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# Table of Contents
## The Scarab 2013

### Front Cover
- Scarab Nouveau
  - *By Jessica Garvey*

### Visual Art
- **5** Catwalk
  - *By Amanda Meyer*
- **7** Root
  - *By Amanda Meyer*
- **8** Moonlight
  - *By Perla Carreon*
- **12** Untitled
  - *By Amanda Fryar*
- **13** Untitled
  - *By Jason Alexander Herrera*
- **14** Roses
  - *By Micah McCoy*
- **15** Untitled
  - *By Brishti Bagchi*
- **16** Coeur et à la Maison
  - *By Mollie Dysart*
- **18** Untitled
  - *By Emma Foroutan*
- **20** Untitled
  - *By Jason Alexander Herrera*
- **21** The Extinct and Extant
  - *By Amanda Gathright*
- **27** Jellyfish
  - *By Alexandra Roy*
- **36** Still Life
  - *Micah McCoy*
- **45** Untitled
  - *By Alexandra Roy*
- **48** Coeur et à la Maison
  - *By Mollie Dysart*
- **55** Untitled
  - *By Jason Alexander Herrera*
- **60** Untitled
  - *By Amanda Meyer*
- **62** Untitled
  - *By Brishti Bagchi*
- **69** Untitled
  - *By Emma Foroutan*
- **71** Untitled
  - *By Danielle Kutner*
- **77** Untitled
  - *By Brishti Bagchi*
- **89** Transforming
  - *By Micah McCoy*
- **102** Gated Door
  - *By Amanda Meyer*
- **104** Whimsical Playtime
  - *By Amanda Gathright*

### Poetry
- **6** A Study in Romanticism
  - *By Dr. Abigail Keegan*
- **7** Troll Bridge
  - *By Anna Bauman*
- **8** This Poem Doesn’t Have a Title
  - *By Erin McCoy*
- **9** Everyone Has a Gnome in Their Pocket
  - *By Matt Randall*
- **10** Swans
  - *By Carmen Paquette*
- **11** The Soul of Poetry
  - *By Jordan Pierce*
- **12** Brave
  - *By Rachel Wolf*
- **13** Scavenger Hunt
  - *By Allison Bevers*
14 Syntax Error
   By Erin McCoy
15 Rose-Tinted Memories
   By Matt Randall
16 Afterlife
   Chickadees
   By Neilee Wood
17 Reading Poetry at 5 a.m.
   Feathers
   By Matt Randall
18 Mermaids Say
   By Anna Bauman
19 Home
   By Caitlin Darlene Swisher
Fiction
22 Cannonballs
   By Zach Parker
28 Peter Rabbit and Jocko Monkey
   By Jessica Garvey
33 My Wondrous Doodle
   By Zachary Guevara
37 Momma’s Joined the Circus
   By Jason Alexander Herrera
44 Offshore
   By Zachary Parker
46 I am god
   By Ashley Lee Ann Dougherty
49 Glass Snowflake
   By Abbie Vestal
52 The Butterfly Tree
   By Erin McCoy
56 Patrick
   By Eric C. Waltman
58 Desperate Bewilderment
   By Emily Guthrie
61 Bad for Your Lungs
   By Zachary Parker
63 The Love You Can See
   By Ashley Lee Ann Dougherty
64 Engagement
   By Theresa Hottel
70 Flying to New Heights
   By Ariel Richardson
Non-Fiction
72 Soviet Skydiving
   By Daniel Reynolds Riveiro
78 Why I Want to Dye My Hair Blue
   By Ashley Lee Ann Dougherty
80 Jasmine
   By Jessica Garvey
87 One Night at Walgreens
   By Abbie Vestal
90 Elegant Chaos
   By Ethan Berney
91 SXSW: Boom and Bust
   By Danielle Kutner
95 My Double Life
   By Courtney Honaker
103 A Writing Exercise
   By Ashley Lee Ann Dougherty
Contributor Biographies
105-107
As you close your books, forget nineteenth
century poets in their ruffled collars and cuffs,
flickering candled bedrooms filled with opium
tinctures, echoing with a consumptive coughs.
Put out of sight Blake’s peacock, naked display
in his back lot, and Byron’s brimming skull,
wine-filled, tippling on a table of ancestral halls
more luscious than anything inside walls
of Walpole’s gothic castle. Set aside
a plum skin separated from the meat of fruit
by the small hands and teeth of Keats
becoming a still life. So too move past
the background of street sellers hawking their wares
under Wordsworth’s blind eye at Bartholomew’s Fair
just before evening’s arrival of whores where
streetwalker, De Quincey, may have discovered
Blake lurking late in the darkness of London nights,
both having heard the same clamorous bedlam
from the Dog and Duck pub, perhaps turning around
at the same corner of misery and history to enter
the sights of their own minds. But what of these,
please, close your books, never mind Ancient Mariners
wandering earth, pointing fingers, whispering at your ear,
find a terrain where your soul burns bright as a tyger
in the dark wilderness of language, and wrap
your heart in a poem that lets you live on your own terms.
Troll Bridge
by Anna Bauman

Every woman in my family fears them—trolls.

They say that wolves and goblins plague our farmland,
but trolls keep us within our borders.

_Do not cross
the bridge at night,
cross at day very quiet._

Mother says they snatch up young women. Foolish girls trying to cross into the next village. Trying to escape this life. My sister says she’d rather die than let him touch her. Says she’d rather dangle off a cliff’s edge than let him love her. She has always been my silent witness.

_Seen every slow dance, goodnight kiss, and morning after._

The troll took her to the bridge to see how the night bleeds red all over our village. Said she needs to learn to be a real woman—seductive and always on bottom. When she spat in his face, he lost control. Picked her up by her neck and threw her into the railing. She saw blue sky, not red—bloodied night.

Her wings were born from his claws in her flesh.

Root by Amanda Meyer
This Poem Doesn’t Have a Title

by Erin McCoy

Like when you wake up for no reason
look around
and there’s an ominous sweater draped over the chair.

The thing that makes you hate that girl
even though she volunteers
and is perfectly nice
to your mother.

That feeling you got
the first time you saw a cheese grater.

That time you stared at the lady on the bus
the one that was clutching
the sandwich
and you knew her
but she was a stranger.

When the hairs on your arm stand up
and go on watch duty
because you felt a draft
but your house isn’t drafty.

Future cousins
that haven’t been born
or thought of yet.

Some things don’t have titles.
Neither does my poem.

Moonlight by Perla Carreon
Everyone Has a Gnome in Their Pocket
by Matt Randall

I keep mine in my open shirt pocket because he enjoys seeing the blue sky.

He peeks out every now and then, wanting to see the world from this vantage point.

Others keep them in their coat pockets so the cold wind doesn’t bite into their chiseled faces.

Some stick them deep in pants pockets where it’s dark. They like it there. It reminds them of the rabbit warrens they grew up in before moving to the yard near the petunias and tulips.

I know a guy who keeps his gnome on his desk at work and consults with him on spreadsheets, graphs, and reports. Few people know how great gnomes are with numbers.

Then there’s the woman with the twins, one has a blue hat, the other, red. They guard her front door, turning back solicitors with extreme prejudice.

What about yours? Do you let him ride where he can see the street, or do you keep her in your inside jacket pocket where she can whisper wisdom into your chest?
Swans
by Carmen Paquette

He is a swan and he sits on a black lake trying desperately to save his feathers from soiling.
They all sit around him bobbing their heads in the filth and minding not one bit.
And as time goes by he knows his feathers have begun to dull
And he tries to fly away from it all
But they refuse to let him, he cannot fly, he is but a swan they tell him with pleasure
And he keeps getting filthier as they help paint each feather
And the lake begins to look more like a prison
And he watches his reflection become what he hates
He forgets about that before that has driven him
And he waits and he waits and he waits and he waits
For something he knows will never come
Help from elsewhere so he won’t have to try
Help from elsewhere to make it easy to fly
This help does not come as it was never out there
There’s no help for a swan that’s full of despair
Only he can turn his prison of hate, a lake full of muck, into a better landscape
The day will come when the swan flies away
And the others will watch and they’ll wonder and gasp
Because they thought swans were only swans, they know this from swans that lived in the past
And as this swan flies, sure his feathers are dull, he can barely flap, and his wings are quite small
But now he can see every lake all around
The Soul of Poetry
by Jordan Pierce

A persnickety painter caresses his grand canvas with
care, pain, and power; every stroke, every color, chosen by heart –
they represent soul.
And what a soul! The human soul! The only soul
that can pour care, pain, and power into art!

Care, pain, and power –
these gifts are divinely ours!
And pour as we might, we still overflow
(our souls still ache) with care, pain, and power.
What a soul, the human soul.

Irrepressible joy, crippling agony – it is all ours!
We are filled, and we pour out,
we are filled, and we pour out
our care, pain, and power.
What a soul – the human soul.

We can pour like the painter with his blissful, bleeding brush;
we might leak tears on our cheeks if we’re in a rush.
But from birth, we hear, feel, and learn that it is these – words! –
which most powerfully pour human care, pain, and power into art.
What a soul! The human soul.

And so, I sit and pour out for you, in the best way I know how to do,
the care, pain, and power of my human soul.
It is this divine act, this sweetly sour deed,
that gives my soul the release it always seems to need.
What a soul! My human soul: a soul of poetry.

What a soul, the human soul – the soul of poetry.
Brave
By Rachel Wolf

Brave—
The word hangs bitter on my tongue.
The promise of dreams,
Dreams not yet achieved—
Conceived!
Dance beyond my fingertips.
But that I could grasp them in fists,
And tangle my fingers within
Their distant glories!
The things that I would do if I were brave.
But bravery is a flimsy notion,
A world’s distance
From my own experience.
How can I,
Inarticulate, so incomplete
With all my loose ends—
How could I ever hope,
Ever learn to dream,
In a world where
The thirst for dreaming
Can never be quenched?
But my thirst for dreams
Dancing just beyond my grasp
Keeps me reaching,
Reaching,
Ever higher, even as that thirst,
Parches my yearning mind.
Still I reach forward,
And dream of a day
When even a wretch like I,
Can be brave.
Scavenger Hunt
by Allison Bevers

I put on my shoes
I gather my things
I leave.
I begin to wander
within the white panes of wood
surrounding my green adventure.
The yard is full
bits of God scattered everywhere
a hat – my father’s – lies beneath the tree.
Mother’s eggplant scarf floats on the breeze
Hanging from the tire swing.
Music falls from the branch –
a home of feathers and twigs and twine.
A wooden sword, standing next to the sandbox
two sided, double edged.
A cooling mist comes from the hose
refreshing, lovely, nice
my bare foot touches something
sharp
a broken piece of glass –
and there is God,
hidden within the green and gold
staring back at me.
I have never donned the sea
with anything but expectations
Felt a snail tickle through my fingers
Held a hatching egg.

Elegance escapes me
I swallow whole popsicles at once
like a cognitively challenged pelican
downing his fish dinner.

Like a too-tight ring I stupidly capture
what I need to release
still counting the rainbows
in gasoline puddles.

The sting of thorns is foreign
My palms only know
the prickling nerves after
I sit on my hand too long.

My friends chewed their tendencies
Spit them
Wove saliva nests for their young
in dark corners of cave walls.

My friends think art is psychological
Premeditated
Vexing
A mammoth blarb of messages

But I make art
so that I can see what it looks like
and my only psychology
is that I have psychology.
Rose-Tinted Memories
by Matt Randall

I still remember that summer
the hot June days eating blackberries
on my mother’s back porch
we would swing into an old castle fortress
on a new piece of rope
speed down a long driveway
to a finish line of fame and scrapes
paying no attention to the clouds
slowly gathering like old women at a garage sale.
Afterlife
by Neilee Wood

In our mythology, the faces on the obituary columns that hang on our refrigerator and sleep in keepsake boxes awaken from their frozen photographic state and slip inside the skulls of the birds who peck at the sunflower seeds in our backyard.

They trade their fingers for feathers and return to this solid world as colored omens who cluster and convene among the ivy and the trees to remind us that they have not gone far.

And as I watch them, I realize that the chickadees are the children: bouncing, boisterous, and numerous; the mourning doves and their brood: the stooped little ladies from church, who lurched unsteady on their canes and praised my singing of the hymns; the mockingbird: my favorite teacher whose avian eye has not stopped questioning; the finch: my dancer sister who finally can fly with these hollow bones;

And the blue jay—well, the blue jay is Eddie, of course.

Chickadees
by Neilee Wood

Stop, listen—the voices of the uncounted multitudes chattering in the bare branches, all around us and high above, each drop of their conversation pattering on my upturned face, carried on the sharp, cold wind, reminding me of windswept days and downy, whispered nights.
Reading Poetry at 5 a.m.
by Matt Randall

I’m reading poetry at 5 a.m.,
conversing with Billy Collins,
Robert Hass, and Naomi Shihab Nye
while others sleep,
dreaming of trivial things
like work and love.

I’m reading poetry,
wind my way through words
and stanzas, lost in a labyrinth
of language.

I’m reading poetry,
and making startling discoveries.
I don’t get Li-Young Lee,
I realize. His poetry is much
too deep for me to understand.
And Sylvia Plath, well,
her, I get, but I’m not sure
that’s such a good thing.

I’m reading poetry,
re-hearing the voice of Ted Kooser
as he reads “Selecting a Reader”
to a full auditorium in Portland.
I’m meeting Mark Doty again,
and being introduced to Charles Simic
for the first time.

I’m reading poetry at 5 a.m.,
and while my bed calls to me,
I find myself drawn
to read just one more poem.

Feathers
by Matt Randall

Words parade through open windows.
Miles and miles of characters
wind their way through
magical worlds, lovers' beds,
and scenes of grisly murders.

They become the perky best friend,
the hero with a dark past,
the villain with a fatal flaw.
They know where children
grew up, why parents married,
when mentors died.

They fly from the page
and glide through the imagination,
swoop through hobbit holes
and over foreboding mountains,
leaving us with a touch of vertigo
and the feeling of feathers
brushing against our cheeks.
Mermaids Say
By Anna Bauman

Mermaids Say

water, ocean
sway

Under with

lungs
waves.

Untitled by Emma Foroutan
Home
by Caitlin Darlene Swisher

Harvest moon
harvest moon in my rearview

Rearview mirror
mirror reflecting east

Eastern dirt
dirt roads winding my dreams

My dreams
Dreams drenched in golden light

Light loses me
loses me running through hayfields

Hayfields drowning
drowning in air saturated in sun

Sunlit leaves
leaves dyed jewels by the fall

Fall time
time for geese to call, coyotes to howl

Howling bitter
bitter, sad wails as I drive

Driving west
west towards cold concrete light

Lights all wrong
wrong against the glowing moon

Harvest moon
Harvest moon in my rearview.
Fiction
“Benjamin lets me do cannonballs whenever I want,” Caleb brags from inside the Mallard Hills Country Club women’s locker room. “Benjamin says I’m getting really, really, really, really good at them.”

I expect the gruff and breathless rattle of his Grandma’s emphysema in response, but a younger and livelier voice chimes, “Will I ever get to see one of these infamous cannonballs, dude?”

Standing outside the door in the morning sun, I holler, “Caleb, you ready to go, buddy? Our lesson’s only 45 minutes—”

The chubby six-year-old totters out of the locker room, stopping at my knees, teething on the untied, slackened drawstrings of his Iron Man swimming trunks. Caleb’s oral fixation muffles the enthusiastic chant he can’t contain:

“Cannonball! Cannonball! Cannonball! Cannonball!”

I shush him before he turns blue, and kneel to tie his drawstrings, asking, “Where’s grandma Annie?” as bare, slender ankles emerge from the doorway, narrowly visible under the hem of a flowing pink linen sundress, tie-dyed with cherry blossoms of varying intensities.

“You are definitely not grandma Annie.”

She’s willowy. Wavy strawberry-blonde hair tumbles down to the bottom of her waist. Fine peach fuzz highlights her lips, disarming; until the black nose ring clipped to her left nostril says I’m not disarming, don’t get comfy mister. I want to kiss her. I want to tell Caleb to leave, to forget today’s swim lesson. I don’t even know her name, and I want to kiss her. I forget how to stand up straight, stuck on one knee like a gargoyle. She grins, but she doesn’t laugh, and I can’t help but linger upon the baby dimples cornering her cheeks. She drops her canvas pool bag and kneels, removing the drawstrings from my motionless fingers, grazing the contours of my thumbprints, looping, swooping, and pulling the strings into a tight knot like the one in my stomach. “So I keep hearing about these cannonballs...” she says, her voice sweet with the scratchiest hint of cigarettes.

And all I can say is, “Well then. Follow me.” The three of us walk from the locker rooms by the club’s big cedar front gate, around the shallow end that only drops to three and a half feet, past the tall lifeguard stand posted at the pool’s center line, and with every step toward the deep end, I see Caleb’s facial expressions turn as pale green as the chlorinated water.

“Here?” he whimpers from the base of the diving board, and she cheers him on.

“Yeah!” I add. “It’s only scary because it’s your first time at this end, but once you do it you’ll see it’s no different than at five feet or anywhere else.” Tentatively, Caleb climbs the short ladder and takes a few steps down the plank. “Don’t even think about the diving board,” I continue, “Just take a deep breath. You’ve done a thousand cannonballs a thousand times, buddy. The water is the same.” His toes grapple the edge of the board, and he looks at me, trying his hardest not to cry. “Okay,” I say, “Are you ready?”

“But is the water cold??”

“I doubt it.” I draw a circle in the water with my big toe. “Nope. Warmest it’s been all summer,” I lie, but Caleb senses it, backing away from the edge of the board.

“You can do it, Caleb!” she cheers, darting from my side to block his possible escape down the ladder.
“Don’t, Brielle!” he shrieks upon realizing he’s trapped, squirming to get past her. Stuck, Caleb hesitantly returns to the edge, his voice starting to quiver as he begs, “Benjamin, can you at least count to three?”

“One...Two...Three!” I shout. He doesn’t move a muscle. Brielle silently scales the steps. “Come on, buddy,” I say. “Try one more time. One—“

Brielle flashes behind him, and before Caleb can defend himself, she hoists him up high in the air, swinging and letting go of him. He flails over the water, releasing a nasty, hair-raising pre-pubescent scream until the balls of his feet punch through the surface and he disappears in a splash.


“He’s in the struggle. He’s alive!” she giggles, looking down at his point of impact, but I see no bubbles popping on the water. I see out of control arm thrashes. I see legs stiff as a board. He’s panicking, wriggling, but he’s not moving anywhere. Caleb can’t stretch his eyes any wider—they plead through his goggles for the surface, for oxygen, for me.

“SWIM, CALEB!” I know he can’t hear me; he’s wondering why I haven’t fished him out yet. I do proper arm stroke motions to show I’m still there coaching.

“Kick, Caleb!” Brielle urges, and I flutter my hands, bending my wrists 180 degrees, back and forth, back and forth in futile hope he’ll mimic my hands with his feet. Alternatively, his cheeks balloon with air, and he seizes, mouth open, howling a violent jet stream of bubbles.

I jump in the water ahead of Brielle’s shrill sounding panic, and when I lift him out, coughing above the surface, she wraps him in his matching Iron Man towel, apologizing as he huddles under the warmth of polyester Tony Stark, dripping and shaking, his body deciding whether to cry or choke, completely lacking enough air in his lungs to do both. She kisses the top of his head, saying, “You’re so brave. I wish you could’ve seen how great your cannonball was!”

“I...I...I didn’t...didn’t do a...a cannonball...” Caleb stutters, but she speaks hurriedly, repairing the emotional damage.

“You just did your first cannonball in the deep end! It was a 10 out of 10! That’s a perfect score!”

“I...I...did?”

I smile, knowing she’s already convinced him, and I pat him on the back. “That was one sexy cannonball, buddy.” Brielle and I lock eyes. She mouths thank you.

At the end of the lesson the three of us say goodbye. She leans against the big cedar gate, mimicking Caleb’s high-pitched farewell, “Bye, Benjamin!”

“It was nice to meet you, Brielle,” I say, awkwardly extending my hand.

She gives Caleb the keys. “Go put the bag in the car, okay? I need to talk to Benjamin real quick.” My heart quickens and I avoid her gaze, instead watching Caleb waddle through the gateway. She grins, placing her iPhone in my outstretched palm. “Don’t shake my hand like we’re business partners. Just put your number in here.”

I do. “It’s under Ben, open parentheses, Pool, close parentheses.”

“Perfect,” she says, taking the iPhone back, turning to leave. Without facing me again she chimes just loud enough for me to imagine a slim cigarette dangling between her lips, “Keep your cell close by, mister.”

“Hot damn!” I say to myself as I towel off inside the lifeguard shack, a one-room hut adjacent to the center lifeguard stand on the opposite side of the pool. Pages rustle in the corner by the stereo system, as a
muscular lifeguard with a buzz cut tosses last month’s issue of Cosmopolitan, one he’s probably read a hundred times by now, across the room to me. “She asked for my number,” I say to him, trying not to smile too much.

“Damn! I’m telling you straight up—that means she digs you, Benji!”

“Freddy, come on. She’s hot, and I’m, eh, not exactly the classic profile of what the ladies want.”

“Dude! It’s not like you’re the Forest Whitaker of white people. You don’t have a lazy eye and a stroke-face. Your head’s slightly egg-shaped, so what? Adam Sandler’s got an egghead, and you just know he’s turning pussy down left and right!”

“Jesus H, Freddy.” I rub the crown of my head, saying, “I just meant I’m not a player like you.”

“Jesus H, Benji. It’s summertime, right? Is it or is it not summertime?”

“Yes. I’m clocked in at the pool. It’s summertime.”

“Summertime and the livin’s easy, my friend! It’s the season of opportunity. Let yourself have some fun, dude! You never come to our house parties, and I’ll say it now, man, you are bananas if you don’t hang out with this what’s her name and do whatever wonderful things she wants to do to you.”

“What are you talking about?” Freddy nods down at the glossy bent Cosmo at my feet. The first string of words I notice on the cover, read: You, Specifically You, Yes You, The Girl Reading this Magazine. You Aren’t Attractive. “So?” I say.

“So, advice for when she texts you. Believe me, she’s going to text you.” He winks. “But seriously though, you should read about the Italian Chandelier. Page 37.”

Sixteen hours later I turn off my car’s engine in the shadows of the Mallard Hills parking lot, by the back row of blue spruces. It’s 12:03 AM, and I text her:

—Brielle! where r u?

I scroll to the beginning of our conversation, re-scanning to make sure I understand her correctly, that this isn’t some trick:

—hi. this is Brielle! remember me? 😄 what’s there to do for fun around here?
—hey! we’d have to go to denver to do anything fun lol. or the mountains but it’s summer 😊
—ugh i’m sick of the mountains...have u ever snuck into ur pool late at night?? Lol
—haha nope. kinda need my job lol. why? have u?
—haha nope. which is why u should 😊 meet me there @ midnight
—who r u and what planet do you come from?!?
—haha how bad do u want to find out?
—pretty bad
—midnight then 😊

The passenger door yanks open, and suddenly she’s sitting next to me with a second nose ring in, wearing an Indian headband to contain the waves in her strawberry bangs, breathing heavy like she just ran a mile. “Sorry to scare you,” she pants. “It’s just...”

“Just what?”
“The cops!”

“The COPS?” I jam the key back in the ignition, ready to turn it, ready to bolt, but Brielle breaks out into the silliest melody of giggles I’ve ever heard.

“I’m just messing with you, Benjamin! Seriously!” She squeezes my arm. “I mean we are only sitting in a parked car—at your place of work.”

I smile to hide my embarrassment, stuffing the keys back in my pocket, sighing, “I hate you, Brielle. I barely know you, and already I hate you.”

She leans closer to me, whispering, “And I thought I told you to meet me inside?” Her breath smells like lemons and Juicy Fruit. “I was waiting for you on the diving board...”

We close the car doors quietly. She’s even more beautiful in the moonlight, and as we near the front gate, I ask, “How’d you get in?”

“You know what your problem is, Benjamin?”

“I’m sure you’re going to enlighten me, Brielle.” The locked cedar gate towers overhead of us, while Brielle gropes in the dark, feeling around the gate for a good handhold.

“You lack a mischievous mind. You’re too mild-mannered, sweet-tempered, nice, whatever you call it. Actually, that’s what I like about you.” Finding her grip she scales the tall gate with ease, landing light-footed on the interior and out of sight.

“Brielle?” I call out to the darkness. Her giggle echoes off the surface of the water, bouncing into my ears. I follow her over the cedar barrier, with less finesse, into the darkness. “Brielle?” I walk along the edge of the pool reflecting just enough of the moon for me to see the diving board tilt, Brielle straddling the end of it, and entirely too loud for midnight, she realizes what’s missing—“WE NEED MUSIC!”

I speak softer to set a responsible example, “Like, on the stereo? It’s pretty late. We can’t just blare—”

“You’re killing my buzz, Benjamin! I’ll wait for you right here.” She crosses her arms, and makes a pouty face. “Don’t make me call you a pussy!”

So, I walk to the storage shed behind the lifeguard shack, open the chemical closet and find the secret key on the high hook inside it, muttering all the while, “Me? A pussy? No ma’am. Not tonight.” I unlock the shack, and press the stereo’s power button. I switch on the microphone reserved for managerial announcements, turning the volume dial to the right (not too much). I speak clearly enough to hear my voice boom from the club’s loud speakers: “Testing. Testing. This next one goes out to the pretty lady on the diving board.”

I tune the radio to 97.5 the Mountain, hippy Boulder music, and return to her already grooving atop the diving board. I hold her waist to balance us as it moans under the addition of my weight. She leans back. Her shoulder blades press into my heart, and I kiss her softly on the nape of her neck.

“Who are you, Brielle, and what planet do you come from?” I whisper. She takes a long breath, letting me hold her a little longer, and swiveling she pecks me on the lips with her own.

“How bad do you want to find out?”

“Pretty damn bad.”

She brushes her hair back with her fingers, and I see something white behind her ear as she asks me in a curiously innocent way, “Have you ever smoked before?”

“I had four Heineken’s at my friend Emmett’s older brother’s graduation party once. Does that count?”
“Oh, boy.” She sits at the end of the board, facing me, her feet dangling. She motions for me to sit in front of her, and when I have she takes the joint from behind her ear and lights the tip of it on fire. I mimic the way she inhales it. I puff, I puff, and I cough a smoky avalanche right into her face. She wiggles her nose, but her eyes twinkle like polished apples. “Virgin lungs,” she smiles. “Do you feel it?”

“I don’t think so...”

“Do you feel anything?”

“I feel...warm. Really warm. Is that normal?”

“Maybe,” she shrugs. “That can be remedied.” Smoke billows off the joint between my fingers, clouding my vision, and before my eyes adjust she’s standing, lifting her shirt over her strawberry hair. She tosses her clothes off, taking the unfinished joint from me, hitting it one last time before she chucks it into the water. I take my shirt off as fast as I can without falling over, and she starts to untie my swimming trunks, asking, “Why the hell did you wear these?”

“We’re at a pool, aren’t we?”

“Don’t you think that defeats the purpose of skinny dipping?” She lets them fall in a bundle at my feet just as a new song comes over the radio. It’s “Farmhouse” by Phish, and as it trickles out of the club’s speakers I can’t help but shake—I’m a nervous laugher. I’ll laugh in church or when I’m being punished, not because I want to, believe me I don’t. I just can’t help it. Inevitably, some absurd memory sneaks into my brain, hiding in its recesses from awkward moments, tickling me and tickling me until I laugh or stop breathing.

“Is the weed giving you the giggles?” Brielle asks me, but I’m already laughing so hard I can barely balance, and the memory of Steve McGarvey’s favorite story floods my mind:

Up until two summers ago I didn’t know the band Phish existed, let alone began with a Ph, but one dry July night my first year at Mallard Hills, back when McGarvey hadn’t been fired, he first told me how he once ate a handful of mushrooms, ultimately climbing onto the roof of the lifeguard shack wearing nothing but the strap of his acoustic guitar. Eventually the cops showed up, ordering him to get down and put his clothes back on, but McGarvey enjoyed the audience and kept performing Phish tributes.

Finally, they elected to just go up there and get him, going through all the trouble of borrowing a ladder from golf maintenance and then moseying up the thing, but McGarvey got a running start and by the grace of some unknowable psychedelic force made it from the rooftop into the pool, his last stepping-stone the crew cut of the first lawman to reach the topmost rung of the ladder. It is precisely at this point in the story’s telling when McGarvey used to digress, explaining why he went for the water, how the shrooms changed his perception, how the chlorinated sea sang in the fluid and playful tone of Phish’s vocalist, Trey Anastasio, begging McGarvey to jump, to experience the freedom of buoyancy for himself. I’ve never done mushrooms, I don’t know. The guitar shattered on impact with the water, crushed between his falling body and the surface. Unfazed, he separated himself from the instrument’s strap, swam to the opposite side, pulled himself out of the water, and sprinted out of the club belting the second verse to “Farmhouse.”

When sharing the diving board of an empty pool with a beautiful girl at midnight and you’re Book of Genesis naked, there’s only one thing left to do.

I catch my breath to ask Brielle if she trusts me, and when she says, “Yes, Benjamin,” I squeeze her hand and run. She bounds behind me, giggling as the diving board dips straight down, then whips straight up, firing our luminous bodies into the air, and in unison we scream,

”Cannonball!”
Jellyfish by Alexandra Roy
In a small wood on the farthest edge of a large farm, there was a twirly, twisty stream. Beside this stream there was a warm and cozy tunnel with an entrance hidden carefully behind a bush. Deep in this tunnel and safe from all the scary predators of the woods, there lived a family of two rabbits and their many children.

May and August Rabbit were very happy. They were proud of their five children, but sometimes it was hard to find enough food for all of them to eat. For dinner every night, mother May Rabbit set out all of the delicious wild plants and vegetables they could possibly find, but it was still not enough for Peter Rabbit.

Peter Rabbit was the youngest bunny, and he was simply always hungry. No matter how much he ate every night at dinner, his stomach always began to grumble again by the time he closed his eyes to go to bed. One night, his stomach was so loud and so very grumbly that Peter could not sleep at all! In the morning, after all the children were given their share of breakfast (a small radish and a carrot) Peter looked up at his mother and begged.

"Please, mother, can I have some more?"

"Oh, Peter," Mother May Rabbit said. "You know that you must share with all of your brothers and sisters. Do you think it would it be fair if I gave extra food to you, but not to them?"

"I guess you’re right,” Peter admitted sadly. “But I’m still sooo hungry. I could eat a whole watermelon!"

Mother May Rabbit laughed at Peter and gave him a hug. "Perhaps, if you’re really so hungry, you can tag along with father today when he goes to work to find food for you and your brothers and sisters,” She suggested.

"Do you think I could help him find extra for dinner tonight?” Peter asked hopefully. His eyes were shining as he dreamed of all the extra carrots and cabbage he was sure he could find.

"You’ll just have to try,” Mother May Rabbit said with a smile. “Maybe if you’re very good, and you do a very good job helping your father, he will let you keep some for a snack.”

Peter exclaimed in surprise, “Hooray!” He gave his mother a kiss on the cheek and then bounced away to find his father. There was nothing in the world that Peter Rabbit wanted more than an extra snack!

Meanwhile, on the other side of the woods, there was a small town full of happy people. The people of the town were so happy because there was a huge, brightly colored circus tent set up along the railroad tracks, and it was full of amazing wild animals and exciting performances. Not a single person who went to the circus did not have a smile on their face.

Except for a single young monkey named Jocko.

Jocko Monkey was a performer, and he did many exciting tricks for the people who came to visit him in his tent. Most of the time his job was very fun, because all he had to do was dance a little and make the people laugh. But sometimes Jocko didn’t feel like dancing, and he wanted to take a break—all that dancing made him a very hungry monkey. Jocko always had a huge appetite, but he could never find enough to eat. He was simply always hungry.
One day, Jocko decided that he would find a place where he could eat as much as he liked and where he didn’t have to dance if he didn’t want to.

Jocko waited until the circus was getting ready to move on to the next town, and then he prepared a small bag of things to take with him on his journey. When the commotion began, and everyone started loading their things onto train cars, Jocko left and hid in the forest instead. Now he would begin his search for food!

Peter Rabbit was working in the vegetable patch with his father, and he was beginning to understand that this was a very hard job. They had worked all morning, but their basket was only a little bit full! "Father,” he said, tugging on August Rabbit’s sleeve. “We need to find more carrots. Where can we find lots more carrots?”

“We have to be very careful, Peter,” August answered patiently. “We cannot eat all of this food at once, or nothing will grow back.”

Seeing that Peter was disappointed, August patted him on the back. “You’re doing a very good job today, Peter,” he said. “I think you deserve a treat.”

He pulled two small carrots out of their basket. When Peter saw them, it made his tummy growl. He wanted the snack very badly, but he had learned a new lesson today. He wanted to be careful. “Don’t we need that for dinner tonight? Shouldn’t we save it?” Peter asked his father thoughtfully.

August Rabbit smiled and said, “I’m very proud of you, Peter. You have learned a great lesson today. But it’s lunch time, so don’t worry about that for now. You should take these with you and return home to join your brothers and sisters. Your mother will want to know what a good job you’ve done.”

“Oh okay,” Peter agreed, and he hopped forward to give his father a hug. He took the carrot gratefully, then turned around and started down the path towards home. His brothers and sisters would be so jealous of his special reward!

Jocko Monkey had spent all morning wandering through the trees in the forest, but he had decided that forest food was not very good. It was so very hard to find! So far, the poor monkey had only found a few berries. They just made his stomach hurt. He sat on the path and pouted, daydreaming about yummy food while his tummy grumbled.

Suddenly, Jocko spotted someone else hopping down the path. Why, it was a little rabbit, and he was holding some carrots! Jocko Monkey waved and called, “Hello!” Peter Rabbit was surprised, because he had never seen a monkey like Jocko before.

“My name is Jocko Monkey, and I just ran away from the circus! I wanted to find lots of food out here in the forest, but it’s very hard. I hope you can be my new friend!” Jocko exclaimed.

“Hi, Jocko. I’m Peter Rabbit. I’ve never met anyone from the Circus,” Peter replied. He was shy because he wasn’t really supposed to talk to strangers.

Jocko was staring at Peter’s two carrots. He said, “The Circus was pretty fun, but I was starving. Is there lots of food here? Could you show me where to find carrots like those?”

Peter looked down at the carrots in his paws. He had worked very hard for them! He didn’t really want to share, but he knew that it was the right thing to do if Jocko was really hungry. “Do you want to have snack time with me?” He asked.
“Oh, thank you thank you thank you!” Jocko exclaimed. He jumped up and down and clapped his hands. “Those carrots does look so delicious!”

“You’re welcome!” Peter replied.

Jocko told Peter all about the circus while they shared the carrots together. He told Peter about the Ringmaster’s huge top hat and big, round belly. He tried to describe the giant elephants and scary lions to Peter, who had never ever seen anything like them before. Most of all, Jocko told his new friend about the food that he loved, like the peanuts, cracker jacks, hot dogs, and cotton candy. “It’s very hard for a monkey to get a lot of that yummy food, though. Not like you guys in the forest! I’m going to eat so many carrots every day!” Jocko said with excitement. “Can you show me how to find them?” He asked.

Peter shook his head at Jocko and said, “It’s very hard to find lots of food here in the forest, too.” Peter explained.

Jocko was devastated. He said sadly, “But I thought that leaving the forest would mean I could have so much more to eat!”

“I wish!” Peter agreed. “I’m always hungry too.”

Jocko pouted as he finished his carrot. He was still hungry. Then, all of a sudden, he jumped to his feet. “Well, we’ll just have to find our own food then!” He yelled.

“Where would we find it? My father took me all over the forest today,” Peter asked.

“There has to be somewhere you guys missed!” Jocko replied. He started walking away from the path. “This way!” he called back at Peter.

Peter and Jocko started searching through the bushes for a new place to find food. It seemed hopeless. It wasn’t until much later that Jocko finally stopped. “Look over there!” He exclaimed.

Peter couldn’t see what his new friend could be pointing at. “What is it?” he asked.

“Follow me,” Jocko answered. He jumped through some tall grass and disappeared from Peter’s vision. Peter was nervous. Then, Jocko called for him with excitement and Peter finally followed.

They were on the edge of a huge farm. Peter could see a barn, a farmhouse, and miles of fields full of crops. Nearest to the two friends, however, was a garden. It was a huge garden, full of everything that you could ever wish to eat—carrots, cabbages, tomatoes, pumpkins—everything!

Peter and Jocko could barely contain their excitement. Together, they ran forward and ducked through the garden’s fence. It seemed endless. Peter had never seen so much food in his life!

They darted from place to place in the garden. There was so much to choose from that the friends almost didn’t know where to start. They would have to spend hours just to try everything.

So they did.

They ate. And they ate... And they ate some more.

They ate in each corner of the garden. They ran back and forth, nibbling and gobbling everything that they could reach.

They ate until their bellies were round and their eyes were sleepy, and then they had just a few bites more.
Finally, when all the carrots had been crunched, all the tomatoes tasted, all the cabbages chomped, all the corn chewed, and all the strawberries swallowed, Peter Rabbit and Jocko Monkey were so full that they could not keep their eyes open any longer.

The pair of friends fell asleep in a comfy corner of the garden, as happy as could be.

As Peter Rabbit and Jocko Monkey slept, Farmer Brown and his trusty sheep dog, Buster, were just returning to his garden to take care of the plants, because that was his job. Farmer Brown worked very hard, and he spent all day either out in the fields, where he collected crops to sell in the town, or in the garden where he grew food for his family. He loved his work, and he was very happy.

But Farmer Brown was not happy when he saw what Peter and Jocko had done. The whole garden had been nibbled, munched, and gobbled! There was nothing left for him to feed his family! Farmer Brown got very mad as he looked at the mess that the naughty friends had made of his work. He would have to clean it up and fix it all by himself, and he didn’t think that was very fair.

Then, Farmer Brown saw that Peter Rabbit and Jocko Monkey were still snoozing in the garden. “Those two must have been the ones to steal all of our food!” Farmer Brown exclaimed. He looked down at Buster and pointed at Peter and Jocko. “Buster, get them! They need to pay for all of that food!”

All the commotion woke Jocko from his sleep. He heard something growling, and he was very scared. He reached over and nudged Peter Rabbit to wake him up. “Do you hear that?” He asked.

Peter Rabbit wasn’t sure what Jocko was talking about. He sat up and rubbed the sleep out of his eyes. “I don’t hear anything…” he replied. Then, he looked around and saw Farmer Brown’s face over the fence. The farmer was very angry, and he was yelling very loudly. Peter realized that the food he and Jocko had eaten must have belonged to this scary farmer! He was very scared then. He knew that he had been naughty, and that Farmer Brown wasn’t happy.

Just then, Buster jumped over the fence and growled even louder. He stared stalking towards the two friends, intending to pounce on them and catch them.

But Jocko didn’t want to wait and see what would happen if Farmer Brown’s dog caught them. “RUN!” He yelled, and he tugged Peter Rabbit by the paw to drag him along when he turned around and ran. Buster was quick to chase them. The dog was not going to let them get away if he could help it!

And so they ran. And they ran… And they ran some more. Buster stayed right at their heels.

They ran through the garden. They ran across the yard and around a tractor. They ran through a field full of sheep. They ran around the farmhouse. No matter where they ran, Buster was right behind.

Peter Rabbit was starting to feel sick. He had eaten too much, and all of this running was upsetting his tummy. “Jocko!” Peter called to his friend. “I need to stop. I can’t keep running, or I’m going to throw up!”

“No!” Jocko said. “You can’t, or you’ll get caught! Keep running!” But Peter started falling behind. He was almost in Buster’s clutches!

Jocko had to think fast. They were running back into the forest, so he got an idea.

Jocko quickly grabbed his friend’s paw and tugged the rabbit onto his back. Then, he grabbed the nearest tree branch and started climbing as fast as he possibly could. This way, they could escape the scary dog… But only if they were fast enough that Buster couldn’t grab them!

He climbed and climbed. He climbed as fast as he could. Buster jumped up and almost caught his long monkey tail in his teeth! Buster jumped again and nearly grabbed Peter Rabbit off of Jocko’s back!
But they made it.

Dogs can’t climb as well as monkeys can, so the friends were safe in the tree. Buster was forced to sit on the ground and bark as loud as he could. The dog hoped he could scare Peter and Jocko into falling out of the branches. But Peter and Jocko were very careful, because they knew they would be hurt if they fell.

“Maybe we shouldn’t have eaten so much,” Peter said. “I feel bad for eating the farmer’s food.”

“Yeah,” Jocko agreed. “I thought it would be wonderful to eat all of that food, but it only made us sick and got us into trouble!”

The two friends decided to get away from the farm before Farmer Brown could find them. Farmers could climb much better than dogs, and they didn’t want to get caught. Peter started leading them back towards his family’s rabbit hole, where he knew they would be safe. Buster tried to follow, but he couldn’t see them in the trees and lost their trail. He sniffed and sniffed, but Peter and Jocko were just too high up in the tree for him to find!

Very soon, they were far away from the farm, and they couldn’t hear Buster’s barking any longer. It was then that Peter heard his father’s voice.

“Peter Robert Rabbit!” Peter Rabbit’s father called. “Where have you been? You were supposed to go straight home with your snack.”

Peter Rabbit was scared to answer because he knew that he would be in big trouble when his dad found out what happened in the garden.

“It was my fault, Mister Rabbit,” Jocko admitted. “When I saw Peter with his snack, he shared it with me. But we were still hungry. I decided to look for more food, and Peter came with me.”

Together, the two friends explained that they had found someone’s garden and eaten as much as they could, until they were discovered and chased away by an angry dog. August Rabbit frowned at them disapprovingly.

When they had finished their story, Peter and Jocko looked at each other, wondering what their punishment would be.

“Peter, what did you learn when you went with me to forage for our family’s food this morning?” August Rabbit asked his son.

“I learned that it’s really, really hard,” Peter answered. “And I learned that there’s not much food at all. We have to share and be careful so that there’s enough for the whole family.”

“That’s right. But when you found Farmer Brown’s garden, you stole all of his family’s food,” August Rabbit said. “Would you like it if he came and ate all of the food that we need for you and your brothers and sisters? If he did, you might not be able to eat very much for a long, long time.”

Peter and Jocko suddenly felt very bad for Farmer Brown. They hadn’t realized that they had caused so much trouble. They were just really hungry!

“Stealing food from someone is very wrong, Peter. That’s why you and I were so careful this morning. We only harvested from our own vegetable patches. If we take more than we need, then others will have less,” August scolded.

“I understand,” Peter said sadly, hanging his head.

“We didn’t think it would cause so much trouble,” Jocko agreed.
August Rabbit looked down at the two boys. Peter was sure that he would continue scolding them, but instead he reached out and put a consoling paw on their shoulders. “I’m not going to punish you any more, Peter. I think your stomach aches were enough of a lesson.”

August led the two boys back to the Rabbits’ home, where he introduced Jocko to the rest of the family. When they learned that Jocko had run away from the circus, Mr. and Mrs. Rabbit decided that he could stay and live with them if he wanted to. As long as Peter and Jocko promised that they would work for their food from now on and never steal from Farmer Brown again, they could be brothers!

“Oh, thank you thank you thank you!” Jocko exclaimed. He jumped up and down and clapped his hands. “I’ve never had so many brothers and sisters before! This will be great!”

He ran over to Peter and gave him a big hug.

“I promise I’ll never steal my food from anyone again. And I’ll help as much as I can to collect the food and share it with everyone!” He said.

“Me too!” Peter agreed, “I never knew how much work it was, or how much we could hurt someone if we took too much. We’ll do our best from now on!”

Jocko gave his new mother and father a hug. He was so grateful that they would share their food and their home with him!

Jocko Monkey settled in with the family right away. He sat around the table next to Peter and shared a room with his new siblings. Every day, he helped August Rabbit and Peter Rabbit collect the food for the rest of the family. He learned that sharing food was almost as much fun as eating it. But what he loved most of all was spending every day with his new best friend, Peter.
There once was a doodle simple and small. He had a line for a body and a circle for a head. He had a line for his arms, and a V for his legs. The doodle looked up and saw his creator, proud and strong, with pencil in hand and dream in mind. He had created the doodle with love in his heart.

The doodle praised his creator with all of his being, “Oh wondrous creator, so wise and just, thank you for my life and my body, these arms and legs. Thank you for creating me.” The creator looked down and acknowledged his creation, “My doodle, who I have created, go and befriend others for you cannot do much on your own.” The doodle, wanting to please his creator, did as he said and began to walk. But as he began to leave, the creator called out to him, “Just remember” said the creator “my wondrous doodle so simple and free, know that you are special because you were made by me.” The doodle nodded and began his trip.

The first person the doodle meet was a flower. She was skinny yet simple like him. “Hello there,” said the doodle. “How are you?” asked the flower. “I am the doodle made by my creator,” replayed the doodle. “Hello there, my name is Lily,” said the flower. “Nice to meet you, Lily,” said the doodle. “So what are you doing here?” asked Lily. “My creator told to befriend others for there is little I can do on my own,” replied the doodle. “Well of course you can do little on your own, you’re not finished,” said Lily. “What do you mean?” asked the doodle. “Well, you’re missing a couple of things,” said Lily. “Like what?” said the doodle. “Like a face. You should go and get a face,” said Lily. The doodle took her advice and returned to his creator.

The doodle returned to his creator and looked up at him. “Hello my doodle,” said the creator. “Have you made any new friends?” “Yes I have,” replied the doodle, “but I need to ask you for something.” The creator was confused. “What could you possibly want?” asked the creator. “A face with eyes and a mouth,” said the doodle. The creator pondered for a second then replied, “All right, I will give you a face.” The creator took out his pencil and on the doodle circle head; he drew two lines for eyes and a long U for a mouth. “There you go,” said the creator when he finished. “You now have a face with eyes and a mouth. Now run along but remember, my wondrous doodle so simple and free, you will always be special because you where made by me.” The doodle walked off back to the flower.

The doodle returned to the flower with face all anew. “Look Lily, I have a face now,” said the doodle. “So you do,” said Lily. “All right, let’s go.” And both the doodle and the flower began to walk together. Soon they ran into a robot, big and bulky, yet friendly. “Hello,” said the doodle. “Hello there,” said the robot. “And who might you be?” “I am the doodle created by my creator,” said the doodle. “And I am Lily the flower,” said Lily. “Well, doodle and Lily, it’s very nice to meet you. I am TED-001, and what exactly might you be doing here?” asked TED-001. “I have been sent by my creator to befriend others for there is so little I can do on my own,” replied the doodle. “Well of course you can do so little, you’re not yet finished,” said TED-001. “What do you mean?” asked the doodle. “Well, you’re missing a couple of things,” said TED-001. “Like what?” asked the doodle. “Like hands, with fingers, and feet,” said TED-001. “You should go get some hands and feet.” The doodle took his advice and returned to his creator.

The doodle returned to his creator and looked up at him. “Hello my doodle,” said the creator. “Have you made any new friends?” “Yes I have,” replied the doodle, “but I need to ask you something.” The creator was once again confused. “I have given you a face. What more could you possibly want?” asked the creator. “I would like some hand and feet,” said the doodle. “Hands and feet?” said the creator. “With fingers,” said the doodle. The creator pondered for a second then replied, “All right, I will give you hands and feet.” The creator took out his pencil and on the ends of the doodle’s upside down V legs, he drew two ovals for...
feet, and on the ends of the doodle line arms, he drew two circles for hands, then five lines for fingers.
“There you go,” said the creator when he finished. “You now have your hands with fingers and feet. Now, run along, but remember my wondrous doodle, so simple and free, know that you are special because you were made by me.” The doodle walked off back to the flower and the robot.

The doodle returned to the flower and the robot with hands and feet all anew. “Look Lily, look TED, I have hands with fingers and feet,” said the doodle. “So you do,” said TED-001. “All right, let’s go,” said Lily. And all three of them: the doodle, the flower, and the robot began to walk together. Soon they ran into a princess small and sweet yet confident. “Hello,” said the doodle. “Hello there, and how are you?” asked the princess. “I am the doodle created by my creator,” said the doodle. “I am Lily the flower,” said Lily. “And I am TED-001 the robot,” said TED-001. “Well, doodle, Lily, TED-001, it’s very nice to meet you. I am Roxie, and what exactly might you be doing here?” asked Roxie. “I have been sent by my creator to befriend others for there is so little I can do on my own,” replied the doodle. “Well of course you can do so little, you’re not yet finished,” said Roxie. “What do you mean?” asked the doodle. “Well, you’re missing a couple of things,” said Roxie. “Like what?” asked the doodle. “Like details,” said Roxie. “You should go get some details.” The doodle took her advice and returned to his creator.

His doodle returned to his creator and looked up at him. “Hello my doodle,” said the creator. “Have you made any new friends?” “Yes, I have,” replied the doodle, “but I need to ask you something.” The creator was once again confused. “I have given you a face, hands with fingers, and feet. What more could you possibly want?” asked the creator. “I want details and clothes. I no longer want to be flat. I want dimension and features.” The creator dropped his pencil in disappointment. “I have given you everything you have asked for. I have given you arms, legs, and a face. I have given you hands with fingers and feet. I have also given you life, yet you continue to ask for more. You are selfish and greedy, and I want nothing more to do with you,” The creator strode away, his head hung down in disappointment. The doodle just stood there in awe of what the creator said and he realized he had been selfish. He had gotten all these wonderful things, yet he just kept asking for more. He felt sad and alone for what he had done. He knew he had to make amends, so he went to the corner of the page a ripped off a piece, then he picked up the pencil the creator had left behind and began to write. He rolled up the paper into a ball and threw it at the creator, words and all. The creator picked it up and unrolled it all then flattened it out to see the note that had been written inside. My wondrous creator so wise and strong, I have been a bad creation, selfish and wrong. I have asked you too much and never thanked you once. You deserve better than me, so you should erase me and begin over again. After the creator finished reading the note, he returned to the page with eraser in hand. He saw his doodle lying there waiting for the end. The creator started erasing, but not all at once. And when the doodle opened his eyes he felt fine and dandy. He looked down and saw ha had a new body. He had arms and legs and his life was intact. He had a face with eyes and mouth, and best of all; he had feet and hands with fingers to boot. He had details and clothes and a hat. He looked up to his creator, who had a smile so big. “How could I stay mad at you forever? You are my creation and a good one at that.” The doodle, with pleasure in his heart, smiled and did what he had not yet done, “Thank you creator,” said the doodle at the top of his lungs. “Thank you for everything I have-- arms and legs and a body to move. I have hands and feet so I can work for you. I have clothes and features to better show myself.” The creator simply smiled, “You’re welcome, my doodle. Now run along and return to your friends but just remember, my wondrous doodle so simple and free, know that you will always be special because you where made by me.”

The doodle returned to the flower, the robot, and the princess with arms, legs, face, hands, feet, fingers, details, clothes, and life all anew. “Look Lily, look TED, look Roxie, I have a new body with details and clothes,” said the doodle. “So you do,” said Lily, TED-001, and Roxie. And as they looked upon him, they felt a little jealous. He had many details, yet was still simple. All three of them were just about ready to go back to their creators and ask for more, but the doodle stooped them. “Now hold on,” said the doodle. “If you go back now and ask for more, you will keep going back for more. You don’t need more. You are already special
the way you all are, and if you go back, your creators will probably tell you what my creator told me.” “And what would that be?” asked Roxie. “It’s simple really,” said the doodle. “My wondrous doodle, so simple and free, you will always be special because you were made by me.” After hearing these words, all three of them pondered for a second. “Well I guess we are pretty special,” said Lily. “From the very beginning,” said TED-001. “And we don’t need anything else,” said Roxie. “All right,” said the doodle. “Let’s go.” And all four of them, the flower, the robot, the princess, and the doodle began to walk together.
Allen Joseph Klein began to worry when his mother’s old blue Ford Taurus didn’t come to pick him up. Usually his mother’s—Momma’s—Taurus would be waiting with the other cars along the sidewalk outside the school at 2:35. It was 2:55, but Allen didn’t know that. He didn’t have a watch.

Allen thought Momma’s car looked like a jellybean. It was the only car he knew that did. Allen’s imagination, like most children’s, was vast and powerful. He imagined that a giant saw Momma’s car from his home on a cloud and thought it looked delicious. The giant must have eaten the car. He must have thought that the car was a blue raspberry jellybean. When Allen thought what the car must have actually tasted like, he shriveled up his nose. Yuck.

It was so simple. That’s why Momma wasn’t there. A giant ate her car. It made sense to Allen.

At 3:12, Allen decided to walk home. He was told never to leave school without his parents, but home was only 3 blocks away. He didn’t even have to cross a street. One day, Allen asked his father—Daddy—why he couldn’t just walk home from school every day. Daddy said that he would be damned if his child became a latchkey kid. Allen had no idea what a latchkey kid was, but he was very afraid to ask Daddy any more questions. Daddy had said a bad word and he seemed angry.

Allen gathered his Mickey Mouse backpack and matching lunch box and began his journey home. He had never walked that far alone. It was going to be a wonderful adventure. He would be like Lewis and Clark, mapping his way home. He walked slowly, looking down at the cement sidewalk. He counted 30 cracks, but he stopped counting because he didn’t know what numbers came next. Had he looked up, he might have found it odd that there weren’t any cars on the road, or people on the sidewalks.

At 3:24, Allen turned into his driveway. When he got to his front door, he turned the knob, expecting it to open like always. But when the knob wouldn’t turn, Allen thought I’ve been locked out. It was a kinda funny thought and he smiled. He sat down on a bench beside the door and decided to think. Most grown-ups have spare keys he thought. He remembered when Daddy made Momma a spare key for her Taurus in case of an EMERGENCY. This was the largest word Allen knew how to read and spell because he had made a point to learn it. It sounded scary and reminded him of the color red.

This is an EMERGENCY Allen thought quickly. He panicked for a minute, but he reminded himself that the faster he found the key, the faster he would be able to watch his favorite cartoon, Angie’s Adventures. It was about a kid named Angie who would go on journeys through time and manage to get herself into the worst troubles possible. What would Angie do? Allen asked himself. Look for the key.

Allen began to look for a spare key. As he searched, he began humming the Angie theme song under his breath. He lifted heavy terra cotta pots that were filled with frost-killed mums. Under one of the pots, he brushed his hands against a spider and screamed. He dropped the pot and despite the short distance between Allen’s hands and the ground, the pot shattered.

“Stupid bug!” Allen yelled. He carefully lifted the bottom of the broken pot and sighed with satisfaction as he saw the spider squished beyond recognition. “You’re peanut butter now!”

Allen laughed, but the sound was unnatural to him. He was still shaken. He decided to check the back door because Momma often forgot to lock it. Daddy would always get onto Allen for leaving the door open, but Allen hated the back yard, so he never used that door. The yard was large and covered with elms that
died years ago from Dutch Elm Disease. They were beautiful when covered in lush foliage, but Allen had nev-
er seen them that way. He only saw them as tall, haggard monsters that clawed at the sky.

In order to get into the backyard from the front, Allen had to open a large and heavy redwood door
that connected to a privacy fence. The door was always unlocked because it was almost rusted shut. When
he tried to open it, the door wouldn’t budge. Allen remembered a movie he watched where a man ran into a
door and broke it open. He decided to do the same.

Allen backed up about 10 feet and began running as fast as he could into the door, hands in front of
him.

The shards of pain that ran up his hands and into his arms were the worst thing Allen had ever experi-
enced in his short life. He bounced off the door and almost comically fell backwards. He pushed himself up,
but immediately regretted doing so. His hands were riddled with splinters. They weren’t bleeding yet, but the
splinters were sharp and they hurt like hell.

Allen tore at the splinters, removing most of them. He felt three that needed Momma or Daddy to
remove with the set of stainless steel forceps in the medicine cabinet when they came home. If Momma or
Daddy ever comes home Allen thought with a chill. He tried to dismiss the thought as soon as it popped up,
but he couldn’t. Instead, he looked back at the mean redwood door.

“It didn’t even budge,” Allen said. But as he looked more closely at the door, it had bужged. A half-
inch tops, but there was still some opening. Allen thought for a moment. Then he figured if he had some-
thing to wedge and work in between the door and the fence, he would be able to open it more. He looked
around the front yard for something and found a small branch that seemed like it would work.

Carefully, Allen placed the narrow edge of the branch into the gap. When he grabbed the branch, he
grimaced and quickly let go. His hands were tender and raw, but he really wanted inside the house, so he de-
cided to “man up.” That was his father’s favorite phrase. He would always use it whenever Allen complained
about pain.

Allen positioned his hands around the branch so that they wouldn’t hurt as bad and he worked it
back and forth until he heard a crunching noise.

“You’d better not break, stupid branch!” Allen yelled. After a minute of silence, he slowly began work-
ing the branch again and he noticed the door opening more and more. Slowly, but surely. He heard the rust-
ed metal hinges groan in protest and he became excited. He worked the branch faster and faster until finally,
it broke in two.

“Stupid old thing! Damn you!” Allen stopped speaking immediately. This was the first time he had
used a bad word ever. He laughed then noticed that the door was now a little more than half a foot open. He
could try and squeeze through it, but Allen knew that he wasn’t skinny; he was a little big for his age. Mom-
ma said that if he kept getting wider, he’d become fat like his Grandpa. Allen didn’t want to become fat be-
cause Suzy Dirkens—Allen’s classmate—said that fat people couldn’t ride in airplanes because the plane
would be too heavy and crash and kill everybody onboard. Allen didn’t want to cause planes to crash.

Allen looked at the door, sighed, and said “I can’t wait all day.” He pushed himself through the gap
and halfway through, he got stuck. Allen couldn’t move in either direction and started to panic. EMERGENCY
flashed through his mind, but he blocked that out. Allen thought for a moment, then sucked in all of his tum-
my, as hard as he could. He pushed himself more and more until finally, he got through the door.

“Yes! You stupid, old, mean, sharp, damn door! I beat you! I won!” As Allen yelled, he jumped up and
down. After a few minutes of jumping, Allen had to stop because he began to feel sick. Allen walked to the
back door, a large sliding glass thing from the 60’s, and pushed on the handle, gingerly. At first, it wouldn’t
move. But when Allen applied more pressure to the handle, the door slid open. Allen yelled in happiness. His
plan worked. He began to cry, but he didn’t understand why. He wasn’t sad. He was the happiest he’d ever felt.

Allen quickly looked through the house for any clue of his parents’ whereabouts. After scouring the kitchen for a note, he went to the garage. Both of his parents’ cars were there. A giant hadn’t eaten the jelly-bean after all.

Allen gave up on finding an explanation and looked at the microwave clock in the kitchen. 3:56. He would just make it in time for Angie’s Adventures. Allen pushed a chair from the dining room over toward the refrigerator, stood up on it, and opened the refrigerator as quickly as his hands would let him. He grabbed a sippy cup filled with apple juice and a little bag of animal crackers. He liked his crackers cold.

Then, he ran toward the TV room and plopped down on the couch. Allen grabbed the remote and turned the television on. The loud sound of static filled the room and made Allen jump.

“Dumb TV! You’re not supposed to do this!” Allen got out of the chair and trudged toward the television. He looked around and behind it, checking every plug and cable attached to it. When he couldn’t find anything wrong with the cords, Allen gave up and turned the television off.

“I hate this!” Allen yelled. He went back to the couch and began eating his crackers and sipping his juice. He was famished and he ate with gusto fit for a growing lion. He tried to figure out what to do next for a few moments after finishing his snack. The phone! He thought. He rushed toward the wall set in the kitchen. When he couldn’t reach the phone, he returned to the dining room and grabbed another chair, pushed it to the phone, and stood atop it.

Carefully, he took the phone off the hook and lifted it to his ear. The electric silence that filled his ear was louder than anything Allen had ever heard. He was always told when there was a true EMERGENCY, he was supposed to call 911. He couldn’t believe that in the first true EMERGENCY of his life, he couldn’t call for help. He didn’t understand it at the time, but the dark feeling that filled his gut with bile was the feeling of being utterly alone. The same feeling that drives people to kill themselves in moments of desperation began to suffocate Allen.

He started to panic. His thoughts didn’t make any sense. EMERGENCYgonedeadfallingdeathgo- nealonederkblackredEMERGENCYcalsomeonecallmecall911leavemealoneEMERG—“STOP IT” Allen yelled to himself. He began to cry. After the heavy sobs turned to light whimpering, Allen began to feel better. Something very dark had passed over him like a storm cloud, but it hadn’t erupted yet. Allen suddenly felt very tired.

Although he didn’t want to sleep, his body took over. His eyelids were rocks, so he closed them. He dosed on the couch for a half hour without having any dreams. When he woke, Allen felt new and his brain was fresh. He decided to think about what to do again.

What did Momma tell me to do in case of an... if something bad happened? Allen asked himself. He refused to think of the word EMERGENCY because it started to scare him very much. He sat trying to remember the day Momma gave him the talk about when bad things happen.

“You see, Allen,” Momma had said to Allen with her beautiful voice months ago. “If you or your dad or I get into any trouble, I mean serious trouble, run to a phone and dial 911, okay?”

So much for that- Allen thought as he tried to remember. He knew that Momma had said something else, but he couldn’t remember what it was. Daddy always got onto Allen for not listening and most of the time, Allen did listen, he just would forget. But Daddy didn’t think that was any excuse. Daddy said he always remembered what people told him, but Allen knew that this wasn’t true.
Once Momma had asked Daddy to pick up milk on the way home from work. Daddy always came home at 6 o’clock sharp. He didn’t like to take time doing anything after work except for coming home. Allen was surprised when Daddy had said “Yes, dear. I’ll get milk. Anything else?” His short, clipped response scared Allen and he noticed that it must have scared Momma because she looked down at her feet and shook her head silently. When Daddy came home that night at 6, he didn’t have any milk.

When Momma asked him where the milk was, Daddy didn’t say anything. A few minutes later, Allen heard a crash from the kitchen. When he ran into the kitchen, he saw Momma—he nose bleeding badly—crying on the white linoleum floor.

“Don’t cry over spilt milk,” Daddy said as a smirk slid on his mouth. He grabbed the car keys and drove away. When he returned hours later, Allen was in bed, but not sleeping. He heard Dad say something to Mom, then go to bed. The next morning, Momma fixed Allen a milk-less breakfast. Allen had noticed a full gallon of milk in the refrigerator, but Momma wouldn’t use it. Daddy finally threw it away weeks later.

Allen had always wanted to remind Daddy of the time he forgot the milk whenever Daddy would say that he remembered everything, but Allen knew better. He didn’t want blood to pour from his nose or from Momma’s nose. He thought it must have hurt to have that happen.

As Allen thought of Daddy forgetting the milk, he remembered what had happened earlier that day. He had had a playdate with his neighbor, Melanie Brenner. The Brenners lived across the street from Allen and he liked their house very much. It was large and smelled like clean sheets. That’s when he remembered the rest of what Momma said.

“Allen, if for some reason the phones don’t work,” Momma had said. “You should run to a neighbor’s house. They should know what to do. Do you understand?”

Allen smiled when he remembered this. He got excited as he realized that going to the Brenners’ house meant that he would get to see Melanie and smell clean sheets.

Quickly but carefully, Allen grabbed his backpack and dumped out his school stuff. He ran to his room and grabbed a change of clothes and underwear—something his mother always told him to do—and a few small toys. He returned to the kitchen and stood up on the chair by the fridge. He opened it and took out some juice packs and another bag of animal crackers in case he got hungry.

Allen looked around the house for a spare set of keys and found some hanging by the phone. He grabbed them and slowly walked to the front door. For some reason, the thought of going back outside frightened Allen. He shook as much fear off as he possibly could and opened the door.

Allen was surprised by the sudden cold wind that had picked up. It was January, so Allen knew it would be cold, but the temperature seemed to have dropped 20 degrees in the last hour. He tightened the string for his hood on his coat, locked the door, and walked quickly to the Brenner house. He looked both ways before crossing the street, but it wouldn’t have mattered if he hadn’t. No cars were going to come down the road.

When Allen got to the Brenner’s front porch, he rang the doorbell. He could hear the bell tinkling softly. Usually Melanie’s mother was home, but today was unusual.

Allen waited on the porch for what seemed like hours before he finally gave up on the Brenners. He figured that he should try the McKenzie house next door, but he didn’t like the idea. The house smelled like old closets and basements. Yet, he braved the cold wind again and rushed to the McKenzie’s. When he got no answer after ringing the doorbell and knocking, he crossed the street again and knocked on the Daniels’s. Their house smelled like lemons.
After getting no response again, Allen gave up on his neighbors. Part of the reason he gave up is because he didn’t know any other neighbors or what their houses smelled like, but the biggest part is that deep down, he knew that no matter whose door he knocked on, he wouldn’t get an answer. *Everyone’s gone.*

Allen decided to return home. He slowly walked back, defeated. When he got to the door, he reached into his coat pocket, grabbed the key and tried to fit it into the hole. Instead of the keyhole beneath the knob like it’s always been, there was nothing but a slab of brass. Allen remembered using the keyhole not ten minutes ago, but it was gone now. Vanished.

Allen pulled at the knob, but the door was locked.

“No! This isn’t fair!” Allen yelled. He began to throw a full-blown temper tantrum on his front porch. He kicked the door and screamed. He pulled at the knob, cursing it for being stupid and mean and ugly. His shouts became hoarse and his throat began to throb, but he didn’t stop. Allen was angry and he wanted to world to know it. After a few minutes of this fit, Allen’s angry turned into fear.

Allen began to cry again, but he stopped himself quickly. He didn’t want to become sleepy again. The last thing he wanted was to sleep out here in the cold. He hated the idea of sleeping alone and he knew that he was completely alone out here. He returned to the redwood door to the backyard and found it shut completely. Allen hadn’t shut it.

Upon further inspection, Allen noticed that it wasn’t only shut, it was locked. He took the front door key from his pocket and tried it on the gate door. It wouldn’t fit into the lock at all.

So Allen put the key back into his pocket and returned to the front porch. He sat on the bench and tried to shield himself from the wind. It was hard to think in the cold, but Allen tried his best to do so. *What now? Was all he could think of. Need to get inside* he answered.

As he thought of what to do, the wind quit and snow began to fall. It was beautifully quiet and although the snow fell slowly, it quickly began to stick. By the time Allen had hatched a plan, everything around him was covered in a thin sheet of snow.

*The Myers have a shed. I’ll go there and wait.* Allen had never met the Myers, but he heard Daddy talk about them often. They lived behind Allen’s house and they shared an alleyway. Daddy hated the Myers because they left their trashcans in front of his trashcans. Although Allen had never been to the Myers house, he had seen their shed from his bedroom window. It was small, but Allen knew he would fit in it.

Allen gathered his things, hitched up his backpack and started to walk around the block toward the alleyway that divided properties. The only sounds he heard were his own footsteps crunching in the snow. Allen loved the snow. It made everything look clean and crisp. It stopped the trees from looking creepy and made everything peaceful. Allen soaked up this simple peacefulness because he had so few moments of peace.

By the time he got to the Myers’s yard—their gate was taken down for repairs— Allen regretted walking so quickly. The cold didn’t bother him very much any more and he wanted to savor the peacefulness. But Allen knew if he didn’t get inside somewhere before too long, he’d freeze.

Allen opened the shed with ease. Inside there was a moth-eaten futon and a bunch of lawn equipment. Allen sat down on the futon and pulled out his snacks. Before he ate an animal cracker, he would play with it, pretending it was an actual animal. The bears growled, the lions roared and the elephants trilled. He washed the zoo down with the rest of his apple juice.

Allen was eerily calm. The snow still fell, slowly, but thickly. Outside it began to pile up by the inches. Allen began to shiver.
He looked around the shed for something to warm him up. He found a moth-eaten blanket that matched the futon. He also found 4 long matches. He covered himself with the blanket and lay across the futon. He lit one match and played with the flame. It went out quickly. So he lit another. After it went out, he lit the third match. And after it went out, he lit the forth. As he watched it burn, Allen didn’t feel cold anymore. He didn’t feel warm either, but he wasn’t shivering anymore. When the match finally went out, Allen looked around the shed for something else to do. He hummed a verse of the Angie’s Adventures theme song before becoming still again.

Allen began to wonder what had happened to his mother. A giant hadn’t eaten her car; he had proof of that now. But where did she go? Allen remembered sometimes when he called for his mother, she would tell him “I’ve run away and joined the circus!” Allen would run toward the sound of her beautiful voice and hug her tightly. “Don’t leave me, Momma!” He would say, clinging to her, breathing in her perfume—Heaven Sent. She was his angel and he hated the idea of losing her.

Slowly, Allen’s eyes closed. He turned on his side and pulled the blanket up toward his face. He thought of his mother and her beautiful voice. He could almost smell that slightly sweet, powdery scent of his mother’s perfume. Allen lay on the futon and thought about his mother for seven minutes before he fell asleep. He slept as the snow fell harder. When the snow finally quit, Allen was in a very deep sleep.

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“I was waiting for him after school at 2:35, like always!” Her beautiful voiced faltered with tears as she spoke. “He wasn’t there!

“What did you do afterward, Miss?’ The officer asked.

“I asked all the teachers and they said they hadn’t seen him leave. So, I drove home and called my husband. I’ve searched the whole block”

“How long has he been missing?”

“About three hours now.”

“Don’t worry miss. We’ll find him.” The officer said. “We’ve got a manhunt geared to search for him now. Your husband will be in it with the other officers.”

“But…I don’t know what to do,” she said.

“Stay here. If Allen comes home or calls home, we need someone here,” the officer said as he placed a hand on her shoulder.

“Please, find him.”

***

Mr. Myers walked to his shed to get a flashlight. It was getting dark and he wanted to help find the Klein boy. He had nothing but contempt for the boy’s father—a man Mr. Myers would surely bet on for beating his wife—and pity for the mother, but he liked the boy. He had never met him, but he had heard the boy talk to his dad while they were in their backyard. The boy was bright.

Mr. Myers had to unlock and push snow away from the shed door to open it. When he did, he looked for his flashlight and a lantern. He found both, but he couldn’t find the matches for the lantern. He knew that he was almost out of them, but he knew he still had a couple left. He looked around the floor for the matches and found four blackened pieces of wood. Beside the wood was an animal cracker.

Damn those kids, always getting into my shed-Mr. Myers thought. He would give his kids an earful about the dangers of playing with matches the moment he got home from this manhunt. He picked the
cracker up, put it into his pocket, and left the shed. He decided to check his kitchen for some regular matches. They would have to do.
I like to place my toddler sized Buddha statue between my thighs, lock it in tight and stare at it. I bought it off eBay two weeks ago, and since then I’ve spent my time lying on the living room couch trying to give it a proper name. As of yesterday it’s Mickey Rooney. Mickey has really chubby cheeks. I like chubby cheeks. My parents scolded me several times for pinching my baby sister’s too hard. I’d treat them like jowls, jiggling her cheeks up and down and side to side. Back then I didn’t understand nerve-endings.

Heavy, recognizable footsteps sounded on the porch and reverberated through the screen in the front door. I hid Mickey behind a cushion.

The fat man on my porch smelled of peanuts and hand sanitizer. His frame blocked every last beam of evening sunlight streaming through the entryway. He wore a loose-fitting charcoal suit, with a matching hat. His under-eyes were slightly sweaty and he had a large Adam’s apple. He peered in through the squares in the screen, looking for me. His eyes were like a fly’s, beady and checkered. They scanned the room, noticing nothing, focusing on nothing. I quickly rolled off the couch, got into an army crawl, threw myself under a worn-in fleece blanket and stared at him. I felt like a spy.

“Hey, you, the weirdo under the blanket. Come on, Doug, get up.”

I didn’t move. Maybe he hadn’t really seen me yet. A few more seconds of silence and he’d walk away, probably realizing he didn’t see a man under this blanket. I could be a dog or something.

“Doug’s not here.”

Shit I said that. I needed to formulate a quick decision with spy-like precision. I felt the remote control under my shin. Without ruffling the blanket, I grabbed it and punched the POWER button. A busty Latina shrieked words I couldn’t understand in rapid succession at high volume. The diversion ought to have thrown him off. It didn’t. He whipped open the door and walked inside.

“I’m coming in,” he announced.

I jumped up into a defensive Sumo-style squat, positioning myself between the intruder and Mickey. The blanket fell off me. His eyes shot down to my boxers, the sole piece of apparel I deemed a necessity.

“Your nuts are peeking out of your drawers. They kind of look like Lieutenant Dan’s knees.”

I didn’t respond and I didn’t readjust myself either.

“What’s it been, Doug, six months?” As he spoke he fiddled with his right breast pocket.

“What the hell are you doing here, Irving? I told you I never wanted to see your damn face ever again.”

Irving chuckled. “You know what’s in here, Doug?” He knocked on the breast pocket. “The remainder of that pesky background check I performed on you. You see, I’ve been doing a bit of spring-cleaning at the office. Lucky for you, Leticia emptied out an old file and found a few extra notes.”
“Bullshit!” I said. “There are no other notes. I read my file the day you set it on my desk, the same day you set it on every one of the partner’s desks, and I’ve re-read it every day for the past six months. I know the details of that file like the smell of my own shit. You found everything, Irving. Both banks I used in the Cayman Islands, and every last laundered penny.”

“You really shouldn’t be this ashamed, Doug. Christ! I perform a hundred background checks a year. The firm employs a lot of people, you know that. Hell, I even investigate your dad every couple years. Most of the time the background checks are harmless. I poke around a bit, see a guy got busted for pot at 16, maybe a guy’s subscribed to an internet gay porn site, whatever. That’s all unimportant. But you, Doug, you changed the game. I mean, Jesus, you’ve been unemployed for six months doing nothing but sitting on your ass and you’re doing just fine. What does that tell a guy like me?”

“It should tell you exactly what you already know. I’ve got a rich lawyer father. Why do you think I’m not watching the first quarter of Sunday Night Football in the federal pen right now?”

Shaking his head, Irving maneuvered his index finger and thumb inside the breast pocket, fishing out something small. He handed it to me by handshake. I knew it was a slip of paper, folded several times over as soon as I felt it. Cash? His handshake was always too firm. Holding the vice-grip, he stared directly into my eyes. I stared back at his chubby cheeks. I wanted to slap his hand away and pinch them raw. Finally, he withdrew his hand, lingered for a beat, then turned on his heel and headed for the door. His cowboy boots clopped over my porch and when he reached the last step he halted.

“I shut them down, Doug. Get a job.”

My hands were shaking. Slowly, I unfolded the paper and read it. It wasn’t green, but yellow. Two sets of scribbled alphanumerics were inscribed in black ink along the top quarter of a sheet of legal paper. They read:

Account #47563958730
Account #39475622098

The slip left my hand, and my ass hit the couch before it fluttered harmlessly into my lap. I threw the cushion concealing Mickey over my shoulder. I placed the statue between my thighs, locked it in tight, and stared at it. Oh, Buddha. I know nothing about the religion itself, but I like the idea of karma. No Hell, not even for Irving Pittiman, but I’d laugh and laugh and laugh if that fat bastard came back as a dirt-licking goat.
I am god
by Ashley Lee Ann Dougherty

This is a work of fiction. Everything you read is a lie, unless you perceive it as truth. Take out of it what you will and ignore anything you dislike.

That being said, I am God.

I have many names. My personal favorite is Yahweh. To tell you the truth, I yawned when I was telling you “AHWEH ASHER AHWEH,” or “I am that I am,” for those who don’t understand Hebrew. I told you to tell my people that, “[YAWWWWN] hath sent me onto you.” Simple mistake, really. It just stuck. Can’t say I don’t like it, though. Has a nice, breathy, open sound. You’ve assigned all kinds of meanings to it that are very love-ly, as well. In a way, you named me, and I thank you.

I’m sure you have many questions. Everyone always does. This is hard to come to terms with. Life. Existence. Creation. Don’t worry. I’m not going to throw you into the pit for asking a question. You’re my child, and I love you.

“Where am I?”
Where do you think you are?
“Heaven?”
You can call it that, yes. This is where I live.
“Where is everyone else?”

Why do you assume there are more people? Did you expect a parade of angels and throngs of human souls?

“There aren’t any angels?”
Well, yes. But they’re not here. This is a special place for just you and me.
“But I am dead?”

You took your time getting to that question. I know, it’s frightening. It’s all right, though. You’ve done this before. You’re always all right in the end.

“I’ve done this before?”
Oh yes. Billions upon billions of times. Since I breathed life into your body. We’ve had this exact conversa-tion millions of times, and even more variations of this conversation. I’m relieved that you’re not crying this time. It hurts when you cry. There, now, don’t cry now. Nothing you love is gone. You will return to it soon enough. I promise. We’ll just have this short time together and you’ll go back.

“So I get to be alive again? I get a second chance?”

No, you’re dead. The person you were is now gone from the world. However, the person you are going to be has not even yet begun to live. Yes, I’m talking about reincarnation. That’s the word you use for it. I prefer to think of it as incubating. You’ve come a long way in the billions of years I’ve given you. You won’t have much longer and you’ll be here forever.

“In heaven, you mean? I’ll get to be in heaven for all eternity?”
Yes. You’ll live with me. By my side. I’ve been waiting for a long time for that.

“Is there anyone that lives with you now?”
Why do you assume there are other people? You ask me that question almost every time. Every time I have the same answer, yet you come back with the same question. There are no people, per se. On Earth, of course there are many, but here there is only you. You are Adam, my Adam. You are my creation and love.

“I’m...?”
Everything.
“What about Eve?”
You are Eve.
“And Jesus?”
You are Jesus. And all the people he saved.
“But that would mean that I am...everyone. That means I’m Hitler, too.”
And all the people he killed.
“Then I’m my mother? My father?”
Your school teacher. Every hand you’ve held. Every shoulder you’ve cried on. Everyone you’ve buried. Everyone you’ve hated. There’s only you.
“But...why? I don’t understand. How is this possible?”
Are you really asking God how something is possible?
“But how?”
I’m God.
“Please...”
Well time is not constant, and it’s certainly not linear. I just send you back at any given place and time. You live, you die, I send you back at a different place and time. You fill up history and the world. You experience everything. You evolve, you grow, you become—well, my friend.

“Friend? But we’re friends now, right?”
I suppose that’s what you say in church, but you’re too young still. You still can’t comprehend the love I have for you. You are still only my child. Soon, though. Eternity will come.

“Are you lonely...?”
This is why I love you. Don’t worry about me. Eternity will come. For now, it’s time for you to live your new life. Are you ready?

“I think I am.”
I know you are. I’ll see you very soon.
“I love you.”
And I love you. Goodbye, Adam. Until next time.

“Where am I?”
Where do you think you are?
“Is this heaven?”
You can call it that, yes. This is where I live.
“You’re making a mistake, Grace. You’ll regret it. Don’t you believe me?” The sour note of anguish thickened Clay’s voice. His words were hard, but Grace didn’t expect different really. She knew this wasn’t going to be easy, but somehow it wasn’t as difficult as she pictured in her head over the last two weeks.

“I believe you’re upset,” she answered him, though she was sure he had asked rhetorically and didn’t wanting an answer. Grace could tell in the tightness of those white grape eyes of his that it only was grinding salt in the wound. “Look, I’m sorry.”

Clay’s jaw tightened, and there was the quiet yet audible click of his teeth grinding together. His eyes were pooling with tears, his mouth twisted in bitter anger. His voice was rough, being choked with tears, and he said, “Yeah, right. I bet you didn’t even listen to me last night, did you?”

Grace sighed and leaned back against the wall of her school dormitory, the rough surface of the red bricks catching at her shirt’s back. They had met outside, as per her request, in hopes that with strolling students around that they both would keep calm if in the presence of strangers. Clay’s cold reserve, though, was anything but quiet. He had had to lower his voice four different times now, at times glaring hotly to people staring over at them in curiosity, only to duck their heads and go back to their walk after receiving the Clay’s attacking gaze.

“You didn’t, did you?” Clay did expect an answer this time, persisting again. He rolled his eyes at her, scoffing. “God, you’re some piece of work, aren’t you? Real class, Grace. Really.”

“Do you even hear yourself?” Grace spat back at him, glaring at him in turn. “I listened, Clay, but I’m sorry. I already have thought this through. I’m not changing my mind, and I’m sorry if I didn’t go about this the right way.”

He watched her, fuming, his lips tightening together so hard they almost disappeared. The small, almost unnoticeable scar on the right side of his jawline twitched.

For a moment, she remembered the day she gave it to him; her nail had dug into his skin when she slapped him that day when she found another girl’s thong in the passenger seat of his truck. She still remembered, too, how she had to clip her nail after being unable to wash the red stain from under it.

“So how long have you been thinking about this?” He crossed his arms for what seemed like the twentieth time, like it made him bigger.

*Like it made him a man.*

“For a while.” She let her gaze wander far off to the side, towards the busy street that the dorm sat next to. Cars whizzed either way, blurring in colors of red, blue, white, tan, and rust. She would have given anything to be in one of those cars right then, to be in the back with her eyes shut, nothing but the road ahead of her and someone driving her far away from here, from this mess she let happen. She nearly did that, too. Grace at one point found herself sitting in her dorm room, at her desk in front of her laptop, and her email was pulled up with a new message window. Drew Dowell’s email address was in the Send To bar, and she felt her fingers twitching against the keyboard as she tried to think of what to say. She hadn’t seen Drew since their junior year of high school, right before he moved to Las Vegas with his dad. Now, Grace wasn’t entirely sure how you ask someone you hadn’t seen in three years that you need to run away, to come see them, and that you had to get away from a life-sentence of a loveless marriage.
Well, half-loveless, she thought. Clay apparently thought he still loved her. She was the only one who had questioned their feelings, and she could see it in his crumbling face that this was hurting him more than anything else they had been through.

“I told you to wait until I got here.” His voice was heavier, thicker with tears that were heavy in his throat. His eyes grew red, salty tears trailing down his stubbly cheek, catching in the hairs of his facial shadow. Shakily, he reached forward and took her hand in his, squeezing her fingers with his. “I told you...why? Why didn’t you just talk about it?”

“Clay.” Grace’s heart was still beating steady, not hammering or hurting like she had predicted it would. She felt dead, but she had felt like that for weeks; this entire time, she had been planning breaking off the five-year-relationship that was crash landing, and the whole time she was fine with it. Convinced that what she was doing to Clay, what she had been planning to do, was the worst thing she ever would have to go through, she couldn’t make herself cry or grieve over it. The tears never came, like her eyes and tear ducts were broken.

Now, Clay was ducking his head, his thick shoulders shaking as he silently cried. Two droplets of tears fell from his face, one hanging on to the round tip of his nose. There was a harsh hiss of his breath as he tried to keep calm, but his reserve melted, and his fingers squeezed hers painfully.

“Clay. I’m sorry, okay? I am, but I got to do what’s right. It’s not just for me, but for the both of us.” She winced as she felt the old, instinctive urge to hug him, to try to shield him from the pain he was feeling, but how can you do that when you’re the one causing the pain?

He only shook his head at her, not lifting his face to see her. His voice was smaller, strained, as he grumbled out between sobbing breaths, “I don’t get that. How can it be for us both? I want you. You know that...you always have. I want to marry you.”

But I don’t want to marry you. She didn’t say the words, but she thought them as clear as if she had. They had been in her heart for the past three months, ever since Clay had come to pick her up, their first meeting in three weeks, and he hadn’t bothered to hug or kiss her as they had for years before. Since then, he only grew colder, emotionless and even shielded from her. Their nightly talks on the phone, an every night ritual since they began dating her freshman year of high school, grew shorter and less caring.

Grace wasn’t entirely sure when all of it started. Since she found the wadded, hot pink thong in his truck seat? Since his father died two years before and Clay never truly recovered? No matter the reason, their relationship had been as fragile as a glass snowflake, and it was time to put it away before they both were shattered.

Not that Clay wasn’t broken enough. He broke into louder sobs, and when she tried to reach her hands up to touch his shoulders, he turned away harshly out of her reach. His voice rose, hotter and acidic. “You don’t give a shit about me, so just stop!”

Grace let her hands return to the tight fit of her jean pockets, unsure of how to respond to that. In her right pocket, she felt her fingers grip unconsciously at the small tube of green apple chapstick, the same tube Clay had bought for her at the dime store a few weeks ago when her lips were so chapped that they split and bled.

“I’m sorry.” She wasn’t sure why she said it again. Obviously, from the way Clay only winced harder at hearing it, he didn’t believe it at all. She was only making it worse, but at the same time it had to be said.

A soft, thrumming buzz sounded, and Clay’s hand twitched to his pocket where his phone vibrated, lighting up through the pocket’s fabric. Without thinking, Grace knew it was Clay’s mother, calling to see where he was, if he had started for home yet.
“I gotta go.” Clay wiped his entire forearm across his eyes, then up his face, smearing the trails of tears messily over his cheeks. He took in a breath, a small gasp to clear himself of the sobs. “I guess that’s all, huh? Nothing else you want to say?”

Grace shut her eyes, feeling a painful quiver finally wirthe in her chest.

No, I don’t have anything else to say you took all of the high school years I was supposed to use I was supposed to date that entire time and choose among all of the belt-buckle cowboys that flirted with me until they saw you and went onto someone else cause I was that weird girl who had already found that perfect boy that everyone said I would marry but now I just want to go back and tell you ‘no’ when you asked me if I loved you, I was only fourteen when I told you and now I know I never knew how hollow and cheap those words could be on the tongue of someone who had never stepped outside of that country town where people wore buckles the size of dinner plates and obnoxiously colored cowboy boots that rose up to your knees.

Yes, there was so much Grace wanted to say, but none of it came out. So she just shook her head. In response, Clay left her. He didn’t say goodbye, didn’t attempt to hug her one last time, or even nod his head. He simply turned and began to trek back to the visitor’s parking lot that was across the campus.

Grace went back inside to her dorm, where the desk girl’s eyes behind her hipster glasses followed her as she walked to the elevator. Luckily, Grace didn’t have to endure the heavy stare for long. The elevator dinged, the doors sliding open. As soon as she stepped in, she pressed the Door Close button before pressing her floor number. In only a minute, she was unlocking her door, her hand shaking, still able to feel Clay’s fingers gripping them as if they left ghost bruises on her skin. She stepped inside, shutting the door behind, harder than she meant to, and leaned back against it. That’s when things inside her broke, and her eyes fixed themselves.

Tears sprung and flowed from not just the corners of her eyes, but from flooded her entire bottom lid. They flooded and ran down her cheeks, smears of unneeded mascara and eyeliner mixing with them. Her heart clutched tightly in her chest, making a tight coil wind inside, and she felt sobs burst out her trembling lips.

She knelt to the floor, her hand going into her pocket, grabbing the green apple chapstick and pulling it out. She threw it, hard, and heard it smack against the wall. It was good enough for now.

For a while, she let herself curl up on the ground, cry out all of her tears that had been building for weeks, weeks that she knew she would never get back. When they finally stopped, her face feeling nasty and messy from the reminiscence of her anger, grief, and pain, she forced herself to stand up. Wiping off her face, she grabbed her towel off a hook from the wall and headed to the bathroom to shower.
Janie’s husband sat on the bed folding clothes. His large hands moved steadily and gently; grab, fold, place. The rhythm of the activity freed his mind to wander. Janie was starting her new job today. No, it was more like her first job, the man told himself. The receptionist position she had in college didn’t count. That morning he had awakened to a pile of blankets in lieu of his wife, because Janie was already on the subway to Manhattan. He imagined her holding on to one of the handle bars, wearing her navy skirt and jacket, with her brown leather bag slung over her shoulder. She would have been nervous, he thought as he sorted the socks. She would have taken a deep breath before walking into that gigantic office with the glass walls on the 16th floor of a New York City skyscraper.

Since Janie had her work and the babysitter had the flu, John was left to watch Sarah. Not that she was much difficulty. Sarah was a quiet child. The spitting image of her mother, she sported gray eyes and a wise face. Though she was only four years old, Sarah could tell you precisely what she was thinking in language far beyond the normal toddler’s vocabulary. Being such a precocious child, she rarely wasted her time on toys or other trivial amusements. Before her birth John and Janie had filled her nursery with books, and Sarah spent most of her time pouring over the pages, willing herself to be able to read.

At the present moment, the house was silent except for the almost inaudible sounds of clothes being folded and the ticking of a distant clock. John wondered which book Sarah was “reading” now: *Great Expectations* or the Poe collection? Just as he came to the conclusion that it was probably *Great Expectations*, she appeared in the doorway.

“Daddy?”

“Yes, dear?”

“Where’s Mommy?”

John glanced at his watch. Five-thirty. “Running late, probably.”

“But she left work a long time ago.”

John looked up from the laundry. “Did she call and tell you that?”

Sarah didn’t respond, but stared down at the fibers in the carpet, scuffing them up with her shoe, and then muttered, “I’m going to go color her a picture. Of a butterfly tree.”

“Okay, sweetie.”

The little girl slowly backed out of the room and tiptoed silently down the hallway. The phone rang with a harsh, tinny trill and John flinched. He picked it up.

Without waiting for a hello, a deep voice said, “May I speak to Mr. Wilson?”

John replied, “Yes? This is he.”

“Sir, is your wife Jane Wilson?”

Something cold trickled down into John’s stomach. “Yes.”

“You should come to the hospital immediately. There’s been an accident. I probably shouldn’t say over the phone, but you need to get here as quickly as you can.”
John suddenly found himself fighting his lungs for oxygen. “What k-kind of ac-accident?” he managed to force out.

“You need to get to the hospital, sir. Quickly.”

John threw down the phone and looked up. Sarah was staring at him.

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It was lunchtime. Janie was eating cold chicken on sourdough bread and a package of crackers. She was sitting at her new desk, which smelled of orange peel and was not far from the glass wall where thousands of people could be seen on the streets below, hustling and bustling to their various destinations. Janie hummed as she chewed meticulously on her sandwich, and the sound of conversation drifted over her shoulder. Her many coworkers were crowded into the lunchroom, and a few were looking directly at her. They must have been thinking how odd it was that the new girl was sitting all alone on her first day and not even trying to associate with the others. But this was the last thing on Janie’s mind. She was thinking of how John would cope with watching Sarah all day. What would he feed her? She tried to remember if there was any chicken noodle soup left in the pantry. Maybe she should call him.

Just as Janie took her cell phone out, there was a great rush and everyone scurried back toward their desks. She sighed and put her phone back in her pocket. John would be fine. Besides, they still had a stockpile of macaroni and cheese.

***

At Johnson & Bell Publishing Co. it was acceptable to leave at four-thirty if you had all your work done. Janie was finished at three forty-five, and had nothing to do but pick her nails until her boss came around to check up on her, and told her with a pat on the back that she could go home. Janie hurriedly gathered up her supplies, stuffed them in her new brown leather bag, and set off down the hallway. She barely had time to register the jealous whispers of her coworkers before the door to the wide office floor shut behind her with a click.

The elevators waited with their buttons glowing and their silver doors glimmering threateningly. Janie had only one great fear. She was exceptionally claustrophobic. Even thinking about an elevator made her pulse quicken and her palms moisten. She always took the stairs, no matter how high she had to climb.

The stairwell was dimly lit and faintly moldy. Janie began to descend anyway, counting the number of steps in a soothing rhythmic fashion: seven, eight, nine, ten... It was a long way to go. She rounded the corner. Eighteen, nineteen, twenty... John would be pleased to see her home early. Had he remembered to lay the chicken out to thaw? Sarah would remind him. She remembers everything.

Thirty-six, thirty-seven... Janie almost regretted taking the stairs. Just almost. Her leg muscles burned from her morning ascent. She was approaching the last step of the 15th floor when the heel of her shoe landed unevenly on the edge of the step. A fraction of a moment later Janie grabbed wildly for the railing. She felt the cool metal slide quickly past her fingers. She was falling slowly, sluggishly forward. A million ideas of how to catch herself sped through her mind but none of them were possible. She was still falling. In her desperation Janie flung her hands out. Her hair whooshed behind her; there was a chill on her neck.

The impact came to her hands first. The rough concrete shredded the skin on her palms as they slid across the landing. The hit jarred her whole body and snapped her elbows in an unnatural direction. She felt several of her fingers break and her wrist bones splinter apart. Her momentum carried her up and over her hands. The next to strike the ground was her upper back. Her scapula landed hard on the tip of the first step, and she kept going forward, performing three somersaults like a kind of grisly gymnast, until her head crashed into the 14th floor landing.
Janie felt funny. Although the whole event lasted only five seconds, she felt older. There was no pain. Sprawled on the concrete, she extracted her arm from underneath her body and looked at her hand, wiggling her broken fingers and imagining them to be wrinkled and arthritic. A dark red liquid illuminated her hand. Where had it come from? As Janie fell asleep, she wasn’t aware that blood was pooling around her, staining her white blouse and her blonde hair. She was only aware of a warm sensation crawling from her toes up her body.

When darkness fell, that warm sensation turned into one of movement, as if she were lying on top of a bumpy washing machine. It was a pleasant feeling. Janie smiled, and then realized she couldn’t feel her lips. She tried to move her leg, twitch her toe, anything. Nothing happened. She couldn’t see or hear or feel. She was nothing. Janie began to panic. Her heart raced. Or did it? She tried hard to think, but then that was slipping away too. Her thoughts were slowly draining out of the hole in her skull. She didn’t exist anymore. She had never existed, actually. There was only this void.

But then as suddenly as the nothingness had come, and as if there had been no nothingness at all, there was everything. An explosion. Every single emotion, pain, pleasure, impulse, instinct, and thought Janie had ever experienced flooded into her. She was laughing and crying and screaming and smiling, incapacitated with feeling. She felt the coolness of mint bubblegum and the sharp labor contractions of childbirth. She felt the break of her arm when she was twelve and her first kiss when she was fifteen, remembered the hopelessness of watching her grandfather waste away of cancer and the elation of the moment she said “I do.” The flood lasted only seconds before fading away, leaving Janie empty and confused.

There was light. Once Janie realized she had eyes, she opened them. She was on a train. The steady rumbling of the engine had been shaking her. She quickly stood up, and was surprised by how limber she felt. Once more she looked at her hands and gasped. They were tiny. Her arms were thin and unfreckled. Her feet were clad in Mary Janes and white socks with ruffled trim. She was six years old. Janie felt her pink dress and the ribbon holding up her hair. She abruptly realized how stupid she was. Of course she was six. Her seventh birthday wasn’t until November. She laughed aloud at herself, hearing her girlish giggle reverberate through the train compartment.

The train ground to a halt, and Janie knew it was her stop. The windows were so full of bright white light that she couldn’t tell where she was. The compartment door rattled open and willed her out of it. Janie jumped lithely from the opening and landed on soft grass.

Stretching out in front of her was a prairie meadow at the height of spring. The grass, some of it taller than Janie, was a perfect green dotted with wildflowers. The sky was aquamarine. Fluffy clouds the color of snow rolled by. The breeze brought a warm scent of earth and ruffled Janie’s dress and hair. A distance away, a giant tree stood, its leaves glittering like diamonds, drawing her in. It was the tallest and most wonderful thing she had ever seen. The branches seemed to reach up farther than she could see into the sky. As she came closer she noticed how old and gnarled the branches were, and concluded that this tree had stood here since the beginning of time. It became clear that its leaves were not leaves, but millions of tiny butterflies in every color, fluttering their wings in unison.

A person appeared. It was a man, standing in the huge circle of shade the tree provided. He was small, wrinkled, and worn. His face was framed by round spectacles and a strong jaw. His smile was pure happiness as he stretched out his frail arms.

“Grandpa!” Janie cried. She rushed into his embrace, unbalancing him. He rocked her, stroking her hair and squeezing her tight.

“Hello, Janie-bug,” he replied in a husky voice. When she pulled away to look at him, tears were filling his gray eyes.

“What are we going to do today, Grandpa?” Janie asked hopefully.
He smiled again, but this time his face was sad. “We can’t play today, sweetheart.”

Janie didn’t understand. It wasn’t fair. She and Grandpa never got to play. Since he lived in Minnesota, she only got to see him on Christmas. She let her arms fall from around his stomach and put on her best pout.

As if reading her mind, Grandpa sighed. “They need you, Janie,” he said in a grown-up voice, one she had never heard before.

“Who?” she asked, bewildered. Who else could there be besides Grandpa and Janie-bug?

In response, Grandpa showed her his palm. A single pink butterfly was resting in it. He held the butterfly out to Janie. She gave her grandfather a questioning look, and he nodded and whispered, “It’s not your time yet.” Teary-eyed but still not understanding, Janie held her finger out. The butterfly floated onto it. Instinctually, Janie raised her finger to the sky and the butterfly fluttered away to its spot on a tiny, withered black twig. As it settled down and nestled in its wings, the twig uncurled and came to life again.

Grandpa smiled.

***

By the time John and Sarah reached the emergency room of New York Presbyterian Hospital, Janie had been stabilized and transferred to intensive care. Hordes of doctors and nurses told them lots of things, but John hardly absorbed any of them. He paced the waiting room clutching a melting candy bar he had bought from the vending machines for Sarah and forgotten to give to her. Sarah curled up in a chair and finished coloring her picture, then fell into a peaceful sleep.

Hours later, they were ushered into the intensive care unit by even more doctors. Holding Sarah in one arm, John pulled back the curtain around her bed and cringed. Janie was lying in a bed, only one eye visible from the thick bandages wrapped around her face. Both of her arms were encased in plaster and she was hooked to what looked like hundreds of machines and monitors, all beeping piercingly. John rushed to her side, dropping Sarah, and began to sob into her bedcovers.

Sarah tiptoed slowly to her mother’s side. She held up the colorful drawing she had finished earlier.

“Look, Mommy. A butterfly tree.”
FADE IN:

INT. PHILLIP’S TRAVELING CAR – NIGHT.

BLUES PLAYS from CASSETTE PLAYER. SMOKE FILLS the car. The RADIO SYSTEM lets off a strong GLOW. The time reads 9:54PM. In front; in the CENTER CUP-HOLDER A SILVER SPOON protrudes from a PLASTIC BAG FILLED with POWDER. PASSENGER’S HAND ENTERS, grabs Spoon and SCOOPS powder from Plastic Bag, then EXITS. A PHONE UNDERNEATH Cassette Player GLOWS and VIBRATES. DRIVER’S WRINKLY HAND ENTERS and RETRIEVES phone.

PHILLIP, early 60’s and greasy with a tired face and little hair. He wears a BURGUNDY POLO with a GOLD DUMBBELL sewn into the shirt pocket. He has a nearly finished cigarette hanging out of his mouth and a PLUNGED SYRINGE sticking out of his shoulder. He takes a deep DRAG, removes the cigarette from his mouth and flicks it out the WINDOW. He rolls it up. He brings Phone close to his face and cocks back his head to focus his eyes on the proper button and presses it with his thumb.

PHILLIP

Hello?

A LIGHTER FLICKS.

PHILLIP

(chuckling)

Yeah, we’re on him. He’s not hard to keep up with.

20 yards in FRONT a CYCLIST, slender male with long DARK PONYTAIL RIDES a BLUE BIKE.

PHILLIP (CONT’D)

(chuckling)

He’s gotta be taking us somewhere. Bruce and I.

Phillip gets Bruce’s attention then gestures to the syringe in his arm.

BRUCE, Neanderthal of a young man with a nearly finished CIGARETTE HANGING from his lips stares at Phillip while lighting the bottom of Silver Spoon.

PHILLIP (O.S.) (CONT’D)

He wanted to come.

Bruce tucks the lighter in his shirt pocket and steadily reaches for Phillip’s syringe. He grabs it and pulls quickly.

He slides it through the OPENING in the WINDOW and takes a large DRAG off his cigarette. He removes it from his lips, then looks at it while exhaling smoke.

PHILLIP (O.S.) (CONT’D)

What was he doing when you saw him?

Bruce flicks out cigarette, then rolls up his window.
PHILLIP (O.S.) (CONT’D)

Weird.

He retrieves the lighter and spoon filled with a clumpier substance and continues to heat it from below. It BOILS, LIQUEFIES.

PHILLIP (CONT’D)

Well, we’ll figure it out. OK. See you in a bit.

Phillip returns the phone to its nook and turns up the Cassette Player.

Bruce sways his head to the music.

BRUCE

What’d Miguel say?

Bruce returns the lighter to the center cup holder in exchange for a fresh SYRINGE.

PHILLIP

It was Agripin. He thinks it’s Patrick.

Bruce uses one hand to suck up liquid while using his other to hold the spoon.

BRUCE

Patrick? I thought they killed him? Weren’t you there?

PHILLIP

I only caught him. Miguel and Agripin did the rest. Do you have your gun?

BRUCE

Yeah. What if he has one?

PHILLIP

That’s why I have one too.

Bruce returns spoon to center cup-holder, then taps the syringe.

BRUCE

What was he doing at the gym? How did he even know to find us there?

PHILLIP

Agripin said Miguel just looked up from his desk and saw him through the window. Like a deer in headlights. Maybe it was by mistake.

BRUCE

Weird.

Bruce injects himself.
Phillip slams on the brakes.

BRUCE (CONT’D)

Jeez!

PHILLIP

Where did he go?!

BRUCE

(gestures to arm)

That was real dangerous.

Bruce removes needle from his arm.

Phillip scans his surroundings with a zombified expression. He notices a large structure in a distant tree. A light is on inside. He SHIFTS the car into PARK and turns down Cassette Player.

PHILLIP

Is that a tree house?

Bruce looks.

BRUCE

Weird.

Philip glances in the middle REAR-VIEW MIRROR.

He sees PATRICK; a long slender man wearing small round SPECS with long DARK HAIR in a PONY TAIL. He stands in the distance with a HATCHET in his hand. Philip fights his SEAT BELT to draw his GUN.

BRUCE (CONT’D)

What are you doing?

The gun falls. THUDS and SQUEAKS come from behind.

They look back to see two feet climb the back windshield and on to the roof. Thuds stop.

They look at each other.

A hatchet crashes through Philip’s side window and passes in front of his face. The bottom point of the blade hoods behind the right side of Philip’s jawbone and pulls.

EXT. WOODS - UNFINISHED STREET - CONTINUOUS

Crouched over Philip’s door, Patrick swings the hatchet wide over head, as part of Bruce’s face flies with it.

Bruce bursts out of the car in running position. He takes 3 strides and face plants with the hatchet stuck in his back. Patrick stands on the car behind him and smiles.

He hops down from the car and reaches past Phillip. He CRANKS cassette player’s volume to continue the sounds of BLUES.

He climbs the ROPE hanging down from the glowing tree house and enters it.

Lights turn off.

CUT TO BLACK:

The blues warps and lowers in pitch. It fades out.
She watched as he walked into the bank. She knew what he was up to as soon as he walked through the door. He had on a long tan over coat with the collar pulled up to his chin, as if to conceal his face. A red scarf was wrapped around the lower half of his face and the 40's style bowler hat he wore was pulled low over his eyes. He looked like he had just walked in from a blizzard. The only problem was that they were in Texas and it was the middle of August. To her, it was very clear what the man was up to. She walked across the bank and leaned in towards one of the security guards on duty and whispered in his ear, "That man has a gun. He's going to rob the bank." The guard pulled back and laughed. "Lady", he said, "you know that there's a metal detector at the front doors, the very same front doors he just walked through. If he did have a gun, which he doesn't, the silent alarm would have gone off and I would have been notified. There's nothing to worry about." With a smug grin on his face he turned back to his post. Angrily she started towards the center of the bank but the security guard grabbed her arm to stop her. "Ma'am, I can't have you scaring the rest of the customers. I'd like for you to just leave. Now." She angrily jerked her arm free of his grasp and glared up at him. She turned back towards the front doors just as two gun shots rang through the air. The man's voice echoed through the bank, "Nobody moves! I want your hands and face on the ground now!" Slowly, she turned and nodded to the guard, a small gesture of 'I told you so', as she slowly bent towards the floor. She saw his eyes were full of fear and question and she couldn't help but feel a sense of satisfaction. He should have listened to her.

Once on the ground she watched the man closely. It was like being in a movie that was stuck in slow motion. She watched him wave his gun, watched him fire two more shots in the air when the teller refused to cooperate with his demands. She could see the desperate anger in his face. She wondered what could drive a man to do something as desperate as robbing a bank, but there was a more pressing issue at hand and she didn't dwell on the thought long. When she was sure he wasn't looking her way, she slowly pulled out her cell phone and dialed 911. The boot came out of nowhere, smashing down on her phone. She was pulled up roughly by her hair and a gun pressed under her chin. "You think your smooth baby? Think you're gonna call the cops? Well, Franky sees all, baby, and the cops just ain't an option." He thrust her towards the bags of money. "Pick them up and walk to the back." He pointed the gun at her. His hand was steady, eyes boring into her. She weighed her options and quickly bent down to pick up the bags.

He followed her to the back and instructed her to load the car. Out back a little green car sat, engine running, doors and trunk already open, waiting to be filled. Her hands trembled violently as she piled the money into his car, but she stayed calm. This man was crazy and she had to be careful. She didn't know what he was capable of. Surely not murder, but he was trigger happy. She couldn't afford to make him angry. She finished putting the money in his car and backed away slowly, her hands in the air. "Where you think you're going doll face?" Franky grinned at her, a crazy look in his eye. 'Oh God', she thought. 'Surely he's not taking me with him'. He grabbed her behind the neck and pushed her into the driver's seat. "Them cops are looking for a car driven by a man, not a dame like yourself. They'll never suspect a thing" he said as he climbed into the passenger seat next to her, gun steady on its prize. "By the time they find out I took you with me, it'll be too late. Besides, I could use me some company in Mexico."

They pulled calmly away from the bank and headed south. Franky was right, the police suspected nothing. They drove all night and Franky told her all about himself. How he grew up in Georgia, but moved
to New York, where he’d met his wife. His wife had just divorced him a little over a year ago. She took the house, the kids, everything. All because he couldn’t control his drinking. "She said I got angry when I got drunk. Hell, I only hit her a few times! That didn't mean I didn't love her. She knows I didn't mean to, right?"
The car fell silent, the question remaining unanswered. She knew he’d asked the question before. Probably on a daily basis. They drove on in silence for about an hour. She was the one to break the silence. "Do you know how you got through the metal detectors?" She stared at him, waiting for his answer. Finally he admitted he didn’t know there were metal detectors, he had stopped there on a whim on his way to Mexico. She nodded. "I disabled them about thirty minutes before you came in." She said, looking him calmly in the eyes. "I want to thank you for messing up my plan. I don't think mine would have turned out this beautifully."

Franky looked at her, shocked, then smiled at her smugly. "Well doll face -" That was as far as he got. The gun shot cut him off. She pulled over just before the Mexican border and pushed his body into a ditch. It wasn’t hard. All she had to do was open the passenger door and he just sort of rolled out. Before she left she took everything from his pockets. A wallet, a wad of cash, and a picture of a woman she assumed was his wife. As she walked back to the car she stopped and thought a minute. Finally, she turned back and tucked the picture of his wife into his front breast pocket. "Thanks Franky baby," she whispered as she pulled back onto the road. The sun was just beginning to rise along the horizon. She loved to watch the sun rise.
I told my mom I was leaving to get a British movie about a hitman with a moustache, a beautiful kleptomaniac with auburn hair and a lonely kid who smoked joints in the bathtub. The socially deviant make the best characters. You know, the ones devoid of inhibition, prone to boisterous fits of laughter, who get silly drunk.

I borrowed mom’s Toyota because she blocked every possible exit strategy, trapping my hand-me-down Chevy inside the garage. I was surprised she let me drive her car this night. She knew well and right half the time I went out, for work or otherwise, I burned one down. Yet she must’ve figured I wouldn’t dare skunk up her car. I told her I wanted to rent a movie, and of course I would, but first I had to consume a serving of “vegetables.”

Smack dab in the middle of our soulless sub-division sat a grassy park and play area. I rolled to a stop under the dark shade of a Blue Spruce on the corner facing the purple mountains in the distance. Driver-side window down, the lemony stench of burning marijuana crept upward through the old tree’s azure needles. My body relaxed while my eyes flooded, peripherally gauging every porch-lit patio in proximity for sudden movement. The night was stagnant, silent until a garage moaned and a nondescript silver sedan pulled out. Mildly paranoid, I moved on.

As I turned into one of the few parking spots bordering the Loaf n’ Jug, an Asian skater kid rolled by me, escaping the nearby apartment complex for a quick suburban siesta and a Red Bull, I guessed; just another brother finding solace in the night. I turned off the ignition, and as I climbed out of the Toyota my clumsy elbow bonked the center of the steering wheel. HONK! The skater recoiled cat-like, just managing to stay on four wheels.

“My bad,” I said.

I walked over to the big red movie machine, a PEZ dispenser for adults with tight budgets and plastic cards. The skater kid de-boarded for store entry, but stopped before he ever reached the door.

“You hurt my eardrums,” he said, turning back to me.

“Sorry, it was an accident.”

“Honk at strangers all the time, do you?”

“Nah.”

The kid had a clay-colored scab the shape of Florida resting puffy on his elbow. He scratched the chunk of black hair exposed in his backwards Knicks snap-back, re-assessing. He blurted out, “Hey, man, I’am 17, I turn 18 in a couple months, I’ve got cash and I’ll do anything for a pack of cigs right now.”

He looked pre-pubescent, maybe 14. His nose was shiny. I didn’t have my first cigarette until my senior year of high school, and I’d never bought a pack before. “Are you gonna kill me if I don’t?”

He grinned and said, “Camel Menthols. Please.”

He didn’t give me enough dollars but I covered the change. It was only a 72-cent difference after all. I left the three extra pennies with the cashier.

“Is this your first tobacco related purchase, dude?” I asked as I handed them over.

“Nah,” he said, already skating away, tapping it in his palm.
Wild Target slid out of the big red movie machine and I jumped back in the Toyota. Mom wouldn’t approve the purchase of tobacco for minors but she didn’t understand the socially deviant. She didn’t know the way clouds of lung-processed smoke filled the Swiss cheese holes of the heart. She didn’t know.
I once thought age was crippling and without benefit. Creeping swiftly, it engulfs the young man and turns him into an elderly creature of routine, an old coot. The lines of my face, oh these lines on my face, I regarded them as heavy burdens. That is, until I was with my daughter one evening.

There she sat on my knees, a book unfolded in her lap, big enough to expand the length of her tiny arms. It’s important to read to your kids. It’s a beautiful way to bond and grow together. Of course, at the time, I didn’t have my heart into it. I was making no attempt to connect with her. She didn’t notice, the little dear. She just said, “I love you,” as she always would when I finished reading to her.

“I love you too,” said the routine creature in a dull murmur that did not convey the emotions I felt for my beautiful child.

“I love you more.” She tilted her head back to look up at me with her impish smile. “I love you more”? Who taught her this game, I wondered.

“I love you most,” I cooed with more effort than previously drawled. I certainly expected the common “I love you mostest” from my dearest, but that is hardly what she said. She whipped around in my lap, letting her book fall carelessly to the carpet in order to look at me with the most serious of faces. The kind of face that a tribal leader would make during a grave ritual.

“How do you know?” she asked, doe eyes blinking not with disbelief, but curiosity. Wonders swirled off her eyes, twinkling with Christmas lights. I stared for a moment without answer. How could I, Daddy, prove to my dearest that I loved her more than she could possibly fathom at this age? At this point I thought I knew more about love than a child—certainly more than a child.

“Can’t you see it?” I answered finally, raising my brows to display incredulity and seasoned confidence. It was a nonsense answer. Similar to “because I said so.”

“You can see it?” Her eyes swelled with what couldn’t possibly be more wonder, but something close. Awe, maybe, and curiosity. After a quiet confirmation from myself, she sat there in quiet contemplation, as if searching for my love. She studied me, closely, touching my face with small velvet hands that swam towards me like the heads of swans. What she said would forever change me as a father. She smoothed my face back and squished my lips and suddenly brightened as if she had discovered a great epiphany. Her eyes screamed, “eureka!”

“Is it in the lines on your face?” she asked in a secretive whisper, tracing my age with her fingers.

“We don’t talk about those...” I tried to tell her, but she cut in, as children do.

“When you’re worried, these lines get deeper...” she said, tracing my forehead and working down between my brows. “And these when you’re disappointed...” She moved her hands to my mouth. “These when you’re angry with me, and these lines when I make you proud every day. Isn’t this the love I can see?”

That is when I saw the complete adoration, intelligence, and love of my child, as if for the first time. Perhaps it was that I couldn’t possibly understand how much this child, my dearest, could and did love me. Her comprehension of love was just as love was, without thought or explanation, without routine or habit. It would forever make me a more loving father. I gingerly took her face, a face with so much love yet to give, into my hands.

“Yes, dearest. That’s the love you can see."
FADE IN:

INT. RESTAURANT – DAY

A bustling lunch hour. People eating. A child tilts her head back, shoveling food into her mouth. A few high-schoolers talk with their mouths full. An OLD MAN takes a bite and coughs.

    CHRIS
    Are you even listening to me?

Quick pan to CHRIS, 30, well groomed. He takes a swig of coffee, flashing an expensive watch. He glares over his coffee at SARAH, 29, also well groomed, with thin wrists, long, conditioned hair, and a tiny gold cross necklace. Sarah is preoccupied with the old man, who is still coughing.

    CHRIS
    Or are you waiting to give that guy the Heimlich?

The old man quits coughing and continues eating. Sarah relaxes, and finally looks at Chris.

    SARAH
    Sorry, go on.

Chris throws his napkin on his plate.

    CHRIS
    What’s the point?

Sarah looks down, playing with the rim of her coffee cup.

    SARAH
    Sorry. It’s just...it was ten years ago today.

    CHRIS
    I know.

    SARAH
    You know?

    CHRIS
    Of course I know.

    SARAH
    It was right here. This restaurant. I came here after the police proceedings, and...

    CHRIS
    And met me. Right here.
SARAH
Yeah.

CHRIS
If you remember.

She doesn’t elaborate, just sips her coffee, looking around. Chris reaches into his pocket, clearing his throat. She suddenly leans forward.

SARAH
Ruth was telling me, yesterday, about this non-profit-

CHRIS
You can’t be serious.

Sarah looks away. They’ve had this talk before. Chris leans forward.

CHRIS
You spend all your time in charities-

SARAH
Those people need me-

CHRIS
Actually, your job needs you. Your wallet needs you. And...I need-

A WAITRESS interrupts with a coffee pot.

WAITRESS
Warm-up?

Chris simply holds his cup out, eyes never leaving Sarah. The waitress fills both their cups.

SARAH
Thanks, Becky. How’s your daughter?

The waitress glances at Chris, who is now glaring into his coffee cup.

WAITRESS
Uh, she’s doing really good.

SARAH
How’s the new school?

Chris leans back as the two chat. He raps his fingers on the table. Under the table, he pulls a small box from his pocket. He opens and closes it, opens it again, removes an ENGAGEMENT RING. The waitress finally leaves. Sarah sips her coffee.

CHRIS
And what if I said I need you?

Sarah closes her eyes and looks away, rubbing her head. Chris takes a big breath and pulls the ring from his pocket.
CHRIS
Because I do.
He holds it out to her, but she doesn’t notice. She is looking away, watching people again. He continues to hold the ring out, dramatically, waiting for her to turn her head. Still nothing.
Chris clears his throat.

CHRIS
Sarah.

SARAH
That sign says maximum occupancy 80. There are at least 90 people in here.

CHRIS
Sarah.

SARAH
Maybe 100.

Chris looks around. A few surrounding customers have noticed his outstretched ring. A small boy is laughing. He withdraws his hand.

SARAH
Should I say something to the manager?

Chris watches her a moment, and then starts to gag, clutching at his throat. Sarah is out of her seat moving toward him when he pulls his hands away, brows raised. Sarah sits back down.

SARAH
Not funny.

CHRIS
Agreed.

He slips the ring back in his pocket. He stands up, puts his coat on.

SARAH
What?

CHRIS
Nothing. See you tonight.

He pulls his keys from his pocket, and Sarah sees something fall to the table. Chris turns to leave, and then turns back.

CHRIS
And be ready. I have something to tell you.
He leaves. She picks up the object. The engagement ring. Her eyes widen, and she swings around to look for him.

SARAH

Chris!

He is gone.

EXT. JEWELERS – DAY

Chris pulls his car into a parking spot outside a large jewelry shop. He opens his car door slightly, notes his car is crooked. He backs out, adjusts, but still isn’t satisfied. He does this one more time, and then finally gets out of his car. He hesitates, standing in the parking lot, and then strides toward the entrance. He pauses, hand on the door handle, and then turns around, heading back to the car. After a few steps he swings back around toward the shop entrance, this time flinging open the door and entering with no hesitation.

INT. JEWELERS – DAY

A JEWELER carefully peers down at a receipt. He finally looks up, examining Chris with appraising, almost gleeful eyes. Chris is fidgeting, looking around guiltily.

JEWELER

Was something unsatisfactory?

CHRIS

Not the ring.

He laughs. The jeweler doesn’t.

Chris reaches into his pocket and freezes. He pats all his pockets, checks his coat, curses under his breath. He looks up. The jeweler watches him with stern eyes.

INT. SARAH’S KITCHEN – DAY

Sarah sits at her kitchen table, the engagement ring on the table in front of her. She holds her hand out in front of her eyes, covering the ring from view, and then removes her hand, so she can see it again. She grabs her computer, does some searching. Gets an estimate on the price: $4000. Her eyebrows raise. She sits back. Smiles. She puts the ring on.

EXT. SARAH’S HOUSE – NIGHT

Chris speeds into Sarah’s driveway, parking wildly askew.

INT. SARAH’S LIVING ROOM – NIGHT

Sarah’s living room, nicely furnished, softly decorated in pastel colors. Chris and Sarah eat a meal. Sarah can hardly contain her grin. Chris eats in silence, eyes turned down.

SARAH

How was your afternoon?

CHRIS

Awful.

SARAH

Oh. Would you like some champagne?

Chris doesn’t answer. Sarah twists her fingers.
SARAH
You said you had something to tell me?

Chris takes a vicious bite.

CHRIS
I do.

He doesn’t continue. Sarah nods and rises.

CHRIS
We’ve been together ten years, and
today I realized something.

SARAH
Let me get some champagne.

CHRIS
I don’t want champagne.

She leaves anyway. He hears the chink of glasses as she pours, and he stands.

CHRIS
I don’t like champagne.

INT. SARAH’S KITCHEN – CONTINUOUS
Sarah pours champagne into a glass, and then pauses, bottle poised over the second glass. She puts the ring
at the bottom of this one.

SARAH
I think you’ll like it tonight.

INT. SARAH’S LIVING ROOM – CONTINUOUS
She reenters, holding the glasses.

CHRIS
No, you simply forgot that I hate it.

She stops at his malicious tone. He reaches for his coat.

CHRIS
I’m right, aren’t I? That’s what I came here to tell you.

He scowls at her shocked expression.

CHRIS
What, you thought I was gonna propose?

He picks up a bowl and tilts it back, throwing food into his mouth. Excess food flies everywhere. He starts to
gag, and the bowl drops to the floor as he clutches his throat. He continues to choke as Sarah stands motion-
less, holding the glasses. This continues for a painfully long time, as he gives alternately realistic and overly
dramatized performances. Finally, he stops. Sarah hasn’t moved. He walks forward, extending his glass of
champagne.
CHRIS
Jesus.
SARAH
Chris-
CHRIS
At least pretend to care.

He storms out.

EXT. SARAH’S HOUSE – CONTINUOUS

Chris slams the porch door, striding down to his car. Sarah runs after him, still holding the glass. As he opens the car door, she puts herself in front of it. He grabs the glass and throws the contents in her face. The ring clatters onto the asphalt. They both stare. As Chris bends down to grab the ring, Sarah kicks it into the gutter.
A fly is persistent. Why doth thou love to annoy thee? As I sleep, he violates my night light. As I sit, he vomits on my hand. As I stand, he races me toward my door. There is no escaping a fly. I cannot function with his constant buzzing ritual manipulating my ear. I cannot think without humming this bizarre buzz aria. What is wrong with me? Am I succumbing to the intellect of an insect? I cannot relax knowing that the traitor of peace is among my thoughts. Why couldn’t you be like your cousin, the Bee, who can at least make something sweet? Instead you choose to make me sick. Oh wretched fly, you are far too friendly. You go out of your way to oscillate around Taylor’s head, scaring her away, so you can have me to yourself. As I breathe, this black dart confronts me. I am captured. I surrender.

Debbie Hadley once said “Flies don’t learn, it seems. No matter how many times you swat them away, they come back.” Well Debbie that would explain my present state of confinement. This fly does not know how to take no for an answer. The little pest annoys me so much that I can’t help but look at it in awe. What is so admirable about this creature that causes me to shift my focus from homework to his six fuzzy legs? He is small and jittery and gracious. The little thing is so minute compared to my hectic life of homework and Ramen, yet he catches my attention immediately. He cannot seem to stay still. He has the energy of an Olympic athlete and the endurance of my mother. Speaking of being a mother, did you know that a female fly can lie up to 500 eggs in the duration of three or four days? Yup, no wonder why the House Fly is more common than any other species in the world. But that accomplishment is nothing to the fly, he has bigger and better things to do, namely, bug me. As much as I want to hate the fly, I cannot. The little fellow is so gracious. I know, you are thinking I have just lost every ounce of sanity I had. But in all seriousness, the more time I spend with him the more I admire him. He cannot help his benevolent attraction towards me. He flies by my head to gaze at my lucid features. He lands on my hand to kiss it, as a display of his affection. He races me toward the door to challenge me. He is so kind and inspiring. He wants me to feel important. He wants me to challenge myself. He wants me to grow. Oh, how I wish I could fly like him.

I need to be like a fly. If I am not persistent, no one will notice me. My lifelong goal is to perform on Broadway. I need to perform. This benevolent attraction defines my being, and just like the fly, I cannot help it. I cannot help that my life revolves around theatre. I am living for that one moment. I dream of gracing The Stage, but to get to that point I will have to take a couple of lessons from, my good friend, the fly. Being told “No” is inescapable. But no will not be the end for me. No is an opportunity, a challenge, to come back and hear another answer. If I am swatted away at first, I must be resolved to come back again and again until I am noticed. I must be persistent. I need to recognize that although I am just a small facet, in comparison to this gigantic world, I do play a part in it. I mean hey, look at all of the talk people make about flies in general. I plan on soaring past the barriers my mind once confined me to. I am going to fly to new heights. This is a new beginning for me and I am ready to annoy the heck out of producers, with my talent of course. And then I truly will be the buzz around New York.
Non-Fiction
Deafened in a cold fury of wind and roaring turbines, falling backwards, legs flailing, feeling completely, horribly wrong.

* 

"So one option is to do it tandem. You get strapped to an instructor and jump from really high, so there's a lot of freefall. But it's $200."
"The other option?"
"A four hour class and then you jump out of the plane by yourself."
"The class will be in Russian?"
"Yeah. Well, it might be in Ukrainian."
"How much?"
"Thirty dollars."
"Let's do it."

* 

Catch a bus from the Ukrainian capital of Kyiv. Ride it an hour to the town of Borodyanka, to its dry riverbed and dreary concrete buildings. From there, catch a taxi to the largest airfield in Ukraine.

Military tourism was supposed to be a moneymaker. In 2002, in an effort to bolster its budget, the Ukrainian army invited the world to come and play with its toys. The expected flood of tourists didn't arrive to pay $400 to drive a tank or $50 to lob a grenade, but the Soviet Union's assembly line system of throwing soldiers out of planes and landing them behind enemy lines was cheap and easy enough to be enjoyed by thrill-seeking Ukrainian youth.

And the occasional American one.

Diana and I were late.

Eighty-two people (I counted) were encircling a short, middle-aged woman with dyed red hair whose hands emphatically underlined her crisp, loud Russian. Her name was Olga Alexandrovna, our jump instructor for the day and the inverse image of the gruff and surly soldier who I imagined would teach us.

She was standing in front of a rusted airplane door, explaining what to do when a real plane door opened and we were supposed to leap out of it at 2,400 feet. She showed us a Soviet surplus parachute, packed into brown canvas sack with its edges worn to white, and then held up a frighteningly frayed strap with a metal clip at the end.

"This will be hooked into a wire on the plane," she said, "and it will deploy your parachute three seconds after you jump."

Someone asked how old the parachute was.

"Thirty two years-old," she said.

The group, nearly all of them younger than the parachute, glanced at one another.
She then held up a smaller canvas pack, once blue but now faded almost gray. "This is your backup parachute," she said. "You only paid for the main parachute. If this deploys, you have to pay a 50 hrivna fine."

There were some chuckles.

"I'm serious," she said.

We were to learn that the backup parachute was not the only possible fine. Although Olga had grown up under communism, she well understood the capitalist mantra of economic incentives. If you landed in a wheat field instead of the designated landing zone, it was 70 hrivna. If you landed in the woods and tore your parachute, you had to pay for the repair. If you landed on someone's house, you had to pay for any damage.

Olga walked us through what would happen when we emerged from the plane: three seconds of free-fall before the parachute opened. Look up. Make sure the parachute looks okay. If it does, disarm the altimeter that was supposed to automatically deploy the backup at 900 feet. If you don't, pay the fine.

Disarming an altimeter sounded complicated, but then I discovered it only required tugging out the string that connected the wire of the altimeter to the wire that opened the parachute.

That was it.

Pull out the string.

At that point, my Russian was holding up splendidly. Even when I didn't understand a word, I understood enough of the words around it to get the meaning. Also, like all good teachers, Olga was repeating everything three or four times. As we took turns jumping through the door, hands crossed in front of our chests, feet together, I felt really confident about jumping out of an airplane.

That confidence started to wane when she walked us over to a harness attached to a suspended metal circle. It was built in such a way that Olga's chosen volunteer—an extremely attractive brunette—was able to sit in the harness and be tossed and spun any way that Olga wished. We now got a crash course in how to maneuver the parachutes and how to avoid running into each other.

Running into each other?

Worry started to worm.

Up until that point, this had seemed like a great idea. I mean, the quality of the parachute was suspect, but my overall responsibilities were nil: jump out of a plane, make sure everything is okay, pull a string. Only now, I learned that ten of us were going to jump out one right after the other, and the possibility of a midair collision was very real.

Olga started going through the possible scenarios: if someone is coming in on your right, pull down on the left control cable to spin out of their way. If they're coming from your left, do the opposite. If you're going directly at one another, spread your arms and legs to try to catch onto them or their parachute cords, push them back, and then turn out of the way. Only don't turn out of the way if you're less than 600 feet off the ground because landing while spinning might break your legs.

What? Push another person? In mid-air?

Jesus good lord gravy.

Only Olga wasn't done.

Now, she said, let's go over when you are allowed to self-deploy the back up parachute. We learned that even with the altimeter disengaged, there was a red, metal handle that we could yank out to release the backup parachute. And if we dropped that metal handle, which apparently was an expensive metal handle, there would be a fine.

I realized that this was probably the most important part, but two hours of heavy concentration and a
rising panic was throttling my Russian.  
Something about failing something.  
Something about something a hole something.  
Something about three something somethings.  
I am going to die.  

Diana listed it for me later: If your parachute fails to completely open, pull the back-up. If there is a hole in your parachute larger than three feet, pull the back up. If more than three of the strings attaching you to the parachute are broken, pull the back up.  

Olga kept going:  
If you land in the woods, protect your face with your arms as you hit the trees. If you see that you are about to land in a lake, unhook your harness while in midair and jump out of it as soon as you are about to hit the water. If you are about to land on the roof of a building and one step or jump will clear you, you are fine. If not, attach one of your cords to something on the roof as quickly as possible.  
"What if we can't?" asked a girl.  
"Just make sure you do," said Olga.  

*  

Despite graphically describing all the ways we could die in the pursuit of a cheap, three minute thrill, Olga did point out that any of it happening was pretty rare.  
«Has have you seen it happen before?» asked one of the guys.  
«Well, yes,» said Olga. «But only to professional skydivers who did things wrong. You don't want to worry too much about all of that. You want to worry about landing.»  

In order to get up early to make it to the airfield, Diana and I had opted to spend the night in Kyiv, crashing with an American friend named Peter. We invited him to go skydiving with us, but he had begged off. It was only after we returned that he told us why: "Yeah, everyone I know who has done that broke something when they landed."  
"Why didn't you tell me this before?"  
"I didn't want to worry you."  

Next to the airplane door was three plywood platforms built at different heights, the lowest about three feet off the ground and the highest at about seven. We spent the next hour jumping off of them. We learned that we were to land with the entire foot hitting the ground, not on our toes or on our heels. We learned how to roll both forwards and backwards without landing on our arms or neck. Then we practiced, over and over.  

Falling came naturally to me, but others were not so gifted. They freaked out with mid-air yelps and landed with their feet apart or didn’t tuck their arms as they rolled. Olga kept sending them back up onto the platform, a conveyor belt of ungainly lemmings.  

In the end, she cleared us all.  
We were well into our fourth hour of instruction, and I was starting to realize that if we’d done the tandem jump, we’d be eating lunch back in Kyiv by now. I had initially balked at the price but now realized what it bought: someone worrying about all of this for you.  

The landing wasn’t even the end of it. We even had to learn how to pack up the parachutes after we reached the ground, correctly wrapping the cords so that they wouldn’t tangle and rolling up the parachute in such a way so that it could be easily repacked later.
Failing to do so correctly would result in a fine.
Finally, when I was sure we were about to learn how to start raising silkworms and weaving parachute cloth, we were allowed to go to the airfield.

* 

Now that we were preparing, adrenaline was coursing. Five men wearing the blue and white stripped tank tops of the Ukrainian army were putting our parachutes on us. I shouldered the straps and mentally re-played the instructions from the morning, was in my own headspace when the soldier putting on my parachute started barking orders at me. When I didn't respond, he spun me towards him, started hooking straps, and then spun me away again. He barked a word I’d never heard before. Suddenly, I felt myself being bent forward at the waist and more buckles being clipped. Despite three years of living in Ukraine, I'd never heard the order for "bend over" before (naclonise if you need to know), and now hope that I never end up in a Russian prison and need to use it. He spun me back around, a look of frustration on his face.

"Does he understand me?" he yelled at Diana.
"Yes, he does," Diana replied.
"Did he understand the jump instructor?" he asked her.
Great. This can't be good.
"Yes, he did," she said.
He looked at me, glared at me.
"You need to take that out!" he barked, pointing at my eyebrow piercing.
"He can't," Diana said before I could answer.
Perfect. Now they think I'm mute.
The soldier walked over and talked to another soldier, complaining not about my language ability, but my piercing.
"What if a cord gets caught on it?" he was saying.
I think that if I was taking a parachute cord to the face, I'd have much more to worry about than it tearing out my piercing.
The other soldier just shrugged.
The pissed-off soldier wasn't being nice to the three girls in our group of ten, either.
"Why do you ladies come here? You'll be getting on the plane, but you'll be too scared to jump out of it. We'll put you on the plane, but then who knows?"
Another soldier walked down the line with a clipboard.
"Name?" he asked. I told him, and he wrote it down.
"Turn left!" he yelled, and I did. He wrote down the number on my parachute.
"Turn back!"
He walked to the next person and did the same thing. I had seen the soldier going up the line with a clipboard with a previous group, and had assumed he was checking each person against a list of those who had paid. Now I realized what they were doing: if they found my body, they only needed to look at the parachute number to know who I was.
They ordered us all to turn left.
We did.
They ordered us to walk towards the plane.

* 

I was the second in line to jump.
Inside the airplane, deafened by the engines, sitting packed five to a side on two metal benches, we
waited. Our parachutes were clipped into two wires overhead. The jumpmaster had pulled the pin that activated each of our altimeters. Below us, the world was rectangles of brown and green.

The jumpmaster, wearing only shorts, a tee-shirt, sandals and a very modern looking parachute (in case he accidently fell out) opened the plane door.

We were hit by a blast of cold air. This was becoming very real.

The guy in line ahead of me--let's call him Sergei--quickly stood up, nearly throwing himself out the door. The jumpmaster shoved him back hard, slamming him into me.

"Sit down!" he roared.

We all glanced at each other.

The jumpmaster, looking out the door, signaled the pilot to turn and we sharply banked. The jumpmaster signaled a few more times, the pilot changing course in turn, until he finally signaled to Sergei. Sergei stood up, stood at the door and then, with the jumpmaster's hand on his back, jumped.

I stood, moved to the door and tried to stay balanced despite the wind and vibration, left foot on the threshold as I'd been taught, arms crossed--left over right--as I'd been taught, and then there was the world, moving far below me.

I purposefully tried not to have a conscious thought, didn't want my reason kicking in at the wrong time, but I did think of something my grandfather had said to me many times:

"Daniel, you are smart, but you have no common sense."

"Pashol!" yelled the jumpmaster.

I jumped.

*

Maybe he was used to people not jumping. Maybe he figured people just needed a push. Whatever the reason, his strong hand on my right shoulder blade had sent me spinning.

It was terrifying. Rather than falling forward I was twisting, rotating, now falling backwards. My psyche was screaming. My feet, instead of being together, were flailing. I had no control. I kept waiting, praying, for my parachute to engage, but it wasn't happening. Then I felt myself being whipped around and everything stopped.

I looked up. My parachute was open, but the cords were twisted around one another. Not good. Do I pull the back up? Do I risk the fine? Then I started spinning. My parachute stayed where it was, but the cords unwound themselves and I was reminded of a kid on a swing, the chains above him twisted tight, him letting go. Under the parachute, that kid was me.

Then the world made sense again.

Then there was peace.

The euphoria came on as strongly as the terror had. I was slowly drifting down, the world spread before me, the antithesis of the fear felt only moments before. I was drifting backwards from the plane, watching eight other parachutes opening one by one in front of me. I looked up and saw the red control handles, pulled the left one and felt myself slowly turn in that direction. Ahead of me and below was Sergei.

Am I okay? Yes, I'm okay.

I reached down and tugged the string.

Then, I drifted. It was calming up there, beautiful, quiet. It took almost a minute of thoughtless awe before I remembered that I was supposed to controlling my descent.

I wasn't sure where to land, and noticed that Sergei and I were drifting in a different direction than the other eight. I sighted the derelict airplanes at the airfield and tried to guess where I was supposed to touch down, but what seemed like a massive drop zone on the ground was hard to find in the patches of color below me. I just knew that I wasn't near water or trees or buildings and that was enough for me.
I pulled my camera out of my pocket and took a couple pictures of the other parachutes and a few of myself. I did it quickly, wanting to have the pictures but also wanting to openly appreciate, rawly experience. I gave myself a few more seconds before sighing and using the controls to follow Sergei towards the ground, hoping that he knew where he was going. The world approached slowly as I tucked my legs into a sitting position, feet together and flat. I was falling so slowly and gently that I knew it would be like drifting onto pillows.

Crunch. Ow.
I rolled as I was supposed to, landing on my side and feeling protest from my ankles.
"That hurt," I said aloud.
I quickly stood up and walked backwards to get out from under the parachute, throwing a thumb to the sky to tell those watching through binoculars that I was okay.
I was supposed to pack up the parachute and await pick up, but instead I threw back my head, spread my arms and howled with joy.
Nearby, Sergei answered my call with the same.
It felt good to be alive.

*

In the end, Diana almost hit some trees but maneuvered out of their way. Others almost landed on some cows. One of our jumpers was so excited about seeing the view that he forgot to disengage his back up and popped a bra. His girlfriend landed in the wheat field. Both paid their fines.
By the time all was said and done, we spent 12 hours in pursuit of those three glorious minutes. Yes, it was worth it.
Why I Want to Dye My Hair Blue
by Ashley Lee Ann Dougherty

Being a girl is tough, but you know all about that. Makeup, nails, scented soaps, tight clothes, the whole thing. It’s hard—borderline asinine. You know what my least favorite part of it all is, though? Yeah, it’s hair. I was really excited in the nineties because the whole sixties flat hair thing was cool. I really didn’t have to do anything with it. Just woke up and left for school in the morning. Like a boy.

Boys have it so easy in the mornings. I’ve got to wake up two hours before I go anywhere. Overall, my hair only takes fifteen minutes to do. It’s not that big of a deal—except when it is. It’s a big deal when there’s twenty minutes left before class and you have to choose between Frosted Flakes—God’s gift to mankind in physical form—and straightening your hair. I don’t know why I choose hair. It’s never done me any favors. Maybe it’s an insecurity bug I’ve caught. Maybe it’s a social commitment I signed in blood at some point. I don’t know, but I always pick hair.

But hair can be a bitch. It’s expensive to dye, tedious to dry, uncomfortable to straighten, and then what? You know what it does next? It falls; it frizzes. The color fades and the whole process has to start over again. Hair isn’t grateful for the attention it gets like nails. At least when you do your nails they get stronger and longer. Not hair. Hair falls out and gives up on life. It kamikazes all over your life and people ask you if you’re getting enough protein because your hair is all over your hair brush.

I’ve been dying my hair since I was thirteen years old. There are very few things in my life that I’d go back and change, but that is definitely one of them. I’d slap that kid in her face and tell her to braid her stupid hair and go to school. Screw the other girls that say it looks like dish water. What do they know? They’re the ones that need the ego boost. That’s the plus side of doing your hair, you know. You know you look good. Your ego hits an eleven on the scale.

I got picked on a lot when I was in school. Dumb blond jokes mostly. It was a major inspiration for dying my hair. At first the jokes were my inspiration for getting on the Honor Role, but bullies don’t actually look at your grades. Dumb blond jokes are self-explanatory when you’re in middle school. You don’t have to back up your evidence with a report card from the victim.

So I dyed my hair. Red. Red because it was a somewhat natural color and the jokes would stop. I got a lot of compliments on it, too. My ego swelled like a watermelon—but in case you didn’t know, when a watermelon swells because something is filling it, it explodes. That’s what I did. I exploded. I exploded like Tom Hanks in The ’Burbs. My ego was so high up there that when I was even mildly insulted in the hair region, I took it very, very personally.

The first time this happened, it was El Diablo de Kiosk that started it. You know who I’m talking about. He’s usually suave, usually foreign. You don’t know where he’s from, and you wouldn’t try to guess because you’re pretty sure that’d be racist in some shape, way, form or fashion, but I digress. He calls you over with a José Eber product. He tries to lure you in with a conditioning sample for your frazzled ends. He asks you point-blank if you use anything to protect your hair. He wants to break down your ego and make you insecure.

But I just get mad.

I’m not sure how, but he gets me in a seat. He starts working on my hair and makes me smell it.

“See? Now you don’t smell like Kung pao chicken.”

“Excuse me?”
“Your hair. This straightener will not burn your hair. See? No Kung Pao Chicken. Very Good.”

He spends a half hour of your precious holiday shopping chatting you up about this great deal he’s going to give you to save your hair. He tells you that he doesn’t need the deal himself, so he’s going to give you his employee discount. Obviously, you’re smarter than him, so you leave, with one kinky curl in your hair that he created on the side of your head and did not take out. You mutter under your breath, “he’s the devil” and go buy some Kung Pao chicken at the food court.

The second time I exploded, I was at the Walmart. I was just in the checkout line. Just minding my business. Buying printer ink. All of the sudden a bald man stops in his tracks as he passes me and whirls on his heel like a Russian soldier and asks, “who does your hair?”

Now, at first, I’m flattered. Wouldn’t you be? I had just gotten my hair done two weeks previously and was still feeling pretty good about it. I mean, when someone stops and wants to talk about your hair, you feel a little bit like a celebrity or a princess or something. The watermelon filled to capacity.

“Her name is Danielle, but she lives in Texas, so…”

“You need to come see me, right now.”

He’s so full of concern while he tells you that he’s a hair stylist. He tells you where his shop is and how long he’s been working there. He asks if you want to write down the directions or if you want one of his cards. You smile at him, tightly, and with all of the passion of someone saying “screw off,” you say “no thank you, please have a nice day.”

So, I’m blown up by this point. It doesn’t matter that the cashier says my hair is beautiful. I go home in a fit. Sometimes being pretty, especially when it looks purposefully, makes you more ugly. To look like your trying means that you could actually be failing. You open yourself to criticism for trying. Sometimes I envy the naturalist girls, even the self-righteous ones. At least they don’t get told they aren’t trying hard enough. Maybe the girl in my class that doesn’t even shave her legs is happier than I am. I don’t know. You know what really sucks though?

The printer ink doesn’t even work.

I spend the better part of two hours trying to get the printer to print. I know you’re not supposed to take the ink cartridges out, but I do anyway. By the end of this endeavor, I’m covered in ink and I’m miserable—but that’s when it hits me. Blue. Blue on my hands. Blue ink on my clothes and on my face. I want blue hair. No one stops you when you have blue hair. They look at you like you’re an alien or a peacock and then mind their own damn business. Hell, sometimes they compliment your hair even if they hate it. That’s the power of blue hair.

No one would see my split ends. No one would stop me at the mall. No one would tell me that I needed to visit the hair salon, no. I would be free. I would have the freedom of blue hair. It’d even be cute. I could be like Miku Hatsune or Ramona flowers. No one would have anything to say to me because it’s not purposefully trying to look pretty—it’s purposefully trying to look strange. There’s not a lot of people who know how to comment on that, let alone insult. It.

And if anyone calls you weird you can just say, “Thanks, that’s what I was going for!”

I wish I had blue hair.
What kind of puppy are we getting?

Well... whichever puppy you want!

Really?

Can we get a... Balto?
or...

Or... Maybe a...

I think these are even better.

Honey, look!

No way...
Just look at all the puppies over there!

YELLOW LAB MIX PUPPIES

BLACK LAB MIX PUPPIES

SO... MANY... PUPPIES!
I think we want to take a look at this one!
And that was it. I chose her myself, out of dozens of puppies.

It was one of the best decisions I've ever made!

We named her Jasmine, after a Disney Princess, and she became my best friend.

As I grew older, so did she. And over the years, though my life changed, she remained constant. She was my rock.

I can't remember anything before Jasmine.
My childhood friend, who I spent nearly every waking hour with for many years, eventually moved away.

But I still had Jasmine.

To Canada, of all places.

My mom moved out, threatening to leave my dad.

My Grampy died.

Followed by my Granny shortly after.

She was a comfort.

Too quickly, I grew up and had to decide where to go, what to do, and what to devote my life to.

COLLEGE

WHAT am I going to DO with my LIFE, Jasmine??

You CANT QUIT PLAYING CLARINET!

WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO WITH ART?!

F... I want to do what I love...

She saw me through the toughest times.
Her death, in March 2011, was difficult for me in more ways than one.

It felt like my childhood was really ... over.

It was a great 14 years,
And she helped me to grow so much.
But Life goes on.
As a writer, I’m always looking for inspiration. I’m always looking for those stories that could easily be
told between men at a barbershop, but could easily be gold in the world of publishing. You know those sto-
ries you hear between people on the street, at church, at work, even in your own home. You hear them and
they make you gasp, maybe feel sick to your stomach, and overall they can make you think, “Wow, I never
expected to hear this!”

I’m a cosmetics girl for a local Walgreens on the weekends. Every weekend is routine: get up, go to
work, come home and pray to God that my writing will be sold someday so I won’t have to take home a mini-

mum wage check for being yelled at by wrinkled women, who claim we never have the right face cream. Ac-
tually, I would take days like that a thousand times over that extra evening shift I took during the Christmas
break of 2012.

I didn’t expect much from that night. I was there to make extra money while I was off school, and I
only expected the same crazy, holiday rush that overran the store every day in anticipation of the gift-giving
holidays. It was constant busywork that we were always running behind in, but I didn’t mind. I had volun-
teered for the small jobs that day, and it was when I was stocking the playing cards rack by the toy aisle that
all of that mess started (at least for me):

“Ma’am, is your pharmacy still open?” The voice rang with a Southern clang, but was thick from
cottonmouth.

The man speaking to me was tall and skinny, his clothes not any cleaner than a bum off the street cor-
ner. They were smudged all over, but this was nothing different; many oil field workers would come in still in
their work clothes, all grungy and dirty. His face was sagging, like the skin could no longer hold up, especially
under his eyes where heavy bags drooped. His brown hair was graying at the roots, thin, but long enough for
him to put up in a ponytail. It was the writing that covered his left forearm that caught my eye, though, scrib-
bles of red ink all up his arm. I’m sure even if I had the opportunity to get a closer look, none of it would have
made sense. It looked like random words and phrases he had scrolled on with a pen.

“It’s right down there,” I said, pointing down the back aisle where the pharmacy counter was in plain
view. “They’re open until eight, I believe.”

“Oh, well, good, but...” he said, jauntily. He paused, sniffled his dry mouth a few times that was
gaining something white at the corner of his lips, and grinned. “I was wondering something else...god, you’re
pretty, ma’am. You know I actually worked with Beyonce at one point?”

“Oh, did you?” I didn’t believe it of course, and I could plainly see that this man was one of those cra-
zies that managed to drift in from time to time. You only had to talk and be polite until they left, which, if
they found what they were looking for, wasn’t too terribly long.

“Well, I have this website really. I need people to look at it, and if you could...”

The conversation was horribly random and went in fifty directions in a matter of ten seconds. He
went on all these tangents of nonsense that I couldn’t follow even if I had him slow his speech, which was
jagged and jumpy. At this point, I declared him “druggy,” not a “crazy.”

“I gotta get my medicine!” It was an abrupt end to the strangest conversation, but as he walked down
the aisle towards the pharmacy, I told myself that this was a good thing. If I wanted, I could hide in the stock-
room for a while until he was gone. No one would say anything of it as long as I looked busy.
Later, a code ninety-nine was called over the speakers, which meant a bathroom door needed unlocking. Usually, stores had a key you could use to take to the bathroom, but ours are kept locked by a combination on the door that all employees are required to remember. I went to answer the code, but now I wish I had let the manager on duty get it.

I stood for a long time, waiting in front of the one door that led to a small hall where our bathrooms and breakroom were kept. I was about to give up and believe that maybe the customer had decided they didn’t have time for the bathroom, when Druggy came up again. Immediately seeing me, he went back on his tangents of a website I should visit, some relatives of his in Ada that were undergoing surgery, how I needed to call a phone number for him…it went on forever.

I led him into the hall and to the men’s bathroom where I punched in the combination on the dial of buttons right above the handle. After unlocking it, I quickly shoved it open and stepped aside; there was no way I was getting in between that man and the opening to a private room. It wasn’t specifically for him, but I was always wary about letting men into the bathroom, especially ones that had a faint smell of piss on them.

Instead of going in to do his business, he stood in the doorway, holding the door open, trapping me on the spot with his conversation again. I began to internally curse the rules of how employees are always supposed to be courteous to the customer, how you couldn’t just brush them off, but I should have done that anyway; I remember realizing how I was alone in the secluded hall with this man, whose words began to slur and body shook and twitched.

"Hey, listen." He stopped talking for a matter of four seconds, just enough to reach into his pocket and began slipping out a few, dirty bandanas that were tied together at the ends like a rope. He held them out for me, his bloodshot eyes going serious. “Now, someone’s probably outside waiting to take me to prison, so if you’ll hold onto my dog leash for me and I come back and you still have them, I’ll get you into any concert you want for free.”

"Uh...okay." I didn’t want to take them, but he was holding them at my face.

There was something terribly off about him, and I prayed to God someone would come back there.

God listened.

In that moment, my manager came into the hall, anger showing on his face in the way his nostrils flared as he saw the man. He walked over, but not before Druggy vanished behind the men’s bathroom door, finally going inside. My manager glared at the door as if that would make Druggy come out, sighing and fuming.

“He needs to get out of here.” The manager grumbled this more to himself than to me, then looked at me, but more to my hands. “Abbie, what are those?”

“Um. I really don’t know, sir. He said it’s his dog leash.”

“You got them from him?” He jutted a thumb to the no longer vacant restroom door. “Abbie, get rid of them. He’s sick. He’s got AIDS.”

At first, I just stared at him. I had never come in close contact (that I’m aware of) with any person who’s had that serious of a disease. It took a few clicks of the gears of my brain to finally recognize that this man had just handed me a bunch of dirty bandanas that had God knows what on them.

In response, I threw them at my manager as fast as I could to get them out of my hands.

88
After washing my hands thoroughly, I did escape to the stockroom for a while. I didn’t want to come out at all, and there was a horrible headache taking over that made being out with customers unbearable. Minimum wage wasn’t worth this, even if I had been working up a lot during the break.

Later, I came out just in time to see Druggy being escorted out by two paramedics, a man and a woman who were trying to guide him out to the ambulance. Druggy dawdled, trying to walk back into the store, claiming he needed his pills. The manager wouldn’t have any of it; he screamed, furiously, “Get out of my store!” I watched from the safety of the skin care aisle, hoping the man would just leave and never come back.

Weeks later, Druggy’s face flashed on my TV screen at home. At first, I just sat there and watch the TV screen, wondering why this face with heavy bags under the eyes looked so familiar. Then it hit me, but not as hard as the news story did: Druggy had gone berserk in the ambulance after he was picked up. He had attacked the woman paramedic, kicked her hard in the stomach twice.

She was seventeen weeks pregnant, and she lost the baby.

I went in not too long afterwards, picked up my paycheck, talked to the manager about it, but there was nothing else that could be done, nothing we could do except think that next time we would call the cops, not paramedics. It had happened, and we would just move on and pretend it didn’t. That week, I made the step to use the extra money I had made that week to buy books for the next semester of classes. The amount took all of the money I had built up off those extra nights, a bunch of William Faulkner novels and history books all I have to show for that night.

I learned from the news story that Druggy was being charged with homicide, and later I learned from a classmate, who had actually met the guy, that Druggy was a hardcore cocaine addict and past-time alcoholic. He had been messed up for years, shooting up and claiming he was John Lennon reincarnated. I’m sure he only gets more messed up sounding the more you learn about him, and I try not to think about him or that night cause or otherwise I think about how we should have just called the cops to come escort him out.

Sometimes messed up things like this happen, and like a lot of things, you have to just take it like it is and move on, maybe write about it for the shock value.
Elegant Chaos
by Ethan Berney

I was blindsided by ignorance in the charred month of August and had I known better, I would have chosen to not know at all. Call it frivolous, omniscient reader, but I have yet to experience something as profound as my freshman year in college.

If life is a marathon, my freshman year of college can be deemed a sprint. Rather, a monotonous, unyielding sprint of marathon length; nothing I have experienced is synonymous. The college experience is built up throughout one’s whole life in such a manner that anything but personal chaos would be anticlimactic. I wish this weren’t true, as I soon found myself finding comfort in the chaos that surrounded my life. I believed that college was merely an uphill climb, a straightforward path that if followed correctly would allow the traveler to experience all there is to experience. Looking back on it, however, my path looked more like a cardiograph.

Freshman year is a most wicked monster. Its cunning prowess draws you in, begging you to eat the forbidden fruits you’ve only heard about in movies and ghost stories. To live the first couple months of collegiate existence is to continually die and be reborn, baptized with alcohol and confirmed with sleepless nights, continually freeing oneself from the cycle to do an assignment or two. There are those who stray from the heartbeat path and live as if they were programmed, but I will not discuss them. They are merely bystanders, watching without experience and grasping without feel, for travelling hopefully and without a map is so much more enjoyable than punctual arrival. They are travelers clinging to a path, whereas I did my best Frost-esque impersonation and unknowingly took all of the roads less travelled by, which truly did make all the difference.

Freshman year is absorption, both physically and mentally. It is exposure to more than any one person can take in at one time, and then forcing them to deal with it all, and all at once. It is athletics, clubs, parties, fraternities, schoolwork, food, independence, and survivalism. It is having a newfound respect for time and sleep. It is meeting more people than you care to meet without any understanding for who will impact it the most—as it is more times than not those whom you overlook. It is finding patterns in an everyday life that has no boundaries. And most of all, it is learning how to learn from these absorbed experiences.

Freshman year is an ocean. The expected rise and fall coupled with the occasional storm have insignificant bearing on the overall pacific nature of the event. Every wave encountered eventually crashes softly to the shore of our existence, while the storms I found most discomforting eventually proved to be the most incredible and inspirational. To hand an eighteen-year-old college is to hand Rosa Parks a bus pass. With this gift, one begins to realize whether they are merely along for the ride, satisfied with a backseat, or if their character is strong enough to push forward.

In the end, freshman year is beautiful. Those who endure find themselves more elegant and refined. Freshmen are nothing more than fermented grapes struggling to mature with age. The experience I gained through the troubles I encountered was certain and unquestionable, and though the pill of freshman year may have been hard to swallow, it was choking it down that made the struggle worthwhile. A girl I love told me yesterday that if she were weather, she’d be a hurricane. This idea of something beautiful from afar and tumultuous from within is so analogous to freshman year. It is chaos, yes. Elegant chaos.
The plan was to meet at the section of 3rd Street and West Avenue, but we couldn’t get much farther than 6th street, nearly two city blocks away from our destination. Holding our press laminates and lofty camera bags above our heads in a futile attempt to protect them from the onslaught of flailing hands, careless elbow jabs, and the occasional full body slams of the crowd, we fought through the sea of dancing bodies that formed an impenetrable wall around the Seaholm Power Plant in Downtown Austin. Upon reaching the chain-link fence that surrounded the plant, the music that had persuaded us to brave the war zone in the first place was quickly replaced by the screech of megaphones. A mounted infantry of police officers pushed their way through our row, yelling something unintelligible at the crowd.

Behind the officer, one of the security men ushered a large crowd of photographers behind the barricade and into a pool of press and video cameras that took up nearly half of floor in front of the stage. While the video cameras were streaming the show on Youtube in real-time for millions of viewers in the comfort of their homes, the crowd lucky enough to get in was left packed like sardines against the back fence. The security man nodded to the officer in front of us. “Maximum capacity!” One of the mounted officers shouted over the music as he fought to keep his horse from rearing at the chaos. His announcement drew a slew of angry protests from a group of teenagers in front of us that insisted they’d been waiting in line for five hours to get in and weren’t going anywhere. The rest of the crowd followed suit, shouting expletives and pumping their fists.

“Let’s get the hell out of here. If the label wants another picture of Kanye West, they can get them themselves,” Mike shouted. Olivia and I, wide-eyed at the spectacle and nearly deaf by then, could barely hear him. Suddenly, Mike grabbed my arm and mouthed the word “retreat.” Olivia got a vice-like grip on his shoulder as he drug us back into the crowd, taking an elbow to the ribs in the process. We’d expected a lot from our first day at one of the country’s largest festivals, but we hadn’t planned for a full-scale riot.

South by Southwest is the leviathan of festivals, cramming three distinct, yet overlapping festivals into ten days, in one city. From 1987 until recently, South by Southwest had the regional reputation as the festival that allowed established musicians draw in crowds offering unknown bands the kind of exposure they needed. Attendees got the best of both worlds: big names they wanted to see and bands that they would never have heard otherwise. Since 2004, South by Southwest reported that it has drawn nearly 2,500 bands, over 100 sponsoring vendors, and a record breaking 190,000 registered industry attendees and music enthusiasts, bringing the city of Austin to maximum capacity.

In the weeks before the South by Southwest, we’d spent our time reading music publications of all kinds with titles like “30 Must-See Bands at SXSW” and “SXSW: Spreading Itself Too Thin?” The first listed the hyped, newly recognized bands that you should see, while the latter criticized why exactly you should see those buzz bands as opposed to the 2,500 other bands and as of yet unannounced “secret shows.” The onset of the digital music revolution in the early part of the 21st century seemed to exponentially raise the stakes of recognition, and beginning each November, record labels and publicists battle in out in magazines, newspapers, and blogs. Mike and Olivia, both record label photographers, already had the buzz bands memorized.

“South by, when you’re working it, is really two festivals. It’s the industry and the stuff I have to write about,” Mike explained. “The sponsors, the buzz bands, the big names starring in an indie film made at UT. But, the bands I want to see that aren’t signed didn’t help pay for this,” he said impassively, spinning his
green badge on its lanyard. Mike shook his head in disapproval as he explained that he’d probably only see a few of the acts he wanted to, knowing it was unlikely that they’d make it into any of his articles.

I, on the other hand, wasn’t in the business. Olivia had managed to talk her boss into handing over two walk-in press badges, arguably the most coveted of the badge hierarchy, one of which was mine if I toted their cameras around. I had my own list of must-sees, sprinkled with a few of those buzz bands. The festival schedule book was my playbook, marked up with an array of strategic chicken scratch listing times, venues, and bands. For attendees who aren’t in the business, like myself, sorting out whom to see out of a pool that large seems nearly impossible to do without relying on Spin or Rolling Stone.

We arrived just after 8 p.m., quickly tossed our suitcases into a friend’s apartment, and packed up the arsenal of camera equipment and schedules. We trudged like infantry soldiers under the weight of the film and photo equipment through the festival’s epicenter, 6th Street, towards a power plant on the outskirts of town to shoot Kanye West’s secret show. Unfortunately, by the time we arrived, the secret was out and we narrowly escaped the first of two major riots at South by Southwest.

After our trial by fire at the power plant, South by Southwest started to resemble the festival Mike had spent years telling us about. Surviving on four hours of sleep a night, we spent every waking hour running from venue to venue in order to see as many bands as possible. Hardly anyone at South by Southwest manages to see any band’s entire show. Whether there for business or pleasure, all in attendance spend most of their time racing towards the ambiguous locations of secret shows they’d read about on Twitter or to the next venue on their list, hoping the line hadn’t reached the end of the block yet.

Luckily, our badges put us at the front of most lines. Olivia and Mike had learned to avoid eye contact with the angry fans as security ushered us in, after one of the men in line launched a beer can at their heads. I couldn’t help but sympathize with the lines. Each fan had paid several hundred dollars to cut loose in this musical Shangri-la only to listen restlessly to the bands they’d come to see from 6th Street. Every windowsill and curb on the drag was converted into a place to regroup, listen to the bands playing in the now at-capacity bars, or chow down on festival street cuisine. Mike, a proud connoisseur of festival food, made a mad dash for the Best Wurst stand every time we passed it. As Mike, balancing a hot dog and his schedule book, approached us on the corner of a brick windowsill, he shook his head and sighed.

“We’re going to The Kills’ show at Emo’s in fifteen, right?”

“Yeah, but we’ve got to leave around 4 p.m., Harry Gym is playing at the convention center, and that’s about two miles, not to mention the line. The Strokes are playing at half past as well,” Olivia said.

“You’ve got to be kidding. I’m not leaving half way through. Harry Gym and The Strokes are great, but it’s The Kills,” I said firmly, holding up my schedule with The Kills’ show highlighted in three different colors. I’d heard other attendees, arguing and prioritizing on street corners, but we’d managed to avoid it until now.

“Well, you’ve got the equipment, so we’ve got to stick together. Let’s just choose one. I’m down for any of them. I’m sure the label would prefer The Strokes, but they’re playing tomorrow night too,” Mike said, as he attempted to to mediate. “Let’s flip a coin. Heads and we go to The Strokes-”

“Tails and we go to The Kills,” I interjected, as I pulled a quarter out of my pocket. After moving away from the crowds, I tossed the coin and caught it in my palm, repeating an inner mantra of “tails, tails, tails.”

“Tails prevails!” Mike shouted. “British blues rock it is,” I said, smiling, as we began weaving through the crowds towards the venue on the outskirts of downtown.

According to Twitter, The Strokes’ show drew so many fans and photographers that it had caused a mini-riot of its own, leaving The Kills’ show nearly empty. Midwestern music fans usually complained about the lack of good concerts, but South by Southwest blessed us with an overabundance. Given the novel-length
schedules and overlapping shows, sacrificing a few shows on the festival alter was inevitable. We spent the remainder of the festival leaving our musical fates up to tossed coins and games of rock-paper-scissors.

By 8 a.m. on Big Saturday, the last official day of the festival, 6th Street looks like a warzone. Food wrappers, cans, abandoned free swag, and schedule books mimic the tumbleweeds you find in West Texas. We’d struck gold on 6th Street and in the neighborhoods surrounding downtown, which play host to so many unofficial events that it could be a separate festival in its own right. The main drag was already filled with people on their laptops and cell phones, intent on finding and getting to Big Saturday’s big show before security could announce they’d reached maximum capacity. Among the bodies occupying every inch of curb, Olivia and I sat fumbling with camera lenses. As we were diligently running over the day’s schedule Mike stood behind us, a fudge bar in each fist.

“What are you doing?” Olivia asked, pointing to the ice cream bars, now beginning to melt down John’s fists.

“Official Big Saturday breakfast of the SXSW elite. You want one? They’re handing them out at the Hey Cupcake stand down the way. They’ve got a few Monster Energy Drinks for those of us with less refined tastes,” he replied haughtily, rolling his eyes.

Olivia’s phone rang. “It’s my boss. Don’t go anywhere,” she said, leaving us on the curb to take the call. Before Mike finished his second ice cream bar, we heard Olivia yell, “No way! Can we get in? Yes, I’ll get something for the article. Mike, Dani, you’re not going to believe this, but Death From Above 1979 is playing a secret show tonight at the Beauty Bar at midnight.” Death From Above 1979 had broken up in 2006. Now, a band that’s fan-base consisted of a large percentage of the independent music community was giving the most attended South by Southwest festival in history what we were sure would be either the last chance to see them or the first show promoting new material. Mike blankly stared at us.

“Are you going to be sick? Ice cream wasn’t the best choice, was it?” Olivia said, smiling. We were all fans, but to call Mike a fan would be a dramatic understatement. Suddenly, he shrugged, his excitement seemingly deflated.

“The Beauty Bar? There’s going to be another riot. The place barely holds 100 people,” he said with a sigh.

“Then we’d better get in line. But, if we’re going to stand in line for 7 hours, promise me we won’t have to dash out after the first Twitter rumor that pops up,” I said. After a week of catching opening acts and encores, I was ready for the full monty.

“I don’t care if they raise Kurt Cobain from the dead for a secret show at the Shore, we’re not leaving the Death From Above show,” Mike said, laughing. After nabbing a few fold-up chairs outside the venue, we set up camp.

Hours after we’d secured our place at the front of the line, it extended nearly the entire length and width of 6th Street. Mike and Olivia exchanged nervous glances and shielded their cameras with their arms as two men behind us began shoving each other, arguing over who had been first in line. I reluctantly offered to rescue the cameras and make a quick escape if the show descended into another riot. Inside, we found ourselves packed shoulder-to-shoulder, directly in the front of the stage with a full view of the building tension outside. The chain-link fence separating the crowd that made it in from those who didn’t was the only thing separating us from a steady pelting of beer cans and fountain drinks.

“Maybe we should call it a night,” Olivia said nervously.

“This is what we came here for. You can go if you want to, but nothing is going to convince me to leave a Death From Above show!” he yelled, inciting a few cheers from the crowd around us. Olivia looked at
me for some support, but I was nearly bursting with anticipation, staring at the stage for any sign that the show was about to begin.

“Hey, as long as there’s a camera that might need to be smuggled out—” Before I could answer, the lights came up and Death From Above took the stage to a roaring crowd that left our ears ringing before the show had even begun. As the bassist unleashed the gritty riffs of their hit song, the crowd came alive and began thrashing wildly against anything standing still. Suddenly, Mike abandoned his camera and disappeared in the crowd while Olivia and I struggled to get a few photos before joining him.

While we were dancing and accumulating battle wounds inside the venue, the crowd outside had reached its boiling point. Bodies clung to the fenced barrier pulling it back with all the force they could muster. By the fourth song, the fence had come down and hundreds of people rushed the stage followed by mounted police officers. I stood, stupefied, against the stage as the audience’s chants and officers’ warnings drowned out the band.

"Hey riot police, can we just play one song and then we'll promise we'll stop?" Death from Above’s Sebastien Grainger yelled, to no avail, over an officer’s megaphone. As we realized the room was quickly filling with a miasma of smoke and pepper spray, Olivia tossed me their backpacks and I raced for the emergency exit. I found an empty spot on the sidewalk across the street and watched as mounted officers fought for control, dragging away stragglers that were unlucky enough to get pepper sprayed or tazed.

Just as I finished stacking their bulky cameras into a neat pyramid next to my bags, I heard Mike yelling incoherently behind me. He was stumbling out of the Beauty Bar, gripping his nose as Olivia tugged at his collar in order to keep track of him as the venue emptied onto 6th Street.

“Dani, check out this battle wound,” he yelled, removing his hand for a moment to expose his visibly broken nose, “it’s a dangerous business.” Olivia and I both looked away, stomachs lurching. “Oh, come on! Hey everybody,” he yelled, at a passing group of girls, suppressing his own laughter, “I got my nose broken at the Death from Above show. Want to get a drink?” Olivia promptly shoved a red bandana over his face, only stifling his laughter for a moment. None of us had any idea how exactly Mike had gotten his nose broken, but he didn’t seem to care. While we were caught up in post-show ecstasy, he raved from under the bandana to crowd of fans who’d escaped the riot with us. In spite of the show only lasting a few songs, we agreed that it had been the most exhilarating show of the festival and Mike would have a permanently crooked nose to prove it.

Just as Mike’s nose was beginning to heal, the reviews were in. South by Southwest seemed to have officially outgrown itself. Nearly every article made the festival sound disastrous. Each one took shots at the festival for the lines and riots claiming it had ripped off everyone but the sponsors and media, while officials claimed that free shows and drunken troublemakers were to blame. Some bloggers were unable to explain exactly what had gone wrong, but knew that South by Southwest was changing rapidly, for better or worse. Festival veteran and blogger Sean O’Neal wrote, “Whether as a journalist, performing artist, or just a fan, I’ll always remember SXSW 2011 as a sort of tipping point."

In some cases, the articles were right. Overwhelming attendance pitted music fans against the media with artists caught in the crossfire, but no one had been left waiting in line on 6th Street for every show. Everyone left South by Southwest with something, whether having been part of the Kanye West riot, an intimate acoustic set at Austin Coffee, or simply conquering the Monster Dog at the Best Wurst stand. In between the stone throwing, both bloggers and officials alike seemed to be missing the big picture.
My Double Life
by Courtney Honaker

I have a confession to make. Up until last summer I had a double life. You see, I was actually a super-hero who ran around in a cape beating up bad guys. Then last summer I took a shot of Kryptonite to the knee and had to retire from the superhero business...

Okay, so unfortunately, my double life wasn’t quite that exciting but I figured that was a good way to start. Truthfully, I led a double life because all of the moments and stories of my life fall into two pretty dis-similar categories. There are the fluffy, PG stories from school and hanging out with my theatre friends. Almost all of my theatre experiences fall into this category. This is the side of the story that most people know. I am calm and confident and most people actually consider me to be very sheltered.

But there is another part of me. This is the version of my life that almost no one gets to know. I don’t hide it from people because I’m ashamed—I’m not. I just feel like people think of me differently when they know about my life. I consider myself to be a lighter person and I just don’t want to be defined by my parents’ choices or where I come from. I have worked very hard to be a person who can be respected and who isn’t pitied. I’d like to keep it that way but I’m starting to learn that I can’t keep living two separate lives.

Growing up was an interesting experience for me. I would estimate that my family moved houses over thirty times in my memory and we’ve only ever lived in Fort Smith, Arkansas so that’s quite a feat. While most of my peers were learning to ride a bike or worrying about getting a date to the dance I was wondering if we’d have food when I got home. Or if my dad had left again. Or if my parents or older brother had some creepy new friend over. Dysfunction has a funny way of rearranging a person’s priorities and opinions. I remember the first time I watched “Freedom Writers” my junior year of High School. I’ve always gone to schools with more privileged students and it usually didn’t bother me but I remember watching that movie and being spectacularly unaffected by it while my classmates were shocked. The only scene that really hit me was the part when Mrs. G’s class was starting their sophomore year. One kid got up and read a passage from his journal about “the worst summer of his life”. He counted it as the worst because his family got evicted and couldn’t afford for him to have new clothes or shoes for the first day of school.

I couldn’t believe it. I could hear a few girls in my class holding in sobs while I was thinking about the fact that my family had been evicted from various houses more times than I could remember. We even lived in our van for a year or so (which with a family of six can get slightly cramped). When I was younger it never really occurred to me that “normal” people didn’t live the way we did. Looking back, I still honestly don’t think it was that big of a deal. It was just a part of life and I lived with it.

Society has a funny tendency to credit TV and movies to my generation’s loss of innocence but I saw drugs, drinking, and crime in real life way before I saw it in movies. I didn’t want that to be my future. I didn’t want to have to take handouts just to feed my kids. I wanted to go to college.

I wanted more.

The problem was the “how.” I had a few teachers who were wonderful and supportive but it was always more of a “You can call me if you ever need my help” sort of thing as opposed to a detailed plan of action. I was aimlessly wandering in the sea of dreams not having any clue as to how to get to the shore of reality. Through a mixture of rap songs and superhero movies I had decided that the only thing I could do was stay in town, get a job, help my family, and maybe, one day, I would get to find my own dream. I figured my dreams weren’t important enough. They were way too unrealistic and I could live with staying in Fort Smith
my entire life. I wouldn’t necessarily be fulfilled but I would find a way to be happy. Besides I wasn’t very
good at dreaming anyway.

Enter Hunter Doohan, stage left.

There really aren’t words to describe Hunter. He’s like this ball of light and life. He knows how to
dream.

We were in drama class together and he wanted to be an actor. I didn’t even know why I was in dra-
ma. Usually I attributed it to the fact that I was trying to be a normal, if somewhat quiet, kid and I liked being
somewhere other than my house. My parents “didn’t have the time or gas money” to take me to rehearsals
or home afterwards and I sort of knew Hunter from church so he was my ride. While he drove we talked. I
found myself actually opening up to him. One day, our dreams came up.

“It’s actually really scary because I think the only way I’ll be happy in life is if I’m an actor and that’s
not exactly a practical choice.” Hunter laughed sort of self-consciously, after all we had only really known
each other a few weeks.

“I think you can do anything you want to do.” I told him and I fervently believe that, and do even
now. “Seriously, I think you’ll be great one day.”

“Thanks.” He smiled over at me then tuned his gaze back to the road. “So, what about you? What are
you going to do after we get done with high school?”

“Oh, I don’t know. Probably stay in town. Help my family, whatever.”

“Really?” something in the way he said it made it my turn to feel self-
conscious.

“Yeah, why?”

“Nothing. I mean, if that’s what you want to do then that’s cool.”

“Well, I have other dreams too.” For some reason I felt the need to explain myself to this boy. “I want
to be a writer someday, actually. I just feel like I have to help out my family. At least until my little brother
graduates.”

Hunter didn’t say anything which made me feel the need to explain more.

“My family just doesn’t have much. Well, we don’t have anything actually and I don’t want to leave
my little brother and sister because well, I mean, my parents aren’t exactly the best people in the world and I
mean, they aren’t like abusive or anything but I could stay and help with the kids and if I get a job we can
have more money and I’ll just go to college in town and get my graduate degree and then I can go wherever I
want.”

Hunter was still quiet for a long time but I couldn’t think of anything else to say. It was the first time I
had shared any aspect of my double life with anyone and I was pretty emotionally spent.

“What do you want?” Hunter finally said.

“Huh?” I didn’t think I heard him right.

“What do you want?” He repeated. “Not what you think you should do or what you feel is right, what
do you want to do with your life?”

I thought for a second and suddenly the answer was simple.

“I want to do theatre. I like being a part of a show. But I don’t want to be an actress. I want to be
someone behind the scenes. Maybe a director?”
“Now that’s a dream,” he smiled. “It needs some work and you have to figure out how to get there but that’s a start.”

By our junior year I had discovered stage management. It was everything I wanted to do and for the first time in my life I had something, other than writing, that I naturally could do. And I was good at it. People trusted me and looked up to me. I was the golden child of the department and I was happy. At the end of our junior year Hunter and I decided to write a play together.

Looking back, I never intended to open up to Hunter. It just sort of happened. I could be honest with him without feeling like he’d judge me and it was really nice having someone to talk with about my mother revealing she had a miscarriage before I was born or that I knew my older brother had a different father than me even though my mother thought only she and my grandmother knew. Honestly, I don’t know why Hunter didn’t run but nothing I said seemed to faze him. I loved that about him. We were writing partners and that was stronger than any of my crazy drama.

No one else at school got to hear all of the inner workings of my mind. They didn’t know that while I was entirely devoted to reviving our Thespian troupe at school, I was also thinking about how my dad had lost yet another job. As I mentioned, I went to a more privileged high school and a lot of the other kids’ main source of complications in life were directly related to theatre. I had always made sure to talk in a more educated manner. I was also an expert on how to make sure my clothes didn’t look like hand-me-downs. I made sure that my situation wasn’t obvious and for the most part it worked. Most people I went to high school with still don’t know how bad my home life was.

Lights up, one summer later and we were starting our senior year. Due to overwhelming class support our teachers had allowed Hunter and my play “Of Age...” to be a part of our mainstage season. It would go up a mere two weeks before we graduated and it felt like things were going perfectly on the nice side of my life. What I didn’t realize was that our teachers weren’t nearly as pleased with “Of Age...” as we were.

As tensions got higher at school (at one point an adult who helped us out on the weekends threatened to hit me) things were going crazy on the not-so-pretty side of my life as well.

I really didn’t think of it this way at the time but I had quite a bit on my plate. I was taking on more and more at school. I did lighting design for three of our four mainstage productions and sound for the other show. I also did the sound for the Drama II production of Macbeth and ran lights for the talent show. That alone would be more than a lot of people had to handle but I was a senior. Every book I had read or test I studied for had led to this moment.

It was time to make my dream of college come true.

I found myself back at the question that had been looming over my head since the third grade. How? None of my family had gone to college and while by that point I had some wonderful friends, most of them didn’t know any more than I did. They had their parents to figure out what a FASFA was. I didn’t even know who to talk to about college. The only other adults in my life were my theatre teachers but they were becoming more and more distant for reasons I wouldn’t know until much later in the year.

I researched. I was a T.A. for Drama over the lunch period so I’d spend one lunch hour selling snacks to students in the theatre office and I spent the other hiding in the Drama room pouring over the computer that was my only access to the internet.

I knew I had to take the ACT. Because of my family’s poverty status the government would pay the test fee two times and two times only. I would only be able to take it again if we paid for it out of pocket. My family couldn’t even afford my $10 National Honor Society dues so I knew going into the process that I had two shots. There was no way we could pay the test fee twelve times until I got the score that I wanted.
My friend Will drove me to the ACT the first time. I used a calculator borrowed from another friend who wasn’t taking the test that day. I was nervous. I am blessed to say I did pretty well on my first try. While my friends were checking their scores on their iPhones I ran to the Drama computer and read my score.

A 29. It was one of the best scores of anyone I knew. I should have been thrilled but I had secretly set my heart on a 30.

For round two I spent the night with my friend Kelsey and she took me to the test. I was much calmer the second time. I paced myself and felt a lot better about it.

When the scores came in I almost was afraid to know. What if I had done worse? I opened the score report and couldn’t believe my eyes.

I made a 32 which was the same score that our class valedictorian had finally achieved after taking the test every year since she was fifteen. My other friends freaked out over the 29 so there was no way I was telling them about the 32. Only Hunter knew that information. Well, so did his mom but that doesn’t count.

As I was trying to figure out what colleges I was interested in, things were getting bad at school. It wasn’t the show or the cast or crew. All of the students were amazing and fiercely loyal to the play. We had the support of our peers and we were making something sort of magical. The problem was with the adults. I can’t honestly depict what all happened because I still don’t really understand it. I’ve always heard adults on TV say “You’ll understand when you’re older”. I hope one day I can understand what exactly happened between the adults in our department and “Of Age...”. They stopped talking to us so we assumed they didn’t want us to bother them so we stopped talking to them. It was a silly cycle of childishness but I guess I just figured that the teachers were above such childishness. Unfortunately, I learned that being older doesn’t necessarily make a person more mature in every situation.

After “Of Age...” closed I decided to talk to Mrs. Elsken, the teacher who had inspired me to be more involved in theatre my junior year. There was a time when I was her favorite student. I figured that if there was anyone I should talk to so I could get to the bottom of all of the drama it was her. I learned the day I tried to talk to Mrs. E about “Of Age...” that I had fallen far from being her favorite.

I was intending to apologize for anything I had done to fuel the flames. All morning I ran over my line in my head.

“Mrs. Elsken, I don’t really know what happened between us with “Of Age...” and I still don’t understand everything that happened but I just wanted to apologize for anything I did that made you feel we didn’t care what you thought. It wasn’t my intention to push you guys away and I’m sorry if I made you feel like we disliked or disrespected you.”

I sat in the theatre office alone with Mrs. Elsken while we waited for the bell to ring and start B lunch. Neither of us spoke. I was mustering my courage and repeating my first line over and over again but for some reason I couldn’t make a sound pass my lips. I was terrified that she wouldn’t believe me. She stood up to leave the room. This was my last chance to talk to her alone that day and I knew I couldn’t keep putting it off forever. I took a deep breath.

“Mrs. Elsken?” I started and cleared my throat. “Um, can I say something? I really don’t know what happened.”

That’s as far as I got because then Mrs. Elsken cut me off.

“No, you’ve gotten to say everything you wanted to say.” she snapped. “Now you’re going to listen to me. You have been the most ungrateful and disrespectful student I have ever had. There has only been one other time in the years that I’ve been here that a student betrayed me like this but you’re worse because I trusted you and you just threw it back in my face.”
The lunch bell rang. Taylor Huntington, who also helped sell at lunch walked in. I assumed Mrs. E would stop as students came in wanting to buy lunch but she just kept going.

“I trusted you and Hunter. I didn’t know what you were planning on presenting last year but you were both ‘A’ students so I decided to focus on the students who were barely getting by and you went behind our backs and write a play just to show off and prove how much better you were than everyone else.”

I just silently took another student’s money and gave him his change. Taylor wouldn’t make eye contact and then ran from the room.

“I only ever agreed to let you two do your show because I thought you were going to bring in an adult to help polish it over the summer. When you two didn’t have enough time to do that I figured the other teacher would pull the show but she let you keep going. She wanted to give you the chance to try and then look at how you treated her! You didn’t want her around. You don’t care what we think and you know something? Your show had some really good parts but it also had some parts that were really silly and if you would have let us help then it could have been great.”

Please understand that I’m mostly paraphrasing. I couldn’t focus on her words too much because it was taking a considerable amount of focus to prevent myself from crying in front of most of our student body callously buying food while my favorite teacher was telling me all about what an awful person I was. Hunter and I had wanted “Of Age…” to be ours and there was already disharmony between our teachers and him so I can partially understand where they were coming from. We just wanted to follow our play through but it was never my intention to cut the teachers out. I don’t know how they got the idea originally but I do know that Hunter and I pulling back when we felt they were annoyed with us only served as more “proof” that we didn’t want them around. I still can’t condone the way they acted but I did want to apologize for allowing the animosity to continue.

I wish they would have talked to us when they felt unwanted.

I wish Mrs. E would have let me explain that. I don’t know if she’ll ever let me apologize.

Hunter says we shouldn’t have to apologize because the teachers were in the wrong more than we were but one day I hope I can let the teachers know that I am sorry for making them feel bad.

After a while Mrs. Elsken left the room and Taylor come back. As it turns out, Taylor had run to find Hunter, who also had that lunch but she couldn’t find him. I appreciated it a lot but I also realized in that moment how much I had come to depend on my partner and friend. I have no doubt if Taylor had found him that he would have came and talked to Mrs. Elsken and somehow make the situation better but I suddenly realized that I didn’t want to spend my whole life waiting on Hunter to save me or make my decisions for me.

Flash back to that January when we went to State Thespian Festival where I had the amazing opportunity to audition for every major college theatre department in the state of Arkansas. I didn’t really want to stay in Arkansas but there wasn’t a way I could find to get around the country to audition for colleges. The thing with theatre majors is that along with getting accepted into the university, we have to audition and get accepted into the program we want to study. I could have done interviews and reviews over the phone but to make the right effect it’s sort of important to be there in person. So Arkansas it was.

I prepared a technical theatre audition without a clue as to what I was doing. No one in the known history of Southside had done a technical audition but it turned out to be quite easy. I just talked for five minutes about my show experiences. As a result of being around theatre kids for three years I was very good at talking.

At the last minute, Oklahoma City University decided to attend the auditions and they were looking for perspective students. I knew about OCU already. It was my secret second choice (my secret first choice
was in Chicago and I knew there wasn’t a chance there). I had figured I wouldn’t be able to go to OCU for the simple fact that it was in Oklahoma and I still had to be driven everywhere by my friends and I didn’t like asking them huge favors.

It was another time when I knew I had a limited window of opportunity and I had to take the leap. I got 14 callbacks of 20 schools that came to auditions. One callback was for OCU. I had scholarship money thrown at me all morning but no school felt right. As soon as the representatives from OCU handed me a show listing for their current season I knew that’s where I wanted to be. They offered me a scholarship and asked if I had applied to the university yet. In a moment of pure wishing I had applied in December and was waiting to hear back. We talked about “Of Age…”

“Wait, who was your co-author?” Cathy Caesar asked.

“Hunter Doohan.”

“Hunter Doohan?” she smiled. “Well, you know your co-author has already been accepted to OCU. You could come together.”

At the time it felt like fate. I knew Hunter was looking at OCU along with a few other places but I didn’t know if he had decided yet.

Fast forward to about a month before our show and I wasn’t so sure anymore. Hunter and another of our friends, Grace, had put down their commitment deposits for OCU as well. That should have made me happy but I didn’t want to be going to OCU just because of Hunter. I also had been accepted to a college in southern Arkansas with one of my best friends, Kelsey. She wanted us to go together. I was torn. I wanted to go to OCU because they had the better program. Didn’t I?

In the end I decided to listen to the advice Hunter had given me so long ago. I thought about what I wanted to do. What program I liked better. Not what I thought my friends, even Hunter, wanted me to do.

I decided OCU which still left the tremendous hurdle of being able to pay for the crazy expensive education. Even with my government aid, academic scholarship, and theatre scholarship I needed more. I had to borrow the $150 commitment deposit from yet another amazing friend, Holly. She surprised me by giving me the money along with a letter explaining that she wasn’t really as religious as maybe she should be and she never gave at offering time but she just felt that God wanted her to give me the money. She didn’t want me to pay her back. At the time I didn’t even know that Holly believed in God.

Then one day Hunter and I were talking about college and I mentioned that I really liked OCU. He asked me if I had heard about the Clara Luper scholarship. I looked it up at school and applied. The scholarship people liked me enough to ask me to come in for an interview. Hunter had an interview too and I was excited for both of us. I went into my interview calm and ready to try to be charming and whatever these people were looking for. We talked about “Of Age…” and my various academic accomplishments and extracurricular activities. Then the questions got a bit more personal. It was my natural instinct to hold back, to not tell the whole story.

I mentioned in passing that I had been trying to figure out all of the college stuff mostly by myself but they weren’t going to let me off that easy. They asked me why my parents didn’t help me.

I had never been asked such a personal question so nonchalantly before. I felt tears build in my eyes. I didn’t want to talk about this. I knew logically that it was okay to tell these people about my double life, I mean, it might even be impressive to them but I was frozen. I knew I only had a second to hesitate before they would question my silence.

I pictured Hunter. It was always easy to talk to him. I pretended I was looking at him and I told them about my parents not ever really being there. I told them about having this desire deep inside to better myself.
and to be more than what society expected of me. I told them quite honestly that I didn’t know what I’d do without the scholarship because having to pay any amount would be too much for my family and that I didn’t know what I would do or where I’d go if I couldn’t go to OCU but that I’d go to college somewhere and I’d keep trying to be more no matter what.

As soon as I said that I felt silly. I was sure that everyone else said that their world would end if they didn’t get the scholarship but I had been talking to Hunter and I didn’t lie to him. That’s when I noticed that the board had stopped taking notes and were all looking at me in this way that made me feel embarrassed and flattered all at once. It was the look people give me when they know my story. I still don’t particularly like the look that is so full of pity and admiration but in that instance I felt like it was a good sign.

“We have one more question for you.” Clint Normore leaned forward and smiled at me. “What do you know about Miss Clara Luper?”

And all of the good feelings evaporated. I didn’t even think to see if she was a real person until I was in the waiting room about to be interviewed and by then it was too late. All I knew was what Hunter had mentioned in passing.

“I know she was involved in the Civil Rights movement?” I chanced. “And that’s it actually. I could have bluffled more but I honestly don’t know anything about her.”

The board smiled more.

“I was only asking because you display a lot of the same qualities as Miss Luper.” Clint reassured me. “She was also passionate and caring and she also came from less desirable circumstances and wanted to better herself. That’s why this scholarship is set up. She wanted to help other young people from lesser backgrounds have the chance to better themselves.”

I was floored and couldn’t stop smiling for the rest of the day.

I got the scholarship.

Sadly, Hunter did not. His family has a lot more money than mine and there was no reason for me to feel bad but looking back I still wish that he would have gotten the scholarship instead of me. He actually seemed really happy for me though and that made me feel better.

By the time “Of Age...” and the whole Elsken-lunchroom fiasco had ended it was time to graduate.

I was getting to the point where I didn’t know if Hunter and I going to the same college was a good idea anymore. He was defiantly my real life Kryptonite. Our relationship had always been strictly professional/friendship based. It would never be a romantic thing but he still had the power to make my whole day better or worse.

I had relaxed comfortably into the shadow of the amazing Hunter Doohan and was content to just be some guy’s partner for the rest of my life. But I had to want more for myself, didn’t I? I had no clue how the next four years would go.

In the end, I didn’t have to worry about how college would affect Hunter and my partnership. Two weeks before the fall semester started he and Grace decided to move to L.A. to pursue his dream of becoming an actor. Ironically enough, it would be cheaper for them to live in L.A. than to come to OCU.

Looking back at everything that happened to me senior year I don’t know how I didn’t have a nervous breakdown or kill someone and this isn’t even the whole story.

I think the point is though, that I made it. I am attending OCU and I know that this school will prepare me for my chosen career path.
As long as I don’t do anything remarkably stupid, I won’t ever have to take out a loan to pay for my education and that’s more of a miracle than anything else that has happened to me.

Hunter and I are still writing partners and are now working on our first novel.

I’m learning to balance the flip sides of the coin that is my life.

The Clara Luper interview helped me see that people want to know about all of my life and Hunter showed me that not everyone will run if I share it with them. I have opened up to a few more friends including Holly and Grace and in them and a few others I have some of the best friends that anyone could ask for. I’m trying to let them see all of me. I hope to keep them in my life for as long as we all are alive and I have a feeling that it will work out that way.

I live on campus and visit my family and friends on holidays (Hunter and Grace even fly in so we can all hang out) so I don’t really have a bad home life to hide. That’s sort of strange but I kind of like it.

It’s too hard trying to keep up with two identities. I don’t know how real superheroes do it.

My life story has a pretty messed up beginning but it is still a part of my story. I can’t edit it out or pretend it didn’t happen. It’s a part of me. All I can do is keep trying to find that balance and maybe while I’m at it, at least for a little while, I can hang up my cape and give being human a try.
“Truth is stranger than fiction, but it is because Fiction is obliged to stick to possibilities; Truth isn’t...It's no wonder that truth is stranger than fiction. Fiction has to make sense.”

Mark Twain

This is a stream of consciousness.

A thought pattern. A writer’s road-map. It’s whimsical—illogical. It’s Suessical, and phantasmagorical. It’s truth, truth out of nonsense, truth in the Subjective. The Subjective is the stream of consciousness—the stream of sub-consciousness that bubbles up into half coherent ideas. And each little bubble floats up to the surface begging “write about me” and then pops on the tip of your frontal lobes like an itch in the windows of your soul. The ideas are on the tip of your tongue, and in the same way, they’re over your head, because the stream of sub-consciousness does not speak English. It speaks you, in your Subjective short hand.

Writing is a translation. You take that muck and gunk and explosive euphoria and you translate it onto a notepad or a computer page. Maybe at first you don’t understand the point, but you keep translating those bubbles and search for patterns and stories that string the ideas like a pearl necklace that you can look at and say “I wrote that.” It makes sense in the end, at least to you. It may be Ancient Klingon to everyone else, but to you it has a soul and a vibe and pure energy that shot right out of your head. Out of your soul, your vibe, your energy.

At first, though, it never makes sense. You’re just thinking and the bubbles rise. You look at the stars and wonder if we’d worship the sun if it was the only celestial body in the sky. You wonder if black holes swallow themselves up to rekindle a new star or go to a backward universe in that Star Trek episode you liked. You gasp and wonder if space is God. You can’t see it. You can’t touch it—it’s a vacuum; it’s nothing—but what if it was God? Then you may be in awe of it and start looking at the sky from an ancient perspective. What did cavemen think the sky was? Were stars just tears in the fabric? Was the black sky the floor of heaven? You wonder if space is round like a planet. You wonder if space is like an electron and this huge thing, this infinite void, God, is just spinning around a greater body...and a greater body...and a greater one. You keep thinking until the possibilities in your head tap out, and you don’t even care about the Science majors that call you loony and tell you what space really is.

You feel small, compared to your ideas. Real small. How can you write them all down? How does little you right down this expanse of the universe, regardless of what form it takes. How do you write a story about flowers, or God, or space, or werewolves or your wacky English teacher. It’s all so big. The bubbles pop and pop behind your eyes like rapid fire, all in complex code. You freeze at your keyboard. You look at the blinking font line and just know it’s mocking you in Morse Code. You hold your pen, something even smaller than you, something that has to give birth to your ideas or you’ll explode. Your Subjective truths aren’t linear. They’re arbitrary and easily forgotten or warped. Your only hope is to write down what you’re thinking.

And think it’s nothing in comparison to the golden obelisk your idea was in your head. But you keep writing. It doesn’t make sense at first, and you hate rereading it because it’s awful and misspelled and grammatically lacking. You imagine it’s your child. You can love it and strap a helmet on its head until it improves or you can be a horrible parent to your striving kid and keep freaking writing because you have a truth to tell and you don’t want the bubbles to stop. Eventually you have a novel, or a poem, or a short story, or maybe even a work of art. It’s dressed up like it’s going to its wedding and you send it out into the world. You turn it
in to your teacher—you submit it to your school publication. You submit it to other publications. You give it
to your mother for Christmas because you’re a broke college student.

But you wrote it. And it makes sense. And you explored all possibilities. And you made something
come to life. It’s yours. It’s intimate. It’s who you are and what you’ve seen. It’s your dreams. It’s your es-
sence and soul. It’s your screwed up little head and it makes more sense than the rest of the world because it
is your Subjective Truth. Your Truth. Your World. So write something. Write on the back of a bar napkin when
you’re too drunk to stand up. Write on the bathroom wall when no one is looking. Write a message to that
angel in your class that makes you want to cry. Write because it’s the only way you get your Truth into the
world and make it Your World.

This is a stream of consciousness.

Whimsical Playtime Amanda Gathright
Contributor Biographies

Brishti Bagchi is a freshman in the Exercise and Sports Science program at OCU seeking a BS in Human Performance.

Anna Bauman is graduating this May with a BA in English and minors in Spanish and Sociology. Her poem is one of those included in her Senior Capstone project, “Nightmares Crave Fairy Tales.” She would like to thank her mentor and constant encourager Dr. Keegan for her influence on this project.

Ethan Berney is a sophomore at OCU and a Cell and Molecular Biology major. He also plays for the OCU varsity soccer team. Ethan is an Oklahoma City native.

Allison Bevers is a Religion major with a minor in Public Relations at OCU. She is a junior from Lindsay, OK.

Ashley Dougherty is a sophomore Creative Writing/Acting major. She is currently working on a novel and aspires to be a professional novelist in the future.

Mollie Dysart, an emerging artist from Oklahoma, says combining craft processes with fine art techniques are her forte. Her merging hand embroidery and non-silver photography reminisce her home in the countryside of Oklahoma. Mollie has been received many awards, and her work has been showcased in two Individual Artists of Oklahoma shows and the Salon des Etudiants show in the Plaza district of Oklahoma City this year.

Emma Foroutan is a freshman Musical Theatre major from Clearwater, Florida. Her favorite hobbies include music and photography. Hers photographs were taken during her junior year of high school.

Amanda Fryar is a junior double major in Studio Art and Education. She was born in Oklahoma City and worked hard through her secondary education to receive the American Indian Scholarship and further her opportunities at OCU. Art has always been fun for Amanda, and it’s that simple. She is very happy with the path she has chosen so far. Amanda says there is always good somewhere; you just have to find it.

Jessica Garvey is a junior English / Studio Art major. She is influenced by illustrators and comic book artists and strives to combine her writing and artwork to tell stories in new and interesting ways.

Amanda Gathright is going to Oklahoma City University for a Bachelor's of Fine Arts in Studio Art and will graduate in May of 2014. She is also president of the OCU Art Club. Amanda’s main focus is painting but she has also been exploring printmaking in the last couple of years. She intends to become a fine artist and work in a gallery after graduation.

Zachary Guevara, freshman from San Antonio, TX, finds influence and inspiration from the books, movies, television, video games, and the friends and family that surround him. Though not entirely sure what direction his film production major will take him, he looks forward to a career filled with creativity inspired and influenced by the same forces that drive him now.

Emily Guthrie is a sophomore double major in Art and English. She is on the cross country and track team at OCU and plans on becoming a collegiate cross country and track coach after graduation. Additionally, Emily plans to publish short stories and novels and hopefully open an art studio.

Jason Alexander Herrera is a junior English major. He has a cat named Alex, a sister named Cristina, and a mother named Beverly. Jason is working toward graduate school. He hopes to become a college professor. He’d love to eventually write and publish cookbooks, short stories and—maybe when he's feeling adventurous—novels.
Courtney Honaker is a freshman at OCU pursuing a BFA in Theatre Design and Production with an emphasis in Stage Management. She has been writing for a while but this edition of *The Scarab* contains her first published work. Courtney enjoys theatre, writing, and referring to herself in the third person. She one day hopes to build a castle on the outskirts of New York City and live there with all of her starving actor friends; or if that doesn't work out, she plans to move to L.A. with her friend Jordan and open a cupcake store.

Theresa Hottel is a sophomore English and Film Production student.

Dr. Abigail Keegan is a Professor of English and Women’s Literature at Oklahoma City University. She has published essays on literature and a critical book queer theory and Lord Byron’s Oriental Tales. Keegan is also a poet and former editor of *Piecework: A Poetry Magazine for Women*. She has published numerous poems and three collections of poetry: *The Feast of the Assumptions, Oklahoma Journey*, and her latest book, *Depending on the Weather*, was a finalist for the 2012 Oklahoma Book Award. She is currently working on a multi-genre book of poems, interviews and photography entitled, *Road Work*.

Danielle Kutner is a senior Political Science and Philosophy double major and English minor. She enjoys writing fiction and literary non-fiction that explores the relationship between art, culture, and industry.

Erin McCoy is from Mustang, Oklahoma, and is a freshman cell and molecular biology major and pre-med at OCU.

Micah McCoy is a senior at Oklahoma City University. His major is BFA in Studio Arts. Micah is excited for his Senior Capstone project this April.

Amanda Meyer is a senior photography major with a minor in studio art. After graduating with a BFA in photography, she will pursue another bachelor degree in art history and a masters in photography. In her rare spare time, Amanda also enjoys baking and crocheting.

Carmen Paquette is a dance major, class of 2016, and likes to use what spare time she has to sing “Bring on the Rain” by Jo Dee Messina into her hairbrush and make survival kits for nature excursions.

Zach Parker is a senior English major with a minor in film studies, who knows about your ADD and if you actually read any of this--mad props.

Jordan Pierce is a sophomore Cell and Molecular Biology Major at OCU. His love and appreciation for any and all things human -- namely art, language, and science -- have led to him explore and crave the intellectually carnal joys derived from performing onstage, writing creatively, and learning about the amazing physical world with which humankind is gifted. He would like to thank this publication for giving him the opportunity to have his work printed, his teachers and professors for creating and nurturing his curiosities, and his family for supporting him in all he does.

Matt Randall is a freelance writer, editor, and social media marketer, which is a professional way of saying he writes blog posts for florists. He is also the co-founder of PegLeg Publishing, a small independent publishing company located in Oklahoma City, and co-editor of *GlassFire Magazine*. His work has been published in *The Muse, The Rectangle, Gentle Strength Quarterly*, and *Entrances & Exits*. Matt is an OCU alum.

Ariel Richardson is a freshman BFA Acting major at Oklahoma City University. Ariel aspires to be an actress in New York when she graduates from OCU; thereafter with the hope of becoming a theatre teacher. You might have seen Ariel in OCU’s production of *A Christmas Carol, The Motherf***er with the Hat*, and *Julius Caesar*.

Daniel Reynolds Riveiro’s life irrevocably changed when one day in OCU’s Learning Enhancement Center he saw a poster for Peace Corps on the wall and then looked them up on a computer when he probably should have been tutoring someone. He now is trying to see the world and save it at the same time. He is 24% of
the way into his goal of visiting every country on earth, something that gets complicated when they suddenly split up (thanks, South Sudan!) or when no one's sure if they are country or not (recognize Transnistria!). He has the extremely pretentious tattoo of "Be the Change" on his forearm and has tried to live that through Americorps (Oklahoma City), Peace Corps (Ukraine), Teach For America (the Bronx) and working with the Obama campaign (Orlando). He is rarely bored.

Alexandra Roy is a Junior Studio Art major at OCU and likes to work with all media. She was born and raised in Oklahoma City. In addition to art, Alexandra enjoys Zumba and photography.

Caitlin Swisher is a sophomore English major at OCU originally from Chandler, OK. Caitlin is a member of the OCU Lady Star’s Golf Team. In her spare time, she enjoys reading, movies, and playing with her English Toy Spaniel, Lucy.

Abbie Vestal is a Junior English major and has been writing short fiction and creative nonfiction for years. It is a passion that she hopes takes her places in the near future. Abbie works hard every year to improve and succeed.

Eric Waltman is a senior film production major in the Moving Image Arts Program. Eric has loved the visual language side of movies for as long as he can remember and has loved video editing ever since his high school broadcasting class. Now, Eric hopes to one day become a professional film/video editor to continue exploring both of those loves. But first he would love to fulfill his dream of screenwriting by going to graduate school at the Houston School of Film and Digital Media in Galway, Ireland, to get his masters in screenwriting.

Rachel Wolf was born in Austin, TX, but has lived the majority of her life in Oklahoma and has remained in Oklahoma City for over a decade. She spends much of her time writing and her focus is primarily on poetry and short fiction, though she is currently working on a novel. Rachel is a freshman working towards earning a double major in English and Film Studies.

Neilee Wood is a senior Cell and Molecular Biology major and an English minor. After graduation, she plans to apply to physician assistant school and work on poetry and fiction.