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### Self-saturated

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*Self-saturated*

A collection of personal essays by Maja Holmquist

By Any Other

by Maja Holmquist

I walk up to the checkout counter in Staples with a pack of color ink. The guy at the counter scans the barcode and asks for my phone number to enter into the computer. I give him my parents' landline. I think of the list of names that come up under it. My mom, my dad, me, maybe even my sister.

"Which name?" he asks me.

I tell him. He looks at the screen.

"Huh. I've never seen it spelled like that."

I look at his name tag. Brylan. Then I look at him a little closer. His hair is shaved close to his head, but because he's blond, he had looked bald as I walked up.

*Whatever*, I think loudly, willing him to hear me.

He has seen my name spelled like that, two months ago. And he said the same thing about it. His hair was longer then.

My name is Maja. Spelled with the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), it's [Maɪ-ʌ], but how many people actually bother with IPA? Besides maybe a brief introduction to it in grade school, I haven't had much to do with it.

Maybe I can explain it better with an example. My head always turns automatically during conversations like this:

"Hey man, did you get my text?"

"No, I forgot *my, uh*" — this is when my head involuntarily whips around— "phone in my room this morning" — this is when I get funny looks for staring because I still haven't figured out why some guy just said my name.

So, Maja. *My, uh*. It works.

Every time a substitute teacher went through the attendance roll in elementary school, my whole class tensed with excitement when the names got close to mine. After it was predictably butchered, the class would collectively yell, "It's Maja!"

By eighth grade and high school, I cringed on the first day of school and every time we had a substitute. Not many of my classmates thought it was fun to correct the teachers anymore. I had to do it. But I'd grown quiet, uncomfortable and unconfident with speaking to other people. Usually with subs I just tried to play along, let them call me whatever.

"Maw-jaw?"

"Here."

"Is that how you say it?"

Who would name their child that?

"No, it's Maja."

"It's what?"

"My-uh," a little louder.

"Oh. Kay. Andrew?"

"Here."

I felt the same cringe-worthy apprehension during my first week of college. But after the last class of the week, after being put on the chopping block seven times, my name was alive and well.<sup>1</sup>

"You won't believe it," I told my friend of twelve years. "They're educated here."<sup>2</sup>

When I used to come home with stories about the new ways people had come up with to say my name, I could count on my dad to say, "What? Don't those people know anything?"

Well, um. No, Dad. They probably don't know how to say Swedish names that you plopped into the middle of Montana, USA, Land of the Hicks. It's only because of you that I know anything about Swedish names, French names, German names and even with this comparatively extensive knowledge, how often do I get them right?<sup>3</sup>

The places people consistently say my name correctly are in Europe, like one of the Scandinavian countries and Germany. If my name had been announced for placing in a 400-meter dash in Sweden, I wouldn't have pumped my fist in the air to a chorus of mimicked mispronunciation from my high school track team. It wouldn't have taken half the year for my terrifying seventh-grade English teacher to stop calling me "May-uh."<sup>4</sup> If I lived in Germany, I probably wouldn't have twenty or so different monikers. But I live in the melting pot of America, and, even better, in a part that has yet to grow comfortably acquainted with the mixing spoon.

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<sup>1</sup> This track record was held until my third semester. An English faculty member delivered the first blow of my college career.

<sup>2</sup> My astronomy professor went above and beyond. Not only was he tall, handsome, funny, and had a PhD in astrophysics, but he guessed that both of my names (first and last) were Swedish. Overachiever.

<sup>3</sup> I often think that a name-pronunciation superpower should have come with my unpronounceable name. Since no one can pronounce my name, I should be able to pronounce anyone else's. Unfortunately, that's definitely not a thing.

<sup>4</sup> I got called to the office over the intercom one day, and she gave me such a surprised look. "You're name isn't May-uh? Why didn't you tell me?" Because you may, uh, have bit my head off.

I've never minded much the different nicknames people have for me. On our high school graduation trip, my cousin occasionally called me "Muh-zhaw," like she and her siblings used to when we were little.

Near the end of our week with her, my mom turned to me. "Do you mind if she calls you that? Should I ask her to stop?"

My mom didn't spend much time around me when I'm with other people, especially people my age. I told her it was fine, no worries, I don't care.

Really, having so many names set me apart in a relishing way that my seemingly bland, quiet self hasn't been able to do on its own. I should be the same person no matter what people call me. Right? The unusual spelling on my birth certificate just might make me inherently more interesting. It's the only part of me that causes people to double-take.

But there have been times when the distortion of my given name was less welcome.

I had a neighbor, Kevin, who always called me "Muh-jaw." We were good friends for a few years. Every day after getting off the school bus in sixth grade he'd yell at me from his driveway as I walked up my back steps.

"Basketball?"

*Well duh*, I'd nod, throwing my pack down just inside the door before running right back outside to his hoop.

We both hung out with other kids at school, though, especially when we hit junior high. In eighth grade, Kevin was always with Andy. When they passed me at school, Kevin had an echo.

"Hi, Muh-jaw."

"Yeah, hi, Muh-jaw."

Every time I'd glare at Andy. Who was he to call me that? Only Kevin got to call me that because we were friends and we played basketball together. I never even talked to Andy.

My older brother had a couple of friends who also found themselves staring into my scowl. They thought they were cool calling their friend's third-grade sister a dumb name. Of course, they meant it as just a loving, brotherly tease. Probably. But to my impetuous third-grade self that wasn't much of an excuse. Coming from them "Mah-jah" was not welcome. On the outside anyway. Secretly, I remember liking the attention from the two older kids.

When they came back to visit after being away for three years, I thought maybe they'd forgotten what they used to call me. In fact, one of them, when he saw me, said, "Wow, Maja (My-uh<sup>5</sup>). You're all grown up!"

The other one, however, told me that I hadn't changed a bit. It must have been true enough. The next time they came they settled right back into my nickname.

Sometimes when I meet people my age and they find out how my name is spelled afterwards, they revert to what they think is their own rendition. Like Justen. I met him at a dance nineteen and a half years after the ink on my birth certificate dried. Scrambling to fill the awkward silence between songs, I told him about my name. After I spelled it for him into the air between us, Justen wittily jumped to calling me "Maw-jaw," insisting I now had a "new name." He introduced me as Maw-jaw to everyone he talked to that night.

And there was Eric. I met him at my university's fall orientation, months before I'd met Justen. A friend and I took Eric to Taco del Sol because he hadn't eaten anything but crackers all week. He was just like the boys I was around in high school, like the boys on my track team. I

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<sup>5</sup> I had this piece workshopped once by a someone with this complaint: "I dunno, like, I just kept getting confused. Like, she kept spelling it M-A-J-A." I couldn't help thinking, "I dunno, like, that is my name?"

could see him jogging past me during a cool down after one of my noms de guerre was announced with my half-mile time:

"Nice job, Maw-jaw," but his smirk would be for the announcer, not me.

When another guy, Keith, started calling me that, it left a bad aftertaste. He single-handedly holds all the real animosity I've ever felt towards someone for taking liberties with my name.<sup>6</sup>

We met at a wedding when I was sixteen. He liked me because I was shy and because I had long, blond hair. I let him lure me in. It was my very own, dumb (but less fatal) Romeo and Juliet story. Indescribable at the beginning, fraught with miscommunication in the middle, convoluted with misunderstanding and thoughtless, self-centered teenage acts at the end. It was near this ending, more than a year after we met, that he decided to call me something other than my name, unknowingly jumping on the Boys-in-Maja's-Life band-wagon.

"Please, Maw-jaw?" he would ask, quietly, softly, with his arms out, his head cocked, his bottom lip pouting. Simpering like a puppy while he waited for me to react.

The worst part about an aftertaste is that you don't know about it until you've already swallowed. When I finally got smart and started to see through his puppy act, the bitter taste spread. My attitude and thoughts soured, although my actions were slow to follow suit.

I aimed thoughts at him, vowing to act on them with vehemence later, after he abused my name with such familiarity.

*Aren't you clever! While you're at it, fetch this ball. Shake? Good boy! Do you really think I've never heard that before?*

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<sup>6</sup> The worst was when he sent me a text, during an already heated conversation, and spelled my name with a Y instead of a J. I was so mad, that if he hadn't corrected himself shortly after, I'm sure my next words would've shattered his phone.



The summer before I started my first semester of college, I got my first real job as an office assistant at an orthopedic clinic. I did the clinic laundry, filed papers and charts, and purged radiology films. I was nervous about the application. I'd heard those with hard to pronounce names are less likely to be hired. I guess the hiring people who have to call potential employees don't want to sound stupid because they can't say a name right.

My mom's answer to this was to just write the pronunciation next to my name in parentheses. But I didn't do that on my application. Thankfully, I seemed to have a confident employer who wasn't afraid of a J. Either that or she had asked her coworker, my family's friend who picked up the application for me, about my name. Either way, she called me up, asked if she said it right, and there weren't any problems.

A couple of weeks after starting, a lady I'd met once or twice before held up a name tag in front of me, pointed to my name, and asked, "Is this you?"

I nodded.

"And how do you say it?"

After exchanging small talk and instructions almost every day for months, another woman I shared basement space with asked the same question.

"It's Maja (My-uh)<sup>7</sup>."

"Okay. Maja, *Maja*. I kept asking myself, 'Should I ask her? Mmmm, I dunno, should I?' and then I decided to just do it."

My coworkers, the girls on my sports teams, my female classmates, my friends, girls I've known for years who grew into women with me, girls and women I'd known for only a few

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<sup>7</sup> Just in case anyone forgot how to pronounce my, uh, name.

minutes—they call me by my name<sup>8</sup>. Every person who has, with consistent purposeful regularity, called me something other than Maja has been male. Justen, Eric, Andy, Keith, Kevin, Parker, Mikey, Jake, Preston, Benton, Jon, Derrick, Tyler. The list goes on. That's not to say all guys are like this, but when compared to how ladies treated my name, the list is significant.

My mom and brother say the boys were flirting with me.

I say that's dumb.

Call it teasing, flirting, brotherly, damning, insensitive, trivializing, pejorative, friendly, provocative, passive, aggressive, anything, everything from sexism to jealousy--I don't know what it is. But it has slowed down a lot in the last few years, possibly matching the maturity level of the people I now spend time with.

The same summer after I graduated high school, I took a college math placement test. When I logged in all my information prior to the test, I didn't notice that my name was auto-corrected. There was no way to change it without calling some complicated phone number that would probably connect me with someone far away, in yet another country where people can't say my name. So, at the end of the test, I was dismissed with the words "Goodbye, Mama!"

"We were just talking about whether our lives would be different if we had different names," I hear Lori say as she walks into the little medical records office with a thin stack of papers. "I know mine would be."

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<sup>8</sup> As always, there are a few anomalies. One coworker called me Mia (Me-uh) for almost a year before someone corrected her. Another called me "Mia Maja" because she was "told both" and wanted to cover all her bases.

My cousin, mentioned before, and my friend Reagan are also exceptions. Reagan sometimes calls me "Maa." Not Ma, like her mother, but Maa, like a bleating sheep.

I smile to myself and pause the podcast I'm listening to in one ear.

"Oh boy, I *know* mine would be," my supervisor says as she spins away from her computer. "My mom wanted to name me Renda."

"Renda?"

"Yeah. Like Brenda, without the B. My dad saved me there. I just know that if my name had been Renda, I would've been chubby and had to wear glasses my whole life."

Darcy is anything but chubby, with a trim figure and just the hint of widened hips from a life on horseback.

Silence interrupts the conversation as Lori goes back to her desk to attend to a patient.

"You know, I've been meaning to ask you," Darcy calls to me across the office. I turn to face her. "How'd your parents decide on your name?"

Well. About that...

A guy asked me once what my parents have against the letter Y. As far as I know, they don't have anything against the letter. All of my siblings have uncommon names, at least in this country. My brothers' names, Hokan (they changed the spelling from H-Å-K-A-N to H-O-K-A-N to make it a little less of a nightmare) and Anders (said with "On" rather than "An") are Swedish, just like mine. All three of our names are unabatedly mispronounced. I would say I'm in good company, but after sharing a bathroom with them for so many years, I'm not so sure. My sister, Hosanna, was born before our parents decided on the Swedish theme so she got a jubilant Biblical exclamation for a name.

Why Swedish, though? Our last name, Holmquist, is also Swedish, or Swedish-American. If it were a full-blood, lutefisk-loving Swede name, it would be "Holmqvist," but it was changed to signify Americanness when our ancestors immigrated from the Old Country. My

dad says that most people in the U.S. have too hard of a time with so many consonants together anyway. L-M-Q-V poses a potentially perplexing pronunciation predicament.

My dad decided, seemingly sometime after Hosanna was born, that first and last names are better when they match. So, a Swedish last name needs a Swedish first name. Like Maja. Or Anders. Or Jens or Hoka or Sigrid.<sup>9</sup>

I am convinced that after almost 20 years of my name being slaughtered or just changed to whatever by whoever, the story of my name would fill a good-sized book.<sup>10</sup> If my siblings, including my sister<sup>11</sup>, added the stories of their names, we could have a whole series; by the end of our lives, probably an entire encyclopedia set's worth. It's funny, though. My dad has always thought nicknames, at face-value, are silly. Why give your kid one name if you're just going to call them by a different one?<sup>12</sup> What's the point of naming babies at all if other people are just going to decide for themselves what to call them?

"We told you, you can change the spelling anytime if you want," my dad once said to me, though I didn't remember him ever telling me that before. I didn't even consider it. Because, really, what's in a name?

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<sup>9</sup> Each time I hear my dad explain this, I feel pressured to go husband-hunting in Sweden.

<sup>10</sup> I haven't even mentioned my middle names. Yes, names.

<sup>11</sup> Hosanna has her fair share of nicknames and odd spellings. Family friends from church liked to call her "Hallelujah" or even "Glory Hallelujah." Much better than "Hoser," a nickname some friends stuck on her. But those are just that: nicknames. When I was younger, I could never remember if it was two Ss or two Ns. Sometimes people are surprised to see that she's not Hispanic. Those people, consequently, try to spell her name with a J rather than an H. Not mispronunciations.

We all love that her husband's name is Joe, and have christened their collective person "Josanna."

<sup>12</sup> His wife and mother of me and all my siblings was named after her mother but goes by her middle name. She has stories too. As does my dad, Cary, with his name's 50 different possible spellings or when he's mistaken for a woman or called "Gary" or "Barry."

I remember that

by Maja Holmquist

I remember that. I remember when Colter got in trouble for running beside me during a track race in sixth grade, too. And I remember Chase Richards stealing my little pink pig eraser from the corner of my desk right after I won it as a prize for the Idatread in second grade. I remember Alyssa Rathers wouldn't clean up at the end of art class in 7<sup>th</sup> grade. She almost made our whole table late to our next period. Repeatedly. I had to run through the halls. I remember the exact moment I decided I never wanted to raise my hand in class again. That was fourth grade. I remember standing in the hall avoiding looking at Ms. Rettig while she offered to write me passes to use the bathroom if I needed one for "womanly" predicaments. She kept leaning, trying to look me in the eyes. I imagine I looked like a white rabbit, pulled out by the ears, fear-crazed, red, buggy eyes darting back and forth, looking anywhere but at the perceived threat facing me. I remember sitting in her study hall, listening to students who came in for English help: "Me and Scott were working on these together—" "Who?" "Me and Scott." "Who?" "...Me and Scott." I remember pleading with them, "Say Scott and *I*, Scott *and I*." I remember jumping on the trampoline at our new house watching the neighbors water their lawn. Hosanna and Hoka made me go talk to them. I remember how cute third grade Kevin Derringer used to be, holding my baby geese in his driveway and screaming and running from the plastic spiders we put by the water spigot. And I remember how cute he was not, after he started playing tuba in high school and told nasty jokes with the rest of the boys in the back of the room during band. I remember the gray, frizzy-haired substitute who yelled at me in first grade for using a pen during writing time when I couldn't find a pencil. Tegan Wick didn't have a pencil either. I know. I asked her for one. She gave me the pen. I remember making lemonade for all the neighborhood boys

during the summer. My brother and I watched episodes of the *Beverly Hillbillies* until they came, thirsty before even looking at the basketball hoop outside. I remember the hardest I ever laughed with my sister. I slopped an entire glass of water on myself when I slipped on the kitchen floor running away from a spider. Or maybe I laughed the hardest with her just a couple of months ago, playing Settlers of Catan after 9pm when the last niece went to sleep. We played with Mom. We laughed at her a lot for some reason. I remember saying the most pompous thing to Andre Hofer in third grade. I'm still ashamed of that. Something about how I decided to let him win our reading contest because I'd already won it the year before. I was behind in the contest at the time I declared my intent to concede. We ended up tying. I remember cleaning out my desk one day when I used to sit by Colter Lansing. The kind of desk with the hinged top that folded up to reveal the dumpster of a sixth grader's school life. Papers everywhere but none of the ones I needed. I got mad or frustrated or something while I was cleaning and said "freak." He told me he liked it when girls got feisty. Or something like that. Appalled and with indignant righteousness, I declared I'd never say it again! But it's still my "curse word" of choice. I remember the day I took a vow of silence because I was upset. Probably because no one would listen to me. I slipped and said a whole sentence, but nobody realized. I remember calling Mom's pager on our landline. I remember our babysitter who dangled ramen noodles down his throat, swallowing them whole before pulling them back out, still whole. I remember Hokan and his friends digging thrones and staircases into his huge hole in the backyard. That all started when he annoyed Dad who told him to go outside and dig a hole. So he did. It's still there. I remember Hokan running away from elementary school. He threw rocks at the living room window to get my attention. He'd been hiding in the crawl space under the house but got hungry. He wanted me to get him something from the fridge. I remember walking home from school with Hokan and

Hosanna, Hosanna way ahead. We picked up Anders from his blue-housed babysitter just down the street from the golf course. I remember reading a book while we walked sometimes and picking up errant golf balls. I remember biking to school in the wind in fifth grade, my trombone strapped to the little shelf we fashioned above the back wheel, and biking home in the wind too. I hated biking for a long time. I couldn't stand the noises my bike made. I still don't like the wind. I remember I loved playing cars with Anders on the road rug in the boys' bedroom. I remember waking up in the morning to Hosanna's alarm clock. Sometimes she snoozed it and got into the shower. So I'd wake up again to climb down the bunk bed ladder to turn it off. And then again when Mom or Dad came down the hallway to turn the light on and make sure I was up. Eventually I would get out of bed. I'd pull out the large drawer under our bed with all of my clothes in it. And I'd sit there, mostly asleep. Somehow I made it to school on time. Hoka still makes fun of me for falling asleep while choosing my clothes. I remember Hosanna listening to books on tape at night. The voices crowded sleep from my mind until the tape needed to be turned, Hosanna asleep long before. I was devastated reading the first Artemis Fowl book, believing the protagonist turned evil by the second book because that's the one I'd heard at night and I got the characters confused. I remember playing hide-and-seek with Mary Fowers in first grade. I got tired of her following me around. I'd hide all recess while she looked for me. I'm not proud of that. I remember Hoka teaching me how to pump on the swings at our old house. I remember being mad when his friends threw my geese off the top of the slide of that same swing set at the new house. The smaller goose later flew over the fence into the horse pasture across the street, and I clambered over the fence and threw her back to our side. I remember finding a dying little mouse in the front of the house and Dad putting it in a box. The mouse died not long after that. We buried it in the back with the hamsters. The hamsters! I remember waking up one

morning to Weasley, the long-haired blond hamster, shrieking. He'd woven a washcloth in between the bars of his cage then peed on it, gluing his long, blond hairs to the washcloth. He got a good trim that day. And I remember the guinea pigs squeaking for carrots every time someone opened the fridge or every time the carrot-dispenser (Dad) walked by. Oscar, the boldest pig, would venture out onto the linoleum in search of the carrots. He'd skitter away, all scared-like, when we came to check on him. I can clearly hear the scratching his too-long claws made trying to find purchase on the linoleum. I remember cold winters, standing, warming the lower half of my body in front of the pellet stove, four baby pictures framing the top of that corner of the room. Hosanna sitting in a spotlight looking angelic in her white dress. Hoka later lived up to his little nautical-themed outfit by joining the Marines after high school. Baby Anders grinning in his photo, resting a hand on a letter B block. And me in a frilly white dress holding myself up on the arm of a blue chair. Smiley, innocent babies. I remember everyone thinking it was hilarious when I read out the directions for making no-bake cookies. "Bring to a boil then add all that crap." Hoka wrote it on a piece of paper and taped it to the pantry door. Another quote or two of mine made the pantry after that. Hoka and the rest of my family thought a lot of things I said were funny. But I remember how I felt when I got the courage to make a joke around people outside of my family. My mom smiled at me, pityingly, I thought, when no one laughed. I remember going to the county fair in high school and seeing a guy I thought my dad knew. My mom told me she'd give me \$50 if I talked to him. I did it. Her jaw dropped and a green-faced Ulysses S. Grant fell into my hands.



Water Lily  
by Maja Holmquist

That was me at my worst. Stripped raw of everything I'd been told of myself before. I was a water lily, transplanted, floating in a sterile swimming pool.

I think about what you said—not *what* you said. Not those words. The words behind them. Those still sting my fingertips.

It was always about what I did, what about me needed to be fixed, never simply what happened.

I shrugged it off at the time. I shrugged it off other days too. Maybe that's why we're not close. We spent so much time together. What else sloughed off with each shrug? Yours and mine. Grains of sand, the weight that could have kept our glass jar upright.

I think about that now, but I didn't then. We laughed together. You never laughed harder than when you asked me the most interesting thing I'd ever done, and I told you I went on a couple dates with the third best ping pong player in Saudi Arabia. I didn't do it to be interesting. I just didn't know how to say no.

Those were the months I ate Reese's Puffs without the milk. The off-brand tasted like coffee. I gave those to the boys.

You ate like a bird. You ate junk. You hated exercise. I resented that and your slimness and your confidence.

I embarrassed you with my awkward and abrupt approach to our work. That day I sprayed myself with too much body mist, you couldn't have missed it. No one else did. You were embarrassed for the both of us. But you didn't say a word. I think I was grateful for that.

I let you drag us shopping, like I dragged you to work. You told me the dress looked good on me. I'd never liked v-necks. I asked if *you* would buy it, for yourself, I meant. You assured me you would, but v-necks weren't flattering on you.

I'd never liked v-necks. I bought the dress with its lily pattern, decided to believe you.

I resented that you thought I needed you to offset me, that I thought I needed it. That I did need it.

I hadn't come to terms with what I fed on before, a shallow of nutrients, broken down first by those who feed themselves—autotrophs, they call them. That was me when I had to be me without autotrophs.

I resented that you thought I needed you to offset me, that I thought I needed it. That I did need it.

You answered questions for me when you knew the answers—where was I from, how long had I been here—as if I didn't have my own voice. Or maybe you were afraid I'd answer even that wrong. You were quick to jump in, quick to help when it wasn't asked for. *There*, you'd say, satisfied, triumphant, like nothing was finished without your touch, like that touch was the purpose behind everything else in the world.

I didn't like that, that I was another little sister for you to work your green thumb on.

You posed with your hands framing your face like your chin resting on a windowsill:  
*Look at me. Yes, me, I did that.*

I had too many older sisters.

But older sisters can never have too many younger siblings.

You loved taking pictures, selfies, with me in the background.

Was the attention you soaked up through your own skin like sunlight not enough? Did you think you needed mine too? You couldn't feed yourself either. Not really, not enough--a hemiparasite, a botanist might call you.

And yet, I compared myself, being next to you. I looked at you and saw what I didn't have, who I wasn't. Did I ever really see you? You were so sure, I didn't think you needed me to. I compared my struggling skin to your flawless chin and forehead. The freckles dappled delicately across your nose and cheeks—smooth, perfect, like a reverse fawn's hide. How effortlessly you changed how you looked. I thought I wanted bangs. I told you so.

We went to the hairdresser. I didn't come out with bangs, but you did.

I filled our days, start to finish. But you were a horse.

When we left in the mornings, you dragged feet shod with mercury; your ears flicked back the way we came, giving away your focus. But your mercury shoes fell off your feet like scales when we turned back towards home, no resistance—a horse headed back to pasture and the ease and comfort of a barn full of grain and no work.

That night when you took the lead, when I couldn't get a word in edgewise—you scolded me.

“You can't be like this just because things didn't go your way,” you said to me. I heard restraint through the thin membrane of your voice. There was more you could have said. And I would've deserved it.

I didn't say anything. I didn't look at you.

I deserved it. I didn't want to admit that.

I kicked at rocks as we walked, picked up speed. I drove us back as fast as I could.

Synchronized  
by Maja Holmquist

I stood in the drizzle outside Great Smoky Mountains National Park headquarters. It would've been damp even if it hadn't been raining.

It wasn't raining or even damp inside the headquarters with the air conditioning. But I was locked out. Separated from my colleagues by a door and just a few seconds.

I stared at the spider web stretched across the corner by the door. I wondered if they wondered where I was.

Then I turned and wandered, waiting for our field lead, Lucy, to bring back her car. I admired the surrounding greenery, leaves and limbs sprawling, crawling, and reaching in every direction. Lush emeralds and olives and shamrock greens sprouting to capacity. So different from my relatively arid Montana. I admired the undersides of leaves with their veins illuminated by what light filtered through weeping clouds, before they were set fluttering, freed until the weight of another droplet slid its way down.

Birds and bugs chirped and chirruped. Even dampened by the rain, their sounds filled space that in Montana would have been left silent.

Lucy drove up with Kendra, our park employee host. They entered the headquarters, and soon we were all outside again, loading the cars with cones, flags, boxes of survey envelopes, everything we'd need for traffic stops during our visitor surveys for the next nine days. Then, off to lunch. The moment I'd been dreading since Lucy sent us the week's schedule days ago.

Kendra regrettably couldn't join, but she directed us toward what she deemed the least objectionable eatery in Gatlinburg, the tourist trap situated before the north entrance of the park. We left the succulent green in exchange for garish, plasticky yellows and reds and blues.

Gatlinburg's diversions, entertainments, and attractions hollered at congregations of consumers from every direction. *Ripley's Haunted Adventure! MAGA! Hilllllbilly Weddings!*

"This place is sooo cute," Bekah, my roommate for the next few days, crooned as she gaped out the window. "I'm definitely coming here on our day off." She pulled out her phone to start planning.

Crowds and pavement and music and fun, fun, fun all around. What I could see felt gaudy and loud and fabricated against the backdrop of forested mountains just within reach.

We scanned the packed streets for a place to park and for any dumpster-diving black bears, which Kendra had assured us were regular problem visitors at the hotels and greasier joints.

The restaurant we entered was fairly empty. It didn't completely fail at cozy, with a stone-facade fireplace and warm color scheme. I couldn't help being put off by the scrawny black bear mounted just inside the entrance. It was small, the size and shag of an Australian shepherd.

I peered at the glossy menu, bluish-green veins popping out on the backs of my hands. Zach, Lucy, Molly, and Bekah chatted about the options.

"Corn pudding?"

This from Bekah. She sat beside me, holding her menu in two diminutive, freckled hands, her skin like the white, airy inside of a loaf of French bread with freckles the color of crust. Her voice still surprised me, deeper and more forceful and hurried than I expected. Almost like every word was a thick bubble, enclosed behind her lips until each escaped in hurried succession. Her ps and bs burst with slight raspberic force.

"What's corn pudding?"

A born-and-raised Northwesterner, I didn't know either. But it sounded substantial, filling.

Zach, Lucy, and Molly all jumped in: Sometimes corn pudding was sweet, sometimes not; sometimes it was good, sometimes it wasn't. The consensus? Bekah would order it, and they'd all weigh in on the quality.

While Bekah and I were the only ones ignorant of corn pudding, it was soon revealed we all had connections to Montana. I'd scarcely left since birth, but both Zach and Bekah came for school. Molly had spent time in the state for a job, and Lucy's family had a cabin somewhere under the Big Sky where she spent time every year.

I tried not to shrink as the waitress came back with filled cups and an empty notepad.

Bekah ordered after another question about a menu item. Zach seemed unsure, stopping and starting, and "I guess"-ing before finally settling. Molly's certainty and her order—a baked sweet potato—matched what I understood so far about her personality: unapologetic, good-natured, down to earth. Lucy hummed her uncertainty. She seemed even less sure after hearing everyone else's orders. Her choice still managed to set my mouth watering, though, thankfully, not my eyes.

The waitress turned her bored expression to me. "And for you?"

"Could I ask what's in the house salad?"

"Lettuce, tomatoes, cheese, boiled egg..."

"Okay. Can I get that but without the tomatoes, cheese, and boiled egg? And no dressing, please."

She looked at me, weight on one leg, holding the notepad from the bottom end in a slack hand, pen hovering.

“Soo. Just lettuce.”

“Um. Yes.”

“Ooh-kay.”

Molly and Lucy “aww”ed in sympathy, Molly’s followed by a muted burst of her surprisingly girly giggle.

Zach fiddled with his menu.

Bekah I would’ve believed oblivious had she not been introduced to my diet the night before when I let her know I needed a trip to the grocery store instead of a restaurant. I had told her she could take the car and go anywhere while or after I shopped, but she was absolutely famished and settled on the seedy, fast food pancake house just down the road from the store. The grunge of the aproned workers matched their establishment, and I wanted to be glad I couldn’t eat there. But the whiff of baked carbs and syrupy sugar just wouldn’t let me.

The waitress walked off with our menus. I imagined her conversation with the cook:

*“This girl out there just wants lettuce.” Hard eye roll.*

*“Just lettuce?”*

*“Just. Lettuce. One of those health freaks,” as she flops the notepad onto some shiny industrial-metal surface and sloughs out of the kitchen to scroll social media.*

*“Allright. Just lettuce.” Another hard eye roll, from the cook this time.*

You’d think he’d be grateful for such an easy order.

I took a sip of icy water as the others deliberated on whether they’d made the best choices.

“I’ve been trying to watch what I eat,” Lucy admitted. “My partner and I have talked about going gluten-free, but that burger—”

“I went gluten-free for about a year,” Molly said. “I lost twenty pounds! I thought I’d gain it all back when I started eating it again, but I haven’t!”

Zach’s thin, nasal tone wasn’t what I expected either, not from his stout frame. He didn’t ever look comfortable about what he was saying, each word laced with dubitation as he “ummed” and “uhhed” his way into a sentence before hurrying through it, pushing his loose, shoulder-length hair back at the temples. Right then he was talking about how he’d let himself go and really was trying to cut back. But since this meal was per diem, and he was sure he’d lose weight during his through-hike of the Pacific Trail...

As for me... There was the shorter answer: I’d eliminated all grains, nightshades, dairy, sugar, nuts, seeds, eggs, legumes, highly-processed oils, all sorts of additives and preservatives, etc. in what was so far the best attempt I’d made to address symptoms from apparently undiagnosable health issues. I usually tailored the list of no-nos to the situation, even though it often caused a lot of backtracking later. (“No, I actually can’t have that either. Or that. Orrr that...”) Either way there was always something I forgot to mention.

The longer answer might have included that said symptoms had reduced me from an engaged student and employee, family baker, easy-to-please dinner guest, and keen trail runner to a ball curled up in bed, having drug herself a half-mile home from class on bones sucking, *leaching* strength from their very marrow with each step, brain fog making any effort to think like trying to see through the mirror after a long, hot shower. That had been 18 months, too many dropped classes, a move back in with my parents, and their entire health savings account ago. I’d plateaued in my recovery, still a far cry from healed. But I was back on my feet, able to at least eat a salad without doubling over, done for the day.

But they didn’t ask. On one hand, a relief.



“I still weigh the same as when I was 15,” Bekah confessed, slumping a little. “Doesn’t matter what I eat.”

“Don’t look so embarrassed about it!” Lucy ordered.

“Yeah, I guess. I dunno, it’s just... I’m so small.” She gestured at herself. “Everyone thinks I’m way younger than I really am. I mean, I’m 21! I’m an adult!”

A sliver of lemon, half the width of my pinky, perched on the rim of my glass. Paltry, but I craved the flavor, however fleeting. I grasped it. The rind was wet and waxy. My fingers slipped as I squeezed. Precious juice squirted Bekah in the face.

Great.

She wiped at the droplets with her napkin, stammering that it was fine as her eyes blinked rapidly.

The food came. The smell of baked sweet potato, barbeque-soaked ribs, corn pudding, warm bread wafted in the air around the single layer of lettuce set before me.

The waitress hadn’t been completely accurate. It wasn’t *just* lettuce. A few splinters of orange poked from between the chopped leaves, revealing that my \$11 (with tip) lunch was most likely unceremoniously skimmed from the top of an industrial-sized Fresh Express bag.

I’d been sure to put a small container of olive oil in the most easily accessible pocket of my pack, next to a quart bag of carrots and broccoli—my original lunch plan along with a strip of specially seasoned jerky. I wished I’d stuck to that. I dug out the oil and drizzled it as surreptitiously as possible over my lettuce before sprinkling the lot with a good helping of salt.

I tried to eat slowly, but I was still done long before the others. I tried not to watch Lucy pick up her substantial sandwich for a bite, tried not to watch her mouth, quite suited to the sandwich’s size, as it fit snugly around the bun. I tried not to watch in between bites as she

dipped her fries in creamy sauce. And I tried not to watch Molly dig into her steaming potato, butter melting into shining translucence over the orange flesh.

Bekah and Zach were easier not to watch since they sat on either side of me. But the smell...

The conversation turned to weed. The thought of that smell almost drove the table scents from my mind. Almost.

Zach was especially partial to indulging. He asked about the hemp house we passed on our walk from the parking lot. Wasn't marijuana illegal in Tennessee? Yes, they believed so. And, Lucy reminded him, you can't be stoned on the clock.

"Oh, yeah, I wouldn't do that," Zach assured her. "I want to try some of their edibles, though. Maybe in the evening."

"I tried weed once with my boyfriend at a party," Bekah said, gesturing with those soft, dainty hands. "I had a massive panic attack. It was...it was not good. I don't think I'll try it again."

Bekah was not a fan of the corn pudding either. They all passed it around for a taste, assuring her it wasn't the best they'd had so she shouldn't necessarily snub the dish were she to encounter it anywhere else. She surrendered but didn't look convinced.

I tried to assume an air of "this is not weird at all" as I fished broccoli out of my bag one at a time and mopped up the trailings of olive oil and salt on my plate. The waitress took it away after I'd only finished half the bag.

Lucy went over the rest of the day as the three of them finished their lunches. She still needed to show survey sites to Bekah and me. They were an hour away on the southern side of

the park. We'd covered Zach and Molly's sites before lunch so they were free to go on the hikes they'd discussed with Kendra.

"Yeah, I'm wondering..." Bekah began. "I get really car sick. I'm still not feeling great from the ride over here. I don't think I can do that drive three more times, but I really want to see the fireflies tonight. Could I just hang out at your Airbnb instead of going back through the park?"

Bekah and I had discussed this a little before lunch. I knew her scant, sugary, peanut butter-reeking breakfast had been set churning by the curvy road up, over, and back down the Smokies. I had been spared only because she'd asked me to drive so she could sleep.

"If Maja's okay with it, I could just show her the sites, and she can fill you in when you get to them this week," Lucy suggested.

I agreed, relieved. I'd come all this way and desperately wanted to hike and explore. But I worried I'd hold everyone up. Besides, I was happy to have a smidgeon of time to myself when we were done touring the sites.

I'd accepted this job hoping for a way to afford an escape, some time to myself. I was grateful for my parents' generosity and love, and yet I was smothered, stifled, sinking in their house. There wasn't space there for me, for my food in the fridge, for my self-perceived deprivation, for the way I now wanted and needed to live, for my many shades of guilt and jealousy, my entire newly variegated roulette of emotions, aggravated and expanded not only by ill health but by coming back to where I'd been a child. I didn't fit there.

I didn't know if I fit anywhere or if or where I even wanted to fit, let alone if it was with the affectionate boy who said he wanted to marry me—a whole other strand of Gordian knots

tangled up in the chains of arteries and veins winding through my chest. Just a snarled, confounding muddle, like the dregs of a novice and artless knitter's rubbish basket.

More immediate, tangible issues faced me right then, however. The meager vegetable supply I'd hurriedly gleaned from the Sav Mor the night before was already half gone. Sans Bekah, I could try the little health food store near our Airbnb and then a more suitable grocery store without feeling guilty for appropriating our shared car. I could go to the Food Lion just down the street.

I'd always wanted to go to a Food Lion, ever since I'd learned from an admired friend that they were a staple here, like Albertsons in Montana. During my last jaunt to North Carolina, I'd only come as close as a longing look out the car window. Not that I stored any particular hopes in what was sure to be just another retail chain. But I did want to see those tiny indoctrinating kid shopping carts: "Future customer in training!"

I also didn't mind a few more hours of pay while we cruised around getting to know the park a little better. (I was less than thrilled to find out later that Zach, Molly, and Bekah were also paid for a full day, which they napped—Bekah—or hiked—Zach and Molly—away.)

Kendra joined Lucy in one car while I drove another to the last two sites. They showed me where Bekah and I should stand, where to set up our flags and cones, where cars should be when we started flagging them, etc.

We stood in the parking lot at the last site. Lucy and Kendra debated the best way to safely pull cars over. We wanted to get them coming *into* the park rather than leaving since the survey questions were geared towards what visitors were planning to do in the park that day rather than what they had already done while there, although there were questions about that as well.

“Hmmm.” Lucy held her chin in one hand, opposite hip thrust in the direction she was considering. “Yeah, I think that would be best. So, one of you will stand over by that sign,” hips squared as she swung an arm to point, “to flag them down. You’ll have your cone set up here in this parking spot to make sure no one’s crossing traffic. You *have* to wear your vests, by the way.”

“I think that will all be okay,” Kendra agreed, arms akimbo, fingers slipped into the pockets of her forest green uniform pants. “Except we don’t want to impede the normal flow.” She shifted slightly to point the other direction, and the curved end of her brown ponytail swayed before settling between her shoulder blades. “What if…”

It was convoluted. But this was one of the sites the park specifically wanted data from.

“Just see how it goes,” Lucy said, as Kendra was called away by a park visitor. “If you need to adjust, I’ll trust your guys's judgement on that. But be safe.”

The visitor, seeing Kendra’s uniform, had approached her with a set of keys they’d found. Kendra was one of the park’s desked social scientists, not a roaming ranger. But she did her best to think of what to do with the keys.

“Why don’t we take them to the campsite host?” Kendra suggested to Lucy. “Then we can ask for their input and let them know we’ll have some surveyors here on Sunday.”

My legs shuddered as I lowered myself back into the car. I followed them the 200 meters to the campground entrance, around the host’s hut, and then back out onto the road. Not directed otherwise, I kept following Lucy, assuming she would want to share the input from the host with me when we stopped again.

Eventually, she pulled over. I stopped my car behind hers and rolled down my window as she walked my way.

“Kendra wanted to make sure you know that we’re headed back up to Gatlinburg, so you don’t need to follow us anymore since Sylva is the other direction.”

Ah.

I turned around and headed the other way, back past the campground and onto a windy, dirt road, eventually making it to Sylva’s health food store despite Google’s misleading directions. The store was tiny, barely bigger than the living room in my parents’ triple-wide. I grabbed a few pricey items and decided to hit the Food Lion after our shift the next day. Hopefully Bekah would be okay if I took the car. It was less than a mile to walk there from our Airbnb, but the twisty, tree-obscured road dropped off abruptly with barely enough room for the white line, let alone a pedestrian. I didn’t fancy a hit-and-roll down the hill when cars coming around the many sharp corners didn’t see me soon enough.

I had just enough time to rush back to the house to bolt down a pan of sauteed zucchini and mushrooms before heading back through the park. I wanted a chance to make a few scenic stops, without the pressure of someone else’s preferences, before we all met up for our exclusive view of the synchronous fireflies.

That morning we had met with a few park headquarter employees to make sure we’d all be on the same page. They were the only ones alerted that we’d be there. No one wanted the data to be influenced by enthusiastic park rangers or survey-shy visitors. We’d gone over the map and schedule with Kendra and were given security briefs by a broad-shouldered park officer and a gray-haired wildlife biologist. One warned us about distracted drivers cruising through the park, the other about the habituated black bears we were sure to see at some of the sites. As it turns out, Great Smoky Mountains National Park has the greatest density of black bears in the country. We were to lock our cars if we wanted to eat our lunches ourselves rather than give them up to a

prowling bear. With such dense foliage we wouldn't see them until they were already right there. Attacks were rare, but they still wanted to put Zach, who'd hiked the Appalachian Trail and thus had the most experience with the mountains' bruins, at the most bear-prone survey sites.

At the end of the briefing, Dana, the matriarch of the group, insisted our survey team be given a pass to see the synchronous fireflies.

"You've come all this way, you can't not see them," Dana leaned further forward, elbows pressed into the conference table, dark hair held back by her temple with a barret. "You're our guests! And you're doing us a *huge* service. We'll give you one of our reserved tickets. It's truly a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. It couldn't have worked out better. Our biologists are saying tonight will be the *very best night* to see them."

Under most circumstances, tickets to see the park's synchronous fireflies are distributed through a random lottery. As an effort to keep disturbance to the fireflies and their habitat minimal, 100 cars are allowed into the breeding grounds each night during the 8-day window. Forty thousand people from all over the world pay the one dollar fee for the chance to see this event, but only 800 cars are allowed through, making the likelihood of us ever getting to see the fireflies outside of this opportunity quite slim.

(Later in the week during our survey work, an older couple peppered me with questions about the event, explaining that they'd entered the lottery every year since they'd moved to the area from India—30 years ago!—and still hadn't made it in. Did I have any connections to the people in charge? They were willing to pay whatever it took! How much did I think the park people would want? I did not concede, knowing that, as a nameless field survey lackey and a contracted one at that, I held no sway with my "connections." If I jumped to pull any of my short strings, this couple would get nowhere, and I'd get somewhere I didn't want to be. Besides, they

were only offering to pay my connections, not me. While this didn't make a difference to my decision, it did rankle a bit knowing they relegated me to their periphery, a step-ladder, not even capable of greed. Or perhaps they sensed that it wouldn't be worth it to dangle money at me. Either way, I liked that people who couldn't pay "whatever it took" got to see them. Like the biologist from Colorado who'd driven twenty-plus hours across four states with her family and their small camper trailer to see the phenomenon.)

I didn't know when or if I'd get the chance for that type of sight-seeing later, given Bekah's limited and differing interests so I dragged my body out of the car to snap hurried pictures as I drove the windy road back toward headquarters again. Not as good as the real thing but better than nothing.

It was a different drive than the morning's had been, and not just because there was no sleeping Bekah in the passenger seat. I marveled at how much water there was, even just what I could glimpse from the road. I could see more of it now that the sun had long ago burned off the fog and dripping clouds that gave the mountains their name. Well, part of their name. I'd been warned that, since I hailed from Rocky Mountain country, the *Great Smoky Mountains* might underwhelm me.

And it's true, their height and ruggedness don't compare with the Missions or the Bitterroots. But the Smokies' weathered slopes are old and generous, their waters running through dense vegetation, providing habitat for an aural kaleidoscope of songbirds like I'd never heard before. No Mount Baldys here. Instead, it looked like bags and bags of green popcorn had been poured out on the hummocks and hills, puffs of trees covering them entirely before the horizon gave way to cornflower skies.



I'd heard a theory that the most beautiful scenes to humans are green landscapes with flowing water. The elements of such pictures soothe and appeal to the most primal parts of us. They promise survival, nourishment, life.

That's what these mountains are great with. Life.

I pulled into the large, divided parking lot of the closed Sugarlands Visitor Center where I would meet the rest of the crew. I took a few steps down the springy nature trail there before hurrying back to the car, wondering if they'd be able to find it.

I waited.

They were late.

I told myself it was too early to panic.

And then I thought about how our phones didn't have service within the park. I had no way to contact them, we hadn't discussed any sort of backup plans, and I had no idea where their Airbnb was. I realized I didn't even know which of the three cars at their disposal to expect.

Vehicles are only let in to the viewing area between 6:00 and 8:00 pm so that the fireflies aren't disturbed by headlights. Our agreed time to meet was already cutting it close. Lucy had our special invitation so I wasn't about to get in on my own.

I reviewed my options. Sit here all night until they came back from the fireflies? Check again that this was, indeed, Sugarlands Visitor Center? I could drive around to find a cell phone signal and hope someone else had one too. Or go back to Sylva without Bekah? I checked again that yes, this was, indeed, Sugarlands Visitor Center. I looked around for a ranger. No sausage. Maybe I could guess the way to the viewing area myself. No. Not a good idea.

What I wouldn't have given for a nap.

I was tired. My stomach empty, my limbs withering and my head starting to ache from the strain of the last few days' packing, wondering if I packed the right things, unpacking, packing again, agonizing over whether I'd have enough food or reading material or if this was a terrible idea, trying to shove the extra supplies from Zach into my bag at the airport, losing my boarding pass, barely getting through security in time, flying with two people I'd never met before, watching them eat, driving, trying to think of things to chat about with Bekah, more driving as she slept, hurrying through the grocery store, up again at 5:00 to drive, meetings, that painful lunch, driving, driving, more driving.

I hadn't even brought a book that I could distract myself with. I'd thought to bring towels from the Airbnb for Bekah and me to sit on but not a book.

Finally, a car pulled up next to mine. I recognized Bekah's pale face in the passenger seat and Zach's beard and long hair behind the wheel.

I climbed into the back of the Malibu, vaguely thankful those twenty pounds hadn't come back to Molly. They were all so sorry, they'd been napping and lost track of time. Zach whipped around the corners to make up for what we'd lost, and I tried not to be sick while he told us a story about how he'd ruined his parents' car in high school. He felt really horrible about it and did everything he could to make up for his dumb mistake. His parents, for their part, took it pretty well.

Two women flagged us down just before the entrance to the firefly area. They peered into our car, hands clasped beneath chins, pleading for a ride.

"Aww, if we had any room..." Lucy sympathized.

We were directed where to park and given red cellophane bags to put our phones in—again, to minimize disturbance to the sensitive highlight species. A kind park volunteer showed

us pictures and explained a bit about firefly bioluminescence and the differences between the lights we'd see that night. One species swooshes like Nike through the air. Another they call the "blue ghost" doesn't flash at all, instead glowing continuously as it whimsies along its way, sometimes a pale green rather than blue. Males of our VIP species, the synchronous fireflies, situate themselves a few feet above the ground and flash five to eight times, then grow "quiet" for eight seconds before flashing five to eight more times. They do this simultaneously in groups, hence the name "synchronous." The females below have an answering pattern. All of this flashing serves as a "photo" ID by which they can distinguish their own species. But there is one type that mimics our synchronous fireflies. They lurk in the underbrush, blinking yellow-y white light to lure the males, a more sinister aim to their show: dinner without the date.

After the explanation from our kindly firefly aficionado and a reminder to avoid the leaf litter where the blinky beetles would be alighting, we trudged up the road to find the connecting trail, which had been paved but was now fallen into disrepair. The others stumbled with its swells, too, masking my fatigue.

We'd arrived in the last car they let in; seating along the heaving trail was limited. We looked for any open area in the trees where the fireflies were likely to be. But the most promising spots were already lined with camp chairs somehow wedged well enough into the sloped ground to keep from tipping out their occupants. Others sat on blankets. Restless children wandered or bounced up and down. People chattered and laughed, but their voices were quiet, subdued with anticipation.

Lucy settled on an area with the crumbled remains of a stone wall, just a brief scramble uphill but right smack in the view of a family in their camp chairs on the other side of the trail. I

perched on a rock crossing my fingers that no one crushed any fireflies in addition to the family's disgruntled hopes.

Comfortably or uncomfortably, we settled in to wait for dark.

"I am *starving*."

Lucy reiterated the hunger she'd expressed both during the whiplash car ride and the hike up to where we were. She pulled a thick hoagie out of her bag, smoothing out the blue-lined, paper-foil wrapper on the ground in front of her to serve as a placemat of sorts. She separated the sandwich, slathering each half with globs of mayo out of a packet.

"Can you believe they were thinking about putting some of us up in a hotel? That's just not doable. They say at the start of all of these trips that the per diem is rated to cover eating out for every meal, but it definitely doesn't. We need [expletive] kitchens if we're gonna be out here for two weeks at a time!"

I imagined my ten days here in a hotel without a range, cutting assembly, or blender: Carrot sticks. It looked like a whole lot of carrot sticks.

"I don't even know how to cook..." Bekah admitted. "My boyfriend came over to teach me to make pasta. It was my first time. He was like, 'Bekah, you just graduated college. You gotta learn.'"

"What do you do then, if you don't cook?" Molly asked.

"I eat out a lot. And a lot of Doordash."

"How can you afford that? That's just not affordable. Is it?"

"Yeah, no, I know... I gotta learn how to cook. I'm going to. Curtis—my boyfriend—we've started cooking together once a week. We've only done it twice, but..."

Molly and Lucy tantalizingly described some of their favorite dishes to make, Lucy demurely covering her mouth before speaking between large bites of bread and meat and cheese. She chewed quickly, eager to talk, her voice loud and robust and resonating. Molly giggled almost as much as she spoke, her voice equally loud yet thinner. Bekah snapped through her ps and bs like a wad of Bazooka gum, and somehow Zach's mellifluous words broke through the noise, floating like lazy cursive through the air.

I had tried not to position my back to them, but the way the hill slanted under my rock made it difficult. So I sat sideways, feet on the ground, my knees bent, facing Lucy. She was nearly finished with the animal product and condiments someone had been paid to wedge between those prime slices of hydrogen, carbon, and oxygen compounds. (It didn't actually help to think of the sandwich this way, but it was worth a try.)

The conversation mercifully shifted from food to family. Lucy talked about what it had been like to find a house in New Mexico, the convoluted backpacking trip she went on last year with her fiancé, why they were waiting to get married, the frustrations of having such a traditionally-minded grandmother always butting in to her business. She swore a lot and loudly. They all did, Bekah apologizing the first couple of times, out of habit. My mind drifted to the family behind me and the ones we'd passed just down the trail.

Bekah mentioned that she and her boyfriend were thinking about moving in together, to save money.

Zach, it seemed, was unlucky in love. Molly and Lucy sympathized, assured him he'd find someone. But Missoula was a small place to go to college, the dating pool even more shallowed thanks to COVID. Nothing sparked for him on Tinder either.

It was starting to get dark, one or two fireflies popping off their own sparks every now and again--rough drafts of their unique dating profiles.

“They’re like those little things in that Disney movie,” Bekah said. “Oh, [expletive] what were they called?” She snapped her slight fingers. “The one about the red-haired girl...Merida! That’s the one.”

They *were* like will o’ the wisps, flitting in and out of sight.

A blue light bobbed towards me, and our little group seemed to hold its breath, just for a moment before Zach’s hushed voice drifted along behind it. “That one came right up to you, Maja.”

Lucy told us about her dad’s English accent, how impressed people were that he still had it after so many years in the states. Her teenage friends had been particularly enthralled by it, but he got a little tired of people asking where he was from.

The weight I’d lost to the last year made sitting on a rock unfamiliarly uncomfortable. I shifted my position—carefully, as I’d been doing all day, not having managed to find a new belt that fit--to face where we hoped the fireflies were congregating. More and more flicked on and off in the space between trees. The winking lights electrified little thrills in my fingertips and chest, reminding me that, somewhere inside, I was in awe at being there. I fought for those thrills. But my aching head just couldn’t help hoping this firefly panoply would be punctual.

Lucy told us about her commitment to her family’s weekly Zoom calls. She thought it was important to attend even if she didn’t agree with some of her relatives’ views—*cough cough*, Grandma.

She eventually relented the conversation in favor of asking about post-graduation plans beyond these survey trips. I inspected the moss on my rock, hoping the conversation would continue to skirt around me and my dragged out undergrad status.

It did.

“I want to see a bear *so [expletive] bad!*” Bekah lamented. “I’ve been in Montana for four years, and I’ve never seen one.”

“Oh, you probably will here,” Zach reassured her.

Soon, the lights pulsed with more regularity and in greater density, dappling the near-complete darkness with dots of illumination.

“They look like those twinkly Christmas lights,” Bekah tried again to describe it, fluttering her fingers.

“Yeah...This *is* really [expletive] cool,” Lucy decreed. Her waxing energy contrasted the waning daylight. “But I thought they were going to be more...well...synchronized. They’re all just kinda blinking at random. And then they all stop blinking together.”

The others agreed that this was not quite what they were expecting.

With a little more time, the beetles did become somewhat more synchronized. One piece of forest would blink-blink-blink-blink-blink haphazardly, but then complete optical silence. Then blink-blink-blink-blink-blink. Some sections seemed to catch on more quickly than others. In each, the return to darkness was more synchronized than anything else.

I watched and tried to wonder in it, my companions’ voices crowding around the ache between my ears.

“Wow, [expletive], just look at them all.” Lucy. “Dana was soo nice to have let us in.”

The lights were bright and crisp, smaller, whiter: reminiscents of Xenon headlights. A sneak into *Fantasia*'s glistening fairy world.

“Yeah... This is really cool!” Molly.

I wondered if this was at all what it was like to watch firefly squid in the waters off of Japan. I couldn't shake the feeling I was sitting in the deep of the ocean.

“Did anyone else see Kendra on the way up here? I wonder how many of them get to watch.” Zach.

Or maybe I was floating on the curve of the earth's atmosphere, watching far away suns die and resurrect, die and resurrect.

“Didn't that guy say it's their butts that glow?” Bekah.

...Indeed.

Theirs glowed while the thinned flesh of mine sat trapped between rock and bone, bruising. I let my head loll for a minute. Thankfully, while the last year and a half leading up to this may have made sitting more painful, it at least served to dull the day's experience of being left out, left outside, left behind, left to wait. But my hollow, ungrumbling stomach conjured a pitiful and tormenting recollection of Lucy's sandwich.

“Oh, yeah. This is my first time being a field lead.” Lucy. “It's soooo nice to be out in the field again, though. I get sooo tired of my computer.”

After so many months of necessary deprivation, my entire body—my desiccated hip joints and spent thighs, the tendons in my flaccid arms, my atrophying thoughts—we *all* wanted that sandwich and whatever life it could provide.

“Wow, it's getting better! This is so [expletive] cool.” Lucy's voice projected toward the stars. She lay on her blanket, feet popping up in turn to briefly rest her ankles on the opposite



bent knee. Settled in but scarcely settled down. “Just look at them! I wonder if they get fully in sync by the end of the night.

I wrapped my arms around my own knees, held them tense with sympathy, empathy for anyone around us who may have come for a night of reverent awe, ready to slip away from the world and be immersed instead in one of earth’s natural wonders, this chance of a lifetime, and were instead met with my callously conversing coworkers.

“How long did Dana say they’ll go?” Bekah.

The significance of the night was almost palpable. I wanted them to stop talking just enough, just long enough that I could forget they were there, just to let me grasp it.

“Uh, hm. I don’t remember. Ten or eleven maybe? It wasn’t super long.” Zach.

The darkness throbbed, surged, rippled with beetle light.

“I think I saw another blue devil!” Zach had rechristened the blue ghosts, thinking they were the tricksters preying on our special species. “[Expletive] bastards.”

Craving an escape for even just one of my senses I closed my eyes—the only faculty I had enough control over.

“Ha, ha! [Expletive] blue bastards!” Bekah’s bs burst through the giggles, Molly’s and her own.

But then, unsurprisingly, I couldn’t see. The whole point of closing them, sure, but it also completely invalidated my presence there. Those small lights igniting the dark woods couldn’t penetrate my voluntary blackout, however much I willed them to, to just let me see without needing my eyes.

“I wish we could take a picture.”

Lucy again. Still.

“Yeah, that’d be sweet!” Bekah.

“Do you think it’ll work through the cellophane? I’m gonna try it.”

“I mean, yeah, you could try it.” Zach.

“Hmmm.” Crinkling cellophane. “What if I... Here we go. Oh. Nope. Waaaiit. Nope. Nope. That didn’t work. [Expletive].”

And an expletive from Bekah. “I was gonna say if it worked, you gotta text it to me.”

I opened my eyes, meeting an ocular quiet that contradicted the noise around me. And then I was re-acquainted with those specks of scintillating brilliance once more. And then again. And again. All around me.

“The pass they gave us is a media pass. So, they’ve got to let *some* people take pictures.”

Lucy.

The fireflies were slated to dazzle the crowds until 10 pm. I wondered how well they’d stick to the program. Would they be exhausted by then?

“I guess you need pretty special equipment for this sort of thing.” Molly.

I found myself unable to help longing for that full-size mattress back in Sylva even as I sat there amidst these zoetic, terrestrial stars. Would my only significant verbal contribution today be to ask to leave?

“Long exposure, maybe?” Lucy.

How much energy did generating your own light—inverse photosynthesis?—expend? What would these, nature’s nightlights, do when they were done, with hours of darkness still ahead?

“I mean, I saw some pretty big-[expletive] cameras along the trail down there.” Zach.

And what would they do when the sun came up? Did they watch the sunrise?

“Soo... We don’t know when they’ll be done?” Bekah.

I'd been promised by a Tennessee native on my last flight that the best Smoky Mountain experience is found in the early, early morning along a trail at the edge of a slope watching the sun tint the sky as it lifts itself out of the low, saturated clouds.

"I know Dana said they don't go all night." Molly.

"If you can work that into your schedule, do it," he'd told me, fingering the fringe of the red and white package of airplane-courtesy Biscoff cookies I'd given him. "Seriously. It's so worth it. It's so beautiful."

He had a bushy brown beard that obscured most of his young, weathered face. I relied on his faceted, polar blue eyes and the wrinkles straddling their edges to read his expression, eyes that matched his words—eager, earnest, awed.

He was in love with this place.

I wanted to see it as those impassioned, diamonded eyes had--if even in just one such secluded, quiet preamble to the rest of a day's gauntlet. Just me, the mountains, the mist, and the morning.

"I hate to be the one to bring this up..." Bekah said, interrupting a rare silence, "but Maja and I still have a long drive back tonight. Annd we have to be up pretty early to start work tomorrow too..."

Blessed Bekah.

I hated to be so happy to leave. But we were off, noisily, obstreperously, *delectably* fumbling back down the undulating path, the forest glinting around us with light inefficient for our feet. Blaze, blink, blink, blink, blink, black... Blaze, blink, blink, blink, blink, black.