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THE OVAL

VOL. XIII • 2020 • STAFF EDITION

SACRED CAFE

THE OVAL

VOL. XIII • 2020 • STAFF EDITION



STUDENT
INVOLVEMENT
NETWORK



Each year, the staff of *The Oval* releases
a companion issue to showcase
the writing and art of those who help
to assemble the main issue.
Welcome to *The Oval Vol. XIII: Staff Edition*.

The Oval is a literary magazine published annually by the Creative Writing Program of the University of Montana English Department, the Associated Students of the University of Montana (ASUM), The Student Involvement Network, and the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Library.

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WHEN I GREW UP

Mielle Hubbard

My grandma wanted us to call her Uma, but my sister Halisia couldn't make her little tongue pronounce it. Her best was "Elmo," which Adriel, our cousin who lived up the road, turned into "Mummo." Our other cousins called her "Mamo," and she officially gave up.

We lived on Three Turtle Crossing, named for the turtles crossing from pond to pond in the summer. Elmo bought these twenty acres of land before Halisia and Adriel were born, a piece of property just far enough away from town to seem like its own territory. My parents and aunts followed.

Elmo lived across the gravel road in a canvas-covered, single room, round yurt, with plastic covering and a small propane stove as her only protection against long Montana winters. We huddled up as close as possible without knocking over the piles of clay molds when we gathered to watch *War of the Buttons* and *Secondhand Lions*. Our backs inches away from the stove, we held competitions to see who could stand the heat the longest. Adriel always won.

We were invested in our art projects, the medium changing with the season. I knew winter had arrived the day I stepped into the yurt and smelled earthy clay. Old yogurt containers sat on every table, some filled with murky water and a layer of silt, others stuffed with tools and paint brushes. Beige dragons already lined the shelves, drying out until they were ready to be fired. Their individual personalities would shine when she layered them with glaze, but until then they all looked over their left shoulders and curved their tails in. I could see Elmo's fingerprints where she pinched up their scales.

I spent the most time in the yurt. I was friends with all of her decorations, and familiar with everything's place. I loved to feel her worn quilt, pluck the strings of her baby harp, and spin the bent forks balanced perfectly on another. Everything crowded together in the small space but it just felt cozy. When the yurt was first built, she asked all of her friends to paint tan tiles, and I could pick out each one. I recognized the white pitbull by my dad, Reuben's purple baby feet, the family trees done by my mom, and the stick figures with prominent behinds I proudly painted.

Elmo covered them up with rugs, but I knew where they lived.

Elmo asked me how school was everyday that I came over and we talked about all the silly things people did. Once, in third grade, I told her about a trick a boy in my class played.

"He told someone to say 'x' ten times really fast." I knew the result, and couldn't bring myself to say it, so I motioned to her.

"X, x, ex, exs, sex, sex, sex, sex," she nodded knowingly. "Little boys think they are very funny and clever when they are inappropriate."

I nodded and returned to my clay elephant.

I always volunteered to walk things over to Elmo, because I could avoid chores for twenty minutes while she showed me the progress she'd made in her scarf, or the pictures of the Cockatoos I'd requested. She loved to have someone to talk to, and I loved to listen to her. She told me about her walks with the dogs and the rocks she gathered. One day she showed me a pygmy owl propped up on a stick. She'd found it dead on the forest floor and carefully brought it home to live among her magazines and art supplies.

There's something witchy about an old woman living in the woods with a little white Westie and a huge half-wolf. Her hair turned metallic after chemo and was often arranged unevenly, pulled back with the first clip she saw in the morning. When Elmo was pregnant with my oldest aunt she had Bell's Palsy and the right side of her face froze. She worked on it for months by making exaggerated faces until the muscles began to move again, but it was never quite the same. She smiled wider with the left corner of her mouth and her right eyelid drooped. Even though the right side of her face had less wrinkles, it still somehow looked older. Less alive.

In the crook of her left elbow, at the base of her forearm, the Subud symbol has bled after a long life. Seven blue concentric circles inside each other, sliced into seven pieces by seven lines.

"It reminds me to do Latihan."

Elmo found all her answers through Latihan, mediating to communicate with her higher power. The energy from the women practicing together allowed answers and insights to be received. She changed her name from Nancy to Lusana. She had just the cancerous tumors removed from her breast. She moved to Montana.

She was a life-long teacher, passing on all that she had learned about nature and crafts to everyone that would listen. She held art camps, and taught the grandchildren how to swim and float in Loon Lake. She patiently showed me how to blow bubbles, but I was scared of the

water and could only keep it up for seconds at a time. She became an elementary and middle school art teacher as we grew up, then moved to an after-school program at a local church. The young kids were enamored with her, and whenever I came to visit they all asked, “Is Lusana really 180 years old?”

“Of course she is! She’s magic,” I always replied. Elmo cackled with delight.

I only ever went to one Subud Congress, when I was thirteen, the same time I decided I didn’t want to call her Elmo anymore. We took the long way back from Denver to Yellowstone to Three Turtle Crossing. I noticed for the first time that her cup holders were filled with loose toothbrushes and dental floss and we sat in silence between rounds of the alphabet game. We had raw corn for dinner that night and I pretended to be asleep until we pulled into Yellowstone. The next day we took pictures of the bison, saw Old Faithful, and walked across geyser pools. I saw some yurts that matched Grandma’s and wondered if they were as cramped as the one I knew.

I knew as a child, when I carefully stroked the clay creations, that all of Grandma’s belongings would have to go somewhere after she died. And, as her health began to fail, Grandma started to pressure the family members to claim their own.

“If you ever see anything you want, just let me know! You can have it!”

I didn’t want to be the one to go over and take everything at once, so I spaced it out. A box of yarn now, great-grandma’s jade earrings the next time. I picked out a stone ring that looked like billowing smoke. I thought, *This will remind me of Old Faithful, when we went to Yellowstone.* It was months before I realized the ring reminded me only of that moment in the yurt.

I stopped going over to Grandma’s so much. Bringing things over to her became a chore when her endless talking started cutting into the time I needed to do homework. Her knitting became less impressive as I compared it against my own. All of her art projects were repeats of the things she was best at making: scarves, clay dragons, painted goblets, rock mosaics. I only saw her on the weekends when we played cards and the school nights she drove me home from piano lessons.

Her memory is fading. At first she was aware of it, apologizing for telling the same stories again. These slip-ups were rare, maybe once every couple days. They started coming more often. Within one conversation, she would tell the same story three times, apologizing after each one.

She was prescribed medication to slow down the deterioration of her memory. She went off of them, forgetting to get them refilled. She convinced herself that they didn't help, anyway.

She needs reassurance often. For a while, she thought I was the only one who loved her because I yelled it as she dropped me off at home. It's easy to think Grandma's fine because she pushes the focus off of herself but every once in a while she'll let slip that she's out of groceries.

"You're only eating cereal?" I asked, "With water? Do you want me to pick up some food for you?"

"Oh, no, no, no," as if this is the biggest hassle she would put on us. "I'll be good for a while. I have my walnuts."

I tried to learn stories from her childhood, picking up little details in passing about how she learned to read maps. She was most honest in the car. She prided herself on her driving, how she could keep a straight line even as she looked at me, at the cousins sitting in the back. I decided that I needed a recording of her. An actual interview on tape, something I could listen to when she was gone. I recruited my siblings and chose questions on the internet. By the time we all gathered in the living room, Grandma had asked six times, "What is this for? For school?" I should have remembered then how little she likes the spotlight.

I started the recording, we each introduced ourselves, and we began. I was hoping to hear more anecdotes, choosing questions like, "What were you like as a child?" and "Do you have any funny stories you want to share?" She talked about her childhood, moving across the country with her military dad. We learn she's happiest in the car with her family, singing songs and playing road trip games. She tells us a little about her siblings, how her relationship with them has changed. Then I got to the one I was most nervous for.

"If this was going to be our last conversation, is there anything you want to tell us that you haven't told us before?"

I could imagine the things she would say. Would she talk about her divorce, breast cancer, the reason she came to Montana, her miscarriage? This was the moment, I thought, her deepest secrets could finally come out. We all leaned a little closer.

"No. I think if I wanted to tell something to you, I would have already told you."

She continued, saying that she would love to go on a road trip with each of us, where we could really get to know and be completely open with each other.

We started asking more pointed questions. Tell us about college, how

you found Subud, your first kiss.

"His name was Harry Hamilton. We were fourteen, both American. There was an ancient burial site, a great tomb, and we stood on top. It was gentle, no expectations or anything, and so, so innocent. I was pretty lucky, huh?" I had to imagine for myself the romantic scene with a gorgeous sunset in the background of the perfect first kiss. Through the rest of the interview, she kept finding ways to turn her stories into life lessons. "Be in the moment." "Find what makes you happy." "Just live your life."

She made it clear how much she would miss me as I left for college through a language of sad sighs and pats on my arm. When I finally came home for winter break, Grandma hugged me tight.

"Your energy has been missed. You have been missed."

I volunteered to help her find a dress for her eldest daughter's third wedding and found myself staring at the body of a woman who birthed six children. I never noticed the disproportion breast cancer left her with until she stood naked in front of me. She put on one of the dresses I picked out with a shawl and asked me what I thought.

"We could do better. Go ahead and take it off."

A recent illness left her constantly dizzy, and the pills to help with her memory lowered her blood sugar even more, so she stumbled, dress stuck over her head.

"Let me hold onto you. Pull the dress off."

I pulled it over her head, and felt the soft, thin skin covering her small, wrinkled body. I wondered how many times had we been in this exact situation, just switched places.

I know she won't have the energy to go on walks soon, so I forced Sawyer and Basil to come with us to Glacier National Park on a ten-mile round trip hike up to Iceberg Lake. She tried so hard. I reminded her I was making lunch, but she packed us tuna sandwiches anyway. We left late because she forgot where she put her license. She sat in the passenger seat, ready to take the wheel when my fear of heights took over. As we hiked, she reminded us that we didn't need to walk slowly just for her sake.

"I like walking this speed. I like to look at the scenery," I responded every few minutes.

We came back down the mountain six hours later. We piled into the car and opened the windows to let out the smell of feet. Grandma massaged her ankle. The last time she did this hike was thirty years ago, and her memory told her it was more of an easy stroll than the laborious

climb she just finished. I was more mentally exhausted than physically, and it didn't help that I had to drive us down the road I was too scared to drive up. The boys talked and laughed, and as we got onto the highway, Grandma touched my arm and softly said, "Should we get ice cream? Should I get you all milkshakes or something?"

My voice was tight. "That sounds nice." I knew she wouldn't remember that I drove straight home.

GOLD

Emma McMullen

A drop of sweat slipped down Keenan's forehead. He brushed back a strand of red hair as Fergus tinkered away in the middle of the room at an industrial-sized safe. He held a stethoscope up to the side and listened as if he could hear the earth's sediments compressing. His slight, knobby fingers brushed the combination lock, caressing it with each small turn. Brayden stood at the door crossing his burly arms.

"Who's this guy again?" Keenan shuffled in the corner, nervously peering out the tenth story window to the busy street below.

Brayden glanced at him. His grey eyes shined like polished nickel. "Logan Caulson. Big bad billionaire, treats his employees like rubbish. In the hospital for a couple days. Which is why we're here."

A smile grew on Fergus's weathered face, and with a barely audible click, the safe's door swung open.

Keenan stepped forward to examine the contents of the safe. The heap of gold coins glittered with warmth against the stark, fluorescent lights. He kneeled down, setting his briefcase down and undid the latches. He snapped on a pair of gloves and picked up one of the coins. Carefully, he took out a ceramic plate and gently scraped the coin against it. He nodded. "It's the real deal." He tilted the plate in the light to see the gold line the coin left behind.

"Brilliant. Let's get the booty and go." Brayden held open a bag for Keenan.

Keenan scooped the coins into the bag, making sure to get them all. He took off his gloves and put away the ceramic.

"Got it? Let's go. Nora is freaking out down there," Fergus said, motioning for them to hurry.

Brayden put the strap over his shoulders, and with Keenan's briefcase in his hand, they slipped out to the fire escape.

However, as usual, Keenan caught the tip of his shoe on one of the steel grates seconds later, rushing to get down.

"Yow!"

"Shhh!" Fergus and Brayden returned, their response well-practiced.

He jumped up and down on one foot.

“Shhhhhh!” They repeated. They left just the way they came: seamlessly. Except for Keenan.

Once at the street level, a sports car with slightly tinted windows pulled up. The window down, Nora stuck her muscular tattooed arm out giving Fergus the go-ahead. They slipped into the car, and Nora hit the gas.

Smoke hung between the rafters in the exclusive back lounge of a dimly lit pub.

“A round of drinks!” Nora called, sliding small glasses down a deep mahogany bar. Now that they were back at the pub which Nora owned as a cover for their organized crime operation, Keenan took this opportunity to examine the coins more closely. He squished down into a leather desk chair, pulling himself into his oak desk, which had dozens of small, labelled drawers that kept tools and samples of metals and rocks. His reflection blinked back at him from his array of magnifying glasses which fanned out around his workspace, distorting his thick face and flat freckled nose. He chose his strongest magnifying lens and leaned in close. Each coin appeared to be brand new and genuine American Gold Eagles.

He got into a rhythm of inspecting, setting into a coin board, grabbing another. He reached into the bag blindly, and what he set down on this station was not like the others.

“Hmm.” Keenan moved to look at the coin without magnification. The coin was had no patina or film, but appeared to be heavily weathered. He flipped it over to see the outlines of an emblem.

“Hey.”

“Brayden! You spooked me.”

“Well, what do you have there? I thought you were inspecting the loot.” Brayden whispered to Keenan from over his shoulder.

“I don’t know...” Keenan leaned in with my magnifying glass, and turned the light to look more closely at it. He lifted and tilted the coin in the light, careful to avoid scratching the intricate and faded design.

With some time, Keenan determined that the emblem displayed a panther, teeth bared, her spine arched in defense of what appeared to be a cub behind her.

“I think it’s a panther—” As he leaned in for a closer look through the magnifying glass, Brayden’s thick hairy fingers reached in to grab the coin.

“Brayden, I—”

“Think it could be gold?” he joked. Brayden brought the coin up

to his mouth and bit down, testing the metal's softness. "Guess so!" he chortled. "Nearly bent the—" His face blanched and his throat hissed. A white froth slipped from the corner of his lips, then poured out over his chin as he fell to the ground, twitching wildly. Keenan was frozen. Fergus threw back the curtains to the study. But it was too late. Fergus kneeled down and whispered a prayer. His hand moved in the shape of a cross. They watched the energy escape Brayden's all-seeing grey eyes as his body went limp.

Keenan let out a sob. "I'm s-sorry, I don't know wha—"

Fergus surveyed Brayden's body. He sniffed the disintegrating white froth, opened and closed Brayden's jaw, scratched at his teeth with a toothpick. Extracting a small piece of gold from between two molars, Fergus turned to Keenan and saw the broken coin on the ground.

Keenan looked down and wiped his eyes.

Fergus held his head in his hands for a moment. Then, he stood and walked out. "Nora, tell me you still have those connections in Southeast Asia."

Keenan reached over to the coin. Only a thin glove protected him from the white powder which filled the coin. Like a chocolate coin, the golden outside was just a wrapping for the fatal treat it disguised.

Keenan fell to the ground, and he shed silent tears for Brayden.

They left him like that for some time, until Nora was fed up. "Keenan, quit blubbering and get out here."

Keenan sighed and headed out the mumbling of Fergus and Nora.

Nora took a long drink.

Fergus was fumbling through some files. "What did they say?"

"Nothing really. That they would look into it." She shook her head. "How would they not know about a poisonous coin?" She turned to Fergus. "What are you doing now?"

"They asked if we were sure. I am sure of the design I saw. I'm trying to find where I've seen it before."

Keenan cleared his throat. "It's an old coin, and it wasn't made in a traditional mint. It was made by hand." Nora made herself another drink. Fergus continued his search.

"You've seen this before, then?" Keenan asked.

"Once. During a time I do not wish to relive. We have work to do, Keenan."

Keenan waited. Tapping his fingers on the table and spinning the ice in his drink.

Fergus had found something and Nora made another call. Nora's "uh huh's" and "hmm's" into the phone did nothing to break the silence.

She hung up. "We caught them just in time. My girl says they plan to target St. Patrick's hospital at midnight," Nora repeated to us from the phone.

"On 32nd street?" Keenan asked.

"The same," Nora replied gravely.

"Who is targeting the hospital? What are they doing there?"

Fergus stared blankly at his dark drink. "This group doesn't need a reason."

"The information is right. It'll be there," Nora said decisively as she set down the phone.

"We have no choice but to take them on," Fergus stated.

"For Brayden," Keenan said, pulling his chair up closer to the table and turning to Fergus and Nora to discuss logistics.

Nora rolled up through an alley behind the hospital. Fergus turned to Keenan. "Remember, we'll be in your ear the whole time."

Keenan nodded.

"Okay, we know how this hospital operates. We have allies on this inside. This should be a smooth, seamless experience." Nora and Fergus glanced at Keenan. "Nora, you are in the safest position from on top of the unused helicopter pad. You need to let Keenan know if anything goes wrong. I'll be monitoring the security camera footage. If anyone enters through the main lobby, we'll know."

They got out to grab their materials. Nora was dressed as a custodian; Fergus, a security guard. Nora grabbed her rifle, which was disassembled to fit into a plumber's tool bag. Fergus had a taser on his belt, a pistol on his ankle. Keenan was dressed as a nurse.

"Okay. Nora, move out first."

Keenan took a deep breath. "Fergus, I..."

"Keenan, I'll be walking you through every step. There's nothing to worry about. Go ahead." He nudged Keenan forward.

Keenan turned around and grabbed Fergus's arm. "No, I wanted to ask. Should I maybe... have a gun?"

"Keenan, you shouldn't need one. Our plan is to catch them before they get inside. You just need to get to Dr. O'Connor so that she can alert her people."

Keenan nodded. "Fergus, is there anything we could be missing? Something feels wrong."

"No." Fergus shook his head. "Don't worry about anything other than your part of the plan. With a man down, we need to rely on everyone doing their part."

Keenan hung his head. "I understand."

Fergus sighed. "How about this: since you're in the safest position, you hold onto the coin, okay?" He handed Keenan the plastic bag protecting the coin.

Keenan nodded.

"Go on, now. Stick with the plan."

"Just like we planned... just like we planned," Keenan repeated to himself. He stepped out onto the cracked concrete. The light purple scrubs scratched him with every step. He tried to look as casual as possible, walking confidently. Upon approaching the huge granite arches and tall glass sliding doors, he paused. He closed his eyes in a grimace and walked forward, bracing himself for whatever calamity would surely come next.

Due to his eyes being closed, he walked right into the glass front door. His already flushed face turned garnet red as the hospital employees shot sideways glances. He gave them a small wave. "Just like we planned," He muttered again.

Inside, his footsteps seemed to echo more than anyone else's as he crossed the hospital's marble floor to the elevator. For once, he didn't trip when he quickened his pace. He let out a sigh of relief when the elevator opened and revealed itself to be empty. He slid inside and illuminated the button for the third floor. Keenan slouched against the wall, exhaling the breath he was holding and told himself that if he kept quiet, there was nothing he could do wrong.

Finally, the bell dinged for the third floor. A flushed woman entered before he could get out. "They're sending me all over the place. Don't they know it's the middle of the night?"

Keenan shrugged as he stepped out of the elevator quickly, crossing the threshold. These marble stairs did not shine the same way those on the main floor did.

A bad feeling twisted in Keenan's stomach. "Fergus, do you copy?" he asked into the microphone wired to his wrist.

"Uh Fergus is a little busy," Nora responded.

He paused. "Roger that." Keenan walked slowly toward the nurses' desk. He couldn't shake the feeling. They must have put a hit on someone in particular. He approached the nurses' desk. "Hey, do you know where Dr. O'Connor is at?"

"She's not in today."

Keenan nodded. Figuring he would look anyway, he passed the blood lab, where he only caught two words: "Logan Caulson." Keenan backpedaled.

"Yeah, didn't you hear? A billionaire in room 311." He could hear her roll her eyes.

"That can't be a coincidence, he whispered. "Since he got here he's been making demands to have a higher security presence. Mix entitled with drugs and you get demanding paranoia I guess. Didn't learn that one in pharmacy classes."

Keenan took a look at the room numbers, and, with newfound confidence, sped toward 311. Grabbing a clipboard, he entered the room.

There, a man stood over a middle-aged man in a hospital bed, a knife to his neck. On the shoulder of his leather jacket, the same emblem as the one embossed onto the poisonous coin was embroidered. Keenan looked down at his cracking leather shoes, realizing he had forgotten to put on those canvas sneakers nurses always wear.

"Where is our treasure?" The man whispered in broken English.

"I don't know. It was stolen from me. They told me yesterday. I don't know."

The man sliced off Logan's ear lobe. He yelped. They both looked to the door to see if anyone had heard.

Keenan managed to go unnoticed until now.

The man pulled out a gun and pointed it at him. Before he could say anything, Keenan felt a muzzle on his lower back.

"Go in." It was Nora's voice behind him.

Keenan raised his arms in defeat, and Nora shut the door behind her.

Logan spoke. "Look, you know I have money. How much do you want? Ten million? One hundred million? How much?"

The man laughed. "Money is not what I seek."

"The item?" the man asked, looking to Nora.

"No, he didn't have it on him." She paused. "Must have left it back at the pub."

The man shook his head. "That's too bad for you." He threw his knife and it pieced Nora's forehead. She collapsed to the ground.

"Nora!" Keenan fell to help her, shook her. He noticed her gun there on the floor. *This can go one of two ways. My gross motor skills might take over, in which case I'm dead. Or, my fine motor skills work, and I have some leverage.* His sleight-of-hand abilities swiftly grabbed the knife and hid it behind his clipboard.

"Leave her." The man pulled out two new knives, one pointed at

Keenan, one on Logan's neck.

Keenan's voice shook. "Okay, it's not money that you want. What is it?" The coin in his pocket suddenly felt heavy.

"I could kill you. But I think I tell you what this man took from me. My culture's history. Our dignity. Our humanity. Our ancestry." The man relaxed his knives and looked up. "My legacy. Passed from father to son for generations. This is a time we fight for something of a different value." He shook his head. "The ones who bit the coin for our cause."

Keenan lowered one of his hands slowly to my scrub pants pocket. "A coin."

"How do you —" The man saw that Keenan had lowered his hand. He raised his knife, but Keenan had already made his move. He held his fist out, holding a small plastic bag. In the other hand, Nora's pistol.

"Is this what you're looking for?" Illuminated by fluorescent lights, he opened his hand to reveal the coin for only a second. The man sliced Logan's neck and charged toward Keenan, but he put the coin in front of the muzzle. His hands were steady.

"Bit the coin? Why all of this for one coin?"

The men were in a stand-off, facing each other.

"During the war. An oath. We will not be taken alive."

Keenan lowered the coin, watching it glitter through the plastic. "If I give you this, we both walk away."

The man raised his knife.

Keenan spoke quickly. "My bullet will get there quicker than your knife. But I don't want that. I want you to have it. It belongs to you."

They inched toward each other, weapons steady.

Keenan's pulse consumed his head as his hand, still clenched, and the man's open palm aligned. He opened his hand and what tumbled out was not the sparkle of gold, but the power of sacrifice, returned.

The door slammed open. "Keenan!"

"Fergus, stop!" Keenan tried to yell, telling him it was over, but his voice was drowned out by the sound of a helicopter.

In that split second, a ladder fell from the helicopter and the man jumped to grab it. As he caught the lowest rung, he turned and mouthed "Thank you."



CATALYST SEASONS

Jayne Albrecht

Singing a frantic summer tongue,
Mother smears sweat——like honey——
from her hair and down her neck.

In another scene I cry gardens
to trudge through with peach-colored
rust in the soles of my
shoes for the next spring.

Mother makes tea to help her throat
and I peer through our living room window
sitting in earth, wishing she'd meet my eyes.

Winter solstice promises of graying flowers
in my gardens, but the comatose
skeletons of my coneflowers will remain
expecting water.

Like nothing ever happened.

Mother tilts her head to the April
rains and sings. Rain soaks into her hair.





Iggy Schuler

SURGEON GENERAL'S WARNING

Noah Belanger

SURGEON GENERAL'S WARNING:

CIGARETTE SMOKE CONTAINS CARBON MONOXIDE

That's What We're Legally Required to Tell You

If You Do a Quick Search on Carbon Monoxide

You Will Learn That It Blocks Oxygen From Reaching Your Heart and Lungs—

This Can Lead to Heart Failure, Difficulty Breathing, Depression,

Tiredness, Panic Attacks, and Lowered Cognitive Ability.

For the Cost of Six Packs of Cigarettes You Can Buy a Detector

To Tell You When There Are Elevated Levels of This Gas in Your Home,

And This is Highly Suggested by Multiple Government Agencies

We Don't Have to Tell You That Nicotine is Addictive

Or That Smoking Will Increase Your Risk of Getting Cancer—

You Should Know This Already—

We Also Don't Have to Tell You That You Will Quickly Form

A Close Association Between Drinking and Smoking

And When You Have Five Beers and Three Shots of Whiskey

You Will Smoke Half a Pack Like Drinking a Glass of Water—

You Did This Last Night and Woke up Feeling

As if You Had Fallen Down on the Tracks Heading Home

And Were Run Over By the Trains That Go By There

You Will Tell Yourself You Can Quit—
You Will Make Several Efforts—
You Will Go Three Weeks Without Buying a Pack,
But Your Coworkers Also Buy Cigarettes,
And When You Work a Ten-Hour Day
Mindlessly Chopping Vegetables and Preparing Salads,
And When You Sit Down at the Bar Afterwards,
One of Them Will Offer You a Cigarette
And You Will Smoke it and Feel Guilty
But You Will Also Bum Another

We Don't Have to Tell You About the Guilt—
You Have Reset the Quit Date on Your App Three Times This Week;
You Will Never Forget the Times You Went Home
And Stood Behind the Shed in the Snow,
Smoking a Stale Cigarette You Found
In an Old Pack Under Your Bed,
Lying When Your Father Asked About the Footprints
In the Snow You Forgot You Left;
You Will Say Foolish Things Like
Everyone Has to Die of Something,
And You Will Remember Those Words
When Someone Else You Know is Diagnosed with Cancer

You Think You Know the Price But We Can Assure You
You Will Not Know Until Your Hair is Falling Out
And You Have Nothing Left in Your Stomach but Bile
That the Simple Phrase
CIGARETTE SMOKE CONTAINS CARBON MONOXIDE
Means Very Little to a Dying Man



PERSPECTIVES FROM HARD ROCK

Lindsey Gallagher

I'm clinging onto small nodules of rock with a grip appropriate for a life-or-death situation. My fingers grasp a puny hold, my toes just barely rest on the rocks below me. I'm less than sixty feet up, but I'm stuck. I've been in the same spot for over five minutes desperately searching for a piece of rock my fingers can cradle to allow me to thrust myself upwards. I move my left hand and wrap my fingers around a protruding piece of rock. My left arm is now outstretched while my right hand remains near my chest refusing to let go of the hold I used to remain in my state of immobility. My toes are the only real balance I have in this unfortunate position. My forearms flex as I grip the rock. I'm over-gripping in attempts to compensate for the lack of security I feel on the open rock face.

I pause for many long seconds, unsure of what I'm waiting for. I'm sure it was the courage to trust the hold and continue climbing because I am not in this position to relax or enjoy the view. I don't want to fall, yet it seems that either position I take brings me uncomfortably close to slipping off. I'm quite petrified. If I were to fall, the rope I'm attached to—the one anchored to not one, but two trees—at the cliff top will catch me. My dad, who stands at the bottom belaying me, will pull the loose rope connected to his harness through his ATC—Air Traffic Controller, that is—essentially locking the rope, preventing me from spending any additional time free from the rock, hanging curiously. I still have trust issues with the rope, though; any fall, even five feet, seems deadly to me. It's hard not to feel vulnerable when the tops of trees are level with my vision.

This is the second time I've been rock climbing in my life. The first time, six years ago, I was there because my dad organized a guided climbing session, not at all because of any real interest in climbing. We were in New Hampshire on routes that were surely easy if someone so inexperienced as myself could complete them. I remember regretting wearing tight plaid shorts as my legs stretched over the rocks; I was more concerned about ripping my pants than the climbing. But, I also recall having a similar sense of fear, a fear rooted in my lack of trust in the rope's strength and the unfamiliarity of clinging to a rock face. There were the

worries of falling, too: a general sort of terror that made me move with slow deliberation to avoid being in any kind of position where I did not have a death grip on the rock. Any real climber would've cringed at my hapless form as well as my utter lack of technique.

It was only quite recently that I became interested in the sport. Months ago, I saw the documentary *Free Solo* which chronicles Alex Honnold's climb up El Capitan using nothing more than his body as equipment. Next, *The Dawn Wall*, a striking film about Tommy Caldwell and Kevin Jorgeson's ascent of El Cap's Dawn Wall. I knew three big names of the sport; that was it.

Then came a visit to Yosemite, the great National Park tucked into the vast California wilderness. Yosemite, John Muir's beloved: the valley of lodgepole pines, their coarse, maze-like bark, cascading waterfalls, choirs of roaring water. The entire valley is surrounded by sheer granite walls, but only one—a three-thousand-foot wall—sticks out by its nose: El Capitan. It's shadow towered over the winding park roads. From the backseat, I couldn't crane my neck high enough to see its peak. As we drove, I craved a true vision of its grandeur. We stopped at a pull-off. I was simply awestruck by this mass; this mass of rock, slow-moving time, crushing pressure. It felt too big to even understand just how big it was. But, then I saw a speck in motion midway up the wall: a climber. Now, I was an ant. We were all ants saluting *The Chief*, this unmoving body. The mere specks struck me. I felt the impulse to put my hands on the rock—to feel its grooves and follow it up. We love to have our feet in intimate contact with the ground. We belong grounded, we tell ourselves. Everything pulls us down and we let it, unconsciously chained. We want to be grounded, yet I longed to be suspended.

When I returned from my thirty-three-day pilgrimage across the country, it didn't take much to convince my dad—a Forest Ranger and climbing enthusiast—to take me to the walls. We drove four hours north from our home to the Shawangunks—"The Gunks"—and I watched as the forests grew thick, the flat topography of my Long Island home giving way to green, rolling hills. We pulled off the thru-way arriving in New Paltz—practically the best place in New York to be a climber. When we arrived at the Peter's Kill climbing area, I followed my dad in a lost puppy dog sort of way as he unloaded various ropes, biners, and strange contraptions from the car into his pack. He handed me a rope of hefty weight and told me to sling it over my back to wear like a backpack. With every step, the rope unraveled from its knot making the straps grow in length. Quite unlike any other backpack I'd worn, this one fell apart as I

wore it. Luckily, it was a short walk to the base of the “Bunk Bed” wall. I looked up at it, noticing a series of ledges, sheer rock faces, cross-cutting cracks.

What I failed to consider prior to our arrival was what the set-up involved. Almost an hour passed by the time we hiked to the top, strung ropes around two trees for our anchor, flaked the rope out—feeling as it slid through our fingers for frays, tied the climbing rope into the anchor, slung the rope over the cliffside, hiked back down, untangled the rope from the tree that ensnared it on the cliff, put our harnesses on, forced our feet into the oddly-shaped, uncomfortable climbing shoes, tied our harnesses into the climbing rope, double checked our knots, and, at last, began climbing.

We climbed well into the day stopping shortly for lunch. Even at this point, I was exhausted from both the climbing itself and the extensive set-up process. We ate our PB&Js in silence, eating quickly out of hunger. A bit distraught, a pit in my stomach gnawed at me. Climbing wasn’t what I thought it would be. It was a lot more set-up, knot-tying, and preparation than it was climbing. The routes I completed in the morning were relatively easy even for someone of my caliber. I was let down; my pointed excitement weathered down as the rocks on the cliffs around me.

It wasn’t until after lunch that my sullen mood took a turn. My dad and I watched another group of climbers attempt a more difficult route earlier in the day, and being that our anchor was close by, we wanted to give it a try ourselves. Watching the older climber before, it was obvious that the first ten or so feet held the most trying part of the climb. As my dad explained, this was called the crux. So began my feeble attempt to make it to the ledge sitting just above the ten feet of rather blank rock face in front of me. Given the minimal number of handholds, as well as the distance between them, this proved a greater challenge than expected. Multiple times I would get a foot on the second hold only to slip off as I stretched with my hands toward higher, sketchy holds. Instead of effortlessly moving upward, I found myself straining, suddenly airborne, half crashing into the rock, and then twirling around in circles as my dad hit the brake on the ATC leaving me suspended, out of control. Blood trickled from my knee where it collided with the rock; I smiled. We were, in proper climbing terminology, figuring out a “problem.” It was only ten feet of rock, but we spent time becoming intimate with it, examining the sequence of holds trying to piece together possible routes.

With a sort of miraculous gracefulness, I at last figured out the problem. My left foot just kissing a hold and my right rather secure on a

small ledge, I inched my left hand from its outstretched position toward my right hand which grasped a nice jug—a large hold. A painstakingly slow process—just barely balanced on the rock—I was always on the cusp of falling off. Too quick a movement would throw off my center of gravity. When I finally got my left hand around the same jug as my right, it made me alarmingly off-balance. My upper body bore the entirety of my weight. My hands, forearms, biceps—all muscles rarely pushed to the limit in this way—were strained. I could feel lactic acid building; they were “pumped.” Already in the tiring position, I realized I needed to make my next move fast for my upper body would tire leaving me with no strength for the move to follow. I was in the same position I found myself in multiple times before, only every time I ended up back at the bottom. The next hold, which I would grab with my left hand, remained just out of reach from my current, unstable position. To make it, I would have to make a pretty grand leap of faith, simultaneously releasing my left hand from the secure hold it rested on. Then, thrusting my body weight upwards, I would outstretch my arm in an attempt to affix my left hand to the higher hold. This move, requiring momentum to reach a new hold, was more simply a “dyno.”

And so, I did it—barely. Again, I had to make my next move fast for my weight rested on my weakening left arm. My right hand kept me pinned to the rock, but it remained useless in moving me up. It now became about finding footholds to raise my body to a less compromising position. Only then could I move my right hand to meet my left and restore balance. I moved upwards, by “smearing” or just tapping my feet against the rock, not touching any particular holds, using the front of my—actually my dad’s—slightly-too large climbing shoes and friction. Moments later, I pulled myself up over my hands, ungracefully rolling over the ledge at the top of the crux—a “mansion move.” Hard part done. I looked to the ground with a certain ardor. Sweat dripped down my forehead. It ran over my back. Lungs heaved. My arms felt drained, zapped of any strength. My hands, interestingly, felt as though they couldn’t grasp a thing. Yet, I had done it. But, then I looked to the top; my short-lived celebration ended. I had not yet finished. So, I located a hold for my foot and stretched my arms up, running my hands across the wall feeling the coarse rock for a divot, a hold, a nodule, anything, large enough to grip.

After the crux, the climbing seemed effortless. Each move brought me further up to my goal; no more did I have to pause to search for a hold or plan out moves in advance. This continued for about forty feet,

then I found myself in a most awkward, terrifying position frozen at the top. I'm fearful beyond a comforting limit, and to add to my terror, my calls for strength from my arms went unanswered, the grip strength in my hands almost none. But, this route—the most difficult one of the day—made me fall in love with climbing.

Since an early age, I was a runner. Much of my middle and high school experience were centered around the sport. Being decently fast—enough so that I won a few races—I naturally loved it. I adored hard days of training, memorizing times, following the professionals, and doing anything that made me faster. I grew up in the altogether familiar world of running. People knew me as a runner, I knew training concepts, prestigious races—you could ask me any question on the sport, and I would passionately spew back an answer.

So, coming into rock climbing—a sport I knew nothing about—was strange. I felt out of place, helpless in a way. I couldn't go off climbing on my own in the same way I train for my cross-country seasons in solitude during the summer months. I relied on my dad and his expertise. Knowing little, I spent much of the time I wasn't climbing asking questions. How does this piece of gear work? How do you tie that knot again? How does it work when you climb on your own? What kind of climbing is this we are doing, again? What does "sport climbing" mean? When do you use "pro"—protection? My mind whirled developing, I'm sure, the most obvious questions—which I often felt quite stupid even asking. Sure, I over-gripped the rocks in fear of falling. I didn't yet trust the ropes to keep me safe. I hated leaning back into the open air and belaying down. The various knots and protocols for set-up were intimidating, seemingly impossible to one day remember, let alone reproduce on my own. I felt awkward. I moved with rigidity and timidity, looking always to my dad to make sure I was doing everything right. Undoubtedly, a beginner. Yet, I loved it.

While climbing, I felt free. In a sport so inherently different from running, there were no expectations. None from others and, better yet, none from myself. I simply tried routes with no perception of *too hard* or, even, *too easy*. I didn't know that using specific techniques would make the climbs easier. I just went, using my limbs in any way that brought me skyward. I learned to celebrate the small victories. Remembering how to tie a knot. Belaying my dad slightly faster than the previous route. Knowing the name for a particular move. I'd smile wide when I accomplished even the most pathetic of tasks. I was inspired knowing I had so much more to learn, so much strength to gain, so much of a

climbing culture to discover.

When I climbed, everything escaped my mind. Except the rock. Once on the wall, no desire became greater than wanting to reach the top. Go up. Counter the forces pressing the opposite way. Go up. Keep going up in spite of all pulling down. It felt natural, cathartic, liberating. It is so simple, yet somehow so meaningful. Climbing is little more than puzzling over a rock in search of places to position oneself so as to continue upward. There was a certain kind of frustrating exhilaration from repeatedly falling off the rock while trying to figure out a problem. There was a painful burn in the finger, hand, and arm muscles so infrequently used. There was a palpable rush of adrenaline in trying to cling to the rock to avoid falling off. Life wasn't truly endangered, but there was something invigorating—fun even—about feeling like it was. Clinging on to the rock, investing all possible strength to avoid falling off, one realizes their incredible want to live, an overwhelming awareness of what it means to be alive.

The rock has an unforgiving nature. It exists with its cracks, ledges, and bumps without any particular desire to make itself easy to climb. As a climber, you cannot change the rock on which you depend. As a climber, you do not question this stagnant mass, you accept, even cherish the holds that exist and create a way up. As a climber, you are at the mercy of the rock; it does not care in the slightest if you fall. Despite this, I found myself smiling enough that my cheek muscles began to throb like my arms. I'd struggle up a route for countless minutes, only to spend mere seconds at the top before belaying down. Then I was back on the wall, in pursuit again of the top. It was a meaningless task, yet an honest undertaking. Unfailingly, it delivered a deep satisfaction when the perplexing, near-impossible seeming was completed. Now, all I needed was to keep going up.



HOME, ONCE

Luke Smith

How strange
to visit the house you grew up in

to eat at the fork-engraved table
and bathe in the caulk-cracked tub
and sleep in your old bed
 (feet dangling)

to see the boy you first kissed
 (or did he kiss you?)
and your ninth-grade teacher
 (palming tomatoes at the grocery)
and your mother

to smell the dog
 (gone)
and the lavender burning on the stove
and the dust on the frames in the hall

and only think:
“I want to go home.”



THE SKYSCRAPER

Sam Pester

A man and a woman looked up at the skyscraper, thankful for the man-made giant whose shade provided some reprieve in the humid heat.

Pigeons flew to the top of the skyscraper, leaving white drippings on the faded neon sign beckoning the pair into its humble inside.

The pair, both in black, wiped sweat off their foreheads with crisp, white handkerchiefs—the woman dabbed at broken foundation mixed with wet black streaks, while the man lifted his glasses to wipe around the bridge of his nose. The man opened the door to the building, letting the woman enter into the refrigerated room.

“Thank god that didn’t last too long,” the man said to the woman. “The people there were awful.”

The woman stared at the man for two long blinks of her coal-colored lashes and placed her handkerchief into her purse.

“Excuse me,” she said, shuffling away, “I’ve got to powder my nose.”

The man sunk into a grey leather couch as the woman faded into the blurry mess of his failing vision. His hands pulled magazines spread across an oaky coffee table, skipping *Sports Illustrated* and *Time* for *National Geographic*, *The Wallstreet Journal* and *Architect*. He flipped open *National Geographic*, thumbed through the first ten pages, then bent the top-right corner of the page and set the magazine on his lap. Using his handkerchief, he wiped away bits of grime, leaving faint streaks on the glass encased in tortoise shell metal. Lifting his glasses back to his face, he slid them on and picked up the magazine, trailing his eyes back to where he left off.

“Did you know penguins leave rocks behind for their mates?”

The woman’s red shoes became visible from underneath the magazine, coming close to touching the man’s black leather loafers.

“Normally, the male penguin finds the creme de la crème of the rocks for their potential lady,” the man said, “and if she likes the rock, and the potential mate, it becomes a part of her nest. And bam, they become family.”

Two adult Emperor penguins stood close to each other, craning their

heads at their gray, fuzzy chick on the cover of the magazine.

"People aren't penguins, Robert."

The man looked up at the woman, his eyes peering over the magazine into her face. "Of course not, we can fly, and penguins have wings that render them useless," the man said.

"You don't understand, dear." The woman balanced on her stilettos as she crouched down in front of the man, resting her palms on the armrests. "Just because somebody bought you a rock doesn't mean they care enough to see it on your finger ten years later."

The magazine lowered a half an inch.

"Go on," the man said.

The woman cleared her throat. "The act of giving is based on the desire to get something in return. To give whole heartedly without the intent of gaining anything is a sham." Her fingers pressed into the leather. "Every act, every single thought curated to benefit the greater good falls upon the basis of someone getting something out of someone."

"But not always." The man rose out of the chair, careful not to knock over the woman as he sidestepped past her. "There are saints, like Mother Theresa. She earned absolutely nothing in return, except the rare chance to see poverty first hand. And then there's the Good Samaritan, the Pope, etcetera, etcetera."

"So, you think of yourself as saint?" the woman said.

"I wouldn't say that," the man said, his footsteps quietly tapping on stone flooring spanning the lobby and lounge. His steps provided percussion for soft jazz that trickled through hidden speakers in the ceiling. "Proposing wasn't an act. I loved you back then and the only difference now is we have Will."

"This is the third building that our son designed, isn't it?" the woman said, replacing the man on the leather couch. She tucked her left nylon clad leg into the crook of her right. "Every single meeting you have gone to this past month has had one of his blueprints."

Warm vanilla and melted dark chocolate wafted into the room as a kitchen attendant brought cookies to set out on the check-in desk. A young couple approached the desk with their child, who tugged twice on his father's coat sleeve. The father patted the boy's back before ruffling his hair, while still talking to the desk clerk.

The man held up his finger to pause the conversation and trotted over to the desk. Picking up two chocolate chip cookies, he broke one in half and crouched down next to the child.

"Could you help me with this cookie? I can't eat all of this myself."

The man looked up at the mother. "If Mom says yes, of course."

The mother nodded her head and the child snatched the cookie, shoving a portion of his half into chipmunk cheeks.

As the man stood up, the other half of the cookie disappeared. "Thanks for the help, sport."

"What do you say, honey," the mother said.

The child mumbled thank-you and smiled, chocolate sticking to the enamel of his teeth and crumb-covered mouth.

The man made his way back to the woman, who took in the scene from her perch.

On the back of the couch, her crossed arms cradled her head, the smooth black blazer she wore a contrast to delicate skin creasing as she remembered meeting her husband and his younger brother, Charlie. Her husband had accidentally spilt beer on her pants while asking her to dance at Ziggy's Tavern. A few years later, they had a son, Will.

Just before their trip to the skyscraper, life started taking bits of the woman's beauty, adding a personal time stamp to sleepless nights and collagen loss. Still, the hair on the woman's head remained a steady strawberry-blond, her eyes the Spanish moss the man and woman visited on their honeymoon to the Bahamas nearly 30 years ago.

"Well, wasn't it?" the woman said.

"Wasn't it what?" the man replied, handing the woman the whole cookie in his hand. Breaking his half piece into two, he nibbled on one while the other was wrapped in a napkin and placed in his suit pocket. Crumbs fell to the floor on top of the stone pattern.

"Wasn't it about Will's building?" the woman said.

"Will's building goes up for sale in about six months." The man sat down on a leather recliner adjacent to the gray leather couch. "Arrow-Dart Industries plans on bidding for it in roughly half the time, just to make sure we capitalize on the market and nudge out any competitors," the man said. The recliner rocked back and forth, a ship on calm waters.

"And that reasoning matches with the purchase of his Philadelphia building and the one in Los Angeles?" the woman said.

"Arrow-Dart won't consider buying anything without checking the market and consulting its investors," the man said. "Profits have to be maximized in order to buy or else, no deal. You know that."

"So, it was by chance that Arrow-Dart found two of Will's buildings for sale, just as they were contracted to be built? And the third they purchased that had already been built was just luck?"

"It just so happened that our boy designed them, but we've been

looking at them for a while, yes.” The man scratched his head, creasing his neat, peppered combover slightly to the side, leaving a small gap of snowy white hairs. “I think it’s time to get our room keys, Camille.” He stood up and offered an elbow to the woman.

She took it and pulled herself off of the couch and patted him on the shoulder. “Thank you, Robert dear.

Robert opened the blue wooden door to the bedroom. Medium gray covered the walls, paired with steel accents and a hand-blown glass lighting fixture. Two large vertical windows spanned one side of the room, with a sliding glass door to a small patio in between them. White cloth curtains partially covered the windows, letting in some warm light as the man and woman rolled their suitcases into the room, and placed them in turquoise paisley recliners.

Sweat beaded on Robert’s forehead as he opened the suitcase and shrugged off his suit jacket, even though the air conditioning in the room whirled in the background. He set the jacket on the opened suitcase, rolled up his sleeves and started unfolding his button-up shirts, hanging them up by pattern and color.

White plain, checkered, striped. Blue plain, checkered striped. Green plain, checkered, striped.

Camille did the same, sorting her blouses and dresses by color and pattern. *Violet plain silk, lavender dotted silk, slightly off-white yet still hint of heather checkered silk.*

“Will graduated honors, summa cum laude.” Camille shook her head, then brushed a stray hair out of her face. “The ceremony was outside, with rows and rows of chairs. The school had lilies set up for the kids. It was their class flower, tiger lilies. He looked so happy when he got his diploma and shook the dean’s hand.” She grabbed the bone-white linen duvet cover at the bottom of the bed and tugged, smoothing the wrinkles in the fabric. Her hands trailed over the folded bit near the pillows, lifting to fluff the hotel pillows and rearrange them by size.

Robert sat down on the bed and patted next to him. “I watched the video you sent on the phone,” the man said. “It looked very nice.”

Camille kept in motion, moving the suitcases to the floor before loading pants and skirts into a white dresser.

Men’s clothing piled into the left side of the dresser.

“We met Cara’s parents. They are great people, you would’ve liked them. Will’s friend Ben—you remember Ben, he could be Will’s twin except brown hair—thought Cara’s dad looked a little like an older Mario

Lopez with a Marlon Brando mustache." A pair of checkered golf shorts hung limp in her hands. "You should have been there."

"We discussed this, sweetheart. I had work."

"Work." Camille threw up her hands. "Our only son graduates from college, with a girlfriend, and we have our first chance to meet her parents, and yet you chose work."

"It was an important bid," the man said.

"Robert, you have spent more time buying your oldest son's buildings than spending time with him."

The woman swiped at her left cheek, removing the moisture so it didn't fall onto the golf pants.

"Today, you spent more time with the little boy in the lobby than you have with Will in a year, Robert. A whole year. And, he is going to marry that girl and you haven't even met her yet..." Camille's voice wavered. "She's wonderful, completely wonderful. But chances are, you won't even be there for the wedding...because of work." Her head bowed down, her slender shoulders shaking in front of the dresser.

The man stared at his manicured hands, twisting his gold wedding band clockwise. His inhaled deeply and kept it prisoner for a few heartbeats.

One Mississippi, two Mississippi, three Mississippi... Release.

"I planned on retiring a year after Will graduated and got his feet wet in the industry." Robert's gray eyes flitted to the window, looking outside at the orange sky and modern buildings trapped within the cityscape. As he stared, he could see every-day life take place on the flat rooftops of many apartment buildings.

On one apartment building, a bright pink blob walked onto a silver patio and wandered around. The blob, which Robert deduced to be a bathrobe, could have been watering plants or picking up only God-knows-what. Another patio a little closer to the skyscraper showed an elderly couple setting their outdoor table with bright yellow plates, possibly preparing for a dinner with friends.

"Charlie was supposed to take over, Cam. Charlie was supposed to take over Dad's business and I was going to be in the background. My brother wanted it so bad...and I was happy to switch off." He paused, his throat swelling from unspent tears. "God, he would've been great." Robert turned to Camille, who had finished folding the pair of pants.

She stared at Robert, eyes puffy and head tilted to the side. Her jacket slid off her shoulders, creating static as it passed close to hair and landed on the ground in a slump. Rising from the ground, Camille moved to

him and sat upon the bed, resting her arms around his once-broad back.

"It will be a nice service, Robert. Charlie will...would appreciate you telling everyone about fishing in Cancun with Pop and Will. And about how he met his wife at Stanford during finals week because he arrived fifteen minutes late to his business class."

Reaching into his pants pocket, Robert pulled out the crumpled handkerchief, wiping around his eyes and nose. "The people at the funeral home were vultures. Don't they care that someone's brother passed away?" The handkerchief moved around his face again, completing the circuit.

Camille lowered her chin onto his shoulder and leaned her head against his. "Will offered that he and Cara could watch Charlie's kids during the church service Friday, then take them to the reception afterward."

"No, Will should be at the funeral." Robert's voice grew more courage. "Charlie needs him there. I need him there." He shook his head. "That boy needs to man up and be there."

"Man up?" Camille pushed away from her husband. "Robert, I don't think Will is the boy who needs to grow up. All Will wants to do is help spare Charlie's kids from any more heartache." She rose from the bed. "Don't you have any compassion?"

"Compassion?" The man rubbed his cheek with his palms, then slammed them down on the comforter. "Where were you when Charlie was in the hospital?"

"Raising our son—"

"—I was there at the hospital to watch him die, Camille. And death's not pretty, not even for a second." Robert's eyelids scrunched closed, trying to forget images of his brother in the hospital. Tubes poked out of Charlie's brittle shell, mixed with the smell of decay and desperation. He sat there, praying for a miracle. And now, he was picking out flowers for the funeral, and a headstone for the grave.

The window revealed a deep indigo sky streaked with cream, salmon and violet, letting less light into the bedroom.

The man and the woman embraced the silence for a few moments, looking at the fading outlines of the skyscrapers. Little by little, darkness slipped into the bright streaks, leaving a sky littered with multi-colored city lights. The elderly couple with the yellow plates had put away their dinner hours ago, the pink burb back inside its home a while before.

Robert reached up to gently squeeze Camille's shoulder, his hand lingering for a few seconds before moving to rub the space between her shoulder blades.

“We should probably get dinner, dear.” His voice felt as if a trickle of water tried flowing out of a rust-filled pipe. Clearing his throat, Robert tried again. “Want to order room service?”

“I’m not hungry...but we should,” Camille said. She picked up the menu sitting on the nightstand and brought it to the man.

The pair scanned the laminated paper, commenting on the price jump from twelve-dollar shrimp to twenty-plus for crab and steak, not including tax. Defeated, they gave up their search and curled up on the bed, waiting for margarita pizza to arrive at the door.

NO FAILURE OF WOMAN

Sam Pester

Pick me, choose me.
I am ripe for the hand of man
to declare I am worthy
of silver rings
and forgotten forever;

Cotton gowns and burning glory,
bringing into this world what two could make
And one hold
in arms now burdened.

Of lonely nights on an empty mattress
dressed with blankets your mother
gave us for the life
we never had.

She told me
a house is not a home
unless people grow within it.
But are we growing at all?

You said maybe,
when I'm not busy and you have
your perfect summer body,
we can be whole.

Now I just sit here,
waiting to be tarnished by
my failures, my inability to carry
our love to fruition.



THE FUNKO POP CONVENTION

Melissa Paulsen

A man's overly enthusiastic voice advertised through the car radio: *The annual Funko Pop convention is coming to the San Diego Convention Center; don't forget we'll be revealing this year's limited-edition figurine, and one lucky fan will be going home with it. You won't want to miss out! The annual Funko Pop convention, coming near you on March 17th!*

Lydia lowered the radio as Macey wiggled in the cloth passenger seat of Lydia's Subaru. Flashing her sister a smile so wide it revealed the pink bands of her braces Macey said, "I'm so happy we scored tickets. I feel like I'm about to explode."

Lydia nodded, listening more to the *splat splat* of San Diego rain and the latest song by Drake rather than her sister, who continued to list the Funko Pops she hoped to collect. Lydia stared at the orange Tesla in front of her. She narrowed her eyes and increased the speed of the windshield wiper. Southern California was practically the sunniest place on earth, so why the hell was it raining now?

"Ursula is my favorite Disney villain, so her of course, and then there are the Dragon Ball Z characters which are cool—"

A driver in an old '69 Mustang cut Lydia off. She slammed on the brakes, swearing under her breath. Macey rambled on about Funko Pops, unfazed by the pandemonious California traffic.

"—I wonder if they've made any Spongebob Funko Pops yet? I heard that they recently released a new cereal character line, you know, like Captain Crunch and the orange bird from the Cocoa Puffs box? Lydia, are you even listening to me?"

Lydia spoke without thinking, "I'm trying to get us there in one piece, I have better things to worry about than freaking Funko Pops. I don't understand why you like those creepy things so much, with their oversized heads and beady black eyes."

Macey's body went rigid. A red corvette blurred by in the next lane over. Peering out of the corner of her eye, Lydia saw that Macey was crying. Crap.

Often Lydia forgot that her little sister was only eleven years old, focused on the latest obsession rather than worrying about bills to pay

or jackass drivers in the other lanes. Lydia softened her voice, “Macey, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it. I’m excited about going to the Funko Pop convention with you; I bought the tickets for your birthday, remember? I know how happy those figurines make you.”

“Yeah.” Macey pulled a tissue out of the glove compartment and wiped her eyes. After a moment she said, “I didn’t like that you spoiled the surprise, but now I’m excited to hunt for rare Funko Pops, like the Loch Ness Monster. Will you help me find it, Lydia?”

“Of course I will.”

Macey smiled. “What are the odds that the convention is on my actual birthday?”

“Pretty crazy.”

“I know, right?”

Lydia imagined the joy etched into her sister’s beautiful face as she beheld row after row of Funko Pops. Macey’s obsession started on her ninth birthday, when Lydia bought her a Princess Bubblegum Funko Pop from their favorite cartoon, *Adventure Time*.

“So, Mace, what’s your favorite Funko Pop that you own?” asked Lydia as she hit the defroster button. The windows were steaming up from their conversation.

“You know that’s a hard question for me.”

“Well, think about it; we still have a half hour until we’re at the convention center anyways.”

As Macey began to yank out various Funko Pops from her backpack, Lydia exhaled through her nose. Keeping her eyes focused on the road, she switched her thoughts to earlier that morning when the two of them were getting ready for the Funko Pop convention. She and Macey bobbed their heads to Post Malone while Lydia brushed Macey’s sleek hair. Macey played with Princess Bubblegum as a distraction from the pain of tangles.

Lydia’s eyes drifted from the road to Macey for a moment. Macey was thoughtfully tapping her index finger on the heads of her Funko Pops and staring out the passenger-side window. Lydia was eight years old when her mother brought Macey home from the hospital. *Remember, it’s your job as her big sister to keep Macey safe*, her mother had told her. Lydia stared down at the still bundle in her mother’s arms, swaddled in a periwinkle-colored blanket. Lydia had set her hand on top of Macey’s head and told her she loved her. Macey cooed in delight. *Look at that Lydia, she already loves you too*.

Lydia switched lanes, passing the orange Tesla. She let Macey’s voice, laced with Funko Pop passion, float around in her head.

“—so yeah, that’s why I think it’s my favorite Funko Pop. It always makes me smile. I also really like—gosh this is hard—why did you ask me this question? I also really like...”

Due to traffic it took an extra half hour for the girls to arrive at the San Diego Convention Center.

“Oh my God! We’re finally here!” said Macey, her blue eyes wide. Lydia had to tell her to wait by the car and not to run off immediately into the building. Lydia scooped up her brown purse from the backseat, checked that she had her phone, asked Macey for the fifth time if she had her phone, and pulled out the paper ticket stubs.

“Stay close, remember?” said Lydia. She handed Macey her ticket. Together the girls walked towards the convention center. The sun began to peek out from beneath the clouds, reflecting off the aqua-colored roof tiles.

“Over 6,000 square feet of Funko Pops,” said Macey. Lydia rolled her eyes but couldn’t help smiling at her little sister’s enthusiasm as they entered through the glass double doors.

A shaky old woman wearing a black polo shirt with the words “STAFF” printed on it slowly scanned the girls’ tickets. Lydia tried not to breathe too hard, her anxiety causing her breaths to come in short bursts. Lydia gripped Macey’s sweaty hand as they entered the convention and heard her gasp. The bustling scene spread out in front of them overwhelmed Lydia.

A tsunami of voices assaulted her ears and she stared at rows upon rows of booths set up equidistant from each other, all crammed full of plastic Funko Pop figurines. Vendors popped out of their stalls like over-caffeinated Jack-In-The-Boxes, all claiming they had the rarest and least expensive Funko Pops. Lydia felt Macey’s body stiffen next to her as one young vendor inched a little too closely inside Macey’s bubble of personal space. Macey shifted her weight from foot to foot, nearly yanking Lydia’s left arm out of her socket as they weaved through the throngs of people.

There were multiple booths with Disney characters, anime heroes and villains, and Marvel characters, as well as celebrity based Funko Pops, DC Comics characters, and Pokémon Funko Pops. The figurines’ wide, empty black eyes sent a chill up Lydia’s spine. Macey guided them past pimple-faced teenagers, thirty-year-old men, and elementary-aged boys and girls, before coming to a sudden stop at the animal-themed booth.

“Hello girls,” drawled a middle-aged woman, ringlets of blond hair framing her face. Her red lipstick was smeared and she stood freakishly

tall in her Stilettos. Lydia didn't like the way the woman peered down her nose at Macey, practically feasting on Macey's juvenile innocence, her stare lingering much longer than it should have.

"It's here! The Loch Ness Monster!" said Macey.

"You have a good eye, sweetheart," said the lady slowly, as if she were talking to a toddler and not a tween girl. She turned around and pushed a box containing a rainbow-colored Bigfoot aside to grab the Loch Ness Monster, pulling it down from the top shelf. She pretended to admire the figurine for a moment before setting it on the counter. She nudged it towards Macey standing at the edge of the counter.

Macey held the box out at arm's length, observing the turquoise colored sea-monster with kelp dangling out of its mouth. "How much is it?" breathed Macey.

"Thirty-five," replied the lady.

Lydia nearly choked on her spit, "Thirty-five bucks, are you serious?"

"It's a rarity, ma'am" said the lady, cattily eyeing Lydia. "It could sell for much higher, but this is the special convention discounted price. Take it or leave it."

Lydia was about ready to shove the plastic Loch Ness Monster down the lady's throat when Macey turned towards her. Macey lifted her dark eyebrows and jutted out her lower lip in a pout. "Please, Lydia? It *is* my birthday."

"Are you sure you don't want to come back and make your decision after looking around some more at the other booths? If I buy you this, I can't buy you anymore, you know."

"Better hurry, this rarity won't be here for long," said the vendor lady, not helping matters.

"Yes, I promise I'm sure. Please, Lydia, it would be the best birthday gift ever."

"Fine."

"I love you, Lydia."

"I love you too, Macey."

"Well, isn't that sweet," said the woman holding out her hand palm up. "It *is* a special figurine for a rather *special* girl." The vendor stooped down and said to Macey, "Remember, don't stick it in your mouth, you could choke on it." Macey nodded, oblivious to what the lady actually said. She was too busy staring at the row of *Power Rangers* Funko Pops in the neighboring booth.

Lydia felt the heat rise in her cheeks. Macey will be a teenager next year, and the figurine was larger than her fists, how stupid did the vendor

lady think she was? Lydia had to bite her tongue from retorting that the woman looked like the ugly cousin of the mythological Amazons. Instead, to keep herself grounded, she focused on Macey's smile: a smile that acted like a magnetic field, drawing people in until it was impossible not to smile back.

Macey clutched the square, white box tightly to her chest: her newfound treasure. Lydia let go of Macey's hand as she fished in her wallet for thirty-five dollars. She placed two twenties in the vendor lady's pale hands.

"And five makes forty," said the lady, handing Lydia her change and scratching her with her fake nails in the process. "It was a pleasure doing business with you."

Yeah, whatever, con woman, thought Lydia. "C'mon Macey, let's go." Lydia reached for Macey's hand but felt nothing except warm air.

"She went that way," said the vendor lady, pointing to the right with her pink bubblegum painted fingernails.

"Damn it, Macey," muttered Lydia. She tried to call Macey on her cell but it went straight to voicemail. She should have checked to make sure Macey turned her phone on.

"Macey?" Lydia cupped her hands around her mouth as she called.

The room was too densely packed to run, so instead she had to elbow her way through clumps of people, like a fish swimming upstream in a current of human body odor. She hurried past Tony Starks and Mickey Mouses, eyeing her incredulously, accusing her of failing her one job; *How could you lose your sister? What if she gets kidnapped?* Lydia turned the corner, knocking over a white Funko Pop box containing a version of Naruto. Ignoring the high-pitched shouts of the vendor, Lydia nearly tripped over a little boy sitting cross-legged on the floor trying to decide between a Spider Man or Babe Ruth Funko Pop.

Finally, she spotted Macey standing at a long rectangular card table, the Loch Ness Monster still held firmly to her chest.

"Macey!" she called. "I thought I told you to stay close besides me at all times. Don't you run off again, you understand me?"

"Sorry," said Macey, her eyes downcast.

"Can I have your phone, please, Mace? You know how important it is to have it turned on so I can reach you in a crazy place like this. Why did you run off?"

Macey dug the phone out from her pocket and placed it in Lydia's outstretched hand. Lydia turned it on while Macey explained, "I saw a sign for a Funko Pop contest. Look Lydia!" Macey bounced on the balls

of her feet and pointed at a yellow signup sheet attached to a clipboard. "Will you please enter for me? I'm not old enough."

Lydia tucked a lock of black hair behind her ears, regretting that she didn't braid it this morning. She wiped the sweat off her neck and looked at the paper: *Enter the Funko Pop scavenger hunt for a chance to win! (Must be 18 years or older to compete).*

"What do you win?"

"Funko Pops!" said Macey. Looking into her little sister's earnest blue eyes, Lydia didn't have the heart to say no. She scribbled her name onto the signup sheet.

"Thank you, ma'am. The contest is going to begin in ten minutes, please follow me," said a man with square glasses behind the table. His hairline was receding and the growing bald spot reflected the room's harsh fluorescent lighting.

"Wait, what about my sister?" yelled Lydia, gripping Macey's bony wrist. "I can't just leave her here alone, are you crazy?"

"Calm down, ma'am. Your sister will be alright. She can watch in our designated viewing area. It's right over there," said the man pointing behind him with his thumb.

"No. I'm not leaving her. Especially not after I just finished searching this entire convention center for her."

"Then I guess you're dropping out of the contest?"

"Lydia, don't!"

Lydia sighed. "Fine, Macey. No, sir, I'm not dropping out of the contest, let me just get my sister settled first, alright?" The man shrugged in response. Lydia led Macey over to a square area blocked off by velvet ropes.

"Macey, listen to me. I need you to sit here in this metal chair, while I compete in the contest for you. You can't go anywhere, okay? I need you to cheer me on."

Macey sat down in the metal folding chair, setting her box containing the Loch Ness Monster figurine in the lap of her pale blue jeans. "It's cold," she said. Lydia opened her mouth to speak when Macey added, "But I'll stay here."

"Five minutes," called the man.

"Okay, I have to go now. See you soon."

"Good luck, Lydia," said Macey. "Win me some rare Funko Pops."

"I'll do my best," said Lydia as she followed the man. He led her over to the side of the building, close to the wall. She stood side-by-side with her fellow competitors; there were too many of them for Lydia to count.

The plump teenage boy next to her picked at his teeth, and the middle-aged man to her left, who wore a red Star Wars shirt, did some stretches. *God these people were odd balls*, thought Lydia. She took a deep breath and reminded herself that she was doing this for Macey on her birthday.

The staff man explained the rules. "Hello, Funko Nerds. The annual Funko Pop scavenger hunt is about to begin." He waved his hands with mock enthusiasm. "It consists of three portions. The first task will be who can stack the most Funko boxes in a minute. The second task will be the Funko in a haystack challenge where you will have to find one specific figurine from a large pit full of Funko Pops. The third and final task will be racing around the convention center to find a specific Funko Pop vendor and doing the thing they tell you. Keep in mind that you are not allowed to ask any vendors for directions."

Lydia didn't like the sound of that. "What kind of *things* would we have to do?"

"I don't know. Do a little dance, bark like a seal, do ten pushups? It depends on the vendor." The staff man pushed his rectangular glasses back up the bridge of his nose. "As I was saying, after these tasks are complete, race back here and climb the Funko Stairs. The first person to ring the bell at the top will be the winner." Lydia glanced at these so-called "Funko Stairs." They were ten wooden steps that led to a square platform with a silver bell. Funko Pops lined the sides. Across the platform sat a green plastic slide; it reminded Lydia of one of those old Forest Service fire lookouts her dad used to take her to when she was a child.

The staff member's deep voice interrupted Lydia's thoughts, "Remember that shoving and physically harming other competitors is against the rules. There is also absolutely no sabotaging the other competitors; we had an issue with that last year. Remember, the first three letters in Funko are F.U.N." The staff man rolled his eyes. "Okay, get yourselves ready, because the competition starts...now." The man thrust his arm forward like a football referee declaring a first-down.

Lydia followed closely behind the middle-aged man in the Star Wars shirt and started stacking boxes.

"Luckily, I work in a grocery store, sweet cheeks, so my bagging skills will come in handy," he said to Lydia, his breath smelling like sour cream and onion potato chips. He made squeezing motions with his hands. Lydia ignored him, the creep; she didn't want to think about the things that man probably did to his poor Funko Pops. She shuddered but continued to diligently stack one square white box on top of the other, building a fortress of Funko Pops; picturing Macey's face, she worked

even faster, ignoring the cuts from the cheap cardboard that found a home in the fleshy parts of her palms.

“One minute is up,” said another staff worker, this time a young Hispanic man with golden stud earrings. “Let’s see what you got. The winner of this task gets a ten second head-start.” Lydia was one of the last in line to be judged. The man looked Lydia’s tower up and down. “I’m impressed, we have a winner here. What’s your name?”

She had to ask him to repeat his question because the teenage girl next to her was loudly sobbing over her toppled Funko Pop tower. “Lydia.”

“Lydia, you earned a ten second head-start. Are you ready?”

She said yes and sprinted across the room towards one of the plastic pool pits filled with Funko Pops. Trying to ignore the ridiculousness of the moment, Lydia dove into the pool and immediately regretted it as plastic dug sharply into her ribs. According to the photograph in front of the pool, Lydia had to find a specific edition of *The Hulk: the Thor: Ragnarok* edition in which Hulk wears a Roman gladiator helmet, red plume and all. She scooped up as many figurines as she could, examined them quickly and then discarded them. Wave after wave she did this: tossing Donald Ducks, Gokus, and Medusas onto the concrete floor. By the time she found the figure, the other competitors were either well into their own searches, or already sprinting to find their assigned vendor. Lydia handed the Hulk figurine to the perky staff worker who couldn’t have been much older than sixteen.

“Awesome work!” he said, turning the figure over in his hands. “Your next task is to find a vendor named Alex who will give you a Cap’N Crunch figurine. Good luck, matey!”

Booth after booth Lydia approached vendors breathlessly and they told her that no, their name wasn’t Alex, sorry, but good luck. Star Wars man and tooth-picking boy were hot on her heels. The closest vendor happened to be a gothic woman selling Funko Pops from video game series. The dark eyes of Pikachus, Crash Bandicoots, and Lara Crofts matched the woman’s lace dress. Tattoos of snakes slithered along her right arm, and on her right hand she wore a ruby ring.

“Are...you...Alex?”

“Who’s asking?” said the vendor with a smirk. What was with these people?

“I was told—” Lydia paused to catch her breath, “—that a vender named Alex would have a Captain Crunch figurine to give to me. I’m competing in the scavenger hunt.”

The vendor applied some plum-colored lipstick and shrugged. “Why

do you think I would have that? I'm a video game Funko Pop vendor."

Lydia turned to leave, trying to stay motivated on this wild goose chase for Macey.

"Hey, wait just a minute," said the vendor smacking her hand on the counter to grab Lydia's attention. "I was just messing with you. Yeah, I'm Alex."

"Do you have the Captain Crunch guy?"

Alex bent down, her dark hair cascading into her face. When she arose she slammed the Captain Crunch Mascot onto the countertop. "There you go. And it's pronounced Cap'N Crunch, FYI. Not captain. To take him you must do the macarena dance three times while standing on one foot.

"Are you serious?"

"That's the name of the game. I could make you do something worse, you know."

"Fine." Lydia complied, standing like a stork with one leg in the air, staring down at her checkered Vans to keep her balance. She felt ridiculous as she put her hands on her hips and shook them in a circle.

When Lydia finished Alex said, "Nice dance moves."

"Whatever, thanks," said Lydia, grabbing the diabetes-causing, cereal eating, blue and yellow clad pirate. At the booth next to her she saw Star Wars man grab a Baby Yoda Funko Pop. Lydia felt lost in this massive convention with its dense crowds and identical-looking booths. She spun dizzily in circles trying to reroute herself back to the Funko Stairs. She had come this far, she couldn't let Macey down.

"Hey," she called to the man in the Stars War shirt, jogging up to him. "Look, I have no clue how to get back to the Funko Stairs, and you know as well as I do that we're both in the lead." Lydia sighed, hating herself for what she was about to ask, "What would it take for you to let me win? It's for my little sister. Today's her twelfth birthday and I want it to be special. Please." Star Wars man's bushy brown eyebrows shot up and he grinned, flashing his pearly whites like the Cheshire Cat.

"Well, well, well," he said, "what an interesting offer."

"Dude, I don't have time for this shit. Will you tell me how to get back to the freakin' Funko Stairs or not?"

"A kiss is very telling."

"Hell no, I am not kissing you on the lips."

"Then no clues for you."

God, she despised this oily, sweaty man.

"On the cheek."

“Lips.”

“Cheek.”

“Fine.”

The man leaned in, grinning profusely. He smelt like body odor and cheap Axe body spray. On his cheek sat a bright red pimple with an ingrown hair attached to it. Lydia pictured Macey’s smiling face, imagining how she would wiggle with joy after Lydia won...it was all she could do to keep from gagging as her lips met the man’s greasy skin.

“Turn around, take the first left, and then a right, and you’ll be there,” he said. Lydia sprinted as far from the weirdo as she could. “Goodbye, sweet cheeks,” he called after her. “See you in the next life.” Yeah, if she was eternally damned to hell.

She followed the man’s directions but as she ran the crowds became thinner. *He didn’t*— Lydia clenched her fists and growled at Star Wars man’s treachery. A little girl in a Wonder Woman costume stared at Lydia while her dad chatted up the vendor.

“Are you in the contest?” asked the girl, her voice softer than Lydia anticipated.

“Yes, can you help me? How do I get back to the stage?”

The girl popped a peppermint into her mouth and sucked on it thoughtfully. “You just have to go that way, past all those folding chairs. Papa and I passed it earlier.”

“Thanks!” yelled Lydia. She sprinted in the direction that the girl’s chubby finger pointed. Soon she came across a roped off area. A short man clutching a clipboard to his chest held out his hand.

“You can’t come through here, ma’am. It’s roped off for Mike Becker’s talk at five—”

Lydia didn’t let the man finish. She ripped the clipboard from his hands and chucked it towards the wall.

“Hey—” the man yelled, chasing after it. Lydia ducked under the ropes and ran across the metal folding chairs, leaving a trail of collapsed seats behind her. The Funko Stairs soon came into eyesight. Lydia noticed Macey’s face light up as she clapped her hands and hollered, “Go Lydia!”

Star Wars man showboated on the steps as the crowd roared. Thinking that the cheering was for him, he bowed and began to princess wave, stopping to take in the moment. Lydia climbed the stairs two at a time; they shuddered beneath her weight. *Cheap pieces of crap*, thought Lydia, as she rushed past the Star Wars man, her arms pumping at her sides like an Olympic sprinter. Lydia held up the Cap’N Crunch figurine and rang the silver bell at the top of the platform. *Clang. Clang. Clang.*

"We have a winner," said a college-aged girl with a blue streak in her hair. The nearest clump of people clapped. Macey jumped up and down, repeating, "That's my sister, that's my sister." The crowd slowly dispersed. Star Wars man pleaded with a judge but the judge turned his back, unsympathetic to the grown man's pleading. Lydia smiled as she watched Star Wars man sulkily walk back towards the Star Wars booth to drown his sorrows in impulse purchases.

"So what do I win exactly?" asked Lydia.

"You don't know?" said the college-aged girl. She laughed and said, "You entered a Funko Pop competition with the world's craziest fans, and you don't know what you were competing for this entire time?"

"No, I guess not. I did it for my sister."

The girl laughed so hard spit flew out of her mouth and nestled in her blue hair streak. Lydia couldn't look away as the girl said, "Oh, man, that's good. Well, first of all, you get to keep the Cap'n Crunch Funko Pop. You also get this year's rarest edition, a golden Freddy Funko figurine on skis. She handed Lydia a golden human boy figurine on silver skis with a crown on his head. The girl also gave Lydia a beige colored tote bag with the Funko Pop logo imprinted on it in block lettering. Lydia dropped the Cap'n Crunch and Freddie Funko figurines inside.

"You also get a sixty second shopping spree to fill up that tote bag with Funko figurines from the Funkopit. You know, the one you dug through in the second part of the challenge?"

You've got to be kidding me. Lydia would have to run again, like a chicken without a head, for more cheap plastic figurines. She looked over the balcony. Macey waved up at Lydia and blew her a kiss.

Lydia called down, "I get to grab as many Funko Pops as I can in sixty seconds from the Funko pit."

Macey beamed, her bright pink braces bands radiant in Lydia's eyes. "Make sure to find Ursula!"

Lydia smiled back, staring at her sister from the top of the ridiculous wooden Funko tower. She admired her sister's upward slanted eyes, and shrunk ears and nose. Most people thought Macey was as intelligent as a three-year-old and treated her as such. They didn't know that Macey was a bright young woman with hopes and dreams of running the Funko Pop company one day. Macey never chose to have an extra chromosome.

"I'm ready," Lydia told the lady with the blue-streak in her hair. Lydia plopped herself down onto the plastic green slide; finding an Ursula figurine was the least she could do for her sister's twelfth birthday.



VORACIOUS APPETITES

Hannah Hall

The Colonel had taken Nina to half a dozen countries on their belated honeymoon, and she had decided that France, the last stop on their tour, was her favorite. They had traveled all over the country to sample local delicacies and national dishes which never failed to delight her taste buds. Her other senses, too, were worked over without complaint, from the bustling Parisian streets to the quiet countryside.

It was to the countryside that they retired for their last days in France, in a charming little village whose name Nina could neither spell nor pronounce. The Colonel was well known in most corners of the world and had accepted an invitation to stay with one of his distant, dear military friends during their last nights in France.

The man, the Captain, was a stocky man, much like Nina's husband, red in the face and balding overhead. When Nina and the Colonel stepped out of their hired car, he greeted them both with an embrace. Too familiar. "This can't be your wife," the Captain said in his heavy accent, eyeing Nina up and down. It took effort not to shrink away from his gaze. "She's far too pretty for you."

Both men let out harsh, belly-shaking laughs, and introductions were made. The Captain had a wife also—a tall, slim woman called Marcelle who wore her hair in a flow of chestnut curls over one shoulder, a few strands escaping to frame her severe face. "Don't mind him," Marcelle murmured to her as the two men led the way into the entrance hall. She directed a servant to carry in their bags before leading Nina inside. "My husband might look, but he knows better than to touch." Her voice was kinder than her face.

Had Nina's disgust been so evident on her face? She adopted a pleasant smile as Marcelle chattered to her all the way down the hall about the dinner awaiting them. Until the Captain called on his wife to join in his conversation with Nina's husband. Nina was grateful for the reprieve from the company, if only temporarily. The Colonel could strike up a conversation with anyone, anywhere in the world. But Nina felt more comfortable observing. It felt strange to insert herself into conversations with people she did not know and would never see again. She slowed her

pace in hopes of prolonging the moment when she was not expected to speak, and she took the opportunity to observe their host's decor.

The ceilings were high, and the doorways Nina walked through were grand, curved arches with elaborate floral designs carved into them. The walls were papered in patterns of roses, swans, and fleurs-de-lis. Each room they moved through (and there were many of them to move through before reaching the dining area) was a contained entity with its own style of decor. And yet, each seemed to blend with the colors and patterns of the room before it. To Nina, this display felt neither effortless nor elegant. Instead, from the chandeliers on the ceilings, to the antique furniture, to the accents of the floor moulding and unused pillar candles in clean holders, the house seemed to have been meticulously, *brutally* planned to the last detail.

As her husband and their hosts disappeared around a corner, Nina paused in the hall, having lain eyes on an oil painting hanging on one wall, which seemed to be at odds with the heartless decor in the rest of the house. It was an image, or the suggestion of an image, of a woman standing at the top of a grand staircase. Only the bottom hem of her green dress was visible. Her shadow, outstretched in the dim lighting of the painting, looked thin and malicious on the stairs before her. Toward the center of the image, rich reds and browns were painted in crisp strokes, becoming more haphazard near the edges of the canvas. The bordering third of the painting was blurred entirely, giving Nina the feeling that she was recalling an awful dream rather than looking at a physical object. She felt off-balance, teetering on the edge of some precipice.

"I heard you studied with Cordero."

Nina startled. She hadn't heard the Captain's wife walking up to her. Marcelle stood shoulder to shoulder with her, fingers curled around a glass of pale wine.

Nina smiled, embarrassed at her nerves, but grateful for the distraction Marcelle had provided from the painting. She fixed her eyes on the woman. "I did, yes," she said. "Where did you hear that?" The Colonel was popular, but Nina had only been married to him for a short while. Surely people were not already gossiping about her all the way in France.

"Your husband mentioned it in one of his letters," Marcelle answered, much to Nina's relief. "I had a few canvases and paints set up in your room. I thought you might enjoy painting while you stay with us."

Nina did not enjoy painting, and had not done it for some time, not since finishing her lessons with Claudius Cordero. She did her best to

hide her horror and gave the woman another grateful smile. "That's very thoughtful. Thank you."

"It's new," Marcelle said, turning toward Nina as if she had some secret, valuable information to pass on. "The Captain bought it from the artist himself just this year. Maybe you saw him working on it?"

Nina gave a ghost of a shrug and turned toward the painting again, as though trying to recall it from her memory. Instead, she scrutinized it. It wasn't new to her. Any painting Cordero might be showing off now, she suspected, would not be unfamiliar. The Colonel had purchased four of Cordero's newest pieces at a gallery showing earlier that year. But not this one. Nina supposed the Captain and Marcelle had gotten to it first. "Maybe," she said. "What do you think of him? Cordero, I mean."

"Oh, I don't think about him much," Marcelle said, flashing a smile. "I never liked his early work. But this one caught my eye."

Nina didn't know what to say to that. A tense moment stretched between them before Marcelle took her arm. "Come on, now. Dinner should be just about ready."

Nina considered tearing away and seizing the painting. Instead, she followed Marcelle into the dining room, where the Captain and her own husband were sitting already. The women joined them at the table, and a few moments later, the quiet, white-clad servants deposited the first dish in front of them: a half-dozen white asparagus tips and morels in a thin, buttery sauce.

Marcelle joined effortlessly the conversation taking place between her husband and the Colonel. Nina did not speak French, except for a few polite words she had picked up during their trip. *S'il vous plaît. Merci. Je ne comprends pas.* Normally, Nina was grateful to avoid being forced to make small talk. Now, she felt conspicuously left out at the table. She joined in the only way she could and, indeed, she thought, possibly the only way that actually mattered to these people, and took thoughtful bites from the dish served to her as her husband and the couple chattered amongst themselves.

Nina and the Colonel had only come into each other's lives a short while ago, when she was finishing up her apprenticeship with Cordero. The lessons had soured Nina on painting. Had she still been inclined to it, she would not have found any respectable patrons, anyway.

The Colonel had appeared as she was contemplating other areas of employment. She had never planned to marry, had never thought she had the inclination for it. But at the time, she had found herself unable to work in her chosen field and lacking in other opportunities. And the

Colonel was well off and well respected, and for whatever reason—gossip of her talent or pure chance, Nina still did not know—his eye had turned to her.

They had met in passing at a party organized by Cordero, the last one Nina had attended before disentangling herself from the artist completely. She and the Colonel had exchanged what Nina thought at the time to be polite but empty conversation. It had clearly meant more to the Colonel, as a proposal and wedding followed shortly thereafter.

They were well suited to each other. The Colonel did not mind that Nina was unresponsive on their wedding night. Nina did not mind that her new husband spent more time traveling for work than he spent at home. She enjoyed the solitude. Enjoyed less the forced conversations which occurred whenever the Colonel returned home for a day or two.

It was after one of these conversations, when Nina had reluctantly told the Colonel about her time studying under Cordero, that he began acquiring the artist's newest works for her. It was at his insistence that they embark on their belated honeymoon, and Nina saw it for what it was: a surprisingly kind attempt at distracting her from the past.

Still, it was the Colonel's appetite which primarily ruled their travels, though Nina found that she enjoyed trialing food as much as he did. And, though she had no interest in the man as her husband, she found him pleasant enough as a traveling companion.

They had started in Israel, and there had tasted locusts fried and covered in chocolate, which Nina had found passably pleasant. In Japan, they had dined on *shirako*, a dish which looked like the brains of some unfortunate animal and tasted, much to Nina's surprise, like a sweet egg custard. Italy had brought, amongst other things, a sharp and pungent cheese on flatbread which Nina had no desire to ever experience again.

France, so far, had been friendlier to her taste buds.

"How is it?"

Nina looked up to find Marcelle eyeing her intently, waiting for an answer. "Excellent," she said. She didn't know the French for it, but Marcelle seemed to understand English well enough.

Marcelle grinned at her response. "Your husband tells me you've been touring the food world. How do we compare?"

Nina recognized it for the forced conversation starter it was, but she answered all the same, singing the praises of Parisian coffeehouses and provincial bakeries. As she spoke, she caught the Captain glancing her way now and then, though he kept up his conversation with her husband. It made Nina want to squirm in her seat, or run from the room,

so she kept her eyes fixed on Marcelle.

A waiter disappeared her empty plate and deposited a new one in front of her, an unrecognizable dish which, as Nina tasted it, turned out to be salmon, beautifully topped with olives and herbs and roasted with zucchini. "The rest of the world can't compare with France when it comes to food, I'm finding."

Marcelle's eyes twinkled at the compliment, and she raised a delicate brow. "As if there had ever been any question of that."

"You keep a talented chef," Nina added.

Marcelle laughed. "My husband is to thank for that. Only the best, you know."

Nina did know. Her husband was just the same, his house as elaborately decorated and carefully staffed, his uniform as perfectly pressed as the Captain's sitting beside him. Nina had never known the Colonel when he *wasn't* the Colonel. Certainly, she had never known the man to accept less than he thought was his due. Or her due, as his wife now. She supposed that was why he had taken it upon himself to acquire her misattributed paintings, why he had only taken that course *after* Nina had insisted he not bother Cordero and give the man another reason to denigrate her to his peers. If the Captain showed his wealth with a lovely house and excellent staff, the Colonel was more personal in his dedication to perfection.

"Was that a Cordero painting I saw in your hall?"

Nina's eyes darted from Marcelle to her husband as he switched over to English, presumably for her benefit. But the man had his attention fixed on the Captain who, for his part, seemed delighted to talk about the acquisition.

"It is," the Captain said, grinning from red ear to red ear, with too many teeth. His accent was thick, so that Nina had to focus carefully even to understand his English. "One of his latest."

Nina thought it odd that he didn't mention her connection to the artist. If Marcelle knew, then he surely knew as well, since the only way she could have known was if her husband was sharing the Colonel's letters with her. Briefly, Nina entertained the idea that her own husband was writing secret letters to Marcelle. But it did not seem his way.

The Colonel went on. "Would you be at all willing to part with it, I wonder?"

"Oh, no!" Marcelle cried. She grasped her husband's arm. "I *adore* that painting. I couldn't bear to lose it, you know."

The Captain patted her hands on his arm and gave the Colonel an

apologetic shrug.

"Isn't there anything I might do to persuade you?" the Colonel pressed. His tone was jovial, his face relaxed. But Nina saw the barely-contained agitation in the tension in his shoulders, the sharp set of his jaw. "I know it would mean so much to Nina to have it."

Marcelle shot Nina a frightening look, eyes wide and fearful, as though she thought Nina might get up and take the painting for herself right then. "You studied with Cordero. Surely you can leave something of him for the rest of us."

A long pause followed, during which Nina realized she was expected to make some response. "...Of course," she said. She looked to her husband. "Let's not be greedy." Her wide eyes pleaded for him to let it go.

The Colonel didn't say anymore about it, but Nina suspected it would not be the last inquiry her husband made about the painting while they stayed with their host. Fortunately, the Captain kept *excellent* staff, and the servants hurried in to swap out half-finished plates with newly prepared ones before the tension grew too thick. The salmon dish was replaced by a spinach crepe, and this was followed by a plate of mussels, shallots, and leeks. Nina enjoyed every bite but couldn't appreciate it fully. She kept finding Marcelle's suspicious eyes watching her, only to dart away each time Nina caught her glaring. The strain between them turned her stomach in much the same way the Italian cheese had.

She was just finishing the last of her mussels when Marcelle's husband spoke again. By his jovial tone, he seemed to have completely forgotten the tension of the past few minutes. "We have a rare treat tonight," he said. He spoke in English, which Nina knew he used exclusively for her benefit.

Their host patted the Colonel's shoulder. For his part, the Colonel looked as though he most definitely had *not* forgotten their near-argument, but his agitated expression turned wary as two servants came in from the kitchen, plates in hand, and Marcelle's husband took the opportunity to speak more on the coming course. "Here we have a native delicacy, the ortolan bunting: caged and fattened and then drowned in Armagnac before being plucked and roasted for dining." Here, he turned again toward the Colonel. "Truthfully, illegal to eat, as it's numbers are so low. But it seemed a shame not to share it with you while you are here."

Her husband looked cautiously curious. Nina felt ill.

"I have planned for us to dine on it in the traditional way," their host continued. "With the face veiled, as to trap the aromas in and to hide the act from God, it is to be eaten whole."

Nina schooled her face into an expression of neutrality as a servant draped her head and face with a cloth napkin, and then she was alone with her horror, blind to her dining companions, her husband. She could only see the dish set before her, and even that only if she strained her eyes downward. Nina did this and immediately regretted it when she took in the horrific course that had been presented. A bird lay face-up on the plate, a whole bird, feet to beak, plucked of its feathers and its flesh roasted dark brown. Its wide eyes stared up at her, begging for mercy. Its body, fat and bulbous, seemed incapable of being supported by its small, spindly legs. Despite the bird's grotesque, globular body, Nina thought it looked to be slightly smaller than her thumb.

No cutlery was provided. Nina brought her face closer to the dish, mindful of the napkin precariously placed upon her head, and the bird's nutty, slightly alcoholic odor struck her, stoking her appetite despite its appearance. It was an absurd sham of a dish, she thought. Even children ate larger portions. What was the point? But even as Nina thought how cruel it was that someone had murdered a bird for such a meager morsel of meat, her mouth watered at the smell captured beneath her napkin. She picked it up by one foot between thumb and index finger before a servant leaned down and murmured gently, "The feet first, *madame*."

The feet first? She picked it up, then, by the beak. The bony extension held more heat than the slim, twig-like legs. It burned her fingers, and she hurried to deposit the bird into her mouth. It burned no less there, but other sensations soon joined it as Nina bit down and broke through the rib cage with a wet crunch. Fat and guts exploded in a fiery spray in her mouth as the bird burst. The ortolan's blood mingled with hers as its broken bones sliced at the soft tissue of her cheeks. Her own blood, then, along with every bit of the tiny creature, slid down with surprising ease as she gasped air into her scorching throat.

There were a few long, painful moments after, as Nina tried desperately to get air into her lungs without further irritating her insides, without making too much noise. She could not tell if her companions were any quieter than she was. It was only once she had finally felt the burn begin to subside, when she had quieted herself, that the servant removed the napkin from her face with a flourish before silently disappearing back into the kitchen with the rest of the staff.

It was immediately clear to Nina that she was not the only one who had suffered. Marcelle dabbed at the corners of her mouth with a cloth, but Nina could still see the greasy residue of the bird shining on her painted lips, and she brought a napkin to her own mouth, hoping to

wipe away the evidence of the cruel experience.

The Colonel and their host were more obviously affected. Sweat lined her husband's brow, and his face had gone red in a mirror of the Captain's, though his expression was decidedly less *pleased*. Marcelle's husband was still gasping, obviously in pain, obviously enjoying every bit of his monstrosity, while Nina could still feel the bird's feet clawing at her insides, seeking purchase as it fell in an unsatisfying heap in her stomach. It had feathers there. It hadn't had feathers on her plate, but it had them in her stomach, tickling and scratching and making the food already in her stomach quake with the need to be expelled.

After dinner, a reluctant Marcelle guided Nina, sickly green and having trouble standing upright, on a walk through the garden behind the house. Nina held the woman's arm, and Marcelle kept up another steady stream of conversation. But it was clear to Nina that the woman no longer had any desire to be friendly with her, even if hospitality dictated she had to be while Nina and her husband were guests in her house.

Nina retired to the room prepared for her and the Colonel after the walk. She had hoped to sleep off the lingering nausea from dinner, and the awful panic that had set in upon seeing that painting hanging in their hosts' home. Instead, Nina's panic was renewed upon seeing the painting supplies that had been left in the room for her. Canvases and vibrant paints were laid out on the desk. Her nausea returned in full force, and she hurried to the water closet to expel dinner. She washed her mouth and changed before climbing into the bed. But once there, she was too restless to sleep as she wanted. The knowledge of the painting hanging downstairs stuck in her head without any distraction present.

When the Colonel finally retired to their room, Nina had already given up on sleep and moved to the dressing table. She had planned to comb her hair, but the jeweled comb lay abandoned on the table while she sat hunched forward, chin propped in one hand. She straightened up as the Colonel entered.

He paused in the doorway for a moment, then closed the door and prepared for bed. Nina watched him from her perch at the dressing table, saw him run a hand across the stubbled skin of his jaw, an anxious habit. "He won't part with it," he said eventually. "Your painting."

"It isn't my painting," Nina said. It wasn't really. It bore someone else's signature, it hung in someone else's house. Even the ones she'd shredded and burned at home hadn't felt like her own anymore. Whatever claim she had had on them, whatever of herself she'd put into them, it was

gone. Stolen away.

"It *should* be yours," the Colonel replied.

"Don't fuss. Please." Nina left the comb on the table and climbed into bed, hoping to put the matter to rest. Literally, if necessary. "His wife already thinks I'm going to steal it."

"Perhaps we should."

Nina shook her head. Her stomach had settled a bit. Trying to convince the Colonel to let the painting go had helped push the fresh horror to the back of her own mind for the moment. She turned on her side, facing the man with wide, pleading eyes. "In any case, it's too late to be thinking about it now. No good decision was ever made at this time of night."

The Colonel gave her a sad smile and climbed into bed beside her.

Normally, as Nina settled into the warmth of her husband's arms, she tried to find some comfort in them, something close to the adoration he had shown her since they had first met. The closest she ever got was a chaste, friendly fondness, a pale thing in comparison to what she knew he wanted of her.

Tonight, she did not even find that, instead lying still and cold beneath heavy blankets, eyes blinking in the darkness of the room. She tried picking out the furniture in the dark, trying to separate thick shadows from thinner shadows, an exercise to keep her mind occupied. Every time her eyelids drooped, she found the image of that painting had been burned into her brain. Once or twice, she did manage to doze off, only to awaken from nightmares of watching the woman in the green dress walk down her staircase, her mangled shadow elongating and twisting toward Nina in her dreams, with insidious intent.

The second time Nina woke, she felt the dampness of tears on her cheeks, the chill of air touching her shoulders as she realized the Colonel had rolled over in his sleep, his back turned toward her now, cutting off what little comfort he had provided.

Nina tried to sleep, but the woman in the painting lived behind her eyelids now. She saw her when she blinked, so she tried not to blink, but that could only go on for so long.

Her feet were on the floor before Nina realized she had decided to get up, the cold hardwood sending a chill up through her feet and into her bones. She fumbled around for her slippers and pulled a shawl over her shoulders. All the while, she studied the darkest corners of the room, looking for the woman she felt certain was lurking somewhere just out of her perception.

Nina made her way out of the room and down the stairs. There was no woman, not really. Nina hadn't painted the image with a subject in mind. She had made her up, the woman in the green dress, and now her creation had come to haunt her, to hurt her, to burrow into her mind as a perverse replacement for the claim she'd once had on the painting itself.

As she descended the stairs, Nina tried to convince herself she was going to do anything but what she had to. She did not want to destroy the painting, did not want the wife of one of her husband's close friends to despise her.

She was almost surprised that Marcelled hadn't left someone to watch over the painting, suspicious as she had been. Yet the painting was unguarded.

Nina studied it. As before, when she had clawed at the paintings the Colonel had bought, when she had held their tattered remains over the fire, Nina felt anger bubble up all at once at the signature in the corner of the painting. The swirling, elaborate *C* followed by an indecipherable scrawl. Once, she'd been proud of her work. Now, all she could see were the many markings of her instructor in it. In the corner, his signature. In the careful attention paid to the crease of the dress where the toe of the woman's shoe peeked out. Whatever pieces of her had once been etched into the picture were gone now, swallowed up and incorporated into someone else's art.

Nina's hand crept up to the painting, until her fingers rested over the signature, one nail poised over the *C* to scratch it away. It wouldn't help. She'd tried it four times already. It wasn't the *name* that made it unbearable, but the betrayal. The theft. The knowledge that her former instructor might be sitting in a room somewhere that very moment, showing off another one of her stolen paintings. Or worse, wooing some other girl into his studio to chew and spit out, to bleed on a canvas and then be discarded.

Her nail scratched at the signature. Softly at first, then with vigor. Some of the paint flaked off, but the signature didn't disappear until Nina pushed too hard and broke through the corner of the painting. She looked at the flap of paper before grasping it between thumb and forefinger and tearing the corner off, taking the signature with it. It wasn't enough to make the painting hers again. But it belonged to Cordero less, and more to Marcelle, and Nina could nearly live with that.



THE NIGHT'S GIFT

Alicia McAlpine

can't sleep. can't get comfortable.
then a low rumble. a night storm.

soft rain on the windowsill
drowsy, drowsy
gentle thuds of tuneless music
unexplainable peace, calm
cozy beneath layers of blankets.

the bookworm, the old soul, the lonely
ease into rest and warmth

AN AFTERNOON IN TURNER 109

Alicia McAlpine

Mom, send me pumpkin chocolate chip cookies
Send washing the dishes and complaining about your coworkers
Sitting at the table, always a little on edge
Send me sunlight from midafternoon in October
And the feeling that life can be conquered and the adults will solve everything.

Dad, send me patience and Weird Al's 42-pound shadow
Conversations about college and the confidence to be a functional adult
Words With Friends in the living room while Mom sits ten feet away
Lesson plans and watching movies til 1 am
And being taken for granted.

Luke, send me stories of school and teenage indifference
Growing up as fast as you can eat all the cookies, becoming a person I don't know
Playing hangman on my bed and being annoying
The moment you cried and said you would miss me.
Your hopes and dreams and loves and faith
And the friend I'll always have.

I've never been homesick in my life
But I've changed.
I'm no longer a gleaming-eyed child
With drying tears.
The chasm mocks me, but
Love is not bound by space or time.



DRAGON FLIGHT

Raemarie Bruce

There had not been dragons in Quarellis since her grandparent's age. Her grandmother used to spin tales about how the whole village would gather together and watch them soar across the skies, the surest sign that summer was approaching. No one was quite sure when they disappeared, or why. Perhaps their migration patterns just changed as humans expanded outwards. Perhaps something more sinister happened. Either way, Rowan was enraptured by the beasts. As a child, she wanted nothing more than to soar above the skies alongside one. Once she took over the family farm, she dreamed that she could find where the dragons went, and bring them back to the valley. Now, she would settle for just *seeing* one, to prove that they still existed.

So it was quite the surprise to her to find the dragon in the barn, sprawled out among the haystacks and scaring the cows.

It was a great deal bigger than Rowan could have imagined it being, so big that it barely fit inside the barn. It made her feel like a small child again, and the sharp claws and fangs did not help. She should have focused on those first, and ran far away. What she focused on instead were the wings, folded against its side at odd angles. She focused beneath the tough scales and rough skin, on the thick wounds that she would have loved to think came from another dragon if it weren't for the black powder lodged inside. She focused on the ram-like horn that was split in half, and the spike along its tail that had been blown off completely. No, this was a creature in pain, and she had to help it.

Now she just had to figure out *how*.

Aria was trained first and foremost as a healer. However, with the exception of the occasional dog that ate some potion ingredients it shouldn't have, those skills were rarely used. It suited her just fine; after all, it meant that animals weren't getting hurt. She was not surprised at all to see the farmer rush into her store, begging for help with an animal. Rowan was her most frequent customer,

She *was* surprised about the animal in question.

"I've never healed a dragon before," said Aria. "I've never even seen

one this close before..."

With the caution one might use when they were sticking their hands into a beartrap, Aria reached towards the dragon. It was either knocked out cold, or just too tired to care at the intrusion. She could make out a pulse—two, in fact—steady but slow. Its skin was colder than she might expect from a fire-breathing dragon, but not cold like a corpse. Its breathing was haggard, with occasional puffs of smoke coming out of its nostrils. There was hope.

"We'll need to take care of these lacerations right away," said Aria. "Plus we'll need to set those wings so they heal properly. But I'm going to need supplies."

The thing about a 25-foot dragon was that it was hard to hide. Soon, half the town had made their way to the barn, trying to catch a glimpse at the magical beast. The members of the Adventurer's Guild stayed close to the barn doors, both to deter those who would interrupt the healer and to get a glance at what could take down a dragon.

At one point, their guild had been the largest in the region. Things changed when the war between Romant-sous-Bois and Cromlexia started. Quarellis was caught in the middle. Some left to enlist, on both sides. Others left to avoid it at all costs. Now it was just the three of them.

"Those are gunpowder wounds," said Liu.

Liu was a soldier before she was an adventurer. She had been trained specifically in the art of fire arrows and fire lances. She knew their markings well.

"Only Cromlexia's *navy* has any cannon powder, not the land forces," said Beatrice. She knew better than any of them; she had *been* in Cromlexia's navy before the war started. "And why would they be focusing on the skies and not the seas?"

"Cannons wouldn't make these wounds alone, either," said Phillip. "These are cuts from a blade."

"That doesn't answer the question," said Beatrice. "Why would an army focus not on the battle, but on some pretty dragons?"

"Well, maybe that means that it wasn't accidental—"

"Does it matter?" said Briar, poking her head out of the barn.

Briar was not an adventurer, but she was Liu and Phillip's partner, so her words held weight even before the war. As such, the three adventurers turned their heads to her, ready to listen.

"You have a point," said Phillip.

"I was only listening to Rowan," said Briar. "You should really brush

up on your signs.”

Phillip hid his reddening face behind his shield.

“I could use your sword, dear,” Briar continued. “I have a whole bolt of cloth we need to cut into bandages. Aria’s won’t even make it around this beast once.”

“I’ve patched up the wounds as best I could, but it’s not responding the way I had hoped,” said Aria. “It hasn’t woken up, and it’s still too cold.”

“We can talk to the blacksmith, see if he can donate coals,” said Beatrice.

“Maybe we could ask the tavern if they have spare fish as well,” said Briar. “You know, to make sure it won’t eat your cows.”

Rowan sent some rude gestures her way.

“I’m worried that the damage is more internal than I realized,” said Aria. “And I wouldn’t dare open it up to check. I’m not about to start cutting open a creature I know nothing about.”

“Then perhaps a magical remedy is needed for a magical beast,” said Liu.

Agatha knew, of course, that the farmer girl was going to be visiting today. One of the few perks of being the village witch was knowing what was going on inside of the village. However, nothing could have prepared her for the farmer, in a flurry of hands, to explain that she needed enough potions to heal a full-sized dragon.

“You would *heal* a dragon?” Agatha asked. “Don’t you realize how valuable one is?”

The farmer glared at her. Apparently, she did not. Agatha grabbed her spell book and joined her guest at the table.

“Dragon heartstrings are one of the basic cores of staff-making,” She recited, flipping through page idly. “Dragon scales are the highest-quality product for gloves, primarily used in potion-making, but someone as magically-inept as yourself could also use them for milking cows or whatever it is you do. Dragon fangs can be used to destroy cursed objects. Dragon blood is one of the most sought-after reagents, used in ‘Create Life from Death’ spells, ‘Flame Wind’ spells, ‘Energy of Death’, ‘Create a Creature of Death’...need I go on?”

The farmer shook her head. Not to confirm her statement, Agatha realized, but to deny what she was saying altogether.

“There’s no need to make this a moral argument,” said Agatha. “Do you think your cows will live forever? You drink their milk while they

live, and eat their meat when they die. Why would you not do the same to another creature?"

The farmer broke her gaze, her glare shifting as she finally used her head. But instead of listening, the girl instead took her ink and wrote her answer onto a page for a Negate Time spell.

This is our chance to be better, she wrote.

Well, there was no convincing someone so determined. Agatha sighed, stood, and began rifling through her potions cabinet.

It was not a surprise that the dragon would wake up eventually. By the time Rowan made it back to the farm, it had managed to emerge from the bard, destroying it in the process. And boy, was it angry.

"You humans hunt my kind, shoot me out of the skies, and now you see to keep me your prisoner?" The dragon roared.

"Hey, *we* didn't do that!" One of the adventurers said, peering over the shield they cowered behind.

The dragon responded by unhinging its jaw and letting out a stream of fire. It was mostly smoke, and the fire that did release barely made it a few inches away from the dragon's face. It would still too weak to fight.

Summoning all of her courage, Rowan stepped forward.

The dragon snapped its head in her direction, jaw unhinging, ready to breath lukewarm flames onto her. She held up one hand to signal that she meant no harm. With the other, she presented the potions.

The dragon froze. Cautiously, he leaned in and sniffed the vials in her hand.

"Healing potions..." the dragon murmured. "You wish to heal me, human? After what the others of your kind have done?"

Rowan lowered her spare hand. She set it flat against her chest and moved it in a circular motion. *Please*. Please let us heal you.

Whether the dragon understood sign language, Rowan did not know. But it was a magical creature, and magical creatures had a knack at seeing within one's heart, or soul, or whatever. It understood that she was not going to change her mind anytime soon.

It lowered itself down to the ground, head arcing away from the adventurers and away from Rowan's gaze, and she got to work.

Even with healing potions, it took time for scales to grow back into place, for bones to realign, and for dragons to heal. Soon enough, the dragon became less of a novelty and more of a feature on the farm. The villagers stopped visiting to gawk at it, and the cows stopped cowering

before it. Rowan had taken to sitting on the porch when there weren't farm chores to do. The dragon never sought her company, but she figured that she was providing it.

Three weeks after the dragon arrived, Rowan sat on the porch to paint her nails. It was hard to maintain a manicure under farm work, but she took pride in her hands. It was how she communicated, and she would rather people focused on the language instead of rough callouses and picked nails.

The dragon was watching her intently.

"What are you doing? Some kind of human ritual?" He asked.

Rowan held up her drying hand. She had not realized the dragon was leaning in until its head recoiled backwards in disgust.

"It smells like hell," The dragon said.

Rowan shrugged. He wasn't wrong.

It took until her hand dried before he spoke again.

"I know what your kind is like," said the Dragon. "You fight and kill your own, squabbling over land that is not yours, right this very minute. And you had every reason not to help me. You had no tools, no experience, no plan. So why? Why would you heal me?"

Rowan shrugged again, a shorter gesture than needed for "Because why *wouldn't* I? What good would *I* be if I ignored someone who was in pain? I can't stop every war from happening, but I can at least help those who need it when I can. And I bet if you talked to more humans, they would say the same thing."

The dragon did not respond. She tried not to worry about whether her heart or soul or whatever was clear enough for him, and turned back to her nails. She jumped out of her seat as she heard the wood of the porch crack as the dragon moved closer, and placed a claw on her table.

"The red one, if you please," He said. "It would be beneficial if I rejoin my pack looking as if I have slain a great foe."

The dragon was gone the next morning. Rowan saw it again, as summer began and dragons soared over the valley.



PEACHES

Alivia Zeiler

My music drowned out the squeaking cart while I made my way to the produce aisle. My phone vibrated and I read a text from my phone: *I picked up another shift, don't wait up.* On my one day off this week- I was going to make a nice big dinner and make up our living room for a movie night- At least my grocery run just got cheaper. A flicker of movement in the corner of my eye made my breath freeze in my lungs. I leaned heavily on my cart, reminding myself there isn't anything there, and turned down the opposite aisle. Hallmark cards screamed at me with bright colors and swirling words: *Congratulation on the engagement! You're getting hitched! From now on you're never alone.*

"Never alone? In the first year that might have been true. In the first year you were both busy setting up a life together, planning, what was it: year one, get good jobs, year two get a big house, year three go on a real honeymoon, year four get a puppy, year 5 have a kid, a girl, hopefully. But it's year three now and your husband still works at a local supermarket while you work six days a week as an assistant to a secretary at a multistate law firm, you live in a shitty one-room apartment, and are no closer to that honeymoon in Switzerland. And as far as I can tell you've never felt more alone." Its voice came from behind me, I ignored it completely and instead focused on the way my right foot didn't quite fit the same in my shoe as my left, on the slight wobble of the cart, anything to grab and keep my attention.

Randy woke me up getting into bed at 4:28 A.M. He's been picking up extra shifts working 50 hour weeks just to pay for our honeymoon, so it's not surprising he's out within seconds. Sneaking out of bed I headed to the kitchen for a midnight snack and some water.

"Can we have that conversation now? You seemed to be focused at the store." A familiar voice echoed from behind me.

I ignored It and pulled out the eggs.

"Eggs?" It mocked, "for a pre-dawn snack? Are we really getting that lonely."

I heard the click of footsteps behind me as It moved, I resisted the urge to turn around. Instead, I focused on the movement of grabbing a

pan from the cupboard and twisting the knob on the oven.

"Trying this again, then?" It sighed, "I only come because you want me here."

"That's not true." I snapped before I could stop myself. I forced my focus back onto the cracking of the egg, the weight of it, the coarse texture, and how it crumbled so easily after the first crack.

"I thought we were gonna stop lying to ourselves about this?" The table squeaked as weight was added to it. It cleared Its throat and mocked my childhood voice, cracking and crying; "Why? Why does this happen! I wish I was someone people like. I just wish someone would actually be my friend."

The second egg cracked in my hand, "I was eight." I growled.

"Eight, fifteen, twenty-four, it's all the same to me."

I reminded myself not to engage, that's what Dr. Grile said. Instead, I reached for a spatula hanging from the wall and flipped my eggs.

I felt long bony fingers and thin palms on my shoulders, "If I'm here, might as well talk to me?" It rubbed my shoulders. I hated the comfort it brought.

I stared at the bubbling eggs and watched the smoke rise; I needed to flip them, but I was too apathetic to bring myself to do it.

"I don't even remember why we're fighting."

"You don't remember?" I hissed, ripping away, still refusing to look at it.

"Of course I remember. " It said, "I was trying to convey the idea of maybe moving forward someday."

I went back to my eggs; they had begun to give off the smell of charcoal. "I won't talk to you."

"Fine. Don't talk." It pouted, tapping the end of Its fingers on the counter.

I turned off the stove, turning away from It with the pan in hand.

It got bored and moved behind me, "Did you see this?"

The grey garbage-can opened with the pressure of my foot and I dumped the eggs.

"It's one of Randal's pay stubs." I heard the flap of paper, "don't you wanna take a look?"

"Randy." I corrected and put the pan down.

"He feels more like a Randal to me." It reached from behind me, placing the small slip into my hand.

"Why are you giving this to me?"

"I just think you might want to take a look. My guess is it's a little

small for how many hours—

“Stop!” I yelled, caught myself, then lowered my voice, “Just stop, go away.”

Soft footsteps enter the kitchen, “Abigale, I’m trying to sleep.” My husband mumbled from the doorway, “Can you please do whatever you’re doing quieter.”

I turned and smiled at him, “Yeah, of course, I’m sorry.”

He muttered to himself as he went back to bed. I set the slip back on the table and looked around the kitchen. It was gone.

I didn’t sleep the rest of that night leaving me exhausted for the next day. That led to completely forgetting to print ten copies of a twenty-page report for my boss until 25 minutes before the meeting. Which brought me to staring blankly at the bottom of the printer as it spat out each page with an annoying scrape and hum.

“Aren’t you tired of this?” An adjacent printer whined as It jumped on it. All I saw out of the corner of my eye was its legs hinge in the middle of its shin as it swung them like a child. “Tired of being at work doing meaningless things while your husband fucks someone else.”

“He’s not—” I stopped myself.

“He’s not at work, that’s for sure.” Its familiar laugh sounded like a pinecone bouncing down a tin roof.

“Why are you doing this!” I snapped up looking at where it had been a moment before.

Its voice came from behind me, soft and full of mock sympathy, “Abs, you have been abused your whole life. I want to make sure your sweet and innocent soul doesn’t get pushed around again.”

“You don’t care! Why do you keep pretending like you do?”

“I do care. I have always cared. Everything I have ever done was to help you get what you deserve, what you want.”

“I want you to go away! I want you to stop.” I spun around again. Its jerky movements and ash grey skin flickered in the corner of my eye as it moved behind me.

“I can’t do that. If I stop, you will fail. You will continue working this shitty job. Being pushed around- you’re late to the meeting by the way- and continue going home to a husband who doesn’t want to sleep in your bed.” The printer continued to hum and scrape hum and scrape hum and scrape.

“I don’t need you. I have never needed what you’ve done!” I ripped the papers out of the printer.

"No need to be unappreciative, I've done everything for you." I whipped around throwing the paper stack in my hand at It. It was out of eyesight by the time the paper hit the floor.

"I have done everything for me. You haven't done shit to help." I saw a coworker walk past the printer room door and give me a sideways glance before continuing.

I took a deep breath and closed my eyes, "You're not real. You couldn't have done anything."

"Fine. Let's say I'm not real. You know what that would mean for you?" I could hear the smirk smeared on its face, "It would mean that everything in your life was your doing. The good... and the bad."

I picked up the paper on the ground and grabbed whatever was done from the printer. Then headed out the door as It called after me, "You win! I'm not your friend, I'm your fall guy."

I went home early, I didn't care if it endangered my job. I tried to call Dr. Grile nine times, but she didn't answer, she was on vacation. I was just hoping she'd be back by now. I immediately sat on the couch and did my breathing exercises and tried to remind myself that It wasn't real. That It was something my subconscious did to deal with trauma and It did not control me. "I don't need to." It threw my medication bottle next to me. I had three pills left and I took them all. I knew it wasn't how they worked but maybe if I believed it enough. I then found myself pacing around the paystub on the table. If I looked I would be admitting I don't trust my own husband and if I didn't I would be allowing him to pull the bag over my head. I eventually decided to turn on the T.V. to drown out my thoughts.

He got home at some point, "I thought you worked until five?"

I stood up and gave him a hug, one he hesitated to return. "He smells like artificial sweaty peaches, you don't wear perfume, do you?" It spoke, Its voice echoing in my head.

"Did you get any new shampoos?" I asked him before pulling away.

He shook his head, "No, why?"

"No- no reason I just, also bought some and didn't want to double up." I walked slowly to the couch.

"Alright I'll remember when I go to the store next," he walked by me and thought I didn't see the guilty squint in his eyes. "I'm gonna take a shower."

I nodded my acknowledgement.

"Look at the pay stub. If I'm wrong I'll leave." It promised me.

I stayed still, staring at the carpet and chewed on a hangnail before I stood. I don't remember grabbing it. I don't remember opening it, but I know, I remember reading: **Hours:** 33.

The shower turned off. "That seems a bit under 50." I didn't move as Its leather sandpaper hands wrapped around mine, "What do you *want* me to do?"

He walked into the kitchen in his stupid basketball shorts not wearing a shirt, "when did he start manscaping?" Its neck creaked as it tilted its head.

"Put on a shirt." I snapped as I turned to face him.

"I'm sorry," He gave me a confused look like he didn't know what was going on, "what?"

I stepped up to him, "Put.On.A.Shirt."

He didn't end up needing to put on a shirt. It took off the skin, it was dirty and reeked of peaches and sex.





I TOOK A WALK IN GREENOUGH PARK TODAY

Rebekah Jenkins

And I was able to forget about my general disdain of the winter months. When the end of November comes around, I'm unhappy all the time. There is no sun in Missoula, no warmth, no freedom of thought. Everything is just gray. Gray and windy. Cold and dreary. It always feels like the universe is conspiring against me to make me fail. Today felt like I took the first steps toward spring.

Although winter and I aren't close friends, I still wish there was more snow. Taking a walk and seeing the clear, paved trail next to the mountains of melting and dirty snow made my heart ache for our earth. And that may sound too corny or like a tree-hugger with too much time on her hands, but it's true. This winter has been too warm, last summer too cold. Is it even still winter? I swear it could be springtime. The light hits the endless bouquets of pine needles, greeting the ground in a golden halo. At least, it could be the *start* of springtime. But it doesn't make sense. February isn't spring. February is still cold. Maybe there isn't snow, but winter is still sitting on Her throne, trying to stay alive despite the rising temperatures and gaping holes in the ozone layer. She used to be more tough — had a little more fight in Her icy bones. But now you could blow a gentle spring breeze across Her frozen cheek: She gets knocked down and gives us the last few snowflakes that come from Her wispy white eyelashes.

But about the walk. I took my daughter with me. Alaska was so excited to not be in the car after three hours of delivering food. That's another thing; I hate my job. I don't hate the smiles on everyone's face when I ring the doorbell in pouring rain or knock-you-down-wind and pull out a brown bag you could stuff a small baby into; it's filled to the brim with plastic containers, plastic forks, plastic bags. All of this plastic; I hate how the word plastic sounds coming out of my mouth. I hate the way it looks on paper. Why is everything made with plastic? For convenience? At the cost of destroying our only home?

Anyway, I forgot how much I love to walk. There are steady inclines on the short trail that circles around and brings you back to the dirt parking lot across the street from pretty houses with chain link fences. A

wonderful slow ache starts at my ankle and travels up to my hamstrings, then my glutes. I can almost hear the blood starting to pound harder in my ears, my breath becoming more drawn in, more deliberate. I *love* to walk, but most days I am stuck for two to ten hours in my little Toyota Camry Hybrid, driving from one end of town to the other, waiting on calls, waiting on people's hunger and waiting on their laziness to take over, begging for plastic containers of Chinese, Mexican, and Greek food.

Alaska feels this physical connection stronger than I do. She runs almost the whole time.

Run. "Mom look at this stick!"

Stop. "Mom look at the big water!"

Look. "Mom look at this rock! 'Spretty cool, Mommy!"

She's amazed by the thousands of sticks emerging from the banks of the snow. She loves the tall trees that she *actually hugs* with her short arms wrapped around the trunk. She is wearing hot pink gloves I bought two weeks ago on clearance from Walmart. On that trip, I noticed that the women's bathing suits were already out on the floor, and I laughed to myself at the thought of wearing a bathing suit at the end of February. Swimming season? Now? It can't be. That's not how I remember it.

There are other things I love about the walk. A twig slices into my right ankle and I physically feel nature for the first time in months. It makes me smile to have skin exposed to open air. The water rushes by in a sound that makes me think of fresh spinach on a ceramic dinner plate. My shoes make a wonderful squelching sound as I intentionally step into a patch of mud. I can't explain these feelings, but the clearness I feel in my head and consequently my thoughts puts a childlike grin on my face. It's a wonderful feeling of freedom: being out here, on a Sunday afternoon, watching my daughter's excitement about being outside. I love sharing this moment with her. I love seeing her happiness when she is outside.

When I raise my foot, I look at the print that's left behind. *Adidas. Made in China.* My clothes say the same country. And it's the same everywhere. That's not what really bothers me. I haven't been patriotic or a 'proud American' for years now. What bothers me is the thought of underpaid workers making my shoes. And, the result that jet fuel has on our air when a plane is constantly going back and forth across the ocean. I ordered these shoes off Amazon (back before I stopped shopping on Amazon) and the amount of carbon I put out into the air from that seemingly harmless action upsets me.

When Alaska and I get back to the car, I walk slowly to hear the loose gravel slide under my muddy shoes. I want to pick up a handful of dirt

and bring it back with me. I don't know when we'll be out here again, and I know I'll miss it when I'm sitting in a basement classroom or delivering more plastic to people. Sadly, Alaska is ready to leave. Not because she hates it, she's just tired. I feel the same way, but she is tired of running. I am tired of thinking.

I think about what someone said a while back when Alaska and I arrive at the grocery store with four reusable bags: *It's not natural to have strawberries in December*. I look at the display of giant red strawberries and my face is blank. Alaska looks at them and her eyes get big.

"Oooh look Mommy! It's strawberries!" She begs for them, but I have my doubts about their identity.

When's the last time I had a *real* strawberry? Every single one of these is as big as my palm – sometimes bigger. Why would I want to eat that? The sweetness is gone. The flesh just tastes like that not-ready-yet green and white color. That's not a strawberry.

I push our cart forward, strawberry-less. Next, bread. In plastic. Then, breakfast sausage that Alaska loves eating on the weekends and the box is recyclable. But...sausage. The carbon from eating red meat makes me feel incredibly guilty. I throw it into the cart anyway, a grocery slave to a two-year-old. Yogurt. Plastic. Milk. Recyclable plastic. Fruit snacks. One cardboard box, 40 individual wrappers. Plastic. Everything is plastic. I'm overwhelmed and a little angry at myself for being a consumer even though it's the only way I can feed my kid and myself. Alaska loves all this food. She knows where we go to grab certain staples like pasta and milk and frozen breakfast and she reminds me that she likes it so that means I have to buy it. I also have to deliver food to pay off medical debt, student loans, not to mention I have to keep my hot water and electricity turned on. I have to—

I stop. I see the bags made from recycled water bottles in my cart. It's not donating over half my net worth to save the planet, but it's something. It's enough to calm me down and continue fulfilling Alaska's demands.

I took a walk in Greenough Park today. I mourned the lack of snow, celebrated the presence of sunlight, and spent time with my daughter. At the end of our walk, we bought groceries, and now, I put four reusable bags in my trunk filled with healthy, nutritious food that Alaska will love. When people say there isn't much we can do, I tell them how I've made many small changes over the course of a year. I have about nine reusable bags for grocery shopping. I am fortunate to have various recycling bins right by the dumpster in my neighborhood. I bought a water bottle

because I hated walking into the UC Market every day to buy a liter of Montana's Treasure water. The bottle is supposed to be compostable, but it still lives for a long time after just one use. When I was delivering food on a unusually chilly summer's day, my cloth pants ripped, and instead of throwing them away, I cut them to make four headbands/ head scarves and three accent place mats to put on my dresser and two book shelves. Redecorating with ripped pants: whatever I needed to do to keep those pants out of a landfill. I have glass Pyrex storage containers my mom bought (off Amazon; we're working on her leaving that abusive relationship) for my 20th birthday. It feels good to pack a lunch in one of those instead of a plastic sandwich bag.

The walk, even with the odd weather, was beautiful. The idea of shoveling blossoms instead of snow pains me, but there is still hope. I still have hope. As long as my daughter is a tree-hugging, trail-running, 'Look-at-this!' type of person, I will be doing everything I can to help my home — my planet — heal. I look in my rearview mirror to see her eyes start to droop. Admittedly, a run in the park along with pointing at all of the food in the grocery store can wear her out.

I am on borrowed time. This is *her* future I'm protecting. I don't want to leave her without a park to take her Sunday walks. I want to leave her with warm summers and cold winters, and real strawberries, just as it should be.

APPLE TREES

Meaghan Nickelson

Apple trees are wilting in the backyard of a woman who hasn't seen her husband in three months, and every knock at the door is a glass of sherry left lonely on the bathroom sink in the hopes of more news on nothing. Police cars were only vessels to carry phrases of grief from the doorstep to the morgue, and back then they would have no trouble pretending that leaving was the same thing as death. Oil burnt low in the kitchen lamp as dust gathered between the coffee pot and where he used to burn matches until they fell charred into the sink, scarring the white porcelain into his misshapen idea of how the world should work. She wanted nothing more than to pick those matches out of the drain and use them as a GPS because maybe the smell of smoke could waft out the window towards every motel 6 between there and Casa Grande. An empty silo nestled into a cluster of dying-orange pine trees, the same color as the ties he left hung on the towel rack, and they told her that the likelihood of him coming back was the same as the likelihood of her being able to finally wash the dishes that had migrated onto every surface in the living room. There was no way to tell how long her listless migration of everything he touched would last, because her last ditch attempt to bring him back was only bringing her closer to the realization that if he wanted to he would already be holding her, apology clearing the clutter she had made to fill his absence. The apples were still rotting in the overgrowth and she didn't make any effort to pick them up.



THE HILLS

Benjamin Sholar

A car hums quietly in an empty parking lot. The man inside the car runs his hand through his hair, while turning the ignition to off. He grabs his wallet off the passenger seat, takes the key out of the ignition and opens the door. He moves his leg out of the car and plunges his foot deep into a puddle. “God dammit,” the man mutters to himself. The man fumbles with his keys and eventually locks the car. He begins to walk. Each time his foot hit the ground, there is a rubbery squish that comes with its own rhythm. The squish echoes through his mind and his thoughts went numb. A murder of crows flies overhead and a homeless person scavenges cigarette butts off the sidewalk and chain smokes each individual one as they pick them up. He walks up to the building and opens the door into a long hallway with an elevator at the end.

The doors slide open and he quickly finds a seat in the waiting room. He sifts through tabloid magazines on the disorganized table, but nothing catches his eye, so he folds his hands and waits patiently. Finally, after thirty minutes of waiting, an old nurse walks into the room.

“Mr. Schultz, the doctor is ready to see you.”

“Please, call me Dean.”

They walk down a long hallway, not saying a single word to one another. Her fragile hand grips the doorknob and opens the door.

“Make yourself comfortable, Mr. Schultz.”

The leather creaks as he sits down in the hardly comfortable chair. The walls are stripped of any decoration and the only noise to fill the room is the loud *tick* from the clock as the second-hand makes its way around the face. There is a soft knock on the door and a short, greasy man enters the room.

“Before we get started with the session today, Mr. Schultz, I—”

“Dean, please just call me Dean, Doc.”

“Dean, I’m a huge fan of your work.”

“Thanks, but I’d rather not discuss my work today.” Dean said sharply. “I’m here to talk about how fucked up my life has been recently, so I’ll fill you in on work details some other time.”

The stubby doctor sits down on the chocolatey chair. He slides the

drawer open from under the table, pulls out a yellow legal pad and a fancy black pen with a gold finish. The doctor clicks the obnoxiously loud pen and scribbles down a few words. Dean stares blankly at his new psychiatrist, waiting for him to finish up god knows what. He looks at Dean and clears his throat.

"Where do you want me to start?" Dean said softly.

"That's up to you."

Dean sat there, studying his hands before breaking the silence, "Okay, bear with me please."

Beep. Beep. Beep.

A fist slammed the top of the alarm clock, causing the noise to abruptly stop. The sound of bed sheets rustling and early morning stretch moans filled the rather large room. Dean slumped his legs over the edge of his bed and slid his feet into his Louis Vuitton slippers. He walked into his bathroom and turned the small radio in the corner to on.

"Thanks for tuning in to 105.1 Hollywood's Hits, take an adventure, "Into the Mystic", by Van Morrison."

Dean's shower rose high into the air. He walked-out of his walk-in shower, rubbed his towel over the mirror, and combed his hair. Dean finished his bathroom activities and set across the house and eventually outside to his driveway. The walls of the house were lined in movie posters, all with Dean's face plastered on them. The posters were so abundant it looked like he made a shrine for himself to himself. Dean was at the height of his acting career, having just been awarded the 1974 Academy Award for Best Actor for his work in the film *Darkness at Dawn*. He portrayed a man who lost his sight and how he had come to terms with it. It was Dean's first dramatic role. Typically, he would be cast as the tall, dark, and handsome, cheesy gun-toting action hero who was killing bad guys left and right. He felt like he needed to grow as an actor, so he accepted the dramatic role and the rest is history.

Dean sat down in his brand new, 1974, mustard yellow Volkswagen Beetle and ran his hands side to side across the steering wheel, he popped his car into reverse and left. He turned the radio up.

"Welcome back to 105.1 Hollywood's Hits, kick back with a little song some like to call "The Joker," by the Steve Miller Band."

The mansions seemed to inspect Dean while he zoomed through the seamlessly infinite landscape of the Hollywood Hills. His day was planned just like any regular day: first, Dean would stop by his publicist's office and see if there was any extra work for him to do in between projects and lastly, he would go to his favorite bar and get questionably

drunk into the late evening and still decide to drive home. Although, tonight was different. Dean had been invited to a party at none other than the Playboy Mansion and all its glory.

Leaving the bar in a questionable state of soberness Dean had found himself behind the wheel once more and soon he was driving, windows down, along Hollywood Boulevard. The music was louder than it was outside and the various bars, strip clubs and movie theaters sped past Dean with a blur. He was content with his life. A small half smirk crept over his face. He glanced down and noticed his pack of cigarettes resting in the seat next to him, he felt almost guilty as he pulled the thin cylinder from the carton. Cigarettes always felt better buzzed. He glanced away to light his cigarette, only to look up in the nick-of-time. His car screeched to a halt. Dean had almost run a red light. He readjusted in his seat and looked to the right. On the corner he saw the most mesmerizing woman. Dean wasn't staring at her because of her looks, he was staring at her because she just knew who she was. She noticed him staring and their eyes met. He smiled. She flipped him off. The green glow from the stoplight entered through the windshield and Dean shifted his car into first. He drove down the boulevard, eyes fixed on the woman until she was out of sight.

The night arrived and Dean climbed into the backseat of the taxi and let out a sigh. The taxi driver looked at Dean through the rearview mirror.

"Huh?" He rubbed his thumbs together, "Oh, 10236 Charing Cross Road, thanks."

The driver nodded, turned up the radio and drove down the hill.

"If you're just tuning in, thanks for tuning into 105.1 Hollywood's Hits. This next song needs no introduction, Jefferson Airplane's, 'Somebody to Love.'"

Dean had always hated riding in taxis, he thought of taxis as "the carnival of transportation," as a drive is unpredictable until the ride ends. He let the curves of the road move him into a clear state of mind. He pictured the taxi driving through the hills and LA as if it were a wide shot from above, just like people see in the movies. The car slowly came to a stop. Dean could see the driver's eyes widen at the site of the mansion.

"What're you, some kinda fuckin' movie star?" he said.

Dean turned his head, "Yeah. I guess you could say that, thanks for the ride man."

Dean flipped up the peace sign and walked through the gate and into the courtyard of the mansion. He held himself high and pushed towards

the crowd. The other guests at the party noticed Dean and rushed to congratulate him on his win and before he knew it, shots were being thrown back. Through the drunken haze of what the last couple hours were, Dean started to sober up. He stumble-walked around the courtyard and froze dead in his tracks. Through the purple haze that lit up the surrounding area he saw the woman from the stop light. His level of liquid courage was off the charts and he marched right up to her.

“Dean, nice to meet you.”

She extended her hand, “Ava.”

They shook hands.

“Hey,” Ava squinted her eyes, “Didn’t I flip you off at a stoplight today?”

“Uh, yes, that was me.” Dean chuckled nervously.

“Well, I’m normally not the type that gives a second chance,” she sighed, “But it’s a party, so I need to be social.”

The two began to walk through the masses of people, just talking. Occasionally, someone would recognize Dean and strike up a conversation. Dean greeted every one with a smile, but would rush through them, so he could continue talking to Ava.

“So, you’re sort of uh hot shot around these parts, huh?” She poked her fingers at Dean.

He fumbled over his words. “Uh—I—uh.”

“Relax, I’m just giving you shit.”

She slid her hand into his. Their grips tightened and the night eventually lead them back to Dean’s mansion where they sat in the kitchen and continued to talk.

“Honestly, if I wasn’t acting, I’d probably be a chef.”

“Pfft, no way in hell you can cook,” Ava said without hesitation

Dean cracked his knuckles. “Well, I guess you’ll just have to come back for dinner one night.”

Ava chuckled. “I guess I will.”

Squish.

Dean blinks and loses his train of thought. “Fucking shoe,” he thinks to himself. His eyes fix on the ugly, off white, shag carpet beneath him.

“I’m so sorry, Doc. Where was I?” He rubs the stubble on his face.

“You were talking about the, uh, pretty stop light girl.” He said. “Ava. Her name is Ava. Er, to make a long story short I talked to her. A day turned into a week, a week into a month, a month into a year.” Dean moves his hand up and down his forearm. “And just like that we were married, ya know? Actually, er, my wedding—our wedding— was five

months ago next Tuesday.”

Ding. Dong. Ding.

The church doors opened to the outside. Dean and Ava walked arm and arm through the neat rows of people on either side of them. Every guest was throwing a variety of flower petals at the newlywed couple. Through the storm of swirling petals and the chimes of wedding bells, Ava looked at Dean and mouthed “I love you.” He could not talk; he was so in the moment that the words would not come out. So, he did what he had done countless times before. He squeezed her hand three times, one squeeze for each word. I. Love. You. Dean put his arm around Ava and they quickened their pace to the all-white cliché vehicle with the dangly cans and “JUST MARRIED” on the back in pink paint.

Ava moved into Dean’s mansion and their collective life took off. The day to day motions were more bearable. Dean would be on set all day and then come home to an empty house. Ava was also at work. He then would change, brush his teeth and hair and head back down to the kitchen to start preparing dinner. On a day like any other, Dean made it to the kitchen, pressed the radio on and began to cook.

“105.1 Hollywood’s Hits, please enjoy “Bennie and the Jets”, by Elton John.”

He cut on beat with Elton John’s peculiar piano strikes. Dean was having a one-man concert in the kitchen. He sang loud and glided his hips to the tune of the song. He was cooking Ava’s favorite meal. Chicken parmesan. He took the chicken breast out of the fridge and plopped it on the cutting board. He began to season the meat and cut various vegetables. The music roared.

“Buh-buh-buh Bennie and the Jetssss.” He sang.

He heard a small laugh behind him. Dean turned, only to see Ava standing there.

“One of the world’s finest actors and yet you can’t sing to save your life.” She broke a piece of parmesan off the block.

“Buh-buh-buh Bennie and the Jetssss.” He walked towards her as he said this.

He put his arms around her and picked her up while spinning around. He set Ava back down on her feet and let go. She stumbled side to side for just a second and re-centered herself.

“Kiss the cook?” She asked.

Dean smiled. “Always.”

She wrapped her arms around his neck and gave him a kiss.

“Love you, Ava.”

"I love you too, Dean. Now, you ready to cook this chicken parmesan, 'cause yours truly is STARVING."

"As long as you're not too harsh on my singing." He winked at her.

Dean continued cooking and Ava grabbed two wine glasses and set them on the counter. Then she grabbed two bottles of red wine and stared at each one with such intent, until she made a decision on which one would taste better with dinner. She poured the first glasses of wine. Dean and Ava could and would talk for hours every night, but they would never run out of anything to talk about.

Months flew by and the both of them had finally settled in. Dean's mansion had changed significantly in the past year. The countless posters of his face had been removed from the walls and abstract paintings, and pictures of the couple filled them. Dean even surprised Ava with a dog. She named him Ernie. With Ernie being introduced into the family, children became the hot topic of the house. Anytime they would go out shopping and see any baby related thing, they would stop and look at it. Ava would always say the same thing "That's perfect for Wesley or Khloe." Dean would smile and agree. He knew he was ready for kids and he wanted one, bad.

The two sat on their corduroy couch in the living room, reading. Ava was laying her head on Dean's lap.

Dean broke the silence. "I'm ready."

Confused, she asked. "For?"

"Kids."

She shot straight up; her pale blue eyes glowed with excitement and she kissed Dean. Ava began to cry. She never cried. He knew they were tears of joy.

"Let me take you some place that's very special to me."

She nodded and they both stood up. Dean bent down to pet Ernie.

"We'll be back soon buddy, love you."

Ernie was unphased by the pet and went back to sleep. They got into Dean's car and drove. Dean had not gone to his favorite bar since the day he saw Ava at the stoplight. He wanted one last night of free-spirited drinking before their lives would change forever. They arrived at the bar, sat down, and ordered the first round of drinks. Then another. And then another.

Dean felt a tap on his back and it was the bar tender letting them know it was last call. They left the bar, and sat down in the car. The engine purred and Dean took a few deep breaths. He was drunk, but it was not his first time driving drunk, so once he gained his confidence to

drive, he peeled out of the parking spot.

The music was playing softly and the drunken conversations didn't stop. Dean knew where he was going. He stopped at a red light, looked to the right, and pointed.

"That's the spot where I fell in love with you."

Ava let out a small burp. "I know silly, you've shown it to me before."

"Yeah. I just wanted to remind you."

"You're the greatest-ever-ever Dean." She drunkenly sang.

He grabbed her hand and the light turned green. He pulled into the middle of the intersection and the car suddenly filled with overwhelmingly bright light.

Squish.

Dean is crying now. "And, that's when we were hit. The right side, where Ava was. It's kinda ironic isn't it? I was drunk and the accident wasn't even my fault, but I still feel completely responsible. I can't even sleep in our bed at night. The emptiness next to me is too much for me to handle."

The doctor scribbles on a small piece of paper and hands it to Dean. "Welp, Dean, this is all the time we have today. Why don't you come back next Thursday and we can continue where we left off?"

Dean stares expressionless at the doctor. "Are you fucking kidding me? Aren't you supposed to help-or-or something?"

"Look, buddy," he places his hand on Dean's shoulder, "Between you and me, you're a wealthy man, I think you could find something for yourself out there."

"I'm not your fucking buddy."

Dean reaches into his pocket and throws down what could have been a clump of about three-hundred dollars and storms out of the building, back to his car and speeds home.

He arrives back at his house and pulls into the garage he never uses. A heavy hesitation weighed down the air as the garage door closed behind him. Dean retracts his hand from the entrance to his home. Instead, he gets back in his car and starts the engine; radio on, he waits patiently, until he falls asleep.

"Thanks for tuning into 105.1 Hollywood's Hits, sit back and relax to "A Day in the Life" by The Beatles."



COMING OF AGE

Vanessa DeSoto

We get high next to a construction site.
Everyone that drives past knows our secret
but prefer to keep it locked in their glove boxes,
to be forgotten with the freshly opened packs of wintermint 5 gum.
Smoke covers our eyes to bend and twists into a new scene,
removing time and creating slow motion scenes that skip
to sitting on squeaky swing sets at an elementary school.
Rusted and creaking they live in someone else's dreams.
Purple dusted skies distract from the sound
of wind whistling into soft pink painted ears
creating a real life score to the movie playing out in our eyes.
I settle into the scene, as though it's supposed to mean something,
and wonder if they feel the same or if it's just my imagination spinning.
Is this the movie scene that we're supposed to constantly chase, that romanticizes
feeling rocks cut into your throat and biting your tongue? Swaying
and looking into the sky, wondering if I could ever replay these scenes or if
they will be frozen in time like the tip of my nose, blushed red, raw to the touch.
You stick out your foot, offsetting the swing: skip to the end credits.
I am reminded that this is not for me.
I don't get a coming of age story.



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