

Acknowledgments

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We hope you enjoy Issue #5 of *Arrow Rock*!

***Arrow Rock* Literary Journal Mission Statement**

Arrow Rock is committed to promoting and providing a mature environment for Lindenwood University students to publish quality fiction, nonfiction, poetry, essays, plays, and artwork, while showcasing the integrity and the individual talents of each writer or artist.

The staff and contributors of *Arrow Rock* strive to produce a literary journal that interests and inspires.



ARROW♦ROCK

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Creative Nonfiction



Together Let's Float Away, Audrey Schroeder

Wet and Wounded

Zachary M. Alley

The conditions that evening were ideal for a wreck. I was on my way home from wrestling practice, so I was exhausted. It was my first time trying wrestling and I was quickly discovering that the sport was more tiresome than dramatic despite what the World Wrestling Federation led me to believe. There was no high school league that involved signature moves, scantily clad women, and impressive outfits so I opted for the next best thing. Part of me had hoped that my days of Rock Bottoming kids on trampolines in elementary school would translate into real wrestling skills, but I digress.

Not only was I tired from practice, but it was raining. Actually it was more like monsooning. My wipers were on the “Poseidon, Please Spare Me” setting and still losing the battle against the tidal waves washing over my car. It was also dark, country dark. I lived in the middle of nowhere so street lights were nonexistent. The curvy backwoods road devoid of lighting, curbs, railings, or other safety precautions served as my path home.

My sixteen-year-old self did not have years of driving experience or formal training to rely on. I had something better-Bonnie Tyler. Something about blasting ‘Holding Out For A Hero’ always transformed me from an easily distracted teenager in an unimpressive ‘89 Mercury Sable to Jason Statham racing my Mercedes in the big chase scene in a movie. Except even more handsome.

So I’m winding through the storm-drenched darkness, guided by my harmonies with Ms. Tyler, and was finally getting close to the safety of my home. Suddenly, I saw headlights approaching. As they got closer it looked like the oncoming car was in the middle of the narrow two-lane highway. I waited for them to do the responsible thing and get reacquainted with their own lane, but it didn’t seem like that was going to happen. We finally passed on a sharp S curve. I tried to get over as far as possible to avoid hitting the car. I succeeded.

I also succeeded in sliding my car off of the road completely. About an inch off the side of the road, where a curb is normally located, there was instead a steep decline leading straight down into a quaint wooded area. As my car dropped so did my stomach. Instead of hitting the brakes as I was tossed about, I found the gas pedal. A moment later my front bumper found a tree.

Worse than the collision itself was the split second “...this should be unpleasant” moment before impact. Predicting how much pain you are about to experience is so much worse than the sensation itself. Our imaginations are vivid and powerful things, and mine is especially cruel at times.

At last I reached impact. I threw my hands up to cover my face so I could at least die with minimal ugliness. My car collided with a tree and everything surged forward. My shielded face collided with the steering wheel, my legs hammered into that area above the pedals but below the steering wheel that I don’t think anyone has come up with a good

name for yet, and my seatbelt snapped me back into my seat and luckily prevented me from flying through my windshield and into the tree. The poor thing had enough damage from my car and I can only imagine how many more trees would have been destroyed by my rock-solid physique hurtling through the woods like a cannonball. Despite what I believed would happen moments before, I did not die on impact.

As soon as I realized that I had cheated death, I also came to the conclusion that I had mere seconds to enjoy it. Mostly because I was not breathing. I gasped harder than my grandma at an Eddie Murphy joke, but to no avail. My lungs had obviously popped and now I was going to suffocate and die a miserable and painful death. For some reason, the only viable option at that point seemed to be to escape the car as if all the oxygen was outside, and if I could just get to it I could breathe again. I ripped my seatbelt off, opened the door, and allowed myself to fall into the mud like a sack of bricks.

I lay there struggling to breathe for about ten minutes. (Later on at the hospital, the doctor would tell me I would have died if I really wasn't breathing that long, and I more than likely only struggled for a few seconds. But what does he know?) While I was sprawled out in the muck taking chaotic curt breaths, I found myself not actually fearing the death that I believed was drawing near. Instead I just imagined other people's reactions to my death. More specifically I envisioned the scene of my body being discovered. It would have been pretty dramatic. My bloodied broken body half-concealed in the swampy earth, the hunk of scrap metal that was my car sitting idly by, rain relentlessly assaulting everything below.

Amidst this morbid daydream I found myself suddenly sucking in sweet air. I was going to live. I sluggishly pushed myself to my feet. As I stood up I realized that my knee was throbbing. Likely broken. I would never be a dancer now. I then became aware of the smoke billowing from the hood of my car. I had survived the impact just to be killed in an explosion right after. While that would be a rad way to die, I still had stuff to do so I needed to live. I figured if I took the keys out of my car and turned it off it couldn't explode. The science is questionable on that, but at the time it seemed to make sense. In a daze I pulled myself to my feet and navigated the twisted wreckage to remove the keys. While I was already inside what was left of my car I decided to retrieve the other essentials.

I gathered my keys, wallet, and phone, the Holy Trinity of men's necessities, and then began pondering my next step. Everything had been some surreal instinctual experience up until this point, and now I was at a loss as to what I was supposed to do. My answer came to me as a car stopped at the top of the hill I had plummeted from. A man braved the rain to call out to me.

"Are you okay?!"

"...No," was all I could muster.

My breath was still extremely shallow and speaking in complete sentences was impossible. I don't remember exactly how our conversation went after that, but we somehow determined that he was going to drive me to my home, which was less than a mile away. As I struggled up the hill with his aid I found myself in another sort of out-of-body cinematic scenario. Once I made it to his car, I locked eyes with a young boy sitting in

the back seat. I imagined the encounter from his point of view. Some ragged and bloody stranger lurching out of the rain and towards him. I imagined how funny it would have been if I gave him a deranged look or drug my thumb across my throat in a menacing manner. Luckily for him, I refrained and simply sat in the passenger seat and told the man the name of my street.

I wanted to apologize for dirtying the inside of his car, but I was still struggling to breathe normally. On the drive I tried to self-diagnose my injuries. My knee was surely broken. My face got personal with the steering wheel, so I assumed I resembled the victim of a botched plastic surgery. I wasn't sure if something happened to my lungs or if I had reached a whole new level of getting the wind knocked out of me. While it seemed like I might live after all, I assumed it would be as a hideous cripple.

After a couple of minutes we arrived at my house, and I was helped through my back door where I took a seat at the kitchen table.

"Mom!" I managed to yell.

No response.

"Mom!" This time I built up my strength and managed to make it more audible.

"WHAT?!" was the response I received from across the house.

"Mom!" One last time as I was now officially out of breath again.

"I told you not to do that! I hate that so much. If you want something, just come to me instead of yelling across the house."

The man looked at me in despair and offered to go get my mother for me. I shook my head and managed a weak chuckle.

"What do you want anyway? Why couldn't you just come downstairs and—oh!"

She froze as she entered the kitchen. Her expression was priceless as she saw her son clearly suffering from serious injuries and a complete stranger standing in her home. That moment was almost worth smashing my car into a tree for.

Blackout

Rachel Factora

In the tunnel. I can't hear anything but System of the Down blaring from my iPod. I start doing high knees. I pretend I'm running up the mountains. I imagine I am running from all the pressure falling down on my shoulders like rain. I hold my breath to expand my lungs for this battle, and I do this till my lungs burn with satisfaction. There's no way my lungs will give out before hers. I'm surrounded by others feeling the same fears of losing, hopes of defeating great warriors, and of coming back through the tunnel the victor. Some are already defeated, going into battle with heavy hearts. I sip water from my bottle to keep my throat wet.

On deck. Moving toward the staging area. Everything is just the same as I stand in line with the other contestants. It's not until I slowly move up the line and round the corner that the nausea hits. The raging crowd comes into view. The arena is packed, and the lights are blinding from all angles. The screaming, like a crowd in the gladiator days, is calling for opponents to massacre each other. Then I see her. The cause of the pressure, the cause of the disappointment I've felt the past week. She thinks she's got this. I can tell by the way she flexes her traps. The other girls fear her because she is built like an Olympic weight lifter, but I know from experience that she's all image. Fake strength. I've made her taste defeat so many times that it sickens me that I allowed her one victory last week. Yet, I doubt myself. The pressure takes hold, and I'm scared.

Up. The moment has come, and we step onto the huge mat that swallows us whole. My hands shake as I wrap on my ankle. I'm red and she's blue. We line up on the opposite sides of the lines and crouch into our stances. Lions waiting to pounce, and at the sound of the whistle we attack. She's big, I'm small. I doubt myself as I move. If I lose, I face disappointment in so many eyes. But then I remember his eyes. My new guardian angel, the reason I've excelled this season. Grandpa would have wanted me to win this, and I want to. I now have two people to put my trust in: God and Grandpa. They've got me. I've got this.

Third period. The last period of the match. I don't know how I got here. There's not much memory of the last two rounds, all I know is that I'm winning and that I'm in top position. All I have to do is ride her out for the whole round and victory is mine. My bald-headed coaches scream, as they dig their fingers into their pants, sweating from the adrenaline of coaching my match. The suspense pushes them to the very edge of sanity, as if they're about to run onto the mat and wrestle for me.

"Wrestle smart! Wrestle smart!" They both attempt to yell over the crowd.

They want me to stall her out, so I must be winning. I feel the burn in my arms and my legs are about to give out. The whistle blows, and she explodes up to escape my lock, but I bring her back down to her side.

Stalling. She tries to stand again and tripod up. Her head and arms are still on the mat, but her butt is in my gut. She finally stands up and tries to rip off my lock. I step my

right leg in front of hers and trip her back down onto the mat. That takes a lot out of me; it's like trying to hold down a pitbull. My arms burn as much as my throat. Man, I must look like complete shit right now. I hope I'm far enough from the stands that the crowd can't see how fat I must look in my singlet as my gut bloats while it sucks more oxygen.

"Wrestle smart here! Two minutes left!" Thank you, coaches, a.k.a Captain Obvious.

One minute forty left. She makes another mistake and leaves her right arm up. Perfect. I scoop my right arm under it and hook it over her head. I start to run the Half on her. I get her to break 90 degrees for back exposure points, but she barely has her back off the mat by an inch. I'm definitely winning now. I know she's already defeated. I've broken her before. Now all I have to do is hold her here until time runs out. I know she isn't going anywhere, I'll just tire her out. But then all of a sudden...

Anger. Oh, hell no! This female dog ruined my undefeated streak for this season and caused me to get so much grief for it the past week. She rubbed that one win in my face as if it made up for the last two seasons I trampled her in every match, all at the same time being a good sport and always showing good sportsmanship. Hell no, holding her out is not enough. I want her to break and know who trains harder, and who has earned this win once and for all. That one win for her was a present from me. I snap. I begin to tear at her arm and push all my weight on her. I wait till she lets out air to push in harder, hoping to make her breathing even harder. A handy trick I learned at a clinic called a Spider Bite. The ref scrambles all over the mat keeping an eye on her back to call a pin. Her back is facing the mat, yet she's still on her knees. What in the world is in her thighs? Hidden weights? I feel her adjust under me, and I automatically adjust my body and sink into hers. I knew I had her, and a second later I hear the whistle.

Wap! The ref's hand smacks the mat. Done.

"Pin!" says the ref.

Blackout. I finally snap out of my rage. Then I can't process anything. I know the crowd is going crazy but I can't hear anything. It's like I've woken from a dream and I didn't even know if I was in reality. Where am I? What did I just do? This is State, right? Apparently I've pinned her, so that means I've won. If I remember correctly this is finals so if I just won....then I just won State? I won...no way. I'm a state champion?! It feels like it took me forever to answer all my questions and to process that this is reality, when really it took less than 10 seconds. I cover my face as my legs somehow stand up without me even thinking about it. I want to cry but I'm so happy. Not because I won a title, but because of all the work I put into it. Because two years ago, I never thought I'd get this far. But I was mostly happy because the one thing I was working for, the whole drive for my successful season was to be able to look up at the sky, and point up to heaven.

"For you, Grandpa."

Fear

Casey Freeman

Fear is a loathsome thing. Or so you tell yourself. You like to think that you could take on the world without batting an eye. Your mind is an eccentric one—and the root of all your problems. It makes you erratically confident in your fantasies and the first to crumble in reality.

In that, you're afraid of the dark. You even told someone close to you, once. Not that it helped you get over it, like you hoped it would. Admission is the first step to recovery, or so they say. They're full of crap, you decided.

You recall that you were like this when you were a little girl, too; when Daddy caught you giving yourself a pep talk to walk the three feet across the hall from your room to the bathroom and, in his own form of kindness, would turn the hall light on and pat your head before returning to his own room to sleep. Or when you would watch your sister play certain games on the Super Nintendo where the cartoonish monsters had an air about them. An air that made your breath stop, and then wonder why you were so scared. They looked bizarre, so bizarre, but not like anything from horror movies. They simply had an air that made them just plain terrifying and sent you into a ball under her desk, despite it being daylight. (You finally played that same game, you admit proudly, though it took you around 15 years to do so). There are some things that kids don't grow out of, you suppose.

You would tell someone about your nightmares when you had them once, too. The nightmares where that someone died, the nightmares where you saw nothing but a bloody stage play, and the nightmares that make your breath hitch when you wake as you still feel a predatory stranger's vice grip on your wrist. You've since stopped, not wanting to be a burden to them anymore, though you still have them every so often. You think it's something you should face yourself, anyway.

Still, those popular schoolyard monsters that everyone knows aren't real make you cocoon under your blankets, afraid and ashamed. Staring into the abyss only nets you shapeless, shadowy figures conjured by your chaotic imagination and its conspirators, your eyes. So, you opt to screw your eyes shut, refusing to open them until morning. You think acknowledging the fact that your fear stems from irrationality will eradicate it. You think that because you have no night lights in your room and refuse to buy one, your fear isn't an actual fear at all.

It's then that you can see all the small glows around you. Your clock; your brightly-colored stuffed animals that remain firmly at your side as they have all these years, in their very specific order (which always, always has to be, from left to right, the mouse, the small bear, the Eevee Pokémon plush, the small Pikachu Pokémon beanie doll, the large Pikachu plush, and the stuffed Anne Marie from *The Aristocats* and if any of them are missing you will not go to sleep until it is found), despite your status as an adult, game systems that are simply in sleep mode versus being shut off entirely. Your cell phone remains on and charging all night, every night, and you know you've illuminated its screen many times

for no reason other than a momentary reprieve from the black. You have a lamp on your nightstand whose switch is located approximately six inches away from your pillow.

And even as you're typing this, you find yourself stilling your hand from creeping toward that switch when the music you're listening to takes a turn for the eerie. You won't look away from the computer screen because you don't want to meet your mental mirages of those shadowy figures, and you wish your cat would come snuggle like she always does, a welcome distraction from your illogic.

Maybe you're just lonely, you figure. You're just crying out for protection. You're not actually scared. With that, you begin the cycle anew. Fear is, after all, a loathsome thing.

Sometimes

Casey Freeman

Sometimes I love you like I love scrubbing the toilet. I don't. At those times, you are that toilet. Too cold and/or disgusting, and I have no desire to use you unless necessary.

But sometimes I love you like I love singing. Carelessly belting out tones that may or may not be in tune until my throat is rougher than the brand new sandpaper in the shed, just because it makes me feel damn awesome. (That means sometimes you make me feel damn awesome).

Much the way songs have an end, you always do something to make me view you as a toilet again. We argue over little things, always. You try to say I'm a toilet too, but oh no, my dear, I am a woman. I'm not full of germs and ew like you. What makes you so damn awesome? You're a twig. How about you make time for me for once? You're way too serious sometimes. You're not Keanu Reeves and the world isn't ending! For being such a good speaker, you suck at communication. You're not as mature as you think.

But I'll be humble (because I'm that damn awesome) and admit that I'm not perfect, either. No, I'm not a toilet—that's you. I am, at worst, a dandelion. (What? That's not gross enough? I could've said tapeworm, but I'm cute. Tapeworms aren't cute). I pop up in your yard, you cruelly decapitate me, and soon enough, I'm back with double the force. I'm rather attached to you, you see, and you'll never get rid of me. And one nice day, you'll look outside and find that actually, you do rather enjoy my sunny, butter petals. And I enjoy your meticulously cared for yard.

Sometimes I love you, as I do many things, with love being loosely defined. How one could love a cold porcelain bowl, I have no idea; but maybe—just maybe—I'm the murky build up under your rim.

And just so you know, I think you're a damn awesome toilet.

Recollection Road Trip

Chelsea Funk

I used to live in rural Missouri right on the Arkansas border, smack dab in the middle of the state between Oklahoma and Kentucky. It's easy to tell where Missouri ends and where Arkansas begins. The blacktop ends right at the state line and quickly morphs into more of a reddish brown pavement than the usual Missouri gray. I guess the Arkansas Department of Transportation has different tastes than Missouri when it comes to color schemes.

The town I'm from is called Thornfield. I'd bet you couldn't even find us on a standard map of the United States, and if I was a betting woman I'd be rich. In fact, if you're on your way into Arkansas for some ungodly reason, don't blink or you might miss us. In fact, let me show you how to get there. Buckle up because we're going on a road trip, kids.

So I'm going to assume that we're starting from Saint Louis, because everyone knows how to get to Saint Louis, right? Right. So, from Saint Louis you're going to take I-44 South to Rolla. It's about 100 miles from Saint Louis to Rolla. There's a road sign that says so, so it must be true. For those of you not keeping score, 100 miles is about 2 hours. At least, when I drive it's about 2 hours. If you've never ridden in a car for that long, I guarantee you're going to need a rest stop. Sooner rather than later, I'm assuming.

I told you to go to the bathroom before we left, didn't I? "But Chelsea," you say, "I didn't have to go then!" Well you should have at least tried. So we're going to stop in Sullivan, Missouri because they have a really nice Flying-J truck stop. The bathrooms have minimal urine stains and the food only half tastes nasty. I think the soda fountain has Coke and Pepsi, if you were concerned about your soda choices. Go ahead, take your pee break. I'm going to grab some sunflower seeds. The big bag, because this is going to be a long trip.

So, now let's hit the road again. Hop back on 44 and drive until you see exits that boast Rolla on them. Take exit 186 to get on Missouri State Highway 63. This is going to take you through the heart of downtown Rolla, with its many fast food joints and gas stations. We should be good on gas, I mean, it's not like this is one of those environmental terrorist machines—I mean, diesel engines. As we get to the center of town, we should pass a few larger stone buildings that say Missouri S&T, Rolla. Right outside the college, there is a replica of Stonehenge. Knowing the smarty pants who go to school there, it's probably to scale. In case you didn't already know, the S&T stands for "Science and Technology" and it's a school for know-it-alls. And by that I mean, they probably know it all. They have high IQs, okay? Don't even think of applying there. Unless you want to go to school there. Follow your dreams, buddy.

A little down the way, we're gonna come to a Wal-Mart on the right. That's pretty much the last Wal-Mart you're going to see for a few hours. I know, sucks, right? After you pass the Wal-Mart, it's pretty much a straight shot to 63 from there. Just stay on the road

you're on until you pass the Sonic to your right. You're going to want to get in the left lane because the right lane ends in about 1000 feet, forcing us to turn right. We don't want to do that. Don't do it! Ahem, I mean, please change lanes. Make sure to check your mirrors first!

Now you're on 63, where there are passing lanes every couple miles so you can pass the inevitable 90-year-old who probably should have had his or her license taken away years ago. Watch it though, sometimes people get really offended when you try to pass them. I think it's a pride thing. When you try to pass the jerk with a lift kit on his extended cab Chevy, he's going to speed up. Don't let him fool you though, he'll slow it back down once the passing lane ends. Pass him. Drive like you've never driven before. Oh, you've never driven before? Oops, guess I should have checked earlier.

So, as you drive on 63 you'll pass through Houston, Licking, and Edgar Springs, also known as the only towns between Rolla and Cabool. Don't forget to take a minute and appreciate what a beautiful place Missouri is. Of course, there is a whole lot of nothin' in Missouri too. If you look to your left, you'll see nothing! And if you look to your right, you'll see more nothing! Look back to your left and you'll see...you guessed it! Nothing! And some cows. Always with the cows, this place.

Besides nothing and cows, there are some interesting things to see. In the fall, when the trees are shedding and the leaves are nearing the end of their lives, it's a beautiful sight. The oranges, yellows and reds roll over the hills for miles and miles and miles and at sunset, I could swear the hills were on fire. The colors of the fading daylight and the fading season are the most striking sight you will ever see. Appreciate this, because when you get back to St. Louis, you'll miss the beauty and mystery of endless forest.

Of course, nothing can stay gold, Ponyboy. There are multiple areas that have seen better days and one too many wild nights. Rusted junkers line the highway in some areas, broken fences and would-be scrap yards as far as the eye can see. Why do those people always seem to own goats? Oy, with the livestock already.

When you get to Cabool, take a right onto Highway 60 and drive to the first stop light you see. You'll pass a Casey's General Store, a Cabool State Bank, a seemingly abandoned garage to the right where it appears the last time it was open was 1976. Once you reach the stop light you should see a grocery store to your left. If you pass a second Casey's, you've gone too far and should be ashamed of yourself. At the light take a left onto Highway 181. You'll pass over train tracks once you've passed the once busy full-service gas station, now abandoned. It's sad really, how time forgot about this place. It looks like something right out of an episode of the Andy Griffith Show. Sorry, I'm getting nostalgic. Where were we? Right, crossing the train tracks.

So, after you've crossed the tracks you'll see a Dairy Queen to your left and an on-ramp to your right. Unless you really want a soft serve ice cream, take the on-ramp onto Highway 60. "But Chelsea," you say, "weren't we just on 60?" Why, yes we were, my little observant friend. We were just on Business 60, now we're getting on regular 60. "But that's so confusing," you say. Trust me, little buddy, I know. Just keep driving until you see

exit signs for Mansfield, but wait there's more! Take the second exit for Mansfield/Ava, not the first, which will take you to Hartville. We don't want to go to Hartville because the only thing Hartville has to offer is exceedingly boring scenery and nothing of what we're heading for. Once you pass the first Mansfield exit, do not, and I must stress this, do not miss the second exit. There isn't another exit for another twelve miles. That would add almost half an hour on to our trip. We've already been on the road for twelve hundred years—or four hours, but who's counting?

When you exit, hang a left at the stop sign and that'll put you on Highway 5 South. When you hit the four-way blinking red light in Mansfield, don't make any turns and head straight down 5. A word of caution, my heavy-footed friend: the good ol' boys from the Missouri Highway Patrol have a passion for writing tickets to anyone driving above 60 miles per hour, otherwise known as the speed limit. Try not to get pulled over please, I've got warrants out for my arrest. Maybe I should have driven.

Continue on 5 all the way to Ava, don't worry you can't miss it. 5 Highway cuts right through Ava. Shortly before you get to town, there will be a roadside park at the bottom of the hill, named after one of the few docs in Douglas County, Dr. Gentry. This is a great place to stop and stretch our legs. On a sunny summer day it's nice to take off your shoes and socks and dangle your toes in the small stream that runs parallel to the highway. The few tiny fish nibble at the underside of your toes but, don't worry, they don't really bite—their mouths aren't big enough. This really is a very serene place, even with the occasional traffic up on the road trying to break the silence. In the fall, the fire-leaves fall off the trees that surround the tiny rest area. Park is a bit of an over exaggeration. This place is big enough for a boulder and a picnic table, but not much else really. In the winter time, when all the trees are barren, a light dusting of white settles over the ground. In the spring, Easter lilies bloom all alongside the stream, their bright yellow color is impossible to miss, even from the road.

When we get back on the road, you should note that when you get to the stop light, we'll have reached Ava. On the left you'll see a McDonald's—newly renovated! Or so they tell me. On the right there is a Wal-Mart Supercenter. It used to be a regular Wal-Mart until they built a new building next to the old one. The former Wal-Mart building is now "Cooper Lumber," it's a True Value store. When the light turns green, stay on 5 highway. In about three miles you'll come to another stop light—this one is a blinking red so pay close attention. My mom got into a car accident at this stoplight when she was pregnant with me. Come to think of it, maybe that's what's wrong with me. Let's move on because that is a can of night crawlers you don't want on your fishing trip.

After you pass the light, stay on 5 highway out of town. One thing about this road is, you'll find that one particular straight stretch always seems to smell of the undeniable pungent odor of polecat. This may be an impoverished area, but we're sure rich in road kill. If only you could make a living off of squashin' varmints under your tires. At most, you'll make a couple bucks every once in a while, but nothing more than the cost of a bottle of pop at the store.

On down the road, you're going to come across a sign that says Thornfield at the

junction of 5 and JJ. Don't take JJ. Don't do it. It's bad.

Just kidding, it's just really curvy and takes longer. Keep driving for another five minutes or so and you'll come up on the junction of 5 and 95 Highway. Take a right onto 95.

On (and around) 95 Highway is where I've had some of the best times of my life. Right at the corner of 5 and 95 is the Y-store, where I used to go park to catch the school bus as it was headed to some out-of-town sporting event that I happened to be playing in at the time. The store itself is closed and has been for quite some time, abandoned in favor of greener pastures. Literally, the owners moved to California because they favored the weather. Apparently, bipolarity is not favored as it concerns the weather. After they moved off and left the Y-Store to quite literally rot, people just used the area as a convenient area to meet up with people and to park their cars.

Much caution, friend, this road is extremely curvy and has caused its lion's share of accidents in its day. Usually I'm a proponent of speeding, but on this highway it's better to take it slow. I do like all of my limbs firmly attached to my body and my bones unbroken, so don't crash the car please. A few miles down the road is Thornfield R-V Elementary, home of the Tigers. Let's stop in and say howdy.

I grew up in that school. I had fights in that school. You see, I was what they called a trouble student, as in I caused a lot of trouble. In my defense, the other guy started it. I didn't have a lot of friends to begin with, but for some reason, what little group of friends I had accumulated deserted me in fourth grade. Maybe it's because I had an affinity for kicking the other children out of the tree house. I mean, I literally kicked people in the face as they were coming up the ladder. It was my tree house, don't look at me like that. Or maybe it was because I used a word I didn't understand to hurt one of my dearest friends out of jealousy.

When I was in Mrs. Daugherty's fourth grade class, a new girl moved to town and I didn't like it. She was tiny with big ears and black eyes and she was a threat. Don't ask me why, my fourth grade self was a bit eccentric. Her name was Carissa Willhite and she loved ferrets but more importantly, she stole my best friend. My friend Samantha and I were tight, but I guess we weren't that tight. Sam started hanging out with Carissa and they liked to exclude me from things. They used to do that really bitchy thing where they would whisper in each other's ears while casting side glances my way and giggling. After a while, my nerves and my patience wore thin. And then one day it all changed. I remember having recess in the gym because it was raining outside. Sam and the Wicked Witch of the Midwest were walking around the gym and I was sitting in a corner by myself, slowly boiling away as I watched them having fun without me. I tried to let it go, but I just couldn't. I stood slowly, my fingernails digging into my palms as I slowly approached them. When they noticed me they got really quiet. I must have looked pissed because they looked slightly shocked and kind of afraid. I only uttered one word, and I swear that word still rings in my ears clear as a bell, even ten years later. *Slut*. I didn't know what it meant, all I know is that it was a word I wasn't supposed to say and I wanted to hurt them. More specifically, I wanted to hurt Sam. I hurt her alright, and in the process, I hurt myself. I still

feel guilty about the incident, hurt from the outcome, and unadulterated hate for Carissa. I took responsibility for my actions a long time ago, but Carissa denied any wrongdoing. She moved away in seventh grade and I couldn't have been happier. I'm petty like that.

The experiences we have growing up shape who we will become. We are a product of the society we grow up in, and I grew up in sadness and hate. It took a long time for me to become the hilarious and gorgeous personality you know today. I wallowed in self-pity for a long damn time but when I finally picked myself up I was better for it. I won't say I grew up, because I haven't, and Heaven help me, I never will.

Frozen Thoughts

Gabriela Graciosa Guedes

A snowflake lands in my hands covered by black leather gloves. It is the first time I have seen snow falling so thick. It amazes me. I look at the sky, and all I can see is grey, a sea of grey covering us all, pouring white snowflakes down on us. The trees on the other side of the river have no leaves, giving the final touch to the winter scene. The cold wind that makes the snow travel diagonally hits my cheeks, the only skin I have exposed, and I feel them turning pink, pinker and red. Under my jeans and my huge winter jacket, I feel my cold skin, but it is inside my body that the cold really lies. I've never felt so cold. I close my eyes, and a picture of me lying on the sand, under the sun appears in my mind, bringing a rush of nostalgia. I shake my head. I am not allowed to think of it. It's not only the endless fight between summer and winter. It is more than that. It hurts to think of my hometown in Brazil, it hurts to think of my family's summer house, it hurts to think about all the people I left behind. It hurts even more to think about the one person that won't be there to welcome me home when I go back.

My mind rewinds to five days earlier. It was a Wednesday, three days before my flight, three days before I left for college over five thousand miles away from home. My grandfather, Orlando, was walking towards me, as I loaded the car to go to my apartment downtown and start packing. He had just taken a shower after coming back from the gym, but he was already sweating again even without a shirt on. The heat was nearly unbearable, and I remember naïvely wishing for the cold. If only I knew then how much I'd miss it. "Hey, Biboca!" He called me by the nickname only he used. "Are you leaving already? Do we have to say goodbye?" He had his arms opened, but I had mine wrapped in three huge bags that I was trying not to drop while taking them to the trunk of my mother's car.

"I'm not leaving until Saturday, Grandpa. We can say goodbye later," I assured him. He dropped his arms, and on he went to the front yard where my stepfather waited for him, but not before messing with my hair as he always did.

I had just finished loading the car to go to my apartment downtown and started to pack when I heard it. At first, the voice sounded too distant, too unfamiliar for me to give it attention. "Girls! Come here!" The voice pleaded. "Girls!" I heard it again. It was only when my stepfather screamed my sister's name that I recognized it. I didn't need to move to know that something was not right. The reason why I hadn't recognized the voice before was because I had never heard it. The desperate tone that my stepfather's voice had in that moment was completely unfamiliar to me until then.

I stood up and ran. But as I ran through the garage, the only distance between me and him, I knew that I didn't want to get there. Whatever it was, I didn't want to see. I slowed down when I got closer to the front yard, but I needed to move. I needed to help him. My mother managed to pass by me and got there first. The way she came to a halt when she saw what was happening made my heart sink inside my chest. Three steps, it

took me three more steps to see my grandfather lying on the lawn, and in that moment I could swear I felt my heart breaking.

“He’s gonna be fine,” my mom told me. “Call an ambulance. He’s gonna be fine.” The way she was talking, though, revealed how she really felt. She knew it, I knew it, but neither of us wanted to believe it. It was my fault. It was my fault, I would tell myself in that moment. The first time he had a heart attack was because he had been too nervous. He was nervous now because I was going away for four years. I did that. It was my fault.

“It’s not your fault, sweetie.” My neighbor hugged me. Where did she come from? How did she end up here? Did I say it aloud? I couldn’t think. I hugged her back, and let all the tears roll out of my eyes. My grandfather was not passing away. That couldn’t be happening. No, that couldn’t be happening.

Carol, my older sister, was upstairs and came to the front yard later. When she got there, my mom and grandmother were giving him CPR, and they never stopped until the ambulance got there. I remember seeing the panic in my sister’s eyes and imagining that they were basically a reflection of my own pain. But I should’ve known better. Carol didn’t cry at first. Her first reaction was to scream, and then she collapsed on the front porch and broke into tears. I watched her sob as she never had before, and somehow I found strength within me and cut off my own tears. I did it for her. I sat beside her and hugged her, and in that moment I was sure the void was a much more comfortable place than inside of me. I felt nothing. I didn’t allow myself to feel. I didn’t allow myself sorrow, because I was not sure I’d be able to stop if I ever started to cry again.

The cold wind travels through the Missouri River, washing the memories away, and I force myself back to the present. My sister is here with me now. We buried our grandfather on a Thursday, packed on a Friday, and flew on a Saturday. I would have never been able to do it without her. My father and Carol came with me to help me move in. They are staying only for a week, but their presence, even for a short time, makes me have the strength to stay. On that Wednesday morning, five days ago, I thought of a million ways to not come to St. Charles, to cancel this whole trip and be there with my family. But I couldn’t. I had to do it for him, more than anything now. I had to do it for him. I had to come and study to become the writer he always wanted me to be.

For a split second, I imagine all my thoughts vanishing and my mind as empty as can be. I don’t think. I just feel the breeze on my skin. But I know the memories will never really leave. They are frozen thoughts. And I am not sure I want them to. In fact, I’m afraid they will. I want to be sure that every time I sit to write, my grandfather will show up in my head. Smiling from ear to ear, he’ll say:

“And your novel, Biboca? Have you finished it yet?”

“I’m working on it, Grandpa. I’m working on it,” I will answer. I long ago learned that pain is inevitable, but we can choose whether to suffer or not. At this moment, I just want the suffering to go away.

“Are you ready?” my sister asks, looking at me and then my father. There is so much more to this question than just “Are you ready to go?” Am I ready? Am I really ready? No. I’m not ready for this 180-degree change in my life. I’m not ready for them

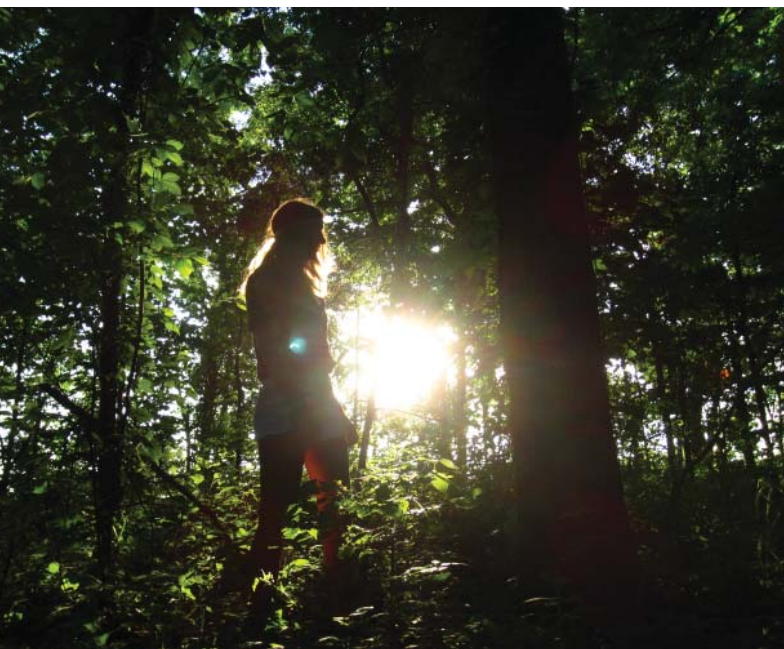
to leave me at my dorm. I'm not ready to say goodbye, even though this is the one thing I wish I could've said to my grandpa. I feel the monsters inside of my head beginning a revolution. These dark thoughts won't leave me, and I am scared to death. I'm not ready to face them alone. I am not ready.

"Yes, let's go," I say, instead.



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Fiction



Stranger in the Forest, Audrey Schroeder

Firewater

Morgan Albertson

Luis Luzaro woke up in a familiar living room, or at least what used to be a living room. A cold breeze swept through the doorway, shocking him from his sleep. He groggily turned toward the door and saw it was hanging on just one hinge. He reached for his flask, or rather, grabbed at the air where his flask would have been had the coffee table not been reduced to broken pieces of wood. Taking one long look around the room, he began to notice the other signs of last night's destruction: the ceiling fan resting in a large dent on the floor, the couch sagging more than it ever had and missing an arm, and the wall opposite him with a fist-sized scorched hole in it (with reverberating damage circling from the point of impact and across the room).

What happened last night?

As Luis groggily tried to remember the details, his eyes rested on the sticky note attached to the broken flatscreen. Luis made his way from his charred seat to read it, but the feeling of a jackhammer in his skull caused him to slow down and slump against the wall.

No moving fast today. Noted.

Taking a deep breath, Luis focused on the message: "Don't wake anyone in the morning. Just get out. Don't call. – Amy."

Crap.

Scant images made their way past his alcohol-addled brain: Luis dancing with a pretty woman, taking his next shot in a string of many, people running out of the apartment.

Not being able to remember more, he took the time to get his balance back and picked up his flask from where it had landed the night before. While he did not know where his jacket had ended up, walking through the house looking for it seemed like a bad move at this point. He resigned himself to the chilly city air, and headed out of his two best friends' apartment. As he took his fourth staggered step down the third-floor stairs, he realized just how terrible his balance still was.

I guess I have to take the elevator.

Luis chuckled to himself and pulled out his flask, quickly taking a shot. As the sweetly burning tequila made its way down his throat, he could feel his muscles growing larger. He maneuvered as far from the railing as possible, then took off running quickly toward it. As he approached it, he shot out his hands, grabbed the metal bars, and threw himself over the edge toward the ground below. The wind rushed by his growing frame for a few fleeting seconds as the ground grew closer and closer. As his now hardened body hit the street he tucked into a roll, tumbling forward fifteen feet before he could stop, right himself, and suddenly he remembered kissing the woman he had been dancing with, sliding his hand down her back, throwing a chair at an indistinguishable figure.

Where the heck did that come from?

As the warmth of the alcohol left his chest, he felt his muscles soften and slight bruises

began to form on his exposed arms. Now in more pain than before the drink, Luis turned in the direction of his apartment twelve blocks away. Keeping his tired eyes trained all around him for any sign of trouble, he began plodding home.

I really should have taken Steel Cranium up on his offer of a jetpack.

After walking eight blocks or so, Luis started paying more attention to the sounds around him, or rather, the lack of sounds around him. Silence pervaded every aspect of the environment, and even the cold wind made no noise as it brushed the hair on his arms.

Could we not do this today, please?

At that moment, Luis felt a sharp impact on his back and fell face first into the sidewalk. He saw himself back at the apartment, getting punched in the face by the indistinguishable figure. Back to the task at hand, he turned rapidly, unscrewed the lid of his flask, and began swallowing the tequila without tasting it, causing the wonderful sensation of his muscles growing and hardening to course through his body. An all-too-familiar voice then rang out, shocking his ears – which had become accustomed to the silence – painfully.

I really need to get a costume so this will stop happening.

“My, my, Brawler!” exclaimed the voice, calling Luis by the name of his alter-ego, “We are starting early today, aren’t we? You can’t just get rid of me in that bottle like you do the rest of your problems. No, you have to actually man up and face me. Do you like my new toy? I call it the auditory cancellator. Quite a nice name if I do say so myself.”

Sound Striker was tall and lanky, wearing a baby blue latex suit and a hat that looked like it belonged more in a comic book than it ever would in the gray city they were standing in. He held an ostentatiously large megaphone, with far too many dials on it for anyone’s good. Luis struggled to get his words out, because along with his increased muscle mass and greater speed, the large amounts of alcohol impaired him, as it is naturally wont to do.

“Striker, I really don’t have time for this.”

I am just four blocks from my apartment. Ugh.

“I do wish you would use my full name, Little B. I keep telling you this, but once again you just don’t listen. I saw your pretty little mess last night, and figured I’d have to come and teach you a lesson about being so . . . theatrical.”

“You saw what happened? What did I do? Did anyone get—”

At that moment Sound Striker turned one of the many dials on the auditory cancellator, and all of the sounds of the surrounding city began to flood Luis’s ears. Above the rush of the wind and distant car horns, his hungover brain was assaulted by the sound of seemingly spontaneous screaming, sending another memory to the forefront of his brain: his fist connecting with the unknown man’s gut, the look of fear on the woman’s face, the screams of people fleeing the party. Forcing himself through the pain in his head, he regained focus on the screaming happening around him and started calculating the distances between them and himself.

The men’s voices are thirty yards northeast in the alley and Wilhelm is roughly forty feet west.

Luis saw a flash of light to his right, sure sign Sound Striker’s henchmen were here, and they were packing. He headed that direction, choosing to take care of the men first. As

Luis turned into the alley, he saw someone with Sound Striker's emblem woven into his grey suit pointing a sound-firing rifle at two cowering citizens. One off-balance punch later and the goon went sprawling against the hard concrete. Turning to the almost-victims, Luis raised his voice, "Get out of here. Now." They were more than happy to comply.

Why does Striker need to "teach me something?" Who the heck does that jerk think he is?

Letting that thought drive and enrage him, Luis' fists erupted in flames, hot enough to burn on anyone he hit. He swiftly ran around the block, deftly knocking out goon after goon – taking swig after swig from his flask – and never quite landing a punch on Sound Striker. As he became more enraged and drunk, Luis' fists started erupting in flames at every punch. Finally, the police arrived and encircled the scene, Sound Striker and Luis stood alone in the middle: one standing tall and haughtily, the other barely standing but with arms engulfed with fire.

"Oh, you poor foolish boy, look around you—tell me what you see." Luis stood agape, not comprehending through his stupor the destruction he had caused to benches, parked cars, and building walls. Sound Striker continued: "It isn't me who is destroying your home, but I think you know what is. Now you get to clean up the mess. Hahahahaha!"

Sound Striker pointed his auditory cancellator at the ground and turned another dial. A sonic boom rang out, reverberating off the surrounding buildings, and momentarily blinded all those present. When they could all see again, Sound Striker was gone.

One last memory shoved its way to the forefront of Luis' brain. Chad's face, indistinguishable no more, scrunched up in pain as his body hit the floor, and he saw Amy's horrified expression as she saw Chad fall.

Luis felt something small touch his back, and then gasped as the Taser's electric shock coursed painfully across his nervous system. He felt the rough arms of two men pull him away, and an authoritative voice called out, "You are under arrest for public intoxication, destruction of property, and the assault of Chad Landon."

His thoughts from the night before finally made sense. The officer lowered Luis into the squad car.

"But I couldn't have done that. I'm a super hero!"

The car door shut.

Become Death

Joe Bayne

The room was violently lit. A created sun cast its rays through the blinds of the bunker, penetrating wherever it could reach with radiant tendrils of energy. Deep and sharp shadows came right after the light found its way in. The faces of the men in the room were cut into harsh shapes from the contrast. Smiles of success and completion were separated into half-faced grins as they turned from facing the blast of light towards each other to revel in what they had accomplished. Everyone was glowing with excitement while the gleam of the young sun, now in its final seconds of life, faded to let the star in the sky take back its normal duties.

One man stood still, facing the remains of the collapsed landscape ahead of him. He was tall, and made up of sharp lines, even before the shadows formed in the room, and was currently lighting a cigarette with a flame from a lighter that seemed harmless to the touch when compared to the ball of fire he was watching explode in the distance.

A thought cascaded from the darkest and most primal spaces in his mind. He couldn't think of his own words to form it. This thought sifted through the rest of his brain until it reached knowledge recalling certain religious texts. Suddenly he had the words for what he was feeling, words that he couldn't produce on his own because he was merely human. He needed a god to say them:

"Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds."

These words he had borrowed from the Hindu god of destruction, Vishnu.

The man supposed everyone in the room thought that in one way or another.

The commotion of the test had begun to die down shortly after the old sun's rays retook the room. Everyone was beaming and basking in the good news.

The sharp lined man was about to let the last of his thoughts of destruction fade, just as the young star's light had, but before the final rays of thought left his head, they were cut off. A hand on his shoulder trapped these thoughts and buried them back in his brain to be rattled around and reflected upon later. The hand belonged to another sharp man, who was very different from the tall one. This man that belonged to the interrupting hand was sharp in attitude, posture, and abrasion. His sharpness was used as a force to pierce its way into the world.

The new man talked.

"We did it. The breakthroughs created by this team have finally come to a head and we now have the power of the gods at our disposal. We have the perfect weapon."

His words were very true. The weapon was perfect and being a man of the military, that is all he cared for. He gave the tall man a pat on the back one more time and let his stabbing presence fade back toward the other figures in the room.

The talk of gods brought back the idea that the tall man had let recede back into his mind. But again, before he had any time to reflect on it, he was his own force to stop himself this time.

He started to smile, but his mouth stopped halfway in the process. Concerned by this, he consciously forced his lips to complete the rest of the grin. He deserved to be happy with such an accomplishment.

With his newfound smile, he finally turned to face the rest of the room. He joined in the ecstatic nature of the group that he had worked with for so many secret months on this singular task. The celebration was dying down by the time he made his way to joining in. It was time for many of them to work. Data had to be collected. Science needed to be done.

After the rest of the day's work, the sharp-lined man headed home for the night to reflect on the results and then go to bed feeling well accomplished. He was certain he would sleep well tonight since he had done such a wonderful job.

Certainty is a hard thing to achieve in science, and even harder in predicting the human mind.

The man sat at the edge of his bed, staring down at the floor as if he were looking toward the great distance of height between himself at the top of a cliff and the ground at the bottom. That sort of height can be scary, and the man was currently afraid.

The thought he had left to fall into the back of his mind had forced its way forward.

The last time man had been given the power of god, the one who gave it away had been punished. Prometheus had taken the power of fire from the heavens and given it to man. For this act, he was chained to the rocks and forced to endure a hell created to last forever. This hell became his world for an eternity, the only world he could be part of.

The man worried, perched atop his cliff that was the edge of the mountain that was his bed.

"Have I become Prometheus?"

This thought formed into a horror that crashed its way through his head, causing shock waves to tremble the rest of his physical body. He wanted to jump off the edge of the cliff he was staring down. He had given man a new fire and the gods themselves could be angry. He had stolen the sun.

He suddenly understood why the gods were so angry at Prometheus. The Titan had given humanity the power to burn. Fire would be used to kill in the most gruesome of ways, and the purpose of stealing the power of the sun was for just that. It was a perfect weapon. And a perfectly horribly one.

The man imagined a future where his world could be swallowed by the thousands of suns that he helped create. He felt a guilt grow inside him. His conscience could not take the pressure that his mind was forcing upon it.

His life's greatest work, his theft of the sun, was a mistake.

The guilt overtook him and the urge to throw himself off an actual cliff, among other desperate thoughts, raced through his mind.

The man didn't want this regret. He needed nothing more than remembrance and respect for his work, but now he was left with a heavy conscience and hatred for his actions.

He had helped mankind become death, with the actual potential to destroy the world.

The hell Prometheus was forced to endure would be no match for the havoc that mankind could now create upon each other. Humanity had the real capability to make hell on earth.

Images of a scorched world flashed in his mind. It was a landscape that was painted with nothing but orange flames and blackened, burnt corpses. This land and all the life that it provided for had been murdered, and he had provided the sun that burnt it into the hell it was.

He knew that at some point soon, this mental picture would become a reality somewhere in the world. Fire would fall en masse from the sky and he had helped it happen.

He jumped off the edge of his bed, knowing that sadly, it wasn't a real cliff. He began to pace the room, wondering what he could do to take this guilt away. How could he turn himself in to the gods and ask for their forgiveness? He couldn't reach them from where he was and the man felt hopeless and small when he imagined them scheming to punish him.

He didn't want to wait for their justice.

The man paced his way into his living room where he found himself reaching into his hanging coat's pocket to grab his lighter and cigarettes.

He paused and stood still in front of a window.

It was morning and the old sun was beginning to rise. A soft light found its way into the room, enveloping everything inside in a warm glow, banishing the dark shadows of the night as well as the blackness of the absence of thought and action of what the man could do to absolve his guilt.

He interrupted his stillness to pull a cigarette up to his lips. He produced a flame from the lighter, lit the cigarette, and gazed out onto the world as it started its new day; a day that he didn't want to be part of.

The sharp lined man inhaled an almost endless drag of tobacco, and before letting out the smoke from his lungs, flicked his fiery cigarette into his curtains that framed the window. The cigarette hit and the flame that caught began to spread.

He exhaled the smoke from his cigarette and breathed in once more, taking in the smoke from his burning living room as the world around him caught fire.

Misery Loves Company

Casey Freeman

It was supposed to be a special day. Her perfect, sunny day filled with love. It ended at sunset with her absentee love, ignored sympathies, and she alone, still adorned in her angelic dress, sat unceremoniously on the edge of the park fountain in the area reserved for her reception, pastel streamers and white trellises all orphaned with her. Her veil floated a few feet away, abandoned in the water and she was halfway through a small bottle of rum.

A boy passed by, tall and lanky and glancing her way, uncomfortable-looking jeans and overly large headphones around his neck playing his music far too loudly. It brought a somewhat condescending smirk to her face. Though who was she to assume he was just a boy? He looked to be around her age, after all. Besides, from what she learned from her experience today, she was still just a girl. A 24-year-old little girl. But now that boy was heading her way.

Much to her surprise, he didn't mock her, or laugh, or tell her to leave; he simply sat beside her, turning his music off and looking her way. The extent of her acknowledgement was a nod in his direction and another sip from her bottle of rum. He kept the silence that was somehow becoming increasingly comfortable, opting to pull a rather crumpled pack of cigarettes and lighter from his jeans pocket—how he managed to fit them in there, she couldn't fathom—and lit one, slowly taking a drag while listening to the cicadas. He held the pack out to her in offering, but she shook her head, haphazardly swirling her bottle while somewhat regretting the head movement.

"Rough day, huh?" He broke the silence, yet the comfort stayed. She drank from her bottle in lieu of a response, but he got the message all the same. He took another long drag, pointedly releasing the smoke above and away from her. She would have thought him courteous if she wasn't so focused on keeping herself upright.

"You're lucky the park's empty over here. The cops could arrest you if they wanted to, you know. Though I suppose maybe they'd take one look at you and cut you some slack."

She let out a derisive snort. "You sure know how to flatter a lady."

"She speaks!" Her answer of choice was another snort. He shrugged and took a drag, and the silence reigned again.

"You've got pretty eyes though, even if they're a little unfocused. Whoever it was that left you will be kicking himself in the ass soon enough, I bet."

"Oh, sure he will. Right. I don't matter."

"Yes you do."

"Not to him."

"Well no, not to him—"

"You know just the right thing to say."

"—but you matter to me, and I just met you. Everybody matters! Now what does

that say?"

"That says you're crazy."

He sighed and shook his head, taking another long drag from his cigarette and letting it out with all the deliberation of splattered paint. "Maybe I am. Doesn't make me a liar, though."

She frowned, swirling her bottle again and watching the amber liquid churn inside. "That makes one of us."

He looked at her, curious now. "What's that supposed to mean? A lovely lady like yourself couldn't tell a lie."

"Pretty things are the greatest liars, kid." She took a sip of her rum, unhappy with how her vision was beginning to focus again as her tolerance level worked against her drunken goal. He let out a short, humorless chuckle.

"Kid, huh? You don't look like you're much older than I am, you know. Besides, I think that's the booze talking. You can't really think that, can you?" He sounded genuinely sad, she noted.

"Pretty weather, pretty dresses, pretty rings, pretty flowers, pretty ex-fiancés... Everything was pretty this morning. Beautiful, even. Perfect, even. Every one of those pretty things lied to me, though. I lied to myself. Never had the chance to say 'I do.' Though I guess that would've been a lie as well, had I known this would happen. But it doesn't matter. I don't matter, and love sure as hell doesn't matter."

He stayed silent, eyes downcast and jaw set. He put out his cigarette and she put down her bottle. The wind blew, a cricket chirped a short serenade, and neither of them moved. Suddenly, he tossed himself backwards into the fountain, landing with a resounding splash. Startled, she twisted around to see him.

"What the—"

He sat back up with a mischievous grin, grabbed her wrist, and yanked her down into the water with him. She gave a short shriek before hitting the water face first, reorienting herself as gracefully as possible and sputtering indignantly. He, meanwhile, laughed brightly.

"What was that for!?" she spat, wet hair cracking like an old whip as she tossed it out of her face. He started laughing harder. She stared at him incredulously.

As his chuckles calmed down, he leaned back, attempting to float in the maybe-three-feet of water surrounding them. "It got pretty somber there. We needed something to spice things up."

She wanted to be angry. She wanted to shout at him, insult him, tell him to just leave her alone and stop trying to make her feel better because she had a right to be upset! But she couldn't. So, she just laughed. She laughed and laughed, one hand clutching at her side while the other attempted to tame the skirt of her dress which was billowing under the water.

He smiled as he watched her laugh, eyes alight with mirth. "Hold still," he said, floundering his way over to her, "and close your eyes, too." A few giggles still escaped her mouth, but she complied. Her eyes shot open when she felt something wet being stuck

onto her head, a confused frown tugging at her lips. She lifted her hand and felt the veil he had placed back on her. He scooted back a few feet and flashed her a thumbs up.

“All right! Good as—well, not new, but better than before!” She raised an eyebrow. He swept a hand through his bangs, teeth showing through his smile, and slid forward to tap her forehead once. “You must’ve looked really pretty this morning, and that’s not a lie. All that glitters isn’t gold, sure, but everyone treasures the gold that they have. And you look really pretty right now. I thought you should know that.”

He stood and stretched, shaking the water out of his hair, limbs flailing and dropping with a contented sigh, and held out his hand. “Come on. Let’s call you a cab and get you home. What’s your address? Matter of fact, you got a name?”

A smile bloomed on her face, the first sincere one since that morning, as she accepted his hand. “Yeah,” she said, “I do.”

The Fairy Fairytale

Daria Ivanova

“Ob-la-di, ob-la-da life goes on, bra,
Lala how the life goes on.”

–The Beatles

The day was certainly hard. So now I finally have time to sit and to breathe. To breathe in the literal sense. Living in an open space, you have to devote some special time for oxygen. It is my little personal sin. Huh.

The sunset was captivating. Stretching on the whole curve of the Earth it was sparkling, with the deep blue color gradating to pomegranate and then to scarlet. At the base of all that riot of light was the precise black circle contour. It seemed like it was telling me “Here I am, the Earth. Look at me, forget about the silent polka dot space, and come back to my flamboyant hysteria.”

But no. I was not going to leave my cozy, warmed place. Slowly sipping the oxygen from my bottle I looked again at the magnificent scenery of the tired sun. I didn’t envy it. Even I have these several light-years to relax for a while.

Sun walks from one corner of the Earth to another, like a confused human analyzing some stupid human situation, and nurtures all “this” like a worrying mother.

It’s probably hard to give birth to something once.

But imagine how hard it is to do it constantly.

So, do not be surprised, people, when it will burn down.

And don’t be scared too much. Something else will appear.

I guess I have to stop my pointless thoughts, though they seem to perfectly fit empty open space.

You probably are asking right now “Who are you and why should I listen to your odd discourses about the things which don’t bother me?”

I’m sorry, but I can’t answer your question. My reality is not that interesting. I already told you, actually showed, my main entertainment: looking at the sunsets, enjoying the especially delicious Earth air, and talking with myself about the different stuff around me.

Oh, I also swing my legs sitting at the edge of the dusty, musty little moon. Sometimes I sing songs.

I live on a little planet called Micasa. I’m the only citizen of Micasa other than my domestic partner, the little fish Poisson. It lives in a little container filled with the forbidden water. I said forbidden because if there would be any government in Micasa stealing water from the Earth would be punishable. The Legitimate Institution of Felicity Engineering (L.I.F.E.) prohibited by the universe’s law the stealing of water and air from the Earth. For there is not enough of it even for itself.

But I stole it.

Because it is so beautiful. I can stare at the glittering water for dozens of light-years, you know. And the Earth air is especially delicious. I just can't resist. This air has a taste of water, thus I guess it glitters inside of me. And simultaneously it has a piece of my native space. Miraculous.

Again, I began to talk about some baloney.

I'll tell you about my day. My ordinary day.

Every gloomy morning I wake up and see the same gloomy Micasan scenery. You probably think that I don't like my planet, but it is not the truth. I love Micasa, but after I got a job at the Earth, I suddenly understood that my planet is boring and there is nothing in it except me and Poisson.

Every day I go to the Earth for my job. I was hired to do the regular minor work there like mixing clouds, beating on a loud tambourine when it rains somewhere, or pouring yellow paint on the trees. By the way, it is very hard work because you have to do it accurately. Sometimes, when I pour a lot of yellow paint in one place, They shout at me. People can suspect something. But they shouldn't know about us. To fix my mistake, I have to take a broom and sweep away all extra leaves. But I'm not gonna tell you all our production tricks, don't expect it from me.

Other workers at the same time do the other things. Some pour the goofy stuff on sleeping and drinking people; somebody mixes and separates people; sometimes they get something from that mixture; others create what they called destiny. But all of these are so complicated. I don't envy them, either. They got a special education for their specialization in good colleges. And I? I can only do the easy job.

Sometimes, while making clouds, I watch the people. They can't even imagine how it is to go home at the end of the day to my monochrome home. They are so lucky to be there, where they are.

Those special workers are never wrong, and they always put people in the place they have to be to create the perfectly beautiful puzzle.

One day I saw a little girl who was watching my clouds. She was looking at them and guessing what they looked like out loud. She observed one really messy cloud and somehow recognized an elephant in it.

I am sure that imaginative human children should do, at least, a part of our magical job. Though, maybe they already do it, who knows. I saw that my work wasn't unnoticed. So, from that day I tried to come to the same place for her, and to make elaborate clouds. The girl didn't always come, but I caught the taste of my job, and from that time I've been trying to create something beautiful, funny, or something else.

From that time, I began to communicate with these Earth inhabitants through my clouds, leaves, or rainy days.

Sometimes I just create the scenery and the mood for the supreme workers' work, but sometimes I try to help people in a more serious than just descriptive way.

And if one day you would want to know my personal advice on some issue, you

are very welcome to just look at the sky and call me.
I promise I'll be there with my bag of clouds for you.

Poetry



Untitled, Chris Hudson

War

Zachary M. Alley

War: Some Salvation

“Protect your country”

“Do your duty”

This will not deliver me from madness

Medals gleam for my fine work

Letters dripping with Crayola thank you’s

They are not enough

Metal rusts and paper withers

Love is eternal

War: Battle Lines

For the last five years I actually believed that

Sitting in a desert covered in camouflage I learned

Danger does not wear a beard

Or plant roadside bombs

Danger wears a sundress

And plants kisses on my cheek

I do not fear the enemy they have given me

I fear what my gut tells me

The paranoia and pessimism

That churns my intestines like taffy

Signs of your deceit

In your voice. In your eyes.

Cryptic hints strewn about on social media

My one gateway to home

Is now a crime scene of clues

I can smell the chalk tracing my broken silhouette

War: Flags Unfurled

The enemy is revealed

You and him

You I know all too well

Or so I thought

The other remains in darkness

But darkness has a face. A name. A connection.

With you

I know my enemy

You know him, too

But how?
You still bear my standard
But cross enemy lines at night
I have to know the truth
From your mouth, not intercepted enemy chatter
White noise
Black hearts
The evidence is damning
Yet, I offer you salvation
One chance to prove this is a terrible misunderstanding

War: Pilgrim's Path

Words form in my head to herd you like a lost lamb
I will guide you along the trail with two ends
She loves me. She loves me not.
I ask questions
You offer lies
I already know the answers
It is another knowledge I seek
Further along the trail we come to a fork in the road
To the left a lie. To the right the truth.
Left we go
Another crossroad, another lie
A blow struck with every turn
The fabrications are delivered with such ease
You will not feed me bitter helpings of honesty
Instead serving platters of sweet lies
I now know the truth
You are none the wiser
You are far from faithful
How I hate being right
We arrive at the end of the trail
She loves me not

War: Sheep Skin

Your deceit has sharpened my axe
I poise to bring it crashing down
To splatter your lies
Among the sand and dirt and tears
So we may observe them together
Instead I turn the axe on myself
A mercy blow

Emotions pour silently from the wound
Discarded and forgotten
I speak no ill will
You believe the veil is still snug over my eyes
You think I am a sheep
But I am a wolf
Your time will come
When my teeth are sharp I will sink them into you

War: Ship at Sea

My teeth remain dull
The juices of revenge taste rotten
I call off the hunt
I would rather have your empty love than couple with my hate
For I have too many months remaining far from home
Better false winds in my sail than a creeping calmness
To stay still is to go mad in this barren brown ocean
I would rather sail towards rocky shipwreck shores
Than remain lost at sea

The war is not over, but my part is played
Finally, I arrive home
One battle behind me
The worst looms ahead

War: Siren's Song

Our game of charades lasts for weeks
Waiting for your guilt to birth a confession
It seems you have aborted the ugly truth
The fuse is mine to light
I calmly tell you that I know what you did
You cry. Beg for forgiveness. Excuses toss and turn my humble boat.
I miss you. You are finally in front of me again.
Yet further from me than ever
You drowned long ago
Your Siren's song nearly drags me below
But I'm not fond of sailing anymore
So I'm heading for solid ground
To tether myself to something hard and true
Before braving the sea again

Awkward Love Poem

Abby Edele

Your hair is much like graham crackers.
In color, not in taste.
But I'm not sure about taste, as
I have not licked your hair.

Your eyes have dark and masked depths.
They have secrets to tell.
But not too many big secrets,
Or I'd be suspicious.

Your scent's that of a gentleman.
Which seems like an odd smell.
But it's like top hats, brilliant books,
And quaint, witty remarks.

Your voice is deep like the sea's depths.
That sounds rather corny,
But the sea's heavy. Obscure. And
That, dear, is how you speak.

It's hard to describe all the traits
You have that are so ... so ...
Indescribable ... and so this is
My true, awkward attempt.

You Used To Be

Rachel Factora

You used to be so sick that you couldn't eat.
You used to sleep most of the day,
Only getting up to empty your stomach again.
You used to have beautiful hair, too.
Then you had none.
Then a wig.
You used to have a tube connecting your stomach to a waste bag,
When you couldn't throw up anymore.
You used to be in pain,
Yet you still are.
Changed by the disease that stole your light.
Born again,
And given a chance.
You used to be someone else,
I wish you took that chance to thrive.
Yet can I complain about who you used to be?
All that matters is that you are,
And miss who you used to be.

Don't Tell Mom

Casey Freeman

"Don't tell Mom" was our favorite phrase. Don't tell Mom that you sent me through your bedroom window because you locked us out of the house. Don't tell Mom that you let me stay up way too late on a school night. Don't tell Mom that you can't afford the groceries this week, but you'll manage somehow.

Don't tell Mom that I scribbled on her pajamas because I wanted to practice writing (scrawling) my name. Don't tell Mom that I think I might be depressed and that her asking me why I don't have a boyfriend is just making it worse. Don't tell Mom that I almost got in a wreck at 2 a.m. after her 57th birthday, even though it wouldn't have been my fault.

"Don't tell Mom" used to be serious, but we now look at it with fondness. We still share stories, but most things are kept to ourselves now that we're both adults.

Yes, don't tell Mom that her baby girl shoots whiskey straight, and does it happily.

Don't tell Mom her baby girl doesn't need a man because she doesn't want to love.

Don't tell Mom that her baby girl wants nothing more than to want to tell Mom everything.

Liquored Love

Casey Freeman

Soldier on, your healing heart.
Hang your cuts out to dry.
Join us and march, together and all,
because when we battle, we cry.

We, the unloved.
We, the uncaring.
We, the bitter and brusque.
We go out together, to our battlefield pubs.
Leaving our “ladylike” in the dust.

She, though, saddles the seat
of the cherrywood bar
as we watch her cover the black of her eyes.
We frown as she grins and walks out to the floor,
as he dips her low and she smiles.

We count the drinks tacked on our dimes,
though they never clear our addled minds.
She’ll be his Desdemona until he
suffocates her dry,
and we sip and slur and trip
until we die.

Coated in bruises,
but with blood in our veins
Maybe we’ll learn to love again.

Winter of Memories

Jacob Grayson

Sitting on the swing set, stinging in the cold
A reverie of memory, like yellow-d pictures old.
Dearest friend and brother, swinging in the breeze
Smiling lack of front teeth, happy as you please.
Coming home with arms full, pets found in the wood
Assorted menagerie, he'd find more if he could.
Football star and mathlete, parents are so proud
Idyllic gentleman son, so high above the crowd.
Grown up, a fine man, time past yet lingers
Gone away to war now, slipping through my fingers.
Last week a man comes, black suit and tie
A letter at my front door, dearest brother sent to die.
Sitting on our swing set, rusted and forgot.
The old house now gone, left for dead to rot
Dearest friend and brother, now and ever lost
Forever remembered, in the bitter winter frost.

Prejudice

Jordan Harms

When will you pull me out of you again?

Why can't I hide?

You cannot see me, touch me or smell me.

Others can hear me; you can feel me, but never in time.

Never yourself do you consider, always the Other Man.

You use and abuse me, you make yourself a fool.

Hindsight is 20/20 they say, but if that is the case then why will you not see?

The Other Man shares but one opinion, yet you are so quick to judge.

Cannot you just leave me alone?

Leave me in the confines of your heart.

Where there should be Love, my better half, you insist on putting me on the front line of your thoughts.

Day in and day out, the Other Man is quickly labeled before ripening.

Would you eat a green fruit or raw meat? Certainly not.

The fruit may have potential, and the meat may be healthy, but they are not ready for consumption.

How should you know what exactly transpires at the bottom of the ocean?

How could you comprehend one's time on this earth if you won't give Him any time at all?

You are a creature of habit. A dark, foul, and grotesque creature when you clench me in your fist.

However; as sick as you may be, I am sicker still.

You could destroy a child's blind trust, a man's courage or a woman's beauty in your heart but you cannot do these things without me as your weapon, I am evermore undesirable than you.

I cannot offer knowledge, though you ask me.

I cannot gain you respect, though you employ me.

I have seen my hand waste potential in the gifted.

I have seen governments disintegrate like dust because of my influence.

Control

Chris Hudson

Seething rage, hateful words bubbling up from
bile-soaked depths come spewing forth. Memories
too painful. Past fights. Past regrets of
her brand my mind. In my thoughts and in my
words. In what I have done and what I have failed
to do. I failed her. A faded picture
on my dresser only cauterizes,
the rift between us. She...is...gone. I'm here.
Guilt fails, apology fails
promise fails, hope...
fails not.

Darkroom

Acidic chemicals assault the nose, flanked
by sweat as fellow photographers clash
in the dark. Through the large, cylindrical
light-tight door, I pass into my own heaven
a Valhalla of fix and filter, of
push and pull. We expose in our language
in grain. Ingrained in silver, we blacksmiths.
We photographers, who stop-down at f 3.5 to expose the highlights,
we shoot our cameras against light, with light.
We fire grays and reds, magentas and teals.
We craft something from
nothing.

Daria Ivanova

Stumbling. Tripping.
Hobbling. Reeling.
Falling. Standing up.
Repeating all this crap.
That's how you write
When your language is not right.
I am the crazy professor,
And English is my Frankenstein.
You are, of course, a strict assessor
To correct everything you are taught very fine
My stitched. Folded. Glued creature
Tries to walk and imitate the human nature
All people around him scream and run away
Don't worry, my child, don't be ashamed to sway

One day I believe
One day I'm sure
It would not be so stiff
You will go through a cure
The ticking of clocks will align superficial
And people will forget that you're artificial.

Indecision

Brenna Swoboda

One hand reaches left, the other right. Mind caught in the middle.
Paper pulled from two ends tears down the center.

A door pushed open too far breaks the supporting hinges.
Ease and closure come with difficulty.

A menace behind and glances are thrown over shoulders.
A curtain drawn evokes more interest.

Crossroads taunt a man's indecision.
If the heart were a boat, a troubled mind would sink it.

All that was may no longer be after today.
The ocean tide replaces yesterday's sand.

Embers glow in a tortured mind.
As a fire dies down its core remains hottest.

Uncertainty threatens a lion's repose.
Stagnation suffocates the soul.

Johebed

Brenna Swoboda

The pharaoh gave this order to all his people: "Every boy that is born you must throw into the Nile..." Exodus 1:22

Unknown to sleeping infants
But to the horror of the slaves
Word had begun to spread
That soon our young sons would be slain.

Hearing the edict given
Each child's mother stifed gasps
Each mother clung to her baby
Each child torn from a mother's grasp.

The streets were full of wailing
So much, I could no longer bear
I fled down to the river
Taking my young son with me there.

Hidden among the rushes
I crouched low, shielded by the reeds
Breathing desperate prayers to God
I held my child on my knees.

The screams in the streets faded,
A muffled grief for children lost.
A chance for his life I took
No matter how much it cost.

Having brought my handiwork,
A skillfully woven basket,
I placed my son inside it
Hoping it not be his casket.
With new eyes I watched him float.
How could I bear for him to go?
My internal organs heaved,
But I could not let feelings show.

The thoughts and dreadful worries
That assaulted my victim mind!
Would fishers spear or boats crush
This basket, this treasure of mine?

In panicked thought I lunged in,
Feeling the water soak me through.
But the basket was too far
For my arms to reach out to.

Too quickly my vision failed me
No sight through a river of tears
I pulled myself onto the bank,
Trying to collect my fears.

I returned to the brick work.
Hours later my breasts had swelled.
My daughter then came to me
With some shocking news to tell.

Like her mother, she had hidden
From the terror in all the streets
She had seen me release him,
And she followed him down the stream.

She mentioned the royal palace,
Brushing bits of clay from my hair.
With urgency and wide eyes
She demanded we hurry there.

After the princess told me,
"I have claimed this boy as my own,"
To nurse he was given me,
And astounded I took him home.

Months of nurturing flew by,
Days were filled with uneasy thoughts
Grateful for time spent with him,
But again, to me he'd be lost!

No more I'd feel his body
Curling snugly into my chest.
Nor stroke his smooth little cheek,
Or have one night of peaceful rest.

Why worry? I asked myself
He'll be a prince and not a slave!
I've nothing but chains to give,
For that I feel deeply ashamed.

My duty came to an end,
Pharaoh's daughter surely pleased.
I handed away my son,
And I somehow managed to leave.

The alabaster hallways
Bright and glad, so unlike my heart
Echoed broken hearted sobs
I released now that we're apart.

Is this, in some way, mercy?
An answered prayer, but high in price.
One goodbye was too many,
But I am forced to say it twice.

Toilet Paper

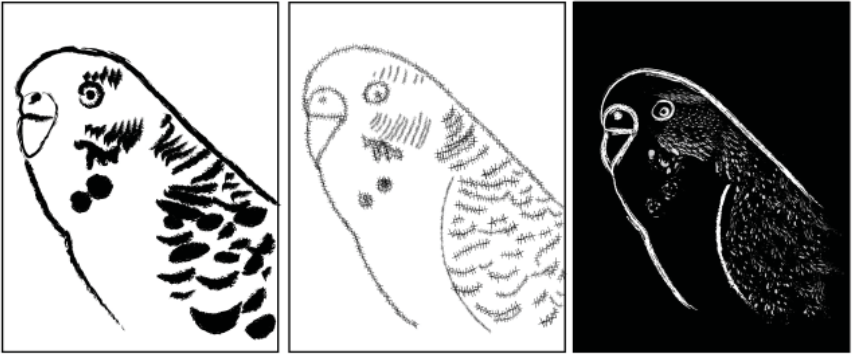
Brenna Swoboda

You used up the last I can see
Leaving the empty tube there
Action comes at the price of time
But clearly you did not care.

I understand completely
How dreadfully long it takes
To replace the one you used up
It's a sacrifice to make.

This often-used spool of paper
Without it, composure folds
I shouldn't have to remind you...
For God's sake, replace the roll!

Plays



Bird Line Art, Jennifer Mullen

Cabin Pressure

Zachary M. Alley

CHARACTERS

Donovan, 25

Timothy, 22

TIME

Present, midafternoon

PLACE

Baggage claim area in airport

As lights come up, DONOVAN and TIMOTHY are in chauffeur suits sitting next to each other. People shuffle through the busy area eager to get their bags and be on their way. DONOVAN is sitting up straight and observing the bystanders with interest. TIMOTHY sits hunched over, staring at his phone and texting.

DONOVAN

Timmy.

There is no immediate response.

Hey Timmy.

(waits a few moments, then grabs the phone out of TIMMY's hand)

TIMOTHY

What?! Give that back. What's so important?

DONOVAN

I should be asking you the same thing. This is ridiculous. Who the hell have you been texting this entire time?

TIMOTHY

Kara.

DONOVAN

Kara?

TIMOTHY

Yeah. My girlfriend.

DONOVAN

The same one as before?

TIMOTHY

Yeah. Now will you give me my phone back?

DONOVAN

No. Why don't you just call her?

TIMOTHY

I like texting.

DONOVAN

Isn't it easier to just talk to her? Timmy, your hands are the size of Cocker Spaniels. With more hair. Texting on that little phone has to be a struggle.

TIMOTHY

It isn't. Besides, I like texting more than talking most of the time. Let's me think about what I want to say instead of blurt out whatever pops in my head. There's not as much pressure.

DONOVAN

Pressure is important. It's what shapes you. Makes you who you are. Pressure squeezes us and packs all the soft bits into one solid object. A sturdy rock. People who never had any pressure in their lives are weak. They squirm when you squeeze them. Mash in your hands. Squeeze someone who has dealt with a lot of pressure and they won't budge. You'll just be squeezing until your hands hurt. That's why people like us hold steady. Other people... they're weak Timmy. That's why it's up to us to squeeze them. Harden them up bit by bit.

TIMOTHY

Can I have my phone back?

DONOVAN

You're hopeless. Listen to me and you might learn a thing or two. Now can't you do something besides sitting there on your phone?

TIMOTHY

Like what? We're waiting to pick someone up. Why can't I be on the phone if I'm just waiting? What do you want me to do? Sit here and stare at people like you do? That's boring. And really creepy.

DONOVAN

You're mistaken. Well, maybe not about the creepy part. It can be weird, but it's far from boring. People watching is one of the most exciting things you can do.

TIMOTHY

Yeah. I'm sure staring at people is a blast. Way better than talking to my girlfriend.

DONOVAN

You were texting. Not talking. Look at that family over there.
(gestures toward the family at baggage claim)

TIMOTHY

What's so exciting about them?

DONOVAN

What do you think their story is?

TIMOTHY

What are you talking about?

DONOVAN

Their story. People are easy to figure out if you pay attention. Once you have them figured out, they're all yours. Now look at that kid. Tell me that isn't the smuggest little punk you've ever seen in your life?

TIMOTHY

Looks like a kid to me.

DONOVAN

Really look, Timmy. What do you think about that kid?

TIMOTHY

I guess you're kinda right. He seems sort of bratty.

DONOVAN

Of course I am. Now look at the way that guy looks at the kid. That man hates that little brat. But it is a defeated look. He hates him, but can't do anything about it. For one, he has to stay cool with the kid to keep getting busy with the hot young mom. The kid knows that. Just maybe not on that intimate of a level. He knows something else too. I bet he caught dear old stepdad doing something he shouldn't. Probably another broad. Maybe talking bad about his mom. Or maybe the dude is into some really messed up stuff. That kid has something on the poor man, and he is milking it. That's what I'm telling you Timmy. That kid has the old guy figured out, and now he can do what he wants. He just applies the right amount of pressure. Too much and he loses the guy and has to hope it isn't long before his mom finds another rich sap. Too little and he will lose his dominance. How do you think he got those headphones? What six-year-old needs \$500 headphones to listen to Justin Bieber? Those are blackmail headphones. Same as that kid's fancy iPad. Bribes, I tell ya.

TIMOTHY

Really? How do you know that?

DONOVAN

I don't, Timmy. That's the beauty of people watching. You observe. You deduce.

TIMOTHY

You what?

DONOVAN

The hell do they teach you in those college classes? I didn't finish high school. You're

supposed to be expanding my vocabulary, my injudicious friend.

TIMOTHY

What?

DONOVAN

Exactly. Now get your head together. Says on the arrivals that our passenger just touched down.

TIMOTHY

Good. Now can I get my phone back?

DONOVAN

Of course, Timmy.

(hands phone to TIMOTHY)

You really like this girl, huh?

TIMOTHY

Well...yeah.

(turns head away from DONOVAN)

I love her.

DONOVAN

Have you told her?

TIMOTHY

(continues looking away and smiles, slightly embarrassed)

Yeah. She knows.

DONOVAN

Good. That's brave of you kid. Don't ever be afraid to tell people what you think. If you hate someone's guts, let him know. More importantly, if you love someone you make sure she doesn't forget it. You're good to her, yeah?

TIMOTHY

I try. I mean, I'm strapped on cash, but I take her out when I can. We ate at Marino's the other night. Got wine and everything.

DONOVAN

Excellent. She's a lucky girl. And you're a lucky guy to find someone willing to put up with your dumb self.

TIMOTHY

I'm not dumb, Don. I'm not good at tricking people like you, but I'm plenty smart about other things.

DONOVAN

I know Timmy. I was giving you trouble. If you were dumb I wouldn't bring you along for these jobs. So tell me more about Kara. Anything serious in your future?

TIMOTHY

Well...

(looks down at phone and fiddles with it)

Yeah. Kinda. I mean not anytime soon because of the money, like I said, but I've been saving up. I think I wanna marry her.

DONOVAN

My little Timmy? A married man? What happened to the bar hopping stud who used to bring home a different dame every weekend? You used to be a master swordsman.

TIMOTHY

I wasn't like that. Not on purpose. And I dunno. Kara is different.

DONOVAN

I'm just messing with you. And it sounds like you really have it for this girl. Too bad you don't have enough to save up for a ring. That's serious cheese you know, if you want to impress her. And you aren't going to be able to afford your own place with her either. You need to be a breadwinner, Timmy. School might get you there eventually, but if Kara is a worthwhile girl there's going to be other guys going after her. Not some neighborhood boys like us. Guys with money. Smarts. People who can provide for a lady.

TIMOTHY

I'm getting there. It just takes time. With school and dad not letting me get another job outside the shop and all. She wants to get out of the city like me. Get a nice little place together. Maybe open up a business of my own in a small town once I finish my business classes. The whole deal. That's gonna be us. And Kara won't leave me. She isn't like that.

She loves me and doesn't care about that stuff. She isn't like the girls you go after.

DONOVAN

Easy tiger. I only mate with the classiest of women. Ask your sister.

TIMOTHY

Shut up. You know, I'll bust your face if you start that talk again.

DONOVAN

Simmer down, buddy. You know I have nothing but respect for your sister and her womanly figure. Plus, I have some good news for you. What if I told you that we can take away a good haul from this job? Enough to get Kara a nice rock and still have a little stash to help you stay on your feet in a starter place outside the city. At least pay for your classes. This one job is going to fast-track you, kid. That faraway dream you have with your lady? That can be next week.

TIMOTHY

No. I told you I'm not doing that stuff anymore. You told me this was honest work.

(stands up)

I'll leave right now. I mean it.

DONOVAN

Relax. Stop making a damn scene. Look, this is easy. Real easy. And not some petty grab. I'm talking twenty large. For each of us.

TIMOTHY

No way. I'm not doing it. You always trick me into this stuff, but not this time. You know I'm keeping my nose clean now.

DONOVAN

It's too late for that, Timmy. In minutes the spoiled daughter of some big shot is going to walk down here chatting into her phone and barely glancing at us through sunglasses that cost more than your car. I'm going to hold a sign that says her name. You're going to get her designer luggage. We're going to the limo. You're driving us to the bank. I've called ahead and they have forty grand available for our guest to withdraw. I'm going to walk her in the bank, make sure she calmly gets the cash, and then take her back to the car. We're going to take the money off her hands and drop her off somewhere to buy us time. No one gets hurt. Daddy will buy her a few cars or purses to make up for her traumatic experience.

You get to buy a ring so big that Kara won't be able to win a fight with you for years. No hassle. Easy money.

TIMOTHY

I don't know. I'm not kidnapping someone. Not some innocent girl. What if we get caught? What if something bad happens?

DONOVAN

That's why I brought you. So nothing goes wrong. You have a good head on your shoulders and know how to handle yourself. Keep your shades and hat on and she won't be able to I.D. you. You just have to drive anyway.

TIMOTHY

(pauses a moment)

No. No, I'm not doing it.

DONOVAN

I'm going through with this. With or without you. You have about two minutes to make up your mind. Get twenty grand and set yourself up nicely for that cozy future you want with your blushing bride by doing one last job. Or let your friend, practically your brother, me, who has been taking care of you since we were kids, do this alone and hope for the best.

TIMOTHY

This isn't fair! You can't trap me like this! I didn't ask for this. I made a promise to myself. I wasn't doing this shit anymore. I'm trying to be an honest man and grow up. You should try it, too! Get serious and stop messing around with this stuff. Do something with yourself.

Settle down. Find something to live for instead of getting cash from one job to set you up for the next one. If this is what you want to do with your life, fine. Leave me out of it, Donovan. I mean it.

DONOVAN

(Stands up and gets in TIMOTHY'S face. After a tense moment, he sits down with a sigh of defeat.)

You're right. Seriously kid...you're right. I don't have a Kara. I don't have a reason to do this differently. You made a promise to yourself, and that's damn important. You may be in a tough spot, but you have your word. And if that's all you have it's still better than most. We'll just help the girl with her luggage and drop her off. I mean it. I hope Kara does wait for you. I really hope you're right about her. She is lucky to have a guy like you. This money...that's the easy way out. You always were stubborn. Keep your nose to the grind and eventually you'll get enough money, or finish your school, or catch a lucky break. All these years of spinning your tires and you still won't take the short cut. You're a good kid.

That may not amount to much now, but it has to count for something.

TIMOTHY

Thanks. That means a lot.

(pauses for a moment while thinking)

You really think I'll make it? That I'll get out and make a good life for Kara?

DONOVAN

Honestly Timmy...I don't know. I'm not gonna lie, it's hard. A lot harder than you think. That's why so many guys like us get stuck here. Most people don't get an opportunity to break out. Here I am setting up an easy way out, but it's for the wrong reasons. Something will work out for you, I'm sure. It just might take a while. Don't give up though. You've waited this long. What's a few more years?

TIMOTHY

Years? Yeah. Yeah, I've waited awhile. And I guess it will be awhile longer. But I'll get there eventually, right?

DONOVAN

I hope so, Timmy. You deserve it. You got a long journey ahead of you, bud.

(DONOVAN looks over and straightens his jacket while standing up.)

Well, there's our girl. Time to give this honest work thing a shot.

TIMOTHY

Hey, Don?

DONOVAN

Yeah, Timmy?

TIMOTHY

Can we really get twenty each from this? And you promise nothing happens to the girl?

(DONOVAN smiles at TIMOTHY.)

(Blackout)

Wishful Thinking

Zachary M. Alley

CHARACTERS

Jackson, 15

Brett, 16

Kevin, 13

TIME

Present, midafternoon

PLACE

Hospital, children's cancer ward

SCENE 1

As lights come up, JACKSON, BRETT, and KEVIN are in JACKSON'S hospital room. JACKSON is in his bed. BRETT is sitting at the foot of the bed. KEVIN is sitting in a chair by the window staring outside.

BRETT

I knew you were stupid, but this is impressive, even for you.

JACKSON

It's not stupid. In fact, it's almost noble.

BRETT

Nah, man. You're an idiot.

JACKSON

You wouldn't understand.

BRETT

Oh no. I understand. You had an opportunity to have almost anything in the world and you said no.

JACKSON

But I don't need anything.

BRETT

None of us really need anything. But think of all the cool stuff you want.

JACKSON

There isn't really anything I want either.

BRETT

I don't think you're grasping the concept here. These people can make anything happen. It's not your mom asking if you want her to grab some Doritos from the grocery store. This is legit. You can meet one of your nerd heroes. Or they can get you on the set of some show you obsess over and nobody else cares about. Or get a huge personal library full of those boring books you're constantly reading. You have to think big.
What did you pick, Kevin?

KEVIN

(was not paying attention to the conversation and turns towards them after hearing his name)
What?

BRETT

For Make-A-Wish. What did you pick?

KEVIN

I...I don't really want to talk about it. Those things are private.

(KEVIN turns and continues staring out of window.)

BRETT

Nice try, man. Spill. It's probably something sappy and boring knowing you. And safe, of course. Let me guess, you wanted to give away baskets of kittens to old people? Or release a hundred doves into a rainbow? Okay, Kevin's a bad example of how to make a legit wish.

Moving on.

JACKSON

Kevin probably picked something decent. Unlike whatever idiotic thing you're going to come up with. I'm actually kind of curious though. What did you pick, Kevin?

KEVIN

(shifts uncomfortably before finally facing the two again)

I...I asked to meet Katy Perry.

(JACKSON and BRETT are stunned silent and exchange a look. Finally, BRETT bursts into laughter.)

BRETT

You really had me going there for a second.

KEVIN

I'm serious! I really like her music. And she seems so nice. And pretty.

JACKSON

You're breaking my heart. You of all people couldn't have seriously asked to meet some vapid celebrity?

BRETT

Personally, I'm proud of you Kev. She's a total babe.

KEVIN

Shut up. Both of you. She isn't vapid. Whatever that means. I just like her, okay? If that is so dumb, let's hear your great ideas.

JACKSON

That's the thing. I don't have any. I don't want to have some meaningless material gift

or go to some theme park or meet some rich jaded whoever. I'm going to die. I want something...something I'll remember. Something unique. Tons of healthy kids get to go to Disneyworld or bump into a famous person. I want something...I don't know. Crazy. Scary. Life affirming. Don't you want to do one of those things that people always say they wish they could do if they had another life? Or didn't have to deal with the consequences? I'm sort of in that situation. I want a chance to truly do whatever I want since I won't live long enough to experience the fallout.

BRETT

That sounds a bit insane, bud. And depressing.

(pauses a moment and stares out of same window as KEVIN before looking back at JACKSON.)

What kind of stuff are we talking about?

JACKSON

I don't necessarily mean kill a person or anything, but something sort of along those lines.

You know like one of those things people would really want to do before they die, but don't want to admit.

BRETT

Gotcha. So just something like murder. But not actual murder. Totally sane. I always knew kids as smart as you were secretly nuts.

JACKSON

Just forget about that. You're failing to grasp the spirit of what I'm trying to convey. It's kind of like what you were saying. Thinking big. Bigger than some cookie-cutter media-friendly wish that will make people shed a tear when they read about how some cancer-ridden kid got to meet his hero before deteriorating into nothing before everyone's eyes as some disease spread through his body. What if there was a no-holds-barred Make-A-Wish? An extreme version. One that let people really do something insane and out-there before they died.

BRETT

Interesting idea. So what kinds of things are we talking about here? Please don't say something like murder again. You're getting as creepy as space cadet Kevin over there.

KEVIN

(while still staring out of window)

You guys are the creepy ones.

JACKSON

I don't know...anything. Like steal a car. Drive across the country. Crash parties. Sneak into

bars. Hang out with complete strangers. Set something on fire. Kiss a girl. Anything. Get out of this soul crushing purgatory and live it up while we still can.

KEVIN

What about your family? And your treatments? And all the staff here? You wouldn't feel bad abandoning all of these people who care about you?

JACKSON

Maybe. My family is fine. The doctors and nurses are fine. I have nothing against the people, but sometimes a smile and encouraging word aren't enough. It doesn't change anything.

BRETT

As cool and unlike you as all of this sounds, I'm sort of worried about you. Are you okay man? Something going on?

JACKSON

No. Well...yes. I don't know. I hate this. Hate that I am burdened with this disease. It's so random and terrible and stupid. I want control of something for a change. What happens if I die next week? What have I really done with my life? I know I'm young, but I've always played it safe. Read about adventures instead of having any myself. Worried about my grades to secure a bright future while ignoring my dull present. I always thought that one day I would get to do all of these cool things. But I won't. It's driving me crazy. I have to do something besides sit here and wither away while my family watches. Don't you guys feel trapped? Feel like escaping? Not just this place, but this condition? This cancer? This role of pitiful sick child that we were forced into?

BRETT

You'll make it through this, man. We're all in a bad spot, but you have to have hope.

KEVIN

Jackson is right.

(JACKSON and BRETT turn towards KEVIN with surprise.)

BRETT

(looks back at JACKSON)

Now you've got little Kevin feeding off of your pessimistic talk. Cut it out man. Stop making everything so dramatic. Just pick a wish, tell the nice people, and get on with it. Don't turn this into one of your philosophical epiphanies that you seem to have every week.

JACKSON

I'm not being pessimistic. And I'm not going to actually do any of this stuff. I'm just talking. You're right though. I should probably just come up with something normal and make everyone happy. I'm just in a mood, I guess. Forget it.

(A long awkward pause fills the room as JACKSON and BRETT avoid eye contact. KEVIN's gaze remains fixed out of the window.)

BRETT

(Finally BRETT smiles and faces JACKSON.)
So you've never kissed a girl, huh?

JACKSON

I was just naming off random things.

BRETT

That's what I thought. You haven't.

JACKSON

I'm really not in the mood for you being a jerk to me.

BRETT

You should be telling some girls that you've never kissed someone. Not confessing to me and little Kev.

JACKSON

What are you talking about?

BRETT

Girls our age eat that up. Especially from dying people like us. I should know. I use the line all the time. You have that whole angsty sensitive intellectual thing going for you too. A broken heart that needs the right girl to fix it. You spill that sappy rant to the right girl and she'll plant one on you for sure.

JACKSON

(smiles reluctantly)

Thanks. I'll be sure to remember that excellent advice when I've sunk so low that I want my first kiss to be out of pity.

BRETT

That right there! That's perfect. You depressing moody mystery man, you. Biting sarcasm to hide all the pain in your heart. A bleak outlook of the world. A regular tortured soul. Let me be the girl to capture your bleeding heart. Let me be your Bella.

(BRETT moves towards JACKSON with arms outstretched and puckered lips while JACKSON laughs.)

KEVIN

And I'm the creepy one.

BRETT

(After settling down, BRETT walks towards window. BRETT stares outside for a moment before turning to face JACKSON.)

We should do it.

JACKSON

Easy there. I appreciate you wanting to help me out, but we're not doing anything like that. I'll talk to a girl if it means that much to you.

BRETT

No, not that. Your idea. Let's make our own list of wishes. Crazy stuff we want to do. And do it. I bet we could actually knock out most of that stuff you said.

JACKSON

I was just ranting. I'm not actually doing that stuff.

BRETT

Why not? Worst case scenario we die before we have to deal with the consequences. If we get caught early, who the hell is going to punish a group of kids with cancer? We seriously can get away with this.

(KEVIN slowly turns to face them and listens)

JACKSON

You really think so?

BRETT

Most definitely. I have a car. You can take money from your loaded parents. None of us are so sick yet that we can't go out and party for a while. The longer we wait the worse our health will be and the less chance we have for something like this. I say we do this thing tonight. We have to stick together though and watch each other's backs. Kevin, you better not rat us out either. People are going to ask you about us and you just say you don't know anything.

KEVIN

I'm going with you.

JACKSON
(stares in shock at KEVIN)
You can't. Something bad could happen.

KEVIN
Like getting cancer?

BRETT
(laughing and patting KEVIN's back)
The balls on this kid. I love it!

JACKSON
You really need to pay attention to your phrasing more.

BRETT
You know what I mean. Kevin is even on board. We are totally doing this. The cancer kid crew is rolling out tonight! Get some paper out. We're making a list. Then I'll grab my keys, Kevin will bring his Katy Perry mixtape, and you can swipe some cash from your parents. This time tomorrow we will be legends.

SCENE 2

TIME
Early morning, weeks later

SETTING
Small town diner

(As lights come up, JACKSON, BRETT, and KEVIN are sitting together in a cramped booth. The table is covered in half-eaten breakfast foods. BRETT has a black eye. A television screen on the wall behind JACKSON and BRETT shows the morning news.)

JACKSON
We're going to be the fattest chemo patients in the world. I love having an appetite again.

BRETT
Amen, brother. You know, I actually feel better now than I have in weeks. I thought we'd hate our lives by now.

JACKSON
Not me. I always felt like that medicine was killing me more than helping me. I know that technically the cancer is doing that, but I still dreaded my treatments.

BRETT

Maybe pancakes, bacon, and chocolate milk are more effective at curing cancer than that garbage we've been putting up with. I'll gladly do a clinical trial for that.

JACKSON

This whole experience feels like it's healing me. Spiritually and physically. I've never felt more alive in my life. Thanks for making me do this. Both of you. I'm really glad you're both with me. I know we might miss our families, but the letters we left them were a better good-bye than having them watch us slip away slowly and painfully. They know we're happy. And I really am. Although if greasy diner breakfast really is curing us we might be screwed in the long run. If I don't die soon my parents will do the job if I have to go back there. Cash is starting to run out.

BRETT

Maybe if you didn't spend it all on hookers we would have some left.

JACKSON

Keep your voice down.
(looks around and speaks in hushed tones)
And I didn't get a hooker.

BRETT

My bad. Tried to get a hooker. And failed. Which is sadder since she still took off with your money.

JACKSON

At least I didn't get punched in the face for chasing her down and trying to get it back.

BRETT

Excuse me for being a good friend. We made a certified business transaction. She can't take the money and then suddenly find the morals not to give a kid a quickie. That was messed up. Apparently she thought helping one kid out was wrong, but punching another in the face was perfectly acceptable.

JACKSON

Which was money well spent to see. Way more satisfying than any disease she would have given me to complement cancer.

BRETT

Whatever. I'm pretty sure we can take Kevin on a college tour and live off of his beer pong winnings anyway. I don't know if I was more amazed by how much money frat guys are willing to bet against a little bald kid, or how insanely good Kevin is at that game.

JACKSON

Seriously. I'm the one supposed to be going to college early, but Kevin was acting like he had been there his whole life.

BRETT

(stares at KEVIN and tilts his head in confusion)

What's up, man? You're being more quiet than usual. Still feeling hung over? It's a good thing you're as good as you are because if you had to drink more than those two beers I'd hate to see what it would do to you.

(KEVIN stares at television and nods at it. JACKSON and BRETT turn around to watch it.)

REPORTER ON NEWS

(voice fades in as group gets quiet and watches)

Nearly thirty-five million dollars in scam. Doctor Eldrige is currently in jail without bond. He faces charges for intentionally misdiagnosing potentially hundreds of patients over the past 2 years with cancer so he could profit off of chemotherapy treatments paid for by the Medicare program and insurance companies. Patients of Doctor Eldrige are encouraged to seek medical attention elsewhere and get a second opinion. Many who were led to believe that they were suffering from terminal cancer may actually be completely cancer free.

Reports show...

(voice fades out as the boys look at each other)

KEVIN

We have to go back. Now.

BRETT

This...this can't be happening. I mean...this is great news I guess, but...but we're in so much trouble. We've committed crimes. Snuck into R-rated movies. Oh God, I watched little Kevin touch a boob! He's just a boy! His parents are going to kill me. My parents are going to kill me. We can go to jail. Actually jail might be safer. What are we supposed to do? Is it bad if I would rather stick around? Maybe hang out and travel a few more days? I can't go back and deal with this. Not now. What do you think Jackson?

JACKSON

I think a chocolate milkshake sounds awesome right about now. And after that I'm probably going to go in the bathroom and cry. You guys want anything?

(Blackout)

The Accident

Hanna Hollis

Characters:

Lisa, age 19

Michael, age 17

Nurse, female, mid-forties

Surgeon, male, mid-thirties

Time:

The present day, around 3 a.m. on a rainy summer night.

Setting:

The small waiting room in the operation wing of a hospital.

The stage is dark. The sound of heavy rain can be heard. Suddenly there is the loud squealing of car brakes. Then a brief, tense pause. All that can be heard is the rain. Then, there is the blaring sound of emergency vehicle sirens. Blue and red lights flash above the stage. All at once, everything goes forebodingly quiet. A few moments pass. As the lights fade up, we see MICHAEL and LISA sitting in a pair of chairs that face the audience. MICHAEL is in the chair on the left, closest to a set of double doors that are each labeled "operating rooms." LISA is on the right. A man's jacket is draped around her shoulders. Both have sterile bandages on various parts of their bodies. A NURSE sits behind a small desk labeled "information," quietly typing into a computer.

MICHAEL

(he looks at his watch, then to the doors next to him and back at his watch.)

Why is it taking them so long?

LISA

(looking at MICHAEL, speaking with irritation)

Oh, I don't know, maybe because he's been rendered unrecognizable. That might have something to do with it.

MICHAEL

It wasn't that bad.

LISA

He looked like a bloody version of the Phantom of the Opera. Worse, actually.

MICHAEL

It wasn't that bad...it couldn't have...

LISA

How would you know? I watched them load him into the ambulance! You couldn't even look at him!

(MICHAEL looks away, ashamed)

MICHAEL

(lamenting to himself)

I wasn't even supposed to be there.

LISA

(having at him)

Of course you weren't! It was a college party, not some high-school hangout! Why did you even want to come in the first place?

(MICHAEL doesn't respond)

LISA (Cont'd)

(now in a full-on rant)

Worse, instead of backing me, Carson actually insisted that you come with us! "Aw, Lisa.

Let lil' Mikey come," he said. Well, you came, you drove and now Carson is

fighting for his life!

(she draws Carson's jacket tighter around her, as if seeking comfort from it.)

MICHAEL

(clearly frightened by her implication)

Lisa, please...it was an accident...I tried to make the turn, but the road was too slick.

LISA

Yeah, keep telling yourself that, kid.

MICHAEL

You can't seriously think I meant for this to happen!

LISA

Well, you two haven't been the best of friends lately, that's for sure.

MICHAEL

(letting the anger get the better of him)

No, we're...

(he catches himself and quickly recovers)

Never mind.

LISA

(leaning forward, puzzled)

You're what?

MICHAEL

(hurriedly trying to backpedal his way out)

Nothing...forget it...

(brings himself back in check)

You're right, we haven't exactly been seeing eye-to-eye. That doesn't mean I want him

dead.

LISA

(skeptically)

Yeah...sure...okay.

(They are silent. LISA puts her arms through the sleeves of the jacket, revealing that it is about two sizes too big. MICHAEL sits with one leg propped up on the opposite knee and nervously picks at a loose thread in the hem of his jeans.)

LISA
(breaking the silence)
How long's it been?

MICHAEL
(he looks at his watch and tsks as he calculates)
It's going on an hour forty-five.

(MICHAEL begins to idly spin the ring on his thumb. LISA groans as she leans her head back against the wall. After a moment, she begins interrogating MICHAEL.)

LISA
(looking at MICHAEL with her peripheral vision)
Why did you want to come with us, Michael? Seriously, Carson and I were the only two people at that party that you knew, and don't say that you wanted to hang out with your dear sister. We both know that's not true. And, for some reason you hate Carson's guts right now, so it wasn't to hang out with him.

MICHAEL
I don't hate his guts.
(pause)
I guess I just wanted to know what a real college party was like; if it was anything like what the movies always paint it to be.

LISA
Please, you'd rather be playing your Xbox than socializing with people in the real world.

MICHAEL
It's a GameCube, actually...completely different system. And, for your information, I've become a lot more social since you left for college. I go to parties, meet people.

LISA
The annual robotics team Christmas party doesn't count. You might count that inter-team mixer thingy they do the night before the competitions, if you can call a bunch of smelly robot nerds trying to dance a party.

MICHAEL
That's why I wanted to go to a real party. One with people who are definitely not nerds and

know how to dance. A party with...
(tripping over the word)
Girls.

LISA
(mockingly)
Aww...is lil' Mikey looking for a girlfriend?

MICHAEL
No. And don't call me that.

LISA
Why not? Carson calls you that.

MICHAEL
Carson's...different

LISA
(sensing she is getting closer to his secret, she leans in closer.)
Why?

MICHAEL
(picking up on her suspicions, he redirects her)
Well, for one thing, he can beat me up if I tell him not to call me that.

LISA
So could I.

MICHAEL
Yeah, but you wouldn't because Mom and Dad would kill you if you did. Nothing is stopping Carson.

LISA
Uh-huh, right. So to keep from getting a few blows from Carson, you let him call you "lil' Mikey."

MICHAEL
(not very convincingly)
You got it.

(Not sure that she finds his answer satisfactory, LISA sinks back into her chair and goes quiet. After a few moments, the SURGEON enters through the double doors labeled

“operating rooms.” He is carrying a ring on a silver chain in his closed fist. He walks over to MICHAEL and LISA.)

SURGEON

Are you two with the young man from the car accident?

MICHAEL

(with anxious urgency; his guard is down)

Yes, we are. How is he?

LISA

(matching MICHAEL’S tone)

Can we see him?

SURGEON

I’m sorry. We tried everything, but we could not save him. We found this around his neck. *(the SURGEON holds out his fist and lets the ring attached to the silver chain drop. It swings slightly from the point where the SURGEON is holding the chain between his fingers before coming to a stop. MICHAEL snatches it out of the SURGEON’S hand before LISA can think to go for it.)*

SURGEON (Cont’d)

Again, I’m so sorry.

(the SURGEON exits through the doors to the operating rooms. LISA watches MICHAEL as he stares at the ring. After a moment, MICHAEL slips the ring off of the silver chain and slips it on his thumb where he wears a matching ring.)

LISA

(understanding the weight of MICHAEL’S gesture)

you...and...

(MICHAEL gives her a look of confirmation)

LISA

(in disbelief)

No.

MICHAEL

(nodding)

Yes. That’s why I went tonight.

LISA

(looking as if she’s about to vomit)

I’m going to be sick.

(LISA runs off stage through a door marked as the women's restroom. MICHAEL lets out a long breath and sits quietly for several minutes.)

MICHAEL

(glancing up towards the ceiling)

I guess we would have had to tell her sometime, right, Carse? Didn't expect it to be like this; but let's face it. Not much we can do about it now, huh? I miss you already.

Love you, bud.

(LISA slowly exits the bathroom. She has heard her brother's confession from the other side of the door. She is still pale, but is visibly calmer. As LISA makes her way towards MICHAEL, she takes off Carson's jacket. LISA drapes it on MICHAEL'S shoulders. MICHAEL puts his arms through the sleeves. The jacket fits him perfectly.)

BLACKOUT

The Interview

Audrey Schroeder

Cast of Characters

Maggie Dawson: 24-year-old secretary at Marshgrove Publishing

Daniel Barnes: 29-year-old boss at Marshgrove Publishing

Larry Jones: 50-something boss at Marshgrove Publishing

Scene

Top floor of Marshgrove Publishing. The office is clean and neat and very high class. This is clearly a nice place to work.

Time

Quittin' time. About 5:00 p.m.

As the lights come up, DANIEL sits behind a desk in an office, shuffling paperwork of some sort. MAGGIE is upstage outside his office at another desk, filing her nails. LARRY closes a door at the far side of the stage, carrying a briefcase. She looks up as he crosses the stage.

MAGGIE

Larry! Can I steal you for just a minute?

LARRY

Oh, no, Maggie, I'm heading home for the weekend.

MAGGIE

(rising from her desk)

It'll only be a minute.

LARRY

(pushing past her)

A minute I don't have time for right now.

MAGGIE

(trying to stop him, but not with force)

It's just a quick question—

LARRY

(turning around to face her)

A quick question that will wait until Monday. Have a good night, Maggie.

He exits.

MAGGIE sighs, staring at the door, then furtively glances over her shoulder at the door to DANIEL's office. He has apparently not noticed the exchange and is still working on his paperwork. MAGGIE crosses to her desk and gets out a compact mirror. She checks her makeup, snaps the compact closed, and straightens her skirt. Then she turns and walks over to DANIEL's office door. She knocks, opens the door, and leans against the frame casually.

DANIEL

(looking up from his paperwork)

Oh, has Larry left?

(checking his watch)

I'll only be here a little longer. You can go home.

He looks back down at his paperwork. MAGGIE takes a deep breath and then steps into the office, closing the door. DANIEL looks up again, confused.

MAGGIE

Actually, I was hoping I could talk to you for a minute.

DANIEL

Can it wait 'til Monday? I'm going through resumes for the new editing position right now.
(he looks down at his papers again.)

MAGGIE

(walking over to the desk)

Have you considered hiring from within?

DANIEL

(looking up again)

Well, no, I guess not. Larry just handed me these resumes to look at... Did you have someone in mind?

(She stares at him expectantly.)

Oh, you?

MAGGIE

Yes, me. I have an English degree. Is that so hard to believe?

DANIEL

But you're working here as a secretary—

MAGGIE

Administrative assistant.

DANIEL

Yes, administrative assistant. Why haven't you mentioned this to Larry?

MAGGIE

I have! But it's always 'I'm busy now, Maggie' and 'Don't be silly now, Maggie' and 'You're too valuable as an assistant, Maggie'.

DANIEL

It sounds like he's made up his mind then.

MAGGIE

Yes, but you haven't.

DANIEL

(he sighs)

I'd hate to go over Larry's head. I've only been at this branch for a year.

MAGGIE

He gives you the final say in hiring decisions though, doesn't he?

(She walks behind the desk and leans in close to DANIEL.)

Don't you think you should give me a chance?

DANIEL

(flustered, he stands and backs away from her)

I don't know if that's a good idea. Larry wouldn't like it.

MAGGIE

(advancing closer to him)

Isn't there anything I can do to convince you?

DANIEL

Jesus, what is this? A cheap porno?

MAGGIE

No, but we can make it one if you like.

(she traces a finger over his chest)

DANIEL

(backs away around to the front of the desk)

What is wrong with you?

MAGGIE

There's nothing wrong with wanting a promotion after two years with the same company!

DANIEL

Well, no, I suppose not...

(MAGGIE advances around the desk and he begins backing away around the other side.)

B-but I'd need to see a resume and conduct an interview...

(he trips and falls back into his chair as MAGGIE leans over him.)

MAGGIE

We could have an interview right now.

DANIEL

(pushing past her, he rushes to stand by the door and clears his throat.)

Yes, well, then. Have a seat and we'll begin.

MAGGIE

(surprised)

Really?

(she begins to undo the buttons of her shirt.)

You're being awfully formal about this.

DANIEL

(panicking, he turns away.)

No no no! I meant a real interview. Not...whatever you're implying.

MAGGIE

(hesitates for a moment, then redoes her buttons and sits.)

You can turn around, you know.

(he does.)

You'd think you'd never seen a woman undress before.

DANIEL

(defensively)

I have, it's just unprofessional. Besides, you don't want to make a bad impression on your interviewer, do you?

MAGGIE

I suppose not.

(she stands and extends her hand)

Hi, I'm Maggie Dawson; I'm applying for the editor position.

DANIEL

(shakes her hand firmly)

A pleasure to meet you Ms. Dawson. Did you bring a resume with you today?

MAGGIE

(stands quickly and smiles broadly)

One second.

She runs out to her own desk and rifles through one of the drawers. DANIEL uses the opportunity to take his seat behind the desk back. MAGGIE finds what she is looking for and sits down across from DANIEL. He scans the paper she hands him.

DANIEL

So you graduated from Lowell University a few years ago and you've just had the one job since then?

MAGGIE

Yes. I got hired right after graduation.

DANIEL

Do you live around here then?

MAGGIE

Born and raised here.

DANIEL

(sincerely)

Your parents must appreciate that.

(MAGGIE smiles tightly)

So, what makes you think you're qualified for this position? You do have a very short resume.

MAGGIE

I was the editor for my college's literary magazine for two years and I had a book critique column online. I'm driven, eager to learn, and willing to relocate.

DANIEL

I'm sorry, Maggie, you just seem a bit underqualified.

MAGGIE

I've been loyal to this company for years, fetching coffee, doing paperwork, finishing jobs no one else would do. Doesn't that count for something? Don't I deserve this?

DANIEL

Deserve? Loyalty earns you nothing in the real world.

MAGGIE

I was raised to believe otherwise.

DANIEL

So was I, but belief won't stop betrayal.

MAGGIE

Bitter much? Just because you were "betrayed" doesn't mean you should take an

opportunity away from me.
(DANIEL remains silent.)
What, did your wife leave you or something?

DANIEL
My fiancée, actually.

MAGGIE
(surprised)
I...I'm sorry. I didn't realize...

DANIEL
Oh, stop. She left me three years ago after six years of being together. Turned out she had been sleeping with the bartender who introduced us.

(shaking his head)
Three years, and I should be over it, right? I should have moved on, but I can't. Not when everything reminds me of her. Not when my apartment is filled with the absence of her things.

(MAGGIE puts a hand on his arm.)
This gives you an advantage, doesn't it? I'm sure you've got tricks up your sleeve for seducing broken men.

MAGGIE
(pulling away from him)
Excuse me? I was being sympathetic. I didn't realize bitterness had broken you.

DANIEL
(sarcastically)
Oh, I'm sorry. What was it I said that offended you? The part where I implied you're easy?

MAGGIE slaps him.

DANIEL
The truth hurts, doesn't it?

She hits him again.

DANIEL
Though maybe not as much as your slaps. Jesus, you swing like a volleyball player! I think one of my teeth might be loose.

MAGGIE

Don't you ever call me that again.

DANIEL

For God's sake, Maggie, you were trying to seduce me for a job. What am I supposed to assume?

(She is silent.)

I can practically smell the desperation coming off you.

MAGGIE

Disappointment isn't exclusive to you, you know.

DANIEL

Let me guess: born and raised in a small town, and now you feel trapped, so you want this promotion as an excuse to leave without hurting your parents.

(MAGGIE is silent.)

Hit it on the head, didn't I?

MAGGIE

It doesn't matter anyway. You weren't going to give me the job.

DANIEL

No, I wasn't.

MAGGIE

You know, you're one of the only men who's ever refused me?

DANIEL

I can understand why. Don't think I wasn't tempted. It's just my professional integrity that stopped me.

MAGGIE

Professional integrity stops you from having sex with me but not from belittling me?

DANIEL

Yeah, sorry about that.

(rubbing his jaw)

You sure have some power for being so small.

MAGGIE

It's not bruising, is it?

She examines his jaw closely. Daniel winces, then puts his hand over hers touching his cheek and turns quickly and kisses her. She pulls back, shocked.

MAGGIE

What happened to professional integrity?

DANIEL

(flustered again)

I didn't mean...I'm sorry...

MAGGIE

What Larry doesn't know won't hurt him, right? We're the only ones here.

(she reaches for the buttons on her shirt again but DANIEL stops her)

DANIEL

No! No, that's not what I meant. It's just you were so close, and you're very pretty, and I'm sorry.

MAGGIE

So we're still at no promotion then. I understand.

(She picks up her resume and walks to the doorway of Daniel's office.)

You really should take a look at those resumes again. There are several qualified people.

DANIEL

How do you..?

MAGGIE

I printed them off and filtered out the bad ones before you even saw them.

DANIEL

You really do practically run this place, don't you?

MAGGIE

(smiling)

Good night, Daniel.

(she begins to step out)

Thanks for the kiss.

(She turns.)

Oh, and don't tell Larry about this? Please?

DANIEL

Of course not.

Maggie walks out to her desk and gathers her things. Daniel sits contemplatively in his office. Maggie is walking toward the door when—)

DANIEL
Maggie?

MAGGIE
(turning back around)
Yes?

DANIEL
Would you like to get lunch tomorrow?

Lights fade.

Lying

Audrey Schroeder

Cast of Characters

Ryan: 17 years old; Jason's boyfriend

Jason: 18 years old; Ryan's boyfriend

Darrell: 43 years old; Ryan's dad

Scene

Ryan's small bedroom in his father's house.

Time

A little after midnight.

At stage left there is a window. A single bed is at center stage, with a desk, chair, and dresser to its right. A closet door is at the back wall of the stage, slightly ajar. Some generic band posters adorn the walls and a few clothes are scattered here and there. At the far right there is a door. As lights fade up, we see Ryan, apparently asleep in the bed. A tap sounds at the window. After a couple more taps, Ryan, a young man in some worn pajamas, wakes and rises. He crosses to the window and opens it.

JASON (OFFSTAGE)

But soft! What light in yonder window breaks? 'Tis the east, and Juliet is the sun.

JASON, wearing torn jeans and a beaten up jacket, climbs in through the window, grinning. He and Ryan embrace, almost desperately.

RYAN

You shouldn't be here, Jason.

JASON

(teasing)

I thought you found these nighttime trysts romantic.

RYAN

(trying to stay serious)

I did, I mean, I do, but I just—

JASON

Shhh.

Jason puts a finger to Ryan's lips.

Let's just enjoy ourselves.

He removes his jacket and moves to sit on the bed. Ryan is silent.

Ryan? What's wrong?

RYAN

You know my dad is home right now.

JASON

Yeah, but he's sleeping, isn't he?

RYAN

Who knows? Last time—

JASON

How many times do I have to apologize? I said I was sorry!

RYAN
Keep your voice down!

JASON
I wasn't trying to get you in trouble.

RYAN
(sighing)
I know you weren't. I'm just a little on edge right now.

JASON
It's not like this is any easier for me than it is for you. I just...I had to see you.

RYAN
Jason, we can't go on like this. I know we've been dating for a year now, but we've been hiding it for that long too.

(beat)
Why'd you have to go and tick off my dad?

JASON
I told you I was sorry! I just wanted to see you.

RYAN
But I told you he was getting home late that night.

JASON
What you said was "he's out bowling". I don't think that's the same thing.

RYAN
Well, gee, somehow I figured you'd be smart enough to figure it out.

JASON
Don't be sarcastic with me. You act like it was all my fault.
Ryan says nothing.
Oh, so you're just ignoring your father's part in this? Is that it?

RYAN
Of course I'm not! I just fail to see how sneaking into my house and trying to massage my father is in any way NOT your fault.

JASON

It was an accident! It was dark! You know how much you and your father look alike.
Haven't people been saying that to you your whole life?

RYAN

That's not an excuse for groping my dad!

Jason stands and crosses to Ryan by the window. He hugs him.

JASON

I'm sorry.

RYAN

I know. You're always sorry.

JASON

Well I mean it! I don't know what else you want me to do! I'm crazy about you, Ryan. I
have been for a long time. Is it my fault that everyone in this town thinks that's so wrong?

RYAN

I've told you to be careful. I'm always careful, but you had to go and blow it.

JASON

I hate all the sneaking around!

RYAN

Sneaking around is the only way to be together! You knew what it would mean if we got
caught. What people would think.

JASON

I don't care what anyone thinks but you. You shouldn't care about those bigots. They want
what we have. They're just angry we've found a loophole to love.

RYAN

(quietly)

My dad is one of those 'bigots'.

(beat)

He was always there for me, Jason. When I was seven, I fell out of a tree and hid the
bruises from him for a week, terrified that he'd be angry. He was always saying 'Don't you
go climbing trees now, son.' But when he found out, he just said 'Why didn't you tell me
sooner?' And he kissed my bruise and made me feel better.

JASON
Ryan...

RYAN

And then I grew up and met you. I got swept up in our forbidden romance without a care for what he would say. Do you know how hard it was to come home at night and smile over the dinner table at him like I wasn't betraying his trust? Pretending I was interested in girls like a 'normal' son would be? I spent every day knowing that I was a disappointment, but still. Somehow...somehow I thought he would tell me 'It's okay, son, why didn't you tell me sooner?'.

Ryan begins to cry. Jason crosses to him and puts an arm around him.

JASON

It's okay. It'll be alright. We'll run away and start over somewhere else.

RYAN
What?

JASON

You were right. We can't be together if we stay here. So we'll go.

RYAN

No, that's not what I want!
Jason recoils visibly as if slapped.

JASON

But I thought you wanted this. I thought...I thought the whole star-crossed lovers thing was exciting for you.

RYAN

That illusion has been shattered for me.
(beat)
I can't go with you, Jason.

JASON

You don't mean that. You can't!
Jason crosses to Ryan and hugs him tight. Ryan does not return the hug.

DARRELL (OFFSTAGE)

Ryan, is everything okay? I thought I heard voices.
Both boys freeze.

RYAN

I'm fine, Dad, sorry for waking you.

DARRELL (OFFSTAGE)

Well, you should get some sleep before tomorrow.

JASON

(whispering)

Ryan, come with me now. All we have to do is crawl out that window.

RYAN

Jason, look. It was fun while it lasted, really, it was—

JASON

No, don't talk like that! You'll just say things you'll regret!

Ryan turns away.

RYAN

Jason, you have to leave. My dad's awake and I don't want you to get in trouble for being here.

JASON

No, not until you tell me what's going on!

(his voice cracks and grows fevered)

What's tomorrow, Ryan? Why won't you leave with me? Why are you throwing all our dreams away?

RYAN

I'm not throwing anything away! You don't understand! Your parents wouldn't care if they found out!

JASON

So it's your dad's fault, then?

The bedroom door swings open and Darrell enters. He is a well-built man in his early forties.

DARRELL

Ryan, what's—

(he sees JASON)

What are you doing here?

Jason rushes to back away across the room from Darrell.

JASON
I'm sorry, sir.

DARRELL
I told you to never come back here.

JASON
With all due respect sir, I don't care what you said. I love your son.
Darrell crosses to Jason and grabs the front of his shirt, his hand raised.

RYAN
Dad, no!
DARRELL stops, keeping his hand raised.

DARRELL
And you think I don't love my son? Is that it, boy?

JASON
I think if you cared about him so much you would be glad that he'd found someone instead of getting hung up on whether that someone was a he or a she.

DARRELL
Don't you ever question that I care for my son. I take care of my boy.

JASON
Making him choose between his father and his boyfriend? Yeah, that really sounds like good parenting. He loves me!

DARRELL
But he'll choose me. I raised him alone after his mother died. I took care of him when he was sick. I was there for him when he needed me.

JASON
He doesn't need you anymore! He's an adult!

DARRELL
I will not be disrespected in my own house.

JASON
Or what? You'll hit me? Because believe me, I have no problem calling the cops.
Darrell pauses for a moment, then turns his back on Jason. He stares at Ryan before crossing to the door.

DARRELL

Make sure you have everything for tomorrow, son. We leave at seven.

(turns to look at JASON)

I suggest you leave.

Darrell exits. Ryan begins putting clothes in a duffel bag.

JASON

What is he talking about?

(beat)

Ryan, what did he mean? Where are you going?

RYAN

Boot camp.

JASON

If your dad thinks he can drill the gay out of you—

RYAN

It wasn't my dad's idea.

JASON

W-what? You always told me a military lifestyle was your dad's dream. What happened to wanting to be a music teacher? What happened to wanting to get a little house together?

RYAN

Dreams change. I'm leaving tomorrow, and nothing you can say will change that.

JASON

I thought you loved me. Is that not true anymore?

Ryan turns to face him.

RYAN

It is, Jason. I'm sorry.

He starts to turn around but Jason grabs his shoulders.

JASON

Don't leave! You can't just give in to your father!

RYAN

It's not 'giving in'! I'm doing what I have to. Dad's been through a lot, what with Mom dying and now this. I don't want to lose him. We take care of each other.

JASON

Do I mean nothing? You're going to leave me here in this stupid town with all its gossip and judgment!

RYAN

So leave! You were dead set on skipping town before. You don't need me here to do that.

JASON

If I leave, how will you find me when you come back?

Ryan says nothing.

You're not going to come back, are you?

RYAN

Not for a while, at least. It'll be years, Jason. We'll be different people.

JASON

You're making excuses. I would wait, you know I would.

RYAN

I don't want you to!

JASON

You need me to conveniently disappear from your life, don't you? You're just going to give up everything because of your father!

(beat)

Well, fine then! Go and get yourself shot! How will your dad feel then?

RYAN

He'd rather see his son dead than a fag.

(beat)

I have to go now. You should leave.

JASON

(attempting to be angry)

I never thought there'd be a day when I would be glad to see you leave.

RYAN

You're a bad liar.

He crosses to Jason and kisses him.

Goodbye, Jason.

Ryan exits, leaving Jason to slump and sit on the bed.

Lights fade.

Contributors



Taylor Mali Quote, Audrey Schroeder

Morgan Albertson has been a lifetime lover of science fiction and fantasy, holding Isaac Asimov, Karen Traviss, and Terry Pratchett as his literary inspiration. After discovering a love of superhero comics in college, he decided that he should be the one to write the next great superhero novel.

Zachary M. Alley is a rather terrific person if you ask him. He is also a creative writing major, a dark humorist, and a liar.

Joe Bayne is a musician, actor, and lover of tabletop games. His piece “Become Death” was inspired by J. Robert Oppenheimer.

Abby Edele is studying Creative Writing at Lindenwood University. She reads too much 19th century literature, and she watches too much Netflix with her dogs. She lives in the St. Louis area.

Rachel Factora is from Oahu, Hawai'i where we ride dolphins to school, live in grass shacks, ohana means family, and we all know how to surf. Aloha.

Casey Freeman is a Creative Writing major who could use a nice nap. When she's not procrastinating on her homework with video games, she can be found baking miscellaneous sweets or scribbling story ideas down on whatever she can find.

Chelsea Funk, 20, is a pre-vet med student double majoring in gender studies and psychology. Her twitter bio reads, “Sarcastic”, which is more or less an accurate summary of her personality. She enjoys making bad jokes and awkwardly timed puns, she's also known to be funny once in a while.

Gabriela Graciosa Guedes is a junior studying creative writing at Lindenwood University. She is originally from Brazil but loves to travel and experience different cultures. Her favorite place in the world is London. Although Gabriela is homesick 90% of the time, she has yet to decide in which country her quiet place to write will be.

Jacob Grayson is a friend, husband, and gamer. Though he has long enjoyed writing, “Winter of Memories” is his first published piece.

Jordan Harms says, “I’ve always found it agonizingly difficult to write about myself, it always ends up sounding like I am the same as everyone else... which is not too far off from the truth, hence the poem ‘Prejudice’. When someone claims to be free of prejudice, he has too much of it.”

Hanna Hollis is a junior at Lindenwood University studying Creative Writing and Literature. She transferred to Lindenwood from Collin County Community College in McKinney, Texas. She is thrilled to be having her play, “The Accident,” published in *Arrow Rock* and hopes it is the first of many publications.

Chris Hudson is a currently majoring in English at Lindenwood University. His pasttimes include photography, writing, and rebuilding vintage cameras. He finds inspiration for his craft through various facets in life.

Daria Ivanova says, “I am Russian, and actually tennis and curiosity led me to the USA two years ago. I am a junior studying Political Science and International Relations at Lindenwood University. I wrote a lot back home in my native language, and here I decided to accept the challenge of converting my skills in English. Here you will see the results.”

Jennifer Mullen is a sophomore in the Interactive Media and Web Design department at Lindenwood University. She works in graphic design, specializing in logo design and web and is always looking for new work.

Audrey Schroeder does a lot of everything and a little of nothing. She thanks her late mentor, Rift Fournier, for teaching her the importance of a well-placed swear word.

Brenna Swoboda, a senior at Lindenwood University, is majoring in English Creative Writing and minoring in Psychology. She often has to remind herself that the little things in life are the most important, and she is slowly realizing that those little things are what bring her the most joy.

Arrow Rock is currently accepting submissions for Issue 6. Please email your poetry, fiction, creative nonfiction, plays, photography or artwork to
ArrowRock@Lindenwood.edu.

To view previous issues of the Arrow Rock literary magazine visit
<http://www.lindenwood.edu/ArrowRock/>

Issue No. 5

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