“A professional writer is an amateur that didn’t quit.”
Richard Bach
It was an absolute pleasure to take over the role of Faculty Editor for The Vanguard this year. The stories, poems and works of art that were submitted by the RCGC community were a true testament to the creativity and talent that resides in our college community.

This was my first year as the Faculty Editor, and I could not have done it without the help of two key people. Professor Lori Joyce’s continued help and guidance, along with her encouragement for her creative writing students to submit their work was key to our success in publishing this year. I cannot thank her enough for her time and for sharing the work her students created with our magazine. The Vanguard also would not have been possible without the help of my Student Editor, Joanna Flynn. Joanna’s dedication, creativity and writing expertise were invaluable to me in this process. She is the perfect example of what hardworking, talented students we have here at RCGC.

This was also the first year that we opened up submissions to the entire RCGC community, not just students. I am truly thankful for the huge response that we received. It is an honor to work in a community of talented students, faculty and staff. Please continue to send your stories, poems and works of art to vanguard@rcgc.edu – we are already looking forward to our publication next year!

Very Best,

Andrea Vinci

English Instructor, Rowan Choice Program
Editor, The Vanguard

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I have never edited anything besides my own papers before, so I’m very excited to have been a part of this. A huge thanks to Professor Lori Joyce and Professor Andrea Vinci for giving me this opportunity! And an even bigger thanks to every student and faculty member who submitted their stories, poems, and artwork this year. I’ve been so encouraged to see how many people still appreciate the value of sharing creativity. Whether writing is your passion or just a pastime, we all have something to share, and I’m grateful that Rowan College at Gloucester County recognizes this and supports us in our creative journey.

In his book On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft, Stephen King wrote, “Writing is a lonely job. Having someone who believes in you makes a lot of difference. They don't have to make speeches. Just believing is usually enough.”

Here at Vanguard, we believe in you. Keep writing.

Joanna Flynn, Student Editor
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Pink Willow Nymph – Digital Artwork

By: Monique Arvelo
I saw her standing there. She was waiting and peering around, searching for something. I quickly looked out the window in fear of making eye contact with her. There was something about her that puzzled me. She appeared despondent. I wanted to know what was wrong, but I felt like I could never ask.

Class went by much too slowly today. I only caught a glimpse of her leaving, but she seemed to be rushing. She wore that same look of despair, I wondered how long she’d been like this?

She was always quiet. That was the main difference between me and Hadley. I didn’t carry myself in the same way. It seemed impossible to portray myself in that light when it didn’t fit who I am. Hadley seemed so sure of herself, while I couldn’t decide what I wanted to have for lunch today. We’d just never crossed paths before, and I guess that’s why we’d never even spoken.

When I walked into class that next morning, my heart was racing. Why am I so concerned about this girl anyway? “Snap out of it, Tessa,” I uttered under my breath as my knees struggled to keep me upright. I got to the door of the classroom, and I held my breath. Remember when I said my heart was racing? Well, now I think it stopped beating altogether. Hadley changed her seat and moved to sit closer to me. This had to be a coincidence. I was trying my hardest to keep my cool, as I sat down to try and decipher why I even cared that Hadley moved her seat closer to mine. I felt so giddy, like I was an elementary schooler again. Do I really want to be friends with her that badly? I mean, we’re 20 years old. It couldn’t be that hard to make new friends. Besides, I had all the friends I needed. Class was starting, and I didn’t know how to act. I tried to distract myself by making conversation and interacting with the professor during the class, but Hadley kept joining in. I get that it’s a class discussion, but why hadn’t she joined in before today? Coincidentally the same day that she moved her seat next to mine, I heard her adding, “exactly” or, “I know exactly what you mean,” to all of my remarks to the professor. Was she really listening to what I was saying? Did she really know exactly what I meant? I sat and pondered these questions for the entirety of the class period with intermittent skips of my heart each time I felt Hadley’s eyes on me. I grew anxious.
with every word I spoke, hoping that nothing came out sounding stupid. I just had to make it eighteen more minutes and class would be over.

I stared at the clock for a few minutes, watching the second hand tick away the minutes. I was disrupted by the sound of our professor’s voice. “Alright everyone, pick a partner,” he said. I tried not to look so eager, but my body jerked around involuntarily, and my eyes met Hadley’s.

“Hey, you want to be my partner?” she asked. My hands were sweating and my eyes were locked onto hers. I stood there with my mouth open for a split second before I realized I needed to answer her.

“Yeah, totally,” I uttered. What had gotten into me? Did she intimidate me? Do I want to be her friend? Why am I feeling so nervous? My head was spinning and my heart was pounding. I was confused, but happy. I could tell that the feeling was excitement, but something else was there.

“So do you want to hang out after school to work on the project?” Hadley’s tender voice pierced through my thoughts.

“Yeah, we can hang out at my place if you want.” The words slipped from my lips before I could even register what had happened. What have I gotten myself into? It’s only a class project, though. It shouldn’t be this nerve-wracking for me. I’m not normally so shy.

Class ended and Hadley and I exchanged phone numbers out in the hallway. The fluorescent lights were beating down on me. They made me aware of the heat rising up my spine. I had hoped she didn’t notice my face beating red with anxiety.

The two of us had attended school together since we were young, but she was a year below me. She gave off the vibe that she just didn’t care about anything. How she did it, I will never know. Every step she took was one filled with ease. I hoped that her attitude would carry over into this project, so we could get it finished in a breeze. I was looking forward to spending time with her, but I was reluctant. I wanted to know more about her. I wanted to help her.

We were walking out of the building as she began to ask me where I lived. I told her my address and some quick directions and she knew right where it was. We stopped walking at the same spot in the parking lot. She
turned to me and her bright eyes met mine. Beautiful green spewed out into the sunlight. She stood and looked at me for a moment while I fidgeted with my keychain. I glanced at her and then looked away as she giggled at me.

“I guess we parked next to each other,” she laughed to me, motioning toward our cars. “Oh look, we have the same bumper sticker, too.” I stood staring at the two candy skull bumper stickers, side by side. I had one because I thought the colors were cool and I had always had an interest in the Day of The Dead, a Spanish cultural celebration. I made a mental note to ask where she got hers.

“Oh my gosh, how weird is that?” I couldn’t come up with anything clever to say. Diverting the awkwardness, I asked, “So you’re really into music, right?” she nodded. “Come check this out,” I said, as I tapped my trunk. She took her back pack off as I said, “Hop in!” She climbed into the passenger seat of my car, and I started up my little piece of metal. The engine squealed, but the stereo began to roar. Bass thumping, she bobbed her head and began to sing along. “Great taste in music, I see. I knew I was going to like you,” I smirked, not realizing what I just said. I liked her, yes, but I didn’t want her to know just yet.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” she joked back, as she playfully elbowed me in the arm, smiling up at me.

“Nothing. Well, I guess I figured you had the same style and interests as me, but I didn’t know that we’d get along so well. I mean, you portray yourself as this person who is careless, yet beautiful and smart. I think I’m just trying to figure you out. Plus you’re going out with that kid Bailey, right? You’ve practically got the whole package, really.”

Hadley laughed a little too loudly and said, “Tessa, you’re going to learn a lot about me tonight. I hope you’re up for it.” I was definitely up for it. That’s what I thought I wanted, right? (Who knows why I wanted it though. I still haven’t gotten that far.) I couldn’t lay my finger on it, but ever since the other day when I saw her sad eyes, I have had this burning desire to get close to her.

We arrived at my house and we both knew we weren’t really concerned about the project. Hadley’s attention was on spilling all of her secrets to me, and I was ready to listen. She began to talk and before I knew it, the sun had set and the cool autumn day turned to a dark frigid night. The curtains on my window blew in the brisk wind, grazing the side of her body. The way she spoke stuck in my mind. I could see her eyes flutter and her nose crinkle when she talked about the things that hurt her. She trusted me with all of this. What is going on? I was
feeling something festering inside of me. I couldn’t recall experiencing this feeling before. Was I afraid? I couldn’t decide.

“So what about you and Bailey?” I chimed in. I didn’t know much about Bailey, but I had heard that he hadn’t treated her the greatest. I just assumed they loved each other and that nothing could tear them apart.

“Well, that’s what I wanted to talk to you about. Bailey and I…”

“Wait… why did you pick me to talk to about all of this? We barely know each other, and, don’t take this the wrong way, but I don’t know why you care about me enough to tell me about your love life. This is just a school project, you know,” I interrupted her.

“Remember how I said you were going to learn a lot about me tonight?” I nodded. “Well, that’s all part of it. I’m not what you think I am,” she grinned and shyly looked away.

Hadley was turning out to be more and more like me. I couldn’t believe what was happening. She became the most perfect person in my eyes. Why hadn’t we spoken before this English class? It didn’t make sense to me. Why did I feel this way? I shouldn’t have felt so strongly for her.

She had this way about her that made me so eager. She made me want to learn and talk and explore. Nobody has ever made me smile the way she has. I wanted to tell her all of these things, but I knew I shouldn’t.

The music playing in the background broke through my thoughts. I realized it had been minutes since I had said anything to her, so I opened my mouth to speak. “So what were you going to say about you and Bailey?” I knew she could hear my voice shaking.

The way she had been talking made me feel like we were supposed to have been talking all our lives. It felt like she was the only one I needed to talk to. It was as if she was a copy of myself, yet so much more than that. She made me see creativity and laughter and beauty in a whole new light. There couldn’t be anyone else to compare. She began to talk about Bailey, and I couldn’t help but shiver as she revealed the truth. She was broken, just like the rest of us. As I looked into her sad eyes, all I wanted to do was take it all away. Her soul could shine through the darkest of days, even as tears spilled down her flushed cheeks right before my eyes.

“Hadley, I had no idea…” I began.
She interrupted me by reaching across my bed where we had been sitting for hours. She wrapped her arms around my waist. I couldn’t possibly have wished for anything else in that moment.

“You know, I think that if it’s meant to be with you and Bailey, it will be,” I added after a few moments of enjoying her warm embrace. I didn’t have the heart to tell her that I don’t think they belong together. She showed so much of herself to me today, and I don’t want to confuse her. She had confided in me and I couldn’t find it in myself to add my feelings for her into this mess. I hoped that she could somehow feel how I wanted her to let go of Bailey.

“Thank you, Tessa. I really appreciate you being here for me and letting me cry in your bed,” she laughed as she sniffed and wiped her eyes with her sleeve. I felt something radiating from her. It was more than her sadness or her relief of sharing her secrets with me. There was heat and electricity rushing through our veins as she hugged me goodbye. I didn’t want that hug to end.

The next morning I walked into school with high hopes of seeing Hadley waiting for me in the hall. I spotted her, not in her usual spot.

“Tessa...I wanted to thank you again for last night. I thought a lot about your advice about Bailey. We talked things out and decided to let fate take our relationship into its own hands,” she uttered with a sigh. She wasn’t happy, but she was trying to smile. I could see fear painted on her face. She looked like she was stuck. I knew that she didn’t want to be with Bailey anymore, but he was the only thing she knew how to love. She was afraid of change. She glanced up at me, flashing me a look that said, “I’m sorry,” as her eyes filled with tears and she started down the hall in the direction of the classroom. I ran down the corridor and busted through the doors. I made it to my car before I let myself explode. Everything I was feeling made no sense at all. Why did I let myself get this way? I felt the anger rush through my bloodstream and the sadness pang in my heart. I turned on my stereo, tears pouring down my cheeks, only to hear that same song that Hadley was singing along to just yesterday. I slammed the steering wheel and the music shut off. I screamed at the top of my lungs as I drove away in silence.
She loved spinning yarns. She could sit by the fire telling stories until even the embers started shivering in the cold night air. Her name was Casey Jenkins, but we all called her Starlight. I remember the first time I met her. It was at the church picnic. My family had just moved to this small town of Pedrickton from the suburbs of New York City. The year was 1903, and I was six years old. I didn’t know anyone and wasn’t about to introduce myself either. But Starlight bounced up to me and said,

“Hi, I’m Starlight. That’s what my mama called me. If my nickname wasn’t Starlight, you’d call me freckles, wouldn’t ya?” She didn’t pause long enough for me to answer. “Well you’d be wrong, because these aren’t freckles.” She pointed to the dots winding around her arms and splattered on her face. “They’re starlight. Ya see, the day I was born a star exploded in the sky, and little bits of starlight got stuck on my skin. They’re all faded now, so they look like freckles. But they’re not. They’re starlight.”

She ran away right after that, leaving me standing under the cherry tree in my new Sunday dress. That whole day I kept close to my parent’s side, no matter how they urged me to go play with the other children. I was a shy girl at six years old, the exact opposite of Starlight, who flitted from person to person without a care of what they thought. Her auburn hair was an unruly mess and she ran barefoot. But wherever she ran, the rest of the children followed. Maybe something about the starlight on her skin drew people to her.

The next time I saw her, I was on my way to school for the first time. School had already been in session a month and I wasn’t looking forward to joining. I had begged my parents to let me stay home. I had even drawn red dots all over myself to convince them I had smallpox. But my mother just scrubbed them off, gave me a lunch pail, and said to be on my way.

So I went, with much trepidation. I walked as slowly as I could up the hill to the one room schoolhouse. As soon as I saw it, painted brick red with its large brass bell, I hid behind a tree. I thought about running home, back to New York. I was planning all the supplies I would need when a voice above me said, “Whatcha doin?”

Starlight swung down from the branches of the tree. I jumped and dropped my lunch pail.

She cocked her head to one side and bent to pick up my pail. “What did you do that for?”
“I didn’t do it on purpose,” I mumbled, taking the pail from her outstretched arm and turning to go up the hill.

“Hey, wait! What’s your name?”

“My name is Laura,” I stammered, “Laura Jean.”

A big smile broke out across her face, squishing her brown eyes. “Hey now, that’s a pretty name. Are you going to school?”

I nodded.

“Hey me too! Let’s go together.” She drew her arm through mine and led me up the hill, chatting the whole time about mice, cheese curds, and anything else that flew into her head. When we reached the steps leading into the building, she turned to me, suddenly serious.

“Laura Jean, do you promise to be my friend?”

I took a step back and clutched my lunch pail. Her brown eyes bored into my green ones. “I, uh, I think so?”

She hugged me. “We’re going to have so many grand adventures!” She put her arm through mine again and we walked into the schoolhouse. And that is how I became friends with the girl called Starlight.

---

That day on the schoolhouse steps marked the beginning of a new chapter in my life, because all of our lives are stories. At least that’s what Starlight would tell me. We’ve been best friends for five years, and I don’t know what I would do without her. She introduced me to all the girls at school, and her unspoken rule was, “Like me, like Laura Jean.” And everyone liked Starlight.

She was no end of trouble, though. Once, she told us that she had jumped in a puddle and ended up in China, where she had made friends with the emperor. Of course it sounded ridiculous, but she said it so sincerely, we all believed her. The next day it rained, and we all spoiled our shoes and dresses jumping into puddles to see if we could find China on the other side.
When we trooped back into the schoolroom, Teacher had us stand in front of the fire to dry, and wouldn’t let us sit until we told her who started jumping in puddles first. Starlight was unashamed. She smiled boldly at Teacher and told her, “We were trying to find our way to China.” I wished she would bite her tongue, but there was no stopping Starlight once she started.

Teacher stared at her. “You were trying to find your way to China?” she repeated, dumbfounded.

“That’s right. Last week I jumped in a puddle and it sucked me right down and spit me out in China. I talked to the Emperor and everything!”

Teacher narrowed her eyes. “Casey Jenkins, come forward.”

From where I stood, I could see the ruler in Teacher’s hand. Starlight couldn’t. So she stepped forward, and as kindly as she could, said, “Please, Teacher, call me Starlight.”

Teacher’s face was hard as she pulled out the ruler. “Casey, place your hands on the desk.” I saw Starlight’s eyes go from teacher’s face to the ruler and her shoulders slumped. But she closed her mouth and put her hands on the desk. “Count aloud please, class.”

*Smack.* “One.”

“Let this be a lesson to Casey, to not make up falsehoods.”

*Smack.* “Two.”

“Let this be a lesson to the class to not listen to falsehoods.”

*Smack.* “Three.”

Starlight’s eyes began to water. “Let this be a lesson to everyone to never-”

*Smack.* “Four.”

“Ever-”

*Smack.* “Five.”

“Disrespect your teacher.”
Starlight’s tears were flowing freely, and some of the other girls had begun to cry just by looking at the raw, red lines on Starlight’s hands. She looked around at the class, and then to Teacher, who stood cold with the ruler clasped in her hand.

“You may sit down now, Casey.”

Starlight stared at her for a moment, with a look I had never seen on her face before. It was a mixture of hurt and hatred. But then she turned and walked away. She walked past her desk, past my desk, and into the coat room.

“Casey Jenkins, where are you going?”

Starlight didn’t answer. She only looked back, with tears still staining her face, and smiled. Teacher’s face was an unholy white, with red blotched on her neck and cheeks. She slapped the ruler against the desk, snapping the ruler in two. “Casey Jenkins, come back here this instant.”

The only answer was the slam of the schoolhouse door. We all watched her retreating figure from the window, and I could see it in all the faces around me. We were all cheering.

The moment school let out, I ran to where I knew I would find her. I climbed to the loft of my family’s barn, and sure enough, she was asleep on the hay. I plopped down next to her and she opened her eyes. They were still wet.

“I don’t understand, Laura Jean. What did I do that was so wrong?”

I bit my lip and thought. “Well, I guess Teacher doesn’t like it when you make up stories.”

Starlight sat up and stared at me. “So you think I made it up too?”

I laughed. “Well of course! You can’t actually get to China by jumping through a puddle. It’s all just pretend.” She turned and looked out of the open loft doors, onto the fields still wet from rain. That’s when it occurred to me. “It is all just pretend, right Starlight?”

She turned back to me with a strange look in her eyes. “Yeah. It’s all just the town. Her shoulders slumped and she walked slowly, so unlike the Starlight I had met five years ago. But those five years had taught me so much… about life, about Starlight, and about myself.
I was no longer the shy girl, too afraid to introduce myself to others. Now I had learned to see myself differently, to not care what others thought if my hair was unruly or I ran barefoot. Starlight had taught me that.

And what had I taught her? That it was all just pretend.

But it wasn’t just pretend to her.

I stood up so quickly I saw spots of color play across the hayloft, but I stumbled to the ladder and climbed down. I took off across the field barefoot and in my still-muddy dress. I felt my hair pins come loose, but I didn’t stop to fix them. I ran until I found the small wooden house on the edge of town, the one Starlight and her father lived in with a collection of stray dogs and unwanted cats. I didn’t even bother knocking.

I opened the door and climbed to the top floor, then slid out a window onto the tin roof. She liked perching high above the ground, to be closer to the stars. I sat down next to her and let one of the cats curl into my lap.

“Starlight, tell me a story.”

She turned to me. “Why do you want to hear it if it’s just all pretend?” There was a slight quiver in her voice.

I searched for the right words. I looked up into the darkening sky, where a few stars were already shining. I looked at them and smiled. “I want to hear the story of Starlight,” I said. “Will you tell me that story?”

She inhaled slowly, as if she hadn’t breathed in far too long. And then she told me her story. It was the story of a girl who loved spinning yarns. She could sit by the fire telling stories until even the embers started shivering in the cold night air. Her name was Casey, Casey Jenkins, but we all called her Starlight. Because the day she was born, a star exploded and bits of starlight got embedded in her skin.

That’s what her mother told her the night she died. Her mother pointed to the sky and said that when a good soul dies; they become part of the stars, to light the sky for the good souls down below. And if she had bits of starlight in her, they could never be separated.

Starlight’s mother saw magic in everything, and gave her daughter that gift. They could both see the impossible, and help others see it too. Starlight had helped me see it. It was never pretend. It was magic. It was bits of starlight embedded in our everyday lives, to help the good souls see in the dark.
Melting

By: Erica Ramnarine
The Monster You’ve Become

By: Courtney Eckstadt

Back when I was young, back when I was “dumb”
Back before I realized, the person I’d become
Back when I had no reason to live my life in fear
Way, way back before I ever filled my face with tears
I’d cheer, and I would yell, and I would always wear a smile
My mother always watched, because she loved her youngest child
But when I wasn’t looking my mother would turn around
And start to walk a different path I’m glad I never found
But one day when I looked for mother, I could only stare
As mother had become a picture of my worst nightmare
I’d yell and scream, and say “Mommy, please! Tell me what you’ve done!
Between me and the monster, I demand that you choose one!”
The monster wouldn’t listen though, all it knew was harm
The monster loaded needles up, and stuck them in her arm
The monster made my mother always act like I was dumb
She never thought I knew, the monster she’d become
She’d tell me, "Honey, it's okay. We'll play again tomorrow"
But as I found a bed to lay, I’d hang my head with sorrow
I sat and cried when mother died, but then when she came back
I came to see the monster side of her would stay intact
Looking back it's hard to frown, on something I was taught
I'll never do this to my kids, I won't amuse the thought
I'll never turn my back on them; I'll shower them with love.
I’ll never be the monster that my mother always was
I jump awake, heart beating faster than a jackhammer, vision blurrier than it was when I went to bed after a few drinks last night. My clothes are soaked, my long, dark hair sticking to my neck and shoulders. I feel around for my dog, Sid, and he’s lying right by my feet like he does every night. What happened? What woke me up? I have this feeling of dread that I can’t seem to shake. I get up and walk through my dark, lonely apartment towards the bathroom. I feel around for the light switch and flick it on. Someone’s standing in the bathroom and I scream. Sid comes running into the bathroom, growling and ready to attack. It’s just me. It’s just my reflection in the mirror. I let out a small chuckle, feeling silly that I scared myself. I pet Sid and encourage him to go back to sleep. I open the creaky, spider-cracked bathroom mirror and grab my sleeping pills. I toss them back with a gulp of lukewarm tap water. I hear a loud bang. I’m falling.

***

“Cass, that guy over there keeps staring at you. Do you know him?” my best friend Zoey asks me.

“He’s probably staring at you,” I think to myself. Zoey has a tall, slim, model-like body and beautiful, curly blonde hair. Compared to my 5’5” slightly overweight self, she’s usually the one getting all of the attention from guys when we go out. She’s actually rejected so many guys in town that we have to constantly switch up our “normal” bars that we hang out at every weekend. It’s starting to get hard to keep track of which guys go to which bars, so that she can avoid them as the mood strikes. “No, I don’t know him,” I tell her.

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I open my eyes. I smell the thick, saltwater air. I look around and see houses whizzing by in the darkness. My clothes still feel damp, but I’m shivering. I feel around and notice that I’m lying on cold, rusted steel. I try to lift myself up by my trembling arms, but I’m chained down. I realize that I’m lying in the back of a pickup truck. The engine roars as it speeds down suburban streets. I wonder where we’re heading. The saltwater smell is getting stronger and the air is getting thicker. I can tell that we’re getting closer to the shore. I try to turn my head enough to see inside of the windows on the back of the truck’s cab, but they’re too dark for me to see through.

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We continue to talk about work, ignoring the man across the way who is still staring at us. I swirl the green olives around in my martini, using the little plastic sword that bartenders stick them on. Isn’t it funny how that works? It’s like when you have a memory that stabs through your heart and then leaves your head spinning for the rest of the day.

I remember when we met. He was so kind; he was such a gentleman. I was at a wedding for a coworker and I didn’t know anyone there. Zoey had skipped out on it to go skiing with her victim of the month. I was sitting alone at a table while everyone was dancing. He approached me with the friendliest smile I had ever seen. He put his hand out and asked for a dance.

“Oh, I don’t dance,” I told him with an awkward grin.

“How about a drink then?” he smiled back. I took his hand as he led me to the bar where a man with a strong Italian accent was serving drinks.

“I’ll take a glass of your finest Merlot,” he told the Italian man.

“And for your lovely lady?” the Italian man gestured towards me, causing me to blush.

“I’ll just have a martini,” I tell the Italian man.

He handed me my drink and we sat in silence for a moment, sipping on our drinks, watching the other guests dance the night away.

“So, what’s your name?” he asked me.

I hadn’t realized that I was zoned out. The sound of his voice startled me, causing me to jump and spill my drink down the front of my black lace dress.

“I, uh - it’s Cassie,” I told him as I frantically looked around for napkins to dry myself off. He reached over an older couple, who were sitting at the bar, and handed me a stack of napkins.

“That’s a beautiful name,” he told me as he watched me blot the front of myself after squeezing the tequila mix out of the ends of my hair.

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I open my eyes, tears falling like a tidal wave of grief. I realize that I had fallen asleep. The truck stopped. It looks like we’re in some sort of parking garage; there are concrete beams everywhere, cars parked all around. How long was I asleep for? I lift myself up without a struggle. I’ve been released from the chains. I look around at the seemingly empty car garage. Aside from a few cars parked near the truck, I saw nothing. I don’t think we’re near the ocean anymore; wind gusts around but it doesn’t smell like saltwater. I climb out of the old, rusty truck and look over the ledge. It seems like we’re on the top story, or very close to it. I look down to see if I recognize where we are, but all I can see in the dark night is a few abandoned buildings and what looks like a small city in the distance. And then I see it - parked right outside of the parking garage: a red 1961 Chevy Impala. Just like his.

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My doorbell rang. “He’s 20 minutes early!” I said to Sid as I hurried out of the bathroom to quickly get dressed. Ding dong!

I cover my face as I opened the door, “You’re early!”

“I couldn’t wait any longer to see you,” he told me as he gently pulled my hands down from my face. “You look gorgeous.”

“I don’t even have my makeup on yet,” I said, feeling my face start to flush. I pulled him inside, showed him to the living room where he could wait, and ran to finish getting ready. It had been five months since the night we met and I still couldn’t bear to let him see me in my natural state.

I finished getting ready and out the door we went. He opened up the passenger side of his fire-truck red Chevy Impala and closed it behind me. Although the car was clearly an antique, nothing about it felt old. It was his pride and joy once it was passed down to him from his grandfather.

We talked and laughed as we were going down the highway. Since I met him, I felt like I was floating. Like there was this constant sparkle in my eye that I couldn’t get rid of. I never would have dared to try. I couldn’t help but think that he felt the same. He was just like me, always smiling. He had gotten used to my awkwardness, and I had stopped trying to act like I had myself together. It was clear to him that I didn’t, but somehow, he made me feel like that was perfectly okay.
We were going 90MPH down the highway. The windows were down and the cool ocean wind was blowing around our hair. Suddenly, the world stopped. I felt the car spin, I heard the tires screech. I heard a bang. And then I heard a crack.

I opened my eyes and looked over at him. His eyes were closed, his forehead bleeding. I screamed his name, but to no avail, he didn’t answer. I shook him while screaming louder than the sirens outside of the car. I felt an arm reach around me. There were voices in the distance. I couldn’t leave him.

“Ma’am, you need to get out of the car. Let me help you. Does it hurt to move?” I hear a man say. I ignored him. I kept screaming but he wouldn’t wake up. He didn’t budge. I felt a second arm wrap itself around me. Despite my greatest efforts to resist, I was pulled out of the broken window. I felt the cold, jagged glass slice into my leg. Lights were flashing everywhere. I felt someone wrap a blanket around me and sit me down. They were examining my body while I was examining the car. I heard a woman say that I was in shock. She handed me a pill and a water bottle.

When I woke up, I was in the hospital. Zoey was sitting beside my bed, glowing from the fluorescent light shining behind her, makeup smeared down her cheeks.

“Where is he?” I asked her. She shook her head and began to cry.

“You’ll be okay. I’m right here with you,” she told me as she reached for my arm. I quickly pulled away from her and demanded answers. “Tell me where he is. What room is he in? Is he okay? Zoey - I need to know. Where is he?”

***

I see a light and I run towards it. Once I get past the doorway where the light was projecting, a heavy concrete door slams shut behind me. I keep walking. I hear an ear-piercing buzzing noise. The light gets so bright that I can barely keep my eyes open. I hear talking in the distance. “Hello?”

It’s Zoey. But who was she talking to? She turns around and looks at me. She’s a glowing, flawless goddess. Why is she here? Who brought her here? Who brought me here? “Zoey, what hap--,” she interrupts me. “Welcome, Cass. I’ve been waiting for you. We have been waiting for you.”
“Who is we? What are you talking about?” I ask, panicked. I think back to last night. That man who was staring at me; could he have had something to do with this? Did he break into my house? Did he kidnap me? Did he kidnap Zoey?

I hear a man’s voice coming from behind her. My body starts to shake. “I knew it was him,” I think to myself. Zoey steps aside and there he was. It wasn’t the man from the bar. It was him.

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I lost the love of my life that night. We never actually said it, but we both felt it. It was never something that we felt had to be said out loud. I was never someone who daydreamed about being in the arms of a person that I loved. Not until I met him, anyway. It wasn’t until I met him that I laughed so hard that milk shot out of my nose. Or smiled for so long that my cheeks cramped up. But despite the pain, I would still keep smiling. Now, I felt like I would never smile again. The thought of laughter felt like a distant memory, despite the fact that I was laughing with him just a few short hours ago.

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I stare in disbelief. “Y-you were gone. They told me you were gone,” I say to him, tears welling up in my eyes. I didn’t know what else to say to him. I must still be dreaming. There’s no way that this is real. It’s been months. I saw the car. I saw his lifeless body in the car.

“I was gone. But we’re together now,” he says as he cautiously steps closer.

“Zoey - what is this? Where are we? What happened to me? I was in my bathroom. I couldn’t sleep so I took my medicine. The next thing I know, I was chained down in a truck.”

“Cass, calm down. This is going to be a lot to take in.”

“Going to be? We’re way past that. This is a lot to take in. This is more than I can handle,” I say as I gasp for air. I look back at him. His perfect hair. His adoring eyes. The sparkle that I remember so vividly. I cautiously reach out and touch his hand. It’s warm and familiar. I never thought I would be able to touch him again.

He looks at Zoey with a worried look on his face. “Do you think she’s ready?”
“Now or never,” Zoey says with a grin. “Cass, listen to me. You died. The man from the bar followed you home. He broke into your apartment and he beat you to death.” I stare at her blankly. “You believe in angels and devils, right? Cass, I’m the Angel of Destiny. I was put into your life to ensure that you followed your destiny. It was never his destiny to die in that car crash. It was never your destiny to go through all of the heartache and pain of being without him. He is your destiny. You are his destiny. You were both destined to be together, in life or in death.” I feel myself hyperventilating. How is it that I can’t get enough oxygen even though I’m dead? How was I unaware that I’m dead? Why does it seem like I’m the last to know?

“I’ve been waiting for you. After all of this time, I waited. I couldn’t move on until I had you here with me,” he says as he reaches for my hand.

“How did you know that I would be coming?” I ask him.

“Zoey has been keeping me informed. When she told me last night that the man who was destined to murder you had been at the bar, my soul was crushed. I didn’t want this for you. I wanted you to live, even if it was without me. When it happened, I could actually feel it happening. I could feel the life leaving your body, but then I felt my soul begin to heal,” he said with tears streaming down his face.

While my mind is still spinning, I realize that I feel complete. I feel more complete than I have in months. I feel the sparkle in my eyes. I feel the cramping in my cheeks. I feel the tears of joy dripping down to my chin. The night he died, I thought a part of me had died forever. But here I am, ironically enough, feeling more alive than I ever had before.

I smile at Zoey and thank her. I take his hands and entangle his fingers in my own. I pull myself into him and push my lips against his in a way that I never have before.

The bright light and loud buzzing noise comes back. We pull away from each other to cover our ears and tightly shut our eyes. When we open our eyes again, Zoey is gone and we are no longer trapped in by the concrete door that had shut behind me. “Mission accomplished,” he says to me, smiling. We take each other by the hand and run down the endless flights of stairs. When we get outside, he opens up the passenger side of his fire-truck red Chevy Impala and closes it behind me. Windows down, wind blowing our hair around, we head for the city. This is the start of something new and beautiful. This is our destiny.
Humanoid and Wolf

Artwork by: Hunter Hampton
I pointed the gun toward the boy in front of me. We were standing behind a grassy hill where nobody could see us. On the other side of the hill were dead men, no matter the state of their breathing. The metal machine shook in my hands and trying to get it to steady was futile.

The boy only watched me. He didn't raise his gun or move a muscle. His expression was something between fear and relief. I took a deep breath and tried to remember everything I was taught in training, but my mind drew a blank. It always did. Even during school I would forget the information taught before test day. But this wasn’t school. This was war. And to think about such trivial matters like school while pointing a gun at another boy's face was almost laughable. Almost.

“Kill me!” The boy’s voice echoed, but was drowned out by shots and explosions not too far from where we stood. I jumped as if his voice was scarier than the war going on around me.

“You’re the enemy.” I spoke out loud. I don't know why I said it. Maybe I needed to remind myself of what was going on. Of who he was. Of what he and his people had done.

“Kill me!” he responded.

“You’re the enemy.” I moved my finger to the trigger, ready to shoot. My hands were still shaking but not as bad.

“Kill me!” I aimed at the boy's chest and then at his face. He looked me dead in the eyes. I closed mine.

“You’re the-”

“Please.” I opened my eyes and looked at the boy. His voice had gone soft and he was now kneeling on the hard ground, hands behind his head. He closed his eyes and whispered, “please,” one more time, but quieter. He nearly mouthed it. I put my gun down. I couldn't kill him. I knew that before I even put my gun up. I couldn't kill him, I couldn't kill anyone. I didn't have it in me.

“Get up.” My voice was strong as if for the first time in my life. I was sure of what I was doing.
The boy opened his eyes and tears rolled down his face. I walked over to him and pulled him up. We stood face to face even though he was slightly taller than I was.

“I'm not going to kill you and you’re not going to kill me. We need to get out of this.” I searched his face to see if he was even listening to me. He had no emotion. Nothing.

“Can you hear me? I said we need to get out of here. Now.” Still nothing. I turned around and ran my hand through my brown hair.

“For f***’s sake say something! I can’t be here. If you’d rather sit here and wait for someone to come and blow your head off then be my guest, but don't let me sit here guessing.” Finally, the boy looked around and pulled me off into the woods to our right. I tried to get out of his grip, dragging my feet and pulling away, but he was much stronger than me. Eventually, I gave up and I traveled silently behind him for about twenty minutes before he stopped, looked around, and sat on the ground. As he sat, he let go a sigh of relief. I looked at him a long while and then sat down with my back against a tree. The shots of the battlefield were distant, yet constantly echoed through the lush, deserted forest. Most of the trees were spread apart enough for travelers to walk through, but there was no sign that any had. Not since the war started at least. I was even surprised to see that the forest hadn’t been completely burned down by that point. It was only a matter of time.

“Name’s Aaru,” the boy, Aaru, said into the sticky air, as he nonchalantly picked his nails like there wasn't a war going on around us, and I wasn’t about to kill him twenty minutes before.

“I’m uh- I’m Leo.” Aaru looked up at me and smiled. He actually smiled.

“Nice to meet you, Leo. If the situation weren't as bad as it is, I would give you a handshake, but we might have to get moving and you did try to kill me so...I’ll hold off.” Then he went back to picking at his nails with the expressionless face he had back at the hill. I didn't say anything at all. I thought it would be best if we stayed quiet because we had to listen out for people coming our way. Or at least I thought we did. Aaru decided it was a nice time to take a nap and laid his head on a small patch of moss. I rolled my eyes and decided I would stand watch until dark. Then I would wake him up and we would get a move on.
Being the watcher wasn’t hard at all considering I couldn't sleep anyway. I made sure to keep an eye on Aaru just in case he was faking and was trying to kill me. He wasn't. He stayed asleep on his little moss pile while I looked around. The gunshots and explosions started to die down and the forest got quiet. The sky was a battle between night and day and night was winning. Its dark forces moved across the now orange sky, taking over and making it surrender. Soon enough, the sky was the night's territory. I listened to the silence for a few more minutes until I was sure no one was around us. I stood up, picked up my pack and my gun, and stared down at Aaru. He was sound asleep. I could have left him. I thought about it. If I left on my own and my troops found me, I could just say I had gotten lost, or I was taken and got out. If I left with him and someone found me, I could be killed. They would say I was a traitor and then kill both of us on the spot. I examined my gun. I could kill him. Maybe if I did it while he’s sleeping, it wouldn't bother me as much. He’s already at rest. If I hit the right spot he won't feel a thing. I moved the gun around in my hands and thought about my options.

“If you’re going to kill me, can you please get it over with?” Aaru opened one eye, looked at me, and closed it. I sighed and put my gun away.

“Let's go. We have to get out of this forest. We’re too close to the battle scene. There are probably troops from both sides scattered through this place. We just have to find a way out.” I said the last part more to myself then Aaru.

“Where are we gonna go?” I shrugged. I had no idea, but I knew we couldn't stay. I knew I couldn't stay.

After a while, we made a plan to walk straight ahead for an hour in hopes that we would find civilization. If we didn't find anything, we’d just camp out wherever we were. I took the lead on our voyage with my gun in hand, ready to shoot, or pretend to shoot, at any moment. Neither of us spoke at all. We let the crickets do the speaking. They sang for us as we wandered the depths of the forest, hoping we would see the end with every step. It wasn't long before the hour was up and despite the hour passing, we got nowhere. It felt as if we walked in circles. Everything in the forest looked the same and there was no opening to a new life, no civilization, no anything.

Aaru put down his backpack and began to unload for the night. I did the same and got out a blanket and the canned beans Marcos gave me before we went out. Marcos. My mind went back to that moment in battle. The invisible bullet going right through his head. His brains and blood being splattered all over everything around him, including me. I peered down at my clothes, still spotted with his blood. I was disgusted yet never wanted to throw
the shirt away. Marcos was the only person I knew that understood me. He understood that I couldn't kill and didn't ask me to.

He was going to protect me. I looked up at Aaru. His all green outfit disgusted me. A man in the same uniform killed Marcos. My Marcos. Anger rose inside of me. So much that when Aaru tried to light a fire, I hurled a rock at his hand. He retracted it quickly and glared at me.

“What was that for?” I opened my can and got a spoon out of my bag.

“No fires. We don't want anyone knowing we're here.” Aaru seemed to buy my lie. It wasn't necessarily a lie though, we couldn't have any fires. He rubbed his hand and sat back against his tree. I watched him for a while as if he were my prisoner and I had to make sure he wouldn’t escape. He didn't. Aaru just sat there and stared out into the darkness of the trees. I glanced in the direction he was gazing to see what was so interesting. There were only trees for miles, so I went back to my beans.

“Why didn't you kill me?” Aaru’s voice came out of nowhere, but it didn't scare me as it did during our standoff. I shrugged.

“I don't know. I guess I just couldn’t. You would have been my first.” When Aaru didn't say anything I looked up at him. The moonlight hit his face in a way that made him eerie. The line of his jaw was shadowed and the darkness around his eyes made them appear sunken in. Did he always look like that and I just never noticed? Aaru’s mouth hung open like he was dead. Then, he smiled and he looked deranged. I didn’t know how his face would have looked in the sunlight, but the moonlight made him look mad. I reached for my gun and put it in my lap.

“You wouldn't have been mine.” That was all he said. He was still grinning as he said it and then went into a full blown laugh. I jumped at that and gripped the handle of my gun. He was laughing hysterically. I was pretty sure he would have started to cry if he continued. He did continue and he did cry. At some point his laughing cry turned into actual sobs and then into nothing. When he was done, Aaru looked over at me gripping my gun. He looked at his own and picked it up. I moved my finger slightly to the trigger. Aaru stood up, walked over to a big rock about five feet away, and put his gun down. He glanced at me, then sat back down at his tree. I did the same. I wasn't going to shoot anyone anyway. We were both quiet for quite some time. I hadn't finished my beans and was just stirring them with my spoon. I looked at Aaru. He was staring into the darkness again.
“Hey,” his eyes moved in my direction. “Want some beans?”

He nodded. I walked them over to him and sat down against the tree next to him. Aaru ate as if he hadn't eaten in days. It didn't dawn on me that maybe he hadn't. When he finished, Aaru laid down on his side and closed his eyes.

“Aaru,” I said, my voice carrying out through the void of the forest. Aaru hummed back. “We’re gonna get up at daybreak okay? Get an early start on getting out of here.” Aaru hummed agreeing, so I went back to my side of our ‘camp’ and laid down.

To say that I woke up the next morning would insinuate that I had fallen asleep, which I had not. I’d stopped closing my eyes because every time I did I saw bodies dropping to my left and right. I’m not even sure I stopped blinking. Aaru slept like a baby from what I could see. He didn't fidget or move in the slightest bit. His eyes didn't even do that move thing they do when someone is in their dream sleep. Maybe he didn't dream. The moment the sunlight had come back to take its throne from the moon, I sat up, ready to move on. I had my pack and gun ready before I coaxed Aaru into getting up. It was like my mother trying to get me up for our religious days. Another trivial thing to be thinking about when faced with war. Eventually, Aaru got up and we walked for three hours in hopes that we would get somewhere. The first two hours, my mind was completely out of that forest and back to training. The first person I met when I stepped onto the field was Marcos. He was one of the older men of our group and was assigned to teach me how to fight - how to kill. Somewhere along the line, after the training went from shooting dummies filled with rice, to killing moving targets like bunnies, Marcos realized that I wasn't cut out for the war. He talked to me in our tent one night, asking me if I knew what I was doing and if I wanted to go through with everything.

“I have no choice,” I said, my fully loaded gun shaking in my hands. I hadn't had the courage to kill the poor puppy they sat in front of me that day. Marcos told me I had a choice and that as a human being with free will I could get out of the war. I could walk away and he would protect me. Despite his pep talk, I didn't walk away from any of it, but it did help. Marcos became not only my mentor, but my friend. He was the one that was going to get me out of that war alive. He was going to be my savior.

Around the second hour of my travels with Aaru, I got tired of being silent.
“So,” my voice boomed out my mouth and echoed. Somehow I’d almost forgotten what I sounded like.

Aaru kept his eyes forward. “Why did you join the war?” He glanced at me for a second then quickly turned back to the endless army of trees and dirt in front of us. There wasn’t a clear path so we zig zagged in and out of the trees.

“You had a choice?” Aaru asked casually. I let his words sit in the air for a moment. Technically I had a choice. I did. They told me I could either sit and die a cowardly death because the enemy was coming to get me and my family, or I could die an honorable death on the field. I didn't want to die at all, but I could tell I didn't have a choice in the matter.

“No. I thought you might have,” I tried to sound as casual as he was. Aaru shrugged.

“It’s the right thing to do, right?” Again I let his words sit, but for longer this time.

“I guess. But how do you justify it?” Aaru raised an eyebrow.

“Justify what? War? You can't justify something that doesn't make much sense.” I thought he was right, but that wasn't what I was talking about.

“Killing someone. How do you justify that? You know, like to yourself and to the world? We’re just allowed to do it because someone told us that someone else was the bad guy? What about someone who kills someone as protection for them or their family? Those people go to jail some places. Are we supposed to justify the killing to ourselves and the world by saying we’re better than them for protecting whole countries instead of a few people?” This time Aaru let what I said hang onto the sticky air. I wished he would say something every minute he did not.

“Yes.” I wanted to ask more about Aaru, but I wasn’t sure if I should. He didn't seem in the mood to talk, but then again he hadn't since I met him.

“You have a family back home?”

“Mother and sister,” he said plainly. I nodded and looked behind us. It really didn't look like we were moving at all. Why did all trees have to look so similar?

“I have a mother and a brother,” Aaru didn't even nod. Maybe he wasn't in the mood to talk. The conversation dwindled down after my sad attempt at small talk, and we traveled in silence for the rest of our trip. After the third hour, we sat down and I took out another can of beans to split between Aaru and me. It was still
morning, so the sun wasn't yet at its highest peak and a cool morning air still surrounded us. Mornings always made me feel refreshed and reborn, but that morning I felt no different than the night before. I looked at Aaru and felt like I was really looking at him for the first time. He had brown hair and brown eyes, like me, and his face was rather plain, but foreign. My gaze moved to the green suit that hung over his rather skinny frame.

From his face I could tell that he wasn't always that skinny, but the war had gotten to him. The green suit was what bothered me the most. I had been taught to hate that suit and there I was sharing my beans with someone who wore one. Aaru didn't seem like the guy I was told about. The guy that would come and kill my family. He had a family of his own.

“What’d they tell you about us?” I blurted out before I could even think about what I was saying.

Aaru did his usual shrug, “You guys are the bad guys and we have to get rid of you. Probably no different from what they said to you, right?” I nodded and Aaru shrugged again. “It’s all the same. The wars, the generals, the soldiers. All the same.” I knew Aaru was right, but something deep inside of me, somewhere that had been trained to think a certain way, thought that my side was the good side. I had to be on the good side.

We walked all day without saying another word to one another. When the night hit, and it hit hard, we stopped at the sound of a twig snapping and leaves crunching. A sound like that would have been considered normal had there been any animal in the forest, but we were all alone. Or so we thought. The crunching of the grass and twigs was coming from more than one thing. Suddenly an orange flickering light was in the distance and chants in a language I could only recognize as the enemy’s echoed in the forest. The flickering orange light began to spread rapidly toward us, engulfing everything in its path. The chants got further away as the fire got closer. As I stood there shocked, Aaru grabbed my arm and pulled me to the right. We ran, our feet racing the flames, until we finally reached the end of the forest. When we got out in the open, both of us dropped to the ground, the flames reaching the edge as well. I caught my breath quickly and stood up.

“Those people are disgusting! They’re all crazy!” I screamed toward the fire and the enemy who birthed it. I could feel the heat of it on my sweating face. Aaru glared at me.

“Those are my people.” My head quickly snapped toward him. For the first time in a while, I saw him as I did when we first met. The enemy.
“What?”

“Those are my people,” he said louder and slower. I couldn't believe he was defending them.

“They almost burned us alive!” I screamed. Aaru spoke over me.

“They were probably trying to flush out the forest,” he said matter-of-factly.

“And you’re standing up for them?” I continued.

“I’m not standing up for anyone. I’m just saying, you talked about all of them and I’m one of them.” I shook my head.

“No. You're not. You’re—”

“One of you?” He paused and then blew a breath from his nose. “Seriously? You don't see it? I look just like them. I am them. No matter how long I stay with you or how I act, I’m still one of them. They’re still my people. My family still resides in their care.”

“You're better than them. You’re nothing like them.” Aaru rolled his eyes.

“We can't deny where we come from. I’m not one of you. You can try to fix your brain to think I am, but at the end of the day, I still have on a green suit and you have on your brown one and we are on opposite sides of this war.” I couldn't believe my ears. I wiped my face and opened my arms.

“You going to kill me then?” Aaru’s face lightened. “Are you? Because, that's what your people would do. If you were one of them, you would kill me. Right here, right now. On the spot.”

“So would you.” I put my arms down and ran my hand through my hair. Aaru sighed.

“Look, Leo, I think I have to go back.” I looked at my feet. Even though we barely spoke and had met a day ago, Aaru had grown on me. I didn't want him to go back. I didn't want to be alone.

“They’ll kill you.” I tried not to sound like I was choked up. If Aaru noticed, he didn't say anything.

“Your people or mine?” I looked up at him then. My face probably looked like a dirty, bloody, wet mess.

“Either. Both. I don't know,” Aaru blinked a couple of times. He didn't say anything. The crackling of the fire went on in the background.
“I’ll tell my people I got lost. You’ll be safe. I promise.” My mind went to Marcos. Aaru is my Marcos.

“Why are you leaving? Why are you going back into that cycle of bullets and death? We got out. We got away! You don’t need to do this. I need you not to do this.” My eyes gave out every single tear I had ever wanted to shed since I’d been thrown into war. Tears for me, tears for Marcos, tears for every soul on the battlefield, and tears for Aaru. Through the blur, I could see Aaru crying too. We both sobbed quietly, but then I started to laugh. We were both crying at the end of the endless forest that was being burned to a crisp and a war going on around us, and we laughed. Hard. It all seemed so surreal. Like a movie and someone would be yelling cut soon.

All we had to do was turn to our right and we would have been at the end of it all. I just couldn’t believe it, so I laughed. Aaru started to laugh too. We were both laughing with bloodshot eyes and blood stains on our clothes while people were being shot and houses were being burned down. We laughed as the fire spread and people screamed for their lives. We laughed because it couldn’t have been real. It shouldn’t have been. Two boys from two different sides of the universe came together and found something to end every war ever. We knew those things could conquer all. We knew it. I knew that’s why Aaru had to go back. His mother and sister needed him. He had to get back to them, but I didn’t want him to go. He was my Aaru and I didn’t want him to go.

After we finished laughing and crying, Aaru told me that he would find me again once the war was over. At any cost. He would search the world to find his best friend from the other side of the universe. I smiled when he said that because I knew he meant it. I told him I’d wait for him and then he was gone. He walked through the trees and disappeared. I didn’t cry again. I didn’t have to. I knew we would see one another again. I had a gut feeling. My gut just didn’t tell me how we would meet.

It was a week after he left. I finally made it back to my own camp and noticed how little people we had. I didn’t ask where they all went because I had an idea. I walked over to the tent Marcos and I shared and took out my belongings. I looked at his side, all neat and clean, waiting for his arrival. I smiled, remembering him and then walked out of the tent. To my surprise, two large men were waiting for me. They told me that the general wanted to see me and they led me to his tent. Once I stepped in, I saw him kneeling in front of the general. His eyes were bruised and barely open; he had cuts and gashes all over his face; and both of his legs were broken. I almost threw up when I saw him. The general was standing behind him, one hand on Aaru's shoulder and the other behind his own back.
“How?” That was all I managed to say. No other words would form in either my brain or my mouth. The general grinned and patted Aaru’s shoulder.

“War’s over, kid. We found him on our land trying to scamper back to his side,” he let out a hearty laugh, smiled at me for a long while, then placed a gun in my hand and whispered into my ear.

“Your traitor told us everything and he has nothing left to live for. We made sure of that.” The general smacked my shoulder and strode out of the tent with his men following. I turned the gun over in my hand and looked at Aaru. He was practically dead already and that was my fault. I knew I shouldn’t have been with him and I knew what the General wanted me to do. The question was could I do it? Aaru struggled to keep his head up to look at me. He knew I had a gun and knew that I couldn’t leave the tent without it going off.

“Kill me!” his feeble voice was loud with emotion. I bit my lip and looked at the gun. “Kill me!” he let out again. A familiar voice, one that I hadn’t heard in a while, echoed through my head.

He’s the enemy. A chill went down my spine. Remember, what the enemy did. He’s the enemy. I pointed the gun at Aaru’s head. He kept his eyes on me.

“Kill me!” This time, my hand wasn’t shaking. I took slow breaths as hot tears rolled down my face. He’s the enemy! Do it!

“Please.”

In that moment I knew exactly what the word enemy meant. I knew it was a perspective and should be treated as such. Standing in that room, looking at the boy who ran away from the war with me, I knew that he was not my enemy. The enemy was in my head. It was brainwashing me, making me think horrible thoughts and try to do horrible things. Standing in that room, looking at the boy who saved me from myself, I knew that we were all just silent names in an unforgiving universe. Some on completely different sides of it. And every once and awhile, two names from two different sides collide into something beautiful; something powerful; something that could end the world. In that moment, Aaru and I were just silent names, hoping to get to the same side of the universe.
Letters to You  
By: Charlie Yahara

Finding ways to get hurt one day after another
But at the end of each day you always cared for your mother
Although you thought she was annoying cause her care was to smother
But looking back on it now, you'd never ask for another
Cause raising you was raising hell, but she'd do it again
Cause back then, back when, you didn't care
Your mother was both parents cause your dad wasn't there
And you just laughed thinking back to all the times he was scared
Cause where the f*** was he when you were waking up with nightmares
And where the f*** was he when you were acting out in school
Where was he when you were acting like a fool
You didn't care because, despite it all, you thought he was cool
Saw him from time to time but he was more like a friend
He let you do whatever you wanted since age ten
And since being like him had always been your dream
You could handle your liquor before you were fourteen
And you would sit and drink alone with a face full of tears
Cause you no longer wanted to be him after all those years
You had to be your own man with a pen and a pad
As your only way of growing up and facing your fears
By: Sofia Kolojeski

The train to somewhere rumbles along the rusty tracks, jerking us passengers with it. Speeding along at a good pace, it’s eventually going to stop—I just don’t know where. I know my stop and that’s all I’m really needing to be concerned with. There is a dull vibration in the background that hurts my head. It’s pounding, my head that is. I haven’t eaten much all day since I left the house. Hopefully, it won’t matter in a short period of time.

I glance around me. People are scarce within distance. There’s an older businessman (I can tell by his suit) and there’s an older woman talking to herself a few seats ahead of me. I sigh. I sit back. My head is still pounding with a million thoughts racing each other to see which one will kill me first. They run back and forth, back and forth. The same ones. Things I don’t want to, can’t bear to remember, shut off, close the door, throw out the key. The old, silvery scars on my forearms tingle. The feeling of a snaky fear ropes and coils in my gut. I clench my fists and pop some headphones in hopes to drown the thoughts. It’s then that I turn to the window and watch as the buildings and houses and tunnels shrink.

I don’t notice when she sits down at first. I’m too absorbed in my head and the window. As I glance over for a split second, I see that she’s there. Silently, I curse the heavens because this journey was to be taken alone. She smiles at me. I try to smile, but I remember I haven’t brushed my teeth and I forgot to shower. Did I even brush my hair? As I stare into her eyes, they’re a dark brown, similar to mine. The only difference is I call mine feces brown. Hers remind me of a caramel. Dark, but with a twinge of color.

“Hey there!” Her voice is warm and friendly, and accompanied by that sweet smile. I know despite my title I’ve ironically given myself as an “artist,” I realize that I cannot seem to paint a smile on. I swallow hard.

“Hey…” my voice is a whisper, a hoarse type of sound. I again curse the heavens for sounding like I never learned the English language. My head squeals in disgust. I flinch ever so slightly for only me to know.

“Headed home? I hear the trains have been running late today. Lucky us I suppose, managing to catch this one on time?” She must be in the businessman category, based on the ways she speaks. I give her a once over, never moving my head to see her skirt, blouse and heels. Her hair is down. I figure most people in business wear their hair
in tight buns. Now I notice her hair is curly as mine, only lighter. I don’t see many people like her with hair like mine. I give her a brownie point for natural looks.

“Yeah. Lucky us,” I mutter. She looks like she’s about to win an award. I look like I’m about to throw myself to the wolves. In a way I suppose I am, just instead to the train tracks.

“Where are you from, love?” Her smile has shrunk, to only a tiny curved point in the corner of her mouth.

“Oh…nowhere,” I say, looking down.

“Nowhere? Never heard of that place!”

Is she for real? I resist the urge to roll my eyes. That response was like a “Dad Joke,” the ones my father would tell for stupid humor to make us laugh at the dinner table. It worked. He could always bring the laughter to any situation.

“I’m coming from a few towns over. I’m going to the city,” it sounds like a good lie. It comes out so smoothly. I’ve practiced, as most artists have. I used to love the city anyways.

“Nice! Me too! I’m going to a conference in the Revel Building. I’m nervous, but very excited. Things have been quite a journey for me lately and I’m grateful that I’ve been blessed with this opportunity,” her face lights up in a smile as she talks. She’s excited. I don’t blame her, as a matter of fact, I envy her. Way back when, I used to foster the same joy. As a matter of fact, it wasn’t super long ago. Time is warped in my head, so it feels like another dimension to me.

“What are you doing there? Sounds like a cool thing to have going for you,” I add, trying not to squash her enthusiasm. I don’t really need to know, but I’ll admit I’m curious.

“I’m a clinical therapist. I never imagined myself here in this spot in life, but it’s happened. I’m going to hear from some of the experts in the field and treatment program leaders. I love hearing stories of inspiration. I want to inspire someone the way I’ve been inspired.”

My stomach drops. She sounds like me. Or the old me. Before everything, my dream was exactly that. In those words. Back when I was still in love with the idea of hope, I said “No one else is going to suffer like me! I want to make sure no one has to feel the way I’ve felt and to make sure they know the light as well!” Yeah, right. I
want to laugh. Not the belly-laugh that my dad had elicited at the dinner table, but the scoff, the pity at myself and what I used to think.

“Sure sounds like you’ll do a good job,” I choke out. It’s all I can muster up. My throat clenches, and I feel a familiar pricking at the corners of my eyes. No. Absolutely not. I cannot, will not, and choose not to cry in front of this stranger who seems to know how to tug at my heartstrings unknowingly.

“Thank you! By the way, what did you say your name was?”

“Eleanor.” Thank God my voice stays level and doesn’t crack. I rub my eyes.

“Ellie? Or Eleanor? I know a lot of women prefer Ellie. Makes it feel more modern I suppose. It’s a beautiful old name.”

“Ellie, actually.” How the heck does she know to ask that? Every adult I’ve met refuses to call me by my nickname because it, “ruins the nature of the name.”

We stay silent for some time. My head begins to whirl again. I feel envious of this woman. I always had my future planned out for me, the things I wanted to do, the places I wanted to go. But it’s all gone now. All of it. All the hope, all the dreams…everything. It makes me angry that this “disease” this “illness” (that’s what they all called it, every treatment place, every doctor, every therapist) became a part of me. I guess one could say I became my own darkness and demon. I call it a curse. An old family curse. My mother had it, her mother had it, and so did hers. I think about how no one talks about it. They tried to get me to talk about it, but I refused. Why should I spill my deepest darkest fears, my hatred for myself to strangers?

My parents love me no matter what. My sister does too, but she doesn’t always know what to say. I know that much is true. But I also know, they’re all tired. I’ve spent their money on these places to “help me get better,” the medication to hush the voices that tell me I’m no good. I’m a washed up headcase. I don’t want to make them cry, but do I have a choice? I’ve made them cry time and time again. The first time they carted me off was the first time I ever saw my dad cry. He told me he loved me and that it was going to be okay. It wasn’t. I went away three more times after that. He learned there was no use crying over spilled milk that was drowning itself. My mother learned the same. I think I make them angry and wonder what they did to deserve a daughter like me. I learned to keep myself in a shadow, since that’s all anyone wants to see anyways.
“Ellie?” Her voice breaks through my thoughts.

“Yeah?”

“What’s in the city that you’re going for?”

“Um…” I panic, because this conversation is going into the danger zone, the place I haven’t prepared for.

“I-uh, I’m going to meet up with some friends there. We’re going to the museum.” Bam. Perfect cover-up.

“That sounds really nice! But I don’t think that’s entirely true…”

“I’m sorry-what?” My heart begins to flutter.

“The station near the museum was two stops back. We’re not near there at this point. Are you sure that’s where you’re off to?”

I sit in silence. I don’t get busted often, but when I do, it’s never pretty. The times my mother asked me questions, the monster inside me reared its ugly head. It clawed its way up my throat and screeched out the terrible words at her. The times I ditched school, the time I lost all the weight…this is one of those times.

I can feel it so clearly. The monster. It’s pushing itself through my organs and up my throat and I feel bile rising and its tail settling in my stomach, stopping me cold.

“It’s not your business, quite honestly. I don’t know why you’re even concerned about where I’m going. Go worry about one of your headcases, instead of a stranger on a train!”

“Ellie, you may not be one of my patients, but you need help. You look like a ghost. Have you eaten today? Hell, does anyone in your family even know you’re on here?”

“No because it doesn’t involve them! So please, for the love of God just let me be! I don’t need help-I’ve been told I need help million times except no one has been able to cure me so good riddance!”

She doesn’t speak for a moment. I hush quickly because I’ve slipped and said too much. Maybe I scared her off. I almost believe I have. And in that moment the monster takes triumph in its glory. Only for a moment because like me, she always has an answer.

“Nobody can cure you, honey…if that’s the way you go around living your life, I don’t think you’re going to enjoy it. I know that maybe it’s hard for you right now, but this isn’t your purpose. Listen to me, please…”
I suddenly feel the wells filling up once again. I try to open my mouth, but I feel a heavy lump taking shape. I close my mouth.

“You’re sick. You’re sad. You feel hopeless. But this isn’t it. This isn’t where it ends. You’re going to go places,” she says, her voice empathetic and kind.

“You don’t know anything,” I say, and I feel it unleash. It happens all at once. The tears start flowing, hot and steady.

“Oh, but I do. I sat here. This seat, quite frankly. I never told anyone about it. I asked why people like me were here? Why are people taken from us so suddenly and sadly and leave us behind? Why are we allowed to live in a world where people don’t understand, and where our heads try to kill us? They should be a place for daydreams, songs, laughter, joy…but it doesn’t always happen that way. I thought that I wasn’t going to be missed. But I said it before, I’ll say it again; this isn’t where it ends. Your story is still writing itself.”

I continue to cry, my body wracking with sobs. She’s right. It isn’t fair. I can only count on one hand the time I cried this way. The first time was when I took too many pills, and the second was when my friend died of a heroin overdose. It hurts, it aches, but it releases.

“I don’t understand. I will never understand why it had to be this way. I was fine. And then I wasn’t!” My body is wracked with sobs and cries; I can barely utter a word.

“You don’t always get the answer you’re looking for, Ellie. I’m sorry that it’s this way too. It’s a shame that we lose the people who matter most, including ourselves. Trust me, it gets better. You don’t have to scar yourself up to feel okay, you don’t have to lie, you don’t have to be okay all the time, and most of all…you don’t have to die.”

I cover my face. I longed to hear those very words. Nobody ever told me that stuff straight up. It felt like I had to hide all the time and pretend so that they’d be okay, even if I wasn’t.

“You’re going to go places. I know that for sure. You think you’re going nowhere. Untrue. That road is closed. Done. Finished. The only way from here is up. Please, please, listen to me. You aren’t a waste, and to many people, you’re important. Get rid of the goodbye letter you wrote to your family. It’s not time yet. The reason you
survived this long is because we aren’t ready to go. ”She wraps her arm around me. I lean in. I sniffle and wipe my eyes on my sleeve.

“Ellie. Your name means light. You know that, right? Be someone’s light in the dark. That’s what you’ve always wanted to do anyways. You can do that. You will do that. I know you can. But most of all, be your own light.”

I stop for a second. It hits me. Light. My name. How did she know what it meant? Not too many people know its meaning in Greek. And wait, we? What is we?

I immediately stop crying. Why did she look familiar to me? She had my curly hair and my eyes, only with a spark.

“Your name…what’s your name?” My voice comes out strong and confident. I feel as though I know, a gut feeling, an instinct…

She lifts her sleeves to show silvery scars up and down her arms, identical to mine.

“You can call me Ellie.”

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**Life Year**  
**By: Liza DeStefano**

One year of devastation.  
One year of recreation...  
One year raw tears flowing.  
One year flowers still growing...  
One year a million miles.  
One year still have smiles...  
One year hard to believe.  
One year thick as thieves...  
One year made it through.  
One year stronger because of you.
I sit by myself at lunch for several reasons, the main one being that all the other interns talk about plants. I mean, we all work at Longwood Gardens, one of the most prestigious public gardens in America, but unlike the others, I’m not here for the gardening experience. I just do this internship because I get paid, I get room and board, and it’s close to my community college. While the plant nerds talk about topsoil and root balls and tree bark, I sit at a table by myself and think about Chopin or Mozart, which was what I was doing the day I met Annabeth.

My first impression of her was a little frightening. I looked up from my soup to find the tallest woman I’d ever seen was striding towards me. She wore the green sweatshirt and name tag ensemble that marked her as Longwood staff and a matching hairband holding back a cloud-like halo of hair. From a distance, she looked like a senior staff member coming over to chew me out about something (which happens more frequently than I care to admit).

I tensed up, hoping this was not about me yelling at the plants this morning, while I was trying to put up lights for the Christmas display. It’s not technically against the rules, but some of the gardeners are a little weird about how the plants are treated. In my defense, however, Christmas lights and bamboo should never mix, especially when you’re 5’2” and have no ladder.

As she drew near, however, I could tell that the woman was more nervous than I was. Her posture was uncomfortably straight, and she sat down stiffly, like she was in a job interview or something, taking off her glasses for a quick polish. Now that she was right in front of me, I realized that she looked about my age, though she was more than a head taller than me, maybe two, even sitting down.

“My name is Annabeth—Gaines,” she said. “And I was just wondering—I’m sorry for interrupting you—are you—you seem to know about music? I’ve seen—I mean, not on purpose, but I’ve seen you—you know, your sheet music, homework. During lunch, I mean.”

I relaxed. I guess this isn’t about the bamboo after all. “You got me,” I said, holding my hands up in mock surrender. “I am indeed a Music Education major moonlighting as a gardening intern.”
Annabeth squinted at my name tag through her glasses. “Parminder?”

“Call me Mindy,” I said, and then, trying to joke: “The only person who calls me Parminder is my mother. And whoever made this name tag, apparently. So, are you a Music major too?”


*Um, okay?* “Like, right now?” I asked. “I’m not done with my soup.”

“No, no.” Annabeth leaned forward and clenched her hands together tightly. “Not now, I mean. The whole conservatory closes at—six, so, after then? Later maybe. Nine is good—everyone has usually vacated the building. We—we can meet at the main entrance.”

She looked to me questioningly, like she needed me to affirm what she just said.

I did a quick mental recap—strange girl wants me to meet her in the conservatory after hours to discuss a music-related problem. That doesn’t sound suspicious at all.

“Sure,” I said. “That sounds great.”

Annabeth was already waiting for me at the main entrance when I arrived. She unlocked the doors and let us into the dark east conservatory; the lights were off for the night, and the tallest trees, mostly palms, stood silhouetted against the stars sparkling down through the glass roof like Christmas lights. I didn’t have time to admire anything, though—Annabeth took off without preamble, forcing me to do that awkward short-person speed walk to keep up with her long legs.

Here at Longwood, my job title is “Conservatory Guest Engagement Intern,” which implies that I guide tours around the Conservatory and should therefore know my way around it. I don’t. They took me on a tour when I was first hired, but I can’t remember a thing. To be fair, the conservatory is massive—it’s basically a giant maze of interconnected indoor gardens opening into greenhouses, all designed to let guests lose themselves in the beauty of plants—but I got lost three times in my first week here without even leaving the two rooms I work in. I’ve been here three months now and I’m still never sure that I’m going in the right direction. I guess I just have a terrible sense of direction around plants.
As Annabeth led me deeper into the labyrinth of greenery, I gave up all hope of ever finding my way out on my own. I stayed close to Annabeth and tried not to jump at unexpected plants looming out of the dark, hoping Annabeth wasn’t leading me into some bizarre gardener prank.

“So, where are we going?” I asked as we entered a hallway, passing under massive hanging baskets that hovered like vultures in the air. The temperature cooled slightly. (Each room has a different climate suited to the plants inside; that’s one of the few things I remember from my tour). “Not to sound paranoid or anything, but this isn’t a trap, right? You don’t seem like the kind of person to play pranks, but I could be wrong.”

We were hit by a sudden wave of humidity as the passage ended in a room with walls festooned with flowering orchids, looming out of the dark ghost-like flowers. We stopped, and Annabeth stared at me for about five seconds before blurting: “I’ve discovered a talking Sarracenia Psittacina.”

I had no idea what a Sarracenia-thing was, but I had the feeling that it wasn’t something that was usually capable of talking. “A what now?”

“A talking Sarracenia Psittacina.” From what I could make of her face in the starlight, Annabeth looked like she couldn’t believe I didn’t know what she was talking about.

“Okay,” I said, holding up a hand. “Let’s back up. I’m guessing that you’re talking about a plant?”

Annabeth nodded.

“And it talks,” I said.

“I mean, not technically, not yet, but it makes vocalizations in a manner no plant should be capable of—”

“Oh, I said, before she could nerd out on me again. “Okay.” She didn’t look crazy, but I guess you never can tell, I thought. Probably best to just play along. “That’s like, super cool, but you said you needed my help with music.”

“I do!”

“I’m gonna be honest with you, okay? I don’t know sh** about talking plants, beyond watching Little Shop of Horrors like, five hundred times. Okay? I barely know sh** about regular plants. My job here is telling people where the bathroom is and yelling at kids running in the Children’s Garden. I do people, not plants.”
Annabeth’s face worked oddly. “I—just let me show you, okay?”

I shrugged. We left the ghostly orchids and continued through another room and into a passage so dark that I promptly walked into a raised bed. While I flailed around and cursed, Annabeth went ahead to put on a light, and I staggered over to where she stood over a small display of strange plants. Even I recognized that they were carnivorous plants—Venus fly traps, pitcher plants, the like.

Annabeth crouched. “This is the *Sarracenia,*” she said, pointing carefully at a small plant partially submerged in a wet spot, each slender, red, tubular leaf ending in an odd bubble shape. The sign beside it identified it as a pitcher plant. I vaguely remembered learning about these in third grade or something—plants that eat bugs. If I remembered correctly, bugs crawled into the hollow, tube-like leaves, got trapped, and were digested at the mercy of the plant.

“You could have just said that it was a pitcher plant,” I grumbled.

Annabeth ignored me. She fished around in a pouch on her belt and produced a dead fly, which she teased into the mouth of one of the plant’s pitchers with a toothpick.

There was a brief silence. For a second, I wondered if Annabeth really thought she was hearing things—like, auditory hallucinations or something.

Then, suddenly, there was a sound. A gravelly, musical rumble, undeniably coming from the tiny pitcher plant; two consecutive notes, first a higher, then a lower. A pause. Then again, the two notes. My brain stopped for a second while I tried to process what was happening. *It can’t be a microphone,* I thought, *not that small, not that loud. An actual singing plant?*

It wasn’t until the third repetition that I realized that I knew what the plant was singing.

“Oh my God,” I said. “You taught him Ed Sheeran! He’s singing “Perfect”!”

Annabeth stuttered. “I didn’t do it on purpose, I listen to music when I’m working, and he must have caught on to the repetition of the word perfect—in the song, I mean, at the end of each chorus he sings—”

“RRRRRrrrr,” interrupted the plant, with impeccable timing.

I was still mentally reeling, but somehow, a plant singing Ed Sheeran made a weird sort of sense in my brain, like,
oh, I guess if I were a singing plant, I’d sing Ed Sheeran too.

“Well we obviously have to name him Eddie,” I said.

Annabeth looked up at me, the light above my head glimmering gold over her dark skin. “It’s a plant. It doesn’t need a name.”

I slide down the doorframe to sit next to her. “That’s non-negotiable. I’ll teach him to sing, but only if you let me name him Eddie. I mean, that, or we could go Little Shop of Horrors and name him Audrey II.”

Annabeth’s brow furrowed. “If you insist,” she said. Then, as if with great effort, she softened her expression. “Thank you—for helping, I mean. I’ve been studying it—I know it only vocalizes after it’s had a fly—but I wanted—I’d like to do botanical research someday, I’m in the Horticultural Research program and everything and—”

“A singing plant is a hell of a jump start into the research community?” I guessed.

Annabeth nodded. “I’d like to compile more data before I submit anything—and—it’s not technically my plant. I’d like to learn what I can before word gets out. Be the leading expert. You’d be listed as a contributor, of course.”

I glanced over my shoulder at the plant, now as quiet as if it had never sung. “Now that will look good on a resume.”

. . . . . .

Over the next few weeks, I visited Eddie nearly every night. Sometimes I worked with him, although I will admit I had no idea what I was doing; sometimes I had to do homework, but I brought my phone and played music on shuffle, figuring that at least Eddie would get some exposure to a wider variety of songs. Annabeth was usually there, clattering away on her laptop, while I taught Eddie scales or attempted to teach him vocal tone. We quickly learned that Eddie either refused to learn pronunciation or wasn’t equipped with the necessary anatomy to form consonants; however, he was able to learn vocal techniques, his range was truly astounding, and he could pick up a tune like nobody’s business. I started out with “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star,” thinking that it would be like teaching the preschool music class at my other internship, but once I realized that his ear was so good, I got him singing everything from jazz to German opera by the next week. I would sing or play songs in the style I wanted him
to learn, and after a few repetitions, he would mimic it perfectly.

I was totally geeking out, of course—I had a plant that could sing literally anything I wanted—but Annabeth was more interested in how he was able to learn than the fact that he could belt out high notes better than Sarah Brightman. She tried to explain it to me on several occasions (or rather, spewed scientific terms in my general direction without warning) but her semi-coherent science–babble sentences were as incomprehensible to me as her shy stuttering.

“It doesn’t just respond to audible stimuli,” Annabeth said, hunched over her computer. “It responds to verbal cues in a way that implies that it is capable of some form of higher thought and has some understanding of oral communication. If only there were some way to determine the presence of an encephalon and examine its function—”

“I’m gonna stop you there,” I said, as you do when the word encephalon enters the conversation. “I didn’t understand anything you said after verbal stimuli, Annie, can you dumb it down for me?”

Annabeth huffed. “It understands you. When you—like now, when you told it to stop, it stopped. It doesn’t just hear the word stop, it responds to it. It knows that the word stop means stop. It’s sentient, somehow, like a cat or a dog.”

“Ah,” I said, looking at Eddie. He did not look like a sentient being.

Annabeth continued. “I can’t determine anything without examining his brain, though, assuming he has a brain. Even if he had a brain, it may be radically different from a human brain. It may be some form of pseudo-brain, even.”

“Hey, don’t say that about our child!”

“It’s not our child, Parminder.”

. . . .

I was at the main entrance, trying to give directions to this old lady—the sort that has tattooed eyebrows and smuggles her chihuahua into the gardens in her purse even though pets aren’t allowed. I don’t like chihuahuas, or old ladies for that matter. This woman wasn’t overtly rude at first, but she stopped me in the middle of a sentence to stare pointedly at my name tag and say, “Parminder—that sounds like a masculine name!”
I started to explain that Parminder can be a girl’s name and that I generally go by Mindy, and all that other stuff I tell old white people who feel the need to comment on my name. Just then, however, the radio on my belt came on.

“Hey, Jeff here, I’m in the orchid house and I’ve had several people complaining about a disembodied voice singing Elvis Presley in the Fern Corridor. Could someone check that out? I’m pretty tied up here.”

Eddie, you little shit, I thought. I grabbed the radio out of my belt, ignoring the woman’s indignant huff. “Mindy here, I’m on it. Probably just kids pulling a prank, you know?”

I shoved the map into the woman’s arms with a brief apology and strode off as briskly and professionally as my short legs would allow. I fished my phone out of my pocket as I passed the children’s garden, dodging damp, squealing youngsters as I dialed Annabeth.

“Hey,” I said when she picked up. “Don’t panic but just a heads up, Eddie must have eaten a fly because he’s singing his heart out in broad daylight and may have startled a few guests but I’m going to be there in like two minutes to stop him and it’s going to be fine, okay? No panicking.”

Annabeth panicked. “I can’t get out of lab!” she wheezed.

“Did I mention that I’m going to take care of it?”

“Please don’t let any of the exotics gardeners hear him!” she begged.

I pretended to huff in annoyance. “Well, there goes Plan A.”

“Mindy, please!”

“It’s going to be fine,” I said, trying (and probably failing) to sound soothing. I quickly avoided a large group of elderly ladies toddling through the fern passage. “I’m almost there. I just wanted to let you know what was up.”

I hung up in the middle of another panicked outburst from Annabeth as I came to the carnivorous plant display. A growing number of people milled about the passage, looking behind fern fronds and peering up among the hanging baskets. They were all talking loudly, but I could still hear Eddie’s unmistakable voice growling out the tune of “Can’t Help Falling in Love” above the noise.
“Alright people!” I shouted, waving my arms like I was shepherding sheep and doing my best to sound important and official. “Move along, please! This is just a practical joke played by one of our interns and we ask that you cooperate and stay clear of our efforts to locate the perpetrator. Please exit the fern passage and continue your tour of the conservatory!”

A few of the kids expressed their disappointment loudly. One of the teenagers tried to convince me that I was a “Weak, Helpless, Female” and needed a “Strong Man” to protect me, but he left without much protest when I fixed him with my specialty Parminder Kaur Laser Eyes™. I couldn’t really blame them for wanting to stay—a disembodied voice singing Elvis Presley was infinitely more interesting than a bunch of plants their teachers were probably forcing them to see.

When the crowd had mostly dissipated, I leaned over the carnivorous plant display and pretended to fuss with the soil. “Shut up, will you?” I hissed.

Eddie ignored me and continued to belt out the chorus, his tiny body quivering slightly with the effort. For such a small plant, he was astonishingly loud.

“Hey!” I said, and then more quietly, “hey,” as a young couple walked past, casting me curious glances. I waited until they reached the far end of the passage before finishing my reprimand. “Eddie, my sweet, sweet son, I know you’re stoked about that fly you just ate, but you can’t sing about it right now, okay? You need to stop.”

Eddie reluctantly ended the song with a gurgle. Once I was sure he would stay quiet, I hurried back to the East Conservatory before my supervisor started to wonder if I’d gotten lost again.

That night, Annabeth ambushed me at dinner. “Is everything fine? You got him to stop?”

I nodded; my mouth was too full of salad to talk.

Annabeth slumped in her chair, nearly upsetting her tray of food. Her head lollined back on her shoulders, relief stamped across her face. “I was so worried,” she whispered. “I was so worried—I even forgot—I called it ‘him’, just now, didn’t I?”

I swallowed. “Annabeth, are you still going to give up Eddie when you’re finished with your research?”

Annabeth said nothing; her eyes were fixed on the ceiling, like she saw something up there that worried her. “I’m not sure. He’s not mine to keep, though.”
I clenched my fist around my fork for a moment before setting it down, carefully. “Let’s steal him,” I said. “Let’s not give him up. Let’s keep him a secret.”

Annabeth’s head bobbed upward. “What?”

“I said, let’s steal him.” Now that I’d said the words, I was determined. “It’s not hard to get in there—I mean, we do it every night, almost. How hard would it be to just replace Eddie with another pitcher plant? It wouldn’t technically be stealing—just, you know, replacing. And then he’s ours.”

Annabeth’s expression made me think she was going to shoot me down, but then she said, “Sarracenia Psittacina is relatively easy to purchase. Online, I mean.”

It was nearly Christmas the night we liberated Eddie, huddled together as we hurried to the conservatory through the biting cold. The icy wind sliced into us like a knife, piercing through our coats. My eyes watered; the Christmas lights on the trees smeared together as we passed. I cradled the plastic box with Eddie’s replacement to my chest while Annabeth fumbled with the keys. We tumbled together through the door.

“This is the most illegal thing I’ve ever done,” Annabeth panted. I don’t think she realized she was clinging to me. I laughed, shaking from cold and adrenaline, not about to admit that this was also the most illegal thing I’d ever done. We shook off the heavy weight of the cold and started through the dark conservatory.

Eddie was singing “It Came Upon a Midnight Clear” when we reached him, quietly for once, almost like he was serenading himself to sleep. He didn’t protest when Annabeth gently dug around his roots and pulled him from the ground. I put him in the box, still singing, while Annabeth planted the replacement. Even when I put my gloves on, I could feel the vibrations of his voice through the box.

“You’ll let me visit him, right?” I asked Annabeth as she put the shovel back under the display. “As his other mother, I have visitation rights. Plus I still have half a Puccini opera to teach him.”

Annabeth rolled her eyes, and I thought I caught a grin. “He’s not our child.”

“Yeah, right,” I said.

Eddie softly began to sing “Perfect”.

THE VANGUARD
Painting

By: Erica Ramnarine
Lucy put her key in the top lock and turned it slowly as she eased the door open, always hesitating before crossing the threshold. She listened quietly before stepping into her home. Lately she was never certain as to what was waiting for her behind that door. Sometimes singing, mostly screaming, and occasionally, silence. The silence was always a sweet relief. When you live with a drug addict, their attitude on any given day tends to determine the mood of everyone else under the same roof. Some days Lucy stayed in her room for hours at a time, submerging herself in homework and books, college applications and scholarship essays. If it kept her from crossing the war path that was her older brother, the seclusion was worth it. It sure beat walking on eggshells every time David entered a room, or placating him to maintain temporary peace, as her parents did. It didn’t even occur to them that they were attempting to put bandaids on gunshot wounds. This was life as she’d known it since she was roughly twelve years old. An endless cycle of toxicity, inconsistency and no sign of long-term change. Was the dynamic healthy? Absolutely not. Then again, insanity rarely is.

She made it safely to her room without incident and sighed deeply as she flopped onto her bed. Deadlines raced through her mind as she tried to determine what to do and when. As she listed them in order in her head, she absentmindedly reached under her bed and pulled out a shoe box tucked in the very back corner. She then opened it and peered in at a small stack of books. She took out the third from the bottom. Inside, a chunk of the book had been cut out to create a secret compartment, there she kept a thick envelope. She stuffed a five-dollar bill into it. She’d had to get extra crafty with her hiding spots once David began stealing her paychecks. These days, any time she had extra cash on her, she stashed it away. Her “freedom fund”, she liked to call it. Lucy was mere months away from obtaining her associate degree, which she’d fought tooth and nail for over the past three and a half years. Balancing school, work, a social life, and her home situation had proven rather difficult, but she was so close she could feel that diploma at her fingertips. She intended on transferring to a four-year college to pursue her bachelor’s degree, ideally far, far away from this madness. Princeton University was her dream. That’s what her freedom fund was for, to get her out when the time was right, so that she could finally focus on her own future instead of being hung up by someone else’s lack thereof. Although these days she could barely concentrate on her assignments, let alone think about tackling another degree while being surrounded by such hopelessness.
Lucy began to hear a bit of a commotion outside of her bedroom door, which sounded just like her cue to leave. She headed to the local coffee shop, one of her favorite places to unwind and indulge in some much-needed caffeine. Upon entering the cozy establishment, she placed her order, claimed the best spot by the window, and sank into the overstuffed purple easy chair with her hot caramel latte in hand. Moments later, one of her very best friends walked in. Natalie spotted Lucy immediately and raced over with a big smile on her face. They embraced warmly, then Natalie sat beside her. Studying Lucy’s face, she stood again.

“I’m going to grab a cherry chocolate Frappuccino and then we’re going to discuss whatever is wrong with you,” she said, turning and making her way over to the counter. Lucy rolled her eyes, laughing. No one knew her better than Natalie, Macie, and Eric.

They say that you’ve got to take the good with the bad, but Lucy was just grateful to have good to help balance out so much bad. She had an incredible group of friends that dated back to their middle school days, and she never failed to recognize how blessed she was to have such reliable, loyal, uplifting people in her life. Friends that help maintain one’s sanity are a gift to this world. Not to mention that they knew the whole story. They lived right through it alongside her. They remembered as well as she did when David needed surgery as a teenager, which then led to an opioid dependency and ultimately... heroin. They were the first people Lucy turned to when she found little empty plastic baggies in David’s trash. They weren’t just friends at this point. They were family.

Natalie returned, plopping herself on the loveseat across from Lucy. “David again?” she inquired, followed up by a long sip of her frosty beverage. Lucy sighed, nodding her head. “What else is new? He started getting into it with Mom and Dad and I’m at the point where I don’t even have anything to say anymore, I just try to leave if possible. I just can’t deal with his hostility and negativity anymore.” She rested her head on her hands.

“Lucy, it isn’t fair for you to have to deal with all of this extra stress on top of what you’re trying to focus on for yourself. Working, school, bettering your own future. That has to come first. Why don’t you consider leaving? You know there’s always a home for you with any of us,” Natalie murmured, giving her a half-grin.

“It isn’t that simple, Nat,” she replied. “I can’t just leave my parents. I have to protect them from David and all of his nonsense, I don’t think they can handle it by themselves.”

“But aren’t they supposed to be the ones protecting you?” Natalie countered. Lucy dug a notebook out of her bag, followed by a pen. “I have some writing homework I have to do,” she announced, giving Natalie an
apologetic look. Natalie knew this meant the conversation was over. “Understood,” she replied, standing and gathering her things. “But Luc, if you need anything… you know my door is always open.” With that, she left the shop, leaving Lucy with her thoughts. She mulled over the idea of finally being free from her brother, but then ultimately pushed the thought away and turned her focus back onto the blank notebook paper in front of her.

When she finally made her way back home, her mother was on the couch, awaiting her return. She looked exhausted. “What now?” Lucy asked, taking a seat. “He took your father’s truck without asking,” her mom answered softly. “Your dad must have left his keys on the counter when he got home. He was so tired, he probably didn’t think to hide them.” Lucy immediately felt her temper flare up inside her. For whatever reason, David felt that he was entitled to anything he wanted, whether it was his or not. He did as he pleased, took what wasn’t his, and expected all of this to be okay. “We wouldn’t have even known if he’d parked in the same spot when he got home,” she continued.

Lucy took a deep breath and turned to look her mom in the eyes. “This is ridiculous, Mom,” she began. “The way that he takes advantage of you and Dad is positively horrifying. You’re good parents. You’re good people. You don’t deserve this. I would never even consider taking anything from either of you, let alone one of your vehicles! What were the consequences for this?”

“There was some screaming and yelling for a bit, he stormed into his room and that was about it,” her mom said. Lucy’s brow furrowed in frustration. “So, nothing was actually done about it? You do realize that what you allow is what he will continue to do, right? He’s on drugs, Mom! I’d also be willing to bet that his addiction ties into some kind of mental illness, and what are we doing to address these matters? Letting him get away with stealing from you? Nothing will ever change if we don’t enforce change.” Her mother just stared at her hands, her eyes refusing to meet Lucy’s.

Lucy stood and walked to her room, feeling defeated. She was tired of feeling like the only voice of reason, like she was the older sibling with all the answers. Isn’t that his job? Isn’t he supposed to be the protective big brother who makes everything okay? She gazed at her own reflection in the mirror sitting atop her dresser and watched as the tears slowly welled up in her eyes and spilled down her pink cheeks. The worst part was that she genuinely did feel for everyone involved. Her heart hurt for her parents, knowing how devastating it must be for them to watch their son waste away. But the hurt quickly turned to anger, recognizing that if they didn’t demand
change… they were simply enabling him to continue down his path of destruction, taking out everything in his wake. No survivors. On the other hand, she truly empathized with David. She blamed him to a degree for messing with pills in the first place, eventually trading them for needles and spoons. She knew deep down that he was incredibly mentally unhealthy, but he had to want to change. He had to want more for himself than what little he had now. David had no friends, he couldn’t maintain a job to save his life. No degree, no car. Lucy’s stomach turned as it occurred to her that he knew he was wasting away, and he was content doing so.

Days ran into weeks, and it was as if time stood still and nothing ever changed. One afternoon, Lucy rushed home from work. She was late and had a short window of time to finish a dreaded math exam. Strangely enough, she didn’t encounter anyone as she grabbed a water bottle and headed to her room, but she didn’t have time to question it. She got comfortable and took a few deep cleansing breaths. As she began the timed test, she heard voices rising from the room next to hers. Lucy quickly rushed out of the room only to see her brother practically on top of her dad, his face an unfamiliar portrait of misplaced hatred. Seeing red, she stormed in and yanked her older brother up off of their father by his shirt, and then proceeded to cock back and punch him square in the jaw. Rage mixed with shock coursed through her as she processed what she’d just done, watching as David slowly backed up, equally surprised. She then exploded into words of fury, enraged that he would even consider physically fighting their father, who’d gotten a knee replacement earlier that year.

David sneered at her, threatening to call the cops for her outburst. They screamed at each other, neither of them shutting up long enough to actually listen to what the other had to say. Their mother barged into the middle of the argument, sending David away and telling Lucy to go cool down. As soon as Lucy returned to her room she saw her open laptop, the timer still ticking away on her test. She stuffed her fist into her mouth, stifling a sob. She then sat down and attempted to finish the remaining portion of her math exam, which timed out before she was halfway through.

All Lucy dreamt about for the next three days was the feeling of her knuckles against David’s jaw bone. Each morning she woke up unsettled, feeling a little less like herself and a little more like someone she didn’t recognize. She’d never before touched someone in anger. She wasn’t a violent person. The ugliness in him brought out ugly parts of her and for once, this was something she didn’t know how to handle.
As she poured herself a cup of coffee late one Sunday morning, Lucy carefully studied the space that she called home. She took in the warm chocolate brown walls of the dining room, the bite marks on the bottom of the barstools from their beloved dog’s puppy days. She noted the soft throw blanket tossed over her dad’s recliner, one that she’d snuggled with over countless sick days, and Saturday morning cartoons. She glanced up at the framed photo of her family on the wall, their faded faces smiling back at her as they enjoyed a day at the lake together. She paused, reminiscing that summer, long before David shattered that idea of a happy family. She was tied to this place from the inside out. From the marks on the wall signifying her growth to the flowers in the backyard that she and Mom had tended to since she was a little girl. This house held such dear memories for her and she could hardly stand the way everything was slowly being poisoned. After their physical altercation, Lucy tried to explain to her mom that David simply needed more help than they could give him. He needed professional help. He needed a proper diagnosis, perhaps medication, and therapy, lots of it. Her mother nodded in agreement, but things just stayed the same. Lucy always knew that walking away from her childhood home would be hard, but it never occurred to her that staying could be even harder.

It was approximately seventeen days before commencement. It couldn’t come sooner, Lucy thought, considering the fact that finals week was trying to put an end to her. Stressed out to the max was putting it lightly, and Lucy yearned for the summer like flowers yearn for sunshine. Life hadn’t gotten easier in the weeks leading up to her graduation. David was still wreaking havoc, and Lucy was still begging her parents to pursue long-term help for him, instead of pacifying him and making him comfortable. Nothing grows within a comfort zone, and Lucy knew this to be true. But her pleading fell on deaf ears. So, she distanced herself. She bided her time and checked the days off of her calendar, knowing that as soon as the summer came, her life would change for the better. She and her brother passed each other like ships in the night. Never talking, just occasionally occupying the same space. Lucy just didn’t know what to say.

As per her check list, today was dedicated to going over Princeton’s reading list, reviewing her finances, and ordering her cap and gown. Never a dull moment. As she debated between three novels to potentially do her summer book report on, she opened her bottom night stand drawer to dive into her emergency stash of chocolate while she confronted her bills, head-on. She pulled out a Reese’s cup with one hand, biting the wrapping paper with her teeth and then shoving into her mouth, her other hand still searching for a notebook to compile her thoughts in.
Once her notebook was found and opened to a fresh page with some budgeting notes to consider, she went to grab her money envelope. She dug out her shoe box and quickly felt that something was wrong. It was lighter than usual. She opened it and her book with her special compartment wasn’t there. Her heartbeat sped up just a bit as she checked inside the other books in case the envelope had gotten wedged somewhere in between some of the pages, although her common sense told her otherwise… and she found nothing. The lump forming in her throat grew as she threw the shoe box on the ground, dropped to her knees, pulled up the comforter and… there it was, under her bed. Next to her open book, its pages creasing from being tossed about, lay the envelope. The envelope that she’d carefully filled over the course of a year with what would fund her freedom, was empty.

Tears stung Lucy’s eyes as she ripped the envelope open, as if there was a hidden compartment somewhere within it, a more suitable explanation than the one she knew to be true, deep down in her soul. She couldn’t believe he’d found it. How? The question pounded like a pulse in her head. A sob escaped her throat as she pulled herself to her feet, grabbed a duffel bag out of her closet and began to stuff the contents of her dresser inside it. As much as she could fit, that is. It was as if she were seeing this situation with new eyes. She’d tried so hard, for so long, to help her brother but it didn’t matter. Things were only getting worse, and she couldn’t risk losing everything she’d worked so hard for in the process. She loved her family so dearly, even David, but how do you help someone who doesn’t want to be helped? They were on a sinking ship and refused to jump. It was finally clear to her that the only person she could truly help get out of this situation was herself. Lucy pulled her phone out of her pocket and dialed Natalie’s number. “Nat, it’s Lucy. I’ll be there soon.”

That day, Lucy chose herself. She finally seized what power she had and made the decision to escape a situation that wasn’t getting better. Later on, she sat down with her parents and explained to them that she loved them, and she loved David too, but she couldn’t put her life on hold for his. She was determined to make her family proud. Leaving was the only way she could do that. Sometimes removing yourself from a bad situation is the choice you can make. Sometimes loving people from afar is the healthiest way to do so. Sometimes the only person that you can save is yourself, and that is enough.
So as not to blind me, I began to simmer down the harsh glow illuminating from my laptop. Following suit of the first action came the succeeding action of quieting down the sounds resonating from the device as well. Prepping myself for a nice long sleep was key on Sunday nights after being awake all hours of the night during the weekend. This night in particular, I was feeling awfully swayed in the direction of falling asleep to something completely opposite from music. After searching aimlessly, I finally decided upon falling asleep to a livestream of NASA, in hopes of my dreams being subconsciously influenced by the topic of course. My dreams recently have been a whole lot of nothing lately; unfortunately, the center of focus was the typical, everyday mundane way of life. I popped in my earphones in hopes of quickly slipping into a dream state. My brain started concocting and mixing certain elements of space and different scenarios of exploration. As I continued to think up stories, my own personal sense of reality started to diminish around me; my room began to fill with blackness, void of any vibrant colors, but hints of burnt orange and dull brown could be seen in the distance. The air started to feel thin, the stars emerged, scattered in a harmonious pattern, enveloping me. I gazed around me in awe, mouth agape. I felt limitless, the thought of my fear of space around me going on endlessly for an unfathomable distance vanished; I felt free.

Just as I was going to continue my expedition of new discovery, a loud unknown noise started to crescendo from the soundless silence. The serenity was disrupted by what I could only identify as some sort of distress signal. I frantically looked around me, but saw nothing that could emit such a noise. I covered my ears but the noise did not lessen. The sound found its way through the slips in between my fingers and entered my ears, rattling my brain, shaking it until the noise knew it was being recognized. The ongoing ringing was too earsplitting to bear. I screeched. I closed my eyes firmly and allowed all the screams to escape, letting my lungs loosen to permit the screams to flow freely into the infinite obscurity.

My eyes, still shut, were able to sense a source of light trying to peek through the lids. I fluttered them open painstakingly slow. Now, starting to become more conscious, I noticed it was the strong, Texan sun’s rays beaming through the cracks in the blinds. I sighed. There was still one thing noticeably loud, my laptop. Indescribable sounds secreted out of the holes from the computer. I was highly startled but most definitely fully awake. My eyes scanned
the screen for answers: *time 6:50 A.M., the stream was live, only nine viewers, comments disabled. Comments disabled? Huh?* After scanning the website for technical issues, I began silencing my laptop, the sounds thankfully stopped filling the entirety of the room.

That’s when I saw it.

I blinked my eyes rapidly then started to rub the sleep out of them. What was bestowed in front of me sent a cool shudder pulsing through my veins. Tilting my head like a dog does out of confusion, I tried to grasp what I was seeing from a different angle to comprehend if what I was perceiving was truly all in my mind. As soon as the image on the screen started to formulate some sort of logical assumption, my laptop abruptly crashed like it knew I was gaining a revelation. In that moment, my final alarm clock rung causing my stiff body to shatter into scattered pieces of absolute terror. Desperately picking up the pieces of my once solid, sane self, I hurried to get ready for school.

*                     *                     *

“Hey Anna, hey Melody, what’s going on guys?” Dustin asked coming up to us in the hallway. I slowly closed my locker and matched his stare with mine.

“Hey,” Melody and I answered monotone in unison.

“Woah, woah, woah, why the sad faces, girls? A little case of the Monday blues, feeling under the weather?” he asked faking a cough. Melody and I both looked at each other and allowed a little smirk to escape, “Damn, tough crowd, alrighty then, I’ll see you two later!” he winked while walking away.

“Are you okay?” Melody inquired burrowing her eyebrows together.

“Yeah, I’m okay. You don’t seem well.” I said.

“Okay. I’m gonna cut right to the chase and come right out and say it. Well, ya know how…” she trailed off looking down, “Okay, promise me you won’t think I’m crazy.”

“Mel, seriously just spit it out. I promise.”

“Well. So you know how we watch all those cool space videos?” she asked, I nodded as my eyes bulged out a little. Pulling me closer she continued, “Anna, I swear I saw something I wasn’t supposed to see. I know how we always talked about how cool it would be if we actually experienced a conspiracy theory firsthand, well, I don’t
know… but as I woke up this morning I saw something very weird on my computer…” Melody kept explaining in great detail what she recounted, but I couldn’t focus on the words that were spewing out of her mouth. *Now I know I’m not crazy, and I’m not sure if this is a good thing, or a bad thing?*

“Wait, you were watching it too?” I cut her off from her tangent. Now she was the recipient of the same reaction I had seconds ago.

“No way, An, no way. You saw it too?”

The bell sounded, all the students ushered their way into their first period class creating a blur of faces while Melody and I stood frozen. My eyes wandered the sea of rushing students; *did any of them see it too?*

“Anna!” Melody yelled softly, “Uh… I guess just text me or whatever. I have to go.” She took one last look at me for a split second and then also faded into the bustling blur. I stood there for another moment in disbelief. The echoing murmurs of my fellow classmates no longer lingered in the hall; I was alone… until I heard the familiar sound of my ringtone signaling the fact that I had a text message from an unknown number: *Stop.* My eyes darted around the hall one last time before I started venturing off to my class.

*                                  *                                   *

I slumped into my bed after an unnerving day of school. I tried turning on my laptop, no dice. My phone chimed once again, eager, yet nervous to discover if it was that unknown number again. I exhaled obnoxiously a huge sigh of relief to find out it’s just Melody. That relieved feeling was short-lived after reading her text: *Are you getting weird texts from unknown numbers?* The lump in my throat thickened as my stomach started somersaulting. I ran my fingers through my hair, as I tried my laptop once again. A blue screen containing an error message with a strain of numbers popped on the blue screen in a repetitive pattern:

29.5518812 -95.0983429 29.5518812 -95.0983429 29.5518812 -95.0983429

As the numbers were being displayed on the computer, I could sense a familiar rhythmic beat to the flashing of the screen. The flashes are not spontaneous; they were planned out with purpose. This most certainly had to be Morse Code. I swiftly lunged to my nightstand scrambling about to try and retrieve a pen and paper, tucking my hair behind my ear to help my concentration, I started slapping down dots and dashes. First word: *Come. Okay, okay, next word come on.* I squinted my eyes hoping it would help me process the phrase more thoroughly. *Second
The flashing continued. My sensory skills were hitting overload, as I continued study the screen. Fourth word: Location. Oh no... stream of numbers... its longitude and latitude. I abruptly pushed away my laptop and commenced looking up the numbers as they continued to disappear and reappear between the flashes. After a very quick Google search the location was exhibited right in front of my glossy eyes. It was coordinates to NASA headquarters. Putting the clues together made me feel queasy rather than elated. In that instant, my phone dinged once again. The message popped onto my screen: Congratulations. You have 24 hours to complete your first task. Failure to complete this task will result in your family’s death.

That’s when I came to the realization that they, whoever they might be were wired into all the mechanisms of my life. There was simply no way I could outsmart the people orchestrating this motive of theirs. I extended my arm to my nightstand again to grab another piece of blank paper and began to fill up the page with my sorrowful goodbyes. This was insane for me to do, but I knew it had to be done; even with the overwhelming feeling of guilt washing over me, I just knew I couldn’t put my family through the wringer. I packed a bag and started slipping through my bedroom window. I turned around to look into my soon to be vacant room and took it all in one last time.

*                                            *                                                   *
It took Melody a good five minutes to acknowledge my knocking at her front door. She peeped out from behind the blinds and finally opened the door.

“Anna, what are you doing? Why didn’t you text me back?” Melody questioned folding her arms.

“You weren’t crazy. Mel, this is real. We need to go.”

“What has gotten into you? You really think the government is behind this…” She flailed her arms to emphasize the word government as to mock it.

“I’m saying you were right. I just found out some insane things and t-they’ve been texting me and contacting me through my computer. They threatened me and my family and… it was in Morse Code… and… w-we don’t have much time, come with me, you’re-”
Melody cut off my rambling, scoffing she raised an eyebrow and refuted, “The government doesn’t just text ya out of the blue, An. It has to be Dustin messing with us, he’s into all that techy stuff.”

“Melody, I found coordinates to a NASA headquarters. Do you think this was just coincidence? I mean really now come on, didn’t you believe it too?”

“Yeah, I did, then I came home and actually thought about it and how much of a prank it actually is. I think it’s quite literally insane that you would like for me to come on an “adventure” with you…all because your phone told you to.” Melody explained raising her voice with each new introduced word in her sentence, “You’ve really lost your damn mind.” She initiated the act of slamming the door on my face.

“Well, good luck then, Mel. Don’t wanna stick around for the, “I told you so,” part.”

*                                          *

After 11 hours of traveling by train from El Paso to Houston, I reached the destination. I readjusted my backpack and headed off the train. The sun’s heat wrapped me up in a warm hug as I kicked around pieces of asphalt playfully. It was a minuscule action, but I was thankful I could be doing it because I truly don’t know what they have in mind for my future. Holding up my map for a couple of seconds, I tried to verify my location. Perplexed, I slowly put down my map to reveal someone in a white lab coat standing in the distance that wasn’t there a few moments ago. I shuddered, recoiling backwards while losing the grip on my map. As it floated to the ground, the man grew closer. I clenched my fists, as if I thought I could really fight off this man that easily towered over me. The ominous feeling that radiated off of him caused me to scrunch my eyes tightly, exhale, and embrace for impact.

“We’ve been waiting for you.” The man whispered into the air, the sound of his voice was softer than I would have imagined it to be. In a sense, I was almost just as apprehensive that his voice was so calm. I opened my eyes and was greeted by his half-smile and gleaming white lab coat, embroidered with the acronym NASA, utterly glistening from the sun beams. He snappishly grabbed me by my wrist and my feet followed unwillingly. I was panting trying to keep up the pace with his swift movements. Just as I was getting used to his footwork we were halted in our steps by an additional man in yet another pristine lab coat.

“Ahh, Anna, is it?” The man requested as he began opening the large metal door. I nodded my head unsure of the answer itself, unsure of everything, “Oh, have we been waiting for you.” I shuddered while letting out
a spineless sigh. The greeter at the door motioned with his hand for us to continue our journey. The man gripping me let go of my hold and I almost collapsed from the sudden loss of support. “Watch your step there, Miss Anna dear.”

Walking through that door made me realize that I entered a whole different reality from the one I was currently living; holding onto my backpack was the only solace from my past that gave me comfort that maybe after all of this was over with I could return to my old life. I created a new chapter of my life in that very instant; I wanted to so desperately turn back the pages, but I couldn’t. Melody was right, maybe I was crazy. My thoughts were interjected by the first soft spoken man’s words, “So… we know that you have found out our little secret.”

“You led me here? Why lead me here if you didn’t want me to place all the clues together?” I spat back shrugging my shoulders with attitude.

“Well, well, well. Why would we let you roam around infecting others with your…” he trailed off placing his index finger on my chin like a child that he was reprimanding, “Absurd accusations…”

“We both know what I saw was real.”

“Ah, yes child, but if the others find out the secret, then their plan is foiled.”

“Their?” I pondered.

“Well you know that they are controlling us, controlling this all. Any perception of reality you thought you knew prior to this moment does not and will not exist. You aren’t real; I’m not real.”

I stared into his crystal blue, scolding eyes. I didn’t take my gawk away, even when I felt the warm moisture build up in the corners of my eyes, I wasn’t going to fall submissive to his power.

“T-their?” I questioned yet again, feeling the lump in my throat start to swell.

“You weren’t supposed to see, you diverted from your predetermined path that they have chosen for you, you indeed glitched from that path, very similar to the glitch that you saw, right? They don’t like that, of course.”

“The thing that we know you saw, was never meant for your eyes. They don’t want pesky little humans, as they refer to us, to see their master plan. They know you saw the glitch; the glitch that none of the common people are supposed to see. They control everything you know; they stimulate the reality you’ve came to learn. But, since you know this information, they want your diseased perception of life to be terminated so you can’t infect others.”
“I don’t understand! You brought me here!” I exclaimed dropping to my knees.

“They brought you here,” he retorted with unyielding composure.

“N-n-no.” I held my head in my hands, “This can’t be happening.”

“None of this is happening. This isn’t real, Anna,” he said smoothly.

“Stop! Shut up! *You* said I would be safe, my family would be safe, if I came here!” I continued to let the tears stream out of my puffy eyes down my red, blotchy face. My cries grew silent from the strain of my chest constricting.

“None of us are safe in their creation,” he crouched down and leaned into my face. I looked up from the ground to find myself encircled by more men in white coats and their fake stitched-on NASA embroidery.

“It’s time,” one man said to another. Without having to look at each other for a cue, in harmony they all lurked closer towards me.

“W-wait,” I began to plead, “Why are you going to kill me? If none of this is real? What is the point of all of this?”

“Stellar observation… but, I’m sorry darling,” he inched closer to my face until he was merely centimeters away. I could smell his disgusting scent, his warm breath swarming all over my swollen face. They all now were in very close proximity to me. The man looked me up and down one final time, elevated an unknown weapon above his head and murmured, “That’s what *they* programmed us to do.”
Is Time Curved or Straight?

By: Monique Arvelo

Does time move forward
Or does it repeat?
Is it a twisted vine of infinity?
Moving far enough ahead
To forget the machete
That will come again

Sometimes
It moves forward
No matter how hard I dig in my heels
No matter how much I hate
The seasons dying
No matter how I shake and grieve

It moves even if there is
A rattlesnake inside my bones
I can’t look behind me
I’m reminded of
Those who are vaporized
Those I can’t speak to
Those who are lost from me

The days
Where I shake and vomit
Where I beg and plead
Where I curl up to hope
The day will slink by
For the late night date
To repeat tomorrow morning

But it doesn’t
Not until I wake up
Tired from weeks
Of loops and curved
And I can’t move my legs
To walk down the new, straight path.

I’m tired despite my racing heart
So tired
Of walking on loop
And sitting
As the world speeds by

I’m tired.

Does time move forward
Or does it repeat?
Is it a twisted infinity?
Moving far enough ahead
To forget the pain
That will come again
The lights from Center City Philadelphia could be seen through the darkness from the window of the small hospital room. Matt had looked out at them many of the nights he was here at Albert Einstein Medical Center. This was his fifth time being admitted into the hospital in as many months. He was getting tired of being laid up due to complications from the chemotherapy treatments he was receiving for Hodgkin’s Disease. Hodgkin’s Disease is a form of cancer of the lymph nodes. Matt had been admitted four other times over the last five months, each time for at least a week. Once was when he found the swollen lymph node on his neck. Twice for blood clots in his left arm and once for another blood clot in his left leg.

* * *

This visit to the hospital started the morning before, on Friday, with Matt going to see his oncologist, Dr. Lighter, for difficulties breathing. Matt complained that he was having a hard time catching his breath and that it felt like an elephant was sitting on his chest. After listening to his chest, Dr. Lighter decided to have Matt admitted again. That afternoon Matt had to endure a battery of tests. Blood work, a chest x-ray and a lung scan. The chest x-ray was no big deal, but he got a little freaked out from the lung scan. Matt was to lay on a table with a mask over his face, breathing in oxygen mixed with medication, while a machine took deeper x-rays of his lungs.

After the tests were completed, Matt was taken back up to his room, where he was to again wait for results of tests. This had become a regular occurrence. Almost every time he was admitted to the hospital, Matt would have to wait hours and once nearly a week to see what was wrong with him. All he could do now was sit in nervous anticipation for hours waiting on the results of these new tests.

It was a little after four o’clock, when Dr. Lighter came into Matt’s room to give him the results of all the tests that were done earlier that day. “Hey, Matt. I got the results of the tests. You have what’s called a pulmonary embolism,” said Dr. Lighter.

“Um, you need to dummy that down for me. What the hell is a pulmonary embolism?”

“It’s a blood clot in your left lung.”

“Is it bad?”
“It’s pretty bad. We are going to put you on blood thinners again to see if we can hopefully get rid of it. I also want to keep you on the oxygen to help you with your breathing.”

“Should I worry?”

“I wouldn’t. We have been pretty successful getting rid of the clots you’ve already had. Try and get some rest and I will check back with you in the morning to see how you are doing.”

With that, Dr. Lighter said his goodnights and left for the evening. Matt laid there in the bed for a few minutes before calling his friends, Jon and Bill, his grandfather, and his mother to tell them the news. It was not long after making his last call that Matt’s dinner arrived. He was not really in the mood to eat. He kind of picked at his food more than actually eating it. He was going to try and find a way to relax that night. He ended up just lying in the bed either watching TV or staring out the window at the lights coming from Center City Philadelphia.

* * *

Matt kept staring out the window, thinking about all that he had been through those past five months. He had lost all his hair, including his eyebrows, from the chemotherapy drugs. The chemotherapy was administered for two weeks every month and then Matt would get a two week break before getting them again. Those two weeks he was on the medication, Matt would get sick every morning from the time he awoke until noon or an hour later. He had been a little on the heavy side, so his friends would tease him about having morning sickness, hinting that he might be pregnant and asking questions like, “When are you due?” Also, being a little overweight and bald, Matt looked like a pale Buddha, if he sat with his shirt off.

Matt was also thinking about all the days that he had spent in the hospital. Over the four stays, he had spent over 40 nights laying in one of those beds. If it was not for his friends, Jon and Bill, taking turns every other day coming to see him, Matt would have gone through all that alone. His grandfather and his parents lived a little over an hour away and couldn’t get there to see him as much as Matt would have liked. His grandfather came at least once every stay in the hospital, but his mother had only been there twice. Once was the day he found out he had cancer and the other was when he had surgery to have an infusaport implanted in his chest. The infusaport was a disc like device that was placed between the skin and muscle with a tube that led to a vein. This was to make it easier to give Matt his chemotherapy and IVs.
Matt just kept wondering how much more would he be able to endure? How many more complications was he supposed to deal with? How many more things would he have to go through? If this was a test of strength and endurance, Matt wondered if he had it in himself to go on.

* * *

It was a little after nine o’clock in the morning. Matt had been awake for a couple of hours, since he was awoken by the nurse, Ellen, wanting to get his vitals. Dr. Lighter was there again to listen to Matt’s lungs in hopes that the blood clot sounded better. After listening to both sides with his stethoscope, Dr. Lighter said, “I think that I want to send you for another lung scan.”

“Is everything alright?”

“I just want to get a look at the clot and see if it has shrunk any. I can’t really tell by listening. I just know that it is still there.”

Dr. Lighter told Matt that he would see him later that afternoon and to try and relax. A few minutes after Dr. Lighter left, Matt’s breakfast arrived. Like the night before, he was not in the mood to eat. He picked at the scrambled eggs and ate the white toast, but that was all he had the stomach to eat. He was still too worried.

A few hours later, Matt was transported back to radiation to get another of those nerve-racking lung scans. He was going to have to endure another two hours with that mask over his face. After the test was over, Matt was taken back to his room to wait again for the results of the test.

Again, it was not until a little after four o’clock, before Dr. Lighter returned to give Matt the results from the lung scan. “Hey, Matt. I have some good news and I have some bad news. The good news is that the clot has not gotten any bigger from yesterday.”

“And the bad news.”

“It has not shrunk like I was hoping it would.”

“S***.”

“I am going to try and give you a larger dose of blood thinners. I can’t increase it too much more or you are just going to have red water running through your veins.”
“Do you think this will work?”

“I hope so. I’m going to leave again, but I will be back in the morning to check on you. I am going to keep my fingers crossed and pray that this works for you.”

“Have a good night. Thanks, Dr. Lighter.”

Not long after Dr. Lighter left for the night, Matt got another dinner for him to pick at. Kind of hard to eat when you don’t know what was going on with your body, or if you were going to live or die.

* * *

After staring at the lights of the Center City Philadelphia skyline, Matt decided that he was going to make a few phone calls before the phones get shut off for the night. The hospital turned them off around ten o’clock, so the patients would not be disturbed by incoming calls.

Matt decided that he was going to make four phone calls. One each to his friends, Jon and Bill, one to his grandfather and one to his mother and little brother, Mike. At the end of each phone call Matt told his loved ones that he loved them and ended the conversation with “Goodbye.” His loved ones may not have realized it, but Matt never used the actual word “Goodbye” when ending a phone call. He would always say “See you,” “Bye,” or “Later.” The last phone call ended just minutes before the ten o’clock cut off for the phones.

It was about an hour later, after the nurse, Denise, changed Matt’s IV bag and gave him some medication that he decided to turn off his lights and go to sleep. After shutting off the lights, Matt stared again at the lights coming from Center City Philadelphia. He then turned his head to stare at the ceiling and then began having a conversation with God.

“Hey, God. I’m tired of all this s***. If this is a test, I think I passed. If you don’t take me tonight, I swear I am going to rip this f***ing IV out in the morning and go on my own.”

With that, Matt began to cry. It was not the first time he had cried in the hospital. He had cried at least two other times. The night he found the lump from the swollen lymph node on his shoulder and once because of the pain from the blood clot in his left leg. This time it was not from sadness but from exhaustion. He just couldn’t take any more of what had been going on with his body and the cancer. Without knowing it, Matt had cried himself to sleep.

* * *
A few hours later, Matt woke up. He knew he woke up because he saw the night nurse, Kyle, walk by the open door to his room. The room was still dark, but there was a glow coming from the end of his bed. Standing there at the end of his bed in a bright glow was his fiancé Anna. “How can this be?” Matt thought to himself. Anna had passed away five years earlier from an asthma attack in her sleep. She was dressed in all white with a soft white glow of light coming from behind.

Anna looked at Matt and said in a soft voice, “Matt, this is not your time. I love you and I have always loved you. I will be waiting here for you. Just don’t quit.” Before he could say anything, she was gone, and the room was dark again. Matt thought to himself that it must have been a dream. He turned in the bed and tried to get back to sleep. The thought of Anna weighed on his mind, but he was able to peacefully fall back to sleep.

* * *

It was a little after ten o’clock in the morning when Dr. Lighter returned to check on Matt. He listened to his lungs and then for some reason listened to them a second time. He looked Matt in the face and then listed for a third time. He then said, “I want to get you sent for a lung scan right away.”

“Is there something wrong?”

“No, I just want to see how the clot is doing.”

With that Dr. Lighter left the room to order the test. Less than thirty minutes had passed when an orderly came into the room and transported Matt down to radiology. Nothing like another claustrophobic causing test to start the morning. A couple of hours later Matt was returned to his room.

Upon returning to his room, Matt thought to himself that he was going to have to wait for hours to find out what was going on. To his surprise, Dr. Lighter came into his room only about forty-five minutes later. He walked over to Matt and said that he wanted to listen to his lungs again. Matt asked, “Is everything alright?”

“I’m not sure. I want to send you down for one more scan before I can be sure what is going on here.”

“Should I worry?”

“No, not at all.”
Dr. Lighter left, and it was just a matter of minutes before Matt was being whisked back down to radiation for a lung scan for the fourth time in three days. When the scan was complete, he was returned to his room to wait for the results.

Matt did not have to wait long before Dr. Lighter returned with the results of the most recent lung scan. He looked at Matt with an expression of surprise, “I can’t explain this.”

“What?”

“Your blood clot is gone.”

“That’s good. Right?”

“Yeah. But with how bad you were getting yesterday, I figured that I’d be fitting you for a toe tag in the next day or two. I can’t figure out how it disappeared.”

Matt shrugged his shoulders as if to say he couldn’t explain. In the back of his head he wondered if it was the visit from Anna that made the blood clot disappear. He did not say a thing to Dr. Lighter before he left. He did not want the doctor to think that he was nuts or something. He just kept it to himself.

Later that night while looking at the lights coming from Center City Philadelphia, Matt smiled for the first time in days. The thought that the woman he had loved saved his life... a tear streamed down his face as he said, “Thank you.”

* * *

Twenty years later, Matt is at the Camden Aquarium in New Jersey attending a wedding with his wife and two sons. He has gone out to the Delaware River waterfront to get a little air and get away from the loud music. Looking across the river, Matt thinks to himself about that weekend all those years before and how the lights from the Center City Philadelphia skyline still looked beautiful to him.
Okay,
This is all state of the art,
Let me grab my cart.
Now,
Let’s start-
Put these on now,
Right across your heart,
Two up by your chest.
Two down by your lungs.
Two on your fingers,
Tie this around your arm, please,
Sit up straight, hands on the chair,
Take it easy and this’ll all be over in a breeze,
Now,
Let’s begin-

“I don’t love her,”
“I never loved her!”
“I hate the way you look at me,”
“I hate the way she smells,”
“I hate the way we make love,”

“I hate the way she walks,”
“I hate her friends,”
“I hate her family,”
“I hate the way she talks.”

“I hated our wedding and our honeymoon!”
“Remember those endless sand dunes in Cameroon?”
“I paid for all of that, wiped my saving clean-”
“I wasn’t born with no silver-spoon.”

“Did you hear me?”
“I don’t love her!!”
“She’s nothing to me!”
“I hate her job,”
“I hate how she does her hair,”
“I hate the clothes she wears,”
“I hate her attitude,”
“I hate her laugh,”
“I hate her sense of humor,”
“I hate the way she drives,”
“I never liked her cooking,”
“I hate the makeup she wears,”
“I hate the perfume she drowns herself in,”
“I hate the way she smiles.”

“I hate you!”
“You!”

“You creeps get that?”
“Are we done now?”
“Huh?!?”

Sir?
He failed the polygraph.
I Wrote a Note to Father Time

By: William Cary-Denson

I wrote a note to father time,
Heal this broken heart of mine.
No more pain. No more crying.
But even the stars in the sky aren’t perfectly aligned.
Who am I trying to explain what’s so hard define?
Trapdoors where’s the key to open up my mind?
Mysteries inside.
Windows to my soul look me in my eyes.
Sitting thinking will I meet him in the sky, when I die?
I just was hungry trying to get a piece of pie.
Got the gift of God, with his light I shine.
Roaring like a lion heavenly design; I can move mountains with my mind.
I feel like I withhold the weight of planets in my palm; with these deadly sins of mine.
Can I turn water into wine from the salted tears I cry?
Like saturated yeast will I rise; from the burning internal battle inside?
Consumed by my pride release me from these chains, I am bind!
Confusion accumulates inside.
Since the womb, I was picked by the most high.
Different bread, different stride, always kept my chest high.
Ancient bean coming out of rest, hear the sweet melody of my heart beating in my chest.
Is there beauty or darkness in the next?
Never fear death, I know one day they’re going to lay my body down to rest.
But the spirit is not in the flesh.
One day we all must confess.
Until then live life with no regret!
Strive to become the best!
In this season and in the next!
There is more to me than just the flesh.
My wisdom reaches unexpected depths; surrounded by intelligence
Speak with eloquence, even the fabric of space and time is, oh so, delicate.
Black minority still they treat us like we’re irrelevant.
But I still have that grit, power of will instilled since a jit.
The past turns into memories
Where has time went?
Cold hearted I can feel the change in the climate.
In the dark I still shine like a diamond.
To the top I’m climbing.
Heart of a lion
It’s rare that you see a king lying, I could never be tyrant
Knowledge and understanding like a Mayan
This paper is my canvas with poetic art I design it
Emphasis, balance, unity, and rhythm all colliding
Different meaning inside it
Mellow, but yet vibrant
Father Time hear what’s on my mind
Feel what’s deep inside
The feelings I can’t keep inside
Let it out to keep a peace of mind.
Complacency

By: Jason Atkins

I glanced in her direction,
A glance turned into a look,
A look turned into a stare.
I felt a deep, complex connection.

She looked at me,
I kept staring, then looked shamefully away.
A smile came across her face.
That was only the first day.

I paraded up the stairs and was met by a gaze,
Not a stare,
No.
A dutiful gaze.
She too shamefully looked away.
A smile came across my face, I was amazed.
The connection went both ways.

She had the eyes of Medusa,
I knew, whenever I looked, I’d turn to stone, but I couldn’t help it.
I couldn’t look away, I was addicted to the stone and she was addicted to the affliction.
Neither Medusa nor her victim had conviction like the Buddha.

Day after day,
I’d turn to stone while she giggled.
Not a word spoken.
Truly haunting foreplay.

Neither of us complained.
I liked the gaze, she liked the stone- we hadn't dreamed we’d be anything more.
Mutualism in its finest form.
Undeveloped rapport.
“Complacency” continued…

It was a new day, I walked up those stairs and prepared to turn to stone.
But, I didn’t.
Where was the gaze?
Where was the stone?
Where’d my beloved Medusa gone?
Why’d I have to be content?
Why’d I have to accept the stone?
My beloved Medusa is gone- I didn’t even know her name.

She was taken from me.
Now,
I will never see my beloved Medusa ever again.

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She Devil

By: Erica Ramnarine
I Build My Home in Other People

By: Trinity Greco

My favorite artist is unashamed.
She is loud and red and gold.
When she laughs it is with her entire body,
And it is beautiful.
She makes it easier for me to be myself.

My best friend is tireless;
He is hungry and blue and silver.
He sees all that life has to offer and is not afraid to chase it.
Success does not change him; he remains supportive and soft.
He makes it easier for me to be myself.

I build my home in other people
Because I do not trust myself enough
To live in.
I visit sometimes.
The walls are too empty. The air is too cold.
Breaking Through The Atmosphere

A Painting by: Rachel Ventrella

&

“Dear Anxiety”

A Poem by Rachel Ventrella
dear anxiety,

i’m waiting for your immediate departure, you’ve overstayed
but your flight has been pushed back for years and weeks and days.
they thought you were just going to be a visit, passing through
but you stayed, and i wish there was something - anything - that i could do.

you’re there in the morning when i first open my eyes,
a wave of incompetence washes over me as you rehearse the lies:
you tell me all that could go wrong because tuesday is not a wednesday,
and that tuesday is also not a saturday, which is right before sunday.
i don’t understand, i never do and i never can, but --
before my day has even started, my stomach is tongue-tied into knots,
injecting witty limericks and unhappy endings into my thoughts.

you’re still here in the mid-afternoon, when the spring sun is at its prime.
i love the natural lights and the flowers in technicolor bloom (at least i think i do);
but learning to live with you is like a paying a dime to ride
on a rollercoaster (i hate rollercoasters) ride that isn’t even mine.
turning my happiness into an overwhelming storm-cloud of gloom,
i’m hiding under a torn umbrella, waiting for the impending doom.

you’re still there, waiting and lurking, as the day transitions to the night,
staring me down with heavy set eyes, pushing through stages of fright
and paths of paranoid (which, honestly, isn’t that stressing or hard).
i press on my headphones and play music, using others’ voices as a guard,
but i obsess over all the things i could’ve done in a day, all the past mistakes i’ve made;
taking over my breathing patterns, stabbing me with your favorite sharpened blade.

sometimes you’ll tease me, and leave for a second, a minute or two,
yet you’re still here, and i become the epitome of the color melancholy blue.
i get that one glimpse of freedom, of happiness, of a moment i can’t believe ---
but you’re still there, with a deviant grin and more tricks up your midnight sleeve.

sincerely,

a girl who just wants to get some sleep.
“My Thoughts Are Clouds”
By: Dina Ali

My thoughts are clouds
As I lie down, I am enveloped by some,
While others pass idly by
They float away, and I wonder why
My thoughts are clouds
They take many shapes, and take up so much space
I shut my eyes, and my mind begins to race
My thoughts are clouds
They accumulate and it gets cloudy
Cue the voices in my brain, and it begins to get rowdy
My thoughts are clouds
They overflow and strike lighting
It quickly darkens, and it begins to get frightening
My thoughts are clouds
Days of avoidance leads to rain
My thoughts are clouds
They burst, and overflow my brain
My thoughts are clouds
Following lightning, comes thunder
And my emotions begin to rain, and I am forced to wonder
My thoughts may be clouds,
But I am the sky
And without the sky, there would be no clouds
I am in control of my weather; It is up to the sky to get better
It may not always be sunny and bright
There will be days as dark as the night
But I needn’t worry. The weather is never steady
And when the clouds merge all in, I have to be ready
Ready for the lightning, and the thunder
The sky has made up its mind
To the clouds it shall no longer be blind
How long had it been? It felt like years, almost decades had passed on this lonely boat. The year was 1920. Or so he had thought. He couldn’t be too sure of much it seemed these days. It was hard to tell what was real from fake when he spent so much time alone.

The loneliness of the rolling ocean water started to take over after a while, seeing the same thing day after day. It was like the desert, seeing things that aren’t even there. The two are complete opposites, yet the mirages take over the mind. This was an illusion that the waves make. They play over and over again in your head. They play small little tricks on you. Back and forth they go. Is that the same wave I had seen before? Or are the waves new? What swims within in waves? What is actually out there? I wasn’t to escape this ship. It was ruining my sanity. I imagined a place where I called home, my woman dancing by the ocean, my children swimming around; playing tag, and running while laughing. My job is to trade goods, from the United States to England. I wanted to escape from work, and the best place was in my head. In my head, I could feel at home again with my family. My family made me insane, but not this type of insane. I missed the way we all sat together for a home-cooked meal. I missed my wife’s perfect smile. I sometimes would think I was at home with them when I was on the ship. The ship would turn into my living room. I was never sure of what was truly real. All I knew was, it felt real. If I had to say the second worst thing in the world, the first being hell, it would be this journey right now.

It was like talking to a loved one about their day, and thinking of a common response they would say.

“How are you doing?” One would ask.

“I’m doing well, thank you. And yourself?” The other would reply.

Not everything was so perfect at home, but you miss those things too. I remember complaining about the little things. Complaining about having to live a normal life. Having to deal with the way my wife would nag me about not fixing the porch, about the dog barking at everything he heard, or because of a branch breaking off into the woods, and even the way our newborn baby would cry while we were trying to sleep. I actually missed the piercing
sound of the cry. It gave me an excuse to embrace my child. Those are the things I missed the most, the things that haunted my thoughts, and taunted my feelings. I wondered how my family is doing, I wondered if I taught my oldest well enough to fend for the household. Would he act as the “man of the house,” during my expedition? As soon as I would think of my need for a friend, my eyes started to play tricks on me, well at least I thought at first. Could they be real? How could I see people, if I was all on my lonesome?

But I did see something. I saw a small wooden structure off into the distance. I stared at it for a good ten minutes, until I knew for sure, that it was actually there. This was no mirage, this was real. I felt it in my blood, and all throughout my body. I maneuvered the boat to the right, where the structure was. I saw a type of fabric laying on the structure, it almost looked like a blouse, which made my heart drop. Could this actually have a person on it? My wife used to wear all different colored blouses. How could someone be alive in the middle of the ocean on a rowboat?

“Are you ok?” I called out.

No response. It felt like an eternity before I finally could see what was actually on the small beat up boat. There was very petite, young, pitiful looking woman who happened to be lying down. Her blue eyes reflected off the moonlight. She looked as if she had been on the ocean for months. Her hair was red like my wife’s. I was scared. I wanted to help her. She reminded me so much of my wife, I had to save her. I was already so alone. This was my chance. This was my chance to have some company. She barely moved, but I could tell just by the look of her she was alive. Her blouse moved up and down. Not from the wind, but from slow breathing. The waves were not vicious at that very moment, so it was easy for me to get to her. I jumped into the water, swam to her boat, and picked her lifeless body up. She started to kick and scream. I then realized, there was a baby in her arms. A baby that had green eyes, just like my newborn. I missed my baby.

I felt terrible for them. I had to pick her up from the pathetic boat, she was too weak to pick herself up. The baby was wrapped in a little blanket that said something sewn onto it, and I couldn’t make it out. She looked at me, as I handed her the infant. She seemed to be relieved. Seeing them made me miss my family.

“You remind me of my wife at home, how long have you been out here?” I said.
She nodded. So, I smiled at her, and went to my cabin to find her some fresh water, and an apple. She didn’t seem to speak my language, or maybe she did not speak at all, but man did it feel great to finally have some company. I poured her a glass of water, and handed her the fruit. She noticed it, but didn’t try to pick it up, so I figured I would give her some time to trust me.

Time passed, and she reached her arm out to me with trust. When our touch met one another, it turned black. Not from the nighttime. My head turned black. I was out for what seemed to be hours. I couldn’t actually tell how long I was under. I woke up in the water. Something dragged me down.

I heard something sweet in the distance. It sounded like my wife’s voice. Softly it sang:

_Sweet tradesman you are brave and strong,_

_Please listen closely to my ocean song._

_I need someone like you, for I am lonely too._

_Come to me, so I can feel something with you._

I felt a painful grip around my ankle. I was being brought under the ocean. I couldn’t breathe. My lungs were being filled with salt water. What in the world is going on? I kicked my leg as hard as I could, and it swam off while letting out a yipe. The scream was so high pitched, I felt deaf for thirty seconds. I heard nothing. My shirt was being yanked on by something else. Something from the the top of the water. I was being attacked at all directions. Then I was being pulled down under again. Everything was happening so fast, I couldn’t keep up. I was submerged under the water, so I quickly put my arms around whatever was gripped onto my clothing. I am your average-sized 30 year old man, and I tried pushing it off; but it was far too strong. I began to wonder if it had already gotten to the woman and her baby inside of my cabin. The creature started to scream, just like the last, it screamed a very high-pitched sound that made your ears ring louder than a dying animal. Not the high pitch I enjoyed from my newborn. This sounded like a banshee.

I pulled my knife out from my pocket, and started moving my arms around until I hit something. It released its grip on me, and suddenly began to swim away. I swam all the way up to breathe some fresh air. Catching my breath, I looked off into the distance. I looked out to see nothing, not a trace of anything. The water was calm. I climbed back onto the boat. Nothing was there. Was this whole thing a mirage? It couldn’t have been. No trace of a
woman, and not even a busted up rowboat was nearby. There was one thing though. A blanket. I walked over and picked it up and read what was written on it. “Never judge nor doubt any person by their appearance, for you will never know who, or what, they truly are.”

By: Sydney Maminski

Old Man Michaels was at it again. After church, us women were mingling by the entrance while the men talked by the General Store when he came running. His trusty tied to his back swung wildly as he made his approach. He flapped his arms above his head, while he ranted and raved, sprinting up to anyone who glanced at him.

“They came back last night I tell you! Came and drew their circles in my fields again! They are going to take me again!” he yelled through his rotten teeth.

I could see my son and some of the other teenage boys snickering off to the side of the store. I felt my face shift into a grimace, as I remembered how my mower was missing this morning.

*If that boy lost our mower I swear, he’s going to get it when we get home.*

I felt my arm being pulled and turned my head to come face to face with the Old Man.

“Families must stick together in these dreadful times! Anyone who is alone is in danger!” the Old Man pleaded and looked right into my eyes.

Everyone’s eyes were on me and I felt my face heat up and eyes begin to water, feeling the embarrassment rise. Then I heard footsteps running behind me, my son grabbed my other arm, and pulled me away from the Old Man.
“Scram you old loon, we’re safe from your made up stories, get out of here!” Tommy yelled.

Others in town surrounded the Old Man and he began to cower. He stepped away from me and ran off before any fights truly began. His big dirty hat became a spec in the distance before everyone turned back toward me. Some other wives came up to comfort me, cooing as if I was a baby and said, “Mrs. Coufman, ignore him sweetie,” and, “He’s touched by the devil, while you are protected by God’s light, you are safe.” They all gingerly touched my shoulders before I mustered up a smile and brushed them off.

“I need to be getting home, so much work to be done to prepare for the harvest,” I said, gathering up my long skirts and stomping off in my good church boots.

Tommy waved off his friends and ran after me. As we got farther out of everyone’s eyesight I stopped and turned to him.

“Boy, stop playing tricks on that Old Man! More importantly, where is our mower?” I said with a stern look.

“Ma, I’ll have it home tomorrow; we hid it in some fields, so we could get away quicker. But he deserves it! Honestly someone needs to teach him a lesson for attempting to scare everyone so bad!” Tommy said and continued down the path.

We walked the rest of the trip home in silence and came home to a quiet house as well.

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Early the next morning, I woke up to shouting coming from outside. I immediately grabbed my gun from under the bed and threw on my dressing gown. I walked past my son’s room where he stood in the doorway, gun at the ready as well. Before he said anything, I sent him a look and nod behind me. He followed me down the stairs and we got to the front of the house. When I opened the door, I saw a figure in the distance waving his arms around.

“There better be a good reason why you're yelling in front of my house at the break of dawn!” I said into the distance.
The figure stopped its pacing and sprinted towards the house. I raised my gun and blocked the doorway. It was hard to see because of the morning fog but the sun started to cast a shine on the fields. When the figure ran closer I noticed it was a roughly dressed man with a full beard. Once I saw the scar across his face, my heart stopped.

“Robert,” I breathed out.

“Mary, oh, Mary!” he said as he ran up and pulled me into his arms, spinning us around.

“Dad!” Tommy yelled and Robert picked him up as well.

“God, thank God, I never thought I would get home, good Lord, thank God,” Robert said.

My eyes were so full of tears, when he put me down. I wiped them harshly before a wash of anger fell over me.

“Where have you been? It has been three years, how could you just leave us one night and never return! No letters! No note! Nothing!” I said, my face heated with anger and my teeth snarled.

“Sweetie, I never meant to leave! They took me! I was out tying up the loose cattle when they just took me! These horrible things from the sky! Creatures created in the shadow of God! But I escaped! I’m home now and they are never going to take me from my family again,” Robert said.

As Robert continued to rave my heart plummeted, Tommy took a step back away from him. I looked at my son and he matched my shocked expression. Robert stood with his hands clasped and looked at us, pleading. Through gritted teeth, I forced myself to focus on the fact he was back, ignoring whatever reason caused him to leave.

“Honey lets go inside, have some food, and rest, I’m sure you’re tired,” I said moving us all inside.

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As the weeks passed I found myself with a case of deja vu. I stood outside of the church next to my son, as Robert stood in the center of a crowd preaching to them about his experience. After each of his claims of
experiments or creatures our neighbors looked toward me, then began to talk amongst each other. I knew the rumors, as much as I attempted to ignore them, they wormed their way into my thoughts and rotted there. How my husband had returned to the town mad and needs to be sent up state. Or how the mistress he must have ran off with left him, so he returned with this convoluted story to cover his a**. When we appeared in town after he returned, Robert instantly started his speeches and refused to quiet down. The town’s joy of his return had been quickly replaced with disgust and hatred. Even Old Man Michaels had been quiet, looking off from the side studying Robert’s antics.

At home things were not better. I was haunted by my past memories of him and attempted to see through this charade to the old Robert, but that man didn’t exist anymore. Robert was nothing like he used to be and turned into a lazy, useless man. I thought with him being back some work would be taken off Tommy and my shoulders for taking care of the farm, but I was wrong. Robert disappeared into the barn every day and stayed in there until I forced him out. He refused to let me inside and I was left to pound on the door to call him for supper. The barn windows were covered, and he appeared to have emptied the place out and surrounded the building with pieces of wood and tools. But the cows remained inside as their constant mooing can be heard at all hours. Robert would occasionally crack the barn door open and bring out buckets of milk, only to immediately dump them into the grass before heading back inside. Dinner was the only time that we were guaranteed to see him, as he scarfed down his food and began preaching to us. He went into graphic detail of the dissections performed on him by the demons of the sky, making it impossible to eat. He lifted his shirt and showed us the imaginary scars and pleaded how they cut him open and sewed him up without a trace. He cried about how his organs were in backwards and how his brain had been moved to his stomach. Tommy and I kept our heads bowed at the table and when Robert ran off back to the barn, we prayed. I cried most nights, while Tommy clasped his hands in anger and glared at the door. In the deep nights, I thought about how Robert should not have returned, then cursed myself for having such a thought.

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As I got ready for bed, I glanced out towards the barn and wondered what he could possibly be doing inside. I looked toward the mirror and saw my face looking more death-like than it used to. My pale face was mostly white, with dark bags under my eyes, and wrinkles that showed every year I have lived and the stress I endured. My eyes were deep, dark pits and the red veins running through them mapped out my madness. The crying of the cows haunted me, so I grabbed my dressing gown and exited the room. My son was asleep and the house was quiet as I
left. I walked as slowly as possible on tiny feet, as I reached the front doors of the barn. They were unlocked and were cracked slightly as I looked inside. There was no light and the barn appeared to be pitch dark. I quietly slipped my way through the cracked door.

I heard the cows stomping in their stalls that lined the barn as I moved, but I could not see them. I held my breath until I walked straight into something that felt like a wall. Placing my hand out, I attempted to discern its shape but only realized that it was a large metal contraption with pipes sticking out of it. At that moment, a lantern was lit from the back half of the barn, illuminating part of the room but still kept me in the shadows. I realized that the object I was hiding behind was an old tractor that was dismantled and reassembled in the wrong order, creating a large metal vehicle that resembled nothing I had ever seen before. It had a large glass dome top and a circular bottom that appeared to be covered in random debris as a way to protect it. I had almost cut my hand on bits of sharp metal as I leaned on it for support. Then I peeked over the top of it just as I heard a deep breath come from the other side of the barn. I saw Robert with his back to me as he stood in front of a cow. The cow looked as if it has been tortured and was a brutal sight. Large gashes ran down its sides and its feet had been put into cuffs so it was forced to stay put. It had a large metal helmet on its head and was flashing different colors as it cried in pain. The helmet was latched on by a strap below the cow’s chin and the cow thrashed in an attempt to fling the contraption off. Robert was standing with a large radio and seemed to be playing with the frequencies, but only the cow’s cries could be heard.

“My God Robert! What are you doing?” I said.

He immediately turned toward me and looked at me with the eyes of the devil. Rage filled them as he rushed toward me. I stepped back from the vehicle and rushed outside praying that I could get back to the house. I heard Robert run out the barn slamming the door behind him. The field around us was quiet except for my panting breath and our footsteps. But then a clap of thunder was heard and the animals in the field shook the grains as they fled for cover.

“Mary, Mary! Don’t run! Please I was just surprised as us all! I ain’t mad at you!” He said catching up to me as he grabbed my arm.

“What were you even doing in there?” I said. “What happened to you?”
“Mary, I’m trying to save us! They are coming back but I’m ready now! I can protect my family! They are sending radio-waves down to track us but I’m going to find a way to block them!” he said while he took his hand off of my arm and threw it up in the air. “I’m going to get us off of this planet and away before they destroy it!”

Just as a bolt of lightning illuminated us, a flash reflected off of the hidden metal pipe he carried.

“Robert stay away from me! I’ll go get the sheriff and we will burn down that barn if you try anything!” I yelled cowering back.

Robert followed my eyes to his hand that held the pipe and made a surprised expression, as if he just noticed he was holding it. He looked between us then twisted his face into something horrid and grinned.

“You’re one of them aren’t you? That's why you're trying to stop me,” he said.

“No, Robert, no! Please just stand back,” I said.

The sky opened up and the rain began to pour blanketing us as Robert advanced toward me. I couldn’t hear anything over the pounding of the rain. My mind was blank, as I was entranced by the anger in Roberts’s eyes.

“No! You’re not taking me again! No! You can’t, you can’t!” he yelled, eyes wide and teeth bared.

Just then a shot rang out across the field cutting through the rain. Robert dropped a few feet in front of me and I stepped back and swung my head toward the direction the shot came from. I saw a figure crouched in the field holding a rifle.

“Don’t you worry miss, he was one of them. Preaching their lies to us. I got you, he seems to be gone now. Leave him for me, I'll wait here and watch him all night just to make sure,” Old Man Michaels said as he stood up and walked over toward the body.

He went up to the body, poked it, and twisted it around. Struck with horror I finally found my feet and rushed back into the house. I blocked the door with a chair and started to hyperventilate. My son rushed toward me from where he stood at the window and grabbed me. His face was wet with tears but his voice wobbled but he remained standing strong.
“Don’t worry, Mama, it’s done now. That isn’t Dad out there and now that thing is gone. Things are going to be better now. We will go get the sheriff tomorrow,” he said moving us toward the kitchen.

We went to the table and sat down listening as the thunder got louder and the rain more biblical. We bowed our heads in prayer and did not speak until the dawn broke through the kitchen. I wiped my eyes and took my sons outstretched hand as he led us outside the house. I kept my head down as we walked through the field, for I could not find the will nor courage to look at his corpse in the daylight. I heard my son intake a deep breath and I snapped my head up looking at the sight before us. The spot where my husband laid was now empty and the pool of blood was washed away from the rain. The only thing left in its place was Old Man Michael’s trusty rifle. My eyes searched the field and noticed deep grooves, creating a large circle around where the body had been.