

# BAILY'S BEADS

VOLUME XX  
NUMBER 1

2015

University of Pittsburgh at Bradford  
300 Campus Drive  
Bradford, Pa 16701

# Submission Guidelines

## *Prose*

*Baily's Beads* accepts fiction, creative nonfiction (memoirs, essays, and commentaries), poetry, plays, and translations.

Please submit your work with a cover sheet containing your name and contact information, including your e-mail address, home address, and phone number.

We ask that your name does not appear anywhere on the document, just the cover sheet. All pieces are judged anonymously and no staff members are allowed to vote on their own work.

Please double space submissions. Entries can be sent electronically to [bailys@pitt.edu](mailto:bailys@pitt.edu). Please note that we accept submissions year-round.

## *Art*

We are always looking for art, especially black-and-white pieces. We seek a variety of photos, paintings, and drawings that express new ideas and are content-oriented and aesthetically pleasing.

All images must be in jpeg format at 300 dpi resolution. The cover sheet must include the title of the work, the media used, the size, and date created. We ask that you submit no more than five black-and-white and two color pieces.

We will not accept “selfies” or pictures taken behind glass. No borders unless they are part of the piece. Only high quality images will be considered.

# Awards

## *Columbia Scholastic Press Association*

- 2004 Silver Medalist
- 2005 Gold Medalist
- 2005 Silver Crown Award
- 2006 Silver Medalist
- 2007 Silver Crown Award
- 2008 Gold Medalist
- 2010 Gold Medalist
- 2011 Gold Medalist

## *American Scholastic Press Association*

- 2004 First Place with special merit
- 2005 First Place with special merit
- 2006 First Place
- 2007 First Place
- 2008 First Place with special merit
- 2010 First Place with special merit
- 2010 Best College Magazine Award
- 2011 First Place with special merit
- 2011 Best College Magazine Award
- 2012 First Place with special merit

# Editors' Note

In this issue we decided on a theme of going on a journey, not only in the physical world, but within oneself as well. The cover, designed by Amy Hughes, is meant to be a symbolic representation of such a journey. Some of the artwork in the magazine helps emphasize our theme. This issue incorporates artwork for the first time in many years.

In addition, this is the first issue of *Baily's Beads* with an illustrated children's story. In it, our heroine from the last issue, Baily, makes a cameo appearance. Our Co-Editor-in-Chief, Selese Huth, created the drawings. For the magazine overall, we wanted the design to be clean and simple, yet still professional looking. We incorporated elements from the cover such as the airplane as an end mark and famous buildings as asterisks. The compass on the genre title pages is meant to be a symbolic representation of traveling and journey; cover designer Amy Hughes also created this image and other graphic elements.

Karen Shoemaker, author of *The Meaning of Names*, judged the poetry and prose contests; winners are indicated in the headings of the pieces. The artwork was judged by ceramic artist Ron Geibel.

We would like to thank our advisor Dr. Nancy McCabe for all her wisdom and supervision through this process. We would also like to thank the staff for putting in long hours even outside of class. Also, a huge thank you goes out to Professor Anna Lemnitzer for her help and advise in the art and design. And also, a thank you to Dr. James Salvo for his help with InDesign and graphic design. Both Professors Lemnitzer and Salvo held multiple graphic and InDesign workshops in order to educate the class on InDesign.

We would also like to thank Professor Jeff Guterman and the Division of Communication and the Arts of Pitt-Bradford for the funds that support *Baily's Beads*.

Lastly, we would like to thank our publisher, Ben at Ferguson Printing, who has been willing to help in any way possible, as well as coming into class for any questions the staff had.

Once again, we would like to thank everyone who has made this issue possible. We hope you enjoy the 2015 issue of *Baily's Beads*.

— Kayla Beers, McKayla Murdock, and Selese Huth



Baily's Beads are the highest points of light that appear around the edge of the moon at the solar eclipse. The beads are created by sunlight passing through the moon's valleys. The last bead is the brightest, resembling a diamond on a brilliant ring. This phenomenon lasts but a few spectacular moments.

# Editorial Staff

## Editors-in-Chief

Kayla Beers  
Selese Huth  
McKayla Murdock

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| Morgan Watson          | Megan Whisennand      |

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| Art Advisor       | Prof. Anna Lemnitzer |
| Technical Advisor | Dr. James Salvo      |

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# Design

Titles, author’s names, headings, and the body text is in *Linux Libertine* font. The cover features *Bebas Neue* and *Linux Libertine*. Division pages are also in *Bebas Neue*. These fonts were obtained with a free, non-commercial license from dafont.com. The cover art and graphic elements were created by Amy Hughes. The picture book illustrations were done by Selese Huth. This issue was created through Adobe Photoshop and Adobe InDesign. It was printed by Ferguson Printing in Salamanca, NY. This is a free publication.

# Contest Winners

## Prose

- 1st Place** . . . . . Kelly Schucker, “Suicide Hotline”
- 2nd Place.** . . . . . Richard Marcott, “Hemingway and Havana”
- 3rd Place.** . . . . . Jason Fetterman, “From the Files of Roger  
and Doof: The Curious Case of Mr. Baxter”

## Poetry

- 1st Place** . . . . . Kayla Beers, “Masterpiece”
- 2nd Place.** . . . . . Kelly Schucker, “Apprehension”
- 3rd Place.** . . . . . Bonnie Mcmillen, “I Wish”

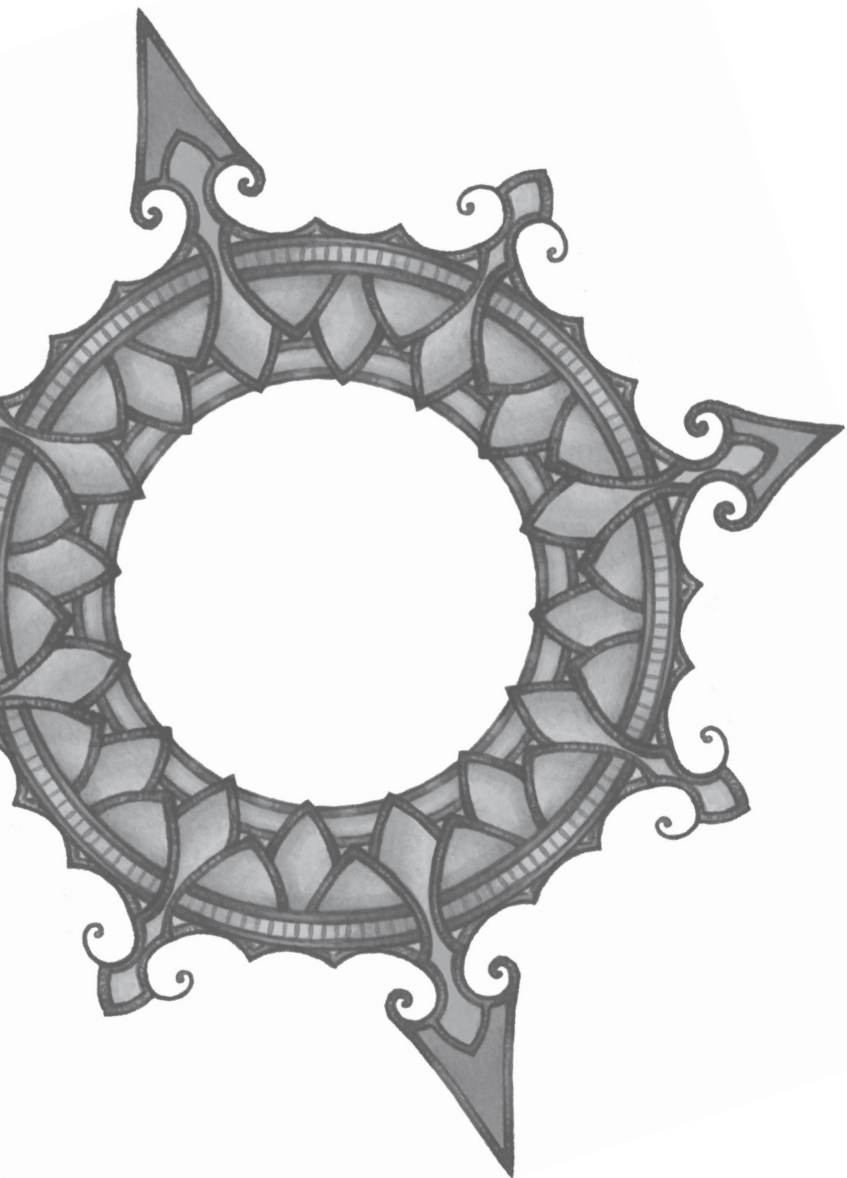
## Art

- 1st Place** . . . . . Ashley Young, “Numb”
- 2nd Place.** . . . . . Paige Wallace, “Worldliness”
- 3rd Place.** . . . . . Jenny Trippett, “Lighters”



*Numb*, Ashley Young–1st Place Art  
Digital Photography

# CREATIVE NONFICTION



KELLY SCHUCKER

## SUICIDE HOTLINE

1ST PLACE PROSE

Call the suicide hotline. A robot voice will thank you for calling the Suicide Hotline.

Don't listen when they explain what button to press for Spanish, which will be explained in Spanish. If you try to follow along, you'll get confused and hang up and be alone with only the voices in your head. Ignore the foreign jargon. It will switch to English, I promise.

Ignore when they tell you the number to press if you are a veteran. You did not earn this.

Take deep breaths when the robot tells you in a monotonous tone that you are being put on hold. Yes, on hold. Your Call is Important to Us. Music will begin and you'll experience slight surprise that it's not the tedious, depressing elevator music you'd expect. Listen to the contemporary music. Fall into the notes. Until silence interrupts the harmony and then a robot voice will tell you your call is being redirected to someone who can help you, ignore this message. The music will then play again. It will be easier to fall into the melody this time.

Do not be startled when they interrupt the music again. This time there will not be a moment of silence, and there will not be words; suddenly the phone at the end of the line will begin ringing. The sound will reverberate within your left ear four times, and then a nice woman will say *hello* in her practiced-to-be-personable voice and thank you for calling the Suicide Hotline. Why are You Calling?

In just two monosyllabic words you will tell her you are upset. This will seem like the pinnacle of understatement but your voice will crack into a million pieces at this utterance and you'll feel your face heat up and your throat will clench and you'll be rendered incapable of saying anything more. You'll decide that "I'm upset" will have to suffice.

When she begins asking you personal questions, simply answer and answer simply. It's procedure. She will ask for your full name. Don't let this frighten you—you wanted anonymity, but apparently you can't have it. Give her your first name, then your last. Enunciate when she asks you for the spelling. She will repeat the letters after you, which makes this a little bit too real for your preference. She

will ask if this is right. You will choke out a “yeah” and nothing more.

You should notice that you need another tissue because you’ve been using this one for hours while you sob and the recycled cardboard tissue is soaked through and has been reduced to a scrunched ball in your hand that’s basically unusable. But you don’t notice. You are too distracted to recognize this and too upset to care.

Now your age. Tell her you are eighteen. Try not to feel pathetic. Shouldn’t you have control of your life by now? You’re sobbing, a little girl asphyxiating on teenage angst.

She will then ask you where you are, and after you answer, she’ll be surprised you were redirected to a Crisis Center two hours away from your location—you were forwarded based on your cell’s area code. But she’s very glad you’re on a college campus. She tells you this many times. College Campuses are a Great Asset for People Undergoing Emotional Struggles. She almost sounds proud when she repeats how beneficial your location is. Do not respond to this. Try not to even nod, because you’ll find yourself tempted to do so. She’s telling you that it was a great idea to have your emotional breakdown in your dorm room with two other housemates present on a college campus that you hate. This is nothing to be proud of. Remain silent. Just remain silent.

You will try to brush your fingers through knotted hair that you haven’t washed in three days but can’t because the dried tears in your bangs harden your tresses like gel. You are wearing a black tank top and jeans that haven’t been washed in at least a few weeks, you think. You realize that as each month passes, you go a longer time without showering. Before your last shower it had been eleven days and you only cared about this enough to count the dates.

She will ask if you have ever harmed yourself. When you reply, you whisper to keep your secrets just between you and this lovely voiced woman whose name you can no longer remember—your housemates can easily eavesdrop. You will not hesitate before you respond affirmatively in a hushed tone. You’ve gotten good at confessing things like this to strangers—therapists, doctors, peers, and anyone else who asks that you don’t really know. Your self-destructive past is kept pretty quiet, sure, but you’re not embarrassed to admit these things.

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She will ask if you have harmed yourself recently. You will say no. Now is when you will have to stop yourself from saying all of the things you're desperate to say: I haven't cut in weeks but I've been a cutter since I was eleven. I've been addicted for over seven years. You will try to rationalize why it would be a great idea to confess this—you want to give her full disclosure, it may be important. The tears in your throat will choke you into silence. Once again you are grateful for it. Some things are better left unsaid.

She says in her too-sweet, too-caring voice that it is very, very good that you haven't cut recently. She continues to ask if this past self-mutilation was ever a suicide attempt or if it was (and here she will stumble over her words before deciding to call it) a Coping Mechanism. You say the latter. She will ask you to repeat yourself because you are choking on snot and salt. You will say yes, even though it isn't a yes or no question. Yes, you reiterate, it made you Feel Better.

You will sit at your desk, perched atop your chair, sitting on one knee, not feeling comfortable in your own skin. You never feel comfortable in your own skin. You are fearful of what this body is capable of doing—a body you have abused too many ways, too many times, over too many years.

She will ask if you've ever attempted suicide in the past. You'll half-laugh and say no, then wonder why your reflex was to scoff at such a notion. You'll decide it's because she isn't asking you about making attempts on your life at all; she is asking you if you are a coward or if you are brave. The answer is that you are a coward. When you were in this situation a handful of years ago, age thirteen, lying in the steamy bathtub, blood cells sprinting, with a notebook and a pen and two razors you took apart for the blades, you could not do it. You wanted nothing more than to do it. You couldn't even figure out how to address the suicide note. (Dear, who? World? To Whom This May Concern? The worst writer's block you've ever experienced.) You have always been a coward.

When she asks if you are having suicidal thoughts now, say yes. Again, it is too easy not to hesitate but this response feels odd in a way that the cutting question didn't. It feels like your tongue has suddenly split in half, sliced straight down the middle. You are used to lying about the suicidal thoughts. You trained yourself for many



years to pretend everything is always just fine. It's a relief to be honest, but honesty feels like too-hot sand under paper-white feet. You called this number for a reason though, so you might as well be honest. Say yes. Yes, you are having ideations of suicide.

She is wondering if you have ever had them before. Again you have a desire to laugh. Of course you have.

She asks what you normally do to cope with these thoughts and feelings and you tell her you talk to your girlfriend and distract yourself with homework. She repeats your answer in a soft, sweet voice, laced with approval. Again, she thanks you for calling the Hotline. She expresses pride, even. This is a Great Choice for You to Make.

You will shift in your seat, feeling awkward. You've been sitting on your feet: gangly legs scrunched up and intertwined beneath you. They should be going numb but they aren't. You are eighty-two pounds and instead of gaining the freshman fifteen, you've lost ten. You've been trying to add some flesh to your calcium-starved bones but you can't. You have no appetite.

Your hand is holding the phone too tightly and the sweat makes your phone case slick and you should probably switch hands but you don't, even though your left ear aches. You move again to press your boney knees up against your chest. You fold into yourself.

She will ask how suicidal you are feeling right now on a scale of one to ten. You'll almost giggle considering what this scale could be—one means you're peachy keen, ten means you've already killed yourself? She will then explain that one means you're only a little suicidal, ten means you are definitely going to go through with it. This scale still seems ridiculous. You will consider for a moment and silently decide you're probably around an eight. She continues to explain this scale and ramble on about you're not sure what and you begin to fear that you'll upset her—maybe a number too high means she's required to freak out and call for backup, the severity of this problem beyond her handling capabilities. You worry this crisis call will change from being the mini-therapy session you need, into a cop and two firefighters knocking on your door, as if you're worthy of such attention.

This is not a good idea. No way. No one can get physically involved. Your intense suicidal thoughts will stay within your head and within this phone line and that is all. You decide that, for her

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sake, you are a six. This is the only number you give her, and you practically hear her nodding with false understanding and something similar to approval—a six on the scale must be reconcilable?—before she continues with her tedious questions.

She asks if you have A Plan. You want to ask, “A plan for what?” But you know for what. Say yes. Just say yes. Pathetic tears continue to drag down your pallid cheeks.

Her voice will remain sweet. Both calm and calming. You almost don’t want to be calmed down, but you fight this self-destructive instinct and let her voice attempt to stabilize your breathing. It’s damn hard to speak clearly and hyperventilate at the same time, you will be realizing. You take deep breaths.

When she asks what your plan is, tell her. Try not to trip over your words too much and when you do, don’t fall too hard. The last thing you need right now is scraped knees—you’re out of Band-Aids.

“Drowning,” you will confess in a hushed tone, which is hard to manage with how the inflamed muscle tissues in your throat have expanded to constrict your windpipe, nearly inhibiting your ability to speak. You become hyper-conscious of the other girls living in your house, who are present just doors and hallways and doors away. You know how easily your mangled voice slithers through the ventilation systems, directly into every bedroom and the bathroom through dusty slats in the ceilings. This taboo subject immediately becomes very difficult to talk about and you consider hanging up.

“Drowning?” She will repeat your answer in question form to provoke an elaboration. Respond flatly with a “yeah” and nothing more and notice how your adrenaline heightens just considering having to discuss something so taboo.

She will ask how you would do that. You won’t be able to avoid this question so just answer. Tell her drowning in a frozen lake. You would drown in a frozen lake.

You want to explain this further but your thoughts become jumbled with the augmented, with emotions colliding so vehemently that you can’t find the words you need to rationalize your answer. You want to walk carefully across a small body of water when the epilimnion of the lake, just the top handful of inches, is frozen. Once you’re above deeper water, the ice thins. It begins to crack under your concentrated weight and the ice will shatter and you’ll fall

in, all of this happening in just half a second. Your mind won't be fast enough to comprehend what is happening until you're already submerged and goose bumps have violently risen on your skin like thorns. Against your desires, your body will go into survival mode as biological instincts overwhelm cognition and thought. Your body will try to survive. It will try to grip the edges of the ice with numb fingertips while your body goes into shock, but it won't be able to get out. Your body will battle to remain afloat, but hypothermia will set in fast and your brain won't be able to communicate with your muscles enough to strategize an exit plan. You may fall under the water and get lost, trapped beneath the ice. Your energy will quickly deplete and you will lose the ability to sporadically thrash; your body will struggle to even cause ripples in the atmosphere around you. You will begin to swallow and inhale water. Death will not take long. It will be too dramatic for your taste, but the pain will be minimal and it will happen quickly. It will be worth it.

You will desperately want to explain this all to her but you lack the eloquence to find the words you need. You will say "drown in a frozen lake" and that is all. You will have to silently berate yourself for the stupidity of this answer. Drown in ice. That's either ironic or an oxymoron. Or maybe it's just moronic.

The nameless woman will ask you if you live near a lake and you have to stifle another laugh. Who doesn't? There aren't many deserts around here. Tell her "yeah." This is the standard answer you will use to keep from indulging her too much, or to keep yourself from saying something stupid. You know this makes it harder for her to do her job, but your fear of where this conversation may be going keeps you from feeling any sympathy. When she asks you how far you are from the lake, stifle another masochistic giggle and tell her it isn't far and lay this particular topic to rest.

After every question you answer, the silence will be notable. Prepare for this. You will almost be able to hear her scrawling out your answers on the Standard Survey Sheet for the Suicidal. You'll convince yourself this is why you're giving her simple, often monosyllabic answers—less for her to write.

You'll think about the purpose of this documentation. You will wonder if they look up a person's inventory sheet if they call more than once. You will wonder if they recycle the sheets of the people

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who commit suicide, or if they just throw them away, or if they let those papers crumble in an old filing cabinet in the basement to keep the spiders company. You predict the last, and for some reason this makes you uncomfortable.

This sweet-sounding woman will use your first name a lot. She must have been trained to, to be personable or to keep you engaged or something. Or as a persistent reminder that you are still human, still a living person. Psych 101. Subliminal messaging: I am using Your Name Because You are an Important Person. You are Alive. Stay that Way.

She will ask if anyone is in the house with you. Tell her yes, two housemates. She will ask if either of them knows what you're going through. Of course not. She will then step way over the lines you have drawn for her and ask pleasantly if she can speak with one of your housemates. You will laugh politely and give her a direct "no" and try not to feel guilty—she's just trying to help you, after all. She will pause for a moment and ask if the counseling center is open. On a Sunday afternoon? That's funny. Nothing is open here on a Sunday. Again, you will say no. But she will keep probing: is your RA home do you like her do you trust her are you willing to talk to her about these things? She is home but you're not interested in talking to her, no way. But you don't respond yet.

You will realize like you have far too many times before that it is far easier to talk to a stranger about something personal than it is to talk to a good acquaintance, a family member, even a best friend. You can tell a woman who doesn't have a name that your options were either to call her or to go for a short walk toward that lake. But you can't tell your RA because she's a young woman who probably doesn't know what it's like to have self-destructive tendencies, and she actually respects you. She will most likely look at you the way most peers do, seeing you as an intelligent young woman, socially awkward but overtly sweet. The RA is probably ignorant of emotional disorders and ignorant of addictions and ignorant of self-hatred. You can't let her see your flaws. You can't let her see that you are human.

(She is not equipped to handle a mental case like you.)

But you have realized something important about this stranger

on the phone—she isn't going to hang up until you are talking to someone face-to-face about this. Her interests are not in talking to you about why you're suicidal, but finding someone else you can talk to about why you are suicidal.

“Yes” you will finally lie. You will talk to your RA. This lie comes easily. This lie will come so easily that you will surprise yourself, but what other choice do you have? The whole point of calling was to talk to a stranger who doesn't know you enough to judge, but all she's doing is redirecting you to someone you do know. Purpose turned obsolete.

You like your RA but know that she would definitely start watching you closely, nervous and suspicious, as if you're a stranger living just next door that has a past of committing violent crimes. Talking to her is not an option.

She asks you what your RA's name is and you tell her but she mishears you and repeats back a different name as a question. You choose not to correct her because it doesn't matter anyway.

I am Going to Stay on the Phone with You While You Go Next Door to See if Your RA Will Talk with You. You will respond with a numbed “okay” and shift the phone from your face, trying not to breathe too loudly. You are not going to leave. You predict she is listening for footsteps, and you quickly strategize ways you could fake this interaction, but decide against it. You feel guilty, but you can't do this. Talking to someone you know about how desperate you are to end your own life is simply not an option.

After several moments you will tell her you are with your RA, who is willing to talk. Perhaps this is protocol or, more likely, the stranger on the phone is suspicious of your demeanor: she tells you matter-of-factly that she will stay on the line while you talk to your RA. What? Can she do that? You decide that, apparently, she can and she will. You contemplate setting down the phone, still on the line, and doing homework for fifteen minutes while having this imaginary conversation with your RA. You consider this for a long moment before deciding this is just silly and you feel guilty and awkward and overwhelmed.

You will hang up. Just hang up. The guilt will intensify for a moment before you remember how to breathe.

You will set your phone down and try to wipe the sticky, dried

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tears from your pale face while turning toward your computer to get some homework done. A minute ticks by and then your phone will ring. The number has your hometown area code, but is otherwise unfamiliar—it has to be the Crisis Center. You do not pick up and you feel tremendously guilty for making this female stranger worry when you're the one who bothered her in the first place, especially since she only wants to help you. But now you are aware of how greatly uninterested you are in the help that she has to offer.

You will press the off button on your phone several times in a row, which only mutes the ringing instead of ending the call. You'll be surprised how long she waits on the line until your phone finally sends her to voicemail. In retrospect, you will be almost surprised that the woman didn't leave a message after the beep. Then you will realize it'd actually be quite purposeless to leave a voicemail on a suicidal person's phone, especially after they've hung up on you.

Half an hour passes, which you will spend watching fragmented documentaries on suicide and how it is A Permanent Solution to a Temporary Problem. This will upset you—mental illness is hardly a temporary problem. People only say this based on the statistics that ninety percent of suicides have a treatable mental illness for which they never sought professional help. But you've sought professional help for years, seeing counselors and therapists starting at age eleven. You've seen four different mental health professionals since then, one of them lasting four years. You've been on medication for anxiety and depression for a year and a half. Temporary problems don't last this damn long.

After listening to thirty minutes of triggering YouTube videos in the background while writing a psychology paper on your laptop, your phone will ring again. This is a 1-800 number, clearly the Hotline again. You panic—if you don't answer, they probably have a "Suicide in Progress Policy" where they send firemen to the location from which they tracked the call, and that kind of attention wouldn't do you any good.

You will hesitantly decide to answer.

The man on the line will say hello and asks if this is Kelly and you will say yes. He will hesitate for some reason and it will make you

oddly uncomfortable before he explains that he received a call from a woman working the crisis hotline in your hometown who is worried about you. You respond flatly with an “oh,” though you can already feel the unwanted tears welling within your sore throat. Why is this happening? You stifle a groan. He asks if you are okay and an unsolicited sob chokes out. Why does that always happen, why are you so fucking fragile? You will not be okay, clearly, but you will respond softly with a yes as the tears will lace your articulated exhale and travel with ease through the phone line.

The man, in his practiced-to-be-sympathetic voice will ask what’s going on with you, what’s wrong? Nothing, you tell him. You are just upset. He will ask why you’re upset and you’ll tell him you’re worried about school and you miss your girlfriend and life is really tough right now. And this is the time that you begin to feel truly pathetic; these things seem acutely trivial and not at all worthy of even being cried over. Meanwhile, you will be sitting at your desk with dried tears like ski slopes traveling from your too-blue eyes to your heated red lips. You will sit with your legs crossed lotus position with your laptop on the desk in front of you, a web page open researching methods to commit suicide on Google: 5,910,000 hits.

He will request you elaborate about your school worries. You stumble over monosyllabic words while struggling to talk about things like poor grades and failing out of college and disappointing family and proving to the world that you have never been anything more than a failure. He then will ask for your GPA (as if a quantitative measurement of qualitative information, is even possible, much less relevant,) and after minor hesitation you tell him and he says that sounds very good. You shrug, ignoring the fact that he can’t recognize this gesture, remaining silent. He asks for where you are on the suicidal scale and he repeats what the numbers stand for and you tell him a seven. He asks if you’ll be okay and you say yeah. He asks if he can have someone call sometime later tonight to make sure you’re still okay and, while this makes you nervous, it is oddly comforting. You will agree, and tell him to call at nine and he affirms this time and you hang up and turn off the YouTube documentary. You switch from the suicide methods page to finish your essay assignment and distract yourself with brighter things like Neopets and ignorant posts on Facebook.

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The sadness will remain, like it always has.

In two years, when you write an autobiographical essay about calling the Hotline, still riddled with depression and anxiety like invasive tumors, now with an inpatient stay under your loose belt, you will realize that life has progressed without progress.

And you will be unable to remember if anyone did call back that night two years ago as promised. You won't be sure what this means. You won't be sure it matters.



*Heartache*, Selese Huth  
Digital Photography



## BIG ROCK

Dad wasn't paying any attention to me.

I stood knee-deep in the river with my arms crossed over my sand pail. He sat in a canvas chair on the bank opposite me, guzzling beer from a green bottle. I knew he couldn't see my sandcastle if I couldn't see the words on his bottle.

"Daddy!" I yelled again.

He flapped a hand at me. He didn't look at my castle. The older kids no longer had any interest in sandcastles; they were nine, I was six-and-a-half. They got to play in the river instead, challenging each other to handstand competitions and fierce games of Marco Polo. They would dare each other to hold their breath under water and have me be the judge of who had stayed under the longest because I could see who was cheating from the safety of the river bank. The nine-year-olds had all swum over to the opposite bank for juice boxes; they had left me and the other six-year-olds with our sandcastles and plastic beach pails.

I waded up to my thighs and yelled for my dad again. He didn't look. I could hear the rumble of his laughter from my place in the water. It lapped at the bottom of my new yellow swimsuit. My mom had a matching suit just like it, and neither one had ever touched water other than from the hose that Dad had set up as a makeshift sprinkler.

I felt lighter as I tiptoed in up to my chest. The current rocked me and forced me to adjust my footing. The slimy sand bed sloped down too fast for me to realize my mistake and left me gulping lungs full of water with "help!" escaping from my mouth as I submerged.

The river went from glassy and tepid to glacial and dark, like I had descended into a nightmare. I couldn't cough. My arms and legs felt like they had concrete blocks attached to them. Bubbles slipped out of my burning nose and my chest ached in time with my throbbing heartbeat. The rest of me was numb, like I had been outside too long in winter.

I could hear shouting from what seemed like miles and miles away. A flurry of bubbles cut through the dark, and I felt the strangling grip of wide hands wrapped around the tops of my arms. The water shifted from cool to warm again and the world became pain-

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-fully bright—too bright to see. I shut my eyes.

When I opened them again, someone had buried me face-down in sand. Irritating grains had found their way into the empty crevice where I had lost a baby tooth. Clumps of it were crammed into my mouth along with the taste of puke on my tongue. Dad called my name. I wanted to answer but I was too busy throwing up water and half a ham sandwich Mom had made me eat before we left for the river. It hurt to breathe.

“She’s alive,” someone said.

Hands cradled me against a large belly in a Hawaiian shirt. I smelled beer and something spicy. I felt lips surrounded by mustache whiskers kiss my forehead.

“Daddy!” I wailed.

He rocked me like a baby and patted my back while I cried. I buried my face in his chest and blew my nose on his shirt. My head ached and I shivered. Dad wrapped a towel around me, and moved me so that I was looking over his shoulder. As he carried me away from the river bank, I saw that someone had stepped on my sandcastle.



“You have to watch her, Ben!”

Mom put a bowl of alphabet soup and a grilled cheese sandwich cut diagonally in front of me. I had told her I didn’t want food. I picked up my spoon and tried to spell my name in the noodle letters.

“Jesus. It’s ninety degrees outside,” Dad said, pointing to my bowl.

Soup splashed over the sides of the bowl as Mom slammed her hand on the table. Her voice rattled the hollow ache in my head as she screamed words like “responsibility” and “numbskull” and “immaturity.” The rest was coated in a din of fury.

When she took a breath, Dad turned to me. “You’re still kicking, right, kid?”

He noogied my scalp. I jerked away.

“Sometimes I think you should have taken a parenting test,” Mom said. She grabbed a bottle from her purse and handed me a little white pill.

“Swallow that while I talk to your father,” she commanded. “Then

you're going to get out of that suit and take a hot bath." She led my father into the neighboring room.

My stomach bottomed out like when we drove over a bump in Daddy's car. My eyes stung, and it was hard to breathe. I flung off the towel and rushed upstairs to my room. I propelled myself into bed, grabbed Lolly, and pulled the crocheted blanket Grams had made over my head. It was too dark. Too warm. Breathing became a chore, like learning to tie my shoes.

The blanket and Lolly came with me as I rolled under my bed. Her plastic head knocked against the hard floor. I was too worried about myself to feel bad. I clutched Lolly close and tangled my legs in my blanket. I heard my parents calling me from downstairs. I stayed hidden.

"Abby? Where are you, sweetie?" Mom ducked her head under the bed. "What are you hiding for?"

I licked a salty tear from my lip. "I don't want to take a bath. Please, Mommy," I whispered.

Mom laughed. "You have to."

I hiccupped as I spoke, "Please, no! Please don't make me."

"Okay, okay," she said. "Come out."

"What are you doing under there?" Dad asked.

Mom glared at him but explained.

"Be a big girl and get in the tub," Dad commanded.

I crawled further under the bed.

"I mean it. Don't make me come over there, kid."

"Dammit, Ben. You're scaring her. Leave her be."

He threw his hands up and left Mom to coax me out of my hiding place.

Over a three-day period all attempts to lure me into the bathroom with bubble soap, ice cream, and butterscotch candies failed. The slightest mention of water made me sweat. My mom pleaded. My dad threatened. I found new hiding places.

In the late afternoon of the third day, my dad tricked me back to the river. I hadn't realized where we were until I was staring down, from atop a giant boulder, at the river that had swallowed me.

"Trust me, kiddo. You'll feel so much better if you just jump in feet first."

I clawed at his arm as he pushed me to the edge of the rock and

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shoved me over the side. I screamed as I sank to the bottom like a stone. The water temperature changed and my ears popped and filled with water. My heart thumped in my head so hard that I could feel it in my eyes. I held my breath and peered up at the muted rays of the sun from beneath the dusky water. The setting sun was blue instead of yellow. I could see Dad's blurry form, and I began to relax.

I waited.

Air bubbles danced above my head.

And I waited.

The current started to carry me downstream. I kicked my feet and disturbed the mud and river sediment. It swirled around me like a black cloud, and I closed my eyes. My lungs began to burn, and I lost my flip flops as I kicked harder. I broke the water, listening to it shatter around me like broken glass. I whipped my head back and forth and slapped my arms against the surface.

"Swim, Abby," my dad said.

I bobbed in the water, the current carrying me further and further away from the huge boulder. I retched, the water stuffing my noise and clogging my throat. It burned my sinuses and smelled like dishwater.

"Get on your belly," he yelled.

I could barely hear him. He perched on the side of the boulder that was starting to look smaller and smaller, like buildings from an airplane. Leaving me alone. I panicked and started to scream. More river water lurched down my throat violently, interrupting my breathing. I could feel that something slimy was in the water with me. It kept bumping against my legs as I thrashed and jerked.

The river curved in an almost ninety-degree angle. Soon Dad would be out of my sight altogether. I started to cry although I tried hard not to. If I cried, my tears would only fill up the river more, causing me to drown faster. My eyes stung anyway, like the yellow jacket stings I had gotten the summer before. My vision became blurry.

It seemed as if my whole world had turned to river. It was everywhere, consuming me, dragging me down to where I would only be able to see a blue sun ripple. I would never see it shine yellow like my swim suit. I let out a wail and sank into the murky water. I did

not look for a figure to break the jeweled surface.

My calves scraped against something in the water and forced me into a horizontal position. I reflexively latched onto the river's barrier. Slightly slimy, but rough and grainy in most spots, I dug my fingers into the rock and curved my elbows around it, fighting against the current. My muscles screamed at me. I screamed back. I forced myself into a half-squat on the rock, taking small breaths of air as I broke the surface a few short moments at a time.

Finally, I was able to squeeze the rock between my knees enough to keep my face above the water. I knew my balance would not hold if I tried to stand, and the current would claim me before I could right myself again.

"Abby! Kick your feet and move your arms!" Dad had descended from his perch but was still far out of reach.

"No," I sobbed to him.

My throat ached with effort and my voice did not sound like my own. It gurgled and was hoarse. I thought maybe the river was changing me already—turning me into a fish.

"Abby, you have to move your arms. Like a windmill, okay?" He stuck his left arm out in front of him, cupping his hand. Then he brought the other arm up behind his head and into his imaginary water. A circle. He repeated the process over and over.

"Take an apple and put it in your pocket," he said, demonstrating.

"Kick your feet at the same time. Keep your belly parallel with the water."

He turned his back on me.

"Where are you going?!"

My voice sounded a little more like my own—high pitched and squeaky.

"My feet hurt," he said.

He walked back to his boulder and let his feet dangle over the edge. My only thought was to bring him back. I pushed myself off of the rock. The current immediately began to pull me back. I stuck out my left arm and swept it under the water in a big circle and then did the same with the right arm. I inched forward.

The river fought against me, an angry sea monster hell-bent on consuming little children like me. I kicked the river with my feet. My father and the boulder he was sitting on began to look bigger. Half

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my face was hovering above the water, one ear totally submerged. The sun had almost completely gone to sleep and would not be a witness to my floundering. I gulped in water but was able to spit it out instead of inhaling it.

Again and again I made my arms circle—made a windmill, took an apple and placed it in my pocket. I kicked because my life depended on it. I held my breath when I could, and only breathed in when I knew it was absolutely safe to do so. I passed trees. My arms burned, my shoulders ached. The more I moved my legs, the more sure I was that I had scraped my calves. The river numbed them a little.

When I was only a few feet away from my father he shouted, “Look, you’re doing it. You’re swimming.”

When I got close enough, I took my newfound confidence and splashed him with it.

He was waiting for me with a towel on the river bank, praising me as I shivered and sniffled. I didn’t hear much of it. I was looking at the river. It seemed smaller than it had before. The current didn’t gush as roughly. The water was like lacquered glass, steady, reflective.

“You’ll thank me for this, kid,” my father predicted.

I picked out apple-scented bubble bath that night and tattled to Mom.



## TAMING THE BEAST

### PART ONE:

#### MYSTERY DIAGNOSIS SOLVED

I stared at the circle of doctors, or at least I thought they were all doctors. Their eyes never moved off of me even while their hands scrawled copious notes after every word I spoke. Was this what was supposed to happen in a psych ward? I wondered, relieved that people actually seemed to care that I was sick. I had been in this meeting room for at least an hour, answering the exam team's questions and trying to stay seated in the puffy spinning chair. A near-impossible challenge for anyone as severely manic as I was, I would later learn. It had been two years since my last stay at a psych ward, two years since I had promised myself never to end up hospitalized again. My failure had greeted me in the mirror that morning as I picked through my tangled hair and mumbled quietly to myself. The questions were intense, shattering any illusion I had at keeping anything private if I wanted to finally receive help: my drug use, sex life, poor judgment, financial mistakes. Everything was revealed as their questions flowed out in calm, kind tones without a single sigh or eye roll.

"So what was the tipping point that brought you to UPMC?" the head doctor, I assumed, asked. The other doctors seemed to be turning to him to direct the questioning, and his easy smile and authoritative voice made even my half-fried brain pay attention to him.

"It was the voices, like I said," I mumbled, unable to sit any longer. I jumped out of the chair. I began to pace around the meeting room, my hands pounding against my thighs, harder with each step. I couldn't breathe, I couldn't think. I couldn't breathe, I couldn't think. I knew I should sit down and stop hitting myself but the world was spinning faster and faster. My heart pounded so hard it hurt. And the voices were insistent, their screams making me want to do more than pace. I wanted to start smacking my head against the walls.

"Yes, we understood that. But you also mentioned in your intake interview that you thought you were a danger to yourself and others. Did you have a plan to hurt people?" he asked, any trace of disgust or disbelief absent from his level tone. His eyes didn't roll or scrunch up into confusion at my insanity. For the first time in my

life, I had found a mental health professional I could trust to withhold judgment.

The hulking concrete dam I had erected to block my cruel thoughts and agitated feelings from normal people started to crack.

“It wasn’t people,” I said, continuing my pacing and hitting. “I wanted to hurt Jeremy. I try so hard to do everything he wants and it’s never good enough. We were in a parking lot and he was yelling at me. And I shoved him. And then he slapped me and I fell. I couldn’t take him screaming and the voice screaming at me, and I just wanted to make him hurt as much as he hurts me.” I stopped my pacing, the energy lessening as the dam went from a simple crack down the middle to a large slab breaking off and smashing into the fractured pieces of my damaged brain. I hurried back to my chair, pulling my legs to my chest and clutching them tightly. My mention of Jeremy only served to produce more questions, including the embarrassing question of my “relationship” with him. I found myself stumbling on my words to explain how we were more than just friends without being a couple. Still, no one gave me a judgmental stare.

After Jeremy, the conversation shifted back to the voices, or rather the screams, I had been hearing. “Do they sound like anyone you know?” one of the female doctors asked, brushing a stray strand of red hair behind her ear.

I started to shake. I’d never had a seizure before, but I imagine that they looked and felt at least a little like what happened to me then. I slid off the chair, still shaking, crying, and wanting everything to stop. The screams, the anger, the energy, the sadness, and its paralyzing pain made it hurt to breathe or even blink. Make it stop.

“It sounds like me,” I sobbed. “Can you help me?” I said as two staff members came into the meeting room and helped me to my feet.

“Yes, Kateri,” the head doctor said, smiling. A smile that seemed so out of place in a nuthouse but felt so good to see.

“What’s wrong with me? This has to stop,” I whispered as the two young men led me out of the room.

“We will figure it out. I promise,” the redheaded doctor replied as I was taken gently back to my room.

Within an hour after I was led from the meeting room, crying and gibbering, the psychiatrist diagnosed me with bipolar disorder. I was called from my room to the med line where the nurse kindly



explained to me what medications I would be taking, the possible side effects, and the diagnosis of bipolar disorder. I nodded, cried, and punched my thighs as I took the assortment of pills. Suboxone to ease withdrawal symptoms. Tegretol 200 mg twice a day, a respected mood stabilizer. Risperidone 25 mg twice a day, an antipsychotic used to treat both schizophrenia and bipolar disorder manic psychosis. For the next three days, I took the pills, went to group and individual therapy, met with the psychiatrist, and remained psychotic. I would later find out that during those three days, I had asked the nurses the same three questions at every med line: What's wrong with me? What are those pills? What are they for?

On the fourth day, I woke up to silence. Not around me, because the other clients were already up and shuffling to the dining room for breakfast, but inside my head. "I'm okay," I whispered, awed but terrified that the pain and fog would descend again, reducing me to the jabbering, crying freak I had been. By the next day, my mood was stable as well; I felt happy and confident. But mostly I simply wanted to get out and back to Jeremy and my drugs. As long as I take these pills, I reasoned, I'll feel happy and I'll be able to limit my using. I was certain I could now rectify the disaster of my life on drugs. I would only use on the weekends. No. I'd only use at night. Or maybe after 5:00 P.M. Maybe just a few lines at lunch, but that'd definitely be it before 3:00 P.M., I finally decided.

When I met with the doctor the next day, I was determined to be released in time for Friday night and the parties that Jeremy and I would crash, drinking as much booze as we could before being thrown out and moving on to the next one. "I'm ready to go home," I said, my makeup and hair done, framing the smile that I no longer had to force.

"You definitely seem to be feeling better. But I think it would be best if you stayed here until there was a bed open at Deerfield Dual Diagnostic Drug and Alcohol Rehab Center. They are a specialized treatment center that can continue giving you the same level of mental health care that we have here while at the same time better addressing your drug addiction," he said, smiling and revealing his perfectly straight and glaringly white teeth. The same "head doctor" from my meeting, he was actually the psychiatrist in charge of my

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treatment. I had trusted and respected him up until this moment.

"I am not a drug addict. My problems have nothing to do with the drugs. It was the bipolar disorder mucking things up. And now that I'm cured, I'm fine," I said, indignant at being called an addict.

"Unfortunately, Kateri, you aren't cured. Bipolar disorder isn't something you can cure," he said, his smile disappearing and his forehead creasing. Clearly, my lack of enthusiasm over his proposed rehab trip was not what he had expected.

"But I'm taking the pills and I feel fine. And besides, I am not going to rehab. Ever. So we can both stop wasting time talking about that and move on to when I should tell my ride to come pick me up." He had seemed so nice, why did he have to go and harp about the drugs? The drugs wouldn't be a problem anymore. I had only used them so much before to try to deal with the pain and anger. They were gone now. I was fine.

"You are not understanding the seriousness of your illness," he said, his voice graver than I had ever heard in our time together. "You will not only need to take medication and see a psychiatrist regularly, but continue with therapy for the rest of your life. You have had two hospitalizations already. Your disease has gone untreated for years. These two facts alone indicate a grim prognosis." He looked at my file and frowned, as if he was disappointed at not only me, but all the doctors before him who should have caught this illness sooner.

"What do you mean by *grim*?" I asked, gaping at the clock and groaning inwardly. Every minute that went by was one minute lost that I could be snorting drugs off Jeremy's glass coffee table.

"I mean even if you continue your treatment as instructed, there is a high probability that you will end up hospitalized again. In fact, I don't think it's so much of *if* but *when*," he whispered, delivering the news that continues to haunt me.

"I am NOT going to rehab, and I sure as fuck will never be in another psych ward!" I was out of the chair, ready to simply march over to the locked ward door and demand to be released. "I am a voluntary. You can't keep me here. I want out, and I want out today." I crossed my arms and severed the serene doctor-patient relationship we had had until that session.

"Fine. You're no longer a danger to yourself or others. You'll be released after dinner today. Call your ride." He walked past me out of

the office, leaving before our session was over. I didn't care. I could almost taste the coke and Jeremy's lips.

Later that evening, Garrett, a mutual friend of Jeremy and me, greeted me with a hug and whispered promise of some Adderall and coke as the locked ward doors closed behind me. I hugged him back, smelling weed on his denim jacket and the lovely scent of Jack. He rarely went anywhere sober. Jeremy appeared from behind the corner and the three of us practically ran to Garrett's hideous green piece of crap on wheels. Garrett slid behind the wheel and pulled out his baggie of crushed Addies and coke. I watched in a beatific trance as he poured out some onto Jer's handheld mirror and swiftly cut it with his driver's license. Now that was better than any fucking mental health treatment.

I went to get in the back seat, but Jeremy encircled my waist with his arms. "I don't say this often, so don't think you'll hear it again anytime soon. But—I'm sorry. I was an asshole." I nodded, trying to speak, but his mouth engulfed mine in one of his characteristic sloppy kisses. When he finally pulled away, sucking softly at my bottom lip, he grinned, exposing his chipped front tooth. How could I ever have wanted to hurt him, I wondered, kissing him again before we both got into the backseat.

Garrett had cut the lovely union of stimulants into nine lines, three for each of us. "Bitches first, girl," he said, and handed it to me before adjusting his glasses. The lenses were cracked and the nose-piece crooked from the night we had all been drinking and snorting Vics on his back porch. He'd nodded off on his feet and fallen down the steps, his glasses ending up in the ice and snow.

I snorted my lines, sucking them up my nose as fast as possible. I was not an addict.

"So what do you want to do tonight, kids?" Garrett asked while Jer took his turn before handing the mirror to Garrett who quickly snorted up the lines before starting the car and leaving UPMC Northwest Hospital behind us.

"Let's go to your place, dude. Your old lady is still at her mom's, right?" Jeremy asked, rubbing his hands up and down my thigh and smiling. I hadn't felt so wanted since Jeremy and I first started hanging out.

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“Yeah man, I don’t think she’s going to be coming back. But whatever, right?” Garrett muttered, his nonchalance revealed as false by the sudden tightness of his posture. He had called Jer the night his wife left him, crying and begging him to come over. Jer had woken me up and we went over to his place to smoke the crack that Garrett had planned to smoke with his wife.

“Sorry, dude. We’ll pick up some weed and see if Carl is around to get some more crack. That shit was wild, dude,” Jeremy said, and I laughed.

He put his arm around me and we leaned against each other. It was just like when we first starting fucking around together. He acted like he really was my boyfriend. And he was, wasn’t he? So the label was restrictive to him, so what. We were still a couple. Just unique.

“You got any prescriptions from the loony bin that you need filled, doll?” he whispered in my ear, grazing his tongue against it so lightly I shivered.

I had a prescription for Tegretol 200 mg to fill. I knew I should, but I felt so good. How could I not be cured? “No. I’m all better.”

“That’s my girl,” he said, brushing a piece of white powder from my nose.

Later that night, after hours of drinking Jack and Captain straight, Garrett gave me a hug and grabbed my breasts. I brushed him off and we both laughed about it, taking a long toke off his bong. When we passed it to Jeremy, he shook his head and instead leaned over me and punched Garrett in the face, knocking his glasses onto the coffee table.

“What are you doing, Jer?” I shouted, obliterating the jovial atmosphere. I leaned over to examine Garrett’s face. Blood trickled from his nose.

“You’re a fucking little slut,” Jeremy shouted and yanked me by my ponytail away from Garrett. I didn’t bother protesting; I knew what was coming. He slapped me across the face, splitting my lip open and producing the tears yet again.

“Don’t,” I whimpered before he yanked me off the couch and shoved me across the coffee table, knocking the liquor and beer bottles to the floor. I landed on top of the broken bottles and Garrett’s destroyed glasses.

I lay there and watched Jeremy stomp out of the room, his orange skater shoes kicking the pile of Garrett's laundry out of the way as he left. After about ten minutes, Garrett helped me up. Instead of thanking him, I pushed him away and went to find Jeremy. I found him sitting on the steps of the front porch. He knew I would come looking for him.

"Sorry, doll," he muttered as I walked painfully down the steps to follow him down the sidewalk. The cuts from the glass stung and my lip throbbed. I wanted to go home. "You want to go back to my house? I scored some heroin and clean needles. I'll even be nice and shoot you up," he said, taking my hand and leading me.

It had been a while since I'd had any heroin. And he was holding my hand, which he didn't do too often. "Yeah."

"That's my girl," he said and softly kissed my bloodied lip. Less than two weeks later, I would check into a drug and alcohol rehab after being raped. Jeremy showed ambivalence about the rape when I told him, simply commenting, "That sucks, man."

## PART TWO

### BROKEN HEART MANIA

My boyfriend, John, broke up with me at the end of August after a brief relationship that culminated with his fist punching a hole in the rotting drywall of his townhouse before he kicked me out of his place at 12:00 A.M. I'd thought I had found a "nice guy" for once. Or at least nice enough to own up to dating me, unlike Jeremy. I met John at a Narcotics Anonymous meeting in Erie, PA the day after I was released from rehab. He asked me out for dinner after the meeting ended, and though I knew that NA rules suggested not dating until you had been clean for a year, I went. Within a week, we were practically living together at his townhouse in Meadville. Happy, hopeful, and high on the frequent sex we were having, we saw only the possibilities that awaited us as a clean couple. Until John started using pills again.

Now, I stood on the sidewalk in front of his house, not bothering to restrain the tears that squirmed their way from my eyes.

I knew I should start walking, figuring out how I was going to get back to Titusville when I had no friends. Before I'd gone into rehab back in May, all of my friendships gradually dissolved because

of my drug use. Somehow, though, I imagined that when I finished rehab, clean, healthy, and medicated, my friends would return. They didn't. As I finally started walking, headed toward the dingy bar and grill just around the corner from John's house, I pulled out my cell phone and looked at the useless contact list. No one was going to drive to Meadville in the middle of the night to get me. Except for my dad. And that was simply not an option. He'd told me that John was garbage from the moment he learned I was seeing him. I refused to humiliate myself anymore tonight by confirming his judgment.

"Oh, fuck it all to hell," I said, and decided that I might as well go have a few drinks. Maybe somebody at Bosco's Restaurant and Bar would give me a ride, I reasoned, though even then I knew all I really wanted was something to numb the aching combination of stupidity and mild heartbreak. Very mild.

By the fifth Smirnoff Ice, I had almost forgotten about John completely, flirting with a man named Jacob, savoring his dark brown hair and wicked smile. He reminded me of Jeremy. We both did a shot of Jose Cuervo before I was drunk enough to ask him to drive me the half hour home to my room at the Shadyside Hotel.

"I don't know, sweetheart. What's in it for me?" he asked, grinning and placing his thick hand on my bare thigh, squeezing it as his gaze shifted to what my mini skirt covered.

"I'll pay you for the gas. And for your time," I said, looking down at his hand on my thigh, wanting to offer what I knew he really wanted but uncertain that I could. The only man I had slept with since I'd been raped was John. And even with the therapy and psych meds, I knew if I surrendered to this stranger, flashbacks would be waiting for me.

"I don't want your money, baby. Come on, let's go to Titusville and I'll make you forget all about the dick that dumped you," he said, already off his bar stool and pulling me off mine.

"I'm not going to sleep with you," I muttered, but if he heard me he didn't react. Instead his grip on my hand tightened and we exited the bar, my book bag slipping out of my hands and smacking against the concrete steps.

He picked it up, finally letting go of my hand, and pointed to a black Camaro. "Nice car," I said.

"Thanks," he said as he crossed the empty street to where he was

parked on the other side.

When we got to his car, he opened up the passenger door for me and motioned with his hand for me to get in. I loved that car. I loved the thought of being able to get over John so easily. But I couldn't do this. "I'm not fucking you, Jacob."

He sighed, ran his paw-like hand through his hair, and laughed. "Either we fuck or you can walk your ass home for all I care. Okay, kiddo?"

"Fuck you!" I shouted and snatched my book bag away from him. I heard him yelling after me as I ran back to the bar, but I didn't stop. Bill, the man who had raped me, had called me "kiddo." I burst into the bar, sobbing, and ran for the bathroom. Grateful for the privacy of a single stall restroom, I locked the door and threw myself onto the floor. Immediately I banged my head against the tiles. The pain felt so much better than the liquor. I took out my cell phone and called my dad.

The car ride to Titusville was silent. My dad didn't need to say, "I told you so." The words sat between us on the center console, blocking any attempts at conversations. When we reached Shadyside, I climbed out of his Cobalt, sniffled, and muttered, "Thanks, Dad."

"No problem. Love you," he replied, handing me my book bag.

"Love you too," I said and watched while he drove away, making the hour drive back up to his home in Erie. It was almost 4:00 A.M. In all the fighting John and I had done, I had forgotten to take my Tegretol and Paxil. I was exhausted, drunk, and sad, and had skipped a dose of pills—the perfect combination for launching me into a manic episode. As I half-pulled myself up the stairs to my room, I knew what I should do. Take my pills and call my doctor in the morning, cutting off the mania before it could overwhelm me. But I was so tired. So damn tired and had been since the doctor in rehab had finally figured out the right combination and dosages of the mood stabilizer and anti-depressant for me. The medicines worked but at the cost of my energy.

I shucked off my clothes, glad to be rid of the smell of the cheap rum that John had drunk by the fifth, and let myself fall into the creaky single bed. I wanted to cry, to think of the precious memories I had made with John. Unfortunately, I finally realized that every

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memory featured us either having sex or him breaking things around the house before he finally discovered that hitting me instead of the furniture was more effective. I didn't need John. I didn't need the stupid pills. When I awoke the next morning, it was a sunny day with a 50 percent chance of rain and a 100 percent chance of mania.

A week later, I was enthralled by mania, sleeping rarely and bringing a different man home each night. It was the beginning of my sophomore year of college and already my attendance at class was abysmal. I couldn't bear to sit still for five minutes, let alone a fifty minute lecture on the Philosophy of Logic. Instead I drank entirely too much alcohol, worked over forty hours a week, and continued to search for excitement in a tragically small town.

"What a fucking mess," the construction guy that I had brought home from the Diamond Bar said as I shut the door to my tiny and decidedly unclean room. Clean and dirty clothes were strewn across the floor, bed, chair, and dresser. An empty pizza box, Subway sandwich wrappers, half-empty bags of chips, and condom wrappers peppered the floor like chicken pox on a sick child. Normally I enjoyed cleaning and organizing, but since the mania had taken hold, cleaning was too slow. I needed to be up, moving, going, screaming, and doing. But nothing and no one was ever enough. Mania was a hunger, as deep and insatiable as the vast universe.

"If you don't like it, leave. I'm sure one of your co-workers would love to fuck me," I retorted, already stripping off my clothes, and adding them to the debris. Nude, I stood by the bed, irritation increasing at the man's surprised stare. "You want to screw or what?" I snapped, my fingers tapping my thighs impatiently. I needed sex and more booze. And more sex. And something. Something to do, see, be. Nothing was fast enough. Why were people moving so slowly? Even Construction Guy; the way he stumbled out of his jeans was ridiculous. No one could keep up with me.

I grabbed a Trojan from the box off the dresser and tossed it in his direction. "Her Pleasure?" he asked, holding it between two fingers like it was a pair of dirty underwear. "I don't use rubbers, babe."

I climbed onto the bed and laughed, the way people do in movies when someone has done something particularly stupid, leaning my head back and letting my mouth hang open. Everything in mania



was exaggerated. “You put the rubber on or you can go at it with your hand and a Playboy magazine,” I said and again I laughed, smiling so wide the corners of my mouth hurt. He grumbled, but yanked down his pants and boxers anyway.

When we were done, I laid in bed, watching him dress, savoring the brief moment of peace that always followed sex. By the time he left, though, the hunger was back and I was getting up, pulling my clothes back on, and heading back out. The bars were closed, the streets were devoid of life. “This is waaaay too boring,” I shouted, running into the middle of the street and deciding to walk around town until I found *something* interesting happening.

I walked down the streets briskly, my eyes wandering up to the brilliant stars. I could see them so much more vividly than I ever could back in Philadelphia or West Chester. I wanted to join them. So bright, so perfect, so distant. Away from the screwed up world and my broken brain. When I finally went home, I lulled myself to sleep with beer, cherry vodka, and the sound of my sobs.

Unfortunately, the mania only became worse as the month progressed. I spent hundreds of dollars on booze, cigarettes, makeup, and clothes. I slept with twenty different men between the first of September and the twenty-first, and those are only the ones I can remember. Mania has a way of distorting memory, enhancing some moments and erasing others. Consequently, there are instances of my life that I have little to no memory of and others that are so vivid it is surreal. In the beginning of this manic run, I knew I should have taken my pills and seen my therapist. But by the time my birthday had arrived, I was too irrational to attend classes at Pitt-Titusville, much less dig through the garbage, clothes, condoms, and cigarette boxes that covered my room to find my medicines.

On my birthday, my dad took me out to lunch at Perkins before taking me to Wal-Mart to pick out a birthday present. He was never one for making birthdays or holidays special. My mother had been the orchestrator; my father had just smiled and followed her lead. But he tried and I smiled when he asked if I wanted the sneakers I picked out wrapped. “No, Dad. It’s fine. Thank you,” I said, and we gave each other a somewhat awkward hug. I had been avoiding him as much as possible, trying my best to hide the signs of mania and

my eradiate class attendance from him.

By the time I got off work, it was 10:30 P.M., leaving me with little time to get my free birthday drinks from the bars. A typical manic, I was too disorganized to request off work for my birthday. When I viewed the schedule and saw that I would be closing the unique form of torture that was Giant Eagle, I had almost thought about calling in sick, until I remembered that I needed all the money I could get. I was spending my paychecks on anything but sensible things like rent or laundry soap. When I finally punched out, I practically ran the few blocks to Shadyside to change my clothes, feeling like every minute was one minute wasted of a night of being completely *wasted*. I was alive, so magnificently alive. Every nerve fiber was on overdrive, making every little sensation a humongous explosion of feeling. Even the skirt and pink halter-top I pulled on felt like electricity touching my skin.

I had texted a few of my old friends, asking if they wanted to celebrate my twenty-second birthday with me at the Diamond and Boonies Sports Bar, yet was not surprised when 11:45 arrived with not a single person who cared about me around. “Fuck them,” I shouted, laughing with the bartender at the Diamond as I finished another Jack and Coke.

“That’s right, sweetie. All we need is Jack and a good lay,” she said, presenting me with another drink before going over to serve the group of bleary-eyed men that had just come in.

I smiled, the whiskey making it easy to despite the gaping abyss of loneliness that I was constantly hiding. I’d had enough Jack, and there wasn’t a single hot guy in the place. I decided to go home. I was alive so it wasn’t a completely awful birthday, I guessed.

I jumped down from the bar stool and felt the liquor slam into me, reaching for the sturdy bar to steady myself. I grabbed for it and missed, heading for the grimy tiles of the floor before firm, thick hands were on me, pulling me upright.

“Hey, girl. Don’t you hate when the shit hits you all at once,” he said, laughing and moving his hand from my waist to my butt.

My reputation around Titusville had shifted from being a druggie whore to a drug-free slut because of my behavior during my manic month of September. When that man, whose name I would later learn was Corey, grabbed my ass it began a night that will prob-

-ably never completely vanish from the consciousness of the Titusville locals. It doesn't matter that I was manic, that I wasn't in a state anywhere close to my right mind, or that on my medication I am nothing like that sex-crazed girl they remember. I accept with bitterness that, to some people in Titusville, I will always be known for my behavior that night.

Corey's brown eyes gazed out from over his beard and underneath his dust covered trucker's cap as he started kissing me.

Kissed away the fact that I had no friends. Kissed away the fact that I sometimes wished I was dead. Kissed away the notion that I was letting my dad down. Kissed away the fact that I was a stupid slut. We groped and kissed for several minutes before interrupting our public display of affection for more drinks.

After a round of shots, Corey whispered something into his friend's ear. The man nodded and shook Corey's hand before Corey kissed me, sucked insistently on my lip, and led me away from our seats.

Every nerve stood up, waiting for the touching, sucking, fucking. I couldn't stand being manic without sex. It was like being rescued after days in the desert deprived of liquid and then made to watch your rescuers gulp down ice-cold water. So when he led me to the men's room door, I didn't think to say no.

"You got rubbers right, sweetheart?" he said, unzipping his pants, taking my purse from my grasp, and bending me over against the sink. After telling him where to find a rubber, I watched while he eagerly tore at its wrapper. Abruptly, he slipped into me. I felt the sweet relief of intimacy for about sixty seconds. After that, irritation and rage replaced the soothing rhythm of our union. The stench of urine and vomit permeated the air and my back began to get stiff. This was too slow. I wanted him to hurry up and finish. Faster. Faster. I had to go. Run. I was writhing in my skin. It was too constraining, not exciting enough. Maybe I should have ripped it off.

I heard a knock on the bathroom door. "I got to piss, man," I heard a man shout. Was he fucking kidding me? I was about to tell him to shut up and hold it when Corey spoke up.

"It's unlocked, dude. Come in, piss, and get out," he said and a moment later a young, skinny, tall man with too-big eyes was peeing in the urinal.

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“Yeah, man. Bang that bitch,” he said before laughing and giving Corey thumbs up.

“Stop. This is ridiculous. Wait until he leaves,” I demanded, but Corey only laughed and continued his business.

I hid my head between my arms against the sink ledge until the skinny man had left. A couple minutes after that, Corey was finished. As soon as he pulled out, I left the bathroom, and went back to the comfort of my drink. When I reached Corey’s friends, they smiled, holding up their drinks at me. I avoided their gaze and reached for my drink. It was gone.

I motioned the bartender over, realizing she might have thought I’d left and gotten rid of it. “Josie, where’s my drink?”

“Don’t play dumb. We all know what you were doing in the bathroom. You and your john can leave,” she snapped, grabbing his drink and dumping it down the sink as well.

“You’re fucking kidding me, right?” I asked, thinking this was her idea of some kind of birthday prank. As a drug addict, I had done it in the bathroom several times to get money for drugs. No one, herself included, had cared. Now, when I legitimately wasn’t prostituting myself, I was being thrown out for prostitution. This had to be a joke.

“No. You want to be some out-of-towner’s whore, you can go back to his hotel room and do that shit. We don’t want that up in here,” she said. As she saw Corey approaching the bar, she repeated her statement, only louder, drawing the attention of everyone sitting at the bar. “Take your whore and leave,” she instructed Corey before turning to me and adding, “Just take your punishment and don’t make a big deal out of it and you’ll be allowed back in after two weeks.”

I looked around at the crowd, every gaze staring at me, some with obvious disdain, some with intrigue and misplaced anticipation. This wasn’t right. I wasn’t a whore. I would never do that again. I’d gone to rehab. I’d changed. I was supposed to be all better now. Why did I still feel like I was on drugs even when I was clean?

“Fuck you, you bunch of hicks,” Corey shouted, flipping his middle finger up and leading me out of the bar. “We’ll go to Boonies and finish our drinking.”

I nodded, too numb to figure out how to speak or how I should feel. When we entered Boonies, we were greeted by the large, bald,

hulking bartender shaking his head. “Josie just called over. We don’t need your whore ass up in here. Get the fuck out,” he shouted. Corey’s muscles tensed and he made a move toward the bald man.

“Don’t,” I said, placing my hand against his shoulder. “Let’s just leave.” He nodded and we wandered outside. My buzz was gone and the two bars that I had dared to attend had both thrown me out. I had just been branded a whore in front of dozens of people who would in turn tell dozens more who would then tell dozens more until most of the town knew. Though I doubted any amount of alcohol could assuage my shame, I still had to try.

“You have any booze at your hotel?” I asked, watching him smoke a cigarette and stare at me.

“Yeah. Got a few bottle of Jose. Sorry about fucking the night up. For what it’s worth, I know you’re not a whore, sweetie,” Corey said, pulling my body toward his before kissing me. His left hand took hold of mine, giving it a reassuring squeeze. That’s when I felt the band around his ring finger.

“You’re married?” I asked stupidly. I knew the answer already.

“Well, yeah. But my wife’s back home in Rochester,” he said, chuckling like this was some clever trick. Cheat on your wife when you’re doing out-of-town work, get kicked out of two bars, and then take your little girlfriend for the night back to the hotel to fuck her until your wife calls to say good morning. I had turned plenty of tricks in the past four years, but all had ceased to be any fun.

“I’m going home,” I said and began to walk away. Corey called after me until I turned the corner, wondering what he had done wrong. I resisted the urge to walk back and tell him “everything.” When I was using, I’d had two different affairs with married men. I knew it was wrong but didn’t care at the time. Later, though, without the drugs and mania to obscure my judgment, guilt and shame knocked into me with a force deadly enough to kill. To this day, every time I see the wives of those men, the exquisite shame returns.

I collapsed onto my bed at Shadyside and held the blanket my mother had made for me. I sobbed, muffling my gasps and whimpers into its thick fabric. This wasn’t me. While my brain spun at ever-faster speeds, I was able to hook onto one thought: my pills.

I rolled out of the bed, letting the piles of clothes and garbage lessen my fall, and began searching for my bottles of Tegretol

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and Paxil. As daunting as I had expected the task to be it was much worse. Two hours later, my room even more chaotic than before, I found my pills. Shaking, I took them, climbed into bed, and waited for sleep.

I have taken my bipolar medications regularly since that night.



*Bared to You, Ashley Young*  
Digital Photography

## FEELING CZECH

As I look down from Letna Park, Prague's rooftops are tiled red. The buildings they top are pushed right up against each other so the small streets between them are miniscule or gone from view completely. Only the spires of the Týn Church in the Old Town and the gate at the end of Charles Bridge stick up above the rest, dark gray instead of red. Vibrant, leafy green trees fill any space the red roofs don't touch.

The gray brown Vltava River comes in from the left and curves to go straight ahead, cutting the city in half. Headed directly south, it'll go down to its source toward the Austrian border. The river is crossed with bridges, all with curving arches between the piers jutting up from the water.

The bushes are taller than I am and I have to push aside leaves and prickly stems to get this view. Crowds of people around me are happily soaking in the warm sun and drinking inexpensive, but not cheap, beer from plastic cups. I lift my own cup to my lips to drain the last few drops of Gambrinus and toss it in the wire can near me, adding it to the collection.

It's hot and unusually humid. I think it will rain soon, and all the little kids running around, the dogs pouncing and lunging at each other, and the teens playing soccer will have to run for the cover of the small beer stand. Some people will probably stay on their picnic benches, sipping their beer while the rain tickles their necks. Hopefully I'll be in class by then.

I move down a curving path from Letna to the city below. I like this walk though it's long, and the winding streets are cobbled, making each step difficult. The unevenness of the stones and potholes cause people to stumble, though the people who live here don't trip. The Czechs, the locals, walk by with a calm, detached façade. They appear to be in their own heads, quiet and seemingly unaware of their surroundings. But they move through the streets, around slow-walking tourists, over trash and around corners with an almost sixth sense.

I like to think I'm getting that way after having lived here for a few months, but while I may know the winding roads around my

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dorm and my favorite spots, I have nothing on the years the locals have spent learning the ins and outs. I can only follow along, pretending, and watch them pass me.

Czechs are quiet, even in groups. If they talk at all on the street, it's in near whispers so that Czech seems like a secret language, one that can only be learned and spoken in private. Even up at Letna, where you'd picture children squealing, dogs barking, and soccer players calling to each other, it's quiet. Like they're all allowing others to enjoy the day for themselves, without interrupting with unnecessary noise. That's why I like writing there. The beer doesn't hurt, either.

But down in the metro, Czech words are spoken loudly, clearly, and slowly, so that they can be the only ones tourists ever hear: *Ukončete prosím, výstup a nástup, dveře se zavírají.* The words are played every time a train leaves a station, every three or four minutes, warning passengers of the doors closing.

Those words are stuck in my mind. Even after studying Czech for a few weeks, that sentence in the metro is the longest string of words I have memorized and understand the meaning of. "Please finish exiting and boarding, the doors are closing." But I like the Google Translate version better: "Please shut up and get in, the doors are closing."

I go down the steps to the Malostranská Metro Station where the locals seem to warm up, come out of their shells. While they are cold and distant in the streets, they stand on the escalators with their lovers, arms wrapped around each other, just hugging, holding each other, or passionately kissing as they go up or down to the metro. I'm right behind a couple as we move down the long escalator. The wind is blowing up at us, warm and heavy, and I turn to the side to save my eyes from tearing as well as to not stare at the couple.

On the red and tan metro train, it's again quiet, though there's still the hugging and cuddling. Some people speak English loud and clear, and everyone else pretends not to hear their ringing voices. I keep with the ignoring crowd, not because I'm ashamed of my English speaking culture but because part of me feels closer to the Czechs. We share the quiet, seemingly detached exteriors that open up to people when necessary or when they've earned it. Czechs are some of the friendliest people when you get past that wall, and I like



to think I'm the same.

The locals, when standing, don't hold onto the poles as the train moves. They simply lean with the train, masters of nonchalance. This quiet, distant personality shared by most Czechs stems from Communism, when they were untrusting of secret police that were known to drag people from the streets for no good reason. And while such incidents were less common in the metro, people continued to stay quiet, only letting their guard down slightly, to cuddle on the escalators.

Back to the surface, Wenceslas Square in New Town is one long, open rectangle amid the older curving streets. Standing at the National Museum, a bronze Saint Wenceslas sits on top of his horse, staring out across the square, down to the shoe stores, clothing outlets, and fast food restaurants. Only the National museum behind him seems to have anything to do with the past. All else looks toward the future as the name New Town would suggest.

But up on his pedestal, Wenceslas rises above the rest. From all over the square, Wenceslas can be seen, holding his flag high. And if this statue weren't recognizable enough, artist David Černý recreated it, into something almost more recognizable. His statue, identical to the one in Wenceslas, except that the horse is upside down, dead, with Wenceslas sitting on its belly, hangs from the ceiling of the Lucerna Palace galleria near the entrance to the Lucerna Theatre, not far from where the original stands.

It's easy to walk past this statue, or rather, under it, without even noticing. But upon seeing it, it's hard not to stare at, moving around the small entranceway to get better angles and being stared at by people through the large windows of the nearest galleria restaurant.

I'm sure everyone in that restaurant is drinking beer. Pilsner Urquell, Staropramen, Gambrinus, Budvar. Czech beers are at every bar, restaurant, and café to be drunk at any time. Beer isn't considered a substance like in most other places and it's cheaper than water in both restaurants and the grocery. The people in the restaurant are probably eating something heavy: beef with thick bread dumplings or creamy garlic soup.

I imagine a dog lying at their feet. It wouldn't have a leash on, or possibly a collar either, and it wouldn't be begging, nose on the table, bothering other people, or making any noise of any kind. The dog is

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trained to sit still until told otherwise. If I were to walk by him, he would just look up with sleepy eyes and wiggle his nose slightly to smell, but he wouldn't make any other movements.

But I don't go see the Černý statue today.

I turn on Jindřišská and walk in the warm sun to my classroom, behind a locked door, up a small dark stairway, and into a classroom where other students are waiting. In the warm classroom, sweat starts to bubble on my forehead. Outside there was a small, cool wind that kept me from feeling too warm, but not in the stuffy classroom.

I choose my seat next to the window to feel the small breeze, and look out at the same red rooftops I'd been viewing from Letna Park. I can see the people on the street below, only a few stories down, and hear the rumble of the car tires over the cobblestones. But above all else, it's quiet, both in the classroom and outside. Things in Prague seem to move more slowly and quietly. Each old building, statue, or road seems to have the same quiet resolve. As if, instead of being shy or timid in the absence of loud voices or active streets, they are all resolute, staying quiet because they're strong. As if they've learned a secret and are reluctant to share it. But spending time there, walking through the small streets, eating their rich food, and catching glimpses of their language gives a sense of being inside that secret, at least for a while. And as someone who's also quiet, also slow to show the "secret" of my personality, I feel better here, more alive maybe, among similar people.

A pattering of rain starts on the window. I pull in the window and latch it closed while the pattering picks up until it's so loud and quick that the professor has to clear her throat to start speaking louder. I picture the people in Letna running to the cover of the beer stand or just sitting and enjoying the warm rain with their beer.



## RITUAL

“Don’t think about it. Don’t think about Frances with someone else. Don’t think about being alone. Think something else. Think tree.” Clear my head. Shake it around and stretch my arms up straight, shoving my favorite ancient feather pillow away so my head can loll. My legs straighten; feet pointing to the silvery black curls and leaves of the metal footboard. ssssStreeetch. Listen for the first few cracks. Knee, hip, back, back, neck. Exhale suddenly and loudly and shake it out like a dog shakes water from her coat. Phlbbbt!

Sit up. Squint at the clock. Twenty minutes early. No point in trying to shut my brain back down now. I am a tree. Sugar maple. See my roots stretching down deep into the ground. Breathe slow and deep in through my nose and grab the giant, fat, fluffy, wonderfully cuddly feather pillow, the one I pretend is my man, the one that used to be way too thick and stiff when my ex-husband Dave slept on it. Now it fits perfectly between my knees with one corner under my waist in that arch between my hip and ribs to keep my back straight on that axis as I sleep with my arm clutched tight all the way around it underneath my breast in some kind of fetal ball.

Haul him out from his place on my right under the oh-so-soft and fuzzy blood red blanket. Throw my left leg over my right. Raise my arms. My branches reaching to the sun, see my pretty leaves. My pillow boyfriend hangs there a second in my right hand as I position myself for the stretch and open up my chest to the last bit of a giant inhale, then twist to the right and blow it out like a birthday wish that actually has all the candles. Fwump! He slams into place against the headboard with a clanging rattling hum that resonates through the whole bed and dies slowly. Damn. Winter is coming. Leaves are falling off. I hate winter. There’s a good loud series of cracks as I push into the twist. One.

Release and grab both those old flat Pittsburgh pillows that cuddle up to my back as I suck in another breath. Today I’m a Sentinel Pine. I’m a mast. Straight and tall. Crows and ravens love me and hummingbirds too, I think. Switch legs. Repeat. These poly crap things don’t have the mass an old feather pillow does and can only make a soft hum in the bed that quickly fades. But the stretch is

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good, and I get a few more pops and cracks. Two.

A strong, dark green pine. Smell my needles. I slide each foot out toward the corner of the bed one at a time and circle them back up the edge and out from under the blankets to straighten them, not that they ever get fucked up when I'm sleeping alone. Well, not totally alone. Me-hoo starts purring and opens an eye at me when my foot meets his backside. He stretches his arms too, and yawns, lifting his ass. I flip onto my knees and stretch like him with my third exhale. Ass up, shoulders down, face smashed into the mattress, arms reaching between the bars into the spidery corner behind the bed, back arched into that magical curve where that spot I can't reach cracks like a rifle and sets off firecrackers up and down my spine. Three.

"Oh yeaah." Sometimes I do downward facing dog too, but I don't like dogs in my bed, so I usually wait for that one till I'm on the floor, but it feels good, so sometimes. I decide my armpit certainly doesn't smell piney fresh and roll out of bed, tweaking the top of the sheets up onto the pile of pillows. Bed is made.

Me-hoo meows "Good morning," and saunters over while I'm reaching straight up for the ceiling. I relax and scratch down his furry grey back. He purrs.

"Good morning, Me-hoo." Scratch under his chin. He points his nose up into my face for a kitty kiss, and I feel his wet nose on my lips and cheek because he's always got to rub into it and mark me as his. "I love you too, but you're not getting breakfast yet."

"Meow," he answers, like "I know," and plops down to lick himself. I touch my toes and go through what I think is a sun salutation. I have a small bedroom and a rather large bed held in the palm of my angled ceiling, so this is a challenge.

Feeling properly cracked and able to move freely, I pull back the curtain behind the door and duck into the attic space. This is a longish dark room with just one small north-facing window at the end under a low slanting ceiling. I navigate toward the pale blue square. One side is insulated, but the other is still just open rafters. Don't think about that today, Scarlett O'Hara.

I left the window open again last night, and I sit in front of it and light a cigarette. Push the dreams out of my head; I don't want to write these ones down. "What did you do to me?" I think as I try not to think about Frances again. I really miss him. He was just what

I needed after I gave up on my marriage and told my husband Dave he couldn't stay here when he was in town anymore, which wasn't much anyway. Frances listened. I thought we fit. I needed security. "Goddamnit! I don't need him. I don't need anybody. I need a new train of thought. I could ride a train to New Orleans. I wish I could. I wish I could. I wish I could." My thoughts chug along with that train. A hundred beautiful images file through my head. My happy thoughts. Keep most of them realistic but it is important to let some of the really grand ones through, to keep those dreams alive. See my cupboards full of good food and my bills paid. See my house finished. See my son shining with pride, bringing home good grades. See myself in love again, that happy melted butter love, a love that fills me with a bright white joy, a deep red passion, a tiny pink baby girl.

I hear the Bose in the kitchen turn on NPR and the voices of the reporters swell to a volume I can almost understand through the floor, but not quite. Leland's alarm will go off in five more minutes. I crush out the butt of my Seneca Blue in an old round cake pan and go downstairs to take a piss and start breakfast.

Turn the fire on under the cast iron egg skillet. Cooking with cast iron requires technique. It needs to be good and hot before food is put in or it will stick and ruin the seasoning of the pan. Get out two eggs and the dish of bacon grease and put them on the stove. Get out two english muffins and carefully split one with my thumbs, turning it a little at a time until it comes apart in two halves, drop them into the toaster and push down the lever. Put a small gob of the grease in the pan, put the dish back in the fridge, and split another muffin.

I hear Leland moving around upstairs as I watch the bacon fat melt. Pick up the pan and tilt it to cover the bottom evenly and return it to the heat. Wait until the grease begins to recede from the heat of the fire beneath, making a star-like pattern in the bottom of the pan, then crack in the eggs and put the shells in the compost tub. Salt and pepper.

I yell up to Leland, "Do you want your egg dippy or in a sandwich?"

"Sammich with ham and hot sauce," he hollers back as the toaster pops. I turn to switch out the muffins. "Mom, I wet the bed again," comes his defeated voice down the stairs.

"Bring down the wet stuff," I say.

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"I am." I can hear him trudging down the steps as I break the yolks for sandwiches.

"Thank you. Hurry and wash up, breakfast is almost ready."

"Okay, Mom," he says.

I grab the ham, hot sauce, a handful of my little tomatoes, and two small plates and drop it all on the counter, thinking that Leland didn't wet the bed the whole time Frances was here, and now that he's gone it's wet sheets and nightmares again. Frances made him feel safe too. Take a deep breath and blow away that thought, there's nothing I can do about it now except chalk it up as a lesson learned and never bring home another boyfriend while my son's around. Don't think about sleeping alone for some unforeseeable lonely span of years. I've got my pillow men.

Flip the eggs when the white looks mostly cooked and turn off the heat. Pop the second muffin and put them on the plates. Lay two slices of ham in with the eggs and shake some Frank's Red Hot on the muffin on the plate without tomatoes. Flip an egg onto each waiting muffin and stir the ham around to lay flat in the warm pan for a minute longer. Put away the Frank's and the ham and get out the milk. Pour two glasses and stir chocolate into one. Flop a slice of ham on top of each egg and put the tops on the sammies just as the water in the bathroom turns off.

"Hurry up and get dressed, breakfast is ready," I call to him.

Take the cast iron from the burner and flash wash it in the sink immediately while it's still hot, just water, never soap. The water sizzles and hisses, steaming as I wipe the inside clean with a green Scotch-Brite scrubby. Perfect, easy and ready for tomorrow.

We eat at the dining room table strewn with knights and their horses, Leland's toolbox, and other random toys and treasures. I check over his homework and make sure his backpack is ready. We put our dishes in the sink and take our vitamins. Then we bundle up to watch for the bus coming down the road from the back porch. I smoke another cigarette while we wait and play a few more moves on the outdoor chess board that I painted on a round stone table. When we hear the bus coming, I kiss and hug my son and tell him to have a good day at school and be careful crossing the road.

"I always do. I love you too, Mom, and you have a great day at your school!" he calls excitedly as he runs away. I finish my cigarette

and go back inside. Time for me to get myself ready for another day. I turn the radio over to music from my computer, turn it up, and go into the bathroom.

Scrub the tub out first. It's an old claw foot. I cleaned most of the rust from it myself with a wire wheel on my drill, and spray painted it with a deep slate-gray Flextone Krylon. That was about four years ago, when I thought my bathroom remodeling was really coming together. Back when I thought I had a faithful husband.

"Don't think about that now. Cleanse to cleanse to cleanse." Stand facing East towards the dawn with my back to my beautiful shower and visualize it in the back of my head, all tiled and grouted, shiny and white with its glass mosaic border. Picture the bags of mortar that will come to me somehow when I get time to do it as I put the rubber plug in the tub and run straight hot water into it. "Water. Cleansing, loving, healing. Beginning anew like spring every day."

Face the South and light the stumpy wick of a tealight with my Bic and drop the disk of white wax back into my Himalayan salt crystal candleholder. "Fire. The will, the drive, the action. High energy and passion in my life." It flickers and glows a nice warm, alive, pinky-orange, two-and-a-half pound weight in my hands as I stand in the morning flood from the window behind the tub. I hold it up to the sun on days like this.

Light a stick of incense from that and turn to face West. Lately it's been Myrrh; feminine, used to gain wisdom when mourning the loss of someone. The bittersweet smoky smell fills the room. "Air. Thought, imagination, reflection. Fall and twilight. Goodbye, Frances. That's sad. Don't think about that today. Think about West for writing. Yes. Inspiration."

Draw it in deeply and turn North. Grab up the carton of Epsom salts and scoop out a big handful, letting it trickle through my fingers into the tub. "Earth. Strength, stability, security. My home. My rock. My mother. Literally. I don't know what I'd do without that woman. She grounds me. I love her." Send a little prayer of gratefulness and love for my mama.

Turn off the faucet with only an inch or so of almost hot water in the bottom and swirl it around three times clockwise to stir it up and wash the salt off my hands. Watch the sunbeams and rainbows bend and break and dance, shimmering on the antique white enamel.

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Unless I've already done some laundry or dishes that morning, I always have to run some hot water and wait for the old hot water tank that lives in my basement to kick the heat on and get it really steamy. This takes that ornery old bastard about as long as it takes to enjoy another smoke. Leave the bathroom slowly filling with the smoky essence of a moon goddess.

Climb the stairs back to the attic and sit by the window. Light up another one. I'm smoking too much, eating too little, and way too stressed. I feel like I could puke that egg right back up and it wouldn't be the first time I wasted a breakfast since he left. I look out at my garden and my chest constricts, my eyes well up with tears, blurring the vision of all that harvest going to waste. I just can't find the time to get out there. Frances helped me make sauces and stuff peppers and keep up on the harvest. I thought he was really into the good food we made together from what I grew. He acted like he really wanted to learn and be a part of it. Guess he abandoned the garden too. I sit there and sob while the cigarette goes out.

Stop crying! Take deep, long slow breaths. Just STOP. Get some clothes, go downstairs. Go back into the bathroom and turn the old pitted faucet full hot. Stand in the steamy air and breathe the smoky scent of myrrh as I take off my clothes and toss them in the old tattered wicker basket. My fat cat, The Red Baron—Red for short—ate half the top rim of that basket a little at a time over the last seven years. Red is a misnomer. Really he's white with pale orange striping, fat as Garfield, and cross-eyed. But when he was a kitten, he was crazy and wild and thought he was a pilot. His feet never touched the floor. He'd get that wild-eyed twitch and take off, across the couch to the back of the chair, up on the shelf, across the top of the door, down onto the mantle, and around the corner right on the wall, running sideways. Now he's so fat he can't even clean his dirty butt. But when I'm in the bathroom he always has to come in and chew another piece off that basket. I swear he does it just to annoy me.

Ease down into water so hot it lobsters my skin and work to clear my head again. Inhale the positive, exhale the negative. Inhale bright white, sparkly, happy goodness; exhale dirty, dark, sad, depressing ugh. Breathe in the peace, joy, love; breathe out stress, tension, depression. Shake it out. Center. Just breathe.

When the stuff I don't want to think about invades again I sit



up and wash. Literally wash it away. Scrub off the broken heart, the food stamps, the divorce lawyer and all her paperwork and appointments, the stacks of bills, the hole in the back account, the hole in my heart, my son asking where Frances is, and the image of her in his bed. Wash it away. Scrub him out of my head as I wash my hair. God, let me heal from this. God help me. Lie down and swish it away. Pull the plug and turn back on the water. Hold the old green plastic pitcher under the cascade and see it glow and sparkle, visualize this water as an infusion of good. Feel it. Feel love, happiness, pride, joy, everything good, as I pour it slowly over my head. Feel it replacing the crap with silver and glitter. Feel fresh and new and ready to begin again. Turn off the water, get out and keep moving, keep this brain busy. I can make it through this day.



*Majestic Glow*, Paige Wallace  
Digital Photography



## PIECES

Depression.

It's a buzzword. A *buzzkill*. It's one of those words associated with *other* people. You know who I mean; they perpetually look sad and are no fun to be around. It's reserved for people that you don't ever want to be left alone with (especially if there is cutlery around). *Don't leave me alone with Suzanne. She's "depressed."*

Depression.

It's one of those words that generally goes unsaid. It's kind of like "the big C." You never want to have it; if you do, you never want to face it. *If I don't acknowledge it then it will go away.* You try to store it in the back of your mind, like old letters from high school sweethearts or pictures of lost loved ones that you hide up on the closet shelf. It's safe, tucked away; but still, it *is* there. Constantly stalking your every move. Playing tricks. Stressing. Harassing. Belittling. Pulling you down until you want to scream, except when you try to scream, nothing comes out. Why? Because then people will know. The cat will be out of the bag. People suddenly won't want to be around you (especially in the kitchen where the sharp things are).

So we hide. Even from ourselves, we hide. But I don't want to anymore. As I write this, my hope is that I can find a measure of peace in knowing that it will finally be out in the open. *It.* I still struggle to admit why I have to fight to smile when times are seemingly good. Or why, if I am smiling, it feels phony and deceitful. I feel like a liar. And it hurts.

I am Jason, and I have suffered from depression for as long as I can remember.

My depression didn't happen overnight. It was built up over time. It was shaped and molded by those people closest to me. By those people that should have been my sanctuary.



I have lived in the shadow of my father my entire life. My earliest memory of him is when I was four years old. It's foggy and broken, but I can see my mom talking to a man at the door. The man has flowers. I can't hear what they are saying, but moments later the

man enters, shutting the door. He walks up to me, smiling. He bends down and offers a hug.

“Give your dad a hug,” my mother says from off in the distance. I will later learn that he had just gotten out of jail. The first time I met my father was when he was fresh out of prison.

My father exists at the periphery of my mind, but he is always lurking on the cusp of my mortality. If I died, all that would be remembered of me would be his last name. His bloodline. He is inside of me. He is scratching beneath the surface.

My brother and sister (sixteen and thirteen, respectively) told me (I was eleven) many times that he was a druggie, but I refused to listen to them. In the back of my mind I knew they were telling the truth though.

“Yes he does, Jason. He keeps it hidden under his bed. I’ve seen it,” my brother or sister told me multiple times.

“You guys are lying,” I said, grasping onto a small hope that what they said was untrue. I was young. Stupid. Stubborn. I pushed what I hoped were their lies to the back of my mind. I let them fester there, as I tried to force myself to believe that my father would never do that.

Several years after I met my fresh-out-of-prison father, I walked into the kitchen to find him cutting up marijuana. I turned and left, without saying a word to him. His voice called from the kitchen, “Did you need something?” I told him I didn’t.

My father lived with my family for about seven or eight years of my life and those are the only words I can remember him saying to me. *Did you need something?*

Yes, a father.

I feel like an old Polaroid. A picture tucked away in an old family photo album. My edges are torn. The color is gone. I’m black and white. I feel nothing but the fracture between how I want to be and how I am. There is nothing to pull me out of this landscape of shades and tones. My life has come to a standstill, a memory, a moment in time—captured. Captured forever in a wasteland of dark and light. I cannot escape this box. This square prison that keeps me trapped.

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The walls are impermeable. Impenetrable. They are my fortress from all things good. All I have around me are these four walls. Inside them, I am safe. I am secure. I am a prisoner.

I am home sick from school a couple weeks later. I sleep on a mattress on the floor. Pictures of my favorite football players cover my walls. My mom walks in. She looks serious.

“The police are here to ask you some questions about today.”

I am alarmed.

My mom notices.

“It’s about your father. They think he may have robbed a house earlier today. Just answer their questions. It will be okay.”

I can sense it. Something passes between us. Something behind her eyes. Something telling me that she wants me to answer the questions a certain way.

I nod. I feel bad for her.

I don’t remember if I lied. Maybe it’s not important enough to remember. I just remember hating my father for making my mom look at me that way.

The cops come and ask me questions. I answer. Then they leave.

I don’t know where my father is.

My heart aches for my mother. As I write the things I remember, my chest tightens. My throat feels thick. Blocked. My mother worked job after job to provide. She worked long hours while my father would disappear. She never let on. Never let us see how he was making her feel. Only years later would my mom cry over the things she was put through. The things she felt. Life doesn’t seem fair sometimes. But in that unfairness, heroes and heroines are made. My heroine is named Harriet. She is the only heroin I will ever need.



The cops were back within a few weeks. This time my father was there.

I don’t remember how the argument started or why my father was pulling at the back of the cable box. But etched into the fibers of my memory is the look on his face, the rage in his eyes.

I am crying.

My sister is crying.

“Stop fighting you two.” My sister forces the words out of her mouth and through the tears cascading across her lips.

“Shut up, you bitch!”

As I said, my mother put up with how my father treated her. But she *refused* to let my father take it out on us. The police were called. They told my father to “go for a walk.”

My father taught me nothing about being a man. My father didn't show me how to ride a bike or catch a baseball. My father never talked to me about girls or offered to tuck me in at night. I don't have a single positive memory of the man.

Yet he still haunts me everywhere I go. I hate it. I hate *him*. This is about the only thing in life I am sure of.

When I was in sixth grade, I was assigned a project for history. I was supposed to make a map of the world. I walked home from school, dreading the thought of how long it was going to take.

I walked through the front door, angry at the world because of the poster board I carried and the hours of coloring and drawing that lay ahead of me.

My mother was just inside the door waiting for me.

“Hey, I've got some news.” She smiled. I didn't really see her smile much. It was nice. “Dick is coming to get us, and we are leaving today. We are going to stay with him until we find a place.”

The world spun. Elation overtook me. I didn't have to do that stupid map project.

I smiled back at my mom.

At my heroine.

My uncle has saved my family and me several times. There isn't a doubt in my mind that he loved us and that he wanted to help us. I could spend page after page discussing the things my uncle has done right by us. I truly could. However, this is not the place for that.

The problem was that my uncle and my dad were pretty close. They had been drinking and smoking buddies every time my uncle came to visit. We could all smell the poisons as they hovered in the air, starting from my parents' room in the back of our apartment. We

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all knew what it was, but nobody seemed to want to acknowledge it openly. Maybe we all thought it would go away if we ignored it. That smell was there a lot, but it was *always* there when my uncle came around.

After we'd lived with my uncle a few months, my father called him. We sat in horror as Uncle Dick relayed that we were living with him. Then our horror grew even more when he gave my father his address. In that moment everything he had done to help us was shattered. He had been our savior. Our hero.

But every hero falls.

He saw the looks on our faces, smiled, and said, "Well, this is my apartment."

Life is a series of moments that can't be taken back. Once a moment passes, it exists forever, but in the background of the following moment. Each one passes, only to be replaced by the next. And the next. Every moment repeats over and over, but, over time, like a record, the memories wear out. The voices become fuzzy. The pictures blurry.



My grandma died twelve years ago (my father had been long gone), during the start of my eleventh grade year. I felt nothing. I was just a set-piece in the sad moments of my family's lives. I hugged my mom as she cried, but I didn't want to be there. I can't say for sure if this is where my depression started; I just know that it's one of the first times I can remember feeling distant. Fractured from those I loved.

"You didn't even cry when Grandma died," my sister said often in the months following my Grandma's passing. "You're just like your father—heartless."

I wish I could say that her words stung. That some part of me recognized what she said and helped me face what had happened. But instead, I packed it away inside. I have been packing things away inside ever since.

As I type this, my brain is telling me that I am being melodramatic. That it isn't as bad as it seems. It's like part of me doesn't want

to let go of my depression. It has been there for me at my lowest. It is the only thing that has stuck with me for most of my life. People come and go. Seasons of life ebb and flow. But the somber voice that speaks to my heart and mind is never changing.

But I know that it deceives. I can feel it crawling along the topography of my spine, nesting against the curvature of my brain. It whispers in my ear during times of joy. *It won't last. These people don't care about you. You don't belong. You're nothing, Jason.* Every time, it feels like truth to me. So I listen to it, and it feeds off my weakness. It's a parasite and I'm its host. I would feel naked, exposed, alone without it. I don't want to be alone.

Shortly after my grandma's funeral, my family moved in with my uncle again. This time he was living in Bradford.

He threatened to beat me up one day because the song "Loser" by 3 Doors Down was playing on the CD player.

"It's just a song," I said aggressively.

My mother, brother, and sister observed and did nothing.

Even in moments like this, when my father is nowhere to be found, he still seems to dictate what happens. I could have been spared moments like this had he simply been the man he should have been. Instead, he was the man he wanted to be. I vowed to never turn out like my father. Or my uncle. And that drive to not be them has often been my undoing. It's frightening trying to focus your energy on what *not* to become. I often get scared that I am losing sight of who I *should* be.

Sometimes, when you try so hard to not become like someone else, you become someone even worse. I fear that my depression is a manifestation of that someone. I sure hope that doesn't prove to be the case.

I create fantasies in my head of being somebody that I'm not. In these fantasies I am better looking, stronger, nicer, happier. I save damsels from distress. I stop zombies from taking over the world. But when the fantasies expose themselves as just that, I retreat back into myself and remember that I am still just me. I'm still lonely when surrounded by my friends. I'm still broken when I'm laughing during a movie. I'm still just a poor college student struggling to get

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by. All these things add up to one inevitable truth—I'm nothing. But is nothing really all that bad when you are trying hard not to become something you don't want to be?





RICHARD MARCOTT  
**HEMINGWAY AND HAVANA**

2ND PLACE PROSE

The Coast Guard Academy long cruise for the summer of 1956, my first-class year, was to the Caribbean. The Coast Guard cutters *Campbell* and *Yakutat* accompanied the *Eagle*. Our scheduled ports were San Juan, Puerto Rico; Coco Solo, Panama; and Havana, Cuba. After the excitement of our European cruise two summers before, some of my classmates expected San Juan to be nice enough, but more like visiting a Florida appendage than a foreign port. Rent a car and drive to the rain forest or hang around the naval base clubs, that would be pretty much it. As for Coco Solo—it was San Juan with interesting shopping. They were right on both counts.

Shopping in the American Canal Zone was indeed interesting. It was a crossroads market for goods from all over the world. There were native crafts, of course, but you could find Irish linens, Delft china, Italian leather, or German crystal just as easily. Small storefronts jammed the length of narrow streets.

The shopkeepers, almost exclusively from India, were pitbull aggressive. They literally pulled you from the street into their cluttered world, shouting, flailing their arms, and dragging merchandise before your eyes, touting their best value on the street. If you were smart enough to walk out, they followed you out of their store and into the one just like it next door to lure you back with a cheaper price. Bargaining was as much their national pastime as baseball is ours. They seemed slighted, if not dishonored, if you did not argue at least a little. It was their game, they played it well, and I suspected that they rarely lost.

I had reason to be more excited about the Panama visit than my classmates. I was going to visit relatives. Two of my great uncles, Fint and Joe, had ventured to Panama as young men and were part of the construction crew that built the Panama Canal. Uncle Fint remained in the Zone, married a native Panamanian, and raised a family of three girls and one boy. No longer living, he had retired as a ship's superintendent, overseeing merchant ships making their way through the canal.

My cousins Catherine and Margaret still lived in Ancon with

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Aunt Isabel. I had managed to get an overnight pass to visit them. It would be a first. Nobody in my family ever dreamed of coming to Panama, although Uncle Fint and his family routinely visited Bradford every other year.

Uncle Joe returned to the states when the canal was completed and remained an adventurer well into old age. A vagabond heater on riveting gangs, he made good money (and spent it when and where he wanted), building bridges and skyscrapers from Michigan to Louisiana. He was the uncle everyone kept in the closet, yet they loved it when he came out to play. But that's another story.

Catherine and Margaret picked me up at the pier in Coco Solo and we drove the fifty miles to their home in Ancon, a beautiful place overlooking the Pacific entrance to the canal. Primarily a residential community that housed American civilian and military personnel, Ancon sat on a bald mountain, approached through rows of banyan trees, and had a 360-degree view across the isthmus. It was easy to see why the Zonians, as the Americans who lived there called themselves, spoke of it as paradise.

We did a little local sightseeing, including a street market where I got a lesson in how to stay in the game with the Indian merchants. Catherine was a close match for the pitbulls, and I came home with a few nice souvenirs.

The Fourth of July was a big deal in the American territory. The Zonians wore their patriotism on their sleeves and celebrated just like they would if they were back home. Catherine and Margaret took me to a grand dinner and dance party at a large hotel in Ancon. It was crowded, with great music, dancing, fireworks, and all. The atmosphere was much like New Year's Eve in Times Square.

At one point I turned toward the long crowded bar and there stood Commander Ralph West, the Assistant Commandant of Cadets. He was one of the Academy officers assigned to the *Eagle* for the summer cruise. But with the ships moored fifty miles away at the other end of the canal, I was surprised to see him here. He gave me a knowing smile and turned back toward the bar.

As the evening wore on, he kept swooping in a circle to face us, both arms dramatically outstretched along the bar. He kept glancing at his watch and smiling at us. I thought I'd better pay my respects. As I approached, he turned back to the bar and I moved next to him.

“Good evening, Commander,” I ventured.

“Good evening, Mr. Marcott,” he said, running his finger around the rim of his drink. He lifted his glass, twirled the ice in slow circles, squinted over the rim like he was about to let me in on a secret, and said, “Who are those lovely ladies you’re with?”

“They are my cousins, sir.” He looked skeptical, tapped his watch with his finger, and said, “Pushing it a little, aren’t you, if you’re going to make it back to the ship on time?” Normal liberty was up at midnight. I showed him my overnight pass and said, “Oh, no sir, I have an overnight pass to visit with my aunt and cousins. They’re driving me back in the morning.”

“Oh. Well, enjoy your evening, Mr. Marcott.” He cut the conversation off and I returned to our table. A few minutes later the Commander finished his drink and left. Then it dawned on me. I turned to Margaret, who was in her mid-thirties, very pretty, and dressed to the nines for the evening, and said, “Was he hitting on you, Margaret?”

“Oh yes.” She laughed. “Big time. He is pretty good looking.”

“I think he had to get back to the ship.” I laughed.

We left Panama and made our way across the Caribbean, conducting various daily ship exercises. After all, this was a cadet training cruise. Finally, we could see on the horizon what we had all been waiting for: Havana!

Although the squadron was moored at the coal piers across the estuary from the main city docks, a small crowd was already gathering. The *Eagle*, of course, draws a lot of visitors wherever she goes. Transportation between the central city and the coal pier was via a fleet of small commercial taxi boats. They were already doing a brisk business. It was a Sunday, and five hundred visitors had swarmed the *Eagle*, mostly Cubans but some American vacationers.

We had spent days pouring over brochures, planning what we wanted to do. Discussion was lively until the crackle of the ship’s PA system announced, “Our Ambassador to Cuba, Mr. Arthur Gardner, and his wife have invited cadets to a dance party at their quarters. There is a sign-up sheet on the forward mess deck—it must be filled before liberty is granted. Uniform is service-dress white. A bus will be on the pier for transportation.”

Someone broke the silent disappointment. “Oh, come on guys, it might be interesting. Remember it is an ‘official affair.’ We’ll hang out for an hour or so, do the receiving line bit, and we’ll be out of there. We may still have time to get to the city. Besides, this is only the first of our four-day stay. We still have time for other stuff.” I followed the lead and resignedly shuffled my way to the sign-up sheet.

Captain Zittle stood at the front of the bus. With a practiced glance, he gave each a quick once-over as we boarded: whites—okay, cap covers—clean, white shoes—polished. He was the SOP (Senior Officer Present), which meant he was in charge, and he was giving us the rundown. Clearly he expected a zero-defect visit.

“This is an official visit; we should not be there long. A receiving line will be formed at departure when I signal. Conduct yourselves in the same manner as in our Academy receiving lines at any monthly formal. Thank the Ambassador and his wife for their hospitality, shake hands, and keep it moving. The bus will be outside for the return to the ships.” Then he paused for effect. “As to drinking—official regulations forbid it—but we will suspend the regulations for the occasion. If the Ambassador should offer, you may accept, and I know you will conduct yourselves as gentlemen.”

“Well, at least that’s something,” an unidentified mumble rose from the back of the bus, followed by a low chorus of stifled snickers. Captain Zittle said nothing.

We arrived at the Ambassador’s quarters and were ushered directly to a magnificent patio with beautifully set tables and surrounded by lush gardens. We could hear the lively beat of a Cuban band over the crowd’s murmur. A number of guests were already there, and our arrival sparked a rise in the background noise. Several adult couples, presumably embassy personnel and Cuban dignitaries, moved to greet us as we entered like a small army.

The first surprise of the evening was when a considerable number of unaccompanied young women in pretty cocktail dresses, swaying with the music, headed our way. Ambassador Gardner’s plans for the evening thoughtfully included inviting a number of debutantes. They were described in an article, with an accompanying photo, in *The Havana Post* the following day as “50 Havana beauties.” Judging from their smiles as they mingled and introduced themselves, coaxing us directly to the dance floor, they had been looking forward to

the party more than we had. But, no question, we were on their side now.

The Ambassador, slightly heavy-set and balding, and his gracious wife mingled, making small talk, generally checking if we were having a good time. "Be sure you take time to meet Ernest Hemingway," he said. "He and his wife, Mary, have been looking forward to meeting you and are really interested in your *Eagle* adventures."

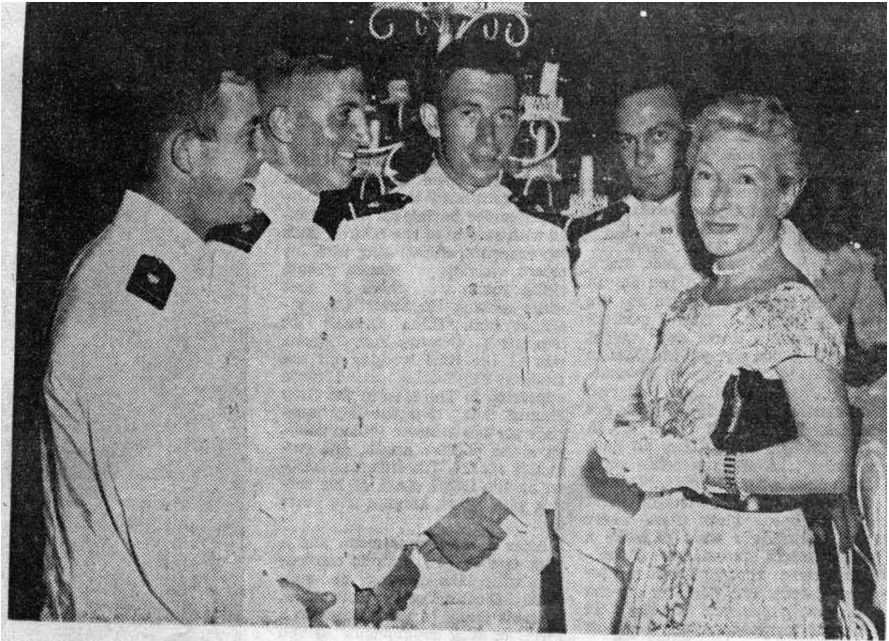
Ernest Hemingway?

It did not take long to find him. His dark businessman's suit and plain tie stood out behind the wall of dress whites that surrounded him like bars in a cage. An occasional pop of a newspaper photographer's flash was a beacon to his entourage. Hemingway sported a neatly trimmed white beard that framed his already square face into a block. He was a tall, powerfully built man, with deep facial lines from years of outdoor adventures. He seemed to enjoy the animated conversation, drink in hand, asking about our summer on the *Eagle*.

Most of us had read Hemingway's short novel *The Old Man and the Sea*, so it was easy to make conversation. It had been only three years before, the year we'd entered the Academy, that it won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction. He and his fourth wife, Mary, now spent a great deal of time in their sprawling home in Havana. He loved deep-sea fishing and often battled swordfish off the nearby coast in the very waters he used for the locale for his simple tale of an old fisherman's victory and defeat.

I joined a small group across the room to engage in pleasant conversation with Mary Hemingway. She was an attractive woman with short swept-back hair. She had a narrow face and a small mouth that she pursed into a pretty smile. She was wearing a single pearl-choker necklace and carried a small black handbag under her arm. She cradled her drink in white-gloved hands. *The Havana Post* photographer snapped a picture of her with four of us cadets that appeared in the morning paper.

Some years later I discovered that in 1954, two years before our visit to Havana, Ernest and Mary had been in two plane crashes within forty-eight hours. They had been on an East African safari when their chartered plane crashed near Murchison Falls. They were rescued by a passing sightseeing boat only to crash again on the



MRS. ERNEST HEMINGWAY, wife of the Nobel Prize-winning American novelist, is pictured with a group of U. S. Coast Guard cadets during the dancing party held at the residence of U. S. Ambassador Gardner.

takeoff of their rescue plane. The second crash left Hemingway with very serious injuries that included a crushed vertebra and ruptured kidney. He was still recuperating to some extent when we met him at the Ambassador's party, but it was not obvious.

The party had been in full swing for over an hour when Captain Zittle thought it appropriate that we take our leave. He collared a couple of cadets to start the receiving line. When he approached the Ambassador's wife, however, she exclaimed, "Oh Captain, you can't be serious. These young people are just beginning to have fun. Let them stay and dance for a while." The Captain, with not much choice, turned to the cadets, hunched his shoulders, and ordered, "Well, carry on men."

And, carry on we did!

The party changed. The music picked up; dancing became more active, the women more exuberant. I began to think that a debutante's confinement must be more restrictive than ours at the Academy. Champagne was too easy to pluck off the trays of roaming wait-

ers. A few of the girls began swigging their glasses, then tossing them over their shoulders like they were in some decadent 20s movie. Some landed on the lawn, but others broke on the patio.

Everyone heard the loud splash of a silver serving tray landing in the middle of the blue-green water of the Ambassador's pool. Gentleman that he was, the captain of our swimming team declared loudly, "I'll get it." One quick dive into the pool, dress whites and all, and he swam to the side with the tray in hand. Coast Guard to the rescue.

Meanwhile, a small noisy crowd had gathered at the entrance to the formal gardens. A large tombstone-like block of granite with an embedded solid bronze seal of the United States was the center of attention along with Ernest Hemingway. He had his jacket off now, his right sleeve rolled up, and was about to take a giant swing at the eagle. He had bet my classmate Ira Jacobson five dollars that he could "dent the eagle's beak in one blow."

Handing his half-full rock glass of dark Anejo rum to a cadet, he struck a mighty blow. I don't know how he didn't break all the bones in his hand. He recovered, hurting, shaking his hand wildly, coaxing the gentle Caribbean breeze to heal it, and fished out a five-dollar bill for Jake. Reportedly, Jake had it signed and framed.

I cannot report, with any degree of accuracy, how the party ended. I found myself with a small group of classmates and debts at a Havana amusement park. I was losing my precious twenty-two dollar monthly allowance a dime at a time, betting on a rat named "Miguel Raton" who scrambled wildly on a large flat spinning circle to find the cheese. He never once entered the numbered hole that I had bet on. The game of Mickey Mouse was a loser.

Meanwhile, the cadets who had taken the bus back to the ship after the party had found their own game. With enough Anejo still in their veins, a challenge to a vigorous game of "King of the Royal Mountain" on the huge coal pile at the end of the pier seemed like a good idea. Their dress whites were the big losers here. Oh well, it was the last port on our cruise.

The following day, I joined a group of classmates to see the stage show at the famous Tropicana Cabaret. We were guests of the Cuban Navy. A brochure described it as "the largest and most beautiful night club in the world." Giant fruit trees left standing during

## CREATIVE NONFICTION

construction rose through the roof, some connected with catwalks adorned with showgirls who moved between the trees to the sensuous Latin rhythms. The dancers wore headdresses half again as tall as they were and costumes that were colorful and enticingly small.

The place was huge. There were two sets of stages with tables that could seat 1700 people. Our Navy hosts had preset our tables with drinks and there were plenty of young women to chat and dance with. The most memorable after-action report was that one classmate, so taken with it all, proposed to three women on the dance floor in the same night. We like to think it remains a Tropicana record.

1956 may have been the last good year for Havana as well as Hemingway. In November, President Eisenhower recalled Ambassador Gardner, who had been exhibiting too much support for the Cuban dictator Batista. The U.S. was more supportive of what we then thought were the democratic motives of the rebel Fidel Castro. In December of that year, the rebels exploded a bomb in the Tropicana, destroying one bar section and maiming a patron. The famous nightclub would never be the same again. Two years later, when Castro ousted Batista, the new communist government took over the Tropicana, the casino was closed, and all the dancers became government employees hired to “exhibit the history of native Cuban dances.”

Many critics felt Hemingway was already on his decline in Cuba, despite the success of *The Old Man And The Sea*. His body, wracked by too many years of hard living, war, the physical pain of multiple injuries, and hard drinking, had given up. He also suffered, as did others in his family, from depression. His story of the old Cuban fisherman was his last significant work. On a morning in early July 1961, in his cabin in Idaho, Ernest Hemingway took a shotgun from the rack and ended his own life.

The cruise was over. While the squadron was returning to New London, as if we needed another exciting event, we were ordered to respond to a distress call and search for survivors of the collision of the Italian passenger liner *Andria Doria* and the Swedish merchant ship *Stockholm*. By the time the *Yakutat* and the *Campbell* arrived on scene, the *Andria Doria* had sunk. Air bubbles and flotsam of deck



chairs, suitcases, and life rings were bobbing to the surface. The cutters retrieved what they could, sank the empty lifeboats, and took what they had to New York.

Other Coast Guard vessels, on the scene earlier, had already removed 1660 passengers. A Coast Guard buoy tender escorted the *Stockholm*, who could proceed slowly on her own power, to New York City. Fifty-two people had been killed in the head-on collision.

If our first-class cruise was not the one most looked forward to, it is still the one the class of 1957 talks about the most. Every reunion brings dramatic recall of Hemingway, Havana, late night swims in the Ambassador's pool, coal piles, and the Tropicana. It was a great way to wrap up our cadet sea days.



## SUNDAY AFTERNOONS

Some of my first memories are of Sunday afternoons. The distinct trumpet riff and single cymbal bash of the NFL theme song on FOX floods me with flashbacks—the energy in the air that brings fans to life, the excitement that tingles and spreads through my body like the first beer I chugged. No matter where the music comes from, it takes me back to the couch, to the bleachers, to Superbowl XXXVII, and to the National Championships in 1996, 2006, and 2008, the same year I graduated high school.

I was born a Florida Gator. I swear one time I fell out of the tree in our front yard and bled one drop of orange and one drop of blue. I ached for the weekends, and not because there was no school; I loved school. I hated the other students who judged me when I raised my hand. They called me Jolly Green Giant because I was 5'6" in the sixth grade and loved all vegetables. No, I loved the weekends because on Saturdays we, my father and brother and their fraternity friends and their wives and kids, all dressed in orange and blue, gathered in vehicles, and drove to Gainesville from Tampa as a convoy of fans.

Once we got past Ocala, everyone on the road was a Gators fan. There were decals of Gator heads, flags that stuck out of windows, and drunk people hanging out of vehicles *whooping*. But my favorite was when everyone honked. It was like NYC but not annoying. Every single person was pepped up to cheer on our Gators in the Swamp, also known as Ben Hill Griffin Stadium. We were prepping for the opening cheer, *One-bit, two-bits, three-bits, a dollar, all for the Gators, stand up and holler*. Then we cheered as loud as we could so the players knew that our heart was there, that they had a reason to play, a fan base to fall back on.

Sundays were just as much fun, but closer to home. Growing up in Tampa, Florida, I was blessed to have an NFL team right in the heart of my city. I had dreamed about cannons going off when exciting things happened in my life, like when the Bucs got a touchdown. Tailgating on Woodlawn Street with all the same friends who joined us at Gators games made the professional league just as exciting as college.

Every game, I asked my dad, "Think we'll win?"

“A hundred to nothin,” he said, every time. We never won a hundred to nothing, but his confidence and our laughs were unforgettable.

After boozing for a of couple hours, we wandered over to our gate, stood in line and made sure we didn’t have anything illegal, since they banned new items every week. This was always one of my favorite parts because right after my ticket was scanned I got free stuff! One time I got a hat which I wore for like a year. The stadium gives out all kinds of great souvenirs: calendars, cups, drawstring bags, and posters. The programs were always free, so I took those too.

I loved the excitement of being at the game: all the fans in their color-coordinated outfits, Big Nasty and Lil Nasty harassing our opponents, and those chants that revved everyone up. (Right side of field) *Tampa!* (Left side of field) *Bay!*

Sundays have always been for football, filled with Coors Light, tailgating, and burly men who smoke cigars and take shots. Now, instead of driving to Gainesville or Raymond James Stadium each weekend with my brother and dad, I glue myself to the TV, rightfully drinking, but this time Miller Lite with my boyfriend, Todd, in rural Pennsylvania.

I watch the Gators every Saturday during the season, wishing to be transported to the Swamp, to that stench of stale beer, the sea of orange and blue. I want to pet baby gators with their mouths taped shut. I want to cheer so loud that I swear the team can hear me, that they can feel my love and see the passion in my eyes for a touchdown, a punt return all the way back.

I don’t watch the Buccaneers anymore, mostly because they aren’t aired up north, here in Bradford, Pennsylvania. Instead, I fall in with the Bills, a comeback team that always loses the lead in the end. Or I follow my newfound love, the Steelers, a hardass team with defense like steel, and a cute quarterback who stands up from every tackle, spins the ball down the field in between two defenders to the wide receiver reaching up, and always, always, throws the ball away when no one is open.



## CREATIVE NONFICTION

My dad and brother know all about football, especially my brother—he’s into every fantasy sport—but I don’t remember them having the same level of knowledge about football as Todd. He is the biggest football fan I have ever met. He knows every player on every team, his position, if he’s been hurt, or when he was drafted. Todd knows where each player played before and where he went to college, or if he was a walk-on. Todd usually agrees with the commentators, but is always one-step ahead, mumbling and goofing off.

“Well that was stupid,” he’ll say when a member of the Gators offense shoves a Bulldogs defender, or shoves his mask, like that would hurt anyway.

“Fifteen yards?!” I exclaim, wishing the Bulldogs defense would stop taunting this obviously angered offensive lineman for the Gators.

“He needs some anger management,” Todd grumbles, grabbing his beer.

“They need to bench him—he’s already cost us forty-five yards in three plays,” I complain, pointing at the screen like he didn’t see the flags or penalties.

The roles are switched when it’s Todd’s favorite college team, Penn State, playing. Like when they got completely shut out by Ohio State, which upset both of us because Ohio State and Penn State are long-standing rivals. Urban Meyer lied about not wanting to coach anymore when leaving the head coaching position with Florida, then weeks later signed with Ohio State. Asshole. I guess he doesn’t care about National Championships, considering that Florida demolished Ohio State in 2006, allowing only one touchdown by Ohio State on the opening drive.

“Interception, you idiot!” Todd yells from the living room. I am leaving the kitchen, popping the top to two cold beers and handing them to Todd so he can punch diveted holes in them for a smooth flow. “You can’t do that against Ohio State, look at that, they’re gonna score now,” he whimpers. I watch his eyebrows furrow and his mouth purse.

“They’ll come back. They just need to get their confidence up,” I try to say positively, but I know that Penn State is not as good as Ohio State this year. “I’m sorry, babe.”

An hour later he’s lying on my chest, exhausted from his long

hours of working in the oil fields all week. I don't have the heart to tell him that Ohio State is beating Penn State by more than thirty points. I just drink my beer and know that both of us will have a rough week because our teams lost.

So watching football together means a lot more than understanding and appreciating the game or rooting for the Steelers, the Gators, and the Nittany Lions; it means comfort and love, home and family, creating a life with the man I love who loves football as much as I do.



*Worldliness*, Paige Wallace—2nd Place Art  
Digital Photography

## THE BUTCHER'S DAUGHTER

Trying to remember my childhood is like trying to open my eyes underwater. Everything is blurry and fragmented, clouded by the ripples of other people's stories. If I focus hard enough, I can make out some little things: the sound of the stairs creaking at night, a red cushioned couch, the names of each of my imaginary friends. The memories flash as I try to grasp them. They are slippery like water. If I focus hard enough, bits and pieces of memory slowly come to the surface and make sense through the distortion. Eventually, however, remembering becomes painful, and my eyes burn from the exposure. It is hard to bring some memories of my childhood to the surface, and it stings to remember that most of these memories center on one constant—I have always missed my father.

Voices from excited game show contestants floated up the stairs as the TV played in the room below me. It was late and I should have been asleep, but I couldn't help myself. I wanted to see my dad. Crawling out of bed, I gathered my pale green comforter in my fist and dragged it behind me as I prepared to set up camp on the worn carpet at the top of the stairs. Going back for my matching pillow, I was careful not to wake Ethan, my two-year-old brother with whom I had the pleasure of sharing a room. He was a quiet thing, but I didn't want him to wake up and steal my dad's attention. As the oldest, I felt that I was at least entitled to that first, so I crept ever so carefully to my cleverly laid out, albeit lumpy, bed on the floor.

At four years old I didn't know much like why my dad left before the sun rose and returned with the moon, or why my mom cried at times as she sat downstairs watching those shows, waiting for him. What I did know was that if I climbed out of bed and waited by the stairs he would have to see me, at least once that day. Sure enough he and my mom found me an hour later as they tiredly trudged up the stairs. As they approached, I feigned sleep so that my dad would be forced to carry me.

"Not again," he said with a sigh as his arms, my stronghold, found me again. Picking me up, he carried me back to my bed while my mom gathered up my little camp. "Stay in bed this time, okay sweetie?" He said, fully aware of the fact that I was awake.

I nodded my head in response with a content smile on my face. He then proceeded to tuck me in the right way, with his mustache tickling my head, as he assured me that he loved me more than anything.



There are many types of absent fathers. Dictionary for Dads defines *absent fathers* as the ones that “usually do not reside with their children or are away for long periods of time. This includes fathers who are divorced, separated, incarcerated, in the military, travel regularly for business and are absent from the home more than they are present.” My father fits in the “travel regularly for business and are absent from the home more than they are present” category.

“Leonard! You have to put your family first!” my mom pled as she revisited their main argument over the time my dad spent at Dave’s Meat Market, the store he had spent the entirety of his life working at. “Your children need their father. I can’t do this alone! I’m tired of being the bad guy here.”

“Jack,”—Jack being the most endearing term that my dad’s ever come up with for my mom, Jackie. “My dad needs me. You know I’m taking over the business soon. The kids are fine. Look how well they entertain each other,” my dad said, nodding to the playroom where I sat brushing my Barbie’s perfect auburn hair as my brother crashed her fancy pink and purple camper into everything he could find. “I’m working to support all of you. How isn’t that enough?”

“How isn’t that enough? Do you think you could at least manage to bring home some meat?” She said, referring to the lack of food in our refrigerator. The basic staples, like butter, eggs, and milk were usually present, but my dad often forgot to bring us home bacon, chicken, steak, or whatever my mom had called and asked for the day before. My mom’s stomach was slowly starting to look like it had swallowed a planet, but her wrists and face looked thinner than ever. Ethan and I looked rather scrawny too, but my mom made sure that we were both well-fed. My dad gave her two hundred dollars a week since she quit her nursing job to take care of us, and she made sure that almost every cent of it went towards feeding, clothing, and caring for us.

## CREATIVE NONFICTION

The rest of their conversation is a bit of a blur since I had decided to bite Ethan because I didn't appreciate how he was treating my toys. I do recall that the argument concluded with my mom scouring the house with cleaning supplies while my dad passed out on the couch. It was Sunday, his only day off.



Before my dad became one of the owners of Dave's Meat Market, he had a little bit more time of his own. In addition to Sunday, the only day the store was closed, my dad had the option to take the last two Mondays of the month off when the food stamp rush slowed down. He worked fifty to sixty hours a week, as he helped his father, the retiring owner of the store, open and close. Saturday was the store's busiest day, and he often went in before six and got home around eight. When his father was feeling especially generous, and the store's business was slow, my dad was able to come home earlier, take weekend trips with his family to the shore, drag us along to car shows, and one year, when I was three, he was able to take off a week to take us all to Disney. He seems happier in my memories before he took over Dave's, and he was never quite so exhausted.

After his father partially retired, relinquishing the business to my dad and his brother, my dad was around much less. Sunday became his only day off and vacations became limited. He began leaving for work earlier than ever, and he got home much, much later as he began working sixty to seventy hours a week. He did the brunt of the work and trusted few, so he took on the sole responsibility of opening and closing the store. He no longer was able to make it home in time for dinner, and we were lucky if we got to see him before bed. Weekend getaways to the shore became a thing of the past, although we still spent a couple of Sundays building sandcastles with him there, if we were lucky. We never went to another car show, and we never, ever returned to Disney despite my parents' promises. In my memories, my happy dad seemed to fade away after he took over the store, and he was replaced by a fatigued, absent one.

One Sunday, almost a year and another sibling later, my father was yet again asleep on the couch.



“Can we jump on daddy?” Ethan asked eagerly. Jumping on dad was a favorite pastime of his. Well, doing anything with dad was our favorite I guess. Ethan was growing especially eager for my dad’s attention, even more so than I was.

While I became more absorbed in myself and created imaginary friends to play with since my new sister Abbi couldn’t play yet; Ethan became a bit enamored with our dad. He clung to my dad those times he wasn’t at work, watched closely when he worked outside on the upkeep of our house, and requested that my mom dress him in denim jeans and multiple plain white T-shirts to match my father’s signature look and gut. He had even tried to draw on his own mustache a couple of times.

“Not right now Ethan. Dad’s tired, let him sleep.” My mom replied before she went off to quiet an upset Abbi. She didn’t have that much time to play with us anymore.

“Do you think Dad will play with us when he wakes up?” Ethan asked, deciding to bother me instead.

“I dunno, but we should definitely jump on him later,” I said, running away to do my own thing. The seven dwarfs (aka my imaginary friends) and I had better things to do.



“Hey, sweetie, can I talk to you for a second?” My mom asked as she poked her head into my room. I had been sitting on my bed surrounded by at least ten dolls, and she was interrupting my heated and animated discussion with one of my husbands. Yes, ONE of my husbands. I pretended that I had three: Carmen, James, and Kyle.

“Kinda busy, Mom, me and James are having a fight.” I replied, rolling my eyes dramatically.

“Which one is that again?” She asked, trying to keep up. I had a lot of imaginary friends.

“He’s the one I can’t stand because he thinks he’s better than everyone else. Remember? And Carmen is the rock star who is always off on tour, but he was my first true love like Prince Charming is to Snow White. Kyle is the sweet one. He is always there for me and the kids.”

“Right, that’s what I wanted to talk to you about. Why three hus-

bands? One wouldn't be enough?" she asked, rearranging some dolls so that she could sit on the bed.

"Well, first it helps explain how many children I have." I said, motioning to the array of dolls behind me. "Plus, if I have three then I always have one for whenever the others can't be around. One can go off and make money for us, since my teaching job doesn't pay much, and one can help me take care of all ten of the kids. I guess I don't really need James. But his kids are my favorite."

"You don't think that just one guy could be all of those things?" She asked. She was staring down at the blue carpeting of my bedroom floor, perhaps contemplating the question for herself or wondering if my abundance of husbands had something to do with the absence of her own.

"What, you mean like an actual Prince Charming?" I asked, shrugging. "I dunno. I just don't want to be lonely. You know?"



Years later, I was outside racing bicycles with my friends. My glittering and majestic Mongoose, complete with pink handles and white handlebar streamers, had granted me numerous victories, and today was no exception. My friend, however, jealous and angry that I had beaten her, decided to declare that I had cheated because "there was no way lame training wheels" could beat her "big kid bike."

"I won fair and square!" I contested, hurt that she had insinuated that my bike was lame.

"No, there's no way! My dad said that bikes with training wheels can't go faster than bikes without 'em. That's what *MY* dad taught me. Is your dad ever gonna teach you? Do you even have a dad?" She said spitefully before I was able to shove her off her bike.

Without looking back, I took off on my majestic Mongoose, training wheels and all, and rode as far away as I could possibly get before I let myself cry. Speeding past the small cape cods that were all closely packed together, forming our neighborhood and the "good" side of Bensalem, a large suburban area outside of Philadelphia, I felt the tears rush down my hot face as thoughts battled in my mind. *Who was she to say stuff about my dad? Just cause her dad taught her how to ride a bike without training wheels, showed her how to*

*throw a ball, and built her a tree house, didn't give her the right to be mean. My dad would have done those things for me if he had the time. Wouldn't he?*

Later that night I ate my dinner silently, noting my dad's empty seat and the plate of food my mom had made for him to heat up whenever he came home. When he did come home, I didn't race downstairs and leap into his arms like I had other nights. As a nine-year-old I was technically allowed to stay up long enough to do so now. Instead, I waited up long enough to hear his heavy footsteps climb the stairs before I closed my eyes, and drifted off into uneasy sleep.

I would not learn how to ride a bike without training wheels until I was eleven years old, when my mom finally had enough time to teach me.



When my dad wasn't at Dave's Meat Market he was: asleep on the couch, working on one of his mustangs, doing yard work, or helping a neighbor or anyone that needed a hand. Sometimes he found time to wrestle with us, take us out for ice cream, or drive us to a late night appointment or class. He usually tried to make at least an appearance at our school plays, judo tournaments, and dance recitals too, but he was often unable to stay or even appear at all. Instead, he was at work, providing for us so that we were able to do all of those things, or he was too exhausted to show.



"You look beautiful, Amanda," my mom said as she rushed to add the finishing touches. A dab of lip gloss here. A spritz of hairspray there. Bedazzlement everywhere. "Don't lick the lip gloss off. You hear me?"

I nodded my head, salon-styled curls bouncing behind me. Truthfully, I would lick it off in a matter of minutes. It was a bad habit I had, since back in the days when dance moms had chided me and chased me down, making sure my tutu was straight and that the standard cherry red was on my lips before my class went on stage. Of course, I had learned to put on my own makeup since, but my

mom still insisted on dolling me up for the night. It was, after all, my junior prom. She had wanted to help me look fabulous, and I did.

*Just like a princess*, I thought as I semi-twirled to make the dark green fabric of my lavish mermaid dress shimmer and dance in the light. *Shame Dad isn't going to see me.*

Ethan must have been thinking along the same lines.

"If Dad doesn't make it home in time, who's gonna be the man in the house to tell this kid no funny business?" Ethan asked, his voice cracking as he got his camera ready. He was stuck in that awkward stage.

"Not you," Abbi mocked, imitating the cracks in his pubescent voice as she stuck her head out of her room. "Besides, Amanda is a goody two-shoes."

I rolled my eyes, grateful I no longer had to share a room with either of them. We had moved three years before into a nice big house that had enough rooms for all of us, plus three vast flat-screen TVs. My dad's hard work had provided us with everything. But he still wasn't there.

"Manda's date is here!" Luke, the youngest, shouted, bouncing all around with excitement. Extreme protectiveness of his sisters wouldn't kick in for another year or so. There wasn't really anything to worry about though. Mike, my date, was a good guy.

"Wow, you know how to pick 'em well," My aunt was saying as I climbed down the stairs. "Handsome, and his dad drives a limo, so you get one for free. What a package!"

I smiled and noted that both of Mike's parents were making their way to my door. His parents were divorced, but they had both made the time to come take pictures of their son.

*Must be nice*, I thought before I pushed the thought to the back of my head, smiled, and prepared myself for a blissful night. My dad didn't make it in time to see me off. I wasn't surprised.

Later on, while I was in the midst of dancing, chatting, and blushing, my dad texted me something like: *I'm sorry I couldn't make it. I would have loved to see you. I will see you afterwards ok?* I think I felt a stab of pain in my chest when I finally saw his texts. It was that tightening and constricting feeling that goes along with a lingering sadness that never really goes away. *Okay, love you dad*, I replied.

When I got home that night, after dancing my butt off and saying

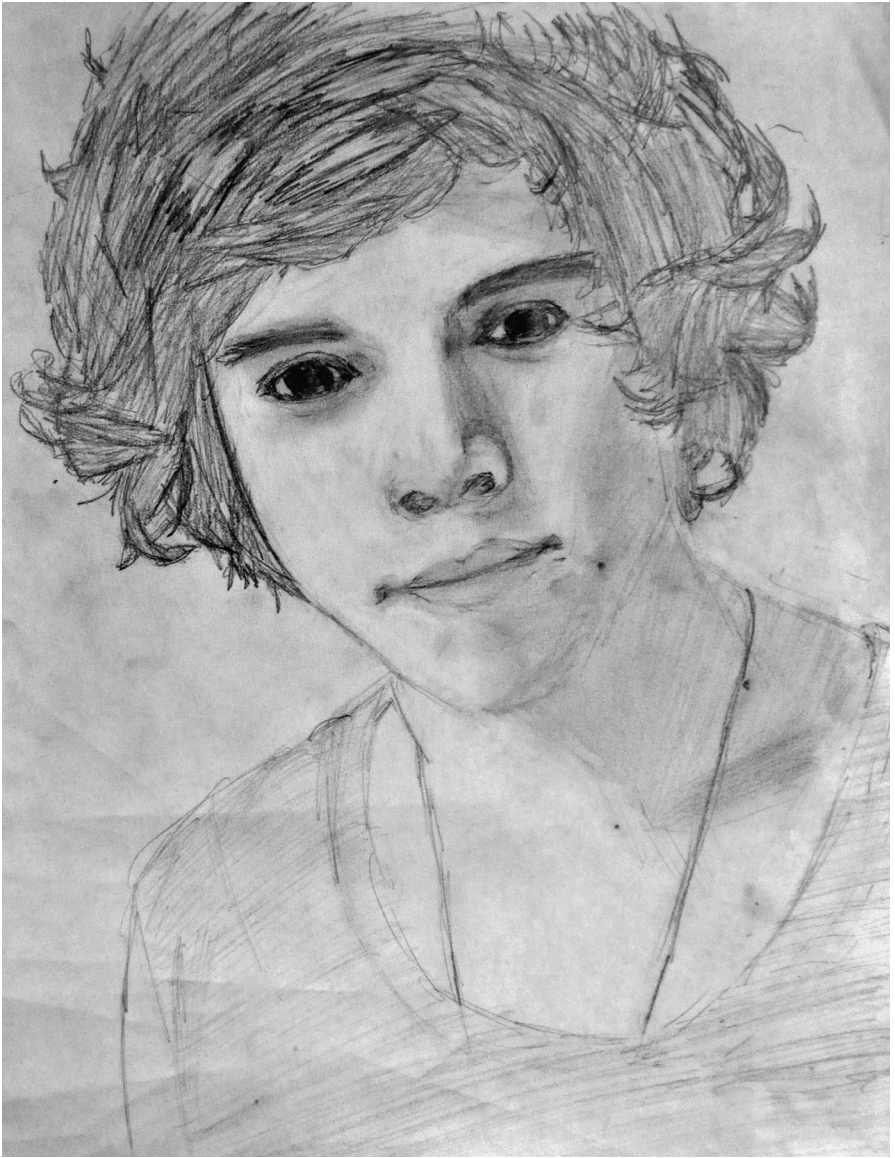
goodnight to Mike (no goodnight kiss, I was too much of a prude for that), I walked through the front door of a very silent house. Everyone was sound asleep, tucked into their beds; everyone except for my dad. He had tried to wait up for me. I found him dozed off on the couch in front of a muted TV.

“Dad,” I said, shaking his heavy shoulder, “I’m home.”

It took him a few minutes to shake off the sleep. His tired eyes lit up when he finally saw me, his little girl all grown up.

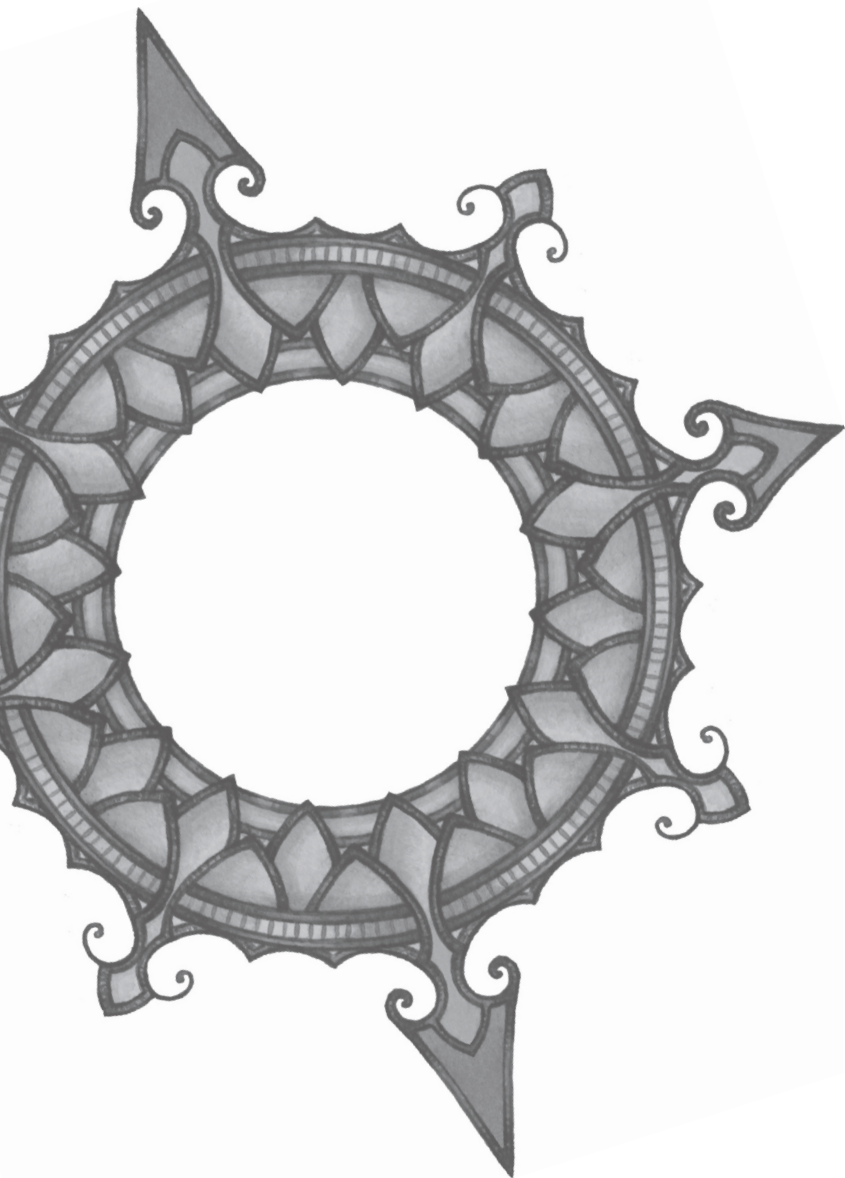
When my senior prom came around, I imagine that reality had finally hit my dad. Despite his pleas that I choose a college close to home, I had picked one 321 miles away, and graduation was quickly approaching. The night of the big dance, he made it just in time to see me off. Just a few months later, he made sure to take off work to attend my high school graduation. By then, it was already too late. He had been absent more than he had been present for a significant portion of my life, and he had missed a lot. The little girl that used to wait at the top of the stairs was all grown up, and she would soon be gone.





*Portrait of Harry Styles*, Emmaline Drummond  
Graphite

# POETRY



## ONIONS

My grandmother calls me into the kitchen and tells me that it is time that I learn to whip up a meal that will snag a man's heart.

Grab the onions.

Little did she know, I had already peeled back the bipolar faces. First the outer layer, which is usually pleasant. Then one more is funny. And then another is sweet and another is mean and another is selfish. They are all opposite tastes of everything you are. I realize I loathe them.

Grab the knife.

Little did she know, I had already cried from dicing onions. The malodorous stench still lingers in my throat. The putrid smell still stains my fingertips no matter how many times I have washed them. I have tried so many times to love onions. I have fried them, grilled them, sautéed them. Nothing works.

## WHEN IT COMES

I can never write a poem  
when I am told to write a poem.

It comes randomly like  
alley cats in my window whining for tuna,  
waves that wash ashore cigarette butts and dead squid,  
excited virgin boys who promise their performance  
will be better next time.

Jot that down.

It leaves abruptly like  
those midday summer rains  
and the only thing that is left is  
a rainbow.



*KELLY SCHUCKER*

## **APPREHENSION**

2ND PLACE POETRY

You live inside of  
your head too much  
they say.  
I only nod.  
Don't reply.  
I see the world as  
melting snowflakes, melting sunsets, galaxies  
meeting one another,  
blending together like lovers' lips, like cream and coffee, like  
loneliness and me

When I speak (however rarely I speak—  
I mostly live inside my head),  
inside of myself I whisper sorries. I preface  
every statement with 'sorry.' I articulate  
opinions as questions.  
All is  
apprehension.  
All is  
apprehensive.

Sometimes I perceive the world  
in pictures,  
in words—  
all is snapshots and  
double syllables like minor couplets.

Whitewashed words, suffocating  
winters, falling suns of watercolor skies,  
falling stars like rain showers of lightening bolts.

*POETRY*

Coffee lips and fingertips  
like icicles. When you speak, I  
move my lips like  
your confident articulations are my  
hesitant utterances, and I  
pretend all is  
not  
apprehension.

You live inside  
your head too  
much  
they say.

I nod  
closed lips like  
snowflakes  
frozen with  
apprehension.

*KRISTYN GRIEB*  
**THE SHOWER**

I turn both knobs  
and hear the  
rush.  
Power and purity  
pour over me  
and cleanse me,  
of dirt, of sweat,  
and the life I live.

Most times I just  
stand there with my  
arms crossed,  
holding my own shoulders.  
It makes the water warmer  
and the thick, steamy air  
easier to breathe.

Hot salt scrub  
gently scrapes  
my skin,  
peeling off layers  
that don't belong.

When the water runs  
clear, I open my eyes  
under the steaming  
heat, my whole self,  
myself again.

# WINTER

Flurries of pure white heaven swirl to earth  
in hidden towns, tucked between mountains  
that guard us from the real world.

The rivers of white pile higher by the hour,  
forming baby snow hills, while children glow  
in the shadows of the men they create.

Mystical crystals form slowly, but with  
force and weight on edges of rooftops,  
making any building suddenly magical.

The howl of the wind,  
the voice of winter herself, sings lullabies  
to the furry animals, bundled up in their  
natural winter coats.

It's a cleansing of the town,  
a fresh start for sinners.  
The flurries fall, covering up then  
washing away the dirty streets  
and mistakes of summer.

# LAUNDRY

Down three steps into the musty  
laundry room that seems more like  
a basement from my southern roots.  
The pieces of leftover lint stick to cobwebs,  
confusing and shooing the spiders out,  
forcing them to create new homes.

I set the basket of only my soiled towels  
and dirty jeans down on the cold concrete.

The washer fills with warm water as the  
water line, broken and exposed under my feet,  
gurgles and burps with distress.

When the lid slams, the bang reverberates,  
scaring the shit out of silence.

I lose track of time between the rushing  
of water for the pile of dirty dishes and the  
assignments I have yet to do stacked on the  
coffee table.

Tick, tock, tick, tock.

The hands of the clock stand still,  
grasping each other like they were stuck in time.

Downstairs, the buzzer almost  
sounds like a horn, like you're coming  
home from those oil fields that  
steal you away.

But it's only Tuesday  
and your truck's horn is much  
more blunt.

## **COME TALK TO ME WHILE I SHOWER**

You are mine for two nights and one day.

Then the fields of crude black oil  
and gas thousands of feet below call you back.

Back to those 14-hour days and big, fat  
paychecks that blur the lines of home.

## *POETRY*

It is 10:30 on a Friday night.  
You drop your bags and strip down to shower.

As you peel off your shirt I see the rivets  
in your upper arms, one solid line defining strength.

Your beer belly is shrinking and the cuts  
from your gut on the side have disappeared.

The subtle puffiness in your cheeks is  
now angled, and when your jaw is clenched,  
I see the muscle protrude on the sharp left.

You come completely undone when  
the boxers are shed. I see the goosebumps  
on your skin from the chill.  
You shake with exaggerated emphasis,  
slightly chuckle, and step into the warm  
shower that billows steam.

I wait for the turn, to see the back I rub so  
often and the calves I loosen.

Firm, perfect muscles, side by side.  
I focus on the dip above, place my hand  
there, slowly. You turn your head quickly,  
with a small, shy smirk. We are inches away and  
our heads are cocked in opposite directions.

In that sensual, steamy moment, we catch each  
other's breath, steal it, and hold each other up.

## WINTER WOODS

The brown fingers stretch,  
reaching for the light, withdrawn—  
snow falls gently.



*The Look*, Angela Nuzzo  
Digital Photography

*BONNIE MCMILLEN*

## **I WISH**

3RD PLACE POETRY

I could go back  
to my younger  
self and  
give her advice and  
a few dollars.  
But mostly I'd blow her mind,  
showing her  
what her body's going to  
look like someday.  
I think it's okay,  
she'll think not.  
I wish  
she'd hear me when  
I tell her  
it will be okay.  
She won't die without  
him, and she deserves  
much better, which  
she gets.



BEFORE AND AFTER 9-11

Blue sky on an  
ordinary Tuesday morning, until  
it wasn't,  
until black smoke  
and flames blocked it out.  
Gray ash  
so much gray ash  
I told my friend.  
She didn't  
comprehend.  
I wished I was her, she  
was still before, I  
was after.  
I told her again, but  
it was as if I spoke a  
foreign language.  
She said:  
My husband's on his way  
to the airport  
with his aunt.  
She's flying to Phoenix.  
All I could say was,  
no she's not,  
no she's not.

*PAT SHINABERGER*

## **ROLE MODELS**

A squad of strong women  
some tall, some short,  
some thin, some stout,  
some wrinkled, some scarred,

in sensible swimsuits meet  
at the shallow end of Y pool;  
bending and stretching  
toned arms and legs, making ready

for set up at nine. For one hour  
they serve, they volley, they slam,  
they laugh, they groan, they cheer, they splash,  
belie their ages of seven to eight decades.

Then shower, sauna, and dress;  
fuss with hair curlers, brushes and dryers,  
enhance smiling faces with  
lipstick, mascara, and blush,

all the while, chattering and chuckling a  
personal repertoire acquired from their  
five-days-a week, twelve-months-a-year,  
twenty-years commitment  
to their sport and each other.

Geraldine, Naomi, Jane, Gertrude, Charlotte, Sue,  
Linda, Kathy, Gail, Gerry, and Mary Lou

primp and polish, give one last  
over-the-shoulders glance in the mirrors,  
assuring their fitness for public appearances  
at local coffee shops or luncheon engagements.

## HEATED DESPAIR

Gaudenzia Rehab in the summertime  
is as pleasant as a hot mug of coffee poured down  
your shirt. The only client—the polite way  
to say druggie or alkie—area that is air  
conditioned is the group room. The dorms, the  
cafeteria, the bathrooms,  
all become so unbearably hot—as hot as the flames  
of our lighters as we lit up our crack pipes in a world without  
sobriety or rules  
that we cannot help but think of escape,  
of the cool, dark rooms with spoons,  
cotton,  
lighters,  
pipes,  
straws,  
and happy rattling pill bottles  
that we reluctantly left behind  
to try something many of us would eventually fail at.

We would shower twice a day, morning and night,  
turn the knob to cold and shiver under the slaps  
of frigid wetness, because we knew that heat,  
humidity, and sweat would welcome us with  
a kiss, hug, and a too tight squeeze as soon as the  
droplets of sweet chill dried. At night,  
after someone mentioned that warm air rises,  
we'd tug our mattresses out of the bunk beds  
and lay them on the floor. We didn't know if  
this did a damn thing, but it helped to believe so,  
to pretend that we controlled something in our  
“therapeutic community” world.

One night a staff member,  
Ms. Sharon, walked into our room,  
saw the circle of practically naked women

## *POETRY*

spread across unmade mattresses strewn about  
the floor, and reprimanded all of us. Her face contorted  
as her wrinkled cheeks moved around her loud words.

The next morning, we showered, the wintry water  
lapped our bodies, creating tremors  
but hiding the tears.

## **UBIQUITOUS SMOKE**

The rain is just beginning to fall.  
Small random drops struggle to be known,  
splish on the blacktop of the parking lot and  
the hood of the black Jeep Cherokee.  
They pepper the lake that extends from bank to bank,  
hill to mountain,  
and speckle the hulking concrete dam  
that jams itself between the picturesque  
scene of nature,  
reminds me that humanity's influence  
is everywhere, like the sticks of smoke  
my boyfriend clutches in his muscular fingers.

He takes my hand,  
leads me to the edge of the parking lot,  
with its chain-link fence that guards  
against a swift fall,  
a painful tumble down into the serene blue.

I grasp the cold metal fence in my hands,  
look down at the rocks, shrubs,  
and unkempt grass that coat the hillside,  
and long to touch the placid enormous puddle below.

He lights up his Marlboro Red, and coughs,

the smoke wafts out towards me  
before I push it away.  
We watch the wind carry the cancerous smog  
out across the lake.  
Another moment in our lives  
disrupted by a stick that steadily leeches life  
away.

## EXAM ROOM ONE

Adagio Clinic,  
Seneca, Pennsylvania  
almost three years ago,  
the drunken dramatics of  
May 5 have skidded into rumors  
and tall-tales after only two days.  
People move on quickly when they drink,  
another fruitful party is always just a night away.  
But not for me.

I sit in the waiting room,  
listen to a teenage girl chew  
her gum. The watermelon scent  
dominates the room,  
saccharine and pervasive like the  
stench that ensues after you accidentally  
dump an entire bottle of perfume.  
Her mother sits by her, head down,  
eyes fixated on an issue of *Parenting*.  
Her eyebrows furrow as she reads,  
perhaps because her daughter is in  
a free clinic for birth control,  
perhaps because her daughter is in a free clinic  
and sits across from a rape victim. She cannot know,  
though. No one knows. But as I stare at the time on my phone,

## POETRY

each minute plods on so casually as to last forever,  
I am convinced she knows.

The nurse calls my name and I leave  
the girl, her mother, and the cloying smell  
behind me. I change into the white, flimsy  
robe, climb onto the hard exam table,  
and wait. The nurse tells me the doctor  
will be with me shortly. They always say that,  
a lie that has become so ingrained they may  
actually believe it. Time stutters by. The  
clock mounted to the wall clicks loudly,  
its rhythm as methodical as Bill was.  
My objections didn't interrupt his  
concerto of sexual violation.

Finally, the doctor enters the room,  
commands me to lie down and  
slide towards the edge of the table,  
drags the metal tray, with its  
instruments of invasion, closer to  
her seat at the edge of the table.  
*Just try to relax*, she says, before  
she begins the exam. For the second time  
in two days, there is something unwanted in me.

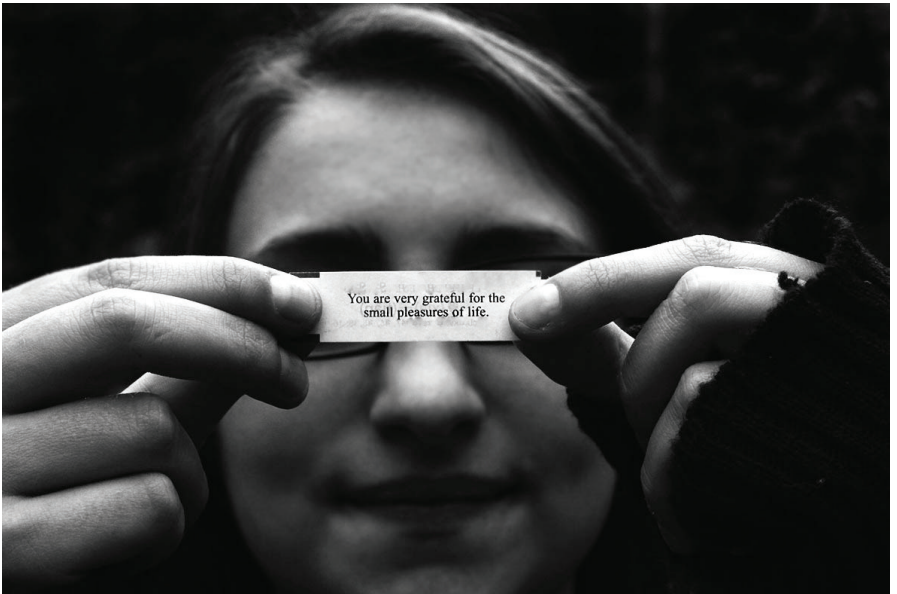
Pain.

Pain.

Pain.

I cry, silently at first,  
as the clock continues to tick  
and she continues her job.  
But soon the sobs muffle the ticking,  
and my body shakes,  
rustles the paper covering of the table.  
*Are you okay?* she asks when she is done.  
I nod.

She gives me the morning-after pill.  
She tells me I will receive a call if  
anything is abnormal.  
She leaves.  
I lay on the table,  
listen to the clock,  
and wonder if time truly  
heals all wounds.



*The Little Things*, Kati Franklin  
Digital Photography

## SPIRITED

My horse's newly shod pie plates  
pound hard as we charge out the gate,  
out the paddock, and  
down the crusted dirt road,  
a contrail of autumn leaves  
blowing behind.

My large arrow head necklace  
slaps my back hard, urging me to squeeze and  
to drive us on faster,  
faster,  
faster.

Our long dark spiral manes flow and flap  
like loose tattered sails  
of a Hades-bound pirate ship.

Mother yells from the porch,  
“*Slow down!*”

I kick my heels.

I always kick my heels when she yells,  
*slow down.*



GEORGE 1998

In Tamarack, Florida,  
palm fronds and curved leaves  
fall and swirl like slag  
from what appears to be  
white-blue sky.

People squint sharply, hands over brows  
peering East. Leaves and twigs bite and bruise  
mud colored complexions;  
ruin freshly swept lawns.  
The wind instills wonder—it is unwavering.

Wonder ceases as fear and resignation take hold.  
Dark gray frayed bands, tough with important points  
creep slowly west, engulfing every inch of the white-blue sky  
making people pray *George* is nothing like *Andrew*.

*JUNE CALDWELL*

## **HOPE SPRINGS**

Lacy branches curtain a dying day's sky.  
Rose petal clouds hint a promise of tomorrow.  
An amphibian chorus fills the night—  
assurance to constellations above,  
hope to those earthbound.

Air moves fresh off the wave,  
yet no sand is seen in streams.  
Memories, long past resurface  
to give the face a smile.

The cadence of the walk soothes,  
but an impatient wolf's bay interrupts the beat.  
I wonder if the two might meet again.

## THESE HANDS

No longer confined in the womb,  
the pink, pudgy fingers  
open wide,  
small hands extended to  
balance first steps.

Blocks fly across the room,  
like birds scattering seed.

As the hands swing the bat,  
the umpire shouts, "Out."

The pencil seeks the answer,  
guided by growing fingers.

Hand holding hands,  
he slips the ring on her finger,  
and with tender hands he  
takes her in his arms.

Years of manual labor  
have taken its toll.

Worn and trembling hands  
cover his heart, remembering  
a fallen hero.

SELESE HUTH

## ANDALUSIAN

Staccato notes of an acoustic guitar  
float,  
glide,  
and tumble  
through the spicy summer air  
over a green ocean of grassy tides and blooming waves  
to where the great beast is kept.

He is peaceful,  
tranquil,  
basking in the high, noon-day sun.  
The reverberating notes fall as white dandelion wisps,  
like black kisses of passions into his ears,  
and his eyes burst open with fire.  
He paws the ground eagerly.  
Sparks fly from the rocks beneath.

And so begins his dance.

His steel dapple coat gleams under Julius's sun,  
starbursts against the dark gray of dusk  
stretched over titanium muscles and tendons.  
Strong legs extend to their fullest,  
hooves fall to the ground, gracefully pointed,  
pivoting like a salsa dancer.

His mane flows gently in copper tinted waves  
over a neck arched with the pride of pure and perfect bloodlines.  
He is the heir of great kings and princes,  
the bane of cheeky bulls,  
and the first of his kind to dance.

And how he loves to dance.

Nostrils flare.

If he could breathe fire, he would,  
such is his passion.  
Gentle eyes are set aflame as he takes delight in his dance.  
His ears prick forward,  
sides quivering,  
awaiting the next notes.

## **AFTER THE STORM**

The sun shines through the trees,  
turning raindrops into crystals  
like liquid diamonds.

COURTNEY GORRELL

## THE HANDS OF A WRITER

These hands:  
broken cuticles,  
rough, dry skin,  
uneven nails,  
painted in random colors—  
only once in a while.  
Otherwise, plain, purple—  
lack of vitamin A, B, C, and D.  
An alphabet of health.

With these hands,  
I hold no pain,  
no disgust for spilled ink,  
for gray stains that  
smear my art, no endless  
tapping, clicking.

Verbs and adjectives,  
nouns and pronouns,  
colors painted on page—  
all coming from the hands,  
my hands.

Fingers stained with ink,  
gray lead running up the side,  
near the wrist. Aching, bruised  
black and purple. Frozen red in snow,  
burned red in sun, left a glowing brown.

And with these hands  
I'll write the world.

## HAUNTED ECHO

It wasn't my choice  
you know,  
evaporating out of this life  
like a cool-steamy vapor  
that chills you to the bone  
as it shoots pain into your nerves.  
You should be cringing now.

I'll come for you  
in your nightmares.  
Your imagination  
will haunt you  
with razor-twisted  
fragments,  
as if you were looking  
through a cataracted telescope  
stained a dark-mystical blue.

And when you wake up  
as fear stales your heart,  
I'll be gone.  
You will never entirely  
get over it.

## ORIGIN

Crazy neighbor  
on the right that catches  
his grill on fire  
at least twice a summer.

To the left,  
Giffordian hillbillies  
have a dozen baby ducks that  
if white, could be chickens,

## POETRY

six ankle-yapping dogs,  
a pig-fat, black and pink,

two parrots, one white, one multicolored  
that almost never shut up.

They want a goat that  
can be assumed to be blue.

Somewhere, there's a boom-  
bottle rockets, guns?  
You'll never really know *who* did it.

There goes the bang.  
Another mower starts,  
glistened, vibrant  
green grass sliced  
and crunched to a  
short buzzzzz.

Then, my favorite part:  
look up to an open, clear  
blue sky, the sun simmering  
down like the cool breeze  
as it snaps, claps around me.



*AMY HUGHES*

## **SNOWDROP**

Returning sun charms  
unfurling emerald fingers  
emerging from snow.



*White Noise*, Selese Huth  
Mixed Media

*KAYLA BEERS*

## **MASTERPIECE**

1ST PLACE POETRY

It glides across her skin  
like a figure skater on fresh ice.  
Ripened berries fall from  
elegant designs.

Left to right, slowly yield the blade  
as an artist yields his brush.  
Her sweet music crescendos as  
the last line is drawn.

Step back and admire the  
masterpiece created.

## **10 PIECES**

When you came into my life  
you stole my heart,  
and when you left  
it broke into ten pieces:

One where we met  
that day in late July when we hid from the rain  
in your old battered pickup truck.

One where you told me you loved me  
and my heart leapt like a ballerina.

One where you saved me  
from the darkness within myself.

One where you kissed me  
in the shadows of my father's house

as we hid from him with knowing smiles.

One in the meadow  
where the green ivy wrapped around the tall oak trees,  
like you wrapped yourself around my heart.

One in the theater,  
your favorite spot to take me to  
when the pain became too much to bear.

One where you betrayed me  
with the skinny brunette who could please you  
in ways I can't.

One where you left me  
as raindrops pierced my skin like the needles  
you love so much.

The biggest is with you,  
to remind you what you did.  
And the last piece is with me,  
in my memories.

## FALL IN LOVE WITH A READER

Fall in love with a reader.  
Find her sitting alone beneath the canopy of a willow,  
weeping for the loss of her favorite characters.

Take her into your arms and tell her  
“They’re in a better place now.”  
Let her find comfort in the fact that you care.

Fall in love with a reader.  
At times, she may seem distant,

## *POETRY*

lost in the blazing infernos of her imagination.

Be patient with her.

She may compare you to Aragorn and Van Helsing  
or to The Bird Man and Galbatorix,  
but she will love you still, flaws and all.

Fall in love with a reader.

When at last you think you've had enough,  
listen to the way she talks about her books.

Remember the days you spent  
recreating the ends of fairytales.  
She'll take you for a thrilling ride,  
a tsunami of emotions crashing down all at once.

Fall in love with a reader.

Hold her close each night  
and whisper in her ear tales of your love for her.

Treat her gently,

for a reader knows all about pain and despair.  
In fact, she'll expect it,  
but she'll always forgive.

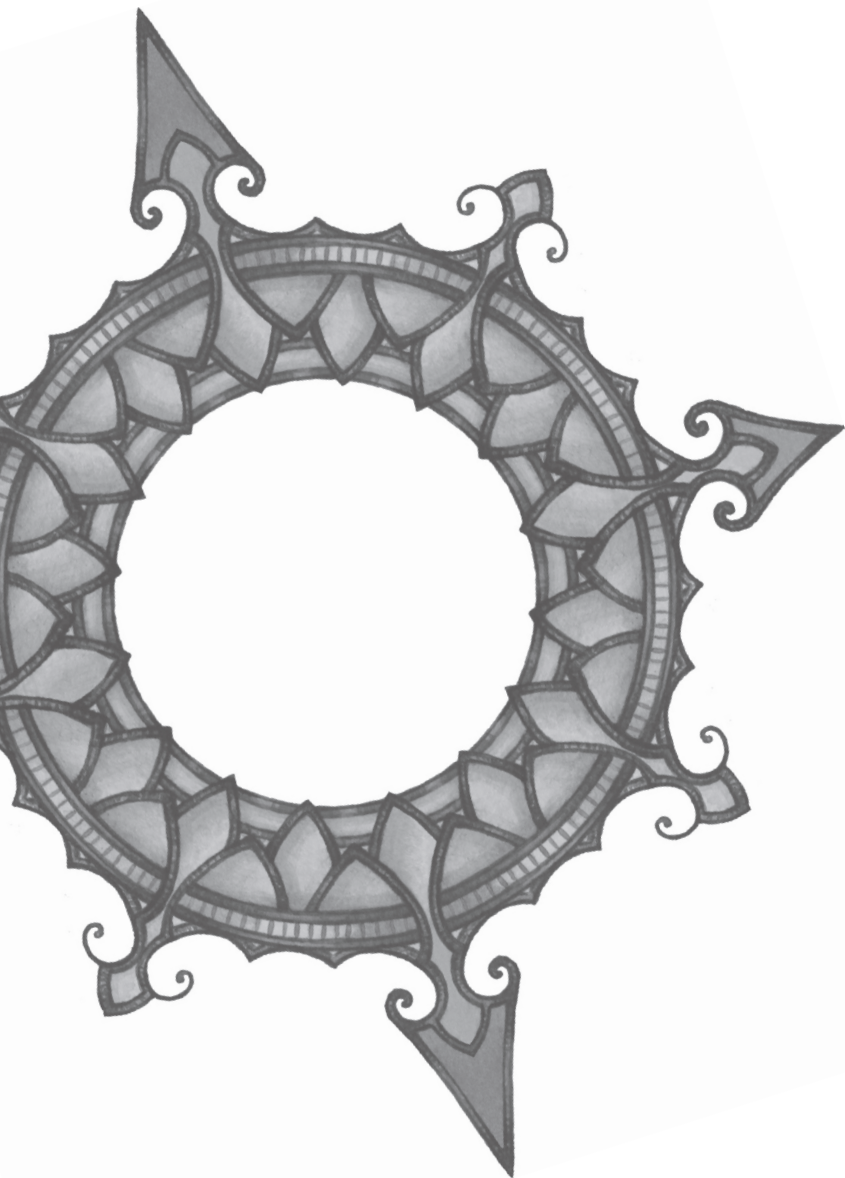
Fall in love with a reader.

She knows how to comfort you,  
and her books have taught her much about love.

Better yet, fall in love with a writer.

She knows all that a reader knows,  
but she does not dwell on other people's stories.  
Instead, she'll write her own.

# ART





*Pitt Game Room*, Jenn Anderson  
Watercolor



*Concept of Life*, Jenn Anderson  
Watercolor

*Inspiration*, Iris Xiao  
Acrylic







*Frog Tadpoles*, Stacey Gildersleeve  
Digital Photography



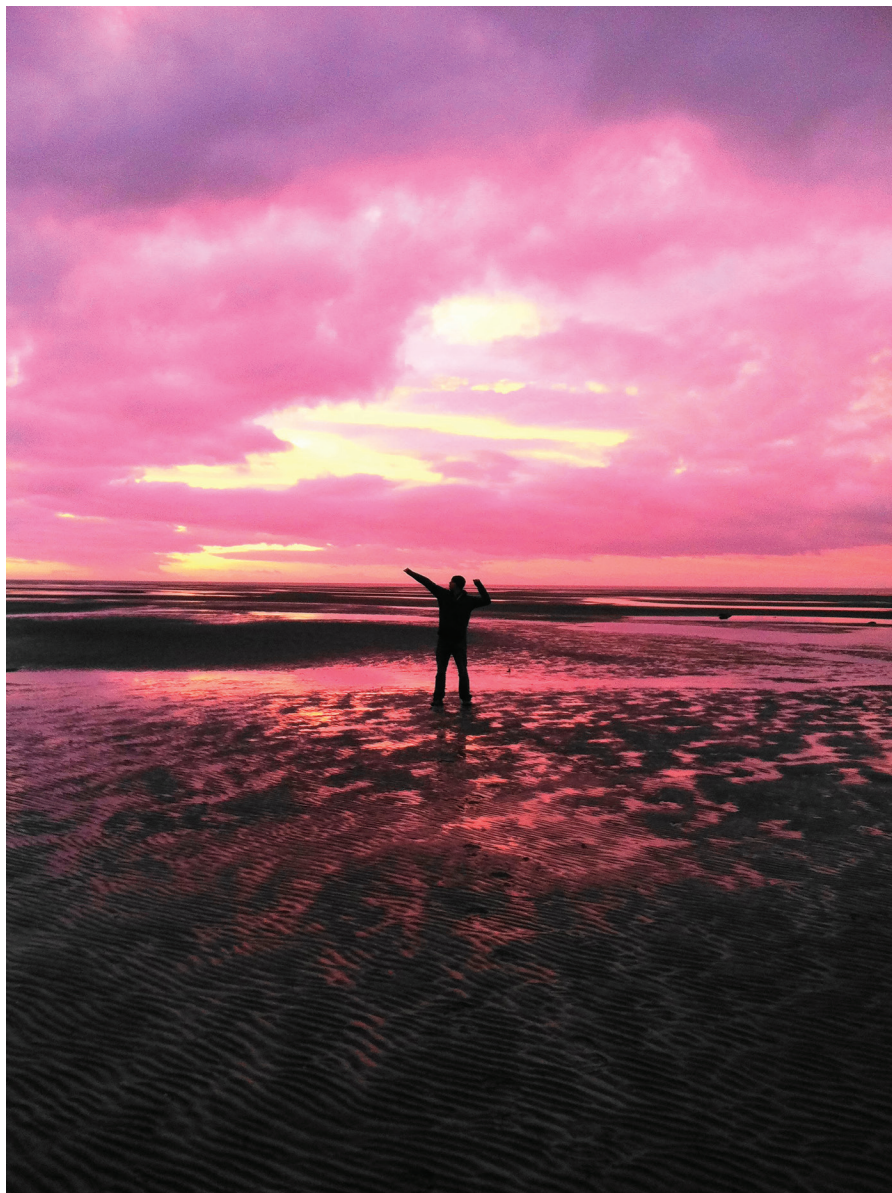
*Lighters*, Jenny Trippett—3rd Place Art  
Acrylic



*Squid for Brains*, Kati Franklin  
Pastels



*Fijian Supplies*, Bradley Miner  
Digital Photography



*Signature Pose*, Bradley Miner  
Digital Photography



*Handprint*, Ashley Wilson-Rew  
Acrylic



*No Heroes*, Ashley Wilson-Rew  
Acrylic



*Ocelot*, Ashley Wilson-Rew  
Acrylic

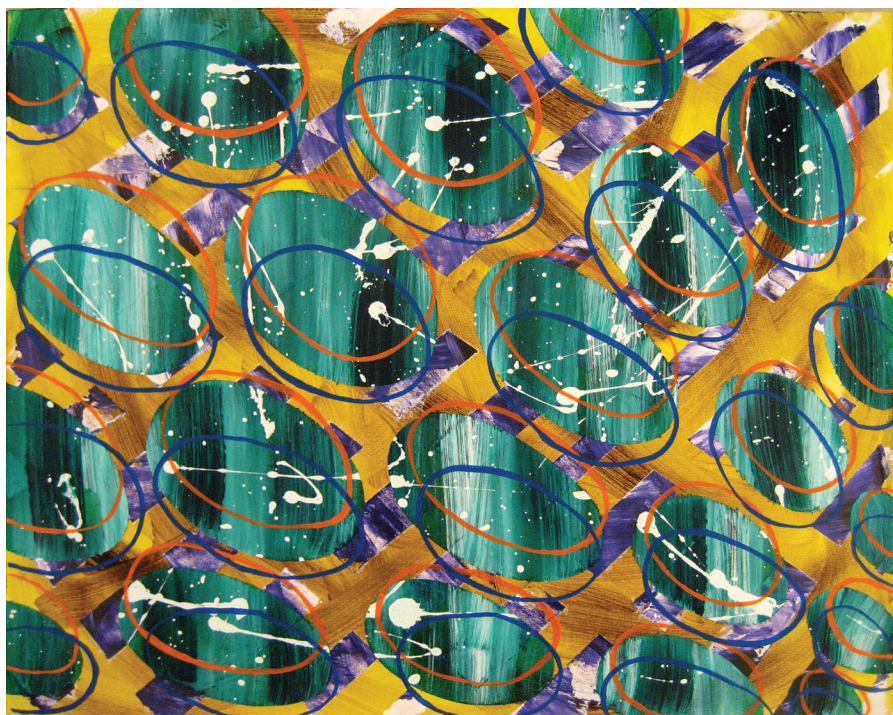




*Water and Light*, Ashley Wilson-Rew  
Watercolor



*Diana Simone, Alana Stewart*  
Acrylic



*Shift of Instance*, Rick Minard  
Acrylic



*Dejvicka*, Mackenzie Miller  
Digital Photography

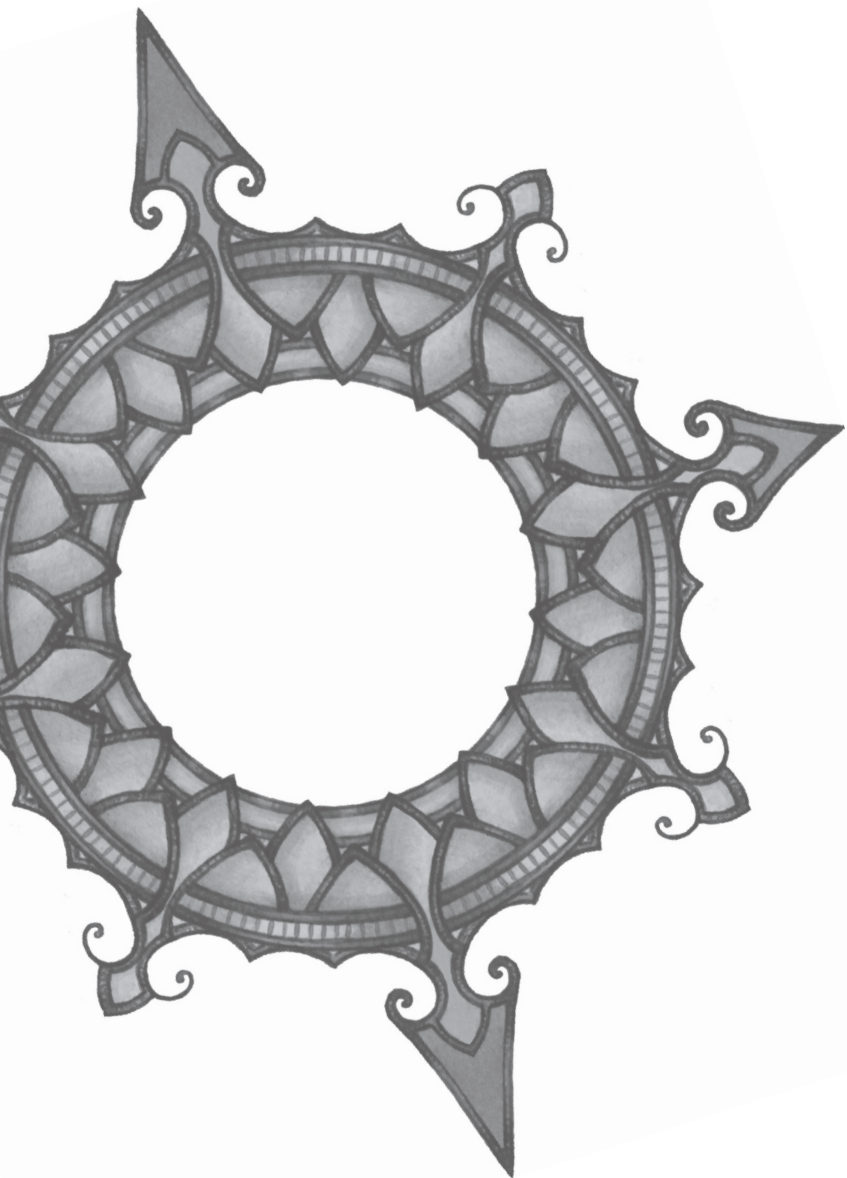


*Intensity*, Andrea Gundlock  
Digital Photography



*The Golden Temple*, Kayla Beers and Selese Huth  
Digital Photography Collaboration

# NOVEL EXCERPTS



## PULLING THE LOOSE THREAD

ADULT FICTION

### CHAPTER 1

Maureen didn't know how long she had stood there, watching her husband, Michael, having sex with another woman in their own bed. Much later, when the hard, painful edge of sadness and despair and anger had smoothed just a bit, she would wonder how long she had stood there with her mouth agape, her heart racing, her skin getting clammy, her stomach roiling. She knew it hadn't been long before she'd run, run down the stairs, run out of the house, and run out of her life.

Was it two seconds? Three seconds? Five? Sometimes, she'd count off to try to get a better idea: One thousand one. One thousand two. One thousand three. One thousand four. One thousand five. Had it been that long? There really wasn't any way it could have been longer, was there? All she knew was that it had happened quickly.

That day, the day that ultimately changed the rest of her days, had started in the same way as nearly all of her previous ones: The alarm clock buzzed at 4:30 in the morning. She quietly gathered the clothes that she had hung on the back of the bedroom door the night before, taking them into the bathroom with her so she wouldn't wake Michael, who didn't have to get up for another two hours. After a shower and a quick cup of coffee, she drove the two miles in the pre-dawn light to Trudy's Café, where she was the baker.

That morning, like most mornings, Levon was already in the kitchen, frying bacon and chopping onions, peppers, and celery for the breakfast crowd that would begin arriving in about thirty minutes. It wasn't even 6:00 yet, but it was unusually warm that May morning, and he was already sweating, the red bandana around his bald brown head dark with perspiration.

"Hey there, girl," he said, smiling. "What's going in the oven today?"

For the last five years, Maureen had baked pies and cakes and brownies and cheesecakes and trifles at Trudy's, a ten-table breakfast and lunch café on Main Street that catered to folks who liked their food simple and their portions big. Patrons of Trudy's didn't want fancy food—no pumpkin lasagna, no goat cheese in grape leaves, and



no tuna tartare—even if it was gaining popularity thanks to the proliferation of such food on TV and in magazines and blogs. When they came to Trudy’s, they wanted big burgers with a hill of fries; a thick slab of meatloaf and a pile of mashed potatoes; or crispy chicken-fried steak smothered in thick gravy. Most also wanted to hear a bawdy joke or two from Trudy, who never disappointed, and to eat one of the desserts Maureen had made.

Maureen spent her mornings baking and assembling those desserts. Then, once the lunch crowd dissipated around 1:30 in the afternoon, she’d take what she called the town’s “dessert pulse.” She’d grab a diet Coke and a copy of the day’s newspaper and sit in the booth next to the picture window that looked onto Main Street. She’d people watch, paying careful attention to how they appeared. Were they hurried? Did they seem angry? Or were they cheerful? Did they carry a lot of shopping bags or only a few? Were they patient as they herded their toddlers to their destination? Were the men kind to their wives or girlfriends, holding the car or shop doors open for them? She’d also read the paper so she’d know what the important local stories were, always remembering to read the letters to the editor so she could assess what her friends and neighbors were most concerned about. If there was time, she’d watch a little of the news on the TV perched high in a corner of the café.

Once Maureen had taken the town’s dessert pulse, she would start making plans for the next day’s desserts based on what she had learned. If people appeared upset or angry, perhaps because city council was going to raise their taxes next year, she knew patrons would want something particularly decadent to take their minds off their troubles, so she’d make double-fudge brownies, a Milky Way or Snickers cheesecake, or crème brûlée. If residents were happy, as they’d been last year when the county commissioners were able to provide enough tax incentives to bring a new label company—along with 300 new jobs—to town, she made triple berry pie with blackberries, strawberries, and blueberries from local farms with homemade ice cream on top. If folks were anxious? French silk pie with its smooth and creamy filling always seemed to ease their fears. If they were sad or lonely? Multi-layer cake with fancy flowers, ribbons, or hearts made of frosting—essentially a birthday cake even though it

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wasn't anyone's birthday—always cheered people up.

She loved cooking for people because she knew that good food prepared with care and attention did more than satisfy their hunger and cravings. It nourished their souls, renewed their spirits, strengthened their resolve, and made them feel loved and cared for. She had experienced many times the restorative power of food. Her grandmother's lemon cake, with its flecks of lemon zest in the frosting that looked like little smiles, always brightened her mood, even if it was only temporary. Eating it was like ingesting little bits of sunshine.

Maureen knew that she had a weird kind of gift, the ability to figure out what treat would ease a person's woes or stresses, anxieties or frustrations, at least temporarily. She knew there was hard science behind it—dopamine, endorphins, chemical reactions originating in the pituitary gland—but she didn't really need to know all of that science. She just needed to know how to satisfy, and rarely was she wrong. When Carl Waverly, who owned a men's clothing store in town, had come in last week for lunch with another man she didn't recognize, Maureen knew what he needed by his pained expression. She didn't know that Carl had decided to sell his business, which his grandfather had started, and that his lunch companion was a potential buyer. But she knew he needed something rich and sweet. When Carl and his guest finished their sandwiches, she brought each man a hefty dark chocolate brownie with warm ganache oozing down the sides and a large dollop of whipped cream with flecks of shaved chocolate on top. When Carl had started to protest—oh, so many people halfheartedly protested when they really just wanted to gobble down what was in front of them—Maureen had whispered in his ear, “This will make you feel better. On the house.” As she predicted, Carl had eaten the whole thing, as did his lunch companion, and both of their expressions had noticeably lightened. Before he left, Carl poked his head in the kitchen. “Thank you,” he said with a smile of relief. When he tried to hand her a five dollar bill, Maureen wouldn't take it. “Use that to pay for your dessert next week,” she said.

Levon was staring at her, the question still on his face: “So, what's going in the oven this morning?”

“I'm making my last cheesecake,” she said while grabbing a springform pan from a cabinet and looking for another one.

“Last?” Levon asked. “Ever?” He looked a bit perplexed.

Maureen smiled. “No, not ever. But Memorial Day will be here soon. People are thinking about fitting into bathing suits and shorts. They’re not going to want to eat something as heavy as cheesecake for dessert.”

Besides keeping her finger on patrons’ dessert pulses, Maureen also paid attention to the time of the year, knowing that also affected how diners wanted to satiate their sweet tooth. Cheesecake was a fall/winter dessert, when diners could hide any extra weight amid the many layers they had to wear to stay warm in their northwestern Pennsylvania town. The exception to the cheesecake rule, of course, was the first part of January, when nearly everyone made a New Year’s resolution to lose weight. However, Maureen had learned, cheesecake was a safe option by the third or fourth week in January, after most folks gave up on their weight-loss resolution. Once the weather warmed though, people wanted something lighter—or something they perceived as lighter—that they didn’t think would pack on the pounds. So, Maureen would adjust the café’s dessert menu, making “lighter” desserts such as angel food shortcakes with local strawberries or blueberries. Interestingly though, some of the desserts diners preferred in late spring and summer were often as calorie-filled as cheesecake: vanilla, lemon, or coconut cream pie; white cake with fresh raspberry or pineapple filling covered in butter cream frosting; and homemade ice cream cakes with a thin layer of crushed cookies in the middle topped with fudge, caramel, or butter-scotch.

Maureen was still rummaging around in the cabinet, trying to find the second springform pan, making more noise than she, Levon, or the two waitresses out front wanted to hear that early in the morning.

“Levon, have you seen the other pan?” she asked, holding up the one she had found so he would know what she was talking about. He was a great cook but didn’t know very much about baking. “I know we have two, but I can’t find the other one.”

“No, ma’am,” he said, putting down his spatula, which was dripping bacon grease, and turning to face her. “You know I don’t mess with your stuff. What’s yours in this kitchen is yours.”

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Maureen thought for a minute, trying to remember if she had put the pan somewhere else for some reason. Levon was right. He didn't mess with her kitchen stuff, and she didn't mess with his, an unwritten rule that they had, which had served them well in the two years that they had been sharing a morning shift.

"I'll just have to run home in a bit and get mine," she said, giving up her search in frustration. By 9:30, Maureen had made and frosted two layer cakes and had a lemon meringue pie cooling on a rack. She had chopped Milky Way bars into bite-sized pieces, which would go into one cheesecake, and had food processed Oreos for the other one. "Okay, I'm going to grab that pan. Be back in a couple of minutes."

When she walked into her own kitchen, she thought she heard voices. Then she noticed Michael's shoes, the ones she called his big-boy lawyer shoes, next to the door. He was due in Pittsburgh later that day to take a deposition for an upcoming trial. She was surprised he hadn't left yet since it took about three hours to drive to the city. Why was he still home? Was his appointment later in the day? If so, why did he say he'd be home for dinner when he wouldn't be able to drive back home in time? Did she have the wrong date? Or, had he just slept in and was getting a late start?

For some reason that she would never be able to explain later, she didn't call out his name or announce her presence. Instead, she went looking for him. And she found him. And her. There they were. Naked. Writhing. Sweating. Maureen stopped cold in the doorway to their bedroom, her feet refusing to move forward or back. "Oh!" she shrieked, her hand quickly covering her mouth as if she could physically hold back a scream while she tried to make sense of what she was seeing.

One second, she was just stopping home to grab a cake pan and then expecting to continue on with what she thought was a pretty good life. The next second—or was it two or six?—she was staring at her husband, who, she now realized, was an adulterer, a liar and someone who wasn't even smart enough to have his affair in a hotel like other cheating liars.

It happened so fast that she could remember only a few details about the woman lying beneath Michael. She was blond, though Maureen didn't know if she was a bottle blond (she secretly hoped so) or a natural blond. She was white, and she was what her grand

mother, Lucy, would call “generous of bosom.” That was it. Maureen was lucky she would never have to take part in a police lineup like all those witnesses on *Law and Order* because she’d never be able to identify her. “I’m sorry, Detective Benson,” Maureen would say after looking at a line-up of naked, like-bodied blondes. “I really didn’t get a good look at her.” Olivia Benson from the SVU squad would try to hide her disappointing frown, as she did with so many other ineffective witnesses, and would lead Maureen out of the lineup room.

In the moment it took for Michael to turn his head and see her, Maureen was already running down the stairs, a voice in her head screaming “Run. Run! RUN!” Somehow she managed to make it down the stairs without tripping even though her son, Angus, had left something—a baseball glove? his backpack? a crumpled up sweatshirt?—on one of the stairs. Fortunately, she had left her purse in the car and still had her car keys in her hand, so she didn’t have to stop. She just ran, out the door and into her car. She sped out of the driveway, miraculously missing the yellow tulips she and Angus had planted last spring that now lined the edge of the driveway.

She didn’t hear Michael as he ran after her, shouting, “Wait! Maureen, wait!” She didn’t hear her car’s tires as they squealed on their concrete driveway. She didn’t hear Mrs. Jacobus’ two Corgis barking their little Welsh heads off next door. All she heard was that voice in her head screaming, “Run!”



# KNIGHTS OF THE ROUNDTABLE CLUBHOUSE

## MIDDLE GRADE FICTION

### CHAPTER 1

#### A KING, A SUPERHERO, AND A WRESTLER

For once, I was actually happy about going back to school. Christmas just wasn't the same this year without Mom.

I felt the cracked blue-green bus seat sink down. I looked over and saw the dark brown, curly hair and hazel eyes of my best friend Wayne Johnson. Wayne always had this gleam in his eyes and crooked grin on his face that made him look like he was up to no good, which was usually true.

"Hey Artie! How was your Christmas? Did you get that NERF gun you asked for, the one with 144 rounds?"

"Nah, but it's okay," I shrugged. "My dad did buy me some refills for my eighteen-round NERF Blaster though."

"Ole Faithful huh?" Wayne smirked. I swear that kid had the whitest teeth in the world. I almost wondered if he mixed bleach into his toothpaste.

I didn't admit to him how hard it had been, my first Christmas without Mom. We didn't go out and cut a tree this year. Dad bought an artificial one. We would have never had an artificial tree when Mom was alive. She had always insisted on getting a real tree for Christmas, no matter how many needles it shed onto the carpet or how scraggly it was. Mom claimed that artificial trees could never compare to the real thing and that she loved the way pine smelled. Pain began to swell up in my chest and I shook the thought out of my head.

"Well, what about you?" I asked Wayne. "Did you get it for Christmas?"

We had both asked for the same NERF gun for Christmas. We had imagined ourselves taking over the world, aka the park playground, with those guns. Not that Wayne needed a 144-round NERF gun to take down the playground bullies. He'd been going to martial arts classes with his dad since he was five. His wall of trophies at home showed the scary truth about his major butt-kicking skills.

"No," Wayne pouted, folding his arms and slouching in the seat.

“You know my mom doesn’t believe in spending ridiculous amounts of money on cool, awesome toys.”

“Buuuuut?” I knew he was hiding something from the mischievous look in his eyes.

“But my dad bought us all tickets to go to the Pittsburgh Pirates’ first home game!”

“All right! Score!” I cried, jumping up and giving Wayne a high five.

“ARTIE! SIT DOWN!” shouted the bus driver as her reflection glared back at me in the rearview mirror.

I quickly sat back down. I could feel the tips of my ears burning red with embarrassment. But I didn’t care. We were going to a Pirates game.



Sixth grade homeroom was really busy when we got there. Everyone was rushing around, talking to friends who they hadn’t seen since break, bragging about the toys they got or the trips they had gone on. The floor of the classroom was so shiny with new coats of wax, you could see your face in it. Our teacher, Mr. Brown, was leaning back in his desk chair with his feet up, surveying the classroom like a king looking over his royal subjects. Another reason to be glad that Christmas was over: Mr. Brown wouldn’t be wearing any more of his awful, tacky festive ties.

Wayne and I took our seats next to the windows that gave us a great view of the baseball field. Wayne turned around in his chair so that he was facing me and popped a piece of spearmint gum into his mouth.

“So, I wonder what Mr. Brown picked for our class field trip this year,” he said.

I had almost forgotten. Mr. Brown had told us that he was going to reveal our class trip when we got back from Christmas break.

“Well nothing can be worse than the trip to the landfill in third grade,” I remarked, scrunching up my nose as I remembered the ungodly smell of decomposing garbage. Wayne made a gagging noise.

“Ugh, yeah. When I complained to old Mrs. Hartle that she had broken the sniffer in my nose on that trip, she made me scrub out the

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cafeteria garbage cans for a week.”

“Old Mrs. Hartle had quite a sense of humor.”

“Yeah, if you call slave labor funny.”

“But you looked so ridiculous with that clothespin over your nose. And the pink hairnet was a very stylish choice.”

“Well, I’m such a stud, I look good in anything.” He smirked, tossing back his curly hair.

The bell rang, and we all stood up and said the Pledge of Allegiance and proceeded to listen to the announcements.

I looked at the empty seat next to me. “Looks like Peter is going to be late again.”

Peter Davidson was my other best friend and he was *always* late. Peter lived on a farm way outside of town, down a dusty dirt road and off the bus routes, so a special school van had to pick him up and it never seemed to get to the school on time.

A worried look crossed Wayne’s face. “I hope Peter won’t be late as often as he was last year. He might not be allowed to play baseball this year if he’s tardy one too many times. Without him pitching, we can kiss any chance of winning goodbye.”

“Not even with your insane batting skills?”

“Well, as awesome as I am—”

“And so humble, too.”

“—all the other teams have three or four guys who are just as good, and we are going to need Peter to strike them out. And even if Peter wasn’t that great of a pitcher, he still looks really scary when he steps off that bus on away games. Ah, speak of the devil.”

I followed Wayne’s gaze to the doorway and there was Peter, his five-foot-ten frame bent over as he gasped for air. There was still snow in his wavy dark hair.

Peter was a giant, towering over everyone in the class. He had always been big, but this past year he had gone through an unbelievable growth spurt. Wayne’s theory was that Peter had been sprinkling Miracle Grow into his morning cereal.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Brown,” Peter gasped, trying to catch his breath. “The van was late again.”

“It’s all right, Peter,” Mr. Brown replied. “Hang up your things and take your seat.”



“Yes, sir,” Peter said sheepishly and walked over to his designated coat hanger, his Carhartt boots thumping across the floor tracking a mixture of snow and mud.

Mr. Brown moved around to the front of his desk.

“Well, I hope everyone had a wonderful Christmas break and that you are all ready to put your noses back to the grindstone,” he declared as Peter took his seat next to me. The whole class let out a groan in response.

Wayne took the momentary distraction to turn around in his seat and greet Peter.

“Hey man, I see you got another new plaid shirt to add to your growing collection,” Wayne teased.

“Well you know, in order to convince everyone I’m not Superman, I need as many plaid shirts as I can get to make myself a convincing farm boy. Isn’t that right, Artie?” Peter winked at me.

You see, my theory on Peter is that he’s really Superman and that’s why he’s so big. I mean, come on. This guy has black hair, blue eyes, can lift more weight than most of the eighth graders, and works on a farm. Hello! He’s totally Clark Kent.

Mr. Brown loudly cleared his throat, “Do you gentlemen in the back have something to say?”

“No, Mr. Brown,” I mumbled and Wayne turned back around in his seat.

“All right then,” Mr. Brown continued, “before we start back into our history class, I have an announcement to make. Now, I know you are all wondering about this year’s class trip and I have decided that during the last week of school, we will go to the Pennsylvania Medieval Festival.”

The room immediately broke into a low buzzing hum of excited students, but I felt my heart drop down to my stomach.

Peter looked over at me.

“Artie, didn’t you go there last year with your—”

“Yeah, my mom,” I said quietly, but I didn’t want my friends feeling sorry for me, so I tried to cheer up. “But hey,” I continued, trying to smile, “a medieval festival is much better than a field trip to the landfill, huh, Wayne?”

“Maybe we’ll save a damsel in distress,” Wayne said, curling the tips of his invisible mustache.

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“And eat giant turkey legs with our hands,” Peter said, smacking his lips together.

“And we’ll get to see knights jousting,” I exclaimed, thrusting my fist forward as if to unhorse a knight.

Mr. Brown called for order.

“All right, all right, settle down. Yes, I know it’s all very exciting. Now, we will be learning about medieval times in history as well as in reading. Your art teacher has also agreed to include some medieval themed art projects. But in order for you to go on this trip, some work will be required. Think of it as building character.”

Wayne sighed and rolled his eyes. “Here it comes.”

Mr. Brown shot a glance over towards Wayne but didn’t say anything. He began to slowly walk around the room, hands behind his back.

“Each student is required to do at least ten hours of community service in order to go on this trip. You will all be working with a group of four or five other students in the class to complete your hours. The group with the most community service hours will be knighted by the king and queen at the festival for their good deeds and become honorary Knights of the Roundtable.”

The room burst into an uproar and Mr. Brown had to almost shout to finish. “Now I want you all to divide into groups and spend the next ten minutes discussing ideas for your community service.”

“Well, we’re going to need one more person,” Peter pointed out. “Mr. Brown said groups of at least four.”

“Jenny,” I quickly declared, gazing at the back of her beautiful auburn head. I must have said it louder than I realized because she turned around and looked right at me.

I said it a little louder. “Jenny.” I began to wave my hand in the air. She started to walk toward us.

“Jenny?” Wayne asked in disbelief. “Artie, you want the girl you’ve had a crush on since kindergarten in our group?”

“Aw, leave him alone, Wayne,” Peter said, elbowing Wayne in the arm. “Besides, Jenny’s cool.”

We all got kind of quiet when Jenny came over. She was wearing her *Keep Calm and Use the Force* T-shirt with a new Darth Vader watch that she must have gotten for Christmas.

Reasons number one and two why Jenny Weaver is cool: She is a huge *Star Wars* fan and her T-shirts are awesome.

“Well, if it isn’t King Arthur himself; farm boy, Clark Kent; and Dwayne, ‘The Rock’ wannabe, Johnson.”

Reason number three why Jenny Weaver is cool: she knows guy stuff like wrestling and comic book heroes. Which leads to reason number four why Jenny Weaver is cool: her parents own a comic book store.

Wayne scowled and crossed his arms.

“Hey, if I’ve said it once, I’ve said it a thousand times, I was not named after ‘The Rock,’” he whined.

“Search your feelings,” she said, waving her hand mysteriously over Wayne. “You know it to be true.”

Reason number five why Jenny Weaver is cool: she quotes the *Star Wars* movies—a lot.

“Umm, Jenny,” I said nervously, looking at my hands and picking nonexistent dirt from under my nails. “We were wondering if you’d want to be in our group. We’re one person short.”

“Yeah, you know, come to the dark side—we have cookies,” Peter chimed in.

Jenny raised an eyebrow at him. “Really? You have cookies?”

“Well, not right now.” Peter blushed. Who knew the big guy was so bashful? “But I could bring some whenever we meet for community service hours. My mom loves to bake.”

She thought about it for a bit, tilting her head to the side like a dog. I caught the smell of her lotion: warm vanilla and nutmeg, reminding me of the snickerdoodles my mom used to make. I felt the pain in my chest flutter again, but I pushed it down.

“It’s a deal, but only if you let Leroy into the group, too,” she said, glancing over her shoulder.

I had been so focused on Jenny, or rather so focused on *not* looking at Jenny, that I hadn’t noticed the brown, unruly hair, taped glasses, braces, and faded shirt that was Leroy standing behind her.

Leroy gave a small wave and managed to get out a shaky “Hi.”

Oh no, I silently groaned, not Leroy. This kid was terrible at everything. Well, maybe I shouldn’t say everything. He did get really good grades. But he couldn’t play any sports, he was a complete

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klutz, and he even had problems sharpening his pencil. On top of that, he was terribly shy, but Jenny had always had a soft spot for him that I never really understood. But there was no way I was saying no to her.

“Deal,” I said, shaking Jenny’s hand. It was soft from her lotion.

I am never washing this hand again, I thought. Well—maybe for like the rest of the day.

“And now the circle is complete,” she remarked, smiling at me. I thought my legs were going to melt into the floor.

Oh Jenny, let me be the Han Solo to your Princess Leia.



## CHAPTER 3

Eyes bored into Bäol from every direction as he followed Lunas about the marketplace, mutterings of “tainted blood” filling his ears. A shoulder roughly crashed into Bäol and he grit his teeth, half-tempted to rip the man’s arm off. “Why didn’t you bring Marcus?” Bäol growled, staring down an old, pig-faced woman. “You know the Anaarians don’t like half-bloods.”

Lunas kept walking, calling back over his shoulder, “Because Marcus is a godsdamned fool. Now stop questioning me and come on.” Bäol threw up his hands and barged through a scowling family, knocking aside both mother and father as well as children. *To hell with the Anaarians.*

As usual, the markets of Lankar were bustling. Hundreds of stalls and carts had been erected or parked in the town square, bringing with them a mix of local and exotic wares. Fatty cuts of meat from the cold, rainy lands of Lythek hung alongside juicy, tender cuts from beasts found on Anaarian soil. Medicinal herbs found only on the frozen isles of the Wei Lands brushed leaves with succulent fruits found in nearby jungles. Fine silks from the island nation of Maera blew about in the warm morning breeze, flirting with domestic cloth and leather. All around, the realm converged as people of all races and standings crossed paths and did business.

“Quit standing around,” Lunas shouted, cuffing Bäol upside the head. “We have matters to tend to.” Biting his tongue, Bäol followed Lunas down a side street, the dagger tucked away inside his tunic suddenly heavy against his flesh. Only several feet removed from the lively marketplace, the world that the pair traversed seemed ancient, foreign even. Old, wooden buildings towered up six, sometimes seven stories, their upper levels an ocean of windows and curious eyes. Signs creaked in the wind, calling out to would-be shoppers and inviting them within. Stopping in front of a quaint shop whose sign read *jeweler*, Lunas glared at Bäol, his voice dangerous. “Let me make this clear. You don’t lay a finger on Hans unless I say so, understand?” Bäol nodded. “Good, now let’s go.”

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Lunas pushed the door open and Bäol followed him inside. The shop was simple yet elegant. Locked rosewood cases lined the walls and stood in rows, housing a collection of precious stones and jewelry atop suede bedding. A counter sat near the back wall, empty aside from two cases filled with rings and small gems. “Coming,” a rough voice called out from the back. Footsteps echoed throughout the shop and a short, bearish man appeared. “Shit.”

“Now, now, Hans, that’s no way to greet an old friend,” Lunas chided, waltzing over to the counter. His hands brushed over one of the cases and he flicked the glass. “After all, we just came to see how business was going.”

Hans narrowed his eyes and stroked his thick, braided beard. “Slow.” He was nervous, Bäol could tell by the way the man’s eyes shot back and forth between him and his master.

“Should I take that to mean you don’t have my money?”

“Not yet,” Hans admitted, raising his hands in defense. “But if you give me just a little—”

A case exploded against the wall, sending shards of glass and wood in every direction amid a cascade of silver and gold. “One month.” Lunas’s jowl shook with rage as his voice continued to rise, gradually filling up the shop and spilling out onto the streets where passersby quickened their pace. “I told you one fucking month, you hairy ape. I want my gold, and I want it now.”

Beads of sweat began to form on Hans’s brow, his hands a jittery mess. “I can get you your money—and more, I just need time.”

“Time is up, Hans.” A deranged smile crossed Lunas’s lips. “Now it’s time to pay.” Bäol’s master gave him a nod. Time to go to work.

Bones loosened and cracked as Bäol rolled his neck and bore down on Hans. The man was short, shorter than most Na’Wei, but like his Northern brethren, his furry frame was packed with muscle. As befitting the bears of the north, though, the man was a coward, timidly backing away as Bäol came closer. He almost felt bad.

Hans tipped a case into Bäol’s path and tried to dash into the back of the shop. With ease, Bäol hopped the case and caught the man by the scruff of his neck. The sound of steel scraping against steel filled Bäol’s ears and he jumped back as a dagger tore through his tunic. The blade trembled unnaturally in Hans’s hand and Bäol

swatted it aside, catching a wad of spit in his face. Footsteps shuffled about the floorboards and someone ran out of the room. Hans was a dead man.

Wiping the spit from his face, Bäol stormed into the back and down a rickety flight of stairs. A shoddy door swung shut with a bang as he neared the bottom of the creaking stairs.

Wood splintered as Bäol crashed through the door and into a dark, dank basement. Across the room another door flew open, flooding the basement with light as Hans ran out into the alley. Patience gone, Bäol tore off and burst out into the hot afternoon sun. Hans was directly in front of him, awkwardly lumbering down the tight alleyway, trying to escape. Digging his heels into the dirt, Bäol took off, running his prey down like a starved beast.

Rage overtook Bäol as he closed the gap and pounced on Hans, bringing the chase to a crashing halt. Eyes wide with fury, Bäol flipped Hans over and raised his fist. The terrified shopkeeper cried out as the first blow fell.

“Enough.” Lunas’s voice was a faint whisper in Bäol’s ears. The blows continued to fall, staining the dirt crimson. “I said enough.” A hand grabbed at Bäol and he spun, tossing Lunas aside like a helpless child. Lunas’s face turned a deep shade of red as he climbed to his feet, screaming. “You—you insignificant little shit. I’ll have you whipped till your back has been peeled of its flesh for this.”

Shoulders rising and falling heavily with each breath, Bäol stared at Lunas, almost daring his master to strike him. Slowly, his rage began to subside and he came to his senses. Looking down, Bäol realized he was covered in blood, his once white tunic now a grisly affair.

A weak voice called out and Bäol looked down at Hans. The man’s face was a battered, bloody mess. His nose was broken, bending unnaturally to the side. His eyes were swollen, and a collection of gruesome bruises painted his face a sickening blue and purple. “I’ll pay—I’ll pay whatever you want, just don’t kill me.”

Lunas sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “I’ll give you two more weeks.” Bäol’s master shook his head and shot him a venomous glance. “At the original price, due to—unfortunate circumstances.”

“Thank you,” Hans whimpered. Bäol walked over and hauled the

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man to his feet, then turned and stalked away. He was going to pay for what had happened, and dearly.



The air snapped, the crack of leather resounding about the courtyard. A forced, pained breath fell from Bäol's mouth as the whip bit into his flesh. He counted twenty lashes.

Off to the right, a woman emptied the contents of her stomach onto the cobbles. In typical Astros fashion, Lunas had forced the other slaves to watch as Bäol's back was torn to pieces. For some of the younger slaves, the display was a harrowing experience, a show of power and brutality they had not yet seen. For the elders, the spectacle was nothing new, merely a reminder that there was no hope to be found within the walls of the Astros household.

Bäol tensed as the air once more cracked. Twenty-one. As the wind picked up, fluttering across Bäol's ravaged flesh like razors, he inhaled sharply. The wound in his side had reopened, the fresh scab cracking and peeling away. Twenty-two. A slave tried to retreat, only to be cut off by one of the guards. Voices raised. Someone cried out in pain, struck down. Twenty-three. Bäol's eyes found Lunas. The pathetic man stood up on his balcony, watching with a straight face and a glass of wine. Twenty-four. Bäol let his eyes sink into his master, his gaze never wandering, never breaking. Twenty-five. Lunas looked away and disappeared inside. Bäol spat, disgusted.

There was a slight click as the shackles about Bäol's wrists fell free, causing him to slump onto his hands and knees. Strong, rough hands slipped around his arms and tried to carry him inside. "Take your hands off me," Bäol growled, ripping himself free. Every muscle in his body begged him to quit, urged him to submit to being dragged to his bed like a beaten pup. He refused, digging deep and rising to his feet. Vaguely aware of the blood running down his back and side, he stumbled out of the courtyard and through the halls of the manor, seeking his quarters.

As Bäol worked his way to the stairs, turning down one hallway after the next, the other slaves watched him from the corners of their eyes. Bäol fumed. He could see the smiles, hear the laughter, pick up



the whispers. To the other slaves, he was an outsider, a filthy half-blood mutt the master had taken a liking to for some unfathomable reason. Bäol hated them almost as much as the Anaarians.

Pain shot up Bäol's spine as he climbed the first step, his legs threatening to fail him. The guards escorting him stepped in to aid his ascent only to be pushed away. Bäol didn't need their help. He didn't need anyone's help.

Cresting the stairs, Bäol placed his hand against the wall and pressed on. The stone was coarse, scratching roughly into the tips of his fingers, yet cool and soothing. Unlike the manor's first floor, where "civilized men and women socialized," the second floor was a collection of bedrooms, both modest and grand, and a large study.

Bäol stopped in front of a plain wooden door and reached for the handle. "Leave," he said, entering the room. Footsteps receded as Bäol shut the door and nearly collapsed to the floor. Legs beginning to fail him, he shuffled over to a small straw bed and sat down.

It was a meager room, furnished only with a chest near the foot of the bed and a stand near its head. But unlike the foul slave quarters tucked away on the first floor, it was all Bäol's. There were no crowded mats of straw to pack onto, no shared chamber pot that flooded nightly, no need to fight over scraps of food and drink like rabid dogs. There was only Bäol.

A second door leading to Lunas's chambers opened, and Bäol's master stepped in. Lunas's face was flushed, his eyelids heavy, his brow dotted with sweat. He was drunk.

"Why do you defy me?" Lunas asked, leaning heavily against the frame. A cup fell from the man's hand, clanging loudly as it struck the floor. Wine spilled out and raced through the cracks in the stone, soaking into the mortar. "Have I not been fair? Have I not given you a life no one else would have?"

"And what life is that, Lunas?" Bäol's face grew hot, his temper beginning to flare. The thought was preposterous. Half-bloods didn't live; they existed.

Lunas reeled back as if he'd been slapped. "One where you draw breath. You of all people should understand the gift—"

Harsh, humorless laughter echoed about the room as Bäol cut his master off. "From the moment I was born, I was shackled, all because

## *NOVEL EXCERPT*

some fucking priest labeled me a disgrace to the gods. If you had truly wanted to give me a gift, you would have tossed me into the river and watched my infant corpse sink to the bottom.”

Lunas pressed thick, sausage-like fingers into his temple and swayed back and forth. “Life is a gift–slave.” The man’s demeanor had turned sour, an ugly scowl plastered onto his face. “You’d do well to remember that the next time you challenge me. I can take life just as easy as I can give it.” The door slammed shut, scarcely muffling Lunas’s heavy footsteps.

The room had become dark. The sun had finally set, warping the sky into an endless black chasm. From a dirty window above his bed, Bäol could see nothing but a dark, blank slate. No moon, no stars, nothing. There was no light, no hope, present in the sky, only a suffocating, black emptiness. Bäol allowed himself a half-hearted smile. He always had felt more at home in darkness.



# FROM THE FILES OF ROGER AND DOOF: THE CASE OF MR. BAXTER

MIDDLE GRADE FICTION  
3RD PLACE PROSE

## CHAPTER 1

### ODD BEHAVIOR

I raced out my front door and made a bee-line for my red and blue Mongoose bicycle (the rewards of my latest straight “A” report card). I unlocked my chain, jumped on the bike, and sped off.

It was the first full day of summer break. No school for like four months!

Houses became a blur. The cool morning air chilled my skin.

I pedaled faster.

“Slow down, son. You’re gonna hit a tree or something,” someone called.

“No time to slow down,” I mumbled, lowering my head and dodging Mr. Whitesocks, an old tiger cat that thought he owned the streets.

I pedaled past the grocery store, the video store, and the post office. I rounded a bend in the road, dodged another kamikaze cat, and just missed hitting a mailbox. A horn screeched as I swerved out of the way of a car.

Then, there it was to my right—Nate’s Nerd Nest. The home of the latest in everything superhero. I hopped off my bike, letting it crash to the pavement.

The worn-out and faded lettering on the awning welcomed me.

Na e’ er N st.

The broken-out windows on the door were covered up only by plastic. In fact, had it not been for the green neon sign that read: *We are open even on the Blackest Day and the Darkest Night*, the average citizen might have thought the place had been deserted and left to rot—a barren wasteland, long since abandoned. But no Hulk could smash closed the doors of the Nest.

I rubbed the sweat from my brow as I walked through the front

## NOVEL EXCERPT

door. “What’s up, Nate dawg? Is Doof here? I didn’t see his bike out front.”

Nate stopped the rapid movement of his thumbs, looked up from his PSP, and gave me his familiar toothy grin. Chip remnants peppered Nate’s beard and had left the top of his Justice League T-shirt stained orange. I smiled back at his Hagrid-like appearance. Nate had always been the Hagrid to my Harry Potter (except he didn’t have any pets named Buckbeak and I didn’t have a “pity me, both my parents were killed when I was a baby” thing going on). Unfortunately, however, we were both muggles.

“Hey, little buddy, just chillin’ in my fortress awaiting your arrival. As for Doof, haven’t seen the big guy today.”

At that precise moment, an out-of-breath ten-year-old crashed through the front door and staggered inside, bent over, puffing on an inhaler. “I (breath) made (cough) it (indistinguishable), Roger.” The next sound was that of a collapsing, overweight Doof hitting the floor.

“Doof. Doof. DOOF!” I dashed over to my fallen comrade’s side.

Slowly, Doof opened his eyes. “Well, that was awesome,” he said, rubbing sweat off his freckled forehead.

“Geez, Doof. That’s like the third time this week. Maybe you need a better inhaler or something.”

Doof had been overweight ever since I’d met him in kindergarten. He always played by himself. He didn’t really have any friends, but then again neither did I. One day we’d both brought in the same Batman action figure. We had been inseparable ever since.

“Naw, Rog. It just takes a lot out of me to be this sexy,” Doof replied, pushing himself up to his feet. Then he picked up his inhaler from where it had fallen on the floor, shook it, and breathed in a shot. “Aww, sweet, magical air.”

Suddenly, I remembered the reason we had commenced at Nate’s in the first place.

“Open it!” I blurted out, turning my attention away from Doof and back to Nate.

It was June thirtieth, which meant a new shipment of comic books and baseball cards. There was nothing quite like the smell of a freshly unwrapped *Fantastic Four* comic book or a spanking new

Josh Hamilton baseball card. I lived for the end of the month. Every other day I merely survived.

Nate's gaze darted between Doof and I before finally settling on me. "Did he almost just die? Should we call an ambulance?"

"What? No." I waved the suggestion off. "That's just Doof being Doof."

"It's true," Doof added. "Mom says it's all part of my charm." He beamed up at Nate and puffed out his chest. His pride vanished as he broke out into another coughing fit.

"One time my mom said I had charm." Nate paused, seemingly lost in thought, then shook his head before adding, "Anyway broskis, came in about an hour ago." As he spoke, he retrieved two large boxes from behind the desk. "The wait nearly kills me every time."

Doof and I moved behind the counter, taking our normal positions atop matching step stools. Nate pulled open the drawer below his computer; Heath Ledger's Joker stared out at us from the screen-saver.

Then Nate was running a box cutter through the tape, splitting it down the middle. The flaps shot up in the air; the prizes inside seemed eager to be removed. The three of us took deep breaths as Nate reached his hand in slowly, his fingers moving deeper into the box. *This is it*. This is the reason I saved my ten-dollar allowance every week.

Suddenly, the sound of an opening door cut through the anticipation.

"Seriously, you pick the worst possible time to—" Nate caught himself before he finished his sentence.

I recognized him immediately. The top of his head was bald with a few little brown spots dabbed here and there. His gray hair went down to his shoulders and looked like it hadn't been combed. Ever.

Mr. Baxter.

Mr. Baxter was the neighborhood's "mysterious guy down the street." He never left his house. No one really knew why. I once heard my mom say it had something to do with his parents dying when he was younger. I had asked her what happened, but she told me it wasn't any of my concern. Other than that, all I ever knew about him was that he used to be a teacher before his parents died.

NOVEL EXCERPT

Kids at school liked to say that Mr. Baxter had killed his parents. I didn't know if I really believed that. It was probably just kids being kids—right?

I had never seen him in Nate's before. Actually, I had never seen him anywhere. But there he stood, staring at us three perplexed dudes behind the counter.

I looked away.

When I looked back up, he was at the counter. Hands resting on the glass.

Then he spoke.

"I require comic books and lots of them."

I stole a glance to my right and saw Doof digging into his pocket again, chest heaving.

"Um, yes. Well, take a look and grab what you want," Nate forced out with as much courage as I think he could.

The gray-haired man turned his attention to Nate. The old-person lines on his face did not move, his brown eyes showed no emotion, and his thin lips barely moved as he replied, "Thank you."

We watched him as he scooped up comic after comic. Troubled glances passed among us three nerds huddled behind the counter. "Isn't he too old to be reading comics?" Doof whispered as Mr. Baxter added three more comics to the pile tucked under his arm.

I didn't answer. What was Mr. Baxter doing out of his house? He never came out. It didn't make any sense.

Mr. Baxter turned away from the comics and headed toward the counter. He dropped them on the counter and stared at us. *This guy used to be a teacher? Jeepers!* "Well," he said after a moment of silence. "How many dollars do I owe you?"

"How many dol-well, um, they are five apiece. It looks like you have about thirty-ish. So I guess it's gonna be—about—one hundred fifty..."

"I only have five dollars in my possession."

I gulped silently.

Nate chuckled nervously.

Doof farted loudly.

Mr. Baxter simply turned and walked toward the door, leaving the comics spread out all over the counter.

As he rested his hand on the door latch, he turned back our way. “Thank you for your–time.” Then he was out the door and headed down the street.

We stood in silence, unable to speak. Then, out of nowhere, came the sound of a collapsing Doof once again hitting the floor.

“That boy really should go to the hospital,” Nate stated, peering down at Doof.

## CHAPTER 2

### FAMILY DINNER

First off, Dad was running late from work as usual. And second, this (as usual) caused Mom to mumble things under her breath like, “ungrateful” and “insensitive” as she rushed between the kitchen and dining room.

“Do you need help, Mom?”

I don’t know why I bothered asking; she never did. I just wanted to get my mind off of what had happened at Nate’s earlier in the day. Things were getting crazy and I should have known that family dinner wouldn’t help at all.

“Go wash your hands. I got it, honey,” she said, pushing her way past the kitchen door and leaving me standing by the table.

“Roger Dodger! Roger Dodger!”

I turned around. My little sister smiled up at me, Barbie doll in hand and mischief in her eyes. “Don’t call me that, Grace. I don’t like it.”

“Why not, Roger Dodger? Roger Dodger! Roger Dodger!”

I snatched the doll from her hands.

“Give it back, Roger. Give it back. I’m gonna scream if you don’t.” Her little arms stretched as far as they could toward her toy.

“Stop calling me that. Okay?” I didn’t like being mean, but she made it really hard sometimes.

“Yes, Roger. Pleeeease?”

“Promise?”

She nodded her head.

I handed over the doll just as Mom walked back into the room. Good timing.

*NOVEL EXCERPT*

“Where is he?” she mumbled, setting a basket of rolls in the middle of the table. “Always late. Doesn’t even call.”

The sound of the front door opening signaled Dad’s arrival. He strolled into the dining room and told my mom the same story he always did. “Sorry, honey. I got held up at the store again. The pool business is crazy this time of year. Floaties are selling like hotcakes. Couldn’t get away.”

Mom, eyes fixed on the table, simply said, “It’s okay, dear.”

My parents sat at either end of the table and I sat across from Grace.

“The turkey looks delicious, honey. You always do such a great job,” my father said with a smile.

“Thank you,” she replied pleasantly.

We ate in silence for the first several minutes. After I couldn’t take it anymore, I spoke. “So, Mr. Baxter came into Nate’s, and he was acting all weird.” I waited for a reply, but nothing came right away. “He sounded like a robot almost and—”

“Rog,” my father cut in, “I’ve heard that people have seen him around town, but making fun of him isn’t nice. Even if he is a bit-eccentric. I’m sure that he is just getting used to society again. After all, he hasn’t been out of his house in so long. How long has it been, honey?”

Mom set down her spoon and looked up at Dad. “Well, it’s been a good while, Gene. I can’t really say for sure.” She picked up her spoon again and resumed eating.

I looked from my mother to my father; he also had started eating again. “But, why would he just come out now? And why would he go to Nate’s? It just doesn’t—”

“Roger.” My name came from both ends of the table. It was my mother who continued speaking. “Roger, don’t worry about Mr. Baxter. It doesn’t concern you. Now eat your food.”

“Roger Dodger! Roger Dodger!”

“You eat too, Grace. Now,” my father scolded.

I looked around in disbelief.

What was going on?

I sat in silence for the rest of dinner. I needed to talk to Doof.



CHAPTER 3

COMIC BOOK HEIST/QUALITY TIME WITH DAD

I was unable to speak.

I read the newspaper headline over and over.

NATE'S NERD NEST ROBBED!! Shocked owner at a loss for words

I flew off of my bed and grabbed my bat-shaped walkie-talkie from its holder thingy on my dresser, smashed in the talk button, and screamed out the name of my trusted sidekick. "DOOOOOOF!"

Static.

Seconds ticked by. Sweat trickled around my eye and swam down my nose. *Why isn't he answering? He always answers right away. What is the probl-*

"Hey, Rog. Sorry, the Penguin was making me clean up my room," an out-of-breath Doof finally replied. "She kept watch over me as I cleaned. I wish she would swim back to Antarkc-Anttarti-The North Pole." The Penguin was Doof's name for his mom. Yeah. Anyway.

"Doof! Have you read the paper? Nate's was robbed last night!"

"-well, the Penguin did leave to go grocery shopping last night. Hmm."

"Seriously? Someone robbed Nate's! And it wasn't your crazy mother, Doof."

"Hey! Don't call my mom crazy! I mean, she is-obviously. But-wait? Are you serious?"

"You're so slow sometimes. Geez."

"I'm fat, Rog. Of course I'm slow." Then his voice finally turned serious. "Get over here! ASAP! We have to talk about this!"

My excitement quickly went away. "I have to ask my Dad. It's his day off."

My dad worked at his pool store all day during the week. Then, on Sundays, he went in to count everything and see what he needed. That usually turned into another full day. I'm not sure what he did in there—none of the pools actually had water in them. It wasn't like he was swimming. Maybe he just liked it there better than home.

"Roger, Roger."

I put my walkie-talkie back on its cradle and made my way out into the hall, down the steps, and behind the recliner my dad sat in every Saturday.

## NOVEL EXCERPT

“Dad?” I said as I watched him watching television.

A brief grunt and a slight movement of his head answered me.

“Dad, can I go over to Doof’s, please?”

He shifted in his chair but continued watching television. “I don’t think so, Roger. It’s my day off.”

Every Saturday, Mom and Grace went grocery shopping while Dad and I spent “quality time” watching old John Wayne movies in awkward silence. He didn’t even care if I watched the movie. I always ended up in my room before it was over anyway. I guess just being in the same house was a good enough bonding experience for him.

“I know, but did you read the paper? Nate’s was robbed. Doof and I—”

“I told you no, Roger. Now please be quiet so I—so we can finish watching this movie,” he answered, still not looking my way. “Plus, I don’t really like that place. You’re wasting your money on those comics books.”

“I like them.”

“Well, hopefully soon you’ll grow out of them.” When I didn’t reply, he finally looked my way. “Let’s just watch the movie.”

“Okay, Dad. Sorry.”

The slight grunt and head movement returned and I knew the discussion was over. If you could even call it that.

Ten minutes later, the movie was over and I was back up in my room. Nothing else was said in those ten minutes. My father shut off the television and went into his and Mom’s room. It was yet another wasted Saturday spent staring at my father and wishing he would ask me how I was doing. Ask me anything. But as usual, I went to my room disappointed. I don’t know if that was the case for all kids; however, I know that I felt enough disappointment for twenty kids.

I curled up in bed, shut my eyes, and fell asleep.

## CHAPTER 4

### A NICE THIEF?

“What happened to you last night? I yelled your name for like ever on my walkie but you didn’t answer.”

I sat up and rubbed that annoying tiredness out of my eyes. My Flash Gordon curtains did nothing to protect my eyes from the burning rays of the sun. After a moment, my eyes defeated the light and I was once again able to see.

I had fallen asleep without telling Doof that I wasn't allowed to come over. I guess I was just too sad to talk to him. He tried to hail me several times, but I didn't hear him. Because of that, I woke up to his goofy face staring down at me at 10 a.m.

"Sorry, Doof. I had to spend time with my dad," I said, peering under my blankets to make sure things wouldn't be awkward. *Pants. Good.*

"Sweet. What movie did he watch while completely ignoring you this time?" Doof always had such a way with his words.

"Some boring old movie with some guy that died like a billion years ago."

"Well that sounds like a blast, Rog. But hey, we gotta get down to Nate's right now!"

Suddenly, my senses heightened as the mission from the night before resurfaced. I pushed my blankets aside, crashed through my bedroom door, and stumbled down the stairs.

"That's fine. Don't wait for the overweight, asthmatic best friend. That's cool," Doof called from behind me.

Because it was a Sunday, I knew Nate's was going to be closed. What I wasn't expecting was the sign that was taped to the door.

Dearest Patrons,

Due to the recent infiltration by some dreg of society, some low-life thug, some horrendous villain of epic proportions—Given this heinous criminal's corrupt Because of what some ruinous and ravenous rapscaillon Oh, heck with it. CLOSED UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE.

Your Awesome Comic Book Dude,

Nate

Xoxo

Doof stood to my right. Our gazes met. Realization hit me—some Hulk had indeed smashed closed the doors of The Nest.

"Do you know what this means?" Doof's voice came out low and serious.

I nodded.

## NOVEL EXCERPT

“Hugs and kisses. That’s gross. Yuck,” Doof said with a scrunched up face. It kind of looked like he had eaten some of his mom’s lemon pie (which was basically just a bunch of lemons thrown into a crust).

“You’re ridiculous,” I said as I started pounding on the door.

I knew Nate was in there somewhere. He never left. Sure enough, after about a minute of knocking, a red-eyed, crazy-haired Nate peered out at us through the glass. Nate practically lived there. It was his nest after all. The lock clicked and Nate pushed open the door.

“Come on in, dudes, but try not to cry. It’s pretty bad,” Nate said through sniffles as he ran his hands through his tangled hair. “Never thought this could happen—” He didn’t get the rest out before the tears started.

It was bad. The *New Releases* rack was tipped over and several fallen superheroes looked up at me from the floor. The shelves along the wall to the right were collapsed in and all the comics were gone. However, the baseball card section on the left wall was untouched.

“Don’t touch nothing, pals. I’m not supposed to let anyone in here. Heck, I’m not even supposed to be in here.” Nate’s crying had slowed, but the hurt was still in his voice.

“Wow,” Doof said. “Somebody has anger issues. They punched a hole right through this shelf.”

I glanced over to where Doof stood. Indeed there was a great big hole in the wall where Batman comics had once stood vigil.

“Man. Yesterday was quite the—*dark knight*—wasn’t it,” Doof said with a grin. “Oh, and look! My head fits in the hole.”

“Doof! Come on,” I screamed. “This isn’t funny.”

His head stopped just short of the hole. “Yeah, sorry, Nate. Just trying to lighten the mood. It’s my specialty.”

Nate didn’t reply. Instead he took his seat behind the counter and buried his head in his hands.

I stepped up to the counter. “What do you think happened, Nate? I mean, who do you think would do this?” I spoke quietly. I didn’t really know why. It just felt right.

He looked up at me and for the first time, he looked old. Tired. Defeated. He shook his head. “I don’t know Roger. The police asked me and asked me, but I just don’t know. I mean, they didn’t take any money. The register was untouched. In fact, I think the person

may have even left me some money. Not much. Only five dollars.”

“What?” Doof and I said in disbelief.

Doof pressed further. “They left you five dollars? At least they were kind of thoughtful. I mean, leaving you some—” He paused, looking into my eyes, “I’m gonna stop talking now.”

I turned back to Nate. “What do you mean?”

Nate’s eyes shot over to the far end of the counter. I followed his gaze. Sure enough, there sat a wrinkled five-dollar bill. “Didn’t see it at first. Not until after the cops left. It’s weird, ain’t it?”

“Nate!” My excitement spiked. “You could have it fingerprinted! Then you would know who—”

Nate shook his head. “Don’t think I have to.”

“What?” Doof forgot about not talking.

Nate inhaled a deep breath before responding, “Who came in the other day? Asking about comic books and being all creepy and saying they only had five dollars?”

I knew instantly who he meant. There was only one guy he could be talking about.

“Oh my gosh! Somebody stole Mr. Baxter’s five dollars,” Doof cut through my thoughts. “Man, whoever this thief is has two crimes under their belt.”

“Doof!” I was getting impatient. “Nate thinks it was Mr. Baxter. Not somebody who stole five dollars from him.”

“Oh. I guess that makes more sense.”

“Yeah. I mean, jeepers. It couldn’t be a coincidence. If I learned one thing from all of these comic books, it’s that the creepy man that pops up out of nowhere is always the villain.” Nate walked around the counter and ushered us towards the door. “Okay, dudes. You better scoot off before somebody sees you in here.”

My mind raced with what I’d just heard. Then suddenly, a thought occurred to me. “Wait, are you going to tell the police?”

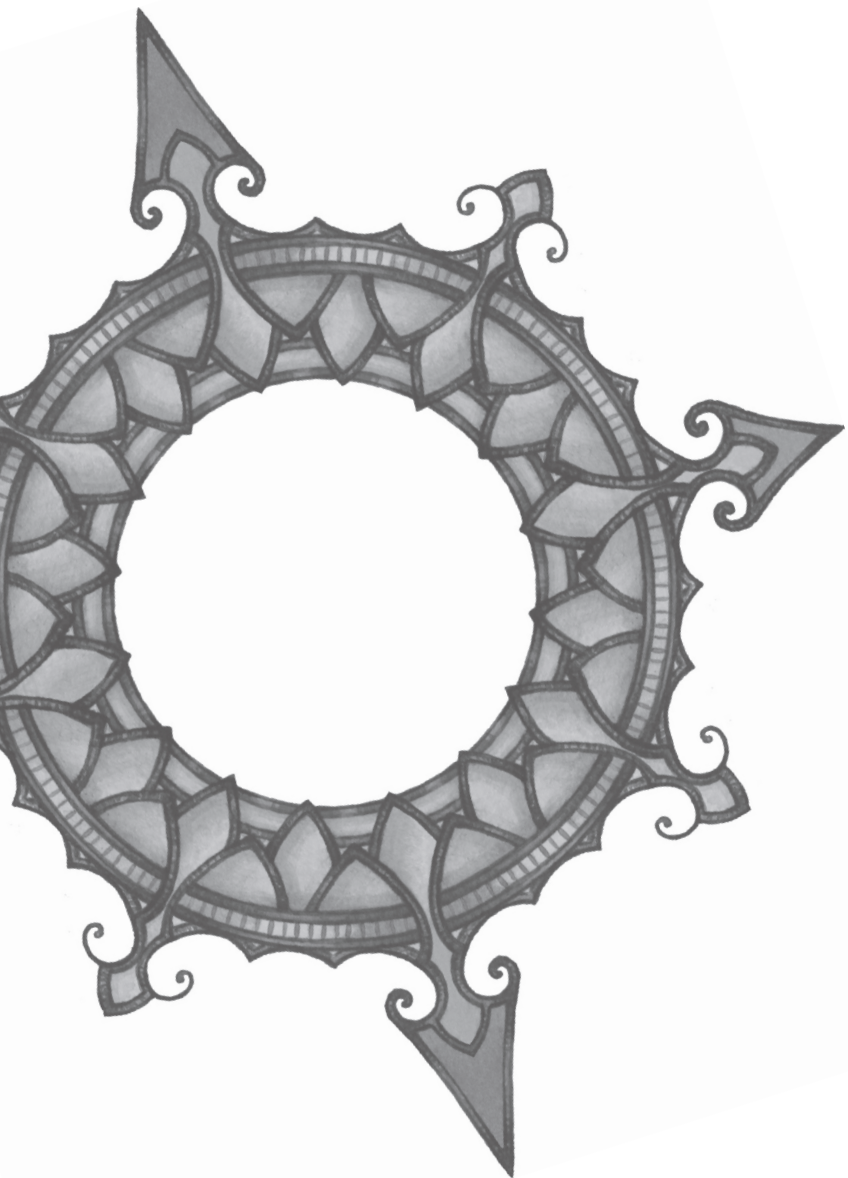
Nate chuckled. “I have no real evidence. There will be hundreds of fingerprints on that five. It wouldn’t mean anything to the cops. Unless they find something else, I may have to retreat back into my fortress. Sit and wait. Gather my strength. Then rise back up.” Turning to Doof, he said, “Now *that* would be a real *dark knight*.”

We were all silent for a moment before Doof spoke. “Seriously, Nate? This isn’t the time for jokes.”



*Portrait of Barbara Palvin*, Emmaline Drummond  
Graphite

# ILLUSTRATED CHILDREN'S BOOK



# THE ADVENTURES OF WINSTON, THE RUNAWAY KITTY

*WRITTEN BY AMANDA PELL*



*ILLUSTRATED BY SELESE HUTH*



Winston was bored.  
He did not want to be  
stuck inside.

He did not want to  
scratch the fancy  
red rug.



He did not want to play with his purple plush toy.

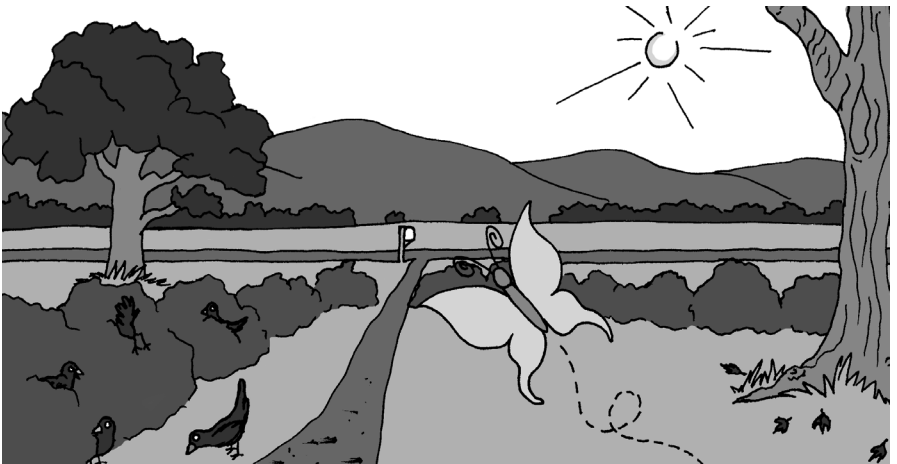
He did not want to nap on his fuzzy blue blanket.

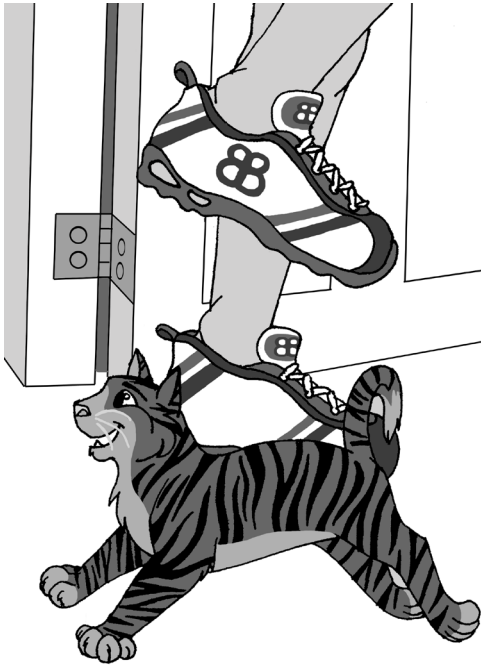
Winston did not want to sit by the window  
or look out the gray, gray screen.  
He wanted much, much more!

Winston dreamed of the great outdoors.  
What a wonderful world he could see!

Past the window there was green, green grass  
and yellowy yellow flowers.

There were tall, tall trees  
full of ruby red leaves.





There were short,  
short bushes  
full of bitty  
black birds.

There were pretty  
pink butterflies.  
They flew in  
squiggly lines.

Winston could not  
stand it anymore.  
He cried, “meow,  
meow, MEOW!”

Outside looked much  
more fun.  
He just *had* to  
go out!

Winston was a sneaky kitty.  
He came up with a plan.  
When his mom came home,  
he ran out the door.

“Come back, runaway kitty!”  
Winston’s mom cried.  
But Winston was much, much too busy.  
He was having fun outside.  
Winston ran through the green, green grass.  
He smelled the yellowy yellow flowers.

Winston scratched at the tall, tall trees,  
and danced under the ruby red leaves.

Winston prowled under the short, short bushes,  
and eyed the bitty black birds.



Winston chased the pretty pink butterflies.  
He ran around and around.

But then something terrible happened,  
something terrible indeed.

The sky turned gray.  
The bitty black birds flew away.

And all of a sudden,  
it started to rain!

Winston cried,  
“meow, meow, MEOW!”  
which meant,  
“LET ME IN, LET ME IN,  
LET ME IN!”

Winston ran to the door.  
He was sad, sad, sad.





But Winston's mom found him.  
She cried, "Oh, my Winston at last!"

Winston's mom picked him up.  
She carried him to the warm inside.  
She said, "I love you, my little runaway  
kitty."

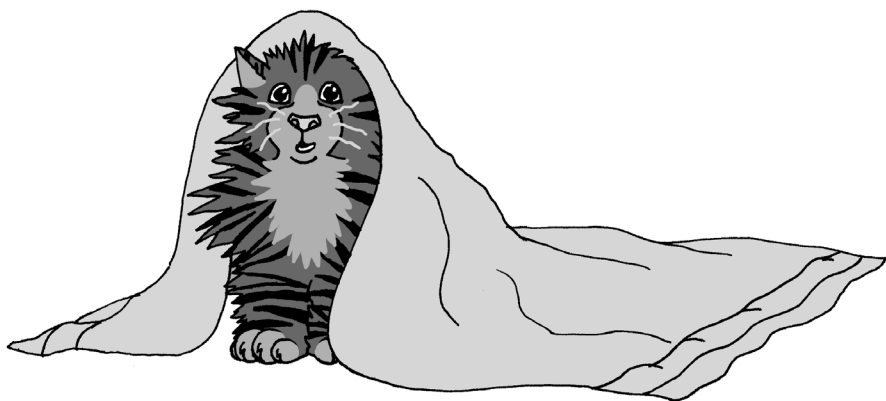
Winston purred, "*purrrrrrr, purrrrrrrr,  
purrrrrrrrrrr.*"

Winston's mom dried him with a soft white towel.  
She fluffed him all up.

Winston licked himself clean.  
He felt much, much better.

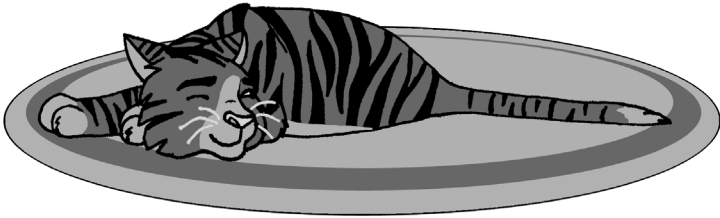
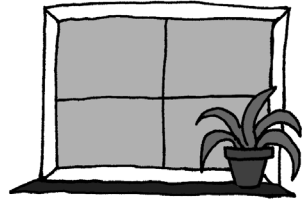
Winston scratched the fancy red rug.  
He dug his claws in deep.

He pounced on his purple plush toy,  
and he played and played.

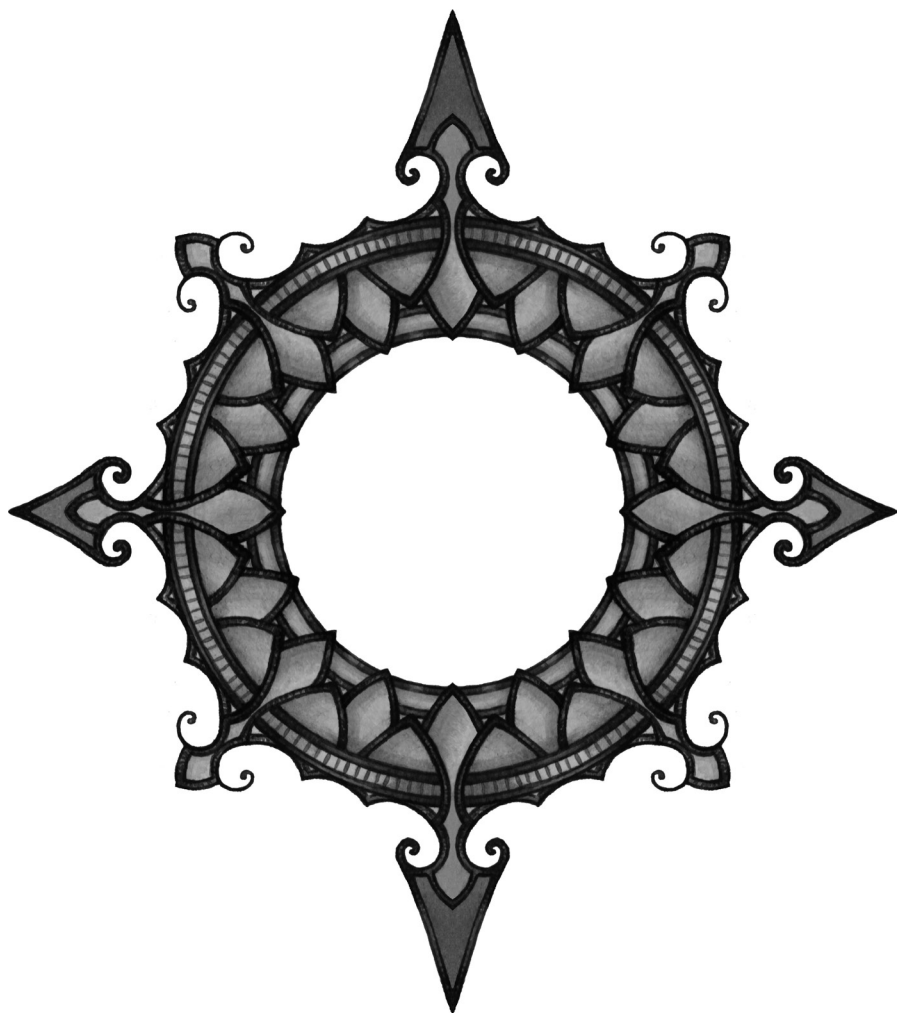


Finally, Winston curled up on his fuzzy blue blanket.  
He stretched and he yawned.  
He yawned and he stretched.  
He was much, much too tired to play.

Winston's mom shut the window.  
The rain hit the gray screen.  
Winston decided he'd had enough adventure—  
at least for that day.



# BIOS



*ABIGAIL ARNOLD* graduated from Pitt-Bradford in 2013 and is currently working on her MFA in writing. Although she has dabbled in a range of genres, her favorite is fiction. She is most inspired by the work of Sharon Creech, Lori Jakiela, David Sedaris, Robert Lewis Stevenson, Ernest Cline, and Lisa Scottoline. Abby spent last year serving as an AmeriCorps VISTA in Morgantown, West Virginia as the Community Outreach Coordinator for the Mountaineer Boys and Girls Club. She also taught a writing class for grades one through twelve as part of an educational programming for the Club, and has become good at explaining to her students why sudden deaths, comas, and alien abductions are not good endings for stories.

*KAYLA BEERS* is a Pitt-Bradford senior writing major and international studies minor from Campbell, NY. She has always had a passion for writing and began writing poetry when she was six years old. When she is not writing, she can often be found planning her next grand adventure, playing video games, walking the trails, or enjoying time spent with family and friends.

*PAT FRANTZ CERCONE* is Pitt-Bradford's executive director of communications and marketing. Over the years, she's been called many names, some of which could never be printed here, but one of her most favorite monikers is *writer*. She's been writing all of her life—except for those early years when she couldn't hold a pencil steady—and hopes that one day she'll be really, really good at it.

*EMMALINE DRUMMOND* is a thirteen-year-old artist from Bradford. She is currently in eighth grade at Fretz Middle School. She enjoys many art forms including sculpture and photography, but concentrates mostly on graphite drawing and recently has been working on a series of portraits. She is inspired by nature and loves to be outdoors taking photographs. She also enjoys singing and playing piano and guitar. At school she is active in choir, show choir, and sports, running cross-country and track.

*JASON FETTERMAN* is a recent graduate of the writing program at Pitt-Bradford. He is currently at work on several projects and hopes to “hit it big” sometime soon. While he enjoys writing in most

genres, ultimately, his goal is to become a screenwriter. He was the 2013 recipient of the Robert C. Laing Creative Arts Award in writing at Pitt-Bradford.

*HEATHER A. FITZSIMMONS* is a Bradford native and a USAF veteran as well as a 2014 graduate of Pitt-Bradford, where she earned her BA in writing with a minor in education. She suffers from wanderlust and enjoys all things associated with travel and the outdoors. She especially enjoys time spent with her husband Aaron, their ever-demanding Brittany Spaniel, Thor and their sinister Tuxedo cat Kitty-kitty Kittikins.

*KATI FRANKLIN* is a graduate of Pitt-Bradford with an interdisciplinary arts degree and was born and raised in Coudersport, PA. She is usually doodling or planning another project. When not drawing, she enjoys walking through the woods, among other outdoor activities.

*COURTNEY GORRELL* is a Pitt-Bradford graduate with a degree in writing and is originally from Gifford, PA. Her favorite genre is poetry, and she loves to spend her days listening to a variety of music genres, reading, and writing. Her time is usually spent laughing with her family and friends while having intellectual conversations with her four dogs and three cats.

*KRISTYN GRIEB* is a Pitt-Bradford writing graduate from Tampa, FL. She has been writing poetry since sixth grade and has since fallen in love with creative nonfiction. She loves to be outside, especially at the beach. Her favorite food is sushi (Philly Roll), and she can't imagine living anywhere but in the heart of the city.

*ANDREA GUNDLACH* grew up in Westfield, NY with a passion for sports and art. She is a health and physical education major minoring in art. She has played soccer since she was five and started pursuing art in high school. In her free time, she also likes to snowboard and wakeboard.

*KATERI HALL* is a Pitt-Bradford graduate and attends Stonecoast's Creative Writing MFA program. She is working on a memoir about



her struggles with addiction and mental illness as well as a book of poetry. She currently resides in Titusville, PA with her boyfriend, his son, and their three cats.

*AMY HUGHES* is an interdisciplinary art major with a penchant for writing. When she is not pecking at a keyboard, you can find her outside in the real world gardening, camping, or making up games with her son Leland.

*SELESE HUTH* is a senior from Tionesta, PA majoring in writing with a minor in digital graphic design. Selese has been a member of the *Baily's Beads* staff for three years, but this is the first year her work has been published in the magazine. When she's not working or catching up on homework, Selese enjoys movie nights with friends or curling up under a blanket with a cup of herbal tea and a good book.

*RICHARD "DICK" MARCOTT* is a retired U.S. Coast Guard Captain, and was encouraged by his daughter, Kimberly, to start writing his sea stories for his grandchildren. With the help of a Pitt-Bradford writing course two years ago, writing group workshops, and a whole lot of reading, he began his memoirs, "The View From The Rigging," and "The Russians Are Coming," which also appeared in *Baily's Beads*.

*BONNIE MCMILLEN* is a native of Bradford and spent her younger years playing around the Harry Emery Airport here on Dorothy Lane. Her earliest desire was to be a philosopher, which amused her family to no end. Her favorite job was staying home and raising three boys, who are her pride and joy. After all that joy, she decided to go to nursing school and become an R.N. Along the way, literature added to her joy, which has blossomed into a desire to write poetry, fiction, and some nonfiction.

*RICK MINARD* is an award-winning artist who resides in Shinglehouse, PA with his wife and young son, where he maintains a private studio. He holds an MFA from the Rochester Institute of Technology. He also taught for two years at Pitt-Bradford.

*MACKENZIE MILLER*, from Attica, NY, graduated from Pitt-Bradford in 2012 with degrees in writing and English. She writes constantly and wishes she could travel just as much, though she does spend at least three months a year abroad, finding inspiration for novels, essays, and her travel blog. She also loves British television and wishes the Tardis was real.

*ANGELA NUZZO* is a lifelong resident of Bradford, PA and a 1995 graduate of Pitt-Bradford. She enjoys taking photographs of nature, architecture, and local events. The very tolerant kitty in the picture “The Look,” is Smokie Sue.

*BETTY FINLAN RENINGER* was born in Bradford, PA and went to high school at Bradford High. She has always had a love for poetry and started writing while attending a class at St. Bonaventure. She has lived in Jacksonville, FL for more than fifty years. She has attended poetry classes at Pitt-Bradford for years, during which time she wrote many poems. One, concerning Oak Hill Cemetery, was in the *Bradford Era* a few years ago.

*KELLY SCHUCKER* is passionate about writing, coffee, and cats – preferably simultaneously.

*PATRICIA SHINABERGER* has read two hundred memoirs since her retirement and is presently writing her own. She enjoys gardening, travelling to National Parks, and hiking, cycling, and canoeing in the Allegheny National Forest with her husband and friends.

*DAN TENNIES* is a writing major expecting to graduate in the fall of 2014. He is an avid fan of all things fantasy. He spends most of his time traversing far-off virtual worlds or creating his own. When he’s not locked away in his room, he can be found in the kitchen whipping up a wide array of culinary offerings. He also holds the title of curator at the Eldred World War II Museum, and plans on becoming a renowned fantasy author.

*JENNY TRIPPETT* graduated with a dual major in interdisciplinary arts and entrepreneurship in the spring of 2013 and was awarded the Robert C. Laing Creative Arts Award in art. After graduating,

she worked at an anthropology lab at Pennsylvania State University.

*ROBERT WALICKI* is a freelance poet from Verona, PA, and has found inspiration through writing and poetry over the years. He is the founder of the literary reading series Versify at the East End Book Exchange. He has had his poetry published most recently in *Blast Furnace*, *The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, *The Stone Highway Review*, and *The Pittsburgh City Paper*. His chapbook, *A Room Full of Trees*, is forthcoming from Redbird Press. When he's not writing, he keeps busy organizing the chaos of creation daily with his wife Lynne and two cats, Buttons and Josie.

*PAIGE WALLACE* was born and raised in Erie, Pa. She is double majoring in public relations and broadcast communications. She is also minoring in accounting and writing. She loves to travel. If she could, she would travel until the day she dies.

*ASHLEY WILSON-REW* is an interdisciplinary art major at Pitt-Bradford. She grew up in the Harrisburg area of Pennsylvania. Her art has won the Robert E. Ribic Art Award and the Richard S. Johnson Art Scholarship. She is very passionate about her art, and she has a special love for animals.

*ASHLEY YOUNG*, a senior broadcast communications major, was born and raised in Philadelphia, PA. She has always had an interest in photography, but it wasn't until she took a digital photography class in fall 2013 that she discovered how much of a creative outlet and tool of personal expression photography could be. This is her first time submitting her work to *Baily's Beads*.

*IRIS XIAO*, who is from China, is a senior Pitt-Bradford graduate with a degree in business management and a minor in economics. Being an art enthusiast for years, she has a keen interest in painting and Chinese calligraphy in her spare time. Since 2004, she has won more than 50 awards on national art contests, and a few of them have been published in local magazines and newspapers. She currently lives in Florida.