

The Omnibus

~ East Lyme High School ~
Literary Arts Magazine 2023-2024



“There is no adequate definition for creative writing, any more than it is possible to describe pain or color or flavor.”

- Frannie Hurst

~ ~ ~ *Contributors* ~ ~ ~

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Mrs. Kydd (advisor)

A Note of Thanks:

A special thanks goes out to Mrs. Rand and the Semester 1 Creative Writing Class for their wonderful additions. And, thank you to the English department for encouraging your students to add their voices to this publication. We are so very grateful for every contribution.

A Note From The Advisor:

I am so proud of these creative writers. This magazine is a curation of imagination, emotion, grit, talent, experimentation, exploration, heart and soul. You will find tragedy, comedy, mystery, horror, and fantasy. The reader should be advised that, at times, adult topics are explored and adult language is used. These topics or this wording may be triggering. We, as writers, seek to understand the complexities of being human, in all its beautiful messiness. Sometimes, that means we tackle pain, trauma, and suffering. Sometimes, that means we tackle joy, triumph, and love. In this magazine, we celebrate and explore all of it, because we are not afraid to confront our own humanity.

Enjoy,
Mrs. Kydd

~ ~ ~ Poetry ~ ~ ~

Untitled

Keegan Stadler

The fear of old age
Creeping in like a thief
Coming to steal life
Yet strength builds in the heart
Wisdom captivates the mind
Like a fox in the dead of night
The experience of old age.

School

Tyler Maurice

Waking up each day
Having nothing to say
Going to school
Feeling like a fool
Just waiting for May

Untitled

Keegan Stadler

and you begin to accept your defeats with your head
in every loss a seed of growth in planted
resilience halted the fires and vices
a new chapter begins
a new seed sprouts

Emotions

Anonymous

She laughs, her head going far back.
Tears start falling from her beautiful blue eyes.
She's laughing and doesn't know why.
She breathes in and out, trying to calm down.
She struggles to get it all out.
Falling down to her knees,
screaming help
me
please.

I Am Perfect

Olivia S.

I am perfect
Yet I have many holes
I know I'm in progress
Yet I've reached many goals

I have much to learn
And much more to try
Sometimes I have thoughts
And I ask myself why

Sometimes I feel scared
And at others I feel brave
I feel every emotion
And ride every wave

I have OCD
But it doesn't have me
For I know myself well
And I love what I see

I dream of becoming
A strong ray of light
For those in the darkness
As I aid in their fight

I am an open book
My wishes are no mystery
For all who want to know
I'll tell them my history

In each present moment
I give the world my best
I wish to share my knowledge
For I know that I am blessed

In past I have made errors
Throughout my lifelong course
But I have gained such wisdom,
that I feel no remorse

I've learned I need help
To make me feel whole
But it doesn't make me less
To take pills for the soul

To some I look big
But to most I am small
I want every creature
To know I love them all

I know I am perfect
Although I have holes
I look forward to progress
And reaching new goals

So Long, Farewell

Amari Shay

The soft touch of grayed and permed curls,
Soft laughter over the chatter of the TV,
Jeopardy on the screen.
Homemade oat bread, fresh out of the oven,
Homemade chocolate cream pies were fresh,
Too.
Wrinkly, pale skin with bright blue veins seeping through.

-
The hum of oxygen, the hacking coughs.
They showed her illness, her age,
Yet I miss them the most.
They showed her life, her willingness to fight.
Despite the words *I hope this is my last* _____
That haunt me like ghosts.

-
They remind me of bees, alive for only the summer,
Buzzing, never yielding
To their inevitable bummer.

-
Do-re-mi,
La-ti-do,
They dance around, our warning sound.
Do you hear those church bells ringing?
They are our guide
For our January goodbye.

-
So Long,
Farewell.

Untitled

Keegan Stadler

And then we're home again in the dusk, and the scent of the Parma violets seemed to drench the air with their
sweetness
Twilight murmurs as the day retreats
Stars shield the violets from the tretchurs of night
We dance in the gentle breeze,
The owls whisper keeping the scent alive
While all are sleeping the flowers begin to grow
Every petal holds a story
They keep a place in our hearts and minds.

14

Cameron D'Effore

when we first met
the first day of kindergarten
i didn't know how to say hello
i was so damn scared
my mind just froze
later on the swing set
you asked me to be friends
i said sure
with no clue of how this all would end
how would i know?
just an innocent little kid
so clueless
i had no idea of what my life would be
now 14
believing every bullshit fantasy they tell me
live it like you see it
nothing lasts forever
things, they will get better
that's what they told me
now i don't know me
second grade
had no reason to complain
so i thought
i had so many feelings
i didn't know what they mean
so many questions
like what the fuck's depression?
now 14
wishing i'd known what my life would be back then
i still don't know what it's all about
there's nothing i can do but doubt
that people stay forever
and it's worth it for me to
seventh grade
so much shit that i want to say
like how i compare myself to friends
and never speak of that night again
though i know that i want to
but i think that they don't care
cuz nobody cares about what i have to say
they only care about themselves
and their perfect lives
and they shouldn't subscribe to mine
cuz i'm so full of shit
now 14
and i think no one cares about me
i think all my friends hate me
i'm so insecure that they don't like me anymore
but how can i like them
if i don't even like myself

well i guess i need some help

Underage

Cameron D'Effore

you're under pressure
you listen to your friends
smoking at 13
that only made things worse
you said you'd never do such a thing
but then it got addictive
how've you been? we haven't seen you
i guess getting caught made you
happier than ever
you're sure making a thing of yourself
living in a hell of your own
that we don't know
and it's hard to understand sometimes
cuz you're so underage, isolated
and there's so much to take in
for anyone
and you're just someone
who needs some help right now
cuz you're living in a hell right now
so go get some help right now
it's not my business
and yet i'm still concerned
don't be pretentious
you're no better than us
you can't see what's right from wrong
and even if you could you wouldn't care
and it's hard to understand sometimes
cuz you're so underage, isolated
and there's so much to take in
for anyone
and you're just someone
who needs some help right now
cuz you're living in a hell right now
so go get some help right now

Untitled

Nathaniel Scott

fragrant,
these ashen remains of the day,
is the snow.
pregnant with desire,
i left summer with little heart.
january laments,
and i found little warmth.
plentiful august once fed us spoonfuls of ambrosia,
and we are now left to be weaned,
starved of our opium.
i dine on the remnants of summer:
a handful of hydrangea,
or a honeybee.
in its cruelty,
winter has left baren the year
and our skeletons were revealed,
our shameful anatomy aquiver.

winter would reveal the unseen,
in pools of gossamer rain,
would echo the unheard,
in the cardinal's cry,
would listen to my heartbeat -
i am there.
would enscribe it in icen glory,
louder than even the softly fallen snow.
so hear it now,
amidst the alabaster fallout.
how it screams.
snow?

or heartbeat?

Something Awful & Great

Anonymous

Throw yourself at my feet.
If I ran across the open road,
and stood in the middle, with my
bare soles ripped open with glass and gravel,
would you follow me?
Can we both die in white clothes and
in romantic moments?
You can try to
take off all my skin when I fall asleep,
but there'll never be a way to get it on without
ripping it,
and when I wake up somewhere else
I'm not letting you into the water with me.
I stand on flat-cut stone and
the more you climb the more it crumbles,
and when I step to the sky there's no way you can
follow.
If you're not there when I'm back
I'll do something awful and great
and I won't let anyone forget it—
but I won't do the same to you, and you know it.

Untitled

Veronica Castro

Sometimes I think that
Humans should not be this way
The Earth is moving

The Art of Gaslighting

Anonymous

The painting was a lie.
A bright, pretty lie.
Alive and thriving,
bursting with blooms of all sorts of flowers and colors.
Gaslighting myself through art.

I'm Young, Not Clueless

Cameron D'Ettore

augmented realities
i'm never where i'm supposed to be
but I know that i can't change the unexpected
i wish that i could be happier with myself
but it just takes time
counting the scars i left with my friends
and it kills me to think how much they mind
hoping someday that we'll meet again
but forgiveness isn't something you can buy
i'm just a kid, i have the rest of my damn life
to make decisions like
who i am
what i want
what i need
and where i wanna be
but nothing feels just right yet to me
am i too young to have an opinion
or are people just not used to me speaking my mind?
i don't usually say how i feel
but now i think it's time
you didn't think i could know this
but i'm young, not clueless.

Untitled

Kylie Oswald

when you stood in front of me,
miscommunication never failed to jump in
the back of my throat and bite my tongue in half.
I swallowed every thought I wanted to announce
because I was terrified to say something
that would make me a bore.
how embarrassing.

I memorized your quirks and the words you highlighted
in your sentences, all of those old dictionaries stored in
your mind don't have the fuzzy blankets mine have.
so I grabbed my mother's cloth to wipe down bookshelves
I hadn't touched in years and planted wisdom in my brain.
I sculpted the structure of my face with a sharpened jaw
and a smile that widened for your satisfaction.
I painted a version of myself with the colors on your palette-
a version that was never meant to see the light of day.
but I adored you, whereas you adored my determination
in hanging on the edge of a tree branch for a dare.
I'd been digging my nails in the thrill of what could be,
and my body had convinced me that this ball of anxiety
jumping off the walls of an empty stomach was comfort for love.
how embarrassing.

months without you, I found balance in standing still
in an over-crowded room filled with spirits of the past
prancing around. But out of habit, I glued my shoes to the floor.
somehow you still haunt me - but you finally found me.
your presence tapped my shoulder and I began spinning.
you towered over me and I fought to untie my shoelaces
and crawl into a hole in fear that you would see a human
that is no longer depicted in your colors
but I am new.

I no longer care to tend the crumbs of this pathetic shadow
I tried to build. *I need to be heard.*
I feel words leap through the windows of my rib cage,
searching for an escape out of cages built from insecurity.
I was a stranger in my own body
who just wanted to be loved by you.
how embarrassing.

The Blue Canvas

Anonymous

Everyone says that
Modern art is dumb.
But it just seems like they're mocking something that is the same way as them.

A blue painting, plain blue
Sits,
Mounted on the wall.
No change in shade
No dimension
Just...
blue.

Exquisite paintings surround it,
Standing out against the 8'x8' blue canvas

People whisper,
"So basic."
"Strange."
"Who would paint that?"

But what they don't realize is that
Colors,
Patterns,
Shapes,
Beauty,
Thrives beneath the blue,
Waiting behind the mask,
Longing,
Hoping,
Awaiting,
To be seen,
To be unveiled to the world,
To be looked at as something more
Than the mask that covers it.

But what made up the painting,
Beneath the blue,
Was different,
Than the other paintings.

So,
The color,
The patterns,
The shapes,
The beauty of the painting,
Was painted over with the basic,
Strange,
Simple,
Blue.

A mask, covering "different" beauty that lies beneath,
Just as we cover up our inner color with a portrait that pleases those around us.

I guess we're not so different from paintings, are we?

Simple Things

Anonymous

When life gets me down,
I simply look up,
And remember all the simple things,
That F
I
L
L
U
P
my cup.

I remember the burst of EXCITEMENT,
On my first day back at the beach,
After a long, cold winter,
I thought the day was so out of reach.

I remember the
R
A
I
N,
The way that first drop feels on my skin,
When all I want to do is sing and dance about,
But oh,
where would I begin?

I remember the THRILL,
The way my heart pounds,
During my final bow of a show,
The applause is my favorite sound.

I remember the AWE,
When I swim above a beautiful coral reef
The way my snorkel mask pinches my face,
When I'm in the water all I can feel is a sense of relief.

I remember the pure

J
O
Y,

That rushes through my veins,

When I get to laugh with my friends,
And no one looks at me with disdain.

I remember that I'm here,
I remember that I am alive,
I remember that my heart is beating,
I remember *I survived.*

And I couldn't be more lucky,
That I get to stand here today,
And recite to you all
Reasons why it's going to be okay.

Because the sun stills rises,
Every. Single. Day.
Even if it's just for the simple things,
Which I'm sure,
Are some good enough reasons to

STAY.



“Genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood.”

- T.S. Eliot

Understanding

Olivia S.

Understanding a person without knowing them
Connecting seamlessly like magnets
There are no words

Just inside jokes where you had to be there
Just the residual laughter in the air
Just the bonding that we share

Echoes of Youth

Isabella Vivas

First day of high school, nervous and shy,
Backpacks heavy and hopes held high.
A chapter starting, in life's grand school
New friends forming, the Golden Rule.

High school chaos, where dreams and doubts collide,
No set paths, just hallways wide.
In our teen years, we share secrets and more,
Friendships bloom on this vibrant floor.

Teenage oceans, waves untamed,
Trying to navigate life, through roads unnamed.
No compass or guides, just the stars above,
In the chaos of youth, we find love.

Rebellion whispers in the ear
As teenage years embrace what's near.
Text messages writing secrets untold
Friendships crafted, words unfold.

Math problems dance, a rhythmic rhyme,
While History's tales echo through time.
Late night struggles, a determined quest,
In the late night hours, we do our best.

Friday Night lights, a stadium aglow,
Chants and cheers in the evening's throw.
Team spirit roars, echoing the fight,
At the highschool, under the starry night.

Lights twinkle, couples sway,
Music plays the night away.
Corsages bloom, hearts in a trance,
Prom night's sparkle, a sweet dance.

Caps in the air, a symbol of flight,
Graduation day is here tonight
Diplomas in hand, dreams are near
High school ends, a new path to steer.

"Write your title here."

Anonymous

Every person unique
Every life individual
A lighthearted question of "What do you want to do with your life?"
Seemingly simple to most
But to me this question was heavy.

Like a baker carrying bags of flour over their shoulder
Or a bodybuilder pushing with all their might just to try and lift up the weights,
It's a heavy question.

I have dreams of being a lawyer, and living a life of something grand
But when I look at my parents going to their 9-5, my dreams get crushed
Because they once had dreams too, dreams to live a life of something grand.

I'm still young, and have much time before I need to title this life
But time goes by faster than lightspeed
So how much time do I have left?
I'm not so sure.

Dreams could be just that, or you can make them something more,
Something real.

I want to make them something real
But who really knows what my future will be holding in its undetermined hands

I want to make an impact
And I want to be remembered
But we all know that faces and names are easily forgotten
And I'm someone easy to forget

If you think. Really, truly, think.
You can realize too how much power this simple worded question holds.

The thought alone of not knowing what can happen next
Scares me more than death itself
Because although we know very little about death
There's no questioning or persistent wondering about what might happen next, because it's already happened

Staying up late on restless nights like this one
I think, and then I write
I try to find a new topic every time, but this one idea is pestering me like an annoying bug that won't stop flying
around and around my head
I am like a moth, and this idea following with an uneasy feeling that settles in my stomach, is the light.
I am drawn to it
And it's so bright that I'm blindsighted by it and can not see anything else

Every person in this school will grow up
Have families
Jobs

Friends
And a purpose

I see true talent amongst people here
And I'd like to think that I could even have a fraction of that talent too

We all are trying to navigate our way through this overwhelming school
Taking it second by minute
Class by day
Day by week
And getting caught up on the little things,
Like tests, love interests, and petty drama that will become irrelevant in a week's time

But when we look at our lives like a book
We are just a couple chapters deep
And these little things hold less than small value

When I look at MY life like a book
I see 15 years of hardships, and then...
untitled chapters
For I am completely lost at what fate has planned out for me

This question, so heavy, slowly starting to break down the bones in my back from carrying it with me
wherever I go

I have my dreams and perfectly painted fantasies of what I WOULD like my life to be like
But no one will ever really know for certain what WILL happen.

Why is it so complicated?

Ruby Thoms

The tree sways intently
Waiting and watching
Believing but gently
Hoping for life to come
Wanting and yearning for something
Something to change

But the love she feels
Burning holes into her
It's too complicated she claims
But it's too easy to blame
All of this that never came

Leaving marks
Boring into her
Marks of pride?
No, of desperation.

Sins In Secret

Anonymous

Far off toward the highway,
A man shouted something and another man shouted back.
Forbidden yet faithful,
Faithful yet hidden.
These men had sinned.
But God forgives;
The town does not.
So they ran.
And ran and ran and ran.
Forever abandoning the life they once knew.

Mumma

Kshreya Arora

There once was a mother and daughter
Whose bond couldn't be stronger
They shared a connection
With love and affection
A treasure to always nurture

Happiness

Kshreya Arora

In the summer's golden glow, we find delight
Days filled with laughter, and skies so blue
Underneath the sun's warm and radiant light
As we chase the waves, our spirits renew

Basilisk

Ruby Thoms

All the roads lead to one,
A great snake is done.
Blossoms in bloom,
Never fail to make a boom.
Don't falter now, for you have won.

Aquaphobia

Ruby Thoms

Flowing free,
The water always clear.
Strong and deep,
No reason to fear.

End

Agnetha Frid

I would find him staring into space for hours, as if listening to a sound only he heard
His fragile body, sitting in a rocking chair for hours
Though his heart is still beating,
his life was gone
An empty shell lay in his bed
His suffering would end
The day the light was gone
He left
Gone, he was now free

Richer than Gold

Amari Shay

Money can bring joy, it's been said,
But true happiness lies ahead.
For in friendships we find,
The wealth of a kind,
That's richer than gold, it's been spread!

Memory

Agnetha Frid

I returned to this forgotten village, trying to put the broken mirror of memory back together from so many
scattered shards
Pieces missing
My old life fades away before me
The life and death of my father now gone from me
Who am I?

Big Backs & Big Macs

Anonymous

Pretzels, McDonalds, Dairy Queen
This amount of big backs was once unseen
Now big backs are running the economy
Stuffing my face constantly

They Don't Know Me

Agnetha Frid

People say they know me
They know the girl from school,
but they don't know me
Most don't look to know me
Most don't care
They know the thought of me,
but they don't know me

Love

Anonymous

Once two souls danced in perfect sync,
But now their steps falter, out of kilter, I think.
Words left unspoken, emotions untamed,
A love once vibrant, now forever changed.
Like a shattered mirror, their love reflects,
The fragments of dreams, now disconnected sects.
Yet amidst the pain, new beginnings arise,
A chance to heal and rediscover the skies.

Cameron

Cameron D'Effore

Creativity isn't measured by your
Ability to think straight.
Measurable talent is
Evaluated by how much you learn and
Retain knowledge of the universe.
Outstanding achievement
Never fails.

Sharks

Anonymous

This is a poem about sharks.
I want to trust sharks.
I really do,
but I have scars of mistrust from false dolphins with razor teeth.
Not all sharks are the same it's true,
but when one attacks you,
It's hard to see any shark differently than the one who bites.
The sharks can go.
The bleeding can stop.
But bite wounds scar deep
and last forever.
This isn't a poem about sharks.

Limerick of Kurt Cobain

Ava Korineck

There once was a man named Kurt Cobain
A rock star with severe stomach pain,
His feelings expressed,
And very depressed,
He died using cocaine.

Watching You

Anonymous

Loving you was easy, watching you die was hard
You were so small
So sweet
So innocent
Watching as all the faded
Watching as your once bright eyes dull and gloss over
Watching your smile fall
Crying with you as we wanted for it to end
Holding you close as they left
Begging for it to be over
To be at peace
Smiling as we carved out the pain
Screaming as we took too much
Laughing as we joke to hide
Wanting warmth I could never give
Watching as the smile returned to our face
Watching as you faded away with the scars
Knowing you were the easiest thing
Watching you die was hard
I'm sorry

6 Word Memoir

Anonymous

Anonymous mask,
Hides a sad face.

Friendship: 6 Word Memoir

M.E.R.

Alone surrounded by all my friends.

6 Word Memoir

Anonymous

Never enough.
But always too much.

The End

M.E.R.

The last stretch had been the hardest part of the way
Tired, so tired
Legs give out, Mentality low
Air can't fill the lungs
Tik... tik... tik
Watches tick on and on and on
The end is near, yet too far
It's too hard
The finish line burns bright then blacks out

Best Friends

M.E.R.

I don't have a best friend
I have many close friends
And I love them all so much
They make me laugh
They make me happy
But I don't have a best friend
I don't have a number one
For me
To have a best friend
I have to be theirs too
I have to be their number one
Not two or three
I love all my friends
They are all great
But I am truly none of their number ones
They all have someone above me
So while they are my closest friends
None of them will see me as their number one
I will never be their first choice
They might deny that
But I know
I know that there is one person you know
One person you like even a hair more than me
So they are your best friend to you
It's truly not me

Pluto's Government

A. Frog

I stand above the in-between
A gravestone left for none to know
As down below the crumbling earth
The devil's laughing at the show
My fingers pour the icy waves
A well of all the ones who grieve
Between towers of dust and towers of gold
We already know who they'll believe.

The House That Built Me

Ayla Peterson

It sat, unassuming, quiet and calm
It's windows open in the Spring and Summer with
Music pouring out, soft wind coming in,
The breeze being the only thing to dissipate the
Tension throughout its halls.
A home is meant to protect, with four sturdy walls and
A ceiling overhead, providing shelter from the harsh world.
Doors locked, windows shut, curtains drawn, keeping the world out,
But the Evil in.
Each room echos with conversations past, furniture absorbs
The hate, and holds it close.
We may forget what was said and felt but the House never does.
Our words fester and rot its very foundation,
Cracks forming in its integral structure.
Paint is slathered over the damage and mold, carpet shifted over the scratches.
Fixing it means admitting something is wrong, so instead
We will paint, dust, and rearrange, making the house look brand new,
While it rots from the inside out.

Unlucky 7

Ava Korineck

It was just a joke,
the idea had furiously formed
like a treacherous tornado on the horizon,
But like a tornado,
Everything spun
oUt Of CoNtRoL.
It's my fault you're gone.

Snowman

A. Frog

A snowman stands as a snowman lies
unmoved
a majestic sight, formed from crude snow
hidden
yet shining as it shows off its icy skin

A snowman laughs as a snowman cries
unsure
It's the only reaction to a future
it knows
will always end in a gleaming puddle

A snowman lives as a snowman dies
quickly
But unlike the dusty snow angels,
blown off,
the snowman holds steady as it can against its weather

Louis Armstrong
Cameron D'Ettore

Red.
Orange.
Yellow.
Green.
Blue
Indigo.
Violet.
The colors of the rainbow
All trapped inside me
But I didn't know yet
That my life would be
Turned around
One right in the dusky fall
Sitting alone
All of a sudden screams from down the hall
Screams from my lips
Hell broke loose
Almost lost my best friend
Time bends
One year later I find out what happened
Heart dropped
Feelings stopped
Didn't know what to say
Wasting away in paradise
Ignoring the scars I plainly see
Loving every minute
Hiding every second
Two years later
Loving every second
Baking my mind
Training to find
What's truly inside
My ego was bruised
Had nothing to lose
Then faked it on stage
With all of my friends
Watching as I sang
Just because I'm gay doesn't mean I can't say I love you for you
I LOVED you for you
But no more
One shit week can put you at rest
I recognize I'm all over the place
But that's the point.
Red.
My anger.
Orange.
My happiness.
Yellow.
My hope.
Green.
My envy.
Blue
My depression.
Indigo.
My fear.
Violet.
My anxiety.
The colors of the rainbow
I am the rainbow.

C'est la vie.

Haleigh Miller

"C'est la vie."

With masks on our faces, known only through screens
Freshman year was nothing like the movie scenes.
There was no homecoming or football games
And most of us didn't even know each others' names.
Our slow return to normalcy came later that year
But it didn't dispel some of the fear.

"C'est la vie."

When we returned in August, we were seemingly vets.
Honestly, we thought that we knew best.
We still hid behind our masks,
And our defining events were held in open air
And the ending question of it all: where are we if not here?

"C'est la vie."

We didn't know what to do with normalcy once it fully returned.
Although junior year certainly burned.
We took our first APs and tried to survive the SAT.
We survived knowing that we're so close but so far from leaving.
All so that schools could look at us in the fall and say,
"We want you."

"C'est la vie."

When we got that acceptance, we were seniors.
We had no one to look up to except ourselves.
We were the standard. And so we had to be better.
We got our prom and soon we'll have our graduation.
Where we'll walk across the stage in our cap and gown and can say,
"We made it."

"C'est la vie."

Through COVID and isolation, and no real closure with middle school graduation,
We made it.
Through virtual learning and messed up Zoom schedules
We made it.
Through APs and SATs and College Admissions
We made it.
And we will make it through the next four years and through the rest of our lives.

"C'est la vie."

Years passed in the blink of an eye.
Four years ago we were in eighth grade,
And now we're saying goodbye.
Goodbye to teachers who inspired us
Goodbye to crappy school lunches and homeroom gossip circles.
Goodbye to the student section
Goodbye to team practices, pasta dinners, and fun bus rides.
And goodbye to the friends we made along the way.

Dear High School,

Thank you for the memories that will forever live and stay in the camera roll
For we will take these memories and lessons and turn them into real world notes of guidance.
So that next year, we will know what to do. When we are no longer the big fish in the small pond,
But one of millions of specks of stardust littering the night sky,
The next four years will pass in the blink of an eye,
But we will take from our lessons and our experiences
And turn them into something truly extraordinary,
Parce que "C'est la vie."

Metamorphosis

A.T.B.

I think in elementary school, most of us grew up learning
About caterpillars and how they would weave themselves
A little cocoon to hide in until they could grow
Wings.

We talked about how plants drank up the sun, the light,
To survive and grow, creating themselves out of nothing.

I don't think we learned exactly how either of them did it,
But I used to think it was basically magic.
We called that beautiful change metamorphosis, to us,
The only other word as long as photosynthesis.

We loved trains and dinosaurs,
Sea creatures and volcanoes,
Construction vehicles and submarines.

We could run through the woods,
Out the back door of civilization, to see if we could find a
Sword in a stone for an adventure that would take us
Out of this world to meet animals that could talk.
We would build fairy houses in the roots of trees
And draw castles in rainbow chalk.
I remember being terrified of butterflies
And hoping to stay up
Late enough to see the moon rise.

4.5 billion years was just a really big number
We used to say without the weight of history sitting on our shoulders.
Back then, the world was just a jumble of first-hand encounters:
We didn't read the news and then start crying.

There was a whole, untouchable world out there, sitting on the
Other side of the Atlantic,

Above the Atlantic.
Some legends say that the stars are spirits or heroes lost to time.
They're light years away,
And it will be years until I appreciate how far that really is.

Now, we can look into the night sky
And name every star.
Now, we dream of plans for the future, but
I can still pick up pretty shells on the beach
And pretend that they're dragon scales.

I'd even call it magic,
Overjoyed at the simplest of things,
This way of smiling at the leaves and clouds
And dandelions growing in the sidewalk,
But I won't say that aloud.

I didn't just wake up one day
With wings that could brush the sky.
I can't paint mountains on the horizon line
Or infuse music into my spine.
I can't make diamonds from sand
Or pour magic from my hands.
But I can make happiness out of light,
And I think that's somewhat the same
Because if the sun is still shining,
I'd love to keep playing this game.

I know that I lose track of hope sometimes too:
When thoughts swirl into a tornado of snow,
Doubt obscures my view.

Sometimes the night sky is a shade too dark,
But the sun wakes up every morning so
Why shouldn't I?
Because this life is made of magic
And about learning to grow wings and fly.

The Woman I Know and the Man I Met

Olivia Kilmer

Her voice whispers in my ear
Telling me secrets only she could know
She whips around through my head, never truly stopping
She is restless, much like her mind
She can not be caught, because she does not want to be
You could reach out your fingers
Stretch far and wide
And just when you think you might have a grasp on her, and you close your fingers
She slips away once again
To a secret place that only she knows
She is unpredictable, even to herself
No move is planned out

She is very different from the man I met the other day

This man, he is not quiet
He likes to make his presence known
He would like for you to catch him
You stretch your fingers
Palms reaching up for the sky
If you wait long enough,
He will take your hand in his
He might not take you to a secret place
But he will take you away
At the same time that he is different from the woman I know
This man in also similar
If you hold on for too long you will suffocate him
He will loosen his grip
He will begin to slip away

The wind and rain go hand in hand
But they can also contrast nicely

Use Me

(a six-word memoir)

Shylah Harris

Under Stand! not Everyone Meets your Expectations.

~ ~ ~ Prose ~ ~ ~

Untitled

Keegan Stadler

Henry hated snow storms. As he stepped out of the threshold of his front door, he was met with a snowy gust of air that snatched his hat right off his balding head. As he attempted to retrieve it, he felt his footing give way underneath him and he quickly found himself lying on the cold hard sidewalk next to his hat and briefcase. He felt the ice begin to crack that was blanketing the sidewalk. Shaken up, he slowly rose up, brushed the snow blanket off of his tan colored pea coat. He gripped his briefcase firmly and shoved his folded hat into it, before triumphantly stomping his way to work in spite.

Heartbreak Comes With Contempt

Anonymous

before i burst like a bubble on a spike, i have to get this off my breast. i hold dear, close to my heart, a place i hope they never part. you wedged your way in, silently creating a crack i didn't see until i fell through. you got close to her, close enough where she felt comfortable enough to ask us to make things about us, about you. and perhaps it's not fair to blame you or her or even me and my insecurity. but this was meant to be my year - it was supposed to be ours. and every step i tried to take with them, you seemed to be, wedging your way in and creating a crack. i felt their grips loosen and perhaps that's when i began to suffocate. i knew that after these next few months, nothing would be the same. i craved for nothing more than the simplicity of earlier years - where it was just our trio of nobodies before you came near. i sit here and cry and mourn the experiences i didn't have with them because of you. you had to be there - on a trip meant for us. a night so special most girls only get one or two, and you were there instead of her. perhaps you now know who i am, but i don't know you. i don't know your soul or your heart - not like i do theirs - have i even seen a glimpse? i haven't - just like you haven't mine. the heart and soul i share to you is meant for them - for the eyes, ears, hands, and hearts who have become intertwined with mine. i mourn the experiences i will never with them - where it is just us. because you have come so close to them that they feel the need to ask if you can come along. now i won't be the explicit asshole and say no, so i will watch you march along beside them while i fall behind. i try to make things that are just ours - but you remain in their thoughts. they are my sisters and you are just the parasite that leached onto our bond. you slowly but surely suck the life out of me to where i have no more patience to keep up with you. you were at our prom and our sunrise and our spirit week and our trip to the city. you'll be at the next prom and graduation. hell, if they have it their way, you'll be with us on our next trip to the city and you will too have a matching necklace that you'll wear as you walk across the stage the piece of paper having been giving to you by my sister's mother. i've come to accept, with tears and heartbreak of great and utter contempt, that you'll always be on my trips, but i'll never be on yours.

Healing

Anonymous

Running towards the cool blue ocean shore in the cold sand that cushioned under my feet like a soft, powdery cloud, I laughed and threw my arms back behind me, feeling the fresh morning breeze against my face and ears. I tossed myself into the water, feeling it pour over my arms and legs as I turned onto my back and laid. My best friends, in their wetsuits, giggled and jumped into the salty ocean beside me. They splashed my face, and I tasted the salt in my mouth. It cooled my skin like the first splash of water in the morning in the bathroom sink. I relaxed my limbs and allowed the waves to rush over me, wetting the material of my black wetsuit. I blinked the droplets away and looked up to see the sunrise. The sun had just peeked from the horizon, shining a soft, light gold onto the beach and coloring the sky pink and blue with hints of orange as bold as the fruit. I laid in the water for another moment, then sprung up from the sopping wet sand to grab my surfboard. My wetsuit clung to my body as I ran back to the water with my sunny yellow board. I positioned it in front of me and jumped onto it, stomach down, arms and legs out. With my friends still laying in the waves, I ventured out into the ocean.

Untitled

Nathaniel Scott

The light from the midday sun diffused gently across the pond, illuminating the fish gently swimming below. Gabriel walked serenely across it with an air of confidence, for he had done this many times before. Frost stuck well in his blonde, curled locks, and, without even knowing it, he looked like the patron saint of all things cold - the cool metal frames of his glasses; the icy blue of his eyes made his nymphish look seem indistinguishable from the foxes that stalked hidden bunnies in the snow. As he laced his skates up, a particularly long and arduous process, he took a long, purposeful breath, filling his lungs with the chill of February wind. It had a pleasant burn in his lungs, and filled one's mouth with a strange heat; like the tingle a fire breather would be expected to have lingering after his act ; like exceptionally strong spearmints. With that, he sailed away into the lake, and soared gracefully on the vast plain before him. In a matter of moments he was transformed into some mythical creature; a bird perhaps. Yes, there was a touch of the avian in his dips, the elegant bend he put on a jump that twisted his arms and used them as wings to soar over the fish that swam in blissful ignorance of the show they saw. With his scarf billowed out like feathers it seemed that he was most swan-like in this moment; when he jumped 3 times in rapid succession and leaped over a fallen tree to swim through the air, flying over a nest of sticks and twigs to land steady and poised, frozen as if carved from marble and unable to do much but radiate the grace of its skill. He stood there for a moment, basking in the glory of the onlookers (a piercingly white landscape with a cardinal for contrast's sake). His cheeks were already ruddy with joy.

House Fight

Agnetha Frid

"Mom, Sarah won't get out of the bathroom!"

"Avery shut up! I've only been in here for five minutes!"

"Both of you shut it! I'm working and don't have time to listen to you guys bicker back and forth!" mom yelled from the kitchen.

"But I need to get in there!"

"Honey, can you go up there and figure out what's wrong?"

He looked around as if she wasn't asking him. She started staring holes into his head when he reluctantly went up the stairs. The only person in this house that never caused trouble was Carter. The rest of the family was always so self centered that they tended to forget Carter was even there. He was used to it. School wasn't much different as he didn't have any friends and his two sisters wouldn't be caught dead near him. The commotion upstairs started to get louder as dad wasn't much help. Much like Carter, he didn't have a backbone and was pushed around by the girls in the house.

Untitled

Anonymous

I want to stay, but everytime I look at her, I freeze. I get petrified. I panic. *What if she hates me the more I stay? What if she hates the real me? What if I'm not good enough?*

Everytime I come over, I always say, "I can't stay long, but thanks for having me." Our "friendship," it's just surface level. I am too afraid to show the real me. I am afraid to let her in. To mess up would cause catastrophe.

I am not good enough, I decide.

But, wait... is she the right one? Is she the one I wanted? Is this just anxiety? Or is it my fault? Was that the right choice? The good conclusion? Wait, what the hell does the good conclusion even mean? What does any of this mean?

Nala

Olivia S.

You came into my life in a strange way. I told my mom that I felt as if getting you was a responsibility that we weren't ready for, but you came anyway. We entered the shelter and the wall of smells and sounds hit us. Cat food, wet fur, and barking. I didn't mind it at all. It made me excited. Those smells meant that there was animal life within those walls. My favorite creatures would be there, dogs. You waddled out to meet us for the first time. I saw your round, golden body, your graying muzzle, and your worn-down joints. I walked you in the fresh grass outside. You didn't seem to mind that a stranger was so close to you. All you had in your heart was love. You sat down on your old bones and smiled as I pet you. The man at the shelter told me your story and it melted my heart. You had been a part of a loving family for 10 years until your owner grew old and died. You had known every comfort until that point. You didn't do anything wrong, but then you were here at a shelter. The next day, we came to pick you up. We considered how difficult it would be for you to get into our car with your arthritis. We thought that we would have to lift all 65 pounds of you, but we were so wrong. You leapt right in before the door was fully opened. You sat in our car as if it was where you were meant to be.

I love you Nala.

Untitled
Frumpkin

Every step you take in this city could spell death. That is what the citizens of Anein have said for generations, and what Imogen is currently muttering to herself as she weaves through the crowd of people, attempting to get to her destination without any confrontation. Or at least as little as possible. Now that would truly be a godsend. The streets of Anein were... not so kind at night, with the cold winds whipping through the alleyways, threatening to knock anyone astray directly off its pathway. There was also something quite off about the atmosphere, with the normally bustling town quieted down by the sounds of people from the night market.

"Don't die don't die do not die..."

Imogens pleading to herself came out in frantic and short breaths, being whisked away by the night air and the chatter from the crowd. She lugged herself through the last bits of the crowd before finally arriving at her destination. A small tavern, that from the outside looks peaceful, homey, and snug. A few windows dot the outer walls, adorned with worn curtains. It isn't the nicest place in the realm, but it will do just fine for a small pair of adventurers seeking a reprieve from the outside world. Imogen pushed the creaky door open and headed inside. She didn't even bother to examine the inside and just bolted straight towards the far back of the tavern, which had the spiral staircase leading to her destination.

As she sprinted up the stairs she thanked the gods above that there weren't any confrontations from strangers tonight. People just weren't her thing. That was Aster's thing. Imogen finally made it up the stairs and dashed towards the shared room with her friend.

"Ah! Imogen, you're back!" Aster threw her book under the bed before the other girl could notice. "Did you get the supplies for the next few days?"

Imogen sighs and throws her bag down on the floor, flinging herself onto her bed. "Yeah. Took some time though. Crowd was big tonight, so I kept to the sides of the road." Imogen huffs and rolls over.

"Well, that's good...gotta plan in the morning..." Aster trails off.

Imogen rolls over to face Aster, only to find her already fast asleep. "Dammit, we were supposed to plan tonight." Imogen huffs again and rolls her eyes. She casts a little spell that summons a small area of light, and pulls out her book, starting to read.

The morning shone its bright rays down on their humble little tavern room. The light illuminated their sleeping forms in their beds. Well, one person was sleeping. But not for long.

"Imogen! Wake up!" Aster sprinted toward her friend's bed, landing on top of Imogen with a quick hop, skip, and jump. "Wake up!" She shakes her friend with such vigor that it was sure to cause an earthquake even the mightiest dragons would have felt. Imogen's book slid off the bed from the shaking and landed on the floor with a loud thud.

"Get off of me!" Imogen frantically shoves her off of her, with Aster landing on the floor with a thud similar to her own book. Imogen gently pushes her blankets aside and leans over the side of the bed. Aster lay there tangled in blankets upside down, frantically struggling to get free before giving up. She looks up at Imogen glancing down and gives a sheepish smile.

"Morning," Aster giggles.

Imogen huffs and leans back up before getting up and out of bed. She throws her day clothes on and grabs her bag. "Get dressed and head downstairs. We have a lot to plan."

"Yes ma'am!" Aster smiles and giggles again.

As they both make their way down the steep spiral staircase Imogen goes over basic plans for the day. The pair sit down at a table, the wooden stools creaking from the wear and tear they've faced over the years. Aster shifts back and forth in the seat, before receiving a quick nudge from Imogen's foot signaling to stop. Aster looks out the open door of the tavern and surveys the surrounding area of the street. Most stalls are still being set up for the day ahead, with minimal people on the road.

"Well, good news for you Imogen! There's absolutely no people outside whatsoever. We're free to roam wherever!" Aster waves her hands in the air at the end of the last statement, flailing about in her typical hyperactive fashion.

"Great. So I have a list of places and things to do today. First, I think it's time to restock on some of the supplies, so we'll need to go to the general store. We also should probably get a map too. We need to find where... *he is*," Imogen's speaking falters, not wanting to state the obvious. Aster takes note of it, and tries to cheer Imogen up. She puffs up her chest and gets ready.

"I assume by *he*, you must be mentioning the big bad dragon! Rahhh!!!!" Aster starts flailing her arms around again, resulting in a small laugh from Imogen. Mission accomplished.

"Well, yes I do. But I suppose we don't have to think about it for a little while," says Imogen.

"That's the spirit! Now let's go!" Aster grabs Imogen from across the table, ultimately leading a small yelp out from Imogen as she is dragged out of her stool and around the table.

"But we haven't eaten!" Imogen's words fall on deaf ears as she is enthusiastically dragged out of the establishment by her friend's hand. She lets out a laugh, giving up on the idea of getting Aster's attention.

The morning passed by at a fairly normal pace, at least for Imogen. Shopping wasn't Aster's strong suit. The pair walked down the street, a gentle breeze blowing past them. The streets filled with more people as the day went on, much to Imogen's dismay.

"Something the matter Imogen?" Aster questioned.

Imogen let out a small hum before scrunching her body to appear smaller. "Too many people. Don't like it," Imogen whispers. Her long lilac hair falls to cover her face, further making her appearance smaller. Aster thinks for a moment, before quickly formulating a plan. A plan that she thought was sure to work.

"Come with me!" Aster grips Imogen's wrist and takes off into the crowd, disregarding the shouts and jeers of the people jumping out of the way. Imogen says something, but it is lost to the wind. The streets of Anein luckily aren't too narrow, so Aster is able to navigate with some ease. She takes a few turns down alleyways, and Imogen thanks the gods above that they are safe alleys, and not the... less kinder, sidestreets. The sideroad they're currently on eventually leads into a dirt trail that twists and turns its way out of the city.

"We're almost there! You'll definitely like this place!" Aster shouts. They navigate through the road and over a small stream before arriving at their destination. It was a dense forest, covered in a thin layer of mist. As the light shone in it appeared in an almost bluish white color, looking like an eternal night. A gentle breeze blew past them as they came to a stop. As Imogen struggled to catch her breath, Aster took in a fresh breath of air and surveyed more of the surrounding area. There were flowers scattered throughout the forest floor, glowing in a bright blue light, shining brightly against the night sky. Well, morning-night sky.

"Where-" Imogen heaves, "where are we?" Aster turns around and smiles.

"Well, dear Imogen, we are in the Bren Forest! Only the finest of forests! At least, that's what I heard..." Aster lets out a sheepish laugh, rubbing the back of her head. "I overheard some locals talking about it and figured we should spend some time here together. Especially considering the, well, you know, the whole we might die tomorrow from a big evil dragon so we have to make the most of the time we have together before we possibly get incinerated by a creature thousands of times bigger than us and-" Aster's rambling is quickly silenced by a hand over her mouth.

"Shush. I love it." Imogen grins. "Let's go."

The pair walk around for what feels like an eternity to them, before settling down in a patch of the glowing blue flowers. Aster flings herself to the ground, short pink hair tousled across her face. Imogen sits calmly, with all of her grace. Aster picks a flower and holds it between her fingers.

"These flowers are called night orchids. They're the only flower known to grow at night, and are very hard to come by. And I absolutely love them." The two lay back and observe the flower for a little while, before Aster gently ties it into Imogen's hair. "Do you remember the last time I gave you a flower a few years ago?" Imogen turns her head to face her friend. "I hope I picked the right one for you, you deserve nothing but the best this world has to offer." She pauses, realizing how forward her words were. "Look, we might die tomorrow, so I just want to enjoy the moment, you know?"

"I understand what you mean. We have to do it. If nobody is going to do it, then someone has to step up. Well some people, in this case," says Imogen. "We'll win. I'm sure of it." Imogen grips Aster's hand. Time passes by slowly, a pleasant reprieve from the world around them. They eventually make their way back to their room, sleeping off the feelings of the day ahead.

The two woke up in a more peaceful way today compared to the previous morning. The sun shone its rays down on the pair, highlighting the golden freckles and faint scar on Aster's face. Imogen was the first to wake, only stirring awake due to a certain somebody's hand on her face.

"Dammit Aster!" Imogen flung her friend's hand off her face. Aster woke up with a half snore, and was greeted by her own hand flung down onto her face, leaving a big red handprint shape on her face. "You are terrible to share a bed with."

"Well excuse me, princess. A good morning would have been nice," huffs Aster. Imogen flings a kicked-over blanket back over the two of them and puts on her glasses. Imogen sighs.

"We have to get up. It's time," says Imogen. Aster rolls over slightly.

"I don't want to."

"I know you don't want to, but we *have* to." Aster rolls back over at her words.

"I know... but five more minutes?" Imogen hums softly.

"Five more minutes."

As per usual with their time together, it passes by at a snail's pace, this time with the threat of the world's end looming over their heads once more. The two eventually do get up, and make their way out of their room. The feeling in the air has changed from one of contentment to one of unease. The dragon's lair wasn't too far from there, but the journey certainly felt like it. As they found themselves at the entrance, Aster stopped to look around the area. The trees were more barren here, a stark contrast to the lush trees in the areas surrounding.

"You ready, 'Gen?" Aster questions timidly. Imogen turns around and takes a look at her partner's face. It was full of hopelessness, a contradiction to her usual.

"Yeah. I'm ready."

The two step inside the cavernous domain, greeted by a dragon already waiting for them.

"You still ready?" says Aster.

"As ready as I'll ever be!"

The fighting lasts for hours, seemingly with no end in sight. Eventually, after a long, tumultuous battle, the pair was able to claim their victory. Both of them used up their spells for the day on the single battle, and used up all their energy as well. They both lay on the ground, breathing heavily.

"So," says Imogen.

"So..." trails Aster.

"We just did that." They turn to face each other, and start to laugh. It's over. Finally. "What do we do now?" Aster shoots up off the ground with what little energy she has left.

"Why, we live of course!" Aster helps Imogen off the ground, and happily skips out of the cave alongside her. "Now, what kind of life are we thinking? Super cool adventurers who saved the realm kind of vibe or a more settled down living on a farm with cozy domestic vibes kind of life?" Imogen blushes and lets out a little giggle.

"As much as I would love a cozy domestic life, I think adventuring suits us a bit better, don't you think?" says Imogen.

"I completely agree!" Aster plants a small kiss on Imogen's lips and takes off running towards the forest.

"Wha? Hey! Wait up!" Imogen takes off after her friend. Though I suppose it really isn't 'friend' anymore.

The nation of Anien is a cold one, yes, but with the right kind of people, it can be a bustling hub of warmth, and aspiration. And to the right kind of people, it can be just the right place to start a lifelong adventure together.



"And by the way, everything in life is writeable about if you have the outgoing guts to do it, and the imagination to improvise. The worst enemy to creativity is self-doubt."

- Sylvia Plath

Untitled

A. Frog

Here I stand in the moment of truth, and watch as it shatters into a million pieces.

It isn't possible, it can't be possible, it shouldn't be possible. The world twists, and I stumble backwards on heavy feet, trying to escape the growing pool of blood. It isn't real, this can't be real, it's just a dream. Some hellish nightmare that my twisted mind is forcing on me, and she's fine. She will be there, in the morning when I wake up, and she will laugh, and she will tuck my hair behind my ear and I will forget about this stupid, impossible dream.

My back hits a wall, and I let out a wracking sob because *this doesn't make sense*. Just a few moments ago she was here, she was breathing, she was happy, *I was happy*, but now she's on the ground and the blood- all the blood, god, why is there so much blood- it's leaking from the hole in her body, the hole in her heart, the hole ripping into mine, and it isn't real but then why is it so *painful*? Why does it hurt so much?

The image replays in my mind, over and over again. Her standing there, reaching out to me, the smile on her face, a loud crack, the split second where nothing changes, before she falls forward and I am frozen, trapped in my mind, in my body, as her face falls, and her with it. I can't move, my feet are glued to the floor, over and over again it repeats, reach, smile, crack, fall, reach, smile, crack, fall, reach, smile, crack, fall and the raw movement at the end, the bare whisper that crosses her lips and draws the tears from my eyes, the sound from my mouth, because it's not fair, we could have had so much more, but now, I am left with nothing more than that small whisper, barely making it past her lips. *'I love you.'*

I drop to my knees, my vision blurry from tears as I crawl forward, forgetting about the blood, the mess, the world, my focus on her. She's not gone, she can't be gone, she's not *allowed* to be gone, but she isn't moving. She isn't breathing. The bleeding has slowed a little. Or maybe I've slowed. Maybe time itself has delayed mourning of her loss. I can see her clearly through my tears. I know someone is yelling. Is it me? Maybe. Maybe those words are me begging her, begging her not to leave. Begging her not to abandon me. But right now my thoughts have a pinpoint focus on her. Her face, still emitting a warm glow even as it grows pale from blood loss. Her eyes, her beautiful eyes. A pale shade of green, usually so full of life and joy, now glazed over. Empty. Helpless. Her hair is matted and sticky from her own blood.

She's still warm as I pull her close, holding her tightly, trying to find the essence of life in her body. I can hear my own heartbeat pounding in my ears, hard and fast. A cruel reminder that hers is missing. Stolen.

Dead.

I hear a laugh. I can think more clearly now, and I look up, still holding her to my chest. My gaze finds him, his mocking sneer, his piercing blue eyes, and he's laughing, still, laughing.

Fuck him. I hate him. This is his fault.

She was here, she was happy, she was *alive*, but he holds the gun. He holds the power. He held her life. He took it, and he wrung it dry, using her and when she had nothing left to steal, he cut it short. Over and done with, just like that. And now he has the nerve to stand there, and to laugh, and I have no doubt that he'll use me, too. That he has already used me. And that just as he did with her, when he is done with me I will end up as she is. Maybe that time is now. Maybe later. I will not know till it comes. Part of me hopes it is now, that I may by some semblance die in her arms, as she could not die in mine. Part of me prays it never comes, that I may escape, though she could not.

But most of me, most of me has lost all concern towards my future. I would gladly die unknown, at a time chosen by none other than fate itself, if I were able to do to him as he did to her. If I were able to rip the control from his hands, to make him *fear*, and then I would laugh, because that is what he deserves.

But he has the gun.

And I am on the floor.

And she is gone.

Truth holds no comfort. Fairness is a foreign fallacy. The world remains whole, and unjust, and terrifying.

She's cold now. I have grown numb. I stare up at him, refusing to look away in a sole act of defiance. Silence hangs heavy in the air.

And then it's shattered by the loud pop of gunfire.

And I burn.



“Don't bend; don't water it down; don't try to make it logical; don't edit your own soul according to the fashion. Rather, follow your most intense obsessions mercilessly.”

- Franz Kafka

An Awakening

Anonymous

Strolling along the road on a chilly, pitch-black evening, sensing an unusual atmosphere. The street lights flash quickly, making me flinch and run away. I keep going till I catch a glimpse of someone. The dark, shadowy creature turns and begins to cross the street in my direction.

Sniff

"Oh my god," There's something strong I can smell."

Smog clouds lifted into the sky, and the scent of burning became closer. I halt in my tracks as I begin to run in search of a safe place.

"It's so strong that I can taste it!" "Gas," I tell myself.

I turn to check behind me, but the figure has vanished. I can't see far enough behind me because I'm running till I collide with something. The tall, dark figure is grinning at me as he places his hands over my arms and shows me where the store is. He's too strong for me to fight. We head towards a business, but before we enter, I notice that the reflection seems strange. It appears empty. I became afraid because there were smoke clouds and a fire that was getting bigger. He shoves me inside the shop. The glass shatters as he slams the door behind him. The fire grew bigger before he could leave. We both never saw the light of day again.

Untitled

Nathaniel Scott

The light from the midday sun diffused gently across the pond, illuminating the fish gently swimming below. Gabriel walked serenely across it with an air of confidence, for he had done this many times before. Frost stuck well in his blonde, curled locks, and, without even knowing it, he looked like the patron saint of all things cold - the cool metal frames of his glasses; the icy blue of his eyes made his nymphish look seem indistinguishable from the foxes that stalked hidden bunnies in the snow. As he laced his skates up, a particularly long and arduous process, he took a long, purposeful breath, filling his lungs with the chill of February wind. It had a pleasant burn in his lungs, and filled one's mouth with a strange heat; like the tingle a fire breather would be expected to have lingering after his act; like exceptionally strong spearmints. With that, he sailed away into the lake, and soared gracefully on the vast plain before him. In a matter of moments he was transformed into some mythical creature; a bird perhaps. Yes, there was a touch of the avian in his dips, the elegant bend he put on a jump that twisted his arms and used them as wings to soar over the fish that swam in blissful ignorance of the show they saw. With his scarf billowed out like feathers it seemed that he was most swan-like in this moment; when he jumped 3 times in rapid succession and leaped over a fallen tree to swim through the air, flying over a nest of sticks and twigs to land steady and poised, frozen as if carved from marble and unable to do much but radiate the grace of its skill. He stood there for a moment, basking in the glory of the onlookers (a piercingly white landscape with a cardinal for contrast's sake). His cheeks were already ruddy with joy.

Untitled

Rumplestiltskin

I was walking back from work during a cold, miserable and terrible day. I was begrudgingly walking through the streets with an angry expression on my face which made little children turn their heads at me in fear and childish mystique. As I was walking, the snow became heavier and heavier and more abysmally frigid. As I walked through New York City my spirits lightened ever so slightly as I saw wanderers amazement the snow, in congruence with the night stars illuminated the great city. Alas my smile simmered as I kept on walking and my shoes began to dampen as they were wet with the snow. As I sat there with my shoes soaked, I thought to myself how snow is beautiful from a distance, but when you get to know it personally it becomes a bleak killer, like a twisted Medusa.

The Experience

Anonymous

My eyes glistened with the city lights at night. Everything was perfect. The rain fell slowly onto my soft, pale skin. This feeling was home. I used to love my life, my place, my family, my friends, and most certainly my love.

...

The city lights turned to police sirens, the breeze in the air, turned into cries for help. The whispers in the forests turned to, "Help me."

All the laughs turned into, "I'm sorry."

Everyone looks at you now and turns the other way. Nobody talks to me. I succumb to the noise. At night, the voices get louder than ever. Sometimes, I hear the creaking of wood yell at me, while people walk up and down the stairs. I start itching into my skin, thinking I'm not in my own body. I look from right to left, thinking someone is going to come attack me. Nobody is my friend anymore, nothing is home. The only person I have now is myself, but maybe that's all I need.

As I write this now, shakily, even the clack of a pencil still worries me. I look back as if someone is watching me from above and below. My therapist tells me to put all my past thoughts onto a page, everything that happened.

...

It was July 1981, my favorite season. The children are laughing in the pool, the sun is beaming down, and the water is splashing onto people's gentle faces. I wipe my sweat from my forehead and guide my boyfriend and I to the chairs. I look up at him and smile, a nice sympathetic smile. The one you see in movies before they kiss. The weather starts getting colder and the wind starts picking up. Towels start blowing over the water and the tide starts to get a little stronger.

For a moment, I enjoyed the little raindrops. It made me think I was back in the city, with my parents.

I miss the city.

The city was my house, but now I'm here in Michigan.

My boyfriend looks at me puzzled.

"Are you okay? Should we leave?"

Without noticing, I let out a giggle and nod my head.

The First Sign, Confusion

I don't remember much of that day, besides the rain. The droplets made a soothing sound, like droplets on a windowsill. The pool now seemed unfamiliar, like I've never been there before.

My therapist looks at me, with an eyebrow raised, and nods his head in agreement. We lock eyes and I continue on writing...

...

The phone rang, it was my parents. I look at the last 4 digits and pick up the phone, just breathing, no words come out. I felt anger. My boyfriend walks over and picks up the phone,

"Hello! How are you guys? Is it nice there?"

I couldn't hear much besides the mumbling my boyfriend spoke. I tried to ignore most of it, for some reason I didn't want to hear them. I had no exact reasoning why, I just felt I needed to, like someone was trying to tell me something. He looks at me with that look of, "Come here", but I just walked the other way. After about 5 minutes, I heard him say, "I'm sorry he'll call you later."

No I won't.

I lock my door and sit there on my bed, filled with such rage.

The Second Sign, Anger

My hands continue to write, but the words don't make sense anymore. To this day, I don't know why I was mad at them. I try to find something, anything, to relieve what I did, but I have nothing. My therapist places his hand

on my book and tells me it's okay to stop if I need to. I look at him and shake my head.

...

When he held my hand, I got upset, when he tried to hug me, I pushed him away, when he tried to hang out with me I said no. Randomly, tears would go down my face onto the silk bed sheets when I tried to sleep. He would look at me.

"Are you okay?"

I would nod my head and turn the other way.

I would feel the disappointment in his teary eyes, but there was nothing I could do to make him feel any better. I wanted him to feel what I felt.

I liked when he was sad. He felt my pain.

The melancholy breeze filled my cavernous room, letting the soft curtains blow. I looked up at the ceiling and sadness filled up my body, like water pouring into a jar. I tried to speak, I tried to ask for help, but nothing came out. Just a squeak, or maybe it was just the rain. I felt stuck in a never ending dream. Not even a dream, a nightmare.

The Third Sign, Sadness

All the words started filling the page. I felt the feelings through the paper. Still now, I don't know how to talk about my feelings, so I write instead. That feeling of sadness is also a feeling of anger. You feel a cloud of rain over your head and you can't wear an umbrella. Sometimes, the sadness controlled my whole body, I felt incapable of doing anything certain days, or even weeks. Doctors would say viruses, colds, even depression, but I would shrug it off. I would take all the meds they gave me, but nothing worked. *Nothing.*

...

1983. I didn't remember the month, I didn't know much anymore, month, season, or day. Sometimes, I'd have to repeat my name a few times to remember. I swear I would hear voices talk to me, actual people saying things to me, but nobody was there.

"Leave your house..."

"Nobody loves you..."

My boyfriend walked in and looked at me, apparently, talking to a wall. He gave me a concerned look and said, "You're crazy."

I looked at him, dazed, and just stared at him.

Me, crazy?

Funny.

The Fourth Sign, Hallucinations

This was the scariest illness. Sometimes, I still think it's not a hallucination, maybe it was real, and everybody else was ill. My therapist assures me that's not the case, and that I was the problem.

Was I?

There's nothing more to write for this one, rather, I'll tell the story.

...

One month later, everything was still a little fuzzy, bits and parts still replay in my mind, but never the whole thing. I guess that's a good thing in a way.

I was in my bed, by myself, my boyfriend at this point left the house and went to sleep at his parents' house. I remember the day he left he looked at me, "I'm scared of you."

Normally, I'd feel heartbroken, anxious, and sad, but instead I felt relieved. After he left, the voices got louder and louder, especially at night. I couldn't tell what was reality anymore. One night, exactly 9:58 PM, I felt a shadow appear over me saying something. I couldn't decipher what it was, but I know it was some type of noise. I made out the words eventually.

Danger...

Leave.

Now.

It was peaceful though, it was a face that was similar. It looked like me, but as a kid. Usually, any normal person would be frightened, but it was somewhat wholesome, if you ignored what it was saying. Since that day, I felt connected to this figure, since I heard it everywhere now. But, it turned into my nightmare.

The voices got louder than ever, I couldn't do everyday stuff, eat, sleep, or even write. I felt they encaptured me, they judged me, and looked at my every move. They would tell me negative things I couldn't even write or tell my therapist. To hide from this distinguished figure, I would sit in my bed all day and night, with the soft blankets over my head, protecting me.

I couldn't leave my bed, especially at night. That's when they come out and attack me.

Or that's what I thought.

The Last Sign, Acceptance

Help was never an option for me, at the time, I didn't know I was sick, I thought everyone else was just crazy and I was the normal one. I couldn't grasp the fact I needed assistance, someone to guide me the right way, or at least something. At this point, everyone was gone, so why'd I need anything. A lot of the time, my mind would tell me how sick I was, if my mind said I had a cough one day, I had that cough, if my brain told me I was nauseous, I would be throwing up. Mindlessly, I made myself sick.

...

This was the last piece of writing in his diary. Maybe his therapist never understood, maybe he was just never understood as a person. He accepted his sickness, but nobody else did. That's why he's gone now.

The last date in this journal reads "1984."

No month.

No Season.

No exact date.

It was a ten letter word, nothing else, besides that one word. I flipped through a couple more pages to see if I was missing anything, nothing at all. The word read, "Experience."

Was it his experience?

The rest of the pages going forward were blank.

Nobody helped him after he experienced something so traumatizing.

Poor dude didn't even know the date.

How could the date be 1984 if it was only July, 1981.

My boyfriend walks over and asks, "It's your favorite season, do you want to go to the pool?"

The children in the pool, laughing, is always a blessing. I look at him.

"Let's go."

The weather became damp, it started to rain a little bit and everyone started to get out of the pool. All the children laughing stopped and the wind picked up. My boyfriend looked at me, confused, "Who are you looking at, there's nobody here."

The children's towels were flying everywhere.

I couldn't really understand what my boyfriend was saying because of the wind.

He was probably laughing at everyone trying to get out of the pool, like we usually do.

He tapped me on the shoulder and stared at me.

"Nobody is here besides us."

My Experience.

Chapter 1

Tyler Maurice

"Me and the boys are gonna go out tonight and get some drinks, you wanna come."

"I'm busy tonight."

"Doing what?"

"Sleeping."

"For God's sake Brady, come have some fun, we have been working our asses off."

"I know, that's why I'm tired."

"Whatever dude, you're only young once you know."

"Ya, I know."

I never envisioned myself being a cop. Just one of those things that happen. The academy is cheaper than college, and even if I wanted to go to school, my C average was never going to get me far. But I guess I liked my job, sometimes at least. Working in a beautiful town like Mystic makes it all worth it at the end of the day. I always love the smell of the ocean and the delicious food the five star restaurants are making.

Mystic is definitely a summer town, and despite the beautiful weather, that is the time of year the cops are most busy. That's the time of the year when you'll have the occasional New Yorker come down and steal something or throw drunken punches in a bar at 3:AM. The last time there was a murder was in the 1950s, and an officer has never been killed on duty. However, this time was different. There was a woman named Sophie Johnson who has been reported missing and no one has seen her. It's a particular case that has kind of gotten to me. She was reported missing around Sunday the 25th of August last being seen in a bookstore having a heated discussion with someone over the phone.

So the police department has been looking for her for about two weeks without any daylight. No evidence, no leads, nothing. It was the sister who reported the case, and she was useless for providing information. Usually around two weeks you expect to start finding a waterlogged corpse floating on to some poor ladies beach house, and as of now, that's the only thing I expect.

"We'll find that girl, Brady."

"Craig, we have nothing on this girl, nothing. No lover, no family other than the sister, we really don't know anything about her."

"Shit happens. She probably walked out of a bar, wasted out of her mind, and fell into the river. Crazier things have happened."

"Not around here they haven't."

"Things change Brady."

"Jones, Smith, in my office, we have something."

Chief Gagliadini was a serious man. Probably pushing retirement, but everyone knew he loved the job. He was a walking Italian stereotype, straight out of the Godfather.

"We got some new evidence from Miss. Johnson case. There is a picture of her getting into some car with a man," he said, in between bites of a leftover cannoli. "We got other pictures of her walking with this guy until they got into a white sedan in the parking lot next to the bakery. Here, take a look."

Chief handed us the pictures, which the two of us looked over. At first glance everything about them seemed ordinary, basically exactly the way the chief explained it.

"Do we know where they came from, or met up?" Craig asked.

"Nope, the first photo was taken on Main street, outside the bookstore."

"The same one she was first in?"

"Ya."

I was trying to find anything at all to get something out of these pictures, anything at all, but there seemed to be nothing.

"There seems to be a reason that she met this guy and drove off with him to do god knows what. It's possible that he killed her."

"It's also possible that they were partners and they drove off together, just to be together," I responded.

"Well do we have guys looking for the car?" Craig asked the Chief.

"In fact, we already found it. In the parking lot of some buffalo wild wings in New London. There was nobody in it. There was nothing in the car, it was like it was brand new. No fingerprints either," he said pointing to the gloves the man was wearing. We staked out the car for hours after the restaurant closed and when nobody came out, we took it in."

"Do we have any pictures of the parking lot?" I asked.

"Nope, no cameras."

"Damn."

"Did you show any of the employees the pictures? Maybe they would have recognized them," Craig asked.

"The guys I sent said they did, no one recognised them. They aren't the best pictures anyway."

Craig nodded in agreement, then looked at me with a shrug.

"Alright boys, best get back to work. I'll print this out in color for you," he said, popping the last part of the cannoli in his mouth.

Craig and I both said thanks, before walking out of his office.

"Well, that was useless," said Craig as we walked to our desks.

"No it's not, we could find out who the guy is."

"Listen, Brady, you're a good cop, but this is over our heads, we could maybe find something off of the pictures and ask around if anyone saw the man, but this is getting out of our jurisdiction. The feds are gonna take over. We aren't detectives."

"I just want to find this guy. This case just doesn't make sense."

"Just sit down and review the papers. That's all we can do for right now. Want some coffee?"

"Sure."

"Cream and Sugar?"

"Ya, thanks."

I sat down at my desk and turned on my computer. There really wasn't much to do at the office. Wasn't exactly thrilling, and it was especially frustrating sitting here knowing that we had a missing person report.

Craig came back with the coffee and placed the mug on my desk. "Thanks," I said as he nodded and walked back to his desk.

After an hour or so, the chief came out with the pictures, giving copies to me, Craig, and a couple other cops. There really wasn't anything else to do so I dedicated my time for the rest of the day to study the pictures, finding anything at all that could be of use to find out who that guy really was. At first glance, other than the gloves, there was nothing off about his general appearance. No fancy clothes or unique tattoos. But I did notice the beanie he was wearing. It had a Spencer's logo on it, which was a store in town. That was the lead. Not much, but it was something.

"Hey Chief, I'm going to check Spencers, the guy is wearing one of their hats in the pictures."

"Sounds good, kid. Hey, do me solid and pick me up some McDonalds one the way back, will ya?"

"Sure thing."

As much as I loved the chief, he's gotta stop eating all of that. But I left the station, got in my car, and went down to Spencer's. When I got there, I showed every single employee down to the janitor, and nobody recognised him. Well that was it, we just aren't finding this guy. I had given up, let the feds solve it because there is nothing here. They're the professionals anyway. So I picked up the food and drove back to the station. Even though I got no evidence, this late August weather was the best, not too hot, not too cold. That on its own was worth getting out of the station.

"You got anything Kid?" the chief said after bringing him his food.

"Wasn't hungry," I replied while scratching an itch on the back of my neck.

"I'm talking about any new leads, ya moron."

"Oh, ya...also nothing."

"Sorry kid. Hey are you going out with the guys tonight to O'Grady's?"

"Nah."

"Why not?"

"I'm tired."

"Comon, go have some fun, don't let this get you down. Crazy things like this happen."

"I know, I'm just really wiped out."

"Comon just go, you can have tomorrow off, you have worked your ass off. Just promise me you'll go?"

"I get tomorrow off?"

"What did I just say?"

"Alright Chief, I'll hang out with the boys tonight, thanks."

"Good. You're off, in 10, ya might as well head out now. Go relax, get something to eat. Enjoy the weather."

"I will. Thanks chief."

Craig and the rest of the guys were pleased to find out I was going but it was best not to tell them I got Saturday off. So I left and felt the beautiful August breeze. It was almost therapeutic. But instead of going to the lot and getting my car, I decided to keep walking downtown on Main Street to get something from Julio's Bakery. The more I walked down the street the more the wind picked up, and the more the thick ocean smell wafted into my nose, making me forget about the missing woman. At least if it was only for a little.

The sidewalks were as busy as ever, almost to the point where it was hard to walk. I was just hoping that the bakery wouldn't be too busy, I was really in need of a sandwich. Eventually I was able to squeeze through to the bakery, and of course, there was a line out the door.

"Hey Brady."

"Hi Izzy."

Izzy was working today. I don't even know how she saw me through the sea of customers. She was about my age and I thought she was kind of cute and I was pretty sure she liked me, so therefore I liked her.

"Sorry about the line, we're trying to get through it, then I'll get you whatever you want."

"Don't be sorry about the line, I'm glad you guys are busy." We were practically yelling at each other through the commotion. "I'll wait."

"Ok, thanks," she said through a smile, but not a forced one, a genuine one, she was a very happy, genuine person, that's what I liked about her.

I went to the back of the line outside and took out my phone. I was pretty sure the Red Sox were playing, I couldn't just remember the exact time. I was looking forward to watching that tonight at the bar with the other guys. I did need something to take my mind off of the woman. *6:30 against the Orioles. Sounds good.* And before I knew it, just like Izzy said, the line was moving fast and was inside, almost at the counter.

"Ok, Brady, what can I get you," she spoke through ragged breaths, clearly tired.

"I'll get a genoa grinder on Italian bread, please."

"Sure thing."

I went and grabbed a bag of chips and a soda.

Izzy rang them up for me and before I was about to leave...

"Hey Brady, do you wanna do something tonight, I don't know, maybe get something to eat?"

I could tell it took her some courage to ask. "I can't tonight, the guys and I are going to the bar. Maybe tomorrow night, I'm off."

"Ok, ya, tomorrow is fine," she said with another smile.

I was smiling too. It gave me something else to look forward to. "I'll text you, ok?"

"Ok, sounds good, see you tomorrow."

I walked out of the restaurant, with a happy, tingly feeling. The thing is, if she didn't ask me I probably would've, but knowing she felt the same was just such a relief, even though I always assumed she did.

I walked down to get an ocean view to eat my sandwich. A moment of solitude by the water. The sounds of my stomach actually reminded me of what I was supposed to be doing right now sitting on this bench. *Eating my sandwich.* As soon as I started to take a bite, I noticed a woman running towards me. She eventually reached me at the bench. Her hair was a mess, she looked like she ran a marathon.

"Officer, please, we need you now!" She was out of breath.

"What's the matter?"

"Washed up on the beach of someone's house..." She could barely breathe.

"What was it?"

"A body," she said.

New Beginnings

Anonymous

The day he died was the first day of the rest of my life.

My Grandpa was my very best friend. Nothing compared to the countless moments staying up extra late when I slept over, or the mindless kitchen dancing. As we grew older, we became closer and closer. Every free weekend we'd go to the local breakfast spot making towers with the coffee creamers or smiley faces with the syrup. Even if I already had plans in place, if he ever said, "Wanna go on a date?" there was never a thought of hesitation.

The visits got less frequent.

Why?

The sudden change didn't make sense, but I didn't worry.

It was a warm August evening. My family sat in the living room watching Mulan, cuddled up hearing the sizzling of the fireplace. While laughing at the dragon Mushu, my mom got a call. We shuffle through the pile of blankets trying to find where the vibrations are coming from. We find the phone and are surprised to see that the call is from Grandpa. She answers it with a certain tone of enthusiasm. Her tone quickly turns into a more monotone, upsetting one.

"Go play in your room until I call you back here."

A feeling of my heart dropping to my feet occurs instantly.

What's wrong?

I enter my room and pick up my colored pencils and coloring books to keep my mind off of whatever she's not telling me. It feels like hours until she calls me back, although when I look at my iPad's time, only six minutes have passed.

She tells me to sit down. I see a discouraged look upon her face.

"We don't want you to worry, but Grandpa has a boo-boo that the doctors will try to fix." She sounds weak.

Months pass, the "boo-boo", which has changed to be labeled as cancer, has gotten progressively worse, resulting in it being declared terminal. November comes and his health is decreasing drastically. The hospital visits are scary. The sounds of the machines, the rolling of the beds, all of it makes me think of the worst. The 22nd comes and in my mind it's just another day. I wake up, get in the shower, and get ready for school.

"Good morning!" I say with liveliness.

"Good Morning Lils," my stepdad says in a tone not reciprocating my energy.

Something is really wrong.

"Sit down Lily," my mother says with tears in her eyes.

I listen, awaiting whatever is about to come from her mouth.

"Grandpa's medicine was too much for his body and-" Her voice breaking and tears falling. "He died."

"What?" I say desperately.

It only takes a few seconds for me to break down in her arms. Knowing we had gone out to that breakfast place only a week before, having the mindset that things were going to be okay, leaves me feeling nothing but guilt and unsureness. All memories are replaying over and over as it becomes more real that they're all gone.

My best friend.

My favorite person.

My biggest cheerleader.

Gone.

Days pass, but time feels as though it's stopped completely. Somehow, even though the world feels like it's stopped, Thanksgiving comes.

What do I possibly have to be grateful for? Why is the universe like this?

The entire day feels robotic. The small talk conversations with relatives feel more forced than usual. The time comes when dinner is ready. Every holiday or family dinner he'd sit with me. If the day didn't already feel weird, it certainly does now. My eyes start to sting as they become full. Unsure of how I could make it through this dinner, I talk to my mom and she helps me change how I look at the situation.

"Wouldn't you rather remember all the happy moments and be sad, than forget and not be affected at all?" She sounds drained, but she's trying to be okay for me.

"I guess, I just don't know how."

"I don't want to finish growing up without him."

"I don't want to do the things we did without him."

"Nothing feels right. I don't know and I don't want to learn how to live without him."

"I know Lils, but he wouldn't want us to be sad on a day like today, you know that as much as I do." She sounds so sure and content.

I don't know how.

Thanksgiving ends. Days, weeks, even months have passed. The worst day of my life allowed me to realize that it hurts so much because of how much love there was. It hurts to hear songs we once loved and not sing them together. It hurts to eat the food that we once enjoyed. It hurts to try creating new memories in the same ways when the one person you want to be making them with isn't here. There are plenty of moments where it feels impossible to move forward, but when I try hard enough to change my mindset, I realize that he would want me to move forward, not continue being caught up in the past. Time continues to prove that no matter how long it has been, we are never completely separated because love will keep us connected eternally.



"A writer is someone who has taught his mind to misbehave."

- Oscar Wilde

Where has all the time gone?

Ruby Thoms and Kshreya Arora

(Choose your own ending.)

The bustling people, talking, laughing, and clamoring of things are nearly deafening until my ears begin to ring. The sounds disappear as he walks away. He nonchalantly tells me to “open this when you get a chance” and walks away?! The lingering scent of his cologne remains still in the air as he leaves. I nearly throw up my heart as I turn the bright pink sticky note over in my sweaty hands. He left his warmth across the surface, gently pressing onto my skin.

“Hey...I think...” I read in my mind as everything disappears. The whole room seems to go black and blurry as I read the note.

“I like you,” my heart elevates. I don't think I have ever felt this good. He actually likes me. This boy has been on my mind since 6th grade. And now he finally likes me. My smile as big as ever I walked over to him.

“Hey! I read the note” I said to him. He took the note from my hand and smiled. He grabbed my chin and brought me close to him. OH MY GOD IS HE ABOUT TO KISS ME. I closed my eyes and waited for him but nothing happened. I opened my eyes and saw his conniving grin. He was laughing at me. His friends were laughing at me. The whole school was laughing at me.

“Did you really think I'd like a bitch like you? You're a nobody, and I'm the hottest guy in school. How pathetic.” He threw the note in my face while walking away laughing . . .

Option 1: If you want a **happy and heartwarming** ending, read below.

Option 2: If you want a **tragic** ending, turn to the next page.

Happy and Heartwarming Ending:

Years pass. Graduation. College. Jobs. But I will never forget the humiliation I felt on that day. I can forgive, since we were just kids, but I can't forget. The 10 year reunion approaches. I have grown so much, both physically and emotionally, so I am curious to see what happened to my other classmates who started out just like me. In a little town, with hardly much promise.

As I walk up to the front of the high school, a wave of nostalgia hits me like a freight train and I open the glass doors and are welcomed by my old friends. We start to chat about our experiences through life and what different paths we took. How we can imagine our past selves meeting us now and what heart attacks we might have had.

All is well, when I suddenly feel a tap on my shoulder from behind. It's light and warm. I hoped it would be Veronica, since she mentioned how she might be a bit late.

“Hey Ver...” as I turn around I see him. The guy who crushed me in front of the whole school. “Oh...hey. Sorry I thought you were someone else,” I said with visible disappointment.

“Hey listen, I wanted to apologize for being such a dick back when we were kids. It seriously wasn't nice and I realize that now after I have grown up. I know that you might not forgive me, but I just wanted you to know that I am truly sorry.” He looks down at his shoes. His fluffy dark hair blocked his remorseful expression.

“Thank you, I really appreciate it.”

“Listen this might be sudden, but would you ever want to get a coffee with me someday when we are both in town? Just to catch up a bit. It's the least I can do.”

“I would love that.” His icy blue eyes look up and meet mine as our gaze locks for what seems like hours. He leans closer until someone taps my shoulder, forcing my stare away.

Tragic Ending:

(A FEW HOURS LATER AT THE NARRATOR'S HOUSE)

I sat in complete silence, still in shock as to how I was treated today. I may not be the best looking girl at school, but that doesn't give him an excuse.

While I was sulking in my bed I heard the doorbell ring, followed by a few soft knocks at the door. I was the only one home so I picked up a baseball bat, just in case things don't go as they should. When I opened the door I stood in utter disbelief.

It was him. He was standing in front of my door holding flowers, chocolate, a teddy bear, and a note. Before he could even say a word I slammed the door in his face. I didn't want to face him after he had humiliated me in front of the entire school.

He knocked gently. "Open the door please, let me explain." I wiped away the tears starting to slowly drip down my face and found the courage to open the door. He was sitting on my porch swing and signaled me to come sit near him.

I sat down next to him and we both sat in silence for a few minutes before he started talking.

"Listen, I know I hurt your feelings with what happened earlier at school, and I just wanted to say that I'm truly sorry for that."

I looked up at him and smiled, he seemed so genuine with the sparkle in his eyes and the smile on his face. He stood up and took my hand, pulling me closer to him.

"I just wanted to say that...you're a complete and utter fool." He screamed in my face as he ran away laughing. He dropped the chocolates and flowers, crushing them on the ground and laughed.

"How could you be so stupid to fall for it twice? You'll never be anything to anybody," he said walking away with a smirk on his face.



"You can't use up creativity. The more you use, the more you have."

- Maya Angelou

HEY

Anonymous

"Hey."

His voice sounded like a song in my ears. His eyes danced with the light. And his smile. His smile brightened up my day.

I could feel the heat rising to my face as I smiled back at him. The sounds of my heartbeat filled my ears as everything and everyone but us faded away. Lavender and roses filled my nose as my mouth dried and I tried to form a simple word.

"Hi."

Smell of Gold

Ruby Thoms

The mid-morning sun gleamed through the windows casting a multi-color reflection on the pasty, linoleum tiles in the new home with a winding staircase and open-floor plan. The baby blue sky reminded the pale, seemingly average, parents with hopes and dreams of their own, of that eerily bright day 10 years ago.

"Today is no different than yesterday, but something feels odd., familiar almost," said the mother.

"I suppose," said the father. "The smell of gold is always the same."

The bright sun reflected through the yellow room that reminded the old lovers of the nursery they were never able to use. Even though they escaped the heavy memory of their loss, the new chapter still reminds them of that day.

Crime in the Grime

Anonymous

Henry never thought he would find himself in New York City, he was always more of a country mouse, but after fulfilling his lifelong dream of being a detective, here he stood. In the middle of apartment 14 on Brownsville. He emerged into the abandoned bathroom after pushing open the loose and rusted door handle. The rancid smell of what seemed like rotting flesh hit him in the face as he held back a gag. He pulled the yellow rubber gloves on and began to examine the scene. Green and brown mold covered almost every inch of the room, specifically filling the cracks in the wall tiling. His eyes shifted towards the mirror, although he was prevented from seeing his reflection clearly, because of the stains and cracks throughout the glass. Dark brown hair clogged the sink drain, presumably belonging to the previous owners. The reason he was here. Back in his home state of Louisiana, Henry never had to worry about his safety. His mother sheltered him from all harm in their small, familiar town. But this was his first case since moving out, and stepping foot into a crime scene intimidated him greatly. His hands trembled as he pulled back the moldy shower curtain to further examine the tub. A pale white washed over his face and his heart seemed to stop. Unable to take his eyes off what he discovered, he stood there. Frozen. Suddenly, Henry felt an epiphany take over him. It was like a sudden switch in his head had been turned on. He knew what he had to do. All of the searching was over.

Brother

Anonymous

Summer. The sky is bright blue, the clouds as fluffy as cotton candy. The grass is so green it almost looks synthetic. Most teenagers favorite time of the year. Released from prison, some may call it school, there's hardly any difference.

I walk out of the green, metal doors that weigh around a ton. The sun immediately scorches my fair skin. I'm not albino just very irish. I hug my best friend goodbye like I'm not going to see her til september. In reality, I will be seeing Tess in less than 24 hours. A big toothy smile fills my face so I can camouflage into the bundle of sweaty, overtired prisoners. Students.

Fraud.

That's all I can think about. How I am the only one who dreads, no loathes summer. It's not fun. Yes, I have friends, I have a job, but I also have this weight, my brother. He's kept me from EVERYTHING in life. He's a troublemaker. No he's far beyond just rude remarks, skipping class, and drinking. He's been in court too many times to count on my hands, he's set the school on fire. Not once, not twice, three times. I'm not saying I'm perfect but compared to him, I'm a diamond ring found among a pile of shit.

"Clara, You getting off?" My bus driver's voice brings me back to reality.

"Oh," my hand grabs the strap of my gray backpack and the strap barely hangs onto my left shoulder.

"Have a good summer," I said right when my sage green converse reached the steps.

Don't trip, Don't trip. The first day of this school year, freshman year, I tripped getting on the bus. I somehow managed to break my arm, but refused to miss out on my first day. Now my arm is permanently crooked. The woosh of air blows my dirty blonde hair across my rosy cheeks and my pace turns from a walk to the inbetween of a run and skip. The door, the only way of escaping my house and I am now forced to be stuck in the prison for about 3 months. I know my parents aren't home from the lack of yellow bug in the driveway. We got it in my grandma's will when she passed away due to breast cancer. It was a pity gift because everyone else got way more. Another thing my brother took from me. It's not fun to invite us over when it's known the devil will be joining us.

"Bro, Let's fucking do it!" I hear him chuckle. Zack, my brother's best friend, greatest enemy, depends on the moment you catch them. Right now they appear to be all buddy buddy, lighter in hand and some sort of explosive on the table.

"Can't you blow that up outside?"

"What if we just blow you up Clara?"

God, I hate how his voice sounds. It rings in my head over and over. My eyes start to tear up. Like right after a yawn. But it isn't fueled by sadness or fear. No. Anger, pure hatred. My feet stick to the laminated floor as I retreat to the one semi safe place in my house. My room. My pace was brisk enough to make the paper towels blow off the counter. I spent the next few hours comforted by my music. There are occasional booms here and there, yet my state of meditation wasn't broken until I heard the car door slam.

Mom. She's bringing home chinese food which is supposedly to celebrate the last day of school. In reality she just has no energy left to cook.

"Hi kids!"

"Hi mom!" I yell from my bed. My phone and stringed earbuds hit my bed. They are coiled and twisted like a snake.

My mother already had the circular brown table with three matching chairs and one random foldable chair. The fourth matching one was broken when my brother, as a fourth grader, decided to throw it at our senior dog, Lulu.

I miss her.

"Hi Honey, how was your day?" Her smile pasted on her face like a mask.

"Is John not eating with us?"

"No, he went out with Zack." I knew by the sour tone in her voice and her slight eye twitch to drop it.

"My day was fine."

"Are you excited for summer?"

"Not really."

"What are you planning on doing?" Everything in her searching for something more out of me. But I just can't. Can't tell her I loathe summer because of her horrible son.

"Nothing." That's exactly what I did for the next two weeks. Nothing. Music, lay in bed, movies with my best friend. Tess is the only person that keeps me from committing during summer. She's my true escape from reality, every moment with her is lighter than all my other experiences.

July is starting. I'm assuming this month of summer will be the same as last.

"I'm going to Tess's house!" I yell into my house assuming the message will make it to someone's ears. Something about the weight of the room dramatically shifts when I make my way from my room to the living room. The small plaid couch, colors dull and fabric worn from the years of use. We got it from my Dad's friend when they upgraded their couch and decided to perform an act of charity by giving it to us for free. My brother's ass is plastered to the couch, his face is in between the look of him going to cry—which I have never witnessed before—and so angry he's going to try to put me in the oven, again.

"What's going on?"

"Zack's dead!" my brother says, well it's more of a grunt and mumble.

"What?"

"He was murdered last night," my mother, attempting to comfort my brother, fills in the blanks. Zack wasn't willing to sit through all the gory details of Zack's death and stomped out of the house. To where? I don't know. My stomach sinks and my heart aches for John. As much as I hate him and hated Zack I couldn't imagine losing my best friend.

I don't know what I would do without her.

"Do they know who did it?" I felt more forced to say it than I actually wanted to know.

"It's an open investigation. John is the main suspect," her voice filled with pain. The thought of her son being a murderer can't be easy to deal with.

"I'm going to Tess's house now." I make eye contact with my mom and wait for her little head to nod, so I know I have permission to leave. I grab my phone out of my pocket and text Tess, "I'm not coming over. Plans changed. Call later." I walk out of the house. Instead of just being the witness to the usual sites you would see in a driveway, I saw my brother face down on the ground. A cop had his knee to his back as he cuffed him and his partner cuffed my brother's feet.

He probably deserves that. I grab my phone like any normal teenager would and take a pic. The cop yells to me.

"Tell his mother we are taking him down to the station for questioning about the murder of Zack Phillip Jones." His voice is deep, assertive, but his chest is rising and falling quickly so I can tell getting John to cooperate was a hassle. My body was frozen and my mouth was dry when it finally clicked that this was real. I could fill his eyes, burning a hole into me waiting for some sort of acknowledgement that I heard him. I throw two thumbs up—like an idiot—and then he proceeds to smush John into the back of the cop car and speed away. My feet were cemented to the ground, even if I wanted to move I felt as if I was stuck in quicksand. Just slowly sinking.

Is this real? He's actually going to jail.

Either 5 or 15 minutes went by before I snapped back to reality. My phone was vibrating in the left back pocket of my jean shorts. Tess' name in capital letters covered my phone screen. My thumb hovered above the green answer button for a few seconds. Then I hit it, lifting the phone to my chin while Tess was on speaker.

"Yo, Clara are you there?"

"Uh yeah, sorry."

"Holy shit! Your brother killed someone?"

"I don't know yet. Maybe?"

"Are you ok?" I can hear the shift in her voice as she picks up on my confused state.

"I genuinely don't know. All I know is that these next few weeks are going to be Hell." Which they were. The next month of summer everyday consisted of something to do with the murder or John. Questioning: one on one, as a family, about Zack, about John. It was a never ending cycle. Not even mentioning the fact my parents had to hire a lawyer, which is not cheap. Also, watching my mom go through this process was heart wrenching. Seeing every last hope that John was just a troubled kid, who is going to grow up to be a good man, leave her soul. The glisten in her eyes dulls down every court date, every visit to John, seeing him in his prison jumpsuit. Worst of all... worst of all was undeniably the judgment from others.

"I can't believe she's the mother of that monster," a random, middle aged woman with a Karen cut whispered to her husband in the supermarket as we walked by.

"God, I bet Clara's just as much of a psycho as her brother," my ex best friend Sophie Finch recites over and over to all her little popular bitches. That's how she got popular in the first place by making my reputation crumble to make herself seem godly.

The end of July is arriving. That means the final court date is arriving.

Is my brother the murder?

Is he going to jail?

How'd he do it?

Why? Why kill his only friend?

My entire family's outfits are the equivalent of a funeral attire. Me in a tight, knee length, short sleeved. My dad is in basically a casual suit, whatever that means. Then my mom, in black slacks, and a nicer gray sweater. I mean who would blame us? This isn't a moment any of us are proud of.

"All rise," the judge said along with all his other nonsense. My mind was in a fog. I was fully aware of where I was, but no words were audible. It wasn't until the actual moment the judge was saying what my brother is going to jail for that I started to listen. "Mr. John Clark is charged with the first degree murder of Zack Jones. He will be facing the rest of his life in prison taking in consideration his previous offenses."

"He deserves it."

"Nasty son of a bitch."

"Pig."

"Monster."

Names were grumbled amongst the crowd. Meanwhile, my father's eyes burned with rage, searing a hole right through John. John just sat there. Eyes blank, body relaxed, it was both hopeless and chilling. My mom held in her tears. I know she believes John deserves this, but doesn't know what she did to make him like this. I truly believe some people are born evil.

For the rest of summer, we didn't leave the house much. Only for essentials, work, food, exercise. I left more than my parents, but it was just to rot in Tess' bed rather than mine. Luckily, her house is on the lake, so I got to tan and have a sort of normal summer without being whispered about every second. I just knew sophomore year was going to be better. I don't care if I am going to be talked about every second.

What's new? My brother is out of my life, forever. Sounds like my dream has come true.

"What are you going to wear?" Tess asks me. Her eyes still locked on her phone screen though.

"To what?"

"The first day of school. Duh." She now has rolled over onto her stomach. Her arms holding up her head.

"I'm thinking of my dark washed jean shorts with either my pink or blue cropped top." She shakes her head knowing exactly what I'm talking about even with my dull description.

"Pink for sure. Wait, no, blue, it'll go with your nails." She smiles at me.

"Oh shit I gotta go. I have to meet John's at the prison." I jump up, rushing to tie my shoes as I run outside.

"Ew. Have fun," she yells to me as I run off. I hop into my uber and it brings me to the prison. If you ever want weird looks tell a middle aged man to drop you off at a high security prison as a fifteen year old girl.

"Uh, we're here," he says, his voice praying for me to give him the reason I'm here.

"Thanks so much. I paid online." I scoot out of the car, my thighs sticking to the leather seats. Then I go through the check in process.

I don't recommend it; it's weird.

Then I sat at one of those seats that has a phone attached to it. Separating me from the prisoner with bullet proof glass. More people are here than I expected. My heart beats faster as I see John approach. His expression is lifeless. Goosebumps covered my entire body despite the temperature being over 90.

"Why are you here?"

"You know why."

"You're the reason I'm in here."

"How could that possibly be? *You* killed Zack." My face is lit up with a conniving smirk plastered to it.

"Fuck you."

"This is your fault. You ruined my life from day one."

"You killed my best friend!" His face brighter than a ripe tomato, fists in balls, so I just smile sweetly and say, "Maybe I did, Maybe I didn't. Bye, Bye."

The best part is no one believes him so he has to rot in jail. Being known as a psycho path. And me, the diamond among the shit, got away with murdering Zack Phillip Jones.

The Last Day

Cameron D'Effore

"Hate to break it to you, but I'm still alive," I whispered into my sister's ear.

Lizzie was the darkness to me.

A shadow of who I once was.

An obscure figure of my dishonesty and trust.

Seeing me go wasn't something I thought would hurt her very much because she always acted so collected.

I noticed Lizzie's eyes slip as my mouth opened again to speak, so I stopped. My eyes began to fall, and I passed between my skin and bones into a dark gray abyss of clouds and smoke.

My eyes darted towards a flare of red in the distance.

Red.

Orange.

Yellow.

A hint of blue, almost as if there was a gas fireplace.

But it wasn't gas. I alluded to the flares of red, orange, and yellow, only to realize where I was.

Bleakly, it was literal hell.

Oh, I forgot to mention, I was a jerk.

Let's rewind a bit, shall we?

August 28, 2023.

* * *

"Cam, are you up?" my mom shouted from downstairs.

I didn't want to get up. It was the first day of school, and I was petrified. Sophomore year was supposed to be the easiest year of high school, but I had a gut feeling that it wouldn't be.

I reluctantly rolled out of bed, my bed creaking to the melody of that one Taylor Swift song. My mom yelled at me from downstairs.

"You haven't taken your medicine in two days! Come on, Cam! We're gonna be late, let's go!" Granted, I hadn't been downstairs yet that morning, and we were indeed not going to be late.

"I'm coming!" I shouted. "Bitch," I muttered under my breath.

* * *

"You got a call from Lizzie last night, she was wondering how you're doing," mom said to me as we pulled up to the school.

I tittered. "Yeah, like she wants to know my life."

"You know, your sister just wants to be included in your milestones. You can't shut her out forever."

"You just don't get it, do you?" I scoffed.

"You're not the only one who experienced loss, Cameron. I lost my husband."

"I don't see why you still talk to Lizzie."

"You need to stop blaming her. It's unfair. She lost her dad, too, and you're completely apathetic about what your sister must've gone through and what she is still going through. She lost her dad too! Imagine what it would be like for you if you were constantly being held accountable for someone's life."

I didn't know what to say, so I grabbed my backpack, got out of the car, and slammed the goddamn door.

"Jeez, love you too!" mom yelled sarcastically out the window as I raised my right middle finger behind my back.

I got into school and looked around aimlessly. I finally spotted my best friend, Jane, and she called me over to her table.

"Long time no see, how are you doing?" Jane asked me.

"Ugh, I feel like I'm gonna die."

"Oh no, what did she do now?"

"She just exists in my life and there's no escaping her. She called my mom, wanting to know 'how I'm doing' or some bullshit like that."

"Have you ever considered that she's just trying to make amends?"

"I don't need to consider it because I know it's not true. I don't know anything about her anymore, and she doesn't deserve to know anything about me."

"If you don't know anything about her, then how do you know she's not trying to be a good sister?"

"Listen to me when I say this: I don't want her in my life. I don't care if we're family. Actions speak louder than blood relation."

Jane sighed, and I walked away with a beating heart and a hollow mind.

* * *

I alluded to the flares some more. It was nothing like I ever imagined hell would be. Almost... elegant. I heard a voice. A deep voice. I couldn't tell what it was saying, but I knew it was talking to me.

"Cameron," it whispered.

Trembling, I clasped my hands and turned around. A dark figure stood roughly 6 feet tall, my height.

"Who the hell are you?" I asked.

The figure looked up and took its hood off. It looked as if it was about to pounce on me.

"Oh, sorry I didn't mean to scare you! I'm Satan."

This dude is a psycho, I thought to myself. "THE Satan?!"

"That's me!"

"Like Lucifer Satan?"

He nodded.

What the hell is this guy talking about?

"You, Cameron D'Ettore, are dead. Welcome to Hell!"

"Yeah, I kinda got that gist. What am I doing here? Isn't this place for people like Donald Trump?"

"You just don't get it, do you?"

What's there to get? Nothing.

"Have you ever seen A Christmas Carol?" Lucifer asked.

"Yeah, who hasn't?"

"You'd be surprised."

I waited a moment for him to finish his thought. He didn't until I asked another question.

"Why do you ask?"

"Oh, right, sorry, ADHD brain!" he answered. "I'm like the Ghost of Christmas Past. I am going to take you back to the day before you died and show you who you were as a person."

I didn't see the connection between this and A Christmas Carol. Scrooge didn't kick it. He was just an old grumpy guy who hated everyone and everything. And to be honest, I didn't blame him based on how society is today. I was the gayest person you'd ever be happy to meet, and I did not enjoy it. That's one of many examples I can give you for how fucked up the patriarchy is. Or was. Now I don't have to deal with it. Get it? Because I'm dead.

"Cameron?" Lucifer waved his hand in front of my face.

That tangent you just saw me go on featured me completely zoning out in front of the literal king of hell. Wonderful.

"Shit, sorry. Shit, am I allowed to say shit? Oh SHIT!"

Lucifer rolled his eyes. "You're fine, but what isn't fine is how you treated your sister."

Here we go.

"You know what? I think I'll pass on this 'adventure'"

"Are you sure? If you don't come with me, you'll be in hell until the universe explodes in 5 billion years. And who knows if we'll even still exist then?"

"I don't need to see anything from my life because I've already lived it."

"The point isn't that you lived it. It's that you didn't understand it."

"I'm not following."

"Just come on."

All of a sudden, I felt a cold, hard wash of wind across my face. I was transported to a cold, plastered room. I noticed an IV in my arm and a table with "Get Well Soon" cards that I could count on one hand. They were all from my Grandma.

The calendar on the wall in front of me said it was April 15th. I died on April 16th.

Was this really happening? He said he would take me back to the day before I died. I didn't think he meant me actually experiencing it again.

I heard footsteps down the hall.

"Who could that be?" Lucifer, now about 6 inches in height, sat on my shoulder and shrugged sarcastically.

I jumped. "Jesus Christ, what are you doing here?"

"What am I supposed to do, just watch you from above?"

"Uh, yeah!"

"No, of course not! It's more fun when I get to be the devil on your shoulder." He laughed maniacally.

"Okay, don't get cocky. You're Satan, not the devil."

"Same difference! Besides, I need one more human to go to heaven on my watch for me to be promoted to the Supreme Court, also known as the Devil's Staff."

I rolled my eyes. "That's original."

"Who are you talking to?" Lizzie walked in and asked me.

Ugh, now I remember who I saw today.

"What the hell do you want?" I scoffed.

Lucifer cleared his throat and knocked on my head.

"Sorry, what do you want?" I asked politely. "Better?" I questioned the annoying dipshit on my shoulder.

"Again, who are you talking to?" Lizzie asked.

"Oh shit, can she not see you?" I whispered to the annoying little figure on my collarbone.

"Nobody can see or hear you except for you and I, bro."

Ew.

"Never call me bro again."

"What?" Lizzie still sat confused in the crappy hospital chair next to what I called my "deathbed." Because it quite literally was the bed of my death.

"Sorry. I was just talking to myself," I answered dishonestly.

"I need to talk to you."

I didn't want to talk to her at all. I'd rather just get my death over with.

"It's about Dad—"

"No, we're not talking about this. Not now!" I interrupted.

Lucifer cleared his throat again. "Fine," I said, "but make it quick."

"I know you think that this is all my fault."

You bet your ass I do.

"But I don't think you understand the whole story."

* * *

October 12, 2022.

2:34 p.m.

I was laying in bed.

My phone buzzed.

I looked over to my nightstand and saw that it was a call from Lizzie.

I picked it up.

"Hello?"

Lizzie was panting frantically over the phone. I could hear her crying.

"Cameron, I NEED you to go find Mom. She won't answer my calls and I'm fucking scared."

"Woah, woah, Liz, what's wrong? What happened?"

Lizzie sniffled. "I can't tell you just yet."

"Lizzie, you're scaring me."

"Where is Mom?!" she cried.

"In the shower! Jeez, Liz, calm down!"

"I don't know how I let this happen. Holy shit, what is wrong with me? Oh my god."

"Okay, okay, take a deep breath," I calmly stated into my phone, "Just walk me through what happened."

"I was driving, and this truck came randomly out of the intersection out of freaking NOWHERE, and I hit him, and I wasn't paying attention to the passenger seat, and he jolted back, and I heard a crack, and now he's GONE!" Lizzie remained in panic as my heart dropped to the point where I could feel it in my ankles.

"Wait, who's gone? What do you mean?"

"And the policeman said he wasn't buckled in and that's what made him break his neck, and—"

"Lizzie, listen to me! Where is Dad?"

Silence.

"Lizzie, please answer me." I started to cry as I waited for a response.

"I didn't mean to, Cam, I promise."

My phone slipped out of my hands and shattered on the tile floor of our kitchen.

How could she let this happen? How could she drive my dad somewhere while she knew he didn't have his seatbelt on? How could this happen? How DID this happen? Is my dad really dead?

That's all I remember from that day. It was all a blur. All I can remember from the week he died was my Grandma coming up and kissing my cheek during the funeral. I couldn't take it any longer, so I stole my mom's car and drove home.

* * *

"Before we pursue this conversation, let's go back to the FIRST time you died and see how you handled your sister trying to talk to you." Lucifer told me.

"No, really, I—"

"This adventure is nonnegotiable. Let's go! I'll lead the way, of course."

I felt the chill again. *What is it with hell and cold wind? I thought hell was supposed to be hot.*

* * *

"See? I told you, the Ghost of Christmas Past!" Lucifer, now back to his original size, said as we entered my hospital room and I was looking at myself from the third person.

"Again, Scrooge isn't dead," I said.

"Look who it is!" Lucifer exclaimed as Lizzie passed through my transparent body.

Uncanny, I thought.

"What the hell are you doing here?" my past self sneered.

"I need to talk to you," Lizzie said.

"I don't want to talk to you."

"Cam, please, it's about Dad."

"Oh, give me a fucking break, you don't get to tell me about Dad!"

"Cameron, I seriously need to tell you what happened. This isn't all about you."

"When is it ever about me? It's all about YOU! Every single day, Mom is on my ass about talking to Lizzie, Lizzie, Lizzie! I'm fucking DONE! I hope I die before I talk to you again."

Lizzie sighed. "Look, Cam, who knows how much longer you have? I just want you to acknowledge me before you go."

"I am acknowledging you! Listen to ME! Go. Away."

"Ok," Lizzie said, wiping a tear from her face. "I'm sorry."

I felt a salt stream fall down my cheek. I looked at Lucifer and said, "I didn't mean to hurt her."

"She didn't have to be sorry, you know. It wasn't her fault. And I'd know because I literally know everything about everyone!"

"Well, you could've just led with that and I wouldn't have to go on this stupid adventure," I said jokingly.

Lucifer looked back at me and chuckled.

"Let's go back to the day you died. I'll give you a second chance to make amends."

"Lizzie doesn't wanna see me, does she?"

"She wouldn't come back to visit you if she didn't. You remember your last interaction, don't you?"

"Sort of?"

"Well, whatever that was, you have an hour to give it a second try. If you succeed, you'll be sent to the man upstairs!" Satan quickly blew into his hands, rubbed them together, and waved goodbye.

"Wait, but how do I know if I—"

He was gone.

"Succeeded..." I trailed off.

That son of a bitch left with no warning! Or I guess he's the son of the Devil, so how does that phrase work?

Ugh, whatever, time to face my past.

I was abruptly transported into my sweaty gown in my stiff hospital bed. I looked beside me to find my sister crying in her hands. I started to cry too. It suddenly came back to me. The whole hour before I died, Lizzie and I were completely silent until I felt my stomach twist. I knew it was time to go.

Lizzie looked up at me. "What's wrong?"

I grabbed Lizzie's hand. Barely holding back tears, I whispered, "I love you."

Lizzie placed her head on my beating chest and quivered. "I'm so sorry," she cried.

"It's not your fault."

"It isn't?" Lizzie asked, surprised.

"I mean it, even though I didn't say that the first time around," I chuckled at the thought of me missing her when I left. I couldn't believe she stuck by my side all this time.

"What do you mean the first time?" Lizzie asked.

"You have no idea of the shit I've seen today."

* * *

Lizzie was a light.

A beacon.

A gorgeous array of understanding and patience.

Seeing me go was something I now knew would hurt her more than life itself.

I noticed Lizzie's eyes slip as my mouth opened again to speak, so I stopped. As I took my final breath, my body began to decompress. A sense of calm washed over me. My eyes began to fall, and I passed between my skin and bones into a plane of light and welcomeness.

My eyes darted towards a peak of blue in the distance.

I knew exactly where I was...

THE END.

The Reality of NYC

Anonymous

New York City in July is not a place you will EVER catch me in again, no sum of money could make me return to 5th avenue after my experience. You would think being in the city of dreams they would have a functioning toilet available within a few feet but nope. I was proven wrong. After drinking my third coffee of the day, my bladder was ready to explode, but nothing could have prepared me for the encounter I was about to have. The nearest bathroom was down the block or so, and the most my body would let me move right now was about a tip toe and a half. Sadly, I knew what I had to do. My worst nightmare was about to come true. I turned my heels as if I was face off, but to be fair, for me it was a face off. Would I survive the porta potty? Just down the street and off a little alley was a blue, nightmare box. The closer I got the more my nostrils flared and eyes twitched. I was starting to think it was a portal to Satan's home. As I reached for the handle, I noticed a white gunk coming out from where the porta potty sat and immediately got dizzy. My eyes filled up with tears as I took my last fresh breath of air and entered the horror house. My fresh air was gone before half of my body entered, there is no way to explain the smell, nothing can compare to the rancid, toxic fumes that burnt my nose hairs off. Not only that, but my jaw dropped along with my stomach when I looked down to see solids and liquids that I could never describe. It was scary but what was scarier was the shit and pee smothered all over the seat and walls. I was about to join the 100 dead flies and what I assumed and hoped was a dead rat in the toilet... because if it was anything else than that would be an even bigger problem. This moment took years of my life, I can promise I will never recover. Ever. Like most would. I ran out of that bathroom and forgot I had to pee till hours later, when I was sitting in a sneaker store after my old ones had holes burned in them from stepping into hell . It has been three years since this experience and to this day, I have not drank coffee, nor gone near a porta potty.

Waking Up

Anonymous

This is the second time this week I've been here. Stuck in bed as my mind alludes me. The sound of my alarm echoing in deaf ears. My body cemented to the mattress like a pillowy grave. The covers weigh on my bones like a strangling sweet rope. Straining to move as I hear the sounds of life from down stairs. My mouth opens but no words form, no sound or breath. My body hurts as I try again and again and again to get up. Till my eyes fall back and I'm filled with calm. Inhaling but no air reaches my lungs. I smile. The alarm reaches my ears and I sit up with a sigh. This is the second time this week I dreamt about not waking back up.

Alone

Tyler Maurice

There I stood in the moment of truth, and it smashed into a million pieces. I'm going to die. All hope was lost and a dread of emptiness sat in my stomach like a rock. There I sat in the woods surrounded by a sea of trees, never ending suffocation. Plane shrapnel scattered along the forest floor. No food, no water, nothing, no one. Just me and my horrible thoughts. The chattering of the birds ringing in my ears driving me even closer to insanity. And if it wasn't the birds, it was the wolves. Their howls sounded closer every minute. But oddly, I wasn't afraid. I wasn't worried about the wolves. Maybe I'd already accepted my fate. Hunger and thirst were almost afterthoughts at this point, I was starting to feel tired and almost dizzy. I just wanted to sleep. I stumbled over through the grass to an oak tree and perched myself against the trunk of the colossal tree. My eyelids felt weighted, breathing slowly. The wolves kept howling, almost soothing me to sleep. I looked up the massive tree to see light breaking through the canopy, lighting up my eyes and face. I started to drift off to sleep, I could hear the wolves getting closer. Lulling me to sleep. My eyes closed, and sleep set in. I hoped I'd never wake up.

My Own Summer

Ava Korineck

If I was granted one wish right now, it would be to take out my brain and stomp on it like a cigarette. My fingers tap a David Ghrol- worthy beat, as I watch the clock inch closer to freedom. My brain is a hot stew, rotting after listening to the mindless chatter of my brother's girlfriend Tiffany prattle on and on at the dinner table.

"...And then we went out to a lovely steak dinner, which Jesse didn't have to do, but was so lovely..."

The clock moved another two minutes since I last checked. I felt eyes boring a hole into the side of my head, and ever so slightly turned to glance at my mom shooting laser my direction. I paused my impatient fingers, and slowed my tapping foot under the table. My shoulders and chin up, I plastered on a fake smile towards Tiffany and Jesse and my mother stared at me approvingly. My hands were itching to move, all curled up and tense at the table corner. I wondered if my nails made an indent into the mahogany, but then I thought that mahogany is a hard wood, and that it would be more difficult to mark up than something like pine.

"...What do you think, Alexis?"

"Huh?"

My mother heavily sighed, and disappointedly shook her head.

"Alexis, just go. We'll talk later."

"Okay then, see ya guys later, bye."

The looming threat of a lecture from my mother couldn't taint the excitement of going out to the lake with Elijah and Zack. My chair squeaked as I shoved it aside as I ran out the back door. I sprinted all the way from the backyard to the path through the woods to get to Eli's house. I didn't want to waste a second of my precious lake time with the boys. I slowed to catch my breath when I heard voices echoing from the dock up ahead. There was just something about this oasis, where the trees were greener, the air lighter, and it was difficult to be in a bad mood at this place.

"Lex! There you are! Okay so here's the deal, we were thinking of swimming out to the raft, whaddya say?"

Elijah ran over to me, his speech out of breath. Zack followed, with a matching eager grin. It was contagious enough to make me laugh just seeing them.

"Only if we raise stakes. Hmmm, how 'bout loser buys me a sundae at Paul's? Ready, set, go!" I chucked my jean shorts and my tank top off as I headed straight to the water. As my toes touched the warm lake water, I felt an elbow shove into my stomach, making my dive off balance, throwing me off course under water. As I push off the murky sand floor, I reach the surface as gasp. Blinking forcefully to get the water out of my eyes, I blindly reached my arms out trying to find who shoved me so I could seek revenge.

"Zackary, if you shove me under, count your days."

"Sorry to break it to ya princess, but I'm all the way over here."

I open my eyes towards his direction and see him already on the dock, leaned up against the ladder, grinning at me. I then realize Elijah is nowhere to be seen, and I frantically start swimming towards the dock. As I approach the ladder, I feel my opponents grinning down at my failure.

"Ha! Looks like Lex owes *us* sundaes, huh?"

"Yeah yeah yeah, whatever asswipe."

As I climb the ladder, my foot slips on the last step, but thankfully I get caught by Eli before I could break my face on the slippery wood.

"Woah, watch it Lex, can't have my sundae supplier all broken."

I roll my eyes at him and ease myself onto the dock. The pallet of vibrant blues and oranges mixing with dashes of pink hypnotize the three of us into a collective silence. We watch as each fluffy cloud sails across the sky, and the sun slowly dips down. Zack was the one to break the serene silence.

"I wish Nicole was here to see this. She would've loved to paint this."

"Yeah me too. Nicole is a thousand times less annoying than Tiffany. And at least she actually has talent."

Zack's girlfriend was actually pretty chill. She's gone along with us on some of our adventures, like the time we went on all the rides at the state fair. I'm not exactly close with her like I am with Zack, Elijah, and Jesse, but for a friend that's outside of our group, she's probably my favorite.

"So Lex, how was your best friend Tiffany?"

I sighed heavily, and looked for a throwing pebble on the dock.

"Same old, same old. All she did was talk about her and Jesse the entire time. It was sickening. Who wants to hear that shit when you're trying to eat? I can't really blame poor Jesse for being a dope when it comes to girls, but dude, I don't understand why he picked such a bitch for a girlfriend."

I turned over the pebble in my hand. I could feel Elijah and Zack staring at me, but I pretended to be invested in every speck of the pebble. I could feel the thickness in the air, and how boiling my face felt, and it wasn't from the late May heat.

"I- I mean- "

"Lex, whaddya say we race back to shore and we go to the movies, my treat?"

I looked up, and blinked at Elijah, then instantly grinned at him, thankful for knowing me enough to when I'm uncomfortable.

"You're on!"

I dropped my pebble, and sprinted to the edge of the dock. I was instantly refreshed with the cool water surrounding me. As I came up for air, it felt as if everything was right again. Seeing my close friends laughing and splashing with me, this is my happy place. My face hurt from grinning so much. The dock wasn't too far out from the shore, so the swim was quick. Once I got to standing distance, I ran out the water searching for my old sneakers. As I was lacing up, a breeze flew in, instantly making goosebumps appear all over me.

Damn it, I forgot to bring my towel.

I threw on my jean shorts and t-shirt, hoping I would feel the slightest bit warmer, but I was being delusional. Elijah must have seen me shivering as he approached me offering up his towel.

"I know it's kinda used but I'd rather have you wear it than be shivering the whole way home."

"Thanks Eli. I wasn't that cold though, I could have managed."

"Yeah right Lex. And I've never had a donut. I mean come on Lex, have you seen yourself?"

He arches his eyebrow up with a smirk, and turns to head towards his old truck. Zack was already in the passenger seat, going through the box of tapes.

"Damn, I wanted shotgun."

"You snooze, you lose, Lex."

"You better pick something good Zack."

"I have the perfect tape for the ride, don't worry."

He picks up the tape from the box, and shoves in the tape to the stereo. I hop in the backseat of the pickup, and pray Zack plays something actually good.

"Hey Lex, do you want me to drop you off at your house so you can change before the movies?"

"I feel like Tiffany will still be there, so I guess if you don't mind I could wait her out for like 45 minutes and then we stop by my house on the way so I can change."

Before Elijah could reply, the sound of Everlong fills the car as Zack turns the volume all the way up. As the bass begins the song, I stare out the window with a smile stuck on my face.

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As the song fades to silence, the truck turns into Eli's road. But as he goes to pull into his driveway, we all notice a blue volkswagen beetle parked in his driveway. Instantly, my smile is wiped off my face, and my heart drops into the pits of hell and shatters as it crashes to the ground.

"What's Kim doing here?" Elijah asked us, as if we were in on something with her.

"Beats me, bro. She must have come here on her own will. Unless Alexis knows why she's here."

Zack and Elijah glance back at me, and I quickly bring my shoulders up and open my mouth to defend myself, when a loud shriek irks my brain.

"Elijah! There you are! I was wondering where you guys went off to! I have a surprise for you, so get out of the car!"

Elijah quickly jumps out of the car, and hastily yells back at me and Zack.

"Guess I gotta bounce guys, I'll see ya later! Lex, I guess I owe you a movie."

I blankly stare at my best friend as he chases after his girlfriend eagerly, as if he was a puppy. I didn't even notice that Zack had gotten out of the truck, and was outside tapping on the window. I numbly crawled out of the backseat and followed him to the curb.

"I'll walk you home Lex, it's no biggie."

"Thanks Zack. At least I know you can be a normal human being, and not a lovesick puppy."

He laughs as we walk two blocks towards our neighborhood. I find a pebble, and keep kicking it as we continue on. As we turned right to our adjacent houses, Zack slowed up and looked over at me.

"Hey Lex, I'm sorry but I can't hang out later either. Me and Nicole are going to her sister's recital. Unless you want to join us, Nicole would be fine with that."

"Nah, it's okay Zack. The Yankees are on tonight anyways. Tell Nicole I said hello, and let me know how her sister does."

I went to kick my rock into my driveway, when Zack turned and stopped in front of me.

"Alexis, are you really sure? Are you okay after everything? Be honest, Alexis, there's no point in you lying, I can read you like a book."

His stare challenged me to pull my gaze away from my rock. I quickly plastered a half grin, and took my hands out of my pockets.

"I'm positive Zack. Really, no worries. I haven't stopped and watched a full game in ages. Besides, I would rather not have to share my popcorn with any of you for once." I stared at him with that half grin, as he stared back at me for what felt like forever.

"I don't believe you at all, but I have to go and get ready for the recital. I will call you as soon as I get back okay?"

I gave him a fist bump, then ran off to unlock the gate to the backyard. As I finally opened the door and went to the back door, I could feel Zack's eyes on me the entire time.

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I went to the back door, hoping I would avoid everyone in the house and get a straight shot to my room. Unfortunately, I caught Jesse's attention across the room because he looked over at me from the couch and went over to me.

"Hey I thought you were hanging out with Zack and Elijah?"

"I was. Then they had plans. Now I'm gonna go upstairs and watch the Yankees in my room if you need me."

"Why don't you watch it down here with me?"

"I thought you were with your girlfriend all night."

"She said she had a project to finish, so we rescheduled for tomorrow night."

"Oh."

Jesse must have felt bad that I'm a loner now, because he instantly got up and prepped snacks in the kitchen.

"If you turn the game on, I can make the popcorn if you want."

"Deal."

I found the remote buried in the cushions, and snagged the blanket on the nearby recliner. As I put on the game, the air was instantly saturated with melted butter. Jesse finally walked over to the couch, and plopped down next to me. Jesse and I grinned at each other, as we grabbed handful after handful, and watched our favorite player, Derek Jeter make an amazing diving play.

"Jeter's the bomb. I'd say he becomes captain."

"If he keeps playing like that Lex, he could be in the Hall of Fame."

"For sure!"

As we kept watching the game, my mind began to wonder. It was weird; I was focused on the game, but at the same time my mind was busy thinking things over.

I wish everything could stay like this.

Just me and Jesse, watching the best game on Earth, off on our own little island forever and ever. Maybe Zach and Elijah could come. But nobody else, just us watching baseball. Is that too hard to ask?

"Hey Lex, do you think I should buy her the necklace?"

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

"Ugh, Lex don't you listen? I was talking about if I should buy Tiffany that necklace from the shopping catalog for our anniversary."

"Oh. Uh, sure. Buy it."

"Now you're just saying that, I want your true opinion Lex."

"Oh so you want my true opinion? Fine, so whatever I'm about to say you can't be mad at, because I'm just doing what you asked me to. In my true opinion, I can't stand her, so I could care less about whatever stupid present you waste your money on for her."

Jesse's jaw is stuck open, his eyes wide, appalled. I blankly stared at him, then shoved the bowl and blanket on him as I stomped upstairs to my room.

"Wait, Alexis!! Come back! Do you really hate her?!"

I pretended not to hear him, as I quickly rounded the corner and slammed the door closed as I locked myself in. I went over to my stereo, and quickly shoved my Slipknot tape in, and turned the volume all the way up.

'I felt the hate rise up in me, kneel down and clear the stone of leaves..'

"ALEXIS OPEN THE DAMN DOOR!" Jesse screamed from the other side of the door. He kept banging on the door, knowing it severely annoys me to the point where I *have* to let him in. Tired of his bullshit, I stomp over to the door and unlock it.

"WHAT, DID I OFFEND YOU? SO WHAT THAT I DON'T LIKE HER."

Instead of a response, Jesse sprints into my room to turn off the music.

"There we go. And yeah, it does hurt when I find out that you don't like who I'm in love with. I wanted your support."

"Jess, she's a bimbo barbie. You can find those types of girls anywhere. I would support you if you actually found a girl who isn't a ditz and who weighs you down."

Maybe I shat on his pride, or maybe I crossed the line, but I didn't expect the sweet, considerate Jesse to go off on me.

"Alexis, are you serious? That's actually so cruel of you. And who are you to say anything, I've never seen *you* with a boyfriend before. You don't understand what it's like dating someone, so you're in no place to say anything. In fact, I bet you're secretly in love with either Zack or Elijah, when you know damn well that they're both in happy relationships. You're just jealous."

I was in complete utter shock. My heart was completely obliterated. My eyes bulged out of my skull, and my vision got suddenly blurry.

I can't believe he would ever say anything like that.

My throat burned, as I tried to utter a word. It was like the eerily calmness after a hurricane destroyed a whole town completely.

"Jess.... H-How could you ever say that?"

I quickly slapped the back of my hand to my eyes and sniffled as I stared him down. Jesse's face was stuck in shock too. I don't think he meant to say all those angered thoughts out loud.

"Lex...." He croaked. "I-I didn't mean.."

"No Jesse. Don't give me all that bullshit. Whether you meant to say it or not, you still said it. And you say *I'm* the cruel one."

I shook my head, and grabbed my walkman off the floor. I picked up my coat off my desk and left him there, stuck in the mess.

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I didn't really know what to do next. I wanted to keep watching the game, but I had nowhere to watch. I started walking towards the path in the woods, but not gonna lie, it seemed kind of scary to do alone when it's getting dark enough where you can't really see where you're going. Besides, even though it's a small town, I've

seen too many movies to know a girl shouldn't go in the woods alone. I decided to keep walking past the path, and keep walking until I found somewhere to go. As I walk, I quickly assess my pockets for any money.

Lets see, \$10 in my pocket, plus a stick of gum and three quarters.

Hopefully I don't need to buy anything.

I am thankful I was smart enough to wear my corduroy jacket, because even though it was a very warm day, as soon as the sun went down a chill lingered. I brought my walkman with me, so I put on my headphones and listened to my Soundgarden tape as I approached the town square. I was hungry, but for something sweet to wash out the salty taste of popcorn from earlier. Thinking of popcorn made me think about the Yankees game, so I walked onto main street looking for Al's AV store, hoping the game was on a TV in the window. I listen to Chris Cornell the whole walk to the shop, which makes me feel as if I'm in some sort of sad movie montage walking the pouring Seattle Streets, instead of a town square in southern Maine in early summer. I see the shop up ahead, and quicken my pace to the window.

Just my luck, the damn store was already closed. I heavily sighed, hitting my breaking point. I slammed my head against the window, defeated. After a minute, I peeled myself off the cool glass, and just started aimlessly walking. I didn't know how late I was gonna be out, or where I'm even gonna go, I just kept moving. I was so spaced out walking around, I was startled when I heard the clack of the tape stopping. Shaken out of my haze, I flipped over the tape and turned it back on immediately. I couldn't be alone with my thoughts, that would be too scary. I saw a skate park ahead in the distance and decided to go over. There was now a little pep in my step, as I finally found a purpose.

Damn it, I wish I took my skateboard when I left. This would have been the perfect time to skate.

I was actually kind of pissed that I didn't think to bring my skateboard when I left. But there was no way in hell that I would go back to the house now, especially after coming all this way. I remembered that I wanted a sweet treat, so I went over to the snack shack next to the skate park and thought over what I wanted to get.

Hmmm, a choco taco? Nah, I hate the nuts on the top. What about a cookie sandwich?

As I was in deep thought, a guy's voice interrupted.

"Are you stuck on what to get?"

I looked up at the voice to see a dude around my age staring back at me. He had dark curtain styled hair, and had greenish blue eyes behind these round glasses, that were waiting for an answer.

"Uh.. yeah, I want something sweet like ice cream but I'm not sure yet."

"Take your time deciding, no worries. I would recommend a chocolate milkshake though, those are my specialty." He smiled and looked away quickly.

I stood there staring at the chalkboard, as if it could tell me what to pick.

Maybe a slushie is the way to go. Or what about a smoothie?

There were too many options for my indecisive mind to wrap around.

"Are you really that stuck?"

"More stuck than gum to a shoe, pal."

He laughed as he leaned over the counter towards me.

"Okay, so we know that you want something sweet, so do you want something sweet to drink or something to eat?"

"Hmm, I'm thinking of something to drink. You know what, I guess I will have a chocolate shake."

He chuckles, and agrees that a shake was the right move.

"As you wish, that will be coming right up."

He smiles as he goes in the back to make it. I put my headphones back on as I wait. I can't shake this weird feeling I have though. It's almost as if I knew this dude from somewhere, I just don't know where from.

Maybe he's someone's older brother? But this town is so small, I feel like I would have known him as someone's older brother.

The tape stops, so I slide my headphones off as I wait. It still kept bugging me that I didn't know where I saw this dude.

"Here's your chocolate shake."

"Thanks, and thanks for helping me decide."

I go to pull my ten buck out of my pocket and hand it to him, when he puts his hands up and says

"It's on the house, don't worry about it."

"What about a tip?"

"Nope, it's absolutely free. No tip."

I smiled back and shook my head, finally something going my way.

"Thank you, you didn't have to do that. And by the way, you really do make a mean shake."

"I know," he grinned.

My face was starting to hurt from smiling for so long. My stomach felt all funny, and I didn't like how my shake was sitting like a brick in my stomach. But it was too decadent to stop drinking. I walked away from the snack shack, kind of in a weird haze. I sat on a bench on the far side of the skate park, watching others do all sorts of sick tricks. I looked back at the snack shack to see the guy, but he was nowhere to be found. Granted, it was almost pitch black, so it had to have been maybe past 9 o'clock. As I watch a guy and his friend practice their ollies, I start thinking down a rabbit hole.

Is this what makes them truly happy?

Do they find true happiness in skating, or is their happiness from being with their people?

Do they have someone that deeply loves them?

Do they care about any of that? Would they be forever happy just doing something they love like skating, rather than finding someone that makes them truly happy?

I honestly hated getting so philosophical. But my mind is a dangerous place sometimes. I got up from the bench and threw away my empty cup.

Do I go home now? Mom is at the office, so I won't have to deal with her, but is Jesse gonna be home?

The problem is that Jesse probably told Zack and Elijah about our fight, and they might be looking for me. The last thing I want is for them to pity me so much that they all sit me down and try to get me to tell them what's wrong. I glanced back at the park to see everyone had left, even the snack shack was closed. I decided as much as it pains me, I rather go home and deal with Jesse then wander the cold streets alone.

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Maybe walking alone at night was a bad idea.

I wish I was smart enough to bring a flashlight.

I was doing this awkward speed walk back to my house. I had the volume on low for my walkman, enough to distract me a little, but low enough to still hear my surroundings. But all my mind could think of was creepy sewer clowns, chainsawer killers and creepy dudes driving slowly near me.

Would it be weird or suspicious if I just started sprinting?

I didn't care, and started booking it all the way home. I was thankful for the orange beacon that is the street lamps illuminating my way home through the dark abyss of the night. As I ran, the crickets and frogs and other critters were harmonizing in a choir of chaos that was the soundtrack of a summer night. By the time I reached my street, I slowed, out of breath. When I had finally reached my house, I hopped the fence to the backyard to go in through the back. I made sure to be as silent as possible, because I had no clue how late it was. I creaked open the door to find my mother and Jesse asleep on the couch, the TV illuminating their peaceful faces. My heart twinged, but backed away and went quietly up the stairs to my room. I didn't think I would be able to sleep, but it was all that wandering that made me knocked out as soon as my head hit the pillow.

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The day after Jesse treated me as if nothing happened. It was weird how he could just spit out such horrible things then act as if it was all in our imagination. He joked with me at breakfast, and at the lunch table acted all hunky dory usual Jesse. But for some reason, I just couldn't let his hateful words go. They lingered at the back of my mind, like ghosts whispering. Since the fight, there was a shift, at least on my end. With graduation quickly approaching, I don't think my friends realized how I was slowly drifting away in the wind. I had now gotten silent at the lunch table, I didn't need to fake laugh anymore when they didn't even notice. It was like I was suddenly unqualified to be a part of their club. When Jesse didn't have his girlfriend to fuss about,

he was off being a soccer star, enough that got him this scholarship to a prestigious division 1 school. I still went to every one of his games of course, but I had become aware of the wedge that was separating us. I slowly stopped hanging out with Elijah and Zack as well. Zack was just so scatterbrained, with prom, graduation, and making his home videos of Jesse, that he didn't really notice as I slowly faded. I know it's not his fault, he's a good guy that's just busy. Elijah was the hardest to let go though. I had mistakenly thought I was so close to him, but clearly I wasn't. He was so preoccupied with his girlfriend, and God knows what else, that we just stopped talking. I didn't understand at all.

Did I even matter to him?

How could everything change so fast?

Am I really that forgettable?

It was different with Zack and Jesse. Obviously I was still close with Jesse, even though our special twin bond seemed tarnished. Even Zack, when he remembered me, would still talk and once in a blue moon hang out with Jesse and the girls. But I would walk past Elijah in the hallway, and weakly put my hand up waving, and he wouldn't even bat an eye in my direction. Jesse and Zack just assumed I had gotten busier as the year winded down, but I just caressed their minds with sweet lies.

"Sorry, can't hangout, I have an art project to do."

"Oh, I have to stay after school on Tuesday, sorry."

I just kept making excuse after excuse and they ate up every single one without a doubt. But Elijah? I thought he would somehow notice, notice the absence of his best friend. But he never did. Never went up to me to ask about why I suddenly wasn't hanging out with the group, why I suddenly had so many projects to get done.

What if he never even saw me as his best friend and it was a one sided friendship?

Why does he ignore me now?

What did I do that made him change so much?

These were the thoughts the ghosts always whispered in my head at night. I have the eyebags to prove it. And my mom was so preoccupied with her precious little soccer star son, she didn't even notice when all my grades tanked. I even saw the letter from the school in the mailbox, and didn't even throw it away before she saw it. In fact, I took it out with all the rest of the bills, and placed it on top of the kitchen counter. I found the letter unopened the next morning before I threw it away. Now, don't think because I'm a loner that I got stupider. I just didn't care. I did all my homework and assignments. In fact I did each assignment carefully, and took my precocious time I seemed to now have. All the homework sits neatly in a stack on my desk. I just don't intend to hand it in. I could care less.

When I wasn't working on homework, I loved being unshackled from the house. While everyone was out on triple dates, or soccer games or parties, I took my skateboard and just rode for miles and miles. Me and Jesse shared a car, but he needed it more than I do for all of his events. I preferred the solitude of a board anyways. I watched the sunset on the beach (when the parties weren't there), I walked on trails with my walkman. I started writing in a journal, a pocket sized one that could fit in my shorts pocket. Slowly, the ghost became more quiet. On the best early June days, I would go to the neighboring town's skatepark. The two guys I had seen my first time there, I eventually became friends with. Joey and Blake were actually pretty chill dudes, they even helped me learn some tricks myself. I even saw the snack shack guy sometimes. Joey and Blake were in a band, *Kerplunk* and asked if I wanted to join.

"Lex, you could be our frontwoman. I can see you as the singer type."

"Oh I don't know Joey, I'm a pretty average at best singer. And I don't think I can pick up an instrument to save my life."

"Lex, we can easily teach you guitar and shit. But you have the perfect look for a frontwoman, and besides you probably have good song ideas if you're always writing in your book."

And so I joined. Now every day we would hang out at the skatepark, and then practice in Blake's garage. Was I a good singer? No, but they for some reason thought I was and so I found my spot. My favorite time of the day had become the minute when school got out so I could go to the next town over to be with my

true friends. I skipped so many of my own school events, senior prom, the senior class trip, you name it I missed it. Every skip I would skate to the park and just laugh and enjoy being with my best friends.

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It seemed as if Jesse didn't understand me anymore whenever I was home with him.

"Alexis, you've changed so much. Why don't you hangout with the group anymore? Who do you even talk to now? It's so weird that you don't even try anymore."

What I didn't understand is why it took this kid so long to realize that I stopped hanging out with them.

"I don't know Jess. We just all grew apart I guess. We all have different things going on now. And it's almost graduation, things get busy."

Jesse just stared at me intently. I looked down at my shoes, unable to keep looking at him.

"No Alexis, this seems different. I just remember the four of us were always so close, and I hate seeing you not here with us anymore. You're always off with those other two guys. It's not the same anymore."

"Jesse, unfortunately things change. I wanted us four to stay the same as we did when we were five, but were not. I know they don't even ask about me anymore, and although it stings a bit, I have other things to focus on. It's okay Jesse, you'll always have me."

His head was tilted, while he pondered what I had to say. He looked lost in nostalgia of our childhood, filled with the adventures of all four of us. I couldn't blame him, it was difficult not to get caught up in the midst of our crazy adventures whenever I thought of Jesse, Elijah, Zack and I.

"I guess... I guess you're right Alexis, and I absolutely hate to admit it."

"It's fine Jess, go be with them. I have my own friends now. Maybe Elijah and Zack were yours to begin with."

The saddest smile I ever saw was on Jesse's face. He shook his head and walked out the door.

.....

I have finally graduated. I am forever freed from this hell hole. I threw my cap, hugged Jesse and got my pictures taken with him for mom. As I waited for Blake and Joey to come find me (I was ecstatic to hear they were coming to my graduation!), I saw Zack and Elijah talking to Jesse. As if they heard my thoughts, they all looked at me. I glanced back at my mom instead.

"All four of you stand together! Come on now we need pictures for the scrapbook!"

I awkwardly joined them. I tried just being on the end next to Jesse, but my mother was not having it and insisted everyone had to stand next to everyone in the thousands of pictures she took. I could feel my plastic smile starting to melt.

"There she is! I told you she would be on *this* side of the field."

"Shut up Joey, at least I remembered to bring my camera unlike *someone*."

Instantly I tore away from the clutches of Jesse and Zack, and ran over to Joey and Blake.

"I can't believe you guys made it!"

"We wouldn't miss this for the world, Lex."

I waved goodbye to Jesse and my mom, and went off to follow Blake and Joey to their car.

"I'd say this is the perfect occasion for celebratory milkshakes!"

"Come on Joey, hurry up and drive over there I'm starving! Sitting through all those speeches makes a girl hungry, you know."

And so we went off to our own little oasis, the skate park snack shack. Once Joey pulled into the parking lot, I raced Blake and Joey all the way to the snack shack.

"HEY COREY GUESS WHO JUST GRADUATED!"

From the back the snack shack guy came up over the counter and hugged me.

"Congrats Lex! I'm so proud! Wanna shake?"

"That's why we came here!"

Corey, Joey, and Blake laughed. Corey let go of me to go back to the shack to make us all chocolate milkshakes.

"It's kind of obvious Lex. I don't know how you don't see it."

"Blake, what do you mean? Joey, what's he talking about?"

"Lex, Corey is definitely crushing you! I mean look at how he looks at you, he's so in love. You should go out with him!"

"I don't know Joey, what if you guys are wrong? What if we're just being delusional?"

"Well, do you like him, Alexis? Like if he asked you right now, would you go out with him?"

"W-well, I mean- "

"So yes, you would is what I'm hearing."

"Shut up, Blake."

Suddenly Corey approaches us with shakes. The boys instantly flock Corey like seagulls which makes me laugh. I make eye contact with him, and he holds on for what feels like an eternity. And for some reason, I'm able to keep staring back. My heart quickened, and I could feel my face getting embarrassingly red. This is when I knew that this was mutual.

.....

EPILOGUE

I can feel the warmth from the sun on my skin like a hug. I watch as a dog runs away from its owner across the town green, chasing after a squirrel climbing an oak tree.

"Is it like a program setting for dogs to chase after squirrels? It's so random."

"Maybe they were enemies in a past life."

I laugh as I take my blanket and place it on the grass. Dropping my tote bag I kneel down to smooth out the corners.

"So what's in the bag, Lex? It felt like a bunch of bricks."

"Rocks."

"You know what I meant."

"No, I'm being dead serious, it's filled with rocks, take a peak."

Corey curiously opened the bag, and his face lit up.

"Aw, Lex. Are we gonna chuck rocks in the pond?"

"I like where your head's at, but not today. I thought it would be cute to paint them."

I whipped out the paints and brushes from the inside pocket of the bag.

"And what is in your bag, may I ask?"

"Well, besides the milkshakes, I brought us a boombox and some snacks."

He placed the boombox in front of us, and placed the milkshakes down carefully. I rummage through his backpack until I grab a bag of popcorn. He leans over and turns on the radio. After a handful of popcorn, I start dumping the rocks on the blanket and pick my first canvas.

Hm, what do I even paint?

A heart with our initials would be cute- ooh wait even better, what if the heart was a baseball with our initials on it, that would be sick.

I dip my brush and start painting the whole rock white, when the radio makes me lift my head up.

"I watched you change, it's like you never had wings.."

I stared out at the park in front of me. I couldn't look away from the little girl running around with butterfly wings on her back. She ran around free, her wavy hair flying behind her. Her shoes were untied, and her striped and polka dot socks mismatched, and her shirt a bright red like a phoenix. She didn't care about anything except that butterfly, and kept chasing it even though it was too high to reach.

"I didn't realize you were a Deftones fan," Corey interrupted.

"Huh?"

Grinning, he shook his head and pulled me into his arms. I smiled into his shirt, and happily sighed.

"I watched a change in you, it's like you never had wings. Now, you feel so alive, I've watched you change."

Betrayal

M.E.R.

There I stand face to face with her — with Alexis. The war between us, seemingly everlasting. She stared at me, eyes wide and dark. Her eyebrows lay furrowed down. Her fists sit clenched at her sides. Her mouth stayed closed, her lips pressed together. I stood with my shoulders down and my hands swinging at my sides. A single tear fell at the sight of her. The rubble around us seemed to disappear. The sky, no more a bright crimson. Just us. In the moment the calm stare came over me, it was gone — and so was she. The rubble was back, mountains spread across the land. The sky returned still bloody. Alexis was gone.

Where did she go?

I fell forward to the ground. Pain shot through my entire back. Arising to my feet. Alexis stood behind me, her fist still clenched, aiming at me. I stood, my hands up in defense.

"I don't want to fight you... not anymore."

She stared at me, her expression hard and cold. For an instant it looked as though her eyes were glassy, but it was gone. Anger. Hatred.

"I'm done with this fight!"

I turned from her, walking away. Pain shot through my body once again. Excruciating, terrible pain. I looked down to my stomach, the tip of a blade stuck through. Blood poured to the ground. My blood. I fell to my knees and turned to face her. She stared with her hands still out, looking almost shocked at what she'd done. I fell entirely to the ground, the blade piercing even further through. I looked at her one last time.

"What... have you done?"

Mysterious Prison

M.E.R.

This is the second time this week I've been in this prison. It started when I was walking alone down the dirt path.

It's only Tuesday.

I just wanted some peace. Some quiet time alone. I walked down the brown, rocky path leading seemingly nowhere. I left my house at three in the afternoon. I thought I would only be gone for thirty minutes.

Walking down the path I could not see far into the abyss. I blamed it on my poor eyesight; I had taken my contacts out at home. But no. I was wrong. *Why couldn't I tell something was wrong?* I continued to walk, birds chirping in the blue sky. Then, all of a sudden, there was no chirping. There was no blue sky. There was no dirt path. Darkness.

Am I blind?

But the birds stopped chirping. I tried to look around, I tried to find something. Panic filled my body. Nothing. Absolutely nothing. Until there was something.

A light? I know you should never go to the light; that means death right?

But I went anyway. The closer I got the more I could see.

Is that a couch?

It looked like a dim room with a lonely couch.

"Hello?"

Nothing.

"Anyone there?"

Nothing. I sat on the couch. It was springy and uncomfortable.

What is this prison? Am I dead?

Night Changes

M.E.R.

The party rages on. Nathan Trace's house looks as if no family has ever lived there. The music blasts so loud no one can even understand it. Groups of people split throughout the living room, all dancing. Maria stood alone. She looks around the room at all the groups of girls and boys, laughing, dancing, and holding red solo cups. Her head pounds and her frown is evident. She slowly walks over to an open single chair in the corner of the room and sits down. Sitting with her legs crossed and her hands fidgeting, she continues to peer around the room into the crowd. The popular girls standing together, with the popular boys standing not two inches away.

All the other relevant kids in the grade are standing with their friends but still standing together with everyone else. Girls attempt to sing to the song playing, but they don't know the words. Maria continues to sit alone, her head hurting even more than before. She looks at her phone. It has no notifications. She puts her phone back in her lap, playing with its case, and she sinks deeper into the cloth chair. A buzz vibrates on her thigh, and she picks up her phone, a slight smile starting to form on her lips. Her barely existent smile drops again; Her mom texted. She glances up at the time in the top left corner of her screen.

I'm ready to leave.

Getting up, Maria slowly walks towards the front door, squeezing past the crowd of teenagers dancing. As she rounds the corner of the living room, she trips over a random phone charger connecting to a phone, and falls into another girl.

"I'm so sorry! I didn't see the charger on the ground and I tripped."

She was quick to apologize, hoping this girl wouldn't get too mad.

"Oh don't worry girl, you're good! I would've done the same thing." Her kind voice rang out. She was smiling brightly.

"Oh are you sure, I really am sorry."

"Girl it's fine, it's just an accident. Hey, are you new? I don't think I've ever seen you around before."

"No I'm not, I've gone to Hilton High school for the last three years..."

"Oh my bad, I must just never see you! I'm Melody!"

"I'm Maria."

Melody continued to smile, talking away to Maria about anything. As the conversation proceeds, Maria's frown slowly curves upwards.

"Oh for real? That's so funny!"

"Yeah I know right! Hey Maria, why don't you come dance with me!"

"Are you sure? I'm not much of a dancer."

Melody grabs Maria's hand and pulls her away from the corner where they met, and back into the main area of the living room. The girls and the boys are still doing the exact same thing as before. The song changes, and still holding Maria's hand, Melody starts jumping around.

"Woah, this is how you dance?"

"Yup! Well only for this type of music...but hey it's fun isn't it!"

"Yeah... I guess it is!"

Maria and Melody continue to jump and dance as the song continues, both girls smiling and laughing.

My headache is gone...now I'm not ready to leave.



"I write only because there is a voice within me that will not be stilled."

- Sylvia Plath

Secrets

Megan Romanowicz

I wake up in my bed, wrapped in my big, fluffy blankets. My body stretches out, and I sit up, preparing myself for the new day. I look down at the shiny ring on my left ring finger and smile. I then turned my head to the other side of my bed to see it once again empty; all that remained was a slight dent in the pillow. I get up and walk to the bathroom to look in the mirror.

I look terrible.

My hair looks as if it's a brown beehive on my head. Bags pile under my eyes. I haven't gotten the best sleep lately. I can't stop thinking about my husband, Rowan, and I. We have felt off lately. Or more so, *he* has felt off, distant almost. We have been married for almost two years now, and up until a few weeks ago, I thought we were still in the honeymoon phase. I blinked, coming out of my trance, and grabbed my hairbrush from the bathroom counter and started to brush it through my hair. Once the mess of knots was combed out, I walked back into my room and sat back down on my bed.

I can't stop thinking about Rowan.

Is his behavior because of me?

My lips frown and I sag my body down until I'm laying flat on the bed. My mind shifts to how our relationship was before. We met in college; I was majoring in history, and he was majoring in law. Both different but we still hit it off. I remember that night as if it was just yesterday.

I was working at the cafe on campus. It was getting later, therefore getting slow for business. I was leaning on the counter just staring off into space when the bell on the door rang, and he walked in. I stared in awe at the gorgeous man that entered. No way is he real. He had the darkest, most perfect hair I've ever seen and beautiful gray eyes. He walked up to the counter and greeted me.

"Hello, how are you today?" His voice was husky and deep, but not too deep. I just stared. "Hello?" He laughed a little.

Oh my god his laugh!

"Oh, I'm so sorry, hi, welcome to Portance Cafe. Can I take your order?" I finally could talk again.

He looks so majestic. He seems almost too perfect.

"It's alright." He smiled at me. "Can I get a medium black coffee?"

"Of course, anything else?"

"No, that's all." He was still smiling at me.

"Alright, and can I get a name please?"

"Rowan." He winked at me.

Oh my god! He literally winked at me!

I felt heat rise to my cheeks as I smiled back.

"Okay Rowan, that will be out in a few minutes."

I turned away from him feeling almost giddy. I immediately went to make his drink, not wanting for him to wait long. Once his coffee was in the cup, I turned to face him to find him staring at me, almost smirking. Still blushing, I handed him coffee. As soon his hand slightly touched mine, I felt like I was in a movie with sparks erupting throughout my body.

"And what is your name?"

His words broke me from my enchanting trance.

"Oh, uh my name is Juliette." I blushed.

Wow, what am I doing? I've never acted like this before. It's just something about him.

"Juliette, huh...that's a gorgeous name for a gorgeous lady."

It was the most basic line in the books, but damn did my heart skip a beat. I just cheesily smiled.

"Oh thank you."

I watched as he grabbed a napkin from the small table and reached into his pocket to grab a pen. Confused, I watched him write something and then hold out the napkin in his hand.

"I would stay longer for you Juliette, but sadly I have class.

Not even processing what he said, I grabbed the napkin from his hand and by the time I read the numbers written, the doorbell rang once again and he was gone.

Oh my god? What just happened?

And that's how we met. Our own fairytale. After that day, he would come into the cafe every time I was on shift. He would just talk to me and flirt until my shift was over. Soon enough he started inviting me back to his dorm or out to restaurants. I was head over heels for him. It only took two weeks of this until we started officially dating. We were perfect together. We were everyone's ideal couple.

I turned over on my bed, now staring at the wall.

I just want to know what's up with him lately.

I sigh as I force myself to stand up and start to walk to the kitchen to get some breakfast. The wooden stairs creak as I descend towards the living room. I walk past the silent room, the TV black and the couches untouched as if no ones ever lived here. Finally, I'm in front of the gray fridge, my blurry reflection staring at me. The handle stings coldly as I look into the disappointingly bare fridge.

Ugh. Now I have to go to the store.

I drag my body back through the empty living room, up through the empty stairs, and back into my empty bedroom. Hovering over my side of the dresser, I slide open the top drawer and grab the first shirt I see. The drawer squeaks as it rolls back into place, and I slide open the next drawer under it grabbing the first pair of shorts that was on top. Dressed, I walked back into the bathroom and grabbed the same brush as earlier, brushing through my hair once more, and then I grabbed my toothbrush on the stand next to Rowan's.

Rowan...what's going on with you?

Is it me?

Is it you?

Is it us?

Why can't you just talk to me?

Where even are you?

Where do you go?

Why do you go?

Why?

The clash of my toothbrush hitting the ground woke me up. I bent down and picked it up as I turned on the sink. I rinse the bristles in the cold water and then put a squirt of toothpaste on it. Brushing my teeth, I stare into the mirror. My once bright blue eyes now a dull gray.

I should leave soon.

I spit into the sink and put my toothbrush back on its stand. Turning around, I walked back into our... my room and grabbed my phone off my charger on the nightstand. It lit up to a text from Josie, my best friend, in a group chat with my friend group.

"Guys, we definitely should hang out today!"

Of course she wants to hangout.

I smile as I unlock my phone to respond. As I'm typing, Eric replies to her.

"Definitely! What time though?"

I erased my previous words and typed once more.

"I don't know but I'm going to the store in a few minutes so maybe I can go to your house Josie?"

I really, really could use their presence right now.

I turn off my phone and walk over towards the door. Going down the stairs, I made it to the front door and put on my shoes. As I open the door, my phone vibrates and I see that now Mara responded.

"Yeah Josie, can we go to your house?"

"Yeah, come over in like an hour!"

Well now that's settled.

I closed the door and walked down the path to the driveway, feeling the hot sun shine on me. Glancing at my broken down car and the other empty spot next to it, I sigh and continue walking towards the sidewalk. Walking down the pavement, I glanced at the telephone pole in front of me. A sign catches my eye, and as I closer examined it, I saw it was for a psychic.

"MISS CARMELA'S PSYCHIC READINGS \$5 EACH! READINGS FOR FUTURE, PAST, AND RELATIONSHIPS!"

Relationships? I might need that.

I tried to laugh it off, but I couldn't stop thinking about that flier.

Could it really help me?

Before I realized, I was at the store already walking through the automatic doors. The smell of the fresh flowers hits me as soon as I'm through. The display of bouquets shine under the store's fluorescent lights.

It's been a while since Rowan bought me flowers...

Rowan used to take me on dates every Saturday. He would surprise me with a bouquet of the most beautiful flowers. He hasn't done that for weeks now. Frowning, I walk past the flowers and back to the dairy section to get milk. After what felt like hours of shopping I made my way to the check out. When it was finally my turn, I placed all of my groceries on the belt.

"Hi, how are you today Juliette?"

I looked up from my items confused as to how the cashier knew my name. I froze. My heart stopped beating. My jaw hit the ground and my eyes widened.

"...Kane? No way..."

"What surprised to see me? I've only known you for what, two years now?" He laughed as if we were best friends.

"Well...I haven't seen you in so long. I thought you and Rowan stopped hanging out or something."

"No? Why would we? Did he say we did?" He seemed generally confused.

"No...not that I know of...me and Rowan haven't been on the greatest terms recently I don't know."

By now my shock was gone, and I felt almost sad again thinking about Rowan. Kane is Rowan's best friend. They knew each other long before I met him. We used to go on double dates with him and his then girlfriend.

"What do you mean you and Rowan aren't on the greatest terms? He acted as if you were fine yesterday."

"Wait...you saw him yesterday?"

"Yeah, why?"

"Rowan hasn't been home for two days. I haven't seen him since Friday morning."

"Oh..."

Kane just looked down, finishing scanning all of my items. The beep of the register was the only noise around us.

"Your total is \$75.68."

"Okay..."

I reached into my pocket and grabbed my phone, pulling my debit card from the back of the case. I inserted it into the pin pad and typed my pin. Kane handed me my receipt, still not looking me in the eyes. I frowned and just picked up my bags of food and walked towards the door.

That was so weird...

He saw Rowan yesterday?

Why hasn't he come home?

What did he just say oh?

I made it out of the store and started to walk back across the parking lot to the sidewalk. I saw another telephone pole with the same flier. After a few seconds of just staring at it, I decided to just continue walking. Not even two minutes later I saw another telephone pole with the same flier.

Damn fate really wants me to go to this psychic. Maybe I should...I don't know.

I continued walking, feeling the warm breeze hit my face. I passed shops and cafes as I continued my journey home. I couldn't stop thinking about the psychic. I stopped on the sidewalk to a leaf blowing right in front of my face. I looked into the direction it blew to and stared. It was the psychic. A giant sign above the wooden doors read "MISS CARMELA'S PSYCHIC READINGS." The place looked old compared to the surrounding buildings. Vines crept up the sides like nets.

"Should I go in? I think I should...it won't take long right? Then I'll go to Josie's house and meet everyone."

I walked up to the doors and pushed on the creaky wood. When the right door opened just enough, I snuck through. My body stayed still, but my head wandered in every direction. The room was big and open. It looked like I just walked into a witches lair.

"Hello dearie! How can I help you?" An old, cheerful voice echoed.

I snapped my neck to the direction of the voice to see an old, shorter woman standing with a wooden broom in her hands. She had round glasses and thick, gray curly hair.

"Oh hi, I'm Juliette. I'm here because I saw the fliers... about the five dollar readings."

"Oh why of course dear! Now what type of reading did you want?"

"Uh... about romance, or romantic advice really."

"Ah, have a special someone in your life dearie?"

"Yeah I guess, well my husband."

"Husband? Now why would you need a reading about romance then?"

"Well he's been distant recently, and I'm not sure why."

"Oh, I'm sorry dearie. Now come along, let's do that reading!"

She turned away from me and started for another door that was in the back of the room.

Damn she's fast for an old lady...jeez.

I had to almost sprint to catch up to her. She reached her hand out to the door. It was huge and oval. Patterns carved into the oak. She pushed the door open, and the room inside looked as if I was in a jungle. Plants were growing absolutely everywhere, even the chairs had vines. In the center of the room there was a big

carpet with some astrological design. On the carpet there were vases of incense, candles, and old books. The entire room smelt like a garden breeze candle. The old lady sat criss crossed on the carpet and patted the space across from her.

"Let's go Dearie, don't keep Miss Carmela waiting!" She cheered at me.

"I'm sorry."

I quickly sat across from her. Smiling at me, she reached out and grabbed my right hand and inspected my palm.

"Alrighty now, let us begin!"

She let go of my hand and reached in between us and grabbed a stick of incense. Pulling a matchbox from thin air, she lit the incense and put it back down letting the smoke fill the air. The smell burned my nostrils as it rose to the ceiling. She then grabbed the candles that surrounded us and lit all of them.

"Romance, romance, romance" she mumbled sitting back down, once again grabbing my hand.

"Do I have to do anything?"

"No no dearie, you can just sit and be calm."

She started chanting. It did not sound like English or any other language. It started off quiet, but gradually crescendoed. As she chanted louder the smoke from the candles and incense grew bigger and darker, spiraling above our heads. She inspected my palm, sliding her finger across it.

"Hm... he loves you alright, quite a bit actually."

"If he loves me so much then why is he distant?"

"Oh...oh. He hasn't been truthful with you dear. He's been keeping secrets... very important secrets."

"What? What kind of secrets? Do you know what it is?"

"I'm a psychic dearie, not a wizard. He wants to protect you. He definitely loves you."

What secrets is he keeping?

Why?

Miss Carmela stared at my hand a little longer until suddenly she let it go and stood up.

"Alright dearie, that's all!"

"Oh, uh thank you."

I stood up and followed her back to the door. She closed it behind me and walked to the front of the first room.

"That's five dollars dearie!"

"Of course."

I reached into my pocket and pulled out my phone. I took a five dollar bill from the back of it and handed it to her.

"Thank you so much Miss Carmela."

"Anytime dearie!"

With that I walked out through the door and ended on the sidewalk where I started.

What the hell are you hiding Rowan.

All of the sudden I felt my phone vibrate like it was an earthquake.

"Juliette, where are you? Are you coming?" Josie texted.

Oh shit I forgot I said I was going to her house.

"Yeah, I just got held up with something. Let me drop off my groceries and I'll walk over."

"Okay!"

My shoulders rose and fell. I started walking home again. When I was nearing my house I saw yet another telephone pole, but this time the flier I saw on it wasn't for the psychic. There was a missing persons report for a man named Peter Sorum. The black, bold words stated he had been missing for about a week now. He was last seen last Sunday.

That's crazy. I hope he's found.

I frowned at the poster one last time and continued to walk home.

Once I was in my house, I unloaded my groceries into the kitchen. I put the final thing back and checked my phone.

"Girl are you coming or what?"

"Yeah sorry, I'm leaving now."

I sighed, turning around and walking back out the door. I walked down the sidewalk again, but this time heading in the opposite direction. After crossing a few streets, I made it to Josie's house. I knocked on the door and Josie, Eric, and Mara met me at the door.

"Hey girl how are you!" Josie cheered.

"I'm good."

"Alright now let's all go inside!" Eric chimed in, ushering us to go inside.

"Okay, so how is life Juliette?" Mara asked.

"It's... good."

"What, did something happen?" Eric asked.

"Long story."

"Oh my god Juliette spill!" Josie screamed at me.

"Okay fine. So Rowan's been distant and hasn't been home in two days and then I went to a psychic who said he was keeping a big secret from me."

"Oh, okay that's not what I was expecting." Josie started to hug me.

"Yeah girl it's gonna be okay, and maybe that psychic is wrong." Mara joined the hug.

"Yeah Juliette, it will be okay." Eric finally joined.

While we were still hugging my phone erupted with a chime and started buzzing. I broke off from the hug and looked down at my phone.

"Oh my god..."

"What?" Everyone else practically yelled at me.

"It's Rowan."

I walked away from everyone else and into another room to answer the call.

"Hello.."

"Hello Juliette."

"Where have you been?"

"Nowhere, where are you right now. You have to come home now."

"What why? No, I'm not ready to go home yet."

"Listen to me Juliette, come home now."

"No. Rowan, what is up with you recently?"

"Where are you Juliette?"

"Nowhere."

"Whatever, I'll figure it out. I'm coming to get you."

"What? Why? Rowan answered me. What is up with you?"

"Nothing, I'm fine."

"Then why haven't you come home in two days!"

"Because! Just drop it Juliette, I'm on my way to get you."

"Rowan stop. You don't even know where I am."

"You are at Josie's."

"How the hell do you know that?"

"I didn't. Now I do though, I'm almost here."

He hung up the phone.

What the hell is up with him.

I walked into Josie's living room to everyone staring at me.

"What?"

"Girl, we could hear you." Josie looked at me.

"Oh...yeah I'm gonna have to go."

"You know you don't have to listen to him, right?"

"Yeah... well I should just go anyway."

The sound of a horn being repeatedly beeped. ring through the house. I looked at my friends and then slowly walked to the front door.

"Bye guys."

"Bye," they said in unison.

I walked out through the door and closed it behind me. I stared out at the black car waiting for me.

What has been up with him.

I walked to the car and opened the passenger door. I sat down, but continued to stare out the window.

"Well hello to you too Juliette."

I continued to stare. I didn't glance over once.

"Talk to me."

"We have nothing to talk about."

"Juliette."

"What? You've been distant, not me."

"I'm sorry, but it's for your own good."

"How is it for my good Rowan?"

"I can't tell you that...not yet."

"Oh great so you are keeping secrets...the psychic was right." I mumbled the last bit.

"What? What do you mean psychic?"

"It doesn't matter."

We pulled into the driveway, and as soon as the car stopped, I got out and walked right to the front door. As soon as I was inside, I walked straight upstairs to my room and locked the door. I could hear his footsteps creep up the stairs and towards the door. He knocked.

"Juliette, please open the door."

"Please I'm sorry about all this, but I promise I'm doing it all for you."

He shook the handle a few more times. Soon enough I heard him walk away.

What is going on? Why is this for me?

I layed on the bed for a while, until my eyes started to get heavy. I jerked up and looked around realizing it was dark outside. I glanced around for my phone and found it sitting next to me in the bed. Picking it up I looked at the time.

Great, it's two in the morning.

I saw a text from Rowan saying "I'm sorry."

Of course he is.

Below that text, there was a text from Josie.

"Are you okay?"

Clicking on it, I unlocked my phone and answered.

"Yeah I'm okay."

Then I turned off my phone and layed back down. While I was trying to fall asleep, I heard a bang coming from downstairs. It was too loud to just be something small falling over.

What the hell was that?

I sat up again and walked to the door. Then I heard another thud, this time a little quieter. I opened the door and snuck down the stairs into the living room. There was no one there. I heard more muffled noise coming from the basement door.

What is down there?

I slowly opened the door and peered around. At the bottom of the stairs it looked wet? I crept down the stairs and when I got to the bottom I saw it...blood. There was a small pool of blood surrounded by crimson drops.

What the hell!

I looked around the rest of the room to see nothing else. There was no one. Just that pool of blood and I. I stood frozen until I heard what sounded like a door closing. I whipped my head to the other direction and the only other door was closed.

What the hell!

Is this Rowan?

I sprinted up the stairs and slammed the door behind me. Without wasting a second I sprinted up the other stairs and into my room, locking the door. I tried for a long time to fall back asleep but I couldn't. The next thing I knew it was daytime, and the sun's rays peered into my face.

What happened last night?

I sat up and looked in front of me to see the door wide open.

I thought I locked it.

I felt the bed move and I quickly looked over to see Rowan sleeping peacefully next to me. I stood up and looked at him for a minute. Shaking my head, I walked out of the room and went downstairs. I sat on the cloth couch and called Josie.

"Hello..." Josie's voice quietly muttered.

"Hi Josie."

"What's up?"

"Can I come over? I need to tell you something."

"Yeah of course."

"Okay I'm gonna head over right now."

"Okay bye."

"Bye, see you soon."

I hung up the phone and immediately put on my shoes and left through the door. I zoned out the entire way there, and soon enough I was at her front door. My hand hit the door slightly, but the door already flew open.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, Josie, I'm fine. It's just...Rowan. Can I come in?"

"Of course, of course. Tell me everything."

I followed her inside to her living room and sat on her couch.

"Okay so last night I woke up to a noise. I went downstairs to investigate and it ended up being from the basement."

"Okay..."

"So I went down the stairs and I saw a pool of blood with splatters around it..."

"Oh my god what?"

"Yeah, but there was no one there, but I swear I heard the door close. And Rowan was the only other person home, who else could it have been."

"Juliette, that's insane."

"Yeah."

"We have to investigate!"

"What! What is wrong with you? No we should not."

"But what if Rowan did something?"

"I don't know Josie."

"Come on Juliette, let's just check."

"Okay fine."

"Let's go!"

Josie grabbed my hand and dragged me out the front door into her car. The engines hummed and she pulled out and onto the road. She sped until we pulled into my driveway. When we made it to the front door I put my finger to my lips and slowly opened the door. We sneaked slowly to the basement door and opened it. Seeing nothing, we continued down the stairs and turned on the light.

"There's nothing here." Josie expressed almost sadly.

"That's a good thing." I sighed. "What if there was a body or something?"

"You really think Rowan would kill someone?"

"I don't know Josie, everything has just been off."

All of the sudden, we heard a thud. Turning around I saw him.

"Rowan?"

He looked at me surprised.

"What are you doing down here Juliette?"

"I could ask the same of you."

"Nothing... you need to leave. And you can go home now Josie."

"No thanks Rowan, I'll stay with Juliette."

"Leave Josie."

"Rowan she's staying."

"Fine, just go back upstairs."

Me and Josie looked at each other and then walked up the stairs and back into the living room. We both sat on the couch and just layed there.

"What the hell was that?"

"I don't know. Why does he want you to go home?"

"I don't know. Something is definitely up with him."

"Yeah."

We just layed on the couch for a while, until we heard the sound of footsteps coming up the stairs. We glanced at each other and then looked at the door. Soon enough, Rowan opened the door and then stared at us. He wiped something off his face and then continued to walk upstairs.

"What was that about?" Josie questioned.

"And did he wipe something off his face?"

Josie looked down at her phone and then looked up at me sad.

"Hey girl I'm sorry but my mom just texted me. She needs my help at her house so I have to go."

"Oh no it's alright, go help her."

We hugged and I opened the front door for her.

"Bye Juliette!"

"Bye!"

My shoulders dropped and I slowly made my way back to my bedroom. When I opened the bedroom door, Rowan looked at me from the bed.

"What?"

I was not in the mood anymore.

"I didn't do anything Jules."

Jules? He hasn't called me that in a while.

"Whatever."

I made my way to the bed and layed down on my side.

"Why are you still staring at me?"

"Am I not allowed to stare at my wife?"

"No."

I put my head down on the pillow and tried to pull up the blanket, but I couldn't because he was sitting on it.

"Move."

"Hm, no."

"Rowan I'm not in the mood right now and it's cold in here."

"Fine." He dragged out his word.

Instead of giving me the blanket, he just layed next to me and put his arms around me.

He hasn't done this in a while either.

I just layed there for a while, not wanting to get up. I soon felt my eyelids get heavy and start to droop down.

I woke up to find Rowan gone. I looked at my phone to see it was seven at night. I slept the whole rest of the day away. I decided I was hungry, so I walked downstairs. When I reached the bottom of the stairs, I saw Rowan on the phone looking angrily.

"Don't you dare come near her!" I heard him yell before he cut the call and threw his phone on the couch.

"What was that about?"

He jerked his face to me and then calmed down.

"Nothing important. Did you sleep well?"

"Yeah, now I'm just hungry."

I went to walk past him into the kitchen, but he stopped me.

"I'll make you something."

"Oh okay. Thanks."

"What do you want?"

"I'm not sure, anything really."

"Okay give me ten minutes."

I sat down on the couch and watched as he got out ingredients and started cooking. Ten minutes later he hands me a plate of pancakes with sausage.

"Breakfast for dinner. I know how much you love it."

"Thanks." I smiled at him.

After eating, I decided I was still tired.

"I'm gonna go back upstairs, okay?"

"Okay." He smiled at me like he has been this way all along.

I walked up the stairs and went back to the room. I layed back down on the bed and as soon as my head hit the pillow, I was out.

A huge bang woke me up again. This time it sounded like a door being broken down. I jumped out of bed and rushed to the door. I could hear arguing and more banging. I ran down the stairs and froze. There was a man in all black with a gun yelling at Rowan. He was also holding a gun.

Since when did Rowan have a gun?

They didn't notice me, however, they just continued arguing. I tried to listen in on what they were saying.

"I told you to leave her alone!" I could hear Rowan yell.

"You know I wouldn't! She was supposed to be mine! My wife!"

"No she's not! She married me, not you!"

I stared in disbelief.

Are they talking about me? Who is that?

"Well she was going to marry me! Everything was perfect!"

"No, you were abusive! I just came in at the right time!"

What?

"She wanted me!"

"If she did she wouldn't have fallen so easily for me! And look at us now, we are perfect together! Better than you'd ever have been!"

The man in black charged angrily at Rowan. They fought back and forth, until Rowan grabbed his gun that he had put in his pocket and shot the man. He fell to the floor.

"See, if you just listened to me this wouldn't have happened. None of this would have happened. Peter would still be alive!"

Peter? Whose Peter? Wait...the guy from the missing persons flier. Did the man in black kill him?

"You know she should've been mine..." the man in black struggled.

"I don't know that actually because she's mine.

I shuffled a little on the stairs, but I knocked over a shoe that was sitting near the bottom. Both men turned their heads and looked at me.

"Juliette... What are you doing awake? How long have you been here?"

"Long enough to see you shoot him, Rowan!"

"Jules, it's not what you think! I'm protecting you, protecting us!"

"Rowan, you shot him!"

"Yeah Rowan you shot me." The man sarcastically muttered.

"You! How are you not dead yet?"

"You shot me in the leg, I won't die that easily." He laughed.

"Who even are you!" I yelled at the man.

"You don't remember me, Julie?"

Julie? No one calls me that. Wait...

"Ethan...?"

"So you do remember me! I knew you would."

"No...no... why are you here!"

"Because I love you, Julie. You're mine."

"No I'm not! I left for a reason!"

"Jules, don't listen to this bastard!"

"You know you love me Juliette."

"No I don't, Ethan."

Just then I remembered Rowan mentioned that missing person.

"Rowan...who's Peter?"

"What? How do you know about that?"

"I heard you talking about him, how he's dead. I saw his missing persons flier. Rowan, who is he?"

"He was my brother..." Ethan coughed.

"What? Brother? I didn't know you had a brother."

"Because I didn't tell you, Julie. He wasn't the greatest person, but he sure was my brother."

"What happened to him?"

"Your dear husband killed him!"

"What?"

Rowan just stared at me with a pleading look.

"Jules I'm sorry, I had to, don't listen to him."

"You killed him? Wait...the blood. Rowan, was that his blood in the basement!"

"Rowan! Answer me!"

"I'm so sorry, but I had to."

"Oh please no you didn't! You killed him because you're crazy! See Juliette, you should still be with me."

What is going on? This is too much...

"Don't listen to him Jules, he's the crazy one."

"Both of you shut up! Someone fill me in on what the hell is going on!"

"Ethan here, has been trying to steal you from me and threatened to hurt you to get me to back down!

And he sent his psycho brother after me!"

"No, your psycho husband came after me to get revenge for being with you and then attacked my brother to get to me!"

This is going nowhere.

"If no one can tell me the truth then I'm calling the police. Ethan, you have literally been shot, how the hell are you still okay?"

"Because I'm so strong, I'm just perfect for you."

"Ugh, I will shoot you again!"

"No you won't Rowan! How could you shoot anyone?"

I wanted to cry. I wanted to just wake up from this nightmare. I sat down on the stairs and put my head in my knees. I could hear shuffling and loud footsteps coming toward me. All of the sudden I heard the loudest bang ever. My ears rang. I looked up, my eyes wide, as I saw Ethan hit the floor. Blood pooled around him. I looked at Rowan and saw the most angry face I've ever seen. He was holding his gun straight out, still seething. I sat frozen, my mouth agape.

He just killed him...like actually killed him.

Rowan looked at me, and his face softened. He walked over to me, stepping over Ethan's body and blood, and crouched to my level.

"I'm so sorry Jules."

He hugged me, but I was in no mood to hug this man. I pushed him off and tried to stand up. As I was pushing myself off the stair, he grabbed me and pulled me into another hug, this time a lot tighter so I couldn't escape.

"Listen to me Jules. It was for your own good. I love you."

I just sobbed into his shirt.

How is this the man I married? How could we go back to normal after this?

In the distance police sirens rang. The gradually crescendoed, getting closer. Rowan pushed me away from him and looked me in the eyes.

"Juliette...the police are coming."

"I can hear them. A neighbor must've called." I cried.

The sirens grew louder until the sound stopped in place.

"They're here."

"Rowan..."

"I'm sorry Juliette, I love you so much."

Just then, the door busted off its hinges, and men with guns and vests flooded the house. Two men grabbed Rowan off of me and pushed him to the ground, handcuffing him. Another man grabbed me gently and pulled me away.

"Follow me, miss."

"What's gonna happen to him..."

"He's most likely going to go to jail for a long time, you're safe now."

We walked outside, I could see the mob of cars and men. Red and blue lights covered everything. I just cried. I cried harder than I ever have before.

What is happening to my life?

I watched as Rowan was thrown into a cop car and driven off. He smiled at me through the window as he left. I just stared at him.

I walked through the prison entrance. I felt the cold metal with my hand as an officer brought me to a room full of glass windows with small phones.

"Here you are, miss."

"Thank you."

I walked over to the furthest window and sat in the small, black chair. I watched as another officer brought him out and unhandcuffed him.

"Twenty minutes inmate!" The officer yelled before slamming the door.

He sat down in the opposite chair and stared at me, grabbing the phone. I grabbed my phone and looked at him.

"Hello Juliette, how are you?"

"I'm fine Rowan..."

"I love you."

"Listen, will you answer my questions?"

"Anything for you. Without having you here is torture."

"Why would you do this?"

"To protect you from your ex."

"What? Ethan?"

"He may have made it seem like he wanted you back...but he wanted to kill you, to torture you for ever leaving him."

"How do you know this?"

"He sent his brother after me, Peter. When I caught him, he revealed the truth as he died."

"Why did he send him after you?"

"Revenge. Did you think the day we met in the coffee shop was coincidental?"

"What...?"

Just then an officer came in and grabbed him, pulling him away.

"I love you Jules."

Meet Me Beyond The Wall

Shylah Harris

Stone walls were all she ever knew. Tall and smooth with a giant door on the northwest side. It never opened. Well, she'd never seen it open. She didn't know what was on the other side now. She figured it changed but she didn't know. She didn't put much thought into it. She only thinks of what was outside for a moment before she was swept into work and her friends. However, she tended to care more about the group of young teen girls she was with. Not a single one over 20. Not one younger than 12 and not a single one being a boy. She didn't understand why. She remembered seeing women older than herself in her memories, or what she believed to be memories. One in particular. She was always there holding onto her, calling out her name.

"Ivy, Ivy come on. You have to keep moving hun."

That's the only thing she would say and she'd repeated it over and over. However, her face was always a blur in her dreams. Never to be identified. Ivy held onto that dream. Her voice. It was comforting. Seemed...familiar.

"Ivy! Hurry up! We're going to be late!" Jane yelled from outside her door.

"Coming! Hang on," Ivy yelled back. She grabbed the pill bottle and dumped two light pink ovals into her palm. It was protocol to take these every day. They said it was to help with the dreams. She swallowed them quickly before grabbing the green zip-up off the small chest on the ground. She looked around a small house. One bedroom, one bathroom, plus a super small living room. No kitchen though. Everyone ate together so there was no need for a kitchen. She opened the door to see the brunette girl tapping her foot impatiently. She looked up from the ground.

"Finally! Let's go. Lyra is waiting for us," Jane said, grabbing her arm.

"She can wait a little longer." Jane gave her a look.

"Lyra is so impatient. You know this. She can not wait any longer. Now move!"

"Yes ma'am," Ivy mumbled. The buildings around her looked similar to her own—small, box-like buildings with a staircase to another one above. The dirt path below them was lined with small blue and pink flowers.

"Did you see there's an assembly today?" Jane asked

"No," Ivy responded. "Do you know what about?"

"They're giving us more pills or injections I think."

"Whatcha suppose those are for?"

"They claim it's for dreams again though DJ said she doesn't believe it."

"Well it's best not to question it," Ivy said subtly pointing to the small cameras and spots where they tended to "hide" microphones.

"Yeah...now that you point that out...I haven't seen DJ since that conversation," She paused. "Do you think they heard it?"

"They have cameras everywhere J. Of Course they did."

"Oh! Don't say that!" Jane said, "Have some hope for her."

"Ok, maybe they didn't hear?... Better."

"Not at all."

They walked through the doors of the dining hall. They saw Lyra sitting at a table while her leg bounced. Her blue eyes looked around quickly before landing on the two 17-year-olds in the doorway. She waved them over quickly.

"Took you both long enough," she snapped.

"I'm sorry I like my beauty rest," Ivy said sitting down. She looked around and didn't see the usual trays of food. "Breakfast hasn't been served yet?"

"No Cleo and Maxie were having trouble in the kitchen. They said soon."

"Good, I'm starving."

Lyra looked around the room quickly making Jane look at Ivy while Ivy just shrugged back at her. Lyra then leaned closer to them making them lean in as well.

"Didja hear about Jackie?" she asked in a hushed voice.

"No...why?" Jane asked with furrowed brows.

Lyra looked around again.

"I heard she didn't take her morning pills last week. Mackenzie said she hadn't come out of her house all week."

"She's still here?" Ivy asked, "They never last that long."

"That's the thing, we don't know if she was relieved or...well...y'know."

Jane shuddered next to Ivy.

"She was such a rule follower. Why did she stop?" Jane asked.

Lyra shrugged. "Got bored maybe."

"Or the infection," Ivy suggested. Jane jabbed her in the ribs.

"Stop! Why do you have to wish the worst on people?"

"I don't wish it. I'm just telling you the truth."

"Foods all set girls! Sorry about the wait," Cleo said while covered in a white substance that Ivy guessed was flour. The girls leaned back in their seats. Jane stared blankly at the table for a moment while Lyra got up.

"Still hungry?" Lyra asked.

"Not really," Jane mumbled.

"Come on. You don't eat now you're gonna bug me about it all day," Ivy said standing up herself. Jane huffed and eventually followed. Breakfast was always a big event with the girls. Trays full of fruit, eggs, pancakes, waffles, french toast, bacon, and sausages. Plus whatever toppings the girls wanted. The trays stretched along one of the walls full of food and always ready to be replaced when empty. The three girls filled their plates before returning to their seats. They chatted more about the other new news and listened to the other girls chatter. Though they knew most of the conversations were about Jackie. They knew by the end of the day all 120 girls would know about her. Then someone would finally go and check on the girl.

"Well," Ivy started as she wiped her face and put the napkin on the plate. "Off to work right?"

"Yeah," Jane said with a sigh.

"Well see you at lunch Lyra."

"Don't be late."

"We'll try," Jane said as they put their plates in the plate area and grabbed their stuff.

Jane and Ivy walked silently along the dirt path to the small building. It was a white building with a red plus on the front of it. They both headed in and grabbed their name tags from the front desk. They walked over to their workstations once they clipped them onto the bottom of their shirts.

This is where the two of them met. They were stationed next to each other in training and then again in the offices. They became quick friends even if at times they were total opposites. Jane was clean and very neat. Every tool had a spot and could not move from that spot unless she was using it. Ivy on the other hand had spots for things but it switched around often. She rarely cared where things went as long as she could find it later. Most of her paperwork was like that too. Put it in one folder and searched through it every time she needed one.

They officially became friends when Jane couldn't find her scissors. She asked Ivy to help and it took them until the end of the day when they were found in Jane's coat pocket with the cover still on them. They decided to hang out at breakfast every day since then. Lyra was already a good friend of Ivy as they lived closer together and saw each other every morning.

"Alright girls," Maddie, the head of health, started snapping ivy back as she took off her zip-up and put it under her table. She looked around and saw the other girls in the room. Around 15 girls all in matching black pants and shirts. "Today we are doing these new injections for everyone so once the assembly finishes everyone will come here and we'll perform the injections. Be prepared for a very busy day. Alright get your stations set up and then start getting ready to leave," Ivy sighed looking around the station. She had set everything up already before she left. Jane on the other hand was double-checking everything and making sure everything was in its exact place. Then the chimes went off.

"Good morning everyone," a voice rang over the intercom. "Please make your way down to the assembly hall for an assembly. Again please make your way down to the assembly hall" Then it chimed again signaling it was over. Ivy grabbed her zip-up once more and threw it over her shoulders. Jane was giving her station a once over before looking over to Ivy. They started following the other girls out the door and down to the hall.

The hall was the biggest building inside the walls. A big screen in the center along with rows and rows of seats. The health group always sat in the back as it was the quickest way out and to their stations. Ivy and Jane sat next to each other while they watched the groups fill in the seats. Once everyone was seated the lights dimmed and the screen turned on. All you could see on the screen was a person but only the chest down to the stomach as their head was out of shot and a table covered the rest.

"Good Morning everyone," a woman's voice said. It was an older voice. Not the voice of any girl in the groups. "Today your health group will be giving you all new shots. These shots are to help with the dreams as is everything else. We will also be asking three people to volunteer for some testing. If you'd like to volunteer please find your group's head of department and let them know." Then there was a small pause as the women grabbed a small vial. "This is the new injection. It will help you sleep without dreams and help you fall asleep much faster. If you don't take this injection and refuse you will be relieved. Please consider our words and take this injection and your everyday pills. We are trying to help you. Thank you for this time and please make your way down to the health department now."

The screen turned off plunging the room into darkness. The light came back on and everyone got up.

The health department stood up the fastest and left as quickly as possible. They all made it to their stations as boxes full of injections were passed around. Ivy set it to the side as she rolled up her sleeve.

"We're gonna be here for a while," she mumbled to Jane.

"Better get a brownie at dinner tonight. A whole tray just for the health department."

"One could wish."

Soon girls started flooding into the building and lined up in front of each person's station. The builders came in first so they could get back to fixing different buildings the fastest. Then the farmers, the cooks, then livestock girls, and the list went on until every girl had gotten the shot.

The building was a mess when everyone left. Mud on the floor from the farmers and trash from the shots thrown messily on countertops. Ivy grabbed the last one from her box as Jane did the same. They both put it on their countertops before throwing the used ones back in the box for the trashers to take out later.

"You do me, I do you," Jane asked.

"Yeah," Ivy responded, wiping down her bench for what felt like the millionth time.

Jane grabbed hers and walked over. Ivy took off her sweatshirt and moved her shirt away from her neck. Jane looked down at her before Ivy nodded. She felt the familiar prick in her neck before the liquid went straight into her veins. She winced as it went in but soon the liquid felt like molten lava inside her. She gripped onto the bench with white knuckles. Then Jane pulled the injector away and threw it into the box.

"It's never hurt that much," Ivy mumbled as Jane put a bandage on it. They then switched places and Ivy stuck it into Jane's neck. She didn't have a strong reaction. Once Ivy put the bandage on Jane looked up at her.

"Did it hurt that bad?" she asked.

"Yeah, it felt like...like it was burning me."

"Ivy...I don't think it was supposed to hurt. Like at all. They never hurt."

"What?"

"They're not supposed to be hurtful."

"Mine always hurt."

Jane stared at her for a moment.

"We should talk to Maddie."

"No, it's fine."

"It's not!"

"Jane, don't worry about it. I got the injection. We all are different, maybe it's just a me thing."

"That's a problem."

"Jane just drop it. I'll be fine."

"Attention ladies. I was asked to see if anyone wanted to be one of the three volunteers for some testing. It's just some new injections and pills," said Maddie. Ivy looked around the room and saw a girl raise her hand. She was one of the oldest girls being 19 and worked in the health department for as long as she worked. Her name was Grace. She was well respected in the health department being one of the first girls in it. Maddie jotted it down. "Alright, lunch is in five minutes. You girls can start heading down now."

Ivy and Jane walked down to the dining hall. They sat down and waited for Lyra. Ivy looked around the room and saw the girl come and sit down.

"Lyra did that shot hurt a lot?" Jane asked as soon as she sat down. Lyra looked at her with her eyebrows furrowed before looking over at Ivy and slowly sitting down.

"No," she said slowly. "It was just a little pinch. Nothing much...why?"

"Because-" Jane started.

"I said it's fine," Ivy said, rubbing her temples. "It's probably nothing and I'm just a little sensitive that's all."

"You said it felt like you were being burned?" Jane snapped.

"What?!" Lyra asked. "Why did it do that? Did you ask Maddie?"

"I don't know and no I didn't ask Maddie," Ivy said. "It's probably nothing. My shots always hurt."

"...I don't think they should," Lyra said quietly.

"Oh my god! I'm fine," Ivy snapped, making everyone around them look at her. She shrunk a bit into her seat "I'm fine" she said quietly "Alright? Just...just drop it" They nodded slowly as the rest of the girls went back to their tables.

After lunch, Jane and Ivy went back to the office and worked until dinner. Ivy decided on skipping dinner that night not wanting to deal with the two teens pressing about talking to Maddie. She didn't want to talk to Maddie. She just wanted them to drop it. She changed into her sleepwear before doing a quick clean-up of the room before letting herself get into bed. She took the nightly pill before her head hit the pillow. She stared up at the ceiling thinking about the injection. They always said it was for the dreams but her dreams never went away. They just became less and less memorable as the days went on. Though they said they would stop. She knew Lyra and Jane hadn't had dreams of life before in years. When they were younger they talked about them but now it was different. Jane said she could never remember one or even recall if she ever had a dream and

Lyra agreed. Ivy knew she was different. She always had a feeling that something was wrong with her. Always feels another presence around her but not knowing how or why. She usually just ignored it. Figured it would stop in time as long as she kept following the rules yet her mind never failed to give her a dream about what used to be before the walls went up.

She tapped her fingers on her stomach as she thought before her body let the sleepiness take over. Her eyes closed slowly and darkness took over her vision as she heard the sound of the clock ticking on the wall. Then a soft bright light took over.

"James come on. Eat something," she heard a male voice say.

"I'm not hungry I already told you," the guy who was being talked to said back. Though she couldn't see this guy very well. It was almost like...she was this guy but not there.

"Is this because of that stupid injection? Drop it. You're just different. That's all it is."

"It hasn't hurt anyone else!" the guy snapped. "There has to be a reason."

The guy next to him sighed.

"Well Max didn't know so I think you're out of luck man."

James or who she assumed was James, sighed. He looked around the area. Very similar to Ivy's place. Small buildings outside the window of the dining hall. Food lining the wall of the dining halls and many tables. The main difference though...it was all guys. Not a single girl in sight.

"I'm going to figure this out," James said standing up. "There is something more behind this."

The sound of the clock ticking returned as the boy and the dining hall faded. Darkness followed before the sound of knocking on a door woke her up.

"Ivy?" she heard Lyra say "you ok?"

Ivy stretched before getting up and walking towards the door. She opened it and saw Lyra standing there. It was still dark. Probably 1 am.

"Yeah why?" she asked.

"Well, you went to bed without dinner and well...it only took you a while to open the door."

"It did?"

"Yeah. Are you sure you're ok? I mean we're getting nervous, you know."

"Yeah, Lyra I'm... I'm ok."

"Alright," she sighs "just uh let me know if you need anything ok?"

"Of course."

"Good night."

"Night Lyra."

She shut the door softly and looked around the room once more. Then the dream came back to her. She recognized the voice but she didn't know why and where this guy was. Where was this group? How are they connected and why? She took a deep breath before going back to her bed. She laid back down and stared at the ceiling once more. Her mind went a mile a minute trying to figure out what that place was and if it was truly real. Right when her eyes were about to close she heard something. A voice. She shut up in bed and looked around.

"*What does that mean?*" she heard. She looked around again before grabbing the book from her bedside table.

"Who's there?" she asked with a trembling voice.

No response.

"Hello?"

"*Marks wrong. It has got to mean something.*" This time she recognized the voice. The dream came flooding into her head. His voice was deep and gentle but also very loud.

"Can you shut up?" she whispered.

Nothing.

She smiled to herself satisfied before lying down.

"*Who was she?*"

She groaned and sat up again rubbing her temple.

"*Can you shut!*" she thought.

"*...What?*" the voice responded.

"*Shut up! I'm trying to sleep!*"

"*Who..who are you and why are you in my head?*"

"You think I know?! I'm just trying to sleep! Now stop and let me sleep in peace."

"Wow, you're pretty bossy."

"And you're annoying so stop."

"Fine bossy pants. I'll shut up and you'll get out of my head."

"I don't even know how I got in your head but I would love to leave."

"Not liking my thoughts that much?"

"Not really."

"Then stop peeking at them."

"I'm not trying to! They just showed up!"

She could tell he let out a heavy sigh.

"Well, I'll shut up if you do."

"Gladly." There was a pause between them before the silence was filled.

"You better be out of my head in the morning."

"You as well. I don't fancy listening to the entitled Princess."

"Excuse me."

"You heard me. You're an entitled princess."

"And you're a piece of shit."

"You haven't even met me and you already hate me."

"You stopped me from sleeping so I believe my hate for you is completely justified."

"Well maybe you should actually meet me and you wouldn't hate me so much."

"I don't want to meet you, I want to sleep."

"Fine, fine. Get your sleep princess."

"Don't call me that."

"Why? it fits perfectly."

She rolled her eyes and felt that her jaw was extremely tense.

"It doesn't. Now I would appreciate it if you shut off your brain and let me sleep."

"You want me to die."

"Possibly."

"Well, that's a little harsh."

"Again. You're waking me up. Justified."

"You and your sleep. It's crazy you're getting so worked up over this."

"Shut up!"

"Fine."

Then silence took the area where their thoughts once filled. She let out a soft sigh before letting her eyes drift shut and sleep take her away. She woke up the next morning to the same knocking on her door. She took the morning pills before changing and walking out the door and meeting up with both Lyra and Jane outside her door. She felt a wave of relief wash over her when she didn't hear that boy's voice in her head.

She wished she never felt that relief when she sat down at the dining hall.

"You're a judgy person," his voice rang through her head. She groaned internally trying not to be too obvious to her friends.

"Why are you still in my head?"

"Cause you're still in mine."

"Well leave."

"Nah I'm ok. Listening to you judge the people you're with is pretty fun."

"Why can you hear that?"

"...Cause I can hear your thoughts."

"Well, I can only hear when you direct them at me."

"Lucky you."

"Ivy!" Jane said, hitting the table in front of her. Her head snapped up and she looked at Jane.

"What?"

"I've been trying to talk to you for five minutes!"

"Oh sorry. What's up?"

"Well, we were thinking about hanging out tonight. After work?"

"Yeah ok."

"Are you alright?" Lyra asked.

"Yeah, I'm fine," Ivy responded. "Why?"

"You just don't seem...well...here."

"I'm fine."

Jane and Lyra glance at each other before looking at their plates.

"So I have a question for you," he asked, breaking the silence in her head.

"No."

"Just humor me for a second."

"Why should I do that?"

"It's just a question! God, you don't like me. It's not like I'm interrupting your sleep anymore."

"Yeah, now it's my breakfast! I haven't even had my coffee."

"Oh my god. You're never happy are you."

"I was just fine before you showed up."

There was a pause. Just like he was taking a breath to compose himself.

"This started right after I got an injection, ok? My question was if you had one too?" he asked slowly.

"Yeah, they uh they sent them down."

"Did it...y'know...hurt? Because all my friends said it didn't and it's making me paranoid about it."

"Why are you asking me about this?"

"Because! Maybe it's why we're connected."

"That's the stupidest thing I ever heard."

"Fine, I was just trying to find a solution for this problem here and you are not helpful whatsoever."

"Well, it doesn't have anything to do with us. The injection was normal. This will stop in time."

"For someone who wants me out of your head, you don't seem to want to solve it."

"I have other things to do and other people to worry about so get a grip on yourself and stop talking to me."

"I'm not talking."

She rubbed her eyes before looking over at the girls who were talking to each other. She took a deep breath before pushing his constant talking to the back of her head and listening to the girls.

"Attention everyone!" a voice rang through the announcements "We will be holding another whole group assembly in five minutes please start heading down" The girls looked at each other before everyone got up and headed down.

"Wonder what this is about" Jane mumbled. Ivy shrugged. Then she heard a screeching sound. She turned towards the noise and ended up staring at the tall stone walls. Her heart seemed to stop for a moment.

"What was that?" Ivy asked.

"What was what?" Jane asked.

"That screeching noise."

"There wasn't a noise, Ivy," Lyra said.

"I'm telling you. It came from the walls."

"Ivy...are you sure you're ok?"

"I'm sure!" she snapped. "Stop asking me this like I'm insane! I heard a noise. Why don't you believe me?"

"Because you've been acting strange lately," Jane said quietly.

"We don't think you're insane," Lyra said.

"But you don't believe me," Ivy asked.

"Not exactly."

Ivy huffed before walking away from them.

"Ivy!" the girls called after her. She ignored them, letting their voices drown in the crowd. Though she didn't walk towards the assembly, instead she walked towards the wall. However, that walk quickly became a jog before that jog turned into a spring. Her hair flowed behind her as she ran. The grass scratched at her legs as she ran through it. The warmth of the sun shone down on her before she made it into the shadow of the wall. A chill ran down her spine. She looked up to the top of the wall. Vines covered the sides of it. She reached forward and touched the wall. The feeling of cold flooded her senses. She closed her eyes for a second before she heard the screech again. Though this time it wasn't as much of a screech but more of a scream. A cry for help. It sounded...human but not truly human.

Something or someone was on the other side. What it was. She didn't know. Curiosity ran through her veins and her body. She reached up to the vines and pulled herself up before stepping on them. The vines burned her hands as she tried to climb. She didn't make it far before she felt thorns poking at the palm of her hand. She carefully jumped back down.

I gotta know.

"Gotta know what?" his voice returned.

"What's on the other side of the wall?"

"You heard it too?"

"The screeching?"

"Yeah."

"I did."

"So I'm guessing you also have the volunteer program that they set up."

"...yeah."

"Join it."

"Why."

"I know you don't trust me or like me for that matter but maybe we can figure out what they are trying to do with us."

She thought for a moment.

"You'll join too?"

"Yeah."

She sighed.

"Fine, I'll join."

"Maybe you are not just an entitled princess like I thought."

"Well, you're still a piece of shit."

"So kind of you princess," he said. She could hear the grin he had on his face just from the way he said it.
"I guess I'll meet you beyond the wall."

"I guess so."

She sighed before starting to walk back to the group though she didn't head back to the assembly. She walked to her house and packed a bag with some clothes and necessities before putting it in the corner of her bedroom. She looked out the window to look at the wall. A surge of nerves rushed through her body as she looked at it. She'd never felt that way. It was new and quite frankly an exciting sense to feel. She's always been someone who tried to float with the crowd. Not put herself out there but today she wanted to. She wanted to be seen and wanted to know what these people truly had in store for them. She let out a heavy breath before announcements rang over the intercoms.

"We are still looking for two other volunteers. Please go to your leader quickly if you want to be a volunteer," Ivy smiled to herself before seeing the crowd of girls walking out of the assembly. She quickly joined in with them trying to be seen with them. Everyone started heading off to their jobs and Ivy walked into the offices. She saw Maddie setting up and walked over to her.

"Maddie?" she asked, making the older girl look up at her.

"Ivy, what is it?" she said with a soft smile.

"I want to be part of the volunteers."

Maddie's smile faltered before she cleared her throat.

"You sure?"

"100%."

Maddie sighed.

"I'll tell them."

"Thank you."

"Good luck."

Ivy tilted her head slightly at her.

"Go ahead to your station. Before you leave, pack it all up. You might need some of that when you leave."

"...Ok," Ivy said, swallowing a new lump that formed in her throat. She didn't think it was going to be this big of a thing to volunteer. She went off to her station and started setting up. Jane walked through and saw Ivy.

A sigh of relief left her body.

"Ivy. I'm so sorry. We shouldn't have said we didn't believe you."

"It's fine Jane."

"Good."

There was silence between them.

"I'm uh...I volunteered," Ivy said, not looking over.

"What!" Jane said, spinning around. "Why?"

Ivy looked back at her.

"It's just something I need to do. To figure out what's happening."

"What do you mean?"

"You wouldn't understand. Just believe it's for a good reason."

"I- "

"It's the best you could do since you didn't believe me earlier."

"I-fine. Fine. just don't do anything too stupid."

"Ok."

Silence engulfed the two of them as they started getting ready.

The day went by slowly before the final bell rang. Ivy packed up everything into her small bag before grabbing her sweatshirt. Jane looked at her before pulling her into a tight hug.

"I need you to come back."

"Why does everyone seem to think I'm going to die?"

"Do you not remember the last volunteer group?"

"No?"

"The three girls came back in bags, Ivy. Bags."

Ivy woke up the next morning to a knock on her door. She got up and saw Lyra in the door.

"Why?" she said with her voice breaking.

"I need to."

"But you don't!"

"I do."

"Ivy."

"Lyra trust me," she said as she saw tears start going down her face. Lyra just pulled her into a tight hug.

"I don't want you to leave."

"I know."

She rubbed her back softly.

"Attention everyone, please give a bit of good luck to our volunteers Ivy, Oliva, and Grace. They will be going outside the walls today. We wish them luck in their endeavors and hope for a safe return. Ivy Olvia and Grace please make your way down to the assembly hall with all your packed belongings in ten minutes. Thank you."

Ivy swallowed quietly before Lyra stepped away from her.

"Well, uh, I guess this is goodbye," Lyra mumbled.

"It's not a goodbye. It's a see you soon."

"Sure."

Ivy took a deep breath before pulling her into another quick hug. She pulled away before grabbing the bag she packed.

"I'm going to come back."

"Mhm."

Ivy sighed.

"I'll see you when I get back."

"Alright."

She slid between Lyra and the doorframe and started to walk towards the assembly hall.

"You ready princess?"

"Stop that!"

The assembly hall had two other people already sitting down in silence along with one other girl leaning on the stage.

"Alright everyone here. Follow me," the blond who was leaning on the stage said. The other two followed with ivy close behind. They were led to a small white jet that had "group a" written on it. Ivy took note of this as she climbed up the steps to the jet. She found a seat in the all-white interior and sat down. The other girls are in the other seats. Each girl is at least one seat away from the other. Ivy tapped her fingers on her thigh as she took in every detail of the jet. Everything was clean and polished. Some of the seats had plastic coverings, others had masks in the cup holders.

"Thank you for volunteering," a voice said from the speakers above them. "You will now be taken to the next part of your test. Please remain calm as we lift off. We will be at our destination very soon. Snacks will be provided shortly."

Ivy looked at the other girls who also were looking around at each other. Then she heard a rumble before looking out the window and seeing them start to move. She'd only seen a jet leave once and that was when she had to unpack some more injections from the back. Soon the ground wasn't as close as it once was and all the familiar buildings turned smaller and smaller. She could see the entirety of the town and the walls surrounding the place though outside the walls was so strange to her. Instead of the bright green grass that she had seen at her own home, she saw miles and miles of dull dead grass and sand. Wilting trees littered the area. However, something else entirely stuck out to her. There were two other places with stone walls around them. One with the same bright green shining. The other with tall metal-looking buildings that the sun seemed to reflect off of and shine brightly. Her jaw fell as she looked at the places.

"What's that other place?" she heard his voice say again in her head.

"Which one?"

"The one with like...metal."

"I don't know."

"So you see it?"

"Yes I see it," she snapped at him.

"Jeez, no need for attitude. I was just making sure I wasn't going insane."

"Well, you're not."

She rested her head on the window just watching as her home moved further and further away from her before feeling her eyes grow heavy and the low rumble lull her off to sleep.

"Are you off the jet yet?" his voice called startling her awake. She looked around quickly and saw that they were finally reaching the ground.

"We're landing... I think."

"Alright."

She heard the chime on the speakers and assumed they had landed. She watched as the other girls started grabbing their bags and throwing them over their shoulders. She heard the doors open and stood up with the other girls. They walked into a room that had three boys sitting across the way. The one closest to them had jet-black hair and glasses. He was watching the girls as they came in. The next guy was sitting across two chairs with his hand near his collar messing with the shirt he was wearing. He had dark brown hair and an athlete's build. The last guy was a blond boy. He was the stereotypical California surfer boy who was just watching lights on the ceiling. The girls sat down away from both each other and the boys. Then a projector screen slid down and an image was cast on it before it started moving.

"Welcome to the test. We have brought three from each group. From group A, Ivy, Oliva, and Grace, and group b James, Aidan, and Peter. Please introduce yourself to each other and then we will explain what is to happen next," Then the screen turned to black. The six teens looked around at each other. A heavy sigh was let out from the guy's side of the room. Ivy looked over to see who it was and saw the blond rolling his eyes.

"Who wants to start?" he asked.

"Why don't you as you spoke first?" Olivia said.

He sighed again and moved to face her more.

"I'm Aidan. Happy?"

"Happy enough."

"What about you?"

"Olivia."

"This is stupid." Ivy heard James' voice in her head once more.

"Why don't you speak?" she said as she looked at the other two boys trying to see if there was a reaction. She saw the boy in the middle roll his eyes and a small smirk appeared on her face.

"I don't like you," she heard him think before he turned to sit in one chair instead of two. *"Though if I go you go. Ok."*

"No promises."

She saw his leg start to bounce a little as he looked around the room trying to figure out which girl she was.

"I'm James," he said in a quiet voice, making the others turn towards him. The boy from earlier nodded and looked at the girl's side once more. Ivy looked at the other girl before eventually clearing her throat quietly.

"Ivy," she said. She saw James' eyes dart to hers as she looked down at her hands.

"So you must be Peter?" Aidan said, looking at the other boy. The last boy nodded. "And grace?"

"Yes," Grace said with a sigh.

"We did it, now let's move this along," Peter mumbled. Then the screen came back down and the video started once more.

"You six now must split into pairs. One boy and one girl to a pair. You have five minutes to decide. If you do not there will be consequences," the robotic voice said. Ivy felt eyes burning into her head and turned her head to see James looking over at her. "Go."

No one moved or spoke as they looked around. James seemed to give her a look telling her to go with him. She looked back at the timer. Four minutes.

"I know you see me and I know you don't like me but if we don't get a pair we might be going home in bags. Just pair up with me."

"And why do you want to be partnered with me?"

"Because we've at least talked. You want to pair up with Mr silent or Blondie over there?"

She thought for a moment before sighing.

"Fine but I ain't moving," she said, raising her eyebrows. He rolled his eyes at her. She looked back at the timer. Three minutes. She heard footsteps and saw James walking over. She saw the other's eyes on him as well before he sat down next to her. The others looked around before the timer ticked down to two. Grace got up and went to Peter before sitting down quickly. He looked at her with wide eyes while Olivia and Aidan stared at

each other with distaste. Their eyes fought one another on who to move. The timer went down to one. Aidan let out a huff before begrudgingly getting up and sitting down next to her. A chime rang through the speakers before a door opened.

"Please walk through the door and we shall get started."

Ivy got up first wanting to desperately get out of this room while James followed closely behind. They walked through the door first.

"Nice to meet Your Majesty in person," he whispered behind her.

"You're still a piece of shit," she whispered back.

"A piece of shit who saved your life."

"Maybe ruined it."

Guards lined the halls as they walked. Small whispers of Aidan complaining could be heard behind them. Ivy looked around the walls. Again everything was white and clean as they walked.

"So where exactly are we?" she whispered looking over at James who was a good several inches taller than her.

"That big metal place I asked you about when we were on the jets. I don't exactly know what this place is but I believe it's them."

"Like the people who send the injections?"

"I think. I mean every video they sent away had a white background sorta like these walls."

She nodded slowly next to him. Then a guard stepped in front of the two of them making Ivy step back quickly while James grabbed her arm softly. He pointed to a room. Ivy looked in and saw two beds and a completely white room. She nodded at the guard slowly before walking into the room. James was sent in after her and the door was shut. Ivy looked around the room slowly. Just enough room for two people. A small bedside table next to each bed. She sighed before putting her bag down near the bed on the left side. She heard James shuffle next to her before passing by her into the right side of the room. She sat down on the completely white bed and looked across the room at James.

"Are you going to complain about sleep tonight?" he asked with a smirk.

"That was one time."

"Yeah, but you only have one first impression and that was yours." She rolled her eyes at him. "You like rolling your eyes."

"Well what you're saying is eye-rollable."

He gave a low laugh before lying on his back on the bed. There was a moment of silence between the two. He messed with the small chain around his neck as her leg bounced. She looked around the room warily.

"Something's odd about this place," she said quietly. "Why do they give you a nice room and everything if they well..."

"Kills us?"

"I guess. Like what's the point of making us feel comfortable?"

"To get us to trust them. Do not question them. But yeah there is something odd."

"I don't understand why they keep doing these tests. They just keep killing more and more kids. How is this a test if almost all the testers die."

"I believe they're trying to find something. I just...don't know what."

Then alarms blared red around them. He groaned and sat back up before the doors opened. Guards came back in and motioned them to follow. They were led into a room that had a blue chair. One that you would see in one of the doctor's stations back at home. They looked at each other before the door was shut tightly behind them. There was a small card on the table and Ivy grabbed it.

"One must sit in the chair," she read out loud "The other must put the injection on the table into the other arm to complete the first task" She looked over at him as he was looking around the room. He turned back to her when she stopped talking. "First task? How many do you think there are?"

He shrugged "don't know. But I don't think they'll kill us on the first one so I'll sit I guess," he said. "Though I tend to be a baby about these shots."

"Alright," she said, quietly grabbing the small syringe. She looked at it for a moment before tilting her head a little at it.

"What's wrong?"

"This...this isn't like our other shots."

"What's different?"

"Well uh, it's empty."

"What? Aren't these supposed to help us as they do at home?"

She shrugged before she grabbed the card again. She read it through again and again.

"I don't think they're trying to help," she whispered. Then a scream was heard. They both looked at the door and heard guards running down the halls. Their door slammed shut and locked with a loud click "We have to get out of here" she said.

"What. Why?"

"Something's wrong, ok! Believe me! You heard that scream!"

"They're trying to help. Aren't they?"

"I- I don't know!"

He sighed before moving to sit on the chair. He was about to sit when Ivy grabbed his arm.

"We need to get out. I don't think that chair is the best idea."

He sighed.

"I need to think."

"We don't have time to think. Someone just screamed. Like a bloodcurdling scream. That isn't right."

"Alright, how do you think we can get out of here?"

"I don't know I just-"

Then the sound of crying was heard near their door as guards tried to shut the person up. James looked around before going over to the door. He tried it but the lock was tight on it. He grabbed the extra chair and slammed it on the door. After a few hits the lock snapped and the door opened slowly. He looked around for a second before grabbing a pole that was on the ground near the door. He waved Ivy over.

"Let's go," he whispered. They quietly slid out the door and shut it behind them before walking down the hall. The only lights were the dim fluorescent lights that flickered as they walked. Red lights blinked violently around them. He kept one hand on the pole in his hand and the other in front of Ivy to keep her behind him. The further they walked down the hall the dimmer the lights got. They got to an open door and James looked in. his eyes widened when he saw Peter with a syringe in his arm and his eyes closed. Ivy looked in as well. A gasp fell from her lips before she walked in front of him and walked over to the boy. She put two fingers to his neck though she didn't feel a thump against her fingers, though his veins were dark and swollen as they ran down his arm and up his neck. She stepped back slowly before seeing the syringe. It was drawing something out of him. It was a goldish-yellow color that made Ivy's skin crawl. James walked in behind and looked at the boy. alarms blared around them as they walked into the room. He put his hand on her shoulder before carefully dragging her away. They spared one last glance at the boy before running down the hall.

"I told you," she said over her shoulder.

"Well good on ya. Now can we please focus on the fact that they're trying to kill us and we need to run?"

"Yeah, ok."

"What do you think they were taking out of him?"

"I don't know!"

"Also why were his veins so dark? He looked almost like...like a zombie. Are they going to send him back to the walls? We couldn't handle a loss like that."

"I don't know James! They're testing something I just" Then her mind seemed to click "Isn't that the same color as the injections they give to the infected."

James' eyes widened behind her. "You don't think..."

"They're trying to find a cure. That has to be what's outside the wall. Infected right?"

"So do they think we're like...immune or something?"

"I...I guess."

The sound of the alarm and their footsteps filled the hall as they ran down. They hadn't seen the other two or Grace since they went through that room but Ivy hoped Grace had gotten out or at least not done what the card had said. They kept running until they saw a door at the end of the hall. Ivy ran into it first and stopped mid-step when she saw the screens. She saw her home. She saw her friends around the village doing their jobs and walking around the place. Then she saw outside those walls. People were out there but they weren't

normal. They walked like zombies dragging their feet. There weren't many in the camera angle but Ivy could feel there were many more.

"I knew they were watching but this...this is crazy," James said standing by her.

There was a pause between the two.

"This has to end." she whispered "Why are we being separated from each other. Why do they need to be watching us?" she pointed out the smaller screen with the zombie people "What are those?"

He shrugged next to her. "Don't know. Let's just...just get as much information as we can. then we have to get out of here."

She looked at the screen a little longer and saw a title over that one screen:

"The Infected"

"How?" she said, turning towards him. "How are we possibly going to leave this place? We don't even know where we are exactly."

He walked over and grabbed her hands. She looked up at him.

"I believed you. You have to believe me. Trust me we will get out of here."

"Alright," she said, trying to fight against the tingling sensation she felt when he held her hands.

He looked at the screens and saw the guards running towards the room they were in along with Aidan and Grace sprinting down another hall. He looked back at her and squeezed her hands as she let out a quick breath of relief seeing Grace running.

"Do you trust me?"

She looked at him for a moment longer.

"Ivy...do you trust me?"

"Yes."

He nodded at her before letting go of her hands.

"Find anything you can about them. We can share it with and get everyone out of the walls."

"Ok."

They both quickly went to opposite sides of the room. James went to blockade the door while she searched through the files and files. She found files on every kid that was ever in the system. She flicked through before seeing her name. She pulled it out quickly and read it over though one thing stood out.

"We have made great progress with James and Ivy. They can talk and communicate through each other's mind which may prove difficult when older but perfect for the moment. Well send them to their separate places soon and they won't remember each other or this gift they have. They might be needed to find the cure. We are sending them to different places to see if they can still talk to each other. We just began the separation, separating the groups and keeping them away from the sickness. These kids might be the only way to stop it. We've lost so many people and need to find out why these kids are immune." The paper shook between her fingers as she read it.

"Hey, Ivy!" James said quickly. She spun around and saw him with a few folders in his arms. "Grab all you can. They're here!"

She nodded before grabbing more of the files of the other kids and seeing Grace's name along with Lyra and Jane's. James was near a window that led to the outside of the building. He pushed Ivy back softly before grabbing the pole from earlier and smashing the window. He looked down as the glass fell to the ground below them.

"How far is it?"

"Pretty far," he responds.

"Survivable?"

"There's a way."

"Then let's do it."

He looked back at her. He grabbed a bag from the counter. It was one of those plastic drawstring bags. He took the folders from her and his and put them in the bag. He reached behind his neck, unhooked his chain and dropped in the bag. She glanced at it as it fell into the bag. He looked up at her from the bag.

"Rather have it in there than on my neck where they could grab it if they get in reach," He said as he tossed the bag to her. She nodded and put it over her shoulders.

"Get ready. Jump to the pool" he said before stepping through the window and onto the ledge. Someone slammed against the door making her jump a little. She stared at the door. She looked back at him with wide eyes. He saw her hands shaking a little. "Ivy come on". She looked between him and the door before he held his hand to her. "We have to go" She nodded slowly and took his hand. "On three," he said.

"One."

The table shook as they slammed into it.

"Two."

The sounds of shouting were heard outside the door.

"Three!"

They both stepped out the window. Her scream was lost in the wind as it whipped through her hair before water replaced the air. She desperately swam up to the edge of the pool they landed in. She pulled herself up onto the cement near the pool. She spit out the water that was in her mouth. James though was already up and ready to go.

"Ivy, get up, they're coming! Come on!" he said desperately. He quickly walked over to her and helped her up. "I see the wall. The gates open, we just need to get there. Come on!" she nodded and they started to run. He pulled her with him as they ran. Gunshots rang through the air and they ducked down while still running. He pushed her further ahead of him as they kept running.

"I see the exit" she yelled back to him. "We're almost there!"

"Keep going," he yelled. A smile was on her lips as she saw the exit nearing. She beat her legs faster and faster not feeling the pain that was coursing through them or even how out of breath she was. She just kept running letting the exit be her hope. The doors were just feet ahead when she heard a thud behind her. She didn't dare turn around until she heard his groan of pain.

"Don't stop!" she heard James yell though more muffled. She turned her head to look at him and saw a guard on top of him holding him down.

"James!" she yelled, stopping completely. His eyes widened as he watched her stop.

"What did I just say? Don't stop! Keep running! I'll figure it out!"

"James! I can't!"

"You have to! Go! Now! You have the files, you have to go!" She saw the other guards running closer to her. She heard one of them speak into a walkie-talkie about the doors. She turned and saw the doors starting to close. "I promise you everything will be just fine. I need you to go! Save yourself while you can!"

"But!"

"No buts! Go!"

And with that, she quickly turned towards the wall and started running. She felt her eyes stinging as she ran, wiping her cheek as she ran. Closer and closer. She felt the heat of the desert just outside the stone walls. Her heart beat rapidly in her head while everything else seemed to shake. The doors were closing slowly. It felt like it was moving at the speed of light as she tried to make it through them. The doors were half closed by now and she was ten feet away. Many footsteps could be heard behind her and they got closer and closer.

She was now five feet away. The doors were getting closer to being closed. She could feel the hope draining from her and flying into the desert ahead. She knew she didn't want her friends to be right. She wanted to survive. She needed to survive.

She could hear the stone scratching against the ground before she was right in front of it. A gap just big enough for her to run through. She put all her strength into running, forgetting about everything else before she slipped through the doors and into the desert. She heard the doors slam shut behind her before she fell to her knees. Tears streamed down her face. She leaned down and put her head in her hands. Her breathing started to slow down as she sat there. Though his face was the only thing she could see. She took the bag off her shoulder and tossed it to the ground beside her. A shimmer of light caught her eye. She looked back over at the bag and saw the chain. She grabbed it from the bag and looked at it before wrapping her hand around it. She looked at the chain in her palm before looking back at the wall. Determination flooded her as she grabbed the bag and turned toward the shadows. She stared off at the other two walls, before setting off towards them, the chain in hand.

Gone With the Wind

Shylah Harris

The letter in her hand had said, "Meet me after school." She could recognize that scratchy handwriting anywhere. She felt her stomach twist and her head start to pound. She closed it with shaky hands before tucking it into her back pocket once more. She inhaled deeply before walking to her next class. Though the note in her pocket felt like a dead weight she just kept carrying around. She swore she could feel it burning a hole straight through her pocket. She tried desperately to ignore the sensation it brought to her.

The clock moved rapidly throughout the day contrary to how it dragged on every other day. It's like the world wanted to throw her into this panicked state. Then the final bell rang. She stood up slowly collecting her things and thoughts. Before she knew it she was the last person in the classroom. Even the teacher was gone. She made her way to the crowded hall before she felt eyes burning into the left side of her head. She turned to see and saw him. The once vibrant blue eyes he had before seemed to fade. The dark circles under his eyes didn't help. Her heart froze mid-beat. Her body along with it. They stared at each other for a long time. Long enough for most of the students to be out of their paths to each other. He slowly and cautiously walked over to her before stopping three steps away. She reached into her pocket and grabbed the small note. Her eyes glanced over the writing one last time before looking back at him. He reached his hand out and took the note from her slowly. He then moved his hand to brush some hair out of her face but it simply went through her hair without touching it. His shoulder sagged as a breath left his lips.

"Let me go," he begged in a hushed voice as tears pricked his eyes.

"You wrote that," she whispered.

"Two months ago. Let me go."

"Wha- "

"I'm gone. I'm not here anymore. You need to let me go."

She felt her heart shatter all over again as the memories came crashing down on her. She looked at the ground before she felt a small breeze like an outside door had been opened. She looked back up to see his face one last time but he had slipped away with the wind. The only thing left was the small note in the spot where he once stood.



"I write entirely to find out what I'm thinking, what I'm looking at, what I see, and what it means. What I want and what I fear."

- Joan Didion

Insufferable

Shylah Harris

Everything went dark. No light. No sound. Not even a small bug could be sniffed out. She ran her hand against the cool stone beside her. Her breathing was heavy and her chest hurt.

"Keep going," a male voice said behind her. "We're almost there."

"How do you know?" she whispered.

"I do."

She sighed.

"Helpful!"

"I'm not the one who got us into this mess."

She spun around to look at him but barely saw an outline of his figure.

"You're saying I am!"

"You said it, not me."

She scoffed.

"God you're insufferable!"

"It's not my fault you don't like me."

"It's entirely your fault," she said, spinning back around to walk forwards.

"What? You not liking me, or this?"

"Both!" she yelled. He stayed silent. The only thing that could be heard was their breathing and her chattering teeth.

"You cold?" he asked.

"No I'm not cold," she seethed.

"Ok," he mumbled with a sigh. She rolled her eyes before another chill passed through her body. She moved her hand to rub her arm to give her some form of heat.

"You sure you're not cold."

"I'm sure!"

"You don't need to snap at me. I'm just asking a question."

"Well stop asking questions and I'll stop snapping at you."

"I didn't ask you a question and you still snapped at me."

She groaned.

"Your insuff- "

"Insufferable. I know. You only tell me every day."

She paused and looked back at him. She could barely see that he wasn't looking at her so she continued. Then again she felt the same chill but a heavy breeze this time. She stood more firmly to keep herself from stumbling in the dark. She bit her lip to keep from her lips chattering. She heard a sigh before something warm was placed around her shoulders. She looked back at him.

"Aren't you going to get cold?"

"I'll be fine."

There was a pause between the two.

"Maybe you're not that insufferable."

Once Upon A Teenager

Anonymous

Note to the reader:

This story is an adaptation of chapters 12 and 13 of a book that I'm working on. The book is going to be an autobiographical graphic novel that personifies different emotions, psychological disorders, and types of thoughts as different characters. For example, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD) is a cloud character and boredom is a talking frog that sits on the princess's shoulder. It is written like a fairytale with the characters and things that I (the princess) interact with being represented by fairytale motifs. This section takes place just after she is transferred from one hospital to a mental health facility for suicidal ideation.

* * *

How had her life come to this? Strapped to a stretcher, wheeled into a room full of curious strangers, the princess had no idea what was about to happen to her. The space was large and intimidating. The dragon in her mind was having a field day.

You're crazy. Why else would you be here in this dungeon?

Every prince or princess struggles sometimes.

I just need to be somewhere where I'm safe, the princess thought.

Safe from yourself you mean.

You don't even belong here with them.

They all have real problems but you did this to yourself.

You're just too cowardly to do what people your age do every day without issue.

You don't deserve to be fussed over as if you have a real problem.

Your problem is yourself and that cloud that you made.

The Princess sat down in a small room with a nurse and her mother, the queen.

"Let's get you settled in for the night. We have to fill out some more paperwork but it will be brief. Is that ok?" the nurse explained as she approached her.

"Yes." She tried to be brave.

"You're in good hands now, but I have to leave very soon," the queen said.

She's leaving you again. She doesn't care how scared you are. See?

But she does care. She's just tired and she's been through a lot this week. She deserves to rest now.

Yes, you've put her through so much, the dragon replied.

That's not what I meant.

She was shaking; exhausted, scared, angry, and confused all at once.

"She can visit you tomorrow, but it's getting late and we have a curfew. Here is a bag of supplies and this is your room."

She didn't look at it for too long but her room was just as dull as the last one. A bed with thin, white sheets, a plastic wardrobe that was nailed to the wall and floor, but something different on the wall. There was a huge chalkboard.

"You can use the chalk from your supply bag any way you like," the nurse said.

She was grateful for the chalk, but she didn't relax yet. She was still in a new, huge building filled with hallways, locked doors, and strangers. She didn't have much time to think about it as she laid down and fell asleep surprisingly quickly. Another thing that she came to be grateful for was the fact that the nurses and workers didn't have to find her face through the door with a flashlight to check on her this time. Instead, they quietly opened the door to check on her every 15 minutes.

In the morning, She was greeted by the keepers telling all of the princes and princesses to get ready for breakfast.

The food will be terrible.

The dragon always had something to add.

It might not be so bad.

They walked through sets of locked doors and hallways to the cafeteria where she was pleasantly surprised by the options. There were eggs, toast, bacon, and some other things. The fruit looked fresh and best

of all, they could choose what they wanted to eat instead of filling out cafeteria forms the day before. However, the keepers paused at the door to give them an announcement.

"You all have to take a knife, a fork, and a spoon even if you aren't going to use them. When you are finished, you have to show one of us all three utensils before you throw them away so that we know that no utensils came out of the cafeteria with you."

They don't trust you here either.

Safety first. I just never considered how many precautions there would be for every little thing.

After breakfast, they went back to the dungeon where they were separated into two groups that determined their school and therapy schedules: group A and group B. The princess was put in group B. They were also informed that they could shower as much as they wanted to as long as it was at least once a day. She realized that her current outfit consisted of a hospital gown, pants, and grippy socks. She asked the nurses if they could call the queen since they were not allowed any electronics. She wished that she could've been with her immediately, but she would have to wait until the afternoon during visiting hours.

"Can you bring me some clothes mom?" she asked over the phone.

"Sure, but which ones do you want?"

"Anything comfortable...and wigs."

She had felt so bald and naked without anything to cover her patchy hair.

The queen couldn't bring the clothes in time for her to shower, so she was still wearing a hospital gown when it was time for school. It felt weird, but some of the other kids were doing the same. When it was time for school, she started to form some questions. Claud, the OCD cloud started rambling.

Is school going to be like normal school?

Will my school send the assignments for me to do?

If so, does that mean that they know that I'm here?

How will all of these teenagers from different schools and ages get appropriate work?

Will you be forced to sit through lessons designed for slower learners?

Will it be worse than regular school in that way?

Will the teachers be able to teach you the right way?

Group B would go to one classroom while group A went to another and they would switch before lunch. They walked to their class. It was a room with long tables arranged in a "C" shape surrounding the teacher's desk and a large SmartBoard. Here, she met Sir Pete. He was a middle aged man with some gray hair who looked very kind and composed.

She sat down excited to find out what the lesson would be since this class was both science and social studies. She would solve riddles and learn about ancient history all with kids that were already in high school. Although she was the youngest in the class in 8th grade, she felt right at home filling out the puzzles, worksheets, and even anatomical diagrams.

This is pretty cool, said the princess. I'm learning the same things as real highschoolers and not drowning or struggling.

The dragon wouldn't let her be.

Real highschoolers? This is a joke. They can't even assign you homework because you can't have electronics or pencils in the dungeon. This is not what highschool will be like at all.

At some point, one of the keepers came and offered them snacks before they switched classrooms.

The English and math teacher, Lady Julia, was a woman who seemed at first like any other teacher that the princess had ever met in any classroom that she had ever seen. She was heavy-set with light brown hair and smiling.

"Good morning kids," she said. "For today's english assignment, I will give you a list of randomly-generated words and you will create a song or rap using them."

Is she serious? This is awesome!

Barely into this class, she was called to meet with the wicked witch known as the psychiatrist. She knew that she would have to answer many questions that she had been asked a hundred times by other counselors. Up until that point, she had always seen psychologists and counselors as benevolent people who wanted to support her. They were good witches with a type of magic called empathy that they used to try to help her. Some witches had even stronger magic that they used to make potions called prescriptions for princes and princesses.

"How are you? Let me ask you some questions and have you fill out some sheets."

The princess had heard those words so many times before. Those words that made her face tighten as she tried not to show her annoyance.

Here we go again, croaked Wartz the frog rolling his eyes.

Wartz is right. There will never be enough detail on these sheets to accurately explain to someone how you feel, added Cloud.

I will explain it to her as best as I can. She is here to help.

She filled out the sheets and they talked about what had brought her here, her feelings, and her potions.

"I see. It sounds like you are a little bit of a coward."

She couldn't believe that those words had come out of her mouth.

That's exactly what I've been saying.

It doesn't even matter what this lady thinks or says.

Her opinion will mean nothing at all.

Nobody's will when you're gone.

It doesn't matter if she validates or discourages you.

"I see that you are already taking a potion, but I'm going to recommend that you take some more."

"Whatever."

She didn't give this experience much more thought that day. By the time that therapy was over, English/math class was already finished. They went back to the dungeon where the princess had to face the daunting task of finding something to do. Even though she had interacted with some of the other kids at school, she hadn't hung out with them before.

As she walked back, she noticed that she was shivering a bit in the thin hospital gown. "It's cold in here," she complained. Another princess heard her.

"You can borrow this," she said, handing her a velvety, red, jacket. You will get used to this in a little while. Don't be scared."

See, the other people here are friendly. There is no need to be intimidated.

She waited for the dragon to interject.

Eventually, the queen came and dropped off a bag of the princess's own clothes. The nurses sorted through the clothes to make sure that there were no strings or low-cut shirts. She held her breath once they got down to the wigs.

You look completely insane without your wigs. I doubt that they will allow them given that you can't have strings.

I have to be able to wear wigs. Please don't make me stay here looking like this.

You do it to yourself, said the dragon.

Claud, the OCD cloud chimed in.

Pulling your hair feels so good. Why even try to stop?

After a bit of explaining and negotiation, she was allowed to keep her wigs. After all, they were one of the only things that provided her with dignity and an added layer of protection from herself since her hair pulling had increased significantly. The last night, she had pulled and picked so much that there were spots of blood on her pillow case. She couldn't sleep in a wig, but it would help her a lot during the day.

It didn't take the princess long to figure out which of the three available bathrooms was the prime real estate. The one closest to her room flooded up to her ankles due to the leaky shower and deep slope in the floor. While trying to use the bathroom earlier, she had slipped and fell into the water. After that, all the princes and princesses nicknamed that bathroom "the swamp."

The next bathroom had no flooding, but the water pressure was so low, that using the shower was difficult. Combining this with the fact that someone had left pee on the seat the night before, the bathroom was deemed "the trickler."

The final bathroom was just right with the perfect water pressure and no flooding. The higher pressure made it sound from the outside like someone was screaming through the pipes which earned it the name of "The screamer."

After that she sat at a long table in the common area with about 15 other people.

"You look good, but you're still pretty without the wigs," said another princess.

"Thank you so much."

I can't stand being seen without them.

All the princes and princesses played various card games, board games, and even listened to music when they were allowed to have radios. Most of them gladly shared their stories, but they had to be careful, for they were still being monitored by the keepers. On one occasion, a prince asked a princess if she could help him to fix his hair. The princess had no objection, but the keepers forbade it.

"No physical contact, no sharing phone numbers, no reading each other's scrolls, no visiting other castles, no sharp objects in the dungeon blah blah blah!"

They went to dinner as usual in the evening. They walked down, ate, chatted with each other, and turned in their utensils. Then, they noticed the cafeteria workers talking with the staff.

"We have a problem here" they announced. "The cafeteria people say that they are missing a pair of tongs."

A pair of tongs? How did that happen?

"We can't have those tongs get back to the dungeon. Girls line up on one side with (female worker) and boys over here with (male worker)."

This is hilarious. Where do they think we could be hiding a pair of tongs? How would we have gotten them? I can't wait to see how this goes.

They were all given clothing and body searches, but they didn't find them on anybody.

"Where were they after all this?" asked the princess.

"Not sure. The cafeteria workers must've misplaced them."

All of the princes and princesses laughed all the way back to the unit. "Maybe you're the tong thief," they teased each other throughout the week.

I never expected that I would laugh this much here.

The next day, the princess was talking to a prince about why he was in the dungeon

"My parents stress me out. They say terrible things about my friends and they don't accept people the way they are. They believe that I'm here because of my friends, but it's they who are the problem," he explained

"I see. I'm so glad that you can think for yourself instead of perpetuating their hate."

"Yes. Well, I apologize to you for them in advance. I suspect that they will say things about you about your pink hair or your race when they come during visiting hours today. Their comments don't reflect my beliefs."

"Thanks for the warning, but don't worry about me. I can ignore them if I hear them whispering or smile at them."

"You're funny. I actually think that it would work."

The princess couldn't hear what the other parents were saying about her during visiting hours, but she got the idea when saw them leaning in and whispering.

The next day, there was a snow storm. The kids in all of the surrounding areas were waking up ecstatic to hear that school was canceled. Because the school attached to the dungeon was part of the closed districts, school was cancelled. They looked forward to sleeping in and playing their video games, but not the princess.

How can school be canceled for a snow day if the classroom is just down the hallway?

The next morning at breakfast, the princess could hardly wait for school to start. She enjoyed Sir Pete's class just as much as she had before. In Lady Julia's class, the princes and princesses shared their songs, played some math games, and made christmas cards. The princess didn't have a single complaint.

I've never had such an amazing time at school in my life.

For the rest of her days in the dungeon, the princess couldn't help but enjoy learning, talking, eating, and even singing with the other princes and princesses.

Eventually, the princess's time in the dungeon was up and the queen came to bring her castle. On the way back to her own house and her own bed, she couldn't help but wish that she had a way to contact the other princes and princesses that she had bonded so much with. After only eight days, she knew that they inherently understood her and wished that she could feel that way in public school too. She thought about how there were good people like the prince who was so insightful and considerate as to warn her about his parents. She remembered how quickly the other princess offered her her jacket when she was cold. She considered Sir Pete and Lady Julia who were so accommodating to everyone in their classrooms. The dragon started a new train of thought.

You will never feel this accepted again. You might as well...

No! I will not let you finish.

The Dark

Anonymous

David was terrified of small spaces and Tom knew it.

"David! Get your stuff ready, we're heading out in five minutes."

"I'm on my way down, just let me grab something first."

David grabs his headlight and his helmet. He has a hard time coming down the stairs because of his heavy boots. Almost falling, David catches himself and stumbles to the front door where Tom is waiting.

"What took you so long! Come on, let's get in the car. I know a great caving spot."

"Whatever you say, Tom."

They walk to Tom's Green Jeep. They both throw their bags in the trunk, making a loud thud.

"So this cave's for beginners, right?" David asks as they enter the car.

Tom responds with a weary "Yeah, I think so."

Thirty minutes later, they're only halfway to the cave's location; unfortunately for David, he's getting more and more nervous by the second. David reaching the pinnacle of his nervousness when they finally arrive he jumps out of the car grabbing his bag from the trunk trying not to express his anxiety.

"It's a mile walk through the woods there," Tom says as David sighs.

"How much longer Tom? It feels like it's been an eternity."

"It's right up here David, only a little longer."

"What's this thing called again?"

"I'm not sure, I've just heard about it online, and I think I just found an entrance of some sort."

David looks around and sees a vent like entrance that only a small kid could fit through.

"Alright, here we go," Tom says.

As he starts to take off his backpack and shoes, Tom goes head first and contorts himself, trying to make his figure as small as possible. Inching his way through the entrance, it looked like he was stuck.

David asks if he is ok, and he responds with "Don't worry, I've done this many times before."

Tom's boots won't fit, so he asks David to pull his boots off. Pulling with great force, David rips the boots off knocking himself backwards causing Tom to slip headfirst into the cave headfirst. David rushes over to the entrance, looking inside with his headlight making sure he is ok.

"Alright, your turn," Tom says.

As he stands up, looking straight at me. David backs up and takes a deep breath putting both of his legs in, Tom guides his leg through to be as helpful as he can. David starts to get nervous as he's making barely any progress at making his way through. David gets more and more anxious as he makes inches of progress but is soon comforted by Tom. Both of the headlights illuminate the cave ahead of them. Dripping water echoes throughout the cave, harmonizing with every drop. They start traversing throughout the cave; it gets narrower with every step. David looks up at Tom, both of them crouching down.

"How far in are we? It feels like it's been forever," David says.

"It's only been five minutes, so calm down."

Soon they were both crawling on their knees.

David becomes increasingly worried about being underground.

"Did you check the weather before we went down? Are you sure it's not going to rain or something?"

"Don't worry, I've been tracking it for the past week, we'll be fine."

Dark clouds began to form and thunder erupted from outside unknowing to David and Tom they kept going on. David starts breathing heavily as they both now crawl on the ground. Tom keeps telling David to keep up as they keep pushing through the cave. David takes breaks because of how claustrophobic he's getting. Tom can't look back, so he doesn't know what's going on; he can only rely on communication. Five minutes later, the cave kept getting narrower, having to take off their bags just to make it thorough. Tom starts to feel water rising from the ground, fearing for the worse he tells David to go faster. Hoping for an air pocket up ahead, Tom keeps going faster and faster hoping David is keeping up with him. Tom can start to hear David panicking behind him, trying to comfort him; he tells him to take deep breaths and keep going. The water was above their hands, but they kept pushing until they could find an air pocket. Tom finds an opening where they can stand up, at this point, the water was at their knees. Tom makes a quick decision to just stand up and wait for the water to subside. David starts to cry will they ever make it out, he starts to yell and get mad at Tom for making them go down.

"You made me do this, Tom, I never wanted to do it in the first place!"

Tom doesn't respond, knowing it was all his fault and he just wanted to have fun with his friend.

"Don't worry, the water will go down soon David, and we'll be out of here in no time." A few hours pass as David starts to eat the food he packed.

"Make sure you don't eat too much. We have to save this stuff just in case we run out of food."

"We wouldn't be down here if it wasn't for you Tom."

Tom stood in the corner of the air pocket with the water up to his knees, trying to ignore David.

"What if we were in here for days, Tom, did you ever think about that?"

"Hopefully someone will realize that we are gone."

More and more hours passed by, losing track of time. Both of them didn't get any sleep that night.

"My head hurts," David says as he falls asleep on the jagged rocks using their bags as pillows. The cave was dark; there was no light, trying to conserve energy in their headlights with the few batteries they had left in their bag.

"I'm pretty sure the water has been going down. It looks like there's barely enough room for us to fit through," Tom says as he wants to get out of this cave and eat food.

"Are you crazy? There's minimal breathing space at the top of the tunnel back." David barely agreed to the caving trip; it was only an attempt to conquer his phobia of claustrophobia. He began to cry again fearing for his life.

Am I ever going to make it out of this?

Tom tells David, "Let's get out of here, I'm going without you if you don't want to leave now."

"Fine, but if there is too much water then I'm heading back." David gets his stuff together preparing for the treacherous trip back. Tom crawls through the water near his mouth. If he gets any lower he's going to have to crawl on his back breathing with the small space that's left. David struggles behind Tom, breathing heavily. David yells with as much power as he can use, "Tom! I don't know if I can do this."

Tom hears a splash. He tries to look back, but is stopped by the walls on his side.

"David! Can you hear me?"

No response.

"David!"

David is slouched down in the water, unconscious and there's nowhere to turn around. Tom starts packing until he can feel David.

"Where are you David?"

Tom's leg hits David in the face making him conscious. David wakes up and screams, panicking because of the claustrophobic conditions. Tom tries to calm David down with his voice and communication.

"David we're almost out, just keep pushing!"

Tom can hear David trying to catch his breath after five minutes David soon slows down his breathing rate, and they can continue on. A few minutes later after moving forward around twenty feet Tom's headlight runs out of battery. David turns his on, but it isn't that efficient because of Tom blocking most of the light.

Tom shouts, "Just throw it up to me!"

"Alright."

They both keep traversing the water filled tunnel as it starts to open up more both Tom and David feel a lot more relieved.

"Tom! Why is the light flashing up there?"

"I'm not sure, but it might be almost out of battery."

"What! I thought you said that you had another set in your bag."

"I was lying. I'm sorry. I just wanted to get out of here sooner, so I lied and said that we had enough batteries to make it out of the cave."

The cave is illuminated with darkness; both Tom and David are limited to one sense touch. Tom begins to move forward with David right behind him. Tom uses his hands to feel around where they are. He feels the sides of his calves, but his hand gets scraped by the jagged surface of the cave.

"Ah!" Tom says after his hands get cut up.

"Are you good?" David begins to get worried, but is relieved once Tom says it was a minor scratch to his hand.

"Wait, I can stand up now," Tom says as he gets up and starts walking slowly, putting his hands in front of him making sure he doesn't run into anything. David gets up and starts to walk behind David holding his shirt to make sure they don't lose each other. Seeing light.

Tom yells back to David, "The exit is right up here!"

"Finally this nightmare of a day is over!"

Tom gets to the entrance of the cave and contorts his body to climb out.

"David come on, let's get out of here."

David uses all his strength and Tom pulls him up to finally make it out. Both David and Tom are ecstatic and relieved. David runs to Tom's green jeep grabbing his phone out of it and calls 911. They had both been reported missing for two days by their family and friends. The police and ambulances arrive and both Tom and David are rushed to the hospital but are soon released because of their minor injuries. Both Tom and David know that they will never be going back to a cave and will spend their time above ground.

The Monster in the Woods

Grey DeGunia

It was supposed to be the end-of-the-year camping trip, not a murder fest. We were all seniors and we just finished school, and we thought we would celebrate it by getting away and going on a trip, a camping trip—Aaron, Sam, Victoria, and my amazing girlfriend Celeste. We were all going, but there was one thing, no one except Aaron trusted Sam. We had good reasons for not liking her. She was, well, weird. Like she would talk about us dying in cruel ways. I never knew how Aaron handled it. But we brought her with us because of Aaron. I mean they were together since like sophomore year, and she's been there for him that whole time so we invited her.

But It was the day the trip was planned for June 17th. It was a perfect summer day. The trees were blowing in the slight breeze. The sun was shining, and there was no cloud in sight. Just perfect. There were two tents, one black tent that Aaron, Sam, and Victoria all shared, and Celeste and I got the smaller pink one ourselves which was nice. We got some alone time without having to go anywhere. By the time we were finally finished setting up the sun was beginning to set.

"Alright we're all set up, all we need is firewood," Aaron said smiling.

"Me and Celeste can go get it," I almost yelled.

"Alright, I guess you and Celeste can go get firewood," Aaron said, sounding kinda concerned.

I turned around and took her hand and walked into the woods with her. The farther you walked into the woods the more birds you could hear chirping their song.

"It's honestly really nice out here," Celeste said as she turned and looked at me with a smile.

"It truly is, I'm glad Aaron found this area." Celeste gave me a look as if I said something dumb.

"Didn't you know that Sam found this area?" she asked. I gave her a look saying I didn't know. She smiled as we continued to walk through the woods picking up pieces of wood as we walked. I have to admit the whole time I felt like there was someone following us no, something following us, and I know I should have said something but I didn't want to ruin the moment we were having. I mean she is great and we never get time to be alone and now for a few days, we get to be somewhat alone time and hangout and talk. But By the time we got back to the campsite I had completely forgotten about the feeling of being watched, I mean I was with my girlfriend nothing else mattered at that moment in time.

"So you all know how I got this campsite," Sam said a little too happily.

"Yeah," I replied. Looking around at everyone else.

"Well guess what?" She looked around us with a smile on her face. God did I hate her smile, it always seemed to be a mask on how she truly felt.

"Well, THIS PLACE IS HAUNTED!"

We all sat in silence for what seemed to be hours, but it was more like 10 minutes. None of us believe her, I mean ghosts aren't real, just a story, fairy tales you go and tell your kids to scare them or teach them a lesson. A small voice then spoke out.

"So, random questions you guys but, umm do any of you have cell service?" Victoria asked.

"Nope," Aaron replied. We all shook our heads in agreement.

That clearly won't be an issue later on right? Oh, how I wished that could be right...

Then after hours of telling stories by the fire, it must have been 11:20 pm. We all decided to head to bed and get some sleep. I mean we were going to stay here for a week.

"Good night," I said looking over at Celeste, yawning. She looked at me with a slight frown.

"Hey babe, can we keep one light on?" Celeste asked, her voice cracking a bit well looking around a little paranoid.

"Don't tell me you believe this area is haunted Celeste," I said, laughing.

"You can't tell me you didn't feel like we were truly alone in those woods."

I looked at her and there were tears slowly pouring down her face.

Shit, she feels it too?

"Celeste it's ok," I said smiling, but I did as she wanted I turned the light on and held my arms out forward to get her into my arms where we then fell asleep. As we slowly drifted off to sleep there was a thud somewhere in the distance, she looked up at me as if she was about to cry. The thing with her is that she gets scared easily, but once again I brushed it off, held her closer, and fell asleep.

Around what I'm guessing was 12:34 am, we heard Victoria scream, we all ran out of our tents to see a trail of blood leading into the woods.

"Sam, what the hell is going on?" I screamed well running out of the tent.

"I told you guys this area was haunted but none of you guys believed me," she said, sounding like the world's biggest pick-me.

"SAM, VICTORIA IS OUT THERE IN THE WOODS BLEEDING OUT AND THAT'S WHAT YOU SAY. YOU KNOW WHAT I'M DONE WITH YOU. YOU ARE ALWAYS LIKE THIS YOU NEVER TRULY CARE ABOUT ANY OF US AND YOU JUST WANT TO SEE US DIE."

I've never seen Aaron ever stand up for himself before, he was always the type of guy that could be and would be a doormat. I have never been prouder of him till that night, he was strong.

"What...you can be serious, you love me. I'm just different, you can't hate me for that."

"I'm one hundred percent sure I meant that Sam, we are over," he said, turning and looking back at the woods.

"Guys I don't wanna get in between this, but we need to go find Victoria," Celeste said.

"Yeah you're right, we need to find Victoria. She could still be alive," Aaron said with a bit of hope in his voice. We all looked back over at the trail of blood. We grabbed a few flashlights and went in. The wind was blowing at a calm, steady pace, leaves crunching underneath our feet with each step we took. As we walked more into the woods the crunching sound got louder and louder till there were no more leaves but there was still that crunching noise that was still getting louder. By this time we all knew Victoria had to be dead there was no possible way she could still be alive. About two minutes later we see the monster. It stood at about 8'1, blended in with the shadows, and had sharp horns and claws. Its teeth looked like that of a lion's teeth. We all slowly started to back away from the monster trying not to get its attention, when Sam suddenly stepped on a twig pointing it in our direction. The monster turned and looked in our direction and slowly became smaller and in less than 2 minutes, the monster looked just like Victoria's except it had this sinful grin. When we all saw that, we turned around and ran back to the camp we were at.

"Sam you idiot!" Aaron shouted.

"How am I the idiot here? It's not my fault I stepped on that twig."

"Not that you idiot! Telling us to go here for our camping trip when you knew this area was haunted!"

"I'm not having this argument with you right now."

Once we made it back to the campsite, we all looked at each other not knowing what to do next. We decided to stay close for the rest of the night.

About twenty minutes later, we realized we needed more wood as the fire was going out. We didn't know if the light kept whatever it was away but it left us alone. Sam and Aaron went out into the woods to get more wood.

"I hope they come back alright," Celeste said as she turned and looked at me, her dark brown eyes filling up with tears. I took her into my arms, hugging her to keep her calm.

"Hey, hey, they'll be fine, they have a light with them, they'll be safe," I replied, trying to keep her calm. Honestly in the moment, I was terrified, but I had to be the stronger one. Then, there was a blood-curdling scream that came from the woods and then out came Aaron, running.

"I'm back," Aaron said with no emotion.

"Where is Sam?" Celeste asked.

"S-She's gone..." Aaron replied as he fell to the ground sobbing. "We were in the woods when we went separate ways to get the most wood when her flashlight died, it's all my fault, if I gave her my flashlight, it would have been me, she would have lived!"

"Hey Aaron it's not your fault, it's hers, it was her idea to come here, you did your best to protect her," I replied.

Thank god she was dead and not Aaron, I thought to myself. I was glad that Sam died; she had it coming to her when she brought us here.

"I also only got one piece of wood," Aaron said as he looked to face us.

"Oh, Aaron, it's ok, you went through seeing the one you love die," Celeste said, hugging him.

"I never loved her," he said while hugging Celeste.

But just as he spoke, the fire went out. I took the piece of wood Aaron had got and ran to the firepit and started to light the fire, but to no avail, it wouldn't light.

"GUYS IT WON'T LIGHT!" I screamed, Aaron ran over to help me light it.

THUD.

THUD.

THUD.

We looked up to see the monster right behind Celeste.

"CELESTE! RUN!" I screamed. She looked behind and there stood the monster with red eyes that were shooting knives into her eyes, as she stood there she started to cry.

Oh, Celeste, please run, I begged, taking pity on my love.

The monster took her, its sharp claws digging into her stomach and ripping it wide open, her blood-curdling screams were so loud I thought the whole world could hear them. Her screaming never got

quieter. I started to feel sick to my stomach at what I was looking at, you could smell something rotting, as if just by the monster's touch it was rotting her flesh. Her blood dripping out of her stomach, she was getting paler by the minute.

"THE SUN! IT'S COMING UP!" Aaron shouted. I looked behind me and saw the sun. At this point, the light was our only hope. I mean it wasn't there in the day and the fire we had seemed to spare us for some time. As the sun came the monster screamed, making us cover our ears.

CRUNCH.

CRUNCH.

CRUNCH.

We looked back up at the monster. Celeste had stopped moving and stopped screaming.

THUD.

Celeste fell to the ground and the monster ran back to the woods, I ran over to her crying.

I put her head on my lap. There laid my badly wounded girlfriend. Her stomach was cut open, her guts were coming out of her body and both of her legs were broken, she looked up at me and smiled. The smell of her flesh rotting made me flinch, but it didn't stop me from kissing her, pulling away just to hear what she wanted to say.

"Please, Cassie, don't ever forget how much I love you. You were always there when I needed to get away from my family, never forget how much you mean to me. Here take this," she said as she handed me a locket with a photo of us. I started to sob, as I watched her eyes slowly close.

"Celeste... Celeste... Celeste... please wake up!"

Aaron stood next to me and hugged me as I cried into his chest, my girlfriend, my love, my world had just passed in my lap. I didn't want to leave. I wanted to stay there with her till I died, along with her.

* * *

"That was a very traumatic experience, but we're here to help you," my therapist said. I nodded.

She got up from her chair and walked over to the door. With the same sinister grin the monster had, in a deep raspy voice, it said...

"I'll see you tonight Cassie."



"The ability of writers to imagine what is not the self, to familiarize the strange and mystify the familiar, is the test of their power."

- Toni Morrison

Statistics

Dilshani Hansa

I was never bad at math, but I was never the best at math either. I was somewhere in the middle. Additionally, I always felt indifferent towards math because I did not understand how it applied to my life. I would sit in a classroom and plug numbers into equations. I would take the square root of numbers, add numbers, subtract numbers, multiply numbers, and divide numbers- monotonously completing worksheet after worksheet. At the end of every question, I would confidently make a giant circle around my answer. But did I know what that answer meant? No. But that did not matter. All that mattered was whether you were right or wrong. For example, let's say that there was a word problem about how Johnny ate 5 oranges every 4 hours throughout the day, and the question was asking how many oranges Johnny ate in one day. Well, there are 24 hours in a day, so if he ate oranges every 4 hours then he would have eaten oranges 6 times throughout the day. Additionally, if he ate 5 oranges each time then $6 \times 5 = 30$ oranges. Finally, I would draw a giant circle around my answer which was 30 oranges. But why was Johnny eating 30 oranges a day? Was he addicted to oranges? Did he have a vitamin C deficiency? Is he a pirate who developed scurvy while at sea? These were the questions that I never got answers to. During my senior year, I decided to take a statistics class and discovered that statistics asked the questions I had that were left unanswered. Statistics is the study of the collection, analysis, interpretation, presentation, and organization of data. In other words, being able to find patterns or meaning in a collection of facts can help us understand the behavior of a population better. It is less about solving for an arbitrary number and more about what that number means in the bigger picture. Similarly in life, it is not enough for people to just find a number but to be able to critically think about what that number means in the context of what they are trying to understand. I realized that the critical thinking that statistics encourages extends outside the classroom and applies to living in general. Therefore, I believe that we all should be statisticians and deviate from merely focusing on the right answer to asking ourselves why that answer matters.

The answer that we get from statistics does not always have to be a number. In fact, you spend more time writing in a statistics class than doing actual math because you must be an effective communicator. When I was a sophomore, I remember one of my algebra teachers calling English, "the most useless subject taught in school." The animosity was so strong that I could not imagine the two subjects existing harmoniously. I was taught to believe that English and math are like oil and water. They do not mix. However, learning statistics I realized that it was integral to write numbers in context. For example, one topic covered in statistics is the idea of correlation. If I had just said that the correlation coefficient of the number of cars in an area and the percentage of carbon emissions in that area is 0.983, most people would not understand what that meant. However, I could say that the correlation coefficient shows how strongly two variables are associated. Furthermore, when it is closer to 1, then that means the two variables have a strong, positive association. Therefore, if one variable increases, the other tends to increase as well. In summary, the correlation coefficient of the number of cars and the percentage of carbon emissions is 0.983 which means that as the number of cars in the area increases, the percentage of carbon emissions tends to increase as well. As you can see, the number is only a small fraction of the answer and a majority of it is the explanation.

Being able to communicate your findings is not a skill needed just for mathematicians but for life in general. For example, when you give a presentation or pitch a product you need to be able to explain why the research or data you collected matters. You cannot just point to a graphic or number and expect clueless people to understand its meaning. Providing meaningful explanations and effective communication is a skill everyone should have. Educating and listening to one another is the core of how we run a functional society. Additionally, it is imperative in various careers. Politicians look at the results from a poll to explain how people will ultimately vote in major elections. People working in sales look at how people respond to certain advertisements and explain which advertisements people engage with the most to sell a product. Scientists look at the results from an experiment and explain how a specific treatment affected the subjects in that experiment to see whether it's effective. Although statistics can help you understand how a treatment affected the subjects you tested on, it is also very important to recognize that the treatment may not have the same effects for every person in the population.

You cannot make assumptions about an entire population of people based on a sample. Let's say we want to find out how Americans are voting in the presidential election. We could perform a census however, they are incredibly expensive, and who has the time to go door to door and ask every single person in the United States who they are voting for? Instead, statisticians create samples of people that they deem are "representative" of the population to collect data from. But, samples can be flawed and it is important to not

jump to conclusions based on the data you collect. For example, let's say that I was trying to determine how the state of Massachusetts felt about a Republican candidate and I took a sample from a small, conservative town in the state. If the people in that town showed support for that candidate then I could not jump to the conclusion that everyone in Massachusetts is in favor of this Republican candidate. That sample is not representative of all the people in Massachusetts. If I had gone to more liberal areas then the results may have varied. As a result, in order to create a good sample, you have to include people with varying perspectives. Through statistics, we understand that we have to consider a multitude of factors like where people live and how that can influence what they believe. This is why I believe that statistics forces you to consider different perspectives which makes you more empathetic. Most of the time, it becomes difficult to think about people outside our bubble. I grew up in a suburb in Connecticut and the public schools I went to were good. I remember I watched a TV show where a kid decided he wanted to go to a public school instead of the private schools in California. Moreover, his parents were strongly against him going to a public school and thought public schools provided a poor education. I was extremely shocked by this notion because I had grown up in a state with good public schools, so I did not understand that in other states public schools were insufficient or dangerous at times. Therefore, I had lived life in a bubble up to that point and had to realize that people living in different areas have varying perspectives from my own. Statistics encourages you to consider different viewpoints to create a good sample, which in turn allows you to become more open-minded to people with experiences different from your own. Because you have to acknowledge the differences between individuals in a population, you cannot make generalized claims that apply to everyone in a population. As a result, learning statistics helps you realize that it is more important to be accurate with your words rather than establish a flawed, generalized conclusion. To do this, you often have to use hedge words. Phrases like "tend to" or "is predicted to" are more accurate instead of stating false conclusions with certainty. For example, it would be wrong to say that more screen time causes someone to need glasses because other factors could increase an individual's likelihood of needing glasses. Perhaps everyone in their family has glasses and it is genetic. Although there might be data to support the claim that people who spend more time on a screen have an increased chance of becoming visually impaired, it is incorrect to suggest it is the sole cause and diminish all possible factors. Writing answers with such uncertainty is one of the hardest parts about statistics because we like having one, confident answer to a problem. In math, we have been conditioned to solve for x so when there is no x , it makes us uncomfortable. We crave certainty. Right or wrong. Black or white. However, we live in a world of gray.

Often in life, there is no one right answer to anything which can be incredibly frustrating. I remember when my dad had a heart attack, I was so puzzled by it. He went running twice a day, ate salads every day, and had no prior problems with cholesterol. He felt like the last person who should have a heart attack. Moreover, when my family asked the doctor what may have caused it, he said that it *could* have been genetic or *possibly* his diet. There were those hedge words again. Consequently, I was upset because I wanted a straightforward answer. What caused this to happen so it does not happen again? Unfortunately, life rarely provides us with that kind of certainty. I realized that I could not be upset at that doctor because he was just doing his job. He was providing an accurate picture of my dad's health and being honest about the factors that could have influenced his likelihood of getting a heart attack. That picture may have been blurry, but he was telling me what I needed to hear instead of what I wanted to hear.

So, how do we navigate a life full of uncertainty? In statistics, I believe that people learn to be comfortable being uncertain. This is because the answer you get usually comes in a range. For example, in statistics, you learn how to find a true population proportion with a margin of error. Let's say that you are trying to find out what percentage of American women have CEO positions in companies. You do not know the true percentage of women who are CEOs in the United States, but you can make a representative sample and draw conclusions from that. When you calculate the percentage of female CEOs in your sample you also need to find the margin of error. The margin of error is a statistic expressing the amount of random sampling error in the results of a survey. Therefore, if the percentage of female CEOs in your sample is 10.4% and you have a margin of error of $\pm 5\%$, then the true percentage of female CEOs in America is within the range of 5.4% - 15.4%. Although we never learn what the actual percentage is, we find a range. Similarly, part of navigating life is not always having a clear, detailed plan, but a hunch or a broad vision. Likewise, when I became a senior everyone was constantly talking about what schools they were going to and what career paths they wanted to take. Some people knew they wanted to attend a certain college and specialize in a specific profession. In contrast, I did not know where I wanted to go to college or what job I could see myself doing. I felt uncomfortable knowing that I was so uncertain about my future amidst people who knew exactly what they wanted to do with their lives. But, statistics has taught me to normalize uncertainty. I may not know the specifics, but I do know I want to go to college, and I am interested in the science field. I may not have a specific profession in mind, but I know I want to do something with science in my future. Similarly, we may not know the actual percentage of female

CEOs but we have a range. In short, I have learned to be content with a blurry image of my future. As a result, I feel less anxious about not having all the answers. Additionally, I think the pressure to have all the specificities of your future figured out is the reason so many young adults go through emotional turmoil when they feel uncertain about their careers. They do not realize that uncertainty is inevitable because as time goes on, our priorities and career paths pivot. Therefore, through normalizing uncertainty we can reassure ourselves that it is okay to not have all the answers and part of life is figuring things out. In summary, statistics has allowed me to navigate the world confidently, having a hunch.

In conclusion, the concepts covered in statistics teach us to think critically about the situations and problems we encounter in life. We learn how to not just solve a problem but effectively explain what our answer means and why it matters. Furthermore, through sampling, we learn how to be empathetic and acknowledge varying perspectives. Also, we realize that the world is more complex than right and wrong, and we should not get discouraged by its blurry nature. We may only have a range instead of a specific answer and that is okay. Much like statistics, perhaps all of us should live life somewhere in the middle.



“I know nothing in the world that has as much power as a word. Sometimes I write one, and look at it, until it shines.”

- Emily Dickinson

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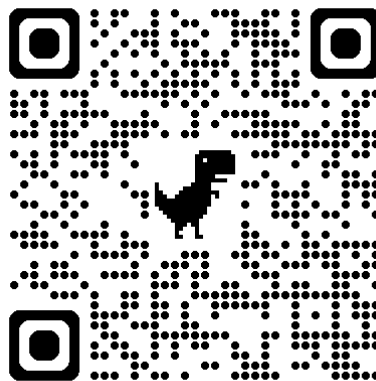
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“Writing is perhaps the greatest of human inventions, binding together people, citizens of distant epochs, who never knew one another. Writing breaks the shackles of time - proof that humans can work magic.”

- Carl Sagan