the plumbing works, and

I learn a lot on my own, online, you know? You can look up instructions on anything, if something breaks down. If pipes leak.” I paused, unsure what impulse motivated the words coming out of my mouth. “I want to replace the wallpaper.”

“Your aunt was clean,” said Simmons. “Yeah, most kids don’t like to be reminded we all get old, we all die. I’d want to gut the place. Probably ratty wiring, a fire hazard. Nice of you to want to keep things working for her.”

Walton nodded. “A lot of kids put their parents in homes and never even visit. Looks like you did a lot for your aunt Judith, living there with her.”

“I didn’t live there,” I said. “I mean, not always. I usually did. Yes, I lived there.” The detectives exchanged glances. Why had I run my mouth? No way could I explain to them how I could afford to live alone. My eyes felt like the Sahara and my throat was parched, yet I could not seem to control my tongue. No one had offered me water, coffee, or anything at all. I had to shut my mouth and think. “Can I get some coffee?”

“You old enough for coffee?” Simmons laughed, but got me a cup just the same, and a handful of little packets of Splenda. “No cream, sorry.”

“Miss Genovese,” said Walton. “Is there someone we can call for you?”

“My parents are dead. You found Judith because she was my only living relative, five years ago, so she could take me in.” Simmons stared at his partner, whose jaw dropped open. “I thought—I thought you knew, that maybe you recognized me, or Judith--”

“Uh, no, no, now that you mention it,” said Walton, and he seemed genuinely ashamed to have forgotten. “Seems longer, a lot longer. Glad it worked out for you, moving in with your aunt.” He tilted his head toward me, but addressed Simmons. “Found her cowering in a dump on Maple and Fourth. Her parents...anyway, she hid when things got ugly and she was the only survivor. Glad to see you looking so healthy, kiddo.”

“Healthier than Judith or my parents, anyway, right?”

“Pardon me?”

Inwardly I cringed, but outwardly, I laughed so hard my stomach hurt. “Sheesh. Did you see that hair on her chin? I was always after her to get it with tweezers. I tried not to look. I can’t believe she’s dead and that stupid hair still bothers me.” Willing myself to sob, I buried my head in my arm. Had I forgotten how to cry? I took rapid deep breaths all the same, to make it convincing. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“There, there, Miss Genovese. You made her food,” said Simmons, eyeing Walton for a moment, not meant for me to see. “Bought her groceries and kept her company, I’m sure.”

“She never went out,” I said, wiping my eyes violently on the back of my hand. At least I could make them look red.

“That’s interesting,” said Walton, jotting something down on a note pad. “Was there anybody else who may have visited the house, to keep her company? Maybe when you were on vacation, at school or work, or on a date?”

“Date?” I choked and gagged, trying to speak, but the impressions of beefy fingers and sweaty palms on my throat left me speechless, though I recognized these as memories, not current events. Just breathe, I told myself. Breathe through it and wish it away. I lowered my head between my knees until I could control the panic. My body is a haunted house, full of unruly ghosts unwilling to be cleansed.

“Hey, Miss Genovese. Are you still with us? You’ve had quite a shock.”

“I’ll say,” said Walton, and the two of them stood up. “We’ve taken up enough of your time.”

“Wait,” I said, rising to my feet so fast I nearly blacked out for a moment. “I have to make arrangements, you know, for her funeral...”

“I think the coroner is about finished,” said Walton, texting something into his cell phone. “Okay yeah, the hair analysis.” He pocketed his cell phone again. “After that, someone will call the funeral home to come collect her. You chose a funeral home, of course.”

“You’d be amazed what we can learn from a single hair,” said Simmons, his hand on my back as he guided me to the door. “If she was drinking or doing drugs, for instance. If she was surprised by death because she was having a bit too much to drink or she’d indulged in some other form of substance abuse, we’ll know that when we get the results.”

I clenched my jaw. “Judith was like a mother to me. Did you see that in your file? She took me in when my parents died. She did drink, but--”

“I am so sorry,” said Walton, almost touching my hand. He stopped himself. Why had he stopped himself from touching me? Did he see something in my face? “No one meant to suggest that your aunt’s death was caused by alcoholism or drugs. I apologize.”

Simmons tripped over himself to apologize as well. “Definitely not my intention, no; I just find forensics fascinating and sometimes I shoot off my mouth without thinking.”

“The dingo ate my baby, aye?” I grabbed my purse and spun toward the door. “That’s what you think? Not all women fall to pieces. Not all of us can afford to fall to pieces. We have jobs to do, we all have jobs.”

“As I said, I do apologize,” said Simmons, with his hand on my back. “We’ll have an officer drive you home.”

After the officer dropped me off at Judith’s house, I scrutinized my reflection in each mirror I passed by. I reapplied my makeup, ignoring the sensations of swarms of bees crawling beneath my skin, batting their wings, buzzing, looking for a way out. I refused to scratch the ferocious itching and

instead, applied antihistamine cream with a vigorous rubbing motion.

Lifting the receiver of the landline in the parlor, I dialed Edmund's cell phone. He answered right away. "You call to apologize to me for lying, Carolyn? Making a fool of me?"

"I do apologize; I wasn't trying to make a fool of you. I'd like to make it up to you, if you let me." My voice could be quite husky and provocative when I wanted it to be. "Why don't you come over tonight and I'll fry up some steaks, we'll have a few drinks and some laughs?"

There was a sound of ice clinking together in a glass and I smiled. He already began drinking. How predictable.

"Steaks? You keep me on a leash while you party with any asshole who can afford to play and now you expect to feed me some fucking steak and all is forgotten, you lying whore?" He gulped down his bourbon. It was always bourbon with Edmund. "I'm done taking no for an answer from you, and I won't marry a whore, trust me. Nothing is ever forgotten."

With my hand inside my purse, I stroked the clear, cold glass vial. "I appreciate that, Edmund. Help me clear out the rest of Judith's things. I have a truck coming tomorrow to haul it all away. I'll make Almond Toffee Pie for dessert. I found a new recipe I want to try. Just come over, and come hungry."

"I'm always hungry."

"I'm counting on that," I said, ending the call.

Lucifer leaped up onto the telephone table, and nuzzled his head against me and purred. "That's right, baby. A guest for dinner."

As Lucifer dropped to the floor and headed off in pursuit of shadows, I turned to leave the parlor and caught my reflection in one of the mirrors for just a moment. For just that moment, I thought I saw a tiny swirling beneath my lower lip. I approached the mirror with a racing heart and touched my face. One single hair...

COUNSEL

I.M.G.

Jesus woke up in a ditch. He didn't remember how he got there, but there he was, in a ditch. Looking up at his truck He thought to himself, *why am I down here when there's a perfectly good truck up there?* He stood up, patted the red clay dust off his jeans, tightened his belt, put on his ballcap, and walked around the truck to the driver's side. The sun had just peeked out from over the flat, empty plains. Cattle used to run here, and before that bison. Now the grass was gone and all that was left was red clay. Jesus took a deep breath of the crisp, dry air as he took in the sunrise. He thought it looked like a fresh egg cracked over a brick. He didn't notice the black and white car that had pulled up behind him, or the man in the tan uniform as he stepped out. No, it wasn't until he heard the click-click of bootheels on the asphalt that he turned and looked.

"Mornin' Officer. That's a mighty fine hat you got there."

The officer's hat was a white Stetson. His boots were plain, made of amber-harness leather. His badge said, "Texas State Police."

"What in the hell are you doing out here?"

"Well, I'm getting in my truck."

The officer rolled his eyes, not that Jesus could see from behind the aviators the officer wore. Jesus wouldn't have cared anyway. He had been on the road for about 6 months now, and this wasn't the first cop he'd talked to on the side of the road. When you drive an old Chevy, you get used to talking with cops. It's like they're all Ford guys. The only time he was grateful for the police was the time when one drove him to the local Autozone outside of Calexico to get a new thermostat. Without him, Jesus would have had to walk 20 miles in the desert in July. He was laying down in a ditch to keep cool when that cop rolled up. With this cop he was doing the same, dazed from non-stop driving on Interstate 40 before getting off the beaten path in a fit of boredom, exhaustion, and excitement of a road he'd never been down. Today, though, all Jesus wanted was a cup of coffee and old Boss Hogg was standing between him and the finest coffee Stripes had to offer.

"License and registration. You been Drinking?" The officer was resting his thumb on the button of his tooled-leather holster. Jesus noticed it was a Glock 19.

"What happened to the days when y'all used to carry .38s?"

The officer removed his hand from his pistol holster.

“Give me your license and registration. This ain’t a goddamned social hour, son.”

“Well, sir, the only person who calls me son is my father, and he’s dead, so far as my license and registration, may I ask what for?”

“Because I said so, and that’s a lawful order. You’re out here in the middle of nowhere, on the side of the road, at the asscrack of dawn, and you got California plates. You look suspicious.”

The sun was climbing in the sky and whatever moisture had been captured by the night was burning off. The asphalt began radiating that dull petroleum-scented fragrance it gets when it is first poured.

“Sir, last I checked it was legal to sleep in your vehicle in the great state of Texas.”

“Be that as it may, if you do not comply, we’re going to have a problem.”

The officer’s hand had meandered back to his holster and his thumb had loosened the strap on his Glock 19. Jesus had a wry smile on his face as the officer started tapping his foot on the freshly repaved tarmac. *Too easy*, Jesus thought. He said to the officer, “Look, chief, I’m gonna reach into my pocket and grab my license, then I’m going to go around my truck to the other side to get my registration. Try not to shoot me in the meantime.”

The officer blushed as he removed his hand from his holstered weapon again. Jesus smiled wryly as he reached into his back pocket to pull out an old brown leather tri-fold wallet. Half of the seams were split and the stitching, which had been white when it was new, was now dyed the same color as the leather. The cop started tapping his foot on the ground as Jesus thumbed through the four or five government-issued IDs he kept in the center fold, to produce his Maryland driver’s license. He handed the card to the officer, strolled around to the passenger side of the truck, opened the door casually, and rummaged around the glove box for his registration among the old auto parts receipts.

“Hurry up, we ain’t got all day out here,” the officer shouted. Not a single other soul had passed down that highway yet that morning.

“Sir, you must be new at this. I mean, you must be if your dispatch sent you all the way out here damn near to Oklahoma on an endless road to nowhere looking for supposed vagrants.” Jesus pulled off his ballcap and combed through his dark brown hair with his fingers. His hair was the same color as his mother’s and her mother’s before her. She used to comb through his hair with her fingers and say *I love you, mijo*, after she spanked him or washed his mouth out with soap for smarting off. The sun was creeping higher as its rays began to beat on his cinnamon skin.

Jesus handed his registration to the scowling officer. “Wait here,” he said before walking back to his patrol car. Jesus knew it would take him about

10 minutes to run his license and his plates, just long enough to smoke a cigarette. He reached into the breast pocket of his blue work shirt, pulled out his pack and his brass lighter, and lit one up. Wisps of white smoke billowed from under the brim of his ballcap. He had been smoking since he was 18, when he worked the graveyard shift at a railyard in Redding. The nights would get cold there, which wasn't bad when the workers were moving, but on break the only way to stay warm was to smoke. The only time Jesus made friends was at a smoke pit, shooting the shit with random people, bumming a smoke, or giving a smoke to a bum. Later, when he was stationed at Hickam Air Force Base, he met his first wife at the smoke pit. As he reminisced about her long black hair that smelled like the Marlboro special blends she smoked, he unconsciously rubbed the scar on his chin where she made sure the diamond he bought her drew blood. He was flying back seat on a mission over Jalalabad when his flight chief held his divorce papers in the operations briefing room.

The officer opened the door of his patrol car and Jesus field dressed his cigarette and put the butt in his pocket. He hated seeing cigarette butts on the ground.

"I'm gonna have to search your truck," the officer said.

"I'm gonna have to say no to that, sir."

"What do you mean, 'no'?"

Jesus knew the cop had been told who to search and how to get consent. They don't ask for it, they order it. He hated the shield-shaped badges they wore on their chest like armor against people like him. Regular people. Normal people just trying to go about their business. Half the time cops would just issue a warning or a ticket and send him on his way. No badgering, no interrogations. Just cut and dry. Those he could deal with, as much as the stolen time made him curse and shout at his windshield, and the time in court made him have to press his suit and shave his face. It was the cowboys that made his blood boil. Every greenhorn trooper or ranger think's they're goddamned John Wayne.

Jesus stuck his thumbs in his belt loops and leaned against the driver's door of his old Chevy. "I mean, you have no right to search my property unless you have probable cause for a search, or a warrant. I know the next question you're going to ask me is to either perform a field sobriety test or take a breathalyzer, both of which constitute a search. You're gonna need a warrant for that."

"Jesus, is it?"

"Our Lord and Savior, you can say it like that."

"Well, Jesus, here's what's gonna happen then. Since you're being obtuse, you're gonna turn around, I'm gonna cuff you and sit you down in the back of my vehicle, and I'm gonna get my captain on the phone. Either way,

I'm going to search your vehicle, so you can open it up, or you can wait 'til we get back to the station. Your choice."

Jesus smiled. "It was never my choice, was it?"

Jesus had never been arrested, but he had been in the back of many a police car. When he was a kid, the Oakland police liked to pick up neighborhood boys right around when school was about to let off. They'd run their name, search their bags and their pockets, and leave them in the back of their patrol cars while they chatted with their other cop buddies. One time, Jesus was picked up near Jack London Square because there was an armed robbery of a Korean store two blocks down. He was on his way back from football practice that afternoon. He laughed at the cop when he opened up his bag and the stench of his equipment wafted up. Jesus never washed his practice jersey in four years of football. It was bad luck. There was a Ranger he used to fly with who never washed his patrol cap for the same reason before he became a flyer. They left the war on the same C-17 to Germany. Later, when Jesus was waiting on a C-17 to fly him from Hickam to Travis and his home, his flight chief called him with the news that the Ranger was killed in Florida on the side of the road.

Jesus turned around and put both hands on the driver's window of his truck. He looked back over his shoulder at the officer with a sharpness in his eye. "Well sir, I guess we're gonna spend some time together. I ain't got nowhere to be, and you're getting paid to be out here."

The officer spit on the ground as he pulled out his handcuffs and scoffed, "You'd think a veteran would know how to respect authority and shut his mouth. Even a half-Mexican one."

"You'd think a law enforcement officer would know the law. Even a racist one." Jesus shot back.

The officer walked toward the passive Jesus. The click of his bootheels raised the hair on Jesus' neck. *Shit, was that too much?* Jesus tried not to flinch when the officer grabbed his shoulder, squeezed the bracelets around his wrists, and pushed him slightly towards the patrol car and away from the only home he had known for the past six months. He was thankful that the rising heat drew sweat from his brow to hide the sweat that would have formed from his nerves. Whether he would step back on to the tarmac depended on him keeping cool. He knew that. Any sign that he wasn't would ruin his fun.

"Wait here."

"Take your time."

A semi-truck billowing black smoke from the chrome pipe above the cab drove by as the officer shut the door. In the back of the police car, Jesus closed his eyes. He was still tired from the long stretch he had just made,

and the sun was drawing out his energy. The back of the police car was cool, and the seats were hard. They reminded him of bus seats to and from the flightline. He preferred to walk. Every day when his flight block of 10 air-men would walk together from the briefing room to the 10 aircraft waiting for them as plain-clothed civilians pumped five thousand pounds of JP-8 into both wings. Every day for six months, he would smell the black smoke that poured out of the back of the engines as the propellers began to spin. In the summer, he was thankful for the rising heat radiating off the tarmac on takeoff.

The officer walked back to Jesus' truck and opened the back window of the camper shell. *This motherfucker*. The bedding and road cases were sitting in plain sight without opening the camper. The Remington 700 was in its case beneath the blankets and pillows. Jesus slept in the bed on cold nights up north, after long days chasing deer around the hills. He thought about the cold cinderblock cell he would have to sit in if this cowboy had his way, shivering like he did on those cold nights as he rocked back and forth in the back of the black and white.

Another patrol car arrived on the scene, flashing lights and everything. Jesus opened his eyes to see a large man in the same tan uniform and a dusty ball cap with a State Police patch on it. He wore a black canvas holster with webbing on it, and had black jump boots with the polish wearing off. His sideburns looked like a t-bone. The siren shook him out of his daze. *Maybe I'll get steak and eggs for breakfast.*

T-bone Sideburns would be a good name for a blues man. But for now, it was what Jesus thought an appropriate name for the ball-cap wearing officer. The cowboy didn't warrant a name so far as he was concerned. Jesus smiled as he watched old T-bone walk up to his subordinate and take a few extra seconds to wipe the sweat off his brow. He closed the camper shell and proceeded to guide the young officer around the truck, looking through the windows. There's a lot the police can get away with, if you're not careful. They're supposed to look for things in plain sight before soliciting a search. The only time Jesus had been searched was going through entry control points or military checkpoints. The desert plain of Texas was not a warzone or a military base.

Jesus closed his eyes again and this time he focused on his breath. He didn't want to think anymore. His shirt was soaked and his hands were shaking. The lord may work in mysterious ways, but the law doesn't. There is a limit to what you can do to a cop, even if you're right. Jesus didn't like getting shot at. His sweat-soaked shirt stopped his skin from sweating in that hard seat, but he couldn't stop his finger from its rapid tapping on the thigh of his jeans. "Five minutes." Five minutes is what he had left

in the tank. The front door opened, and his finger stopped as he opened his eyes.

Old T-bone's sat in the driver's seat of the patrol car. "Sorry, he's new," his wrinkled face reported as a consolation for the time his subordinate had stolen. Jesus smiled at that face that likely hadn't smiled much in its entire existence.

"I know." Jesus wanted to call the young officer a window licker and excoriate him about his lack of professionalism and competence. He didn't. "So, I'm assuming I can go get my coffee now?"

"I am curious," the officer said ignoring the question. "What are you doing out here?"

"Just passing through on my way north," Jesus' voice cracked. "Maybe east." He couldn't answer a question he didn't know the answer to.

"The kid wants to take you in. I told him we don't have probable cause or reasonable suspicion. But you knew that, didn't you?" T-bone looked him dead in the eye.

Jesus chuckled, "Well, if you'd taken me in, who knows what would happen. Maybe y'all would be buying me a new truck."

T-bone scoffed. "Well, that very well may be true. You know, I ain't never seen a Mexican with a German last name."

Jesus laughed, "I ain't Mexican. Tell the kid to lighten up. Maybe you should too. Also, maybe have some more weapons safety courses."

T-Bone sighed as he opened up his door, then opened up the back door. "Well, we ain't got nothing to hold you on, we've run your plates and your license and you're clean. As much as my colleague wants to push the issue, I won't. I would say you should watch your mouth, but you won't."

Both officers were silent at that point. The young one knew well enough not to open his mouth, and the old one had the reputation of the department in mind. Jesus had coffee on his mind. A place to stop on the road to who knows where. The shadows cast by the sun were beginning to shorten as he walked from the black and white car to his truck. The door squeaked as he opened it and climbed in. He took one last look at the officers as he started his engine. Over the low rumble, Jesus said to T-bone "You should really wash that hat."

"It's bad luck."

THE CRACK

Julian Ford

You step from the lecture hall with your head held higher than Atlas holding the world in his brazen arms. Classes are finished, fully and finally, not just for you but for everybody on campus. There are still probably some that have a few finals lurking in their shadows, pursuing them across the fields and through the halls, but you couldn't be ranked among such sorry souls. You've just finished your last statistics exam of the year, and by that same token, you've just finished your last *exam* of the year. This, you feel, is some cause for celebration, so you do what you always do when you're in a good mood and you take the long way home.

You turn from the academic hall, pattering along Hilltop Circle to watch the commuters roll by, and watch the setting sun play off of each and every one. Class ran late tonight, but it's almost Summer, and the standards for lateness haven't quite caught up with the shift of the seasons. Across the road, the trees that encircle the campus chirp and buzz with locusts, finally stirred from their annual hibernations. The sweet breezes of Summer engulf all of campus, made all the more saccharine by a season of preceding rain. Squirrels skip alongside the road, birds skate through the clouds, and in general, everything seems as satisfied with life as you. You shuffle along, trudging up Hilltop, barely noticing the sweat breaking out across your back.

You consider how you're going to spend the evening - maybe on the quad, watching the sunset, maybe in your dorm, with a movie and a bowl of popcorn, maybe driving around with a few friends, maybe just the same thing you're doing now - when suddenly you realize you're at the top of the hill, where the view of the surrounding area is at its best. In the far East, hazed by the late Spring air, Baltimore shines in the orange sundown, gleaming like Far Ithaca. The stark, hard edges of the city skyline slice firm against the swirling pink skies overhead, knives through so much butter. Adjacent to Baltimore, that nameless bridge sits above the unseen waters, nameless by way of ignorance. On first sight, *everybody* thinks it's the bay bridge, but you're *adamant* in your belief that the bay bridge is way too far-

Then something catches your attention, and the horizon drops from your thoughts. You crane your neck upwards to get a better look at it, cupping your eyes with a hand to block the sunrays. Increased attention doesn't

explain it any, though, and you stare at it for a long time before realizing you have no explanation for it.

Overhead, cutting through the rosy pink clouds of the evening, a thin, dark gash runs along the entire sky.

You scan it for a long time, trying to pin it down to a single word and coming up short every time. At first, you assumed it to be the final traces of a jetliner's fuel, like the "chemtrails" that one weirdo in your sociology class is always prattling on about - BWI is, of course, only a shuttle bus away, and planes always leave their tracks over the campus. The more you look at it, though, the more impossible a notion that seems. For one, it's sharp and well-defined, totally unlike the nebulous trails airplanes always leave behind. It has a color, too; a firm, deep black, far removed from the white of emission lines. More than anything, though, it's without pattern, jagged and random, zigzagging through the incongruous Spring skylight like a scribble, or a snake, or maybe a-

Or maybe a crack?

More sweat breaks out across your back. You tear your gaze from the sky and continue walking with an increased fervor. The hill slopes down under your feet, pulling you down, pushing you forward, but there's no joy in the newfound speed. You cross an empty intersection with your pockets in your hand, eyes at your shuffling feet, desperate to think of anything but the thing you saw (*thought* you saw) overhead. The commuters have disappeared now, and the breeze has all but died. Now the trees from across the way aren't singing but hissing, wheezing, begging you to vacate the streets as quickly and quietly as possible.

You keep your gaze down, prodded by the nagging thoughts in your head. What is it you're so afraid of, anyway? There are plenty of inexplicable weather patterns that, without context, seem some great cause for alarm. The Vikings and the Japanese thought rainbows were the bridges of the Gods, surely this wasn't any different? Maybe it was just a particularly obscure atmospheric occurrence, some hitherto undocumented phenomenon brought about by a warming climate. Surely, this wasn't anything out of the ordinary, was it?

Was it?

Somehow, the thoughts sound tinny in your head, unconvincing. You try your best to keep your eyes steady at your toes, but you fail. Your eyes shoot skyward, and you're met with shock: the crack in the sky has grown.

You stop in your tracks, immobilized by sheer surprise. Against the rift's jagged edges, smaller splinters slither outwards across the firmament, blotting out the clouds behind it, eating up the stars and filling them in with darkness. The trunk of the splinter widens, doing so at a quicker pace than before, and suddenly any thoughts that this was a weather phenomenon

seem absurdly remote, nearly comic in its naivete. Worse still, as you continue to watch the splinter grow, a realization comes that puts everything preceding it to shame.

Across the horizon, more cracks are forming.

Immediately, all pretenses of calm are abandoned, and you break into something bordering between a jog and a full-on sprint. You aren't sure just where you're running, or just why, but you know that you can't stay out for any longer. Something terrible is happening, and the longer you stay out, the more likely it is you'll see it. The hill falls under your feet easily enough, and at the next intersection, you take a sharp left, turning away from the outer ring of the campus, trying to remember the quickest way back to the dorms. You run by a few apartments and a few parking garages and come out under the shadow of the library, situated at the base of the quad. Across the grass, your dorms slump against the road, tantalizingly out of reach. All you've got to do is make it across the quad, get into your dorm, and you're home again, home again, jiggety-jig.

Panting, you cut to the nearest bench and lean against it, shocked by how winded you've become. As desperate as you are to get to your dorm, the stitch in your side is begging you to stop, and you comply. In the quad, you see (with no great surprise) a girl and a boy gazing skyward, lacrosse sticks at their feet, baseball caps in the air. They must have been in the middle of the game when it - whatever it was - started, and now they look as enamored as you. The sight is vindicating; you aren't going crazy. You toy with the idea of running up to them when one of them screams and points upward. The scream jolts you from your stupor, and in spite of every screaming synapse in your body, you look up again. Then, very much against your will, you scream too, and burst into a sprint with reinvigorated energy, not even bothering to see how the quad-goers react. Strangely enough, it's them that you'll remember last of the event, the innocent lacrosse players in the field, rather than that final thing you see in the sky, that last push into a frenzied, mindless explosion towards your dorm. Those blameless people, out and looking for a fun time, so carefree, just as you had been minutes before, ready to put that semester utterly behind you.

Overhead, pointing through the rift in the sky, ten fingers and two gaping eyes peered from out of their darkness and into this world.

PERFECTDAY

Ryan Saladino

Of course, you'll walk down the aisle, beaming at the congregation, doing your best to make it look like you actually want to be there, swinging your gaze from the eyes of the crowd to the stained glass windows, or the great pool of holy water in front of the altar, or the marble floors that shine and pop with every step, and you'll feel the beads of sweat as they drip from your father's cold, clammy hand as he wheels his little wheelchair along next to you, both of you going as slowly as possible so that the other can keep up – or, maybe so your father can smile heartily at each and every guest as he rolls by, as if the beautiful blonde woman in the white dress next to him is a precious show-and-tell item, never before revealed to the world, and in turn, each and every guest can return the gesture without the strained wrinkles or evaporating hair – that is, except for the herd of children that you pass by who don't smile back, only because their plastic racecars are too busy burning rubber on the mahogany of the pew and the worn covers of the worship manuals, and as your father's gaze leaves them to their antics and the cars struggle to find their track, he'll turn to you with glittering eyes and joke about how he wants to go back to the back of the cathedral, to the inception of the aisle, and he wants to try the walk again, only standing up this time – after all, the cameraman's roll of footage won't look like what he envisioned again and again in his mind, but he'll drop his jests by the third row of pews, because that's when your eyes will lock with another gaze: the suited man beside the great lake of holy water, his smile gentle and warm like a tranquil morning sun as you creep up to the territory of the altar, and he'll look the dress he bought you up and down – expensive, pale, backless, just like you – while he adjusts his pressed black suit, one which you won't be able to pick out a single wrinkle on, and after a couple moments of shriveling under his gaze, you'll realize that another all-too-familiar face is smiling at you from the front row of pews, and your gaze will turn to him – not him, *him* – and you'll stare at the way he's pulled his sheepish curly hair out of his eyes and reigned it back, wondering if you've ever seen him clean up this much, or this well – not in the pictures from Amsterdam, or Sydney, and certainly not Dubai – in fact, not anywhere he travelled with the band – and you'll wonder if he still smells the same way that his hotel room did last night, like buttery crushed soap and wrinkled drier sheets, and if his hands

still sport the same coarse smoothness as when he peeled your dress off, and if he still tastes like the same expensive wine that you spent two hours – straight – spinning like a centrifuge in your glass, and as your mind starts to move deeper into the bed, burying itself like your face in the pillow, you'll bite your tongue and feverishly snip apart the ropework that binds your eyes to his, because at this point, you'll be moments from standing before the groom, and now you'll be able to see that he really doesn't have a single wrinkle upon him, and your father will shift to a halt as if there's a red traffic light hanging above the altar, or an invisible barrier that prevents him from rolling any farther along, and he'll pull your ear down to his cracked lips and relay, again, how proud of you he is, how delighted he is that you've finally found a man that can take care of you, a man who can use his wealth and love and status to support you, and then your father's hand will slip from yours as he changes direction and wheels his squeaking steel throne to the single designated 'RESERVED FOR FAMILY OF THE BRIDE' spot, its only use to seat his suit jacket as he struggles out of it, folds it carefully, and sets it on the pew under the sign, but at this point, your attention will have left him – you'll be more focused on the man directly in front of you who, in thirty-two minutes, will be your husband, and the man a short distance away from you who, in thirty-two minutes, will not be your husband, but when you look at it reasonably, like you've told yourself countless times to, you can see they're two sides of the same coin – one polished, and smooth, and reliable – a best foot forward – and the other mysterious, and wonderful, and rolling, rolling away, spinning on its side away from you until it's someplace far out of reach – it's like a beautiful flower you've been waiting on to bloom, waiting and waiting and waiting, only to realize that it never will, probably not in your lifetime, and certainly not in your father's flailing lifetime; the words will be quick, as if they're speeding you toward your fate, and in no time you'll be holding a pair of unbelievably smooth hands and choking out your vows – *I do*, you'll say, but the words won't echo in your head in that order – you'll be prepared to plaster on a smile like you're a member of one of the stained glass windows that shines down on your face, just to make your act passable, to make it believable as the starry-eyed priest next to you fuses the two of you together like he's a scientist shaping a new species, but when he finishes reciting the binding incantations, you'll realize you no longer have command over yourself – not to smile, not to say "I love you," not to lean forward and imagine the expensive wine again, spinning, spinning – and your body will be floating, sailing away like an angel, toward the painted ceiling where cherubs that would rival Michelangelo's twist and dance, and the congregation will gasp as you tilt, their eyes will tear themselves from hymnals and windows and watches and phones, and for the briefest of moments, even the plastic cars will stop

racing over the worship books, and *his* eyes, and his eyes will be all you can watch as you stumble in a failed attempt to catch yourself, eyes brimming with surprise and wonder, and your golden head, your neatly-tied bun will hit the surface of the holy water lake like a fair little porcelain hailstone, and you'll sink, deep down into endless depths, an infinite expanse of blue that rivals the deepest ocean floor, sailing down with your glittering white dress puffing out in all directions like an elegant jellyfish, your newfound angel wings donated to the cherubs above, your breaths quickening and slowing as you feel drowned in thousands of cold, clammy hands, hands that you recognize, that pull you down, deeper and deeper, until the stained light that shines on the surface is gone, hands that are as cold as the holy water itself, that chill you to your very bones – cold, so very cold...

THE PRINCE FROM BEAUTY AND THE BEAST, THE ONE WHO'S CURSED TO LIVE A LIFE HE CAN NEVER ESCAPE FROM, GOD, THAT MUST REALLY SUCK.

Ryan Saladino

That's when I remember. My little Andrew is still sitting on the floor of the living room, watching *The Adventures of Sparkington the Superdog*. The little yellow mutt is probably yapping away in his fluttering cape about The Importance of Friends and Telling the Truth, and Andrew is leaning forward, his head almost hitting the flatscreen as if he's trying to become one with the cartoon.

I jerk the sedan to a stop and it practically skids over the double yellow line. The rosaries hanging from the rearview mirror smack against the windshield. My seatbelt snaps against my chest in a chokehold, gripping and then quickly releasing me as I catch my breath.

"Why are we stopping?" Bethany croaks from the passenger's seat. Her hand cups her bloodied arm.

Sparkington always comes on in the morning before I take Andrew to school or the doctor's. I watch it too, out of the corner of my eye, to measure the time I have to get ready. He never wants to leave before Sparkington reveals his life lesson. I don't let him look at the TV guide or keep watching past eight thirty *sharp*, when my third alarm rings, because if he knew the show ran all morning he'd never want to leave.

"*Anne*," Bethany says again, with more persistence this time, leaning over and gripping my shoulder as if she's trying to show me something. "Why are we stopping? We're almost at the hospital."

I don't answer, not immediately. My mind traces the route to the school and I think of all those little pink 'Missed Homework' slips. Andrew has quite the collection of them because of his doctor's appointments. The woman who writes them up always gives me a bad look when I go to drop him off. Her face looks like the one lady from *Monsters Inc*, the one who is

always on Mike Wazowski's case, only without the slug tail. I'd never seen her move, though I do imagine she leaves a trail of slime wherever she walks. It always takes a while to get her out of my brain when I go back home, and every time I'm left shuddering throughout the morning while I wish my forgetfulness would, for once, work in my favor and erase her from my memory.

But that didn't happen this morning. So that means I never saw her today.

I look at Bethany with paralyzed eyes. "Andrew..."

She stares at me, her own widening behind the long blonde hair that flutters into them. "You said he wasn't at your house."

I shake my head and spin the wheel in my hands, twisting the car into the opposite lane. There's fog out today. Like, a lot of fog. Like, Michael Jackson 'Thriller' fog. It covers the road and the farmland around us, and my high beams can barely stretch twenty feet in front of us before cutting off on a cloud of gray. My surroundings are almost as indiscernible as the scribbles on my calendar – the ones that should have reminded me to get Andrew to school. How had I forgotten to take him there, of all things? He couldn't still be at the house. He couldn't.

I try to retrace the morning. Andrew hadn't noticed all the bloodstains on the carpet. He was already at school because I'd taken him early – no, wait, he was still asleep. I was letting him sleep because of all the blood tests yesterday. That's why he didn't see his Aunt Bethany when she stumbled through the door, bleeding all over my newly-steamed carpet.

"What the hell happened to you?" I asked her as I grabbed my sweatshirt off the kitchen counter and tied it around her arm. She'd been shot. Twice. Not directly, thank God, only grazed. The two impact welts on her skin looked like beady red eyes staring up at me.

"I said I wouldn't leave with him," she sobbed. "I told him I was done. He's killed someone, Anne, he wants to kill *me* next if I don't steal from you so we can run away..."

"Slow down, slow down," I said, dabbing at her wound. I was already having a hard time following.

"It's Felix," she said, grunting and wincing as I tended to her arm. "He killed a guy, over at Teagan and Hobbes... another drug dealer, I think... he's trying to scam now, leave the country before the cops find him. He wants money to get away... he told me to rob you so that we could run away together."

"So are you robbing me?"

"Of course not! I told him that, and then he attacked me, so I came

here. But I think he followed me... I think he's coming here too. And he has a gun."

"I'll call the police."

"No!" Her hand rushes to mine as I reach for my phone, dripping blood down my wrist. "No. If you do that, he'll kill us both for sure."

"He'll kill us both for sure," I repeated.

"We have to leave. We have to get far away, where he can't find us. Then we can figure out—"

"Far away? Bethany, where would we go?" I asked.

She opened her mouth and then closed it, biting her lip.

I gazed back down the hall toward Andrew's room. If we left with no destination, his medication would only last so long. "I can pay Felix. I'll pay him and he'll leave by himself and leave you alone. That's all he wants, right? Money?"

She winced and sighed. "Just enough to leave the country..."

I stared at her arm again. "We have to get you to a hospital. I'll leave it here for him."

Her eyes widened and she eyed the crystal bauble on my fireplace mantle. "I'm fine. And you can't. He'll take more than just the money."

"We'll be okay, as long as we're not here when he is," I said. Material things can be replaced. That's what I told Andrew when his glow-in-the-dark beach ball had bounced into the river and gone on a journey to the next county over. He'd tried to jump in after it, but luckily I had been quick enough to catch him by the neck of his shirt. Material things can be replaced. You cannot.

"How long has it been?" I ask, keeping my eyes trained on the road.

"What?" Bethany grunts as she adjusts the sweatshirt tied around her arm.

"Since we left the house."

She checks her phone, bringing up a picture of her and Felix together, hand in hand. He looks exactly how I thought he'd look, or at the very least not too far removed.

"Twenty minutes. Anne, he's probably there by now."

My foot flirts with the gas pedal, trying not to push the sedan too far past sixty with the fog everywhere. "I locked the door."

"That won't stop him. Felix gets what he wants."

He probably does. He seems like the kind of guy who always gets what he wants, one way or another. I don't know, though – I only just met him this morning over the phone.

“Hello?” I said when Bethany gave me his number.

“Who the hell is this?”

I gulped. His gruff voice reminded me of the leader of some biker gang, a real bad one, with tattoos snaking up his arms of images that would make a priest blush and a ring through his nose like some kind of angered bull. He probably drove a motorcycle with flames plastered all over it. I didn’t think we had biker gangs this far up in rural Maine. “I’m Anne... Bethany’s sister.”

“Bethany, yeah? Well you can tell that bitch her throat’s about to—”

“I have your money,” I said quickly.

He paused for a moment on the other side of the line, and I could imagine him twiddling his fingers together like an evil mastermind. “My money?”

“Enough to get you across the border. So you’ll leave us alone.”

He chuckled. “Well, then, alright. Where?”

“My house.”

“I guess we have a deal.”

“I live at—”

“I know where you live.”

I shuddered, my free hand gripping the marble counter so hard that my knuckles were losing feeling. “There’s a fake well in my front yard. Under the big cherry tree. I’ll leave it in there.”

“Perfect,” he said, and hung up.

“This is a bad idea,” Bethany said.

I threw a series of towels over my blood-mottled carpet. “Let’s get you to the hospital,” I insisted.

For once, I’m not worried about The Slug Lady haunting my memory. A different face, one with considerably more tattoos, has taken her place. It’s 9:25 now, and that means it’s time for Sparkington to confront his episode’s antagonist. There’s lots to choose from – the cyborg dog, the evil miser cat with the bow tie – don’t ask me how he ties it – and there’s this little group of penguins and one of them kind of looks like the one from that one movie where they’re all dancing, I think, but just more evil. I can only hope that the antagonist won’t present himself in the form of the tattooed man bursting through my front door.

Maybe Andrew’s not in the living room. Maybe he’s enjoying his new-found day off by other means. Maybe he got bored of Sparkington’s antics and went back to his own room, twisting up the extra pink slips that lie strewn around on his floor. Someone at school had taught him how to make little origami figures out of them. Since then, a herd of deformed pink creatures had invaded his bedside shelf. I could only guess as to what each of

them was.

“Is this one a stingray?” I asked.

“It’s a dog,” he said.

“Oh, yes, I see it,” I said, staring at the flattened head and three legs.

I barrel through a red light and Bethany braces herself against the passenger’s seat. She keeps lifting her phone to her ear and putting it back down and cursing.

“He’s not picking up,” she says.

“Don’t call him. Why would you call him?”

“I’m just trying to help out here,” she spits desperately.

We round the corner off Fifth and Lawrence and, of course, the railroad crossing barrier is down, and a train is snaking along the tracks in front of us, its body peeling off into the fog in either direction.

“*Damn* it!” Bethany says.

I screech the car to a stop next to the tracks. We’re only a few minutes from my house. I know that because I spot the treehouse off in the meadow next to us, which means the next block over is the Olson’s Farm, and after that, the graveyard of the neighborhood church.

We’re so close. So close to Andrew. Do I want to scream? I can’t harness my breath for it. I stare past Bethany, who is banging her fist against the dashboard, and for a moment all I can see out the window is us two sisters in that treehouse. We always laid in there in the fading sunlight for hours in the summer before fifth grade, breathing hot air and imagining and drawing and waiting until it was safe to cross the tracks and head back down the street.

“Why do you forget things?” Bethany asked, stretched out on the treehouse floor like the starfish I’d just sketched.

“I don’t forget things *that* much.”

“Gina from spelling says you do. She says you forget homework and stuff all the time and Mrs. Collins lets you off easy.”

I didn’t really care what Gina From Spelling had to say. I was writing things down in my homework book at *least* two or three times. Sometimes *four*. People kept whispering in the background, in the hallways, in the stairwells, thinking I wouldn’t hear them. It wasn’t like I didn’t – more that I chose not to. I only needed to worry about what I was doing for myself. I wasn’t going to let it affect me.

“So, what is it? And *don’t* tell me you forget why it happens,” Bethany added.

I sighed and picked a splinter out of the floor, twirling it in my fingers. “I think I’m cursed.”

She looked at me quizzically. “Cursed? Like the prince from Beauty and the Beast?”

“Like the prince from Beauty and the Beast.”

She sighed. “I wish I was cursed. Then maybe I’d get out of Mrs. Collins’ stupid English project.”

Today’s Bethany seems intent on tearing her hair out and ruining my car’s dashboard. I grab her arm, taking care not to touch her injury. Her hands stop abruptly and it’s like her tears freeze on her cheeks.

“Stop that,” I say. “You’re making your arm worse.”

She shakes her head slowly, looking at me with churning eyes. “You don’t deserve this, Anne. I should never have come here, I...” She trails off and I stay silent. Having a conversation with Bethany requires more care and precision than playing Operation with Andrew.

“This is all my fault,” she continues. “You and your son are in danger because of me, because of my stupid—”

“Andrew will be fine,” I say. It’s more of an insistence to myself than anything. Andrew will be fine. He will be. There’s no other way to see it.

I shriek silently at the train to move faster. I want to wave it past, to push it over like it’s one of those tiny plastic models that chugs infinitely around its track. But all I can do is hold the steering wheel in a death grip and listen to Bethany’s sobs.

She lifts her head after choking a few more tears into her jacket, rubbing at the mascara that seeps down her cheeks. Her blue eyes look like the ocean, only not the calm, clear version that sits in paintings around my living room, but the sad, stormy kind that sweeps up on little sailboats when they least expect it. She still looks as pretty as ever, though. I think that’s her thing.

I mean, it’s nothing new for her. My sister has always been pretty. More so than me, I’m sure of that. We’d look in the mirror in the morning as teenagers and I could see it, and I was okay with that. Between two sisters there’s always The Pretty One. I had my own things going for me, or so I liked to think.

“You’re going to be a model,” I told her.

“No, I’m not,” she laughed.

No, she was not. She had the looks part down. She had the confidence part down. She had the boys part down. She had the partying part down. She had the partying part a little too down.

All she needed me for was moral support, and loans. A lot of loans. Even more loans when our father died and left the estate to me in his will. I always thought that was a strange decision on my father's part. Did he really think with my forgetfulness that I was the more responsible one? After a while, though, I started to see why.

"I need you to spot me," she said.

"Bethany," I started, and I stopped there, because I knew she would interrupt me and I just didn't have anything else to say. We played this game a lot.

"Just a few! Just a tiny bit, I promise this is the last time. I just need a bit to tide me over. Please, you'll do that for me, won't you, Anne?"

Of course, she was going to spend most of it on drugs. A drug that I couldn't pronounce the name of. The slang was easy enough to say, but once you got into the nitty gritty of the much rarer things it was impossible to say their names. Metabnadrol Hypothencine. That's not a real chemical, by the way, but it was something like that.

I fished the bills out of my purse and shelled them out across my kitchen counter to her, one by one. "Thanks," she said, "I'll pay you back, I promise." The copies of Andrew Jackson's face just kind of looked at me like we were never going to see each other again. And we never did.

That's how she met him, I guess. Through the Metabnadrol Hypothencine. "Felix is amazing," she told me over pancakes at Bob Evan's. "I've never met anyone like him."

"What does he do?" I asked. I already knew the main thing he did, but I was hoping he did something besides supply my sister.

"He's an entrepreneur," she said.

I nodded as I slathered my meal in syrup. "An entrepreneur," I repeated slowly.

"Don't say it like that!" She laughed. "I know what you're thinking, Anne, but he's incredible. He's hardworking and he has connections. He's strong, handsome, charming..." She smiled slyly. "Not to mention, the sex is..." She trailed off as a family hobbled by us, giggling under her breath.

"I'm just looking out for you, Bethany," I said. That was my go-to cookie cutter response.

She crossed her arms. "I know, Anne. That's very... you. But I'm fine on my own."

I bit my lip, staring at my plate.

"He says he's gonna take me to Aruba," she continued. "*You've* never even been to Aruba, have you, Anne?"

"I've never been to Aruba," I said. I didn't think I would like to go, either.

The end of the train finally appears, and it's like seeing the light at the end of a tunnel. As soon as it passes, it vanishes into the fog like it was never really there. I waste no time accelerating the car forward, bumping it over the tracks. Bethany now has her hands clasped together. It looks like she's praying, but that's kind of weird, considering the last time I tried to get her to come to church with me, she blew me off and called the Prodigal Son an asshole.

The fog is sweeping over us, consuming the road. I can barely see the spire of the Olson Farm's silo, or the barn where I take Andrew after Sunday School to pet the animals. I can't find Mrs. Olson's pink Cadillac in the dirt driveway, either. It's as if it's been eaten by the mist.

Abruptly, a hearse lurches into view on the other side of the road, making me jump. I don't really believe in omens, but I find myself launching into a few Hail Marias in my head. A little parade of drab cars flit past after the hearse. One by one, I study their drivers' solemn faces, each one replacing the last. They must be coming from the graveyard up ahead, heading to a reception to chat about their newly-buried body.

But I'm pretty sure that at a funeral reception like that, no one is actually talking about the person who died. It's just like this little theory I have. No hard evidence or anything – well, except my father's funeral reception. I buzzed around my kitchen and living room, listening like a fly on the wall to the people whispering in black suits and black dresses, and no one really cared because I think they knew it was going in one ear and out the other. And it was going. In one ear and out the other, I mean. They talked about things like finance, friendships, betrayals, sex, and oh how the little cheesy crackers I'd set out on strategically-placed plates were soooooo darling! Those were just the major themes I remember. My sister and I were certainly no different.

“You can't take that,” I said.

The crystal bauble from my mantle didn't quite fit in her purse, and it was sticking out and shining in the low light. It was easy to notice.

“Why not? What are you going to do with it, Anne?” She hissed.

“Dad left it to me in the inheritance. In the will. Along with the house. I think it's quite expensive.”

“It's just one little thing. It's not doing any damn good sitting around here collecting dust.”

I paused for a moment, staring at the crystal as she twirled it between her elongated crimson nails. I was going to say something powerful, something important, but I couldn't remember what it was. “I think you should leave,” I said.

“What? When someone, when your own sister, starts grabbing at things you never cared about, suddenly you get all protective? Suddenly you feel like it all belongs to you? Dad didn’t leave me anything!”

I could’ve sworn he left her something. But I’d known for a long time she wanted this house, because of all the space and the pool in the back. I was certain I wouldn’t be filling that up unless I could figure out some way to remind myself to drain it in the winter.

“Bethany, you know that’s not true,” I said. “You’re drunk, you don’t know what you’re saying.”

“It’s not like you’ll even *remember* it’s missing,” she snarled.

I think it was snowing, too. I remember that much because when I finally coaxed the bauble away from her and she stormed out into the front yard, she nearly stumbled in a snowbank as she trudged away with her middle finger raised.

“Enjoy daddy’s presents, Anne!” she shouted as she slunk into the Uber.

I felt bad. I felt really bad. I would even say I felt like I’d started lowering another mahogany casket into the ground. The guests’ conversations had shifted again, now focusing on her. “How *deplorable*,” they said. “What a *shame*.”

Bethany finally looks up as the graveyard gate comes into view. “I’m a bad person.”

I keep staring straight ahead. “Everyone’s bad, one way or another.”

“You’re not. That’s why I came to you in the first place. I have no one else, and I knew you would help... why? Why are you helping me?”

I don’t say anything. I’m still and silent, like freezing in place will make her forget I’m there. It doesn’t work and just ends up a mess, of course.

“Why didn’t you turn me away, Anne? I’ve been a damn criminal to you. Don’t you hate me?” She’s practically in tears again. I’ve seen more water spill from her eyes in the past fifteen minutes than bubbled up from a broken pipe onto our street last month. “You hate me, right?”

“Is that what you want me to say?” I finally snap. “Bethany, I hate you? Bethany, I wish you weren’t my sister? Bethany, why couldn’t you ever just stay inside all day, alone, like me? Bethany, I wish I could forget you? Bethany, I wish you had the heart condition and not Andrew? Bethany, why couldn’t you stay where you’ve been for the past six months in... um...”

“Island Falls?” My sister says flatly.

“Island Falls,” I finish. “Is that good enough yet?”

“Just say something! All those things! I don’t care. Just don’t make me feel like I’m all alone over here,” she murmurs.

The graveyard is coming up, and part of me – the part that just said all

those things to Bethany, I guess – wants to leap out of the car and flop into a freshly-dug six-foot hole. Bethany’s eyes are puffy and red and pleading, but for once she’s not seeking pity or money or the crystal bauble or just *ooooone* bottle of wine, Anne, I swear! She looks at me like I’m the last person on Earth, one last lifeline.

“You need it,” I say. “If you want a reason why I’m helping you. It’s because you need it, okay? You came back, you’re still here, you’re still you.” Material things can be replaced. You cannot. “So I can’t say I hate you, or any of those things. You’re still my sister.”

She looks at me hard, like I’m under a microscope, for a long moment. “You are something else, Anne. Seriously.”

We’re driving past the graveyard now. It’s a familiar sight to me, since I’ve been in there a couple times, trying to memorize all the names. I thought it would be an interesting activity to see how many I could remember. James McFarlane. That was an easy one, since we had three or more parks dedicated to him around the area. He was in the war – Civil or World – and he won a purple heart. Susan Dufflin, she was a writer. I read some of her works and I can’t say I really liked them. Arnold Gold... wait – maybe he was the war hero? He has a big crypt all to himself and everything. Lots of them do. The graveyard looks more like a little neighborhood of playhouses than yard of bodies.

The one I remember most clearly is tucked away in the corner, covered in dust. Despite the fog, I can see it now. Tyler Olson. He’d died in the eighteen-hundreds at the age of twelve from typhoid. What a way to go. Mrs. Olson is his sister’s daughter’s daughter. She was getting rickety in age, but I asked her why they didn’t give Tyler a big crypt like the others.

“I don’t think they could afford it,” she said.

“Anything they could’ve given him is better than a dusty little corner of that graveyard. It’s so... forgettable.”

She shrugged. “My grandmother said Tyler was a quiet child. Maybe that’s what he would have wanted. I’m certain Jesus welcomed him into the Kingdom just the same.”

Mrs. Olson was in charge of taking Andrew to Sunday School on the weekends, so I didn’t want to keep pressing her. She’d agreed ever so graciously when I told her my work schedule had changed and I could no longer get him there. “Of course!” she’d said. “There’s nothing I admire more than a good Christian mother doing what she can to educate her son about the Good Word.”

I thanked her, but I never forgot about Tyler Olson’s grave, and how sad and lonely it looked. And now it makes me have one of Those Thoughts.

The kind that's like a fly you just want to swat away, but it keeps buzzing in your face, and when it finally disappears you think it's gone for good, but it turns out it landed on your shoulder five minutes ago and it's been there the whole time! I hate Those Thoughts. I hate that I picture Andrew there, lying under the sad stone in the corner, where no one would remember him, not even me.

I push it away, firmly out of my mind, by the time I pull up in front of my house. My front yard looks perfectly picturesque, with the cherry trees and the lavender bushes and the fake well with the dead drop in it. It seems that way, that is, until I notice the giant hole in my front bay window. The glass is shattered like someone's thrown a brick through it, which could very well be the case. My heart leaps to my throat and tears form in my eyes as we get out of the car and rush up to the front door.

"The money's gone," Bethany calls from behind me, peering into the well.

I can barely hear her over the rushing of the wind and the ringing in my ears. I unlock the door after paging through my labelled keys until I find the right one. As it swings open, I'm met with a horror scene. My heart drops like a rock. It looks like a tornado has just torn through my living room and kitchen. I step carefully over bits of broken china and glass.

"Andrew!" I shout. "Andrew, darling, where are you?"

Not here. My eyes rove over the tumbled furniture, the broken tables and chairs. The stuffing that's been torn out of the cushions and blows around my carpet like the fog outside. I step forward as if I'm in a trance, waiting, praying for Andrew to pop up out of nowhere and reassure me that he's fine. Silence has descended over everything like thin snow. There aren't any life lessons from Sparkington to be heard, since the TV has vanished altogether. I notice the crystal bauble is missing from above the mantle as well, leaving only its stand behind.

Bethany rushes through the door behind me and claps her hands over her mouth when she surveys the wreckage. She quickly races to the kitchen counter and snatches up a steak knife from the utensil rack. "Felix!" She roars. "Where are you, you son of a bitch? What did you do?"

"Andrew!" I yell again. "Andrew!" I feel like I keep calling his name, over and over again, yet every time I do it feels like the first time, like I'm trapped in some kind of really weird time loop. Am I falling or standing up? I can't tell. I stumble through what's left of my living room and head for Andrew's bedroom down the hall. His door is open, swinging loosely in the breeze that sweeps through the house. I push it open, half expecting to see his smiling face, sitting there on his bed folding another three-legged zebra or a plump little rabbit. But his room is in no better shape than the rest of the place – and worst of all, it's empty. The army of pink creatures lies

crushed on the floor, and I stare at them as I slowly sink to my knees in the crumpled paper. It's like Noah's flood has come too early and drowned all the animals, and now their little forms have melted away. All of Andrew's hard work is gone.

Andrew is gone.

I only hear Bethany come in behind me. "No one's here," she says. I guess she must see me on the floor with my face in my hands, wondering how my memory could take the Slug Lady from me so easily. "Anne, it's okay," she whispers. It's not okay. "We'll find them. I can get a trail on Felix, we can get the cops on him, we'll find Andrew, I promise; I know you don't believe me, but I swear I'll fix this. We'll fix everything."

"I forgot," I said blankly. It's almost like I can't believe it, even though I should. I stare up at Andrew's wall, his Sparkington posters, his Bible-themed calendar, this month sporting the sorrowful face of the Prodigal Son. I look at the days, the writing, his handwriting tracing my own.

"Bethany," I say. Her head is buried in my shoulder. "What day is it?"

She looks up at me like I have three heads. "It's Sunday."

There's a rumble from outside in my front yard, a low growl. Slowly, we release each other and get up. I walk toward the front of the house as if I'm in a trance, Bethany trailing close behind me. I hear voices. Laughing voices. I creep over the field of crushed glass, feeling pieces bury themselves in the bottoms of my Nikes, and stare out the broken bay window. A pink Cadillac has chugged up in my driveway. Mrs. Olson is the first to emerge from the driver's seat. Then, out pops my boy, my little Andrew, smiling like he's just walked into Philip's Ice Cream down the street, carrying his Sunday School packet. Mrs. Olson says something and they both giggle, and then they hold hands and walk, slowly, up to the door.

THE PERSONAL LOGS OF CAPTAIN MARLEIGH

Eshna Kumar

(The personal logs of Carrier Captain David Marleigh, assigned to S.S. Indefatigable, are here transcribed, as compiled by Junior Agent L. Mishra, as part of her mission (given 2 December 2349) to retrieve the Indefatigable and refill its computer records. Those sections which are considered relevant in Captain Marleigh's case are marked below.)

PERSONAL LOG

28 MAY 2349

Take-off was, as of this very minute, seven days ago. I officially left Z-Colony on the 21st of May at 9:04 AM.

I've been assigned to survey the expanse of area near asteroid B-34. Maybe not the most exciting mission, but someone's gotta do it. I suppose very few people would want to spend two months drifting through space alone, doing nothing but routine checks you just about know are going to turn up blank. Who else would they pick other than me? Good old, reliable Marleigh. There's a decent one. He'll do whatever you ask of him. I hope that's what they say about me.

It's not the first time I've been out alone, but it is the first time I've been alone in this quadrant. In some seasons, ships do pass through this stretch -- cargo ships, sometimes even large passenger ships. In the off season, though, the only ship to pass through is the occasional survey patrol. This time, that patrol is the Indefatigable.

Even though being out alone can mess with your mind, it's a unique experience in its own way. The closest intelligent life is a small settlement on B-39, but I'm already half a day's flight past them. After that it's a little less than three months' flight until I reach System A, where I'm meant to report to the embassy on Omega Colony and debrief with them. On the way back to Z-Colony, I'm meant to carry a small crew. I've been told their names and positions -- they're all in my files somewhere, I can't be bothered to pull them out right now. But the return trip will go easier -- it's just a matter

of getting there. Well, no use in complaining. Mother used to say that I complained too much. Best to keep a smile on your face, no matter what! I'll do my best.

2 JUNE 2349

This quadrant seems more deserted the longer I spend out here. Now of course I knew it was deserted when I took the mission, but you never really think about it until you're actually out here alone, the only one of your kind- the only one at all, actually.

I feel I have to talk about the unique beauty of empty space. Of course, so many others have put it far more beautifully than someone like me could, but being out here experiencing it alone and so far from anyone who could share it, has to at least be somewhat unusual. It occurred to me that I won't hear a human voice besides my own until I reach Omega Colony. All I brought were books -- some of the Old Earth classics -- Fitzgerald, Murakami, Smith-Yang and all of them. I've never been much of a reader, but I thought it would be good for me to get into the habit. Perhaps I should have brought some holovids.

It's really so strange to think I have to be completely self-reliant out here. If something goes wrong and I can't fix it, well... In these types of missions, they even include this little pill that's supposed to take you out peacefully in cases of hopeless situations; it's in one of the compartments under the control panel, with a bio-keypad and all these neat security measures so it can't be opened unless you really want it. Hopeless situations are virtually unheard of, but if my ship's (modern, state-of-the-art, one-thousand-times-error-checked) engines were to spontaneously fail out here, nobody would figure it out for weeks at least. Things like that, I suppose, are what the emergency pill is for.

Well, I suppose that's why they asked for a Captain with engineering experience. I shouldn't worry about things that are out of my control, anyway.

9 JUNE 2349

Something strange happened today. I'd been running my blank tests when I got an alert for an incoming communication. At first, I thought the system had just detected a false positive, as it's apt to do, but then I checked myself. There it was: a call, apparently a distress call. No other transmission, just a general indication of distress. I ran a scan for vessels or life in the general area, but everything came up negative.

I sent out the standard common greeting for distress calls of unknown origin: "This is Captain David Marleigh of the S.S. Indefatigable. Are you in need of assistance?" I didn't know where the signal was coming from, so

I sent it out generally. No reply came. At that point, I supposed there was nothing else to do but to move on.

I had to admit it was a little disconcerting, but I suppose that's just my imagination getting ahead of me. I suppose the rational explanation is that it was a very strong distress signal sent from far away. Well, I hope someone closer to them helped them out.

17 JUNE 2349

Being out here alone really gets you thinking. I'm sure not even my own diary wants to hear me talk about my personal thoughts, but I feel I'll go crazy sooner or later if I don't get it out a bit.

It's strange to think about how I ended up as a Carrier Captain. If I think back to when I was a teenager, I didn't think I'd be a captain at all. Some part of me thought I'd stay on Luna-3 forever. It was Mother who insisted I go down planetside and get a proper education. All the good schools were on Z-Colony proper -- staying moonside was no way to get a proper education, or so they said. So I put in the proper applications, and got admitted into a captaincy program at Central University.

I was terrified to go down planetside at first -- I'd never been down. But I made great friends at the university. Of course, my best friend was Baten. I still remember how we met; I had to take a basic medical training course, as everyone else did, and I was panic-studying for the exam at the library. I suppose my panic was noticeable enough that Baten wandered over; I didn't even notice him at first. He was looking over my shoulder at my textbook; then he brightened. "Mandatory Medical Training?"

"Yes."

"You need a hand? I'm a medical student!"

With his help, I not only passed but ended up 6th in the class. After that, we became fast friends. He wanted to be a doctor, so he could help people -- he talked about how he wanted to work in war zones, give those people some much needed care.

Of course, back at the University I was like all the other boys (well, except Baten), wanting to be a Senior Captain with a luxury starliner of my own and exciting missions and a brilliant crew. But the thing is that you have to be an exciting and brilliant person in your own right to qualify for those things. Baten used to hate it when I talked down on myself like that. "David, the only thing stopping you from doing whatever you want is the fact that you don't think you can." If he hadn't been planning to be a doctor, Baten almost certainly would have made a great captain -- he was so encouraging.

Ah, I don't need to hash out all those old memories out right now. I'll write the rest of these thoughts next time.

24 JUNE 2349

Another distress call- or something like it- came today. I ran the scan again, but no ships or even life forms came up. It was completely empty space- yet the call was coming. I opened an outgoing channel. “This is Captain David Marleigh of the S.S. Indefatigable. Are you in need of assistance?”

An audio transmission popped up on one of the incoming channels and I immediately accepted. I couldn’t help flinching when I heard it. Perhaps I’m going crazy, but it sounded like a human voice, moaning, sobbing. I pulled myself together and repeated the question: “This is Captain David Marleigh of the S.S. Indefatigable -- please state your name or mark. Are you in need of assistance?”

They -- if it was a person -- didn’t seem to hear me. The moaning sound came again and again; I began to repeat the question a third time, but the transmission cut. It disturbed me, but once again, there was nothing I could do about it.

The first time I thought that the distress call had to be some kind of fluke, and maybe this time it is too -- perhaps the ship mistook some other kind of signal for an audio transmission and interpreted it as such? Even so, it does seem strange. If someone else was out here with me, I’d have an easier time shrugging it off, I think. Being out here alone can really mess with you.

There isn’t much I can do about it now, but it probably at least merits further investigation; I’ll have to remember to mention it in my formal mission report. I was writing about how I ended up as a Carrier Captain, wasn’t I? Where was I? Ah, yes, Baten.

Baten was the best friend I’d ever have. I wish I’d told him that while he was still alive, but we were so young when the accident happened. We’d been joyriding in a turbo-car; it all happened so fast that I didn’t even see the vehicle that T-boned us. The way we were thrown, Baten’s body cushioned mine -- I had only a few scrapes, but I still managed to pass out. When I came to, we were at the hospital -- or I was, at least. Baten had died on impact.

The accident was just before the Captaincy exam. I don’t have very clear memories of that period. I managed to recover enough physically to sit the exam, but my mind wouldn’t sit still. My performance was mediocre, yet it was enough to just scrape by. My placement came: Carrier Captain. The lowest placement possible.

I remember the professors encouraging me: “You’ll get the posting you want soon enough. You just need a little more practice. And besides, being a Carrier Captain is a fine job in its own right.” They weren’t wrong about that, I supposed; I accepted the posting. Now I’ve been in this rank for nearly six years.

I didn't even want to return home at that point: I just took a position straight away, and I sent Mother a letter saying I'd placed. I suppose I didn't hide my disappointment too well, because it rubbed off on Mother. She'd had such big dreams for me -- that's why she was willing to send me away. Her heart was broken, I knew, though she kept telling me it was fine, that I'd done my best and that was enough for her -- I wonder, sometimes, if that's why she had the stroke that ended her life. But I never thought about her, in all those days. I was out on a mission when it happened, and I didn't get the news until a few weeks after.

This is all rather morose talk, isn't it? I try not to discuss my past; it seems the bad sticks out more whenever I do. Why bother focusing on such things? It's best to focus on the present. I have a decent job and I'm alive; why should I complain?

2 JULY 2349

It happened again today. A distress call and the same audio transmission, a person sobbing. After hearing it for such a long time, I'm definitely sure -- if it is a person sobbing- it is a human man.

This one, however, didn't cut off, not for ages. I spent about an hour trying everything I could to communicate with it, but nothing worked. This won't sound very good, but eventually I got sick of listening to it and shut it off.

I originally suspected it was simply a very strong signal from very far away. But I don't understand how an audio transmission would have lasted so long -- a distress call could, but an audio transmission into general space which was that strong would be very unusual. I'm not sure I've ever heard of such a thing.

I suppose there's a rational explanation for all of this -- it could be a normal, unusually powerful transmission which has just gotten very garbled. It's just that it sounds so uncannily human, and it's really the only human sounding thing I've heard in a long while. That may be why it's been bothering me so much.

7 JULY 2349

Today the transmission came again. Against my better judgement, I opened the channel, only to hear the same screaming. It's almost become routine at this point, sending out the same questions I knew nobody would respond to. Routine, at least, in the sense that its presence no longer shocks me. That doesn't mean I've gotten used to it. Even as I write this, I find I can't stop playing it over in my head, trying to find some sense to it, to pick out some kind of meaning. It probably shouldn't bother me as much as it does. I've

been going back and forth on this, and perhaps it's just in my brain, but his voice almost sounds familiar. I don't know how I can tell -- but his sobbing almost sounds like I've heard it before.

The odd thing happened when I gave up and went to shut it off. The computer gave me its usual chipper message: "Denied. Given security clearance is incorrect value."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" I asked it, knowing fully well I would get no satisfying response. Against the background of sobbing, I tried my own code again, all the alternates they'd given me, every other officer's code that I could pull from my brain. Denied, denied, denied. I eventually gave up for fear of locking myself out of my own computer.

It's a worrying precedent: if something goes wrong with the ship's security out here and I'm unable to fix it using my codes, it could end very badly. It's never happened before, so I'll have to hope this isn't a reflection of things to come.

22 JULY 2349

It hadn't happened for some time; I was finally beginning to relax. But then it came again, yesterday morning; I spent so long trying to shut it up somehow; when I couldn't do that, I drugged myself to sleep, but it was still screaming when I woke up. Finally, it stopped just about a half an hour ago... my hands are finally still enough to type this entry. I can hear it so vividly in my mind, like it never stopped. Sobbing, sobbing.

I can't play this off anymore -- it's really begun to disturb me. There's no benefit to turning back now -- I'm more than halfway to Omega Colony at this point. Still, when I get there, I may turn over this mission to somebody else. I'll let them look at the records of the transmissions and let them analyze them. Somebody else has to listen to them.

29 JULY 2349

It hasn't started up since that awful incident a week ago, thankfully. Still, I find that awful sound is burnt into my mind. I've been trying to distract myself while the ship runs its tests, but none of the books I've brought seem to hold my interest. Instead, I find myself ruminating on the cause of those signals.

I've tried so hard to find a rational explanation, but what if something supernatural -- that is, beyond the explanations of our current science -- is at play here? I've never been a religious man, and I'm still not one, but a part of me can't help but wonder if this is some kind of sign from a higher power, trying to tell me something. A more cynical part of me wonders if this is divine punishment.

I've gotten into the habit of drugging myself to sleep, too. I've seen too

many good officers ruined that way, but I reason it's only for the duration of this awful trip. The only side-effect I can't stand is the dreams -- or hallucinations, maybe. I'm not sure if I'm awake when they come up. They're brief, but disturbing- then again, perhaps everything is disturbing when I'm in this kind of mental state. A giant spider will be scuttling across my wall, which vanishes as soon as I sit up, or there'll be a figure standing by my bed, who vanishes as soon as I process that they're there. I shouldn't worry about it so much -- it's a very common reaction to sleep drugs, I've been told. Even so.

There's a little less than a month left in my voyage this point. I just need to stay strong until I reach Omega Colony. I can do this.

2 AUGUST 2349

I woke up to another distress call and audio transmission. I kept telling myself I wouldn't open it, I wouldn't, I wouldn't. But the blinking screen and the chiming alert wouldn't leave me alone. Fine, I thought, let's just get this over with. The same screaming. I don't know how I haven't gotten used to it at this point.

Not sure what else to do, I drugged myself around middle afternoon Z-Colony time. I woke up at some point in the evening, the lights dimmed, the dull noise of sobbing in the background, and by my side, a figure. The figure didn't dissolve as quickly as I thought. I looked closer. It was Mother.

She was in her navy blue gown- the same one she'd been wearing when she had sent me off. "My son, my son," she was saying. "You don't need to do this."

I couldn't place the emotion in her voice. I tried to reach out to her, but I found my body was paralyzed. When I tried to move again, she dissolved and I found in her place was Baten. He was shaking his head, a sympathetic light in his eyes. "This isn't necessary, David."

I wanted to shout at him, even though he was only something my mind had made up to taunt me. What do you mean by that, Baten? What does any of this mean?! But then he was gone, and I was face down. Was that one a dream? I don't know. God, I don't know. All I knew was that I couldn't stand this anymore. I got out of bed, got my toolkit, and went to the head panel.

I knew where the audio systems were -- I screwed the panel off. It was an intricate, delicate system. I didn't want to do this, but I knew I had to. I took a deep breath, and smashed it. I thought the first blow would be enough but it continued. I smashed it again -- and again -- and again. The system was in bits. All the connections would be broken. There would be no way to fix this- they'd have to replace the audio system altogether. I landed one final blow. It was in shards.

The screaming continued. And I don't know why I didn't recognize it earlier, but in that moment, in my desperation, I finally recognized it. It was my own voice.

I couldn't help myself; in that moment, I broke down, and began to sob myself. I had never -- not after Baten, not after Mother, not after failing -- been so alone. I don't know how long I stayed like that.

I shouldn't have used so much sleeping-drug before. It was never meant to be something you use daily. Now, even if I ration it out, I barely have enough to last me a few days of constant sleep. But what else can I do? I cannot bear this punishment, though I know how much I deserve it. Believe me, I know.

This is exactly where I deserved to end up: all alone, tortured by the sound of my own sobbing, my own inefficacy. I've always been a spineless coward -- I just never admitted it until now. There's no way someone like me can survive a punishment like this. I'm going to try to sleep until it stops. If it doesn't stop before I run out of sleep, there's only one option left.

9 AUGUST 2349

I think sometimes that it's stopped, but it's possible my brain finally begins to tune it out, just for a split second, before it comes roaring back. I don't even have enough left for another full dose of sleeping-drug. I have no choice. I can't stand another minute of this. I'm going to finish this entry, and then I'm going to swallow the emergency pill. I already got it out. It's on my desk, right next to the computer.

Mother, Baten, everyone, I'm so sorry. I failed all of you. I lived this pathetic life and never achieved anything. I die here an unaccomplished, unfinished man. This is why I was sent on this mission -- it was the only way I'd realize this would be the rest of my life. There's good old reliable Marleigh, he's a decent one. No brain of his own but he'll do whatever you ask of him. Not anymore. This one last time, I'm going to make my own decision.

I'm all alone out here. Is this how you felt in that car, Baten? But for you, it was over in a second. Mother, is this how you felt in the hospital bed? But you knew it was coming, didn't you? Well, so do I. I guess I always did. Deep down I always knew I was a coward.

I know they'll send someone with a fancy security override code. I want them to look through these logs and know what happened to me, know I don't want everyone to think I just went crazy. I want everyone to read my story and know not to live a pitiful half-life like I did. Please. Please let me be worth something to someone. That's all I ask. I can't write anymore. I can't wait anymore.

(The logs cease here. Agent Mishra and her crew, in investigating the death of Captain Marleigh, found the Indefatigable in perfect condition, with the exception of a completely destroyed audio system; upon checking the interior of the ship, the remains of Mr. Marleigh were discovered in the bedroom. His remains were biofrozen and transported to Z-Colony for a further autopsy, which determined that Mr. Marleigh had been deceased since approximately the second week of August. Cause of death: cyanide poisoning. There were no indications that the ship's computers were accessed after this point.

Miss Mishra, upon checking the ship's records, found that there were no traces of ANY radio communications or distress calls received by the Indefatigable. Upon viewing the case, the Board agreed with Miss Mishra's opinion that the case does NOT involve any noteworthy circumstance and should be considered closed; Captain Marleigh's body should be returned to the closest surviving kin, as he has no direct descendants. Investigations will be commenced into Captain Marleigh's estate shortly.

The circumstances of the case indicate a serious revision of current standards may be necessary; standards both for the screening of officers applying for positions in solo missions as well as in what scenarios solo missions are necessary should be reevaluated. The Board will discuss this at a future point. Captain Marleigh will be memorialized as an honored officer; arrangements will be made to have him posthumously promoted to Senior Captain.)

ART



Primordial Beast

Tawakalitu Abiwa | WINNER



On the Edge
Ashley Troutman



Caution
Raquel Hamner



Distant Memories
Eliška Merchant-Dest



East Village

Justin Cooper



Hot Head
Raquel Hamner



It's Complicated
Ceyda Baysal



Lagoona
Raquel Hamner



Let Me Go
Justin Cooper



Love Never Hurts
Ceyda Baysal



Misty Mountains
Eliška Merchant-Dest



Never Going Home
Eliška Merchant-Dest



Obscured Observations

Eliška Merchant-Dest



Oxidation
Justin Cooper



Rainforest Sun
Olivia Sola

**CREATIVE
NON-
FICTION**

CAKES OF SIGNIFICANCE

Lauren Gouin | WINNER



I am seventeen years old. We are celebrating the 19th anniversary of your birth with a modest fete in your two bedroom apartment. My once-dormant paint set has been awoken to make a watercolor skyline of the town in which you were born. I've not yet learned to bake and your funfetti cake came from a box. We get high and hold each other in your

bed.

Three months ago I gave birth to our first child and I am entering my nineteenth year of life. We feel isolated from our prior friendships and everything is both

beginning and caving in around us. We buy a supermarket ice cream cake and eat it on the living room floor with our son. I am disappointed with my life but not with you (though I know it seems that way). You unfairly bear the brunt of my anguish. I am a child and I have not yet found my words.



{{insert every year that I made, but can't recall, your birthday cake}}
{{insert every year and every cake that I made for our children's birthday}}

You are turning 26, we own a home together. We have two children now.

I have made you a Chocolate Malted Milk Ball Cake. We are trying to hold everything together.



I don't know it yet, but this will be the last cake I make for you as your partner. A homemade ice cream cake. Even the ice cream was made in our modest kitchen because your favorite is the one I make using store-bought chocolate and cream cookies. Our closest friends come over for dinner and remark on how much effort the cake must have been. "Nothing is too much to celebrate the person you love most in the world."

I made that statement in complete honesty which is hard to believe considering I'll move out in less than a year.



I make a berry blitz cake for a friend. He will aggressively and inappropriately pursue me while I am married. I will cave in to this pressure and allow myself to get swept up in the concept of a life unlike the one I live. I convince

myself that he "sees me." But you and I... we were children together. Coming of age together created an intimacy I undervalued. Freedom and passion are not the same as intimacy.

We no longer live under the same roof. I still love you. I am worried about you. I am at fault. It is Halloween and I am the monster of our present reality. I bring you a cake. A peace offering. A plea for your love and forgiveness.



I've met someone new. Someone I'd like to impress. I make him a vegan birthday cake decorated with candles that sparkle and figurines from his favorite childhood movie. This man will waste three years of my life.

I heard secondhand that she made your cake this year. I don't think I will ever bake for you again. I don't know what it looked like. What it tasted like. I have to close my eyes to see your face. The way it was when we were still children together. Sitting in the sun by the water, your hair blowing in the wind and tickling my lips as we kiss. There is something wrong with me, I mistakenly assume that the men I encounter now will have your integrity. I keep pouring salt in the wound.



THE MATRIARCH

Frances Grace Ghinger



I think I was 16 years old in this photo—a junior in high school, maybe. The room I was sitting in was a concrete box with walls covered in graffiti and art. Angela moved in here a couple months prior. She was the first one out of all of us to have her “own” place, so it was where we spent all of our time. Technically, it was a studio space. Technically, you weren’t supposed to live in there. But she did—on a mattress in the middle of the concrete floor that was stained with oil, paint, and foreign substances. She didn’t really make art either, but I think she wanted to.

The pole behind me read “kids. DRUGS.” The surrounding walls were strewn with similar transcriptions and various patterns and images. When someone wanted to add to the collection, I think they would just paint over someone else’s work. Pinks and yellows turned into purples and greens turned into browns and blacks. At one point, I think we stayed there until 2pm the next day not realizing the sun had been up for hours. There were only two windows in the box: one that showed the outside and another that was boarded up in a zig zag pattern with black electrical tape and strips of cardboard.

It might have been a couple days before this photo was taken when Oscar lost his hearing in his right ear. Jack shot a gun out the other window, and Oscar was too close. The bang reverberated off the concrete walls. With nothing to absorb it, the sound snapped back so hard Oscar's ear drum snapped too. Angela just laughed, I think, and went to find the cardboard in a dumpster somewhere. I sat with Oscar and put a piece of garlic in his ringing ears while I massaged his head in my lap. Only later did I realize that the garlic is just good for infections and you're supposed to eat it not shove it in the canal.

The box smelled like stale cigarettes, weed, toast, and acrylic paint. Rose was burning sage and letting ashes fly everywhere as she argued with Mary about something faux-abstract, faux-intellectual. She flung her whole body into the argument. With every "but," a new black smudge on the white-turned-gray area rug. I think Angela inherited it from a dumpster, as well. Rose never raised her voice; it was always just in the background.

Mary, on the other hand, took this photo while yelling, I think. She used a camera I inherited from my father. I grew up with a darkroom in the basement of my home. My father and I spent hours in there. Around this time, though, the darkroom was empty. My father could no longer stand in there or see well enough with the one amber lamp. I don't think I really cared about it anymore. So, that same year, he sat down to give me all of his cameras. Unfortunately, the camera Mary used to take this photo died right after this roll was shot. The camera repair man said it was "old age."

That year, I worked at a recording studio for cash. I made commercial jingles and, occasionally, recorded a local band or two. I made enough to buy the \$300 leather jacket I was wearing in this photo, and the 15-year-old, two-toned black Honda Civic that drove me from northeast Baltimore City down to this Station North warehouse. I do not have the car anymore, but I still have the jacket. I still wear it, here and there. Those jeans aren't mine, though. I think I took them from Lucy's closet in the ninth grade, but they still fit me in the photo. I still wear them now too, here and there.

In the background, my friends are playing beer pong. The game was never something we did or even cared about; mostly we just sat and talked to each other. But this time, Seb brought a 30-rack of Natty and Ralph brought a table. Seb was working at a pizza place in Charles Village at the time where he met a couple of students from Johns Hopkins University. They invited him to a party, probably a fratty one, and there, I think, he discovered that beer pong was real and not just something in bad movies from 2005. This photo was taken a few moments before Ralph hurled himself onto the table and broke it clean in half. I think he was losing. Regardless, I never moved from this spot and never played beer pong either.

They called me “matriarch.” I was one of the first ones to have a car and I hardly drank. The night of this photo, I think I drove a fifth of the kids home. Everyone looked to me to plan what we did next. Once, I invited 350 people over to this girl’s house in Gilford. She had a big enough house to accommodate, and I couldn’t think of anything better to do. Everyone still talks about this party and all the crazy things they did: Gary stole a life-size painting of Shakespeare, Ralph made pancake with cough syrup instead of sugar, Sara blew the transmission out on her mother’s car while trying to drive away from the police, and I stayed upstairs the whole time visiting with one or two people at a time. Throughout all of this, my face remained like the one in this photo. I don’t remember the girl-with-the-house’s name, but I do remember the shade of Clinique lip stick I stole from her extravagant gold and white bathroom. I still wear it today: Fullest Fuchsia.

A couple months after this photo was taken, I went away for the summer to live with my godmother on her farm in upstate New York. I, along with my parents and some of my friends, decided I needed time away from Baltimore and that concrete box. That summer, I did not have to plan anything or show up anywhere. I think it was the first time my expression changed in months, maybe years. When I returned, though, I found myself again in that concrete box surrounded by the same people doing the same thing. The only thing I missed when I left was that Lucy and Seb broke up and Rose no longer worked at the apothecary on Chestnut.

It was then that I realized I wasn’t moving. Much like how I never moved from this chair or never moved my expression—I also never moved on to different friends or to different places. Even when I left for college in North Carolina, I rushed right back less than a year later. The concrete box is gone now, but the people are still around. I visited Mary in Greece last year. Oscar and Ralph were over last weekend. The photos of us in the concrete box live on. Occasionally, we send them back and forth to each other and laugh at “the days.” Next year, I leave for good and wonder how that will work out. In Baltimore, I might be stuck in these places, people, and memories but at least I am *someone: Matriarch*. Who will I be elsewhere? Have I peaked?

SUMMER ET. AL

Ann Weisgerber

My mother absolutely loves flowers. The larger plants, trees and hydrangeas and azaleas and assorted shrubbery, line the sides of our house while the front is decorated with flowers. The pots of pansies and hyacinths sit, perfectly spaced, under the rose bushes, surrounded by daffodils and tulips. In the back we have an herb garden, mostly consisting of huge basil plants with some thyme, rosemary and cilantro mixed in.

The summers of Bethany Beach are sweltering. Not as muggy as D.C., admittedly (it helps being on an ocean as opposed to a swamp), but still decidedly hot. I don't know if there are fewer trees, or if the air conditioning is never as high, but it is much harder to escape the beating sun in Bethany than it is in the suburbs of D.C.

All I remember of summers during my childhood is sweating. We would go to the beach, yes, but most of my time was spent in or around my house, reading books, riding bikes, playing in the garage, or watering the flowers. We spent what seemed like hours and hours every day watering the flowers. Every plant got two buckets of water, filled with the hose, teetered over to the front and poured carefully on each plant.

"They need to be watered slowly," my mom explained. "It's been so long since it rained and the ground is so dry, the water will pour right off. It needs time to soak in so the roots can soak it all up nice."

My mother had the patience for flowers that she never had for me or my sister. She would spend hours finding the right corner for her orchids, the right mix of food and water for her Christmas cactus and shamrocks, the right trimming for her spider plants. Her children were not afforded as much leniency. My brother got off a little easier—he was the the baby of the family. My sister Rose and I were not so lucky. She was always in the wrong place at the wrong time and I was the oldest, the practice child.

"Kids are like pancakes," my dad said. "The first one never turns out quite right."

I could never find myself as eager to care for the flowers as my mother always was. She would spend hours out in the blistering heat pruning the hydrangeas or repotting the gardenia for the fifteenth time. I would stand out in the sun with her, running the hose, filling bucket after bucket. When I was older, I was given the task of deadheading the roses and thinning the

basil plants, but it took almost two years before my mother trusted me enough to not check every time I finished.

“You gotta make sure you do it just right,” my mom said, turning over the rose’s leaves to look for bugs. “They’re so sensitive, if you clip them in the wrong place or give them too much water, they won’t like it.”

Her children were another matter. We had things to do and chores to get done. Clean bathrooms, make beds, pick up living rooms, fold laundry. Of course we did fun things, too, like play around the house or go to the beach or paint pictures or go into Ocean City for the evenings. But even then, everyone had to look presentable, best behavior, no talking back, no rude looks. Punishment for transgressions came with certainty and celerity. A slap to the back of the head, a pinch on the kneecap pressure points, or a murderous look were all tools frequently employed. My mother had high expectations and was not afraid to let anyone who had disappointed her know.

“That’s the thing about your mom,” my dad said. “Her flaws are all right there, out in the open. We all have them, the rest of us just like to hide ours. She has hers right up front.”

I passed through my teen years always at odds with my mother. When I started my first year of college in New York City, I was relieved. Finally, she wouldn’t be right in my ear telling me what to do or looking over my shoulder pointing out everything I did wrong. I felt at peace, eager to start this new part of my life as a new person.

But it wasn’t that easy. I’ve always had a hard time making friends and starting by myself in a college of over 26,000 students made it that much harder to stand out. I felt lonely and isolated most of the time.

One day in late October, I passed by a store having a sale on small potted plants. I picked one up, a little succulent for \$4.99, and brought it home. I transplanted it into a red plastic cup, gave it a little water, and set it on my windowsill overlooking the Brooklyn Police Station 9 and the New York Lottery billboard. By the time winter break rolled around, I had over 10 little plants and flowers, haphazardly growing out of different containers, sprawled across my ledge.

I spent time with my plants, carefully watering and trimming and transplanting them. Not all of them liked direct sunlight, or as much water as the others. I enjoyed figuring it out on my own. They gave me something to do on slow Sunday afternoons after my homework had been sufficiently ignored.

My mother saw my shelf when she came to pick me up for Christmas break. She turned around and clapped excitedly.

“Oh, I knew you would find some flowers up here. They always make you feel just a bit better, don’t they?”

A MEMORY FROM LONG AGO AND A VISIT TO AN UNUSUAL HOUSE

Ray Digiondomenico

Many years ago, on a warm afternoon, a small boy stood in front of an old wooden house. The boy watched for birds as he waited for his father. He noticed that the sky was bright blue. There was a very tall tree near a sidewalk, and the boy looked up but could not see the top. He imagined that it reached into heaven, and he wanted to learn to climb, so that he might have a peak.

As the boy waited, he amused himself by chasing a robin that had landed on the ground. Then he heard a sound that excited him. He looked toward the sound, and saw children running and laughing in front of another house. Suddenly, the children ran around the side of the house into a back yard. Although he could no longer see them, he could still hear their laughter. The sound was irresistible.

The boy began to run. He ran past two houses and came to the one where the children were playing. There were seven or eight of them. He could not remember seeing any of them before. When the children saw him, they welcomed him as if they already knew him. Some were playing with a ball, others played hide and seek.

The boy ran with the children and tried to learn their games. One of the older ones ran inside the house and came back with a blue blanket. All the children gathered around and held the blanket taut. One after another, they climbed onto the blanket as the others tried to toss them in the air. Someone said, "I'll fly away!" but none of them flew very high.

When the boy's turn came the children pulled the blanket away and threw it over his head. They laughed as the boy dropped to the ground. He felt the blanket becoming tight around him. Suddenly filled with terror, the boy thought that the blue sky of heaven had fallen. He shouted and struggled and then began to cry. When the children heard this, they pulled the blanket away and helped him to his feet.

One of the children said, "Hey your father's here!" Sure enough, the boy looked up and saw the tall man he knew was his father. "I've been looking for you," his father said. "You shouldn't leave the yard without your mother's permission."

That was how the boy began to fear tight spaces.

One day, when he was visiting his grandmother's house, he asked her to show him the coal-fired furnace. She took him downstairs and stood him in front of it. She reached for a handle and pulled it. A door opened and the boy could see the black coals blazing. She showed him a dark space under the front porch where the coal was stored. The boy asked his grandmother if it was the entrance to Hell. She laughed and told him "no" but still he wondered.

When the boy became a man, he was still troubled by small spaces. One day he tried to climb onto the roof of his house when suddenly his whole body froze – he was too terrified to move. The palms of his hands began to sweat. From this he understood that heights disturbed him too.

He resolved to find ways to avoid places that frightened him. He disliked elevators, and usually found stairs to use instead. He often told himself, "Climbing stairs is good for me," even when it meant leaving others behind. He had a curiosity about foreign countries, but avoided visiting them because it meant flying in airplanes.

He liked to say, "I don't have to fly overseas. There are plenty of places here in the USA that I can visit by train." He especially liked to visit historical places, like old houses where famous people once lived.

The man lived near Baltimore, an old city with a strange history. He often walked its streets. He visited Westminster Hall and Burying Ground, which includes the gravesite of Edgar Allan Poe. He learned from a guide that the hall had once been a church. So many families wanted their remains to be buried in the churchyard, that it soon became necessary to dig a catacomb beneath the foundation.

The man thought about this and remembered that Poe had written a story about a nobleman who avenged himself by luring another nobleman into a deep catacomb. He used only torchlight to pierce the darkness. After walking deeper and deeper into the catacomb, the avenger suddenly turned on his victim and fastened him with a chain. He then built a brick wall to seal off the passageway, so that no corpse would ever be discovered.

"What an awful way to die," the man thought. "No-one there to see you. No-one to hear you. Only complete darkness, silence. It amounts to being buried alive."

The man studied Poe's connections to Baltimore and learned that he had once lived with relatives in a house on Amity Street. The house has been restored, almost to its original condition, and is now a museum with public tours and its own website.

One day the man learns that the house will be hosting an appearance by Rissa Miller, a local artist, poet, and fiction writer. He decides to attend this special event.

The day arrives, and the man parks his car in a space in front of an apartment building. He looks up at the second floor windows and notices a hole in a screen, large as a baseball. He looks across the street and sees high-rise apartment buildings. In spite of the presence of so many apartments, he sees nothing in the windows but darkness. The street is empty.

Directly across the street, he notices a small area of vacant ground, overgrown with weeds. Something unusual catches his eye. A small black figure, resembling a raven, appears to be perched on something in the weeds. The man slowly approaches for a better view.

As the man comes close, he sees the green eyes of a black cat staring back at him. The cat sits on a wooden pallet, the kind construction workers use. “How strange to see that cat here,” the man thinks to himself. Then he remembers another story by Poe; one that features a black cat.

The man approaches the old house, a relic from the 1830s, and is relieved to see other visitors arriving. They are mostly young, college-age or slightly older. Some are wearing black top-hats and leather vests. Others wear costume jewelry.

“So this event will be like a party,” the man thinks, feeling slightly relieved as he approaches the door. But as he crosses the threshold, the man is suddenly gripped with an uncomfortable, suffocating feeling. He immediately wants to leave.

The front room of the house or “parlor” is too small to accommodate the crowd that has entered. There is a table with a cash register, and two women collecting money. There are tables stacked with books and small gift items. The man looks at the walls, decorated with old photographs, and notices a very small fireplace at the edge of the floor. It is the smallest fireplace he has ever seen. “How could anyone build a fire in such a small space?” he thinks to himself.

“It seems impossible.”

As the man steadies himself to ward off his discomfort, he is surprised to find that the special guest has suddenly appeared. A remarkable woman is standing in the center of the room. The crowd makes a circular space around her, as if she were about to explode, but everyone just wants to get a good look at her, especially at her unusual attire.

Rissa Miller looks around her and smiles. She is very slim and small in stature, but striking in appearance and beautifully dressed. She wears a replica Victorian costume, with form-fitting black leather and bright silver buttons. Her long blond hair is pinned on top of her head. She wears silver earrings that match her costume. Her appearance is striking enough, but its most interesting aspect is the very large, black-rimmed glasses that she wears. They serve to accentuate her intense, dark eyes.

When he sees her, the man forgets that a moment ago he wanted to walk out the door. He is charmed.

As quickly as she appears, Rissa Miller turns a corner and ascends a small, winding staircase. The man follows, but immediately his suffocating feeling returns because the narrow space above him resembles a dark tunnel. He begins to feel dizzy. Fortunately, the house's restorers have provided a handrail, which he immediately reaches for with a firm grasp.

After his climb, the man enters an upstairs room, again filled with visitors, but the group is limited to fifteen persons. Most of these are seated on two rows of benches. The man stands behind the benches and looks about. The room has another toy-like fireplace, same size as the one in the room below. This fireplace features a mantelshelf, decorated with lighted candles and fresh sprigs of rosemary.

Rissa Miller takes her position in front of the benches. Behind her, a shuttered window allows only the yellow glow of filtered afternoon daylight. She introduces herself to the audience, and begins by telling them of her first experience reading a Poe story while in grade school.

"I fell in love with it!" she says. "From that story, I began to learn how short stories can be written, and how villains can be portrayed. Reading Poe gave me an understanding of both character and plotlines. I continue to learn from his writings."

She begins her reading with a famous Poe story: "The Tell-Tale Heart," and moves on to read some of her own work from a book of poems called *Goodnight, Poet*. She reads with joy and enthusiasm, and connects easily with her young audience, smiling as they clap for her after each selection. "You don't have to clap after every poem!" she says with a laugh.

The man listens with quiet interest, but his attention soon shifts to the scene around him. It is like something from the past, when people sat together and told each other ghost stories. It is also like a scene from an old Technicolor movie. For example, he notices rectangular floor lamps, filling the room with soft, yellow light. Their light perfectly matches the candle-light and window-light. Rissa's astonishing eyeglasses reflect the lamp-light, flashing and flaring as her eyes dart around the room. She is enjoying herself.

After reading her poems, Rissa reads from a work that is still unpublished: *Devil's Boudoir*. She also reads from a novella that is still unfinished, with the tentative title of *Blue Bones*. The story involves a young woman who is kidnapped and held prisoner in a hole. She wakes up inside someone else's skeleton. The bones are blue, and when she cuts herself on them, she starts turning blue and her skin sloughs off in blue sheets.

"What a lovely idea," the man thinks to himself, sarcastically. "Waking up inside a hole, with only a blue skeleton for company." The thought

triggers a memory: “That’s how I used to feel when I had to inspect a crawl space underneath an old house.” He thinks of the many years he spent working as a housing inspector, and tries to remember how he came to do such work.

As he ponders his own thoughts and memories, the man is suddenly surprised to see the event drawing to a close. Rissa’s listeners laugh and applaud as she concludes her last story. They don’t seem to be bothered by thoughts of blue skeletons in holes, or skin coming off in blue sheets.

They also are not bothered by undersized fireplaces or narrow winding staircases.

The man remembers that Edgar Allan Poe once lived and wrote here, in this cramped, dark house. He feels a sudden identification, and thinks it not surprising that this sensitive man, yearning for fame, who spent his life in such a place, and many other such places besides, would write stories about being buried alive.

Then he thinks about Rissa and her 21st century audience. “Perhaps she has the right idea,” he says to himself. “Maybe the best thing to do about our fears is to write about them, celebrate them; have a party. Chase them back to their tight, dark spaces.”

STUFF, THINGS, AND LIFELONG

REGRETS

Ann Weisgerber

The day I moved out for college, my sister wanted to get rid of my bed. Although our previously shared bedroom was the largest in the house, and I had taken all my belongings, she still felt confined by the presence of a whole other (now unused) bed in her room. Luckily, my mom talked her out of it. I would be coming home for holidays, she pointed out, and probably the summer, too. And who knows if I was even going to stay in college? At that point, my trajectory was anything but stable. Besides, it wasn't my sister's bed to get rid of.

My sister hated *stuff*. Almost every day throughout my entire high school experience, she would pick a fight about my belongings all over the room. I conceded that my clothes should be put away, but she always took it a step further. Tops of dressers were meant to be empty (I disagreed). The shelves shouldn't be so full all the time. I pointed out that my things were nicely arranged. She said it didn't matter, that there was too much crap there anyway. I argued that she couldn't tell me to do with my own stuff on my own shelves. She complained that she couldn't concentrate on her homework with clutter everywhere. I told her to work downstairs. She said it was her room too and she had a right to be comfortable up here. I said she didn't deserve rights, she tried to smack me, we ended up wrestling until the dog heard us and tried to join in. Every. Day. Of high school.

I ended up moving back in for one year, two years after leaving. Luckily, she had not gotten rid of the bed yet, but she had repainted the room, thrown out the chairs, and completely emptied the shelves. She was not happy, not that I was back in the house, but that I was back in the room. And the day my family moved me into my dorm at UMBC, my sister called her friend to move my two dressers out of the room and into the basement. As far as I know, the bed is still there.

My sister wrote her college application essay on this whole room sharing experience. She described growing up with a sister who didn't want to play with her, who always felt distant and reserved and quiet. She talked about how frustrating it was to have to share a room with someone who didn't prioritize order the same way she did. At the end, she talks about the

past year we shared a room together again, how we had both changed. She understood that messy just had to happen sometimes, and I understood the importance of cleaning up as much as I could.

I read that essay and cried. Even during middle school, I could feel myself withdrawing, ignoring my siblings when they wanted to spend time with me. But even then, I couldn't help it. I couldn't get past myself to reach out to them, to play with them, to help my sister with homework or play soccer with my brother in the front yard.

Being a shitty older sister is the biggest regret of my life. It's something I can't change, no matter how hard I try. I can never get back the time I never spent with them when they were little, when they were young and vulnerable and needed me. I wasn't there. I spent most of my life depressed. I was withdrawn, isolated, cold, almost all of the time. I felt that I couldn't be myself, not at school, with mocking classmates, nor at home, with a harsh mother. I spent so long hiding myself I eventually lost who I was.

My siblings were not like that. They were loud, boisterous, certain and happy, even from a young age. I was so threatened by my sister's strong self-confidence, my brother's comfortable outspokenness, that I felt I needed to belittle them, mock them, "prepare them for the real world." That is not how an older sister should act. It was my job to support them, to help them become the most confident and self-assured versions of themselves they could possibly be. But I was so caught up in my own problems, in my own depression and insecurity, that I never stopped to think how my actions were affecting them. I would hide in my room when my sister needed help with her homework, pretend to be busy with chores when my brother wanted to play, always pushing them off and away and out of sight when they wanted me, when they needed me. I couldn't be there for them.

I've moved out now, and that's a bridge I can never recross. I can visit, I can call, I can laugh with them and send them pictures and ask how they're doing, but they're older now. They're their own people, with their own independent thoughts, and feelings about me that have already been formed by the time I never spent with them. I can feel it, when my sister makes a passing joke about me or my brother wonders why I'm asking how his day was.

They still want to talk to me, they still miss me, or so my mother tells me. But my brother and sister and I have spent so long apart we don't know how to be close anymore. I feel the pain in my heart, every time my sister doesn't respond to my messages or my brother would rather play soccer with his friends than spend time with me.

I wasn't ready. When they were young, when they needed me, I wasn't able. I couldn't be the big sister they needed me to be. I'm better now, and ready, but they're all grown up. They don't need or particularly want me anymore. And that hurts, far more than I ever thought it would.

BLIZZARD OF 2010

Marcus Lindsey

Sandpaper winds shave the smile off my lips. Winter is growing increasingly hostile, crushing, conquering at its peak. It started off right. Cancelled school. Time with friends. My dad scraped the snow from his truck every day like morning crust from tear ducts. Eventually, it became too brutal to stand in.

I began to think of our house as our protector. If not for these walls we would be buried and frostbitten. The blood in our veins frozen solid like the roots of trees. Smothered out of existence by the sheer bulk of ice that loosed from the clouds.

I overhear my parents in the living room talking. My mother is consoling my father. “People are losing jobs left and right this year. It’s not your fault.” The wind beats the walls senseless. It’s hard to hear them. I make out, “We’ll find somewhere else. It’s just a house.” Wrong. It’s our first house. Designed from scratch by my mother. Still unfinished on the bottom floor. What could make her lie this way?

I find her again in her room a few moments later looking at apartments on her computer. “Aren’t you cold?” she asks as I walk beside her bed in a t-shirt and shorts. I’m distracted momentarily by an offer of hot cocoa. Mom walks me to the kitchen.

Questions stir in my brain as I listen to the melody of metal on ceramic going round and round. Tap, tap, the spoon strikes the brim of the mug like hammer on anvil. Mom slides me the cocoa knowing something’s wrong but she doesn’t have good answers. We both sit in silence waiting for the catalyst to the inevitable conversation. The cocoa is perfectly warm and smooth. I want to forget about my questions altogether. I want to live in this moment. I want to take my hot cocoa upstairs and stay blissfully ignorant to what is happening to our family.

My dad stamps downstairs in full snow gear before I make my move. His gloved hands fumble with the knot on the trash bag for a while. He lumbers to the side door and lets out a few ineffectual groans before he tears open the membrane that’s been protecting us. The cutting air rushes in like an assassin and riddles my unprotected skin. “What’s happening to our house, mom?” The cold snaps me into action. She lets out a considerable sigh. Her breath sweeps up the steam above her hot chocolate. My dad

bursts back in the kitchen with one more layer than he left with. His face is blood red. The body does its best to defend us from the elements, but in the end, it's not good enough. The cold invades once again. "We'll let you know when we figure it out. For now, we're okay." I can only accept it, finish my cocoa, and lay down for bed. As I try to fall asleep, I think I hear screams beneath the bluster.