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CRAB FAT MAGAZINE

FLASH FICTION, SHORT STORIES, & POETRY

1

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EDITOR'S NOTE:

THE FIRST ISSUE OF *CRAB FAT LITERARY MAGAZINE* IS THEMED AROUND THE IDEA OF DISCOVERY. HERE YOU WILL FIND DIFFERENT INTERPRETATIONS OF THIS THEME, SOME LITERAL, SOME FIGURATIVE, BUT ALL ARE EMOTIVE, ELICITING A WIDE RANGE OF EXPERIENCES.

TO THE WRITERS: THANK YOU ALL FOR MAKING THIS POSSIBLE.

Contents

- Dragons Don't Have Mustaches [Adam Kuta] 5
- Miss Lilac Arugg [Robert Boucheron] 16
- The Deputy Clerk's Daughter [Vanessa Escobar] 19
- Missing People [Stephen Mead] 23
- Maryjane and Cream of Wheat /
A Last Dance with Maryjane
[Erren Geraud Kelly] 25
- What You Do When You Die [Lucas Khan] 29
- Highlighters [Brooke Hendricks] 30
- Already [Hannah Pascale Jarvis] 40
- Jump, Bitch, Jump [Allison Whittenberg] 41
- Pig Alley [Haley Fedor] 42
- Broken Glass [Andre-Naquian Wheeler] 50
- The Closet [Philicia Montgomery] 58
- My Summer Something [Liz Gauthier] 62
- To Aria [Catherine Plath] 63
- Nomad's Land [Heather Lyn] 67
- At the Gambling-Related Suicide Prevention Workshop
for Pathological Gamblers in Kansas City
[pd mallamo] 68
- Garage Sale in Oak Bluffs [Kirby Wright] 70

Dragons Don't Have Mustaches

By: Adam Kuta

Anthony

Katlynn says I'm a Princess.

Princess Annie, she calls me. It makes me smile, but not too big, because princesses don't usually show their teeth when they smile. They just flutter their eyelashes and put their hands together in front of them and twist back and forth a little bit.

Katlynn always smiles when I do that. Like a princess.

Dylan smiles, too, sometimes. He doesn't play Princess very good, but Katlynn makes him try. I tell him what to say, and he plays good then. But, he's not very good unless I tell him how to play. I don't think he ever played Princess before.

Lauren played Princess. But, she thinks it's for babies now. Even though I'm not a baby. I'm six and a half. Momma says I'm a 'big boy.' And 'big boys aren't babies.'

Momma also says that 'boys don't play Princess,' but Katlynn and I still play Princess when Momma is gone. Momma is gone a lot.

My favorite days are when Momma leaves pizza money for Dylan. He sometimes makes silly voices when he orders pizza. Sometimes he says the pizza is for Princess Annie and asks them to draw pictures in the pizza box.

One time we got a dragon in the box. We made Lauren play as the dragon. Katlynn and I were princesses, and Dylan was a knight. Dragon Lauren kidnapped Princess Katlynn, and Dylan the knight and me the princess had to rescue her before she was turned into a poisoned toad and eaten alive!

That night was so much fun. Katlynn even found me a crown and one of Lauren's old Princess dresses to wear. We gave Dylan a paper plate for his shield. Katlynn even let her hair down.

Momma wasn't happy when she got home. I think she was mad that I didn't eat my pizza crust. I just threw it in the trash and didn't tell anyone. But Momma always knows everything. She says she has eyes everywhere, kinda like a monster. But she's a nice monster. And sometimes her eyes don't see everything.

She made me put my pajamas on straight away and go to bed. Lauren didn't have to, though. So she must've been mad at just me. Lauren doesn't get into trouble much.

Dylan hasn't called me Princess Annie much after that. He calls me Anthony again. And I think the evil dragon may have kidnapped Katlynn for real this time...

Dylan

I walked her out to the front porch. Suspended swing time. A few airplanes blinked above us; never stars.

"What do you think the big deal is?" Katlynn said, finally.

"Kat..."

"What? I mean, let her express herself. She isn't hurting anyone. Right?"

"Kat—"

"Right?"

I sighed. "No, you're exactly right."

"So what's the big deal?"

"It's just different."

Silence. Must have said something wrong.

"Not different," I said. "Just... not what mom's used to."

"Because that's much better."

Guess I didn't fix it.

Katlynn looked at me. "Don't you think it's wrong?"

"Of course it's wrong. She can't tell me who I can or can't see."

Katlynn smiled. Her shoulders slumped. "Not what I was talking about."

"What then? Being Annie?"

"No. Being Anthony."

I paused. Make it or break it moment. "All my mom is arguing is that six is just too early to really have that concept. Like... what does he know about gender?"

"Annie knows what she's feeling. She knows who she is inside."

I sighed. Katlynn was so confident. Mom was so not. And where did I stand? I didn't know.

Katlynn huffed. "I'm not saying that your mom is a bigot... I'm just saying," Katlynn said. "Maybe she's a bit too old-fashioned."

I sighed. Defeat. "There's not much we can really do about it, Kat."

"Isn't there?" She leaned forward. And stared at me. "Can't we show Annie that it's okay? That she is loved? And accepted?"

I closed my eyes and sighed. The breeze slapped my face. "There's not much we can really do about it, Kat," I repeated.

"And that's why your mom is a bigot."

Wendy

No one likes working on Saturdays. Pete wasn't convinced, but even I don't like it. But what else could I do? I was buried in the case. It won't defend itself. And his opinions ceased to matter the minute he left, leaving me in charge of getting food onto the table for our kids. Putting me in charge of paying the mortgage. Insurance. Medical bills. Dylan's college funds. Lauren's college funds. Anthony's college funds. Groceries. Yes. Pete's opinion was obsolete at this point.

So, imagine my surprise, walking in to my house, the house I pay for by myself, to find my son twirling around in a bright pink dress, laughing and giggling to his little heart's content. Off the record, his smile was what every mother begs to see from her child, but there was no admitting that. Not tonight.

"What in the world is going on here?"

The pizza box in Laruen's hands dropped as I walked in. Dylan's girlfriend let go of Anthony's hands, and she stopped, mid-spin, to look at me. Even Dylan's hands fell to his sides. I could swear that the music in the background skips a beat, silencing the den like a courtroom.

"Ms. Bell, we were just playing."

"Momma!"

Anthony rushed to embrace me, so I knelt down to his eyelevel, taking him in a full embrace and then pulling him back to examine his costume.

“Anthony. What is this?”

“I’m a Princess, Momma.”

“A princess?”

My eyes dart to Dylan.

“Yeah, Momma! I’m Princess Annie. And Lauren is being the evil dragon who kidnapped Princess Katlynn. So Dylan is being the knight and we have to rescue her! Who do you want to be?”

“And whose idea was this?”

“Mom.”

“Katlynn said –“

I stood up, and the room stood still.

“Anthony. Take that dress off.”

Everyone blinked: guilty.

“You don’t want to play, Momma?” Anthony’s voice quivered.

“Get into your pajamas, Anthony. It’s bedtime.”

“Mom—“

“Dylan. Zip it. Anthony. Now.”

Anthony nodded. I could see the tears building in his eyes, but he stumbled into the hallway and out of sight. Dylan crossed his arms.

“Don’t give me the sass, Dylan.”

“I didn’t say anything.”

He didn’t need to. Dylan’s eyes screamed with unease.

“I am going to put Anthony to bed, and I expect this room to be spotless when I get back. Got it?”

Dylan nodded. His new girlfriend thought she was sneaky, giving him a look out of the corner of her eye.

In his bedroom, Anthony pulled his pajama shirt over his head as I walked in.

Untouched racecars decorated his shelves. A bin of Dylan’s hand-me-down action figures remained in the same posed position I set them in when decorating. It was as if the room was never played in. Mostly because it wasn’t.

“Did you brush your teeth?”

“Yes, Momma.”

“Wash your face?”

“Yes, Momma.”

“Get into bed.”

“Can I say goodnight to everyone?”

I knelt down to be eyelevel with my son. Pete’s eyes stared back at me.

“I need to have a talk with your brother. You’ll see him in the morning.”

“What about Katlynn?”

I hesitated. “It’s bedtime, Anthony.”

He was reluctant, but nodded. If there’s one good thing about working so much, it’s the fact that my word is law with my children. At least, I tell myself that’s a good thing.

Sometimes I’m not so sure.

Anthony hopped into his bed, and I kissed his forehead, tucking him into sleep. I flipped the lights off and gave my routine second glance at him before delicately closing his door.

The den was spotless when I got back. Lauren had migrated to her bedroom by then, so only Dylan and his girlfriend waited for me, standing awkwardly in the middle of the room, waiting for me to lecture them.

“Sit down.”

“Ms. Bell, let us explain.”

“Please. Do.”

We took our spots; me in the lone chair, and them together on the sofa.

“Mom.”

“We were only playing. Annie—“

“Anthony.”

“Katlynn.”

“No, Dylan. Ms. Bell, Annie—“

“Anthony.”

“Annie wants to play princess.”

“Kat—“

“She likes to be pretty and dainty and flutter her eyelashes. She—“

“Katlynn.”

“No, Dylan. Gender identity is a real thing. And I don’t want to see Annie get in trouble for it! You agree, don’t you?”

“Mom...”

There was a long pause as Katlynn and Dylan struggled to keep their emotions in check, but I made sure to keep my lips as pursed together as possible; my courtroom face.

“Is that what you think is going on then?”

“Without a doubt, Ms. Bell.”

Off the record, I applauded her passion.

“Dylan?”

His eyes raced back and forth, struggling for an answer.

“Ms. Bell. Annie just wants to express herself.”

“And who’s to say that this isn’t something you’ve simply put into her head?”

“Mom.”

“Anthony has never been this way before.”

“Mom.”

“Has he? When was the last time Anthony wore a dress?”

“He hasn’t—“

“When was the last time Anthony called himself a girl?”

“He never—“

“What has changed recently that would encourage this behavior?”

“Nothing—“

“Nothing?”

“Mom.”

“Answer the question, Dylan.”

Dylan looked at Katlynn. His voice quivered, but nothing audible escaped him. I could see the defeat in his face, but I could also see Anthony in him. Both spitting images of their father, Pete.

What would Pete say about all this? *Our son has gender issues? No surprise. You're so consumed in your career of course he's going to be messed up. This wouldn't have happened if I had full custody. He needs a man in his life to get this princess crap out of his head.* And maybe Pete would be right...maybe this was my fault.

And yet, Anthony had looked so happy. His smile was so genuine. He was beaming in that dress. Was I really one to be able to turn him away from this?

But wasn't it my duty to stop this? As a mother, wasn't it my duty to protect him? Wouldn't society tear him apart? If his own mother could hardly understand, how would the world?

No. I couldn't let this continue.

"Simply put, I just see the correlation between Anthony's supposed 'gender issues' and your involvement with him, Katlynn. Anthony is Anthony. A six-year-old *child*. What does he know about 'gender identity' at *six*?"

Katlynn glared at me, and I could see the protests in her eyes, hear her arguments through her closed mouth, and taste her bitterness towards me.

Dylan put his hand on hers.

"I think it's best that you not come around here for a while, Katlynn."

"What? Mom! You can't—"

"I can. And I did. Katlynn, I think it best if you go home now."

"Yes, ma'am."

I stood up. "Good."

They stood.

"Oh. And Dylan?"

"Yes, Mom."

"Bedtime is 11:30 tonight."

"Yes, ma'am."

Lauren

Dear Diary,

I never wanted a sister. I like being the only girl. It makes me special, in a way. Daddy likes me best. Dylan doesn't even deny it.

So, watching Anthony parade around in one of my old princess dresses was so frustrating. Katlynn called him 'pretty.' She doesn't give me compliments. (Okay, maybe she does. But still, those should be reserved just for me. Just sayin').

I mean Anthony can get attention sure, but what about me? Where do I fit in to all of this? I don't want to give up being Daddy's Little Girl or let him like wear my prom dress or something when I go to senior prom! How is this fair to me?!

Let him have Dylan's old stuff. Or get him new things. But I don't want him to be a little mini-me. That's not what I'm about. What would Aiden say if I had some little boy following me around in my old, hand-me-down clothing? Yuck. I'd be the laughing stock of school!

Ugh. Why does Anthony have to do this to me?

But, maybe having a gay brother is kind of the best of both worlds, right? I mean, Anthony is only a little kid, but I know what being gay is. There's a sixth grader at school who is out. Jayson Something-Or-Other. He says he knew from a young age that he was 'special,' and you don't choose who you love. Maybe that's true.

Then there are those two boys in my class that like to draw and don't do anything in P.E. but cower in the corner. Aiden says they're gay, and he's the cutest boy in school. So, he'd probably know. Anyone interested in boys would be a fool to not be crazy about Aiden. I'm sure those boys must have asked him out or something.

A lot of kids pick on those boys, which is actually kind of sad. I try to be nice to them, but I have a reputation to uphold! And they're kind of bottom of the totem pole. Though, Bethany from dance class says that gay guys are the best. And she's a sophomore at the high school. Gay boys are apparently the best shoppers. And super fun to gossip with. And talk about cute boys. Some of them even know how to do fancy hair stuff. And makeup tips!

Maybe I should try to befriend those boys in school...

Dylan

"I'm not uncomfortable, Dylan."

"Lie voice."

"I'm not lying."

The look. She knew I knew.

"Dylan... I really appreciate the fact that you want me to meet you dad, but your mom—"

"Doesn't have a say on who I date."

She smiled. Her sweet smile. Then fixed her dress. Too cute.

I motioned to the door. "After you, m'lady."

She giggled. Three knocks on the door.

The door opened instantly. Lauren. "Daddy!"

"Not quite." Resentment resonated in Mom's voice.

Through the living room into the kitchen.

"Mom. I told Dad that Katlynn would be here. He wants to meet her."

Katlynn forced a smile. Mom didn't.

"There's cheese."

I smiled. Only Katlynn was a vegetarian here.

Pizza box on the counter. Plates, napkins, and utensils. For some reason,

Mom was still convinced that someone may choose to cut their pizza into little bits instead of eat it like a normal human.

I smiled. "Thanks, Mom."

"Yeah. Thank you very much, Ms. Bell."

Mom's death stare. To Katlynn. Of course.

"When is Daddy getting here?"

"Soon."

"Where is your brother?"

“Upstairs coloring.”

“Do you want to go get him? The pizza will get cold.”

Lauren grumbled. “Why do *I* have to do it?”

“Mom asked you, didn’t she?”

“But I want to be here when Daddy gets here!” Lauren pouted. “Mom! Why can’t Dylan get him?”

Katlynn giggled.

Mom’s nose flared. Seemingly Katlynn’s voice alone triggered her rage.

I sighed. “I can do it.” I messed up her hair. “Spoiled Gremlin.”

“Mom!”

“Dylan, be nice to your sister.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

I motioned for Kat to join me. But she didn’t.

Down the hallway, up the stairs. Alone.

“Hey, Anthony. Dinner’s ready.”

His door was half-shut. So, I pressed it open. Anthony was sprawled out in the middle of the floor. Surrounded by a rainbow mess of crayons. His feet kicking.

“Hey, buddy. What’re you doing? Pizza’s gonna get cold.”

Anthony looked up. “Dylan!”

“Hey buddy. Are you hungry?”

“I’m just coloring.”

“I see that.”

Anthony smiled. Back to his masterpiece.

“Whatcha coloring?”

“A picture for Daddy.”

“Oh. That’s nice of you.”

Anthony smiled. “Yeah.”

“Well, Mom wants you to come downstairs for pizza.”

“Okay. I just need to draw in the dragon. And his mustache.”

“The dragon has a mustache?”

Anthony laughed. My smile was instantaneous. “No! Dragons don’t have mustaches!”

He laughed some more. Even more kicking.

“Hey, buddy. You’re the one who said it.”

“No! You said it.”

“I said it?!?”

“Yeah! You did!”

“No way!”

Anthony giggled. “You did it! You did it! Dragons don’t have mustaches!”

I smiled. “Okay. Then who does?”

“Daddy does.”

“Oh! So you’re drawing Dad’s mustache.”

“Dragons don’t have mustaches.” Anthony laughed again.

“Well, I’m sure Dad will love whatever you’ve drawn for him. So let’s go downstairs and get some pizza.”

“Okay.”

I messed up his hair.

Katlynn

When the doorbell chimed, the Bell household became a tornado around me. I sat, frozen in the chaos, as Lauren and Annie trampled to the front door like an elephant stampede. Annie's crayoned drawing drifted in the wind to the floor, narrowly avoiding being stepped on amidst the madness.

Ms. Bell went into a frenzied rush to tidy up the pizza boxes on the kitchen counter. Like a whirlwind, she was everywhere. Wiping this, clearing that, and giving herself a once over by aid of the reflection in the kitchen window.

Dylan flashed me one of his dimpled smiles, and his eyes twinkled their cinnamon brown sparkle that drew me in in the first place. Amongst the madness, his eyes, his smile, his acknowledgement assured me that everything would be okay. My façade of confidence had been broken.

Lauren and Annie pulled a tall, lanky man into the kitchen, their arms wrapped around each of his arms as if letting go meant never seeing him again. The large man's thick mustache lined his thin lips with the same thickness of his eyebrows: caterpillar-like in length, width, and bushiness. His poignant, spicy cologne wafted through the kitchen, overpowering the greasy pizza's aroma. His teeth were as white as the Earth is green.

Ms. Bell's back stiffened as he approached her with an awkward embrace. "Pete."

"Wendy."

Dylan was greeted with a firm handshake and a strong, swift pat on the shoulder. Only the manliest for the man of the house, I assumed. Such is the way of the manly man.

The tall man's cinnamon eyes averted over to me and flickered in renewed charisma. "And who's this beauty?"

Dylan and Ms. Bell both groaned, for completely different reasons.

Staring into Dylan's eyes in the body of another, I half expected to blush, but something was unsettling with Mr. Bell. I couldn't quite put my finger on it, so forced a polite smile. "Pleasure to meet you, sir."

"Sir?" His laugh was like a hollow Santa Claus. "No one calls me Sir. What do I look like? An old man?"

"No, sir, I just meant—"

"There you go again with this sir business." Santa Claus came out again. "Call me Pete."

I forced a polite laugh, and Dylan came in his shining armor to my rescue.

"This is Katlynn, Dad," he said. "I've told you about her."

"Oh, the choir girl. I've got it in my *notes* here. You really struck a *chord* in my memory, there. I'm afraid that names aren't my *forte*, Katlynn, so you'll have to forgive me. But alas, I'll give it a *rest*." He stressed each pun with a wink and a gentle nudge of his elbow into nothing.

"Dad. Please. It burns," Dylan joked.

"Quick! Wendy, where is the aloe vera?!"

Wendy's eyes rolled, like aqua frisbees through the air. She poured herself a tall mug of coffee, letting the habit-forming beverage serve as her escape from the trivial request.

“So, Katlynn, *if that is your real name*, do you like Chinese food?”

“Chinese food? But there’s pizza...”

“Pizza?” Mr. Bell’s eyes turned from cinnamon to a dark mud in his masked rage as he fired a menacing glare towards Ms. Bell. “I told you on the phone that I was treating the family to Chinese tonight.”

“And I told you, Pete, that Lauren has a peanut allergy, and Anthony does not like Chinese food.”

The tension in the room was like a thick fog that blanketed the kitchen; a fog so thick that its nothingness was the only thing that was visible.

“I think I would have remembered if you had said that, Wendy.”

“Would you have? Because you offer Chinese food every time.”

The fires behind both Mr. and Ms. Bell’s eyes were fueled with each bitter word shot at one another.

“Dad, it’s fine.”

“You’re right, Pickle. It’s fine. No need to worry. We’ll get Chinese next time.”

I couldn’t help but giggle. “Pickle?”

“Like Dyl? Short for Dylan? And as in dill pickles?” Mr. Bell nudged at the air again with each question.

“Dad. Please stop.”

I laughed again.

“So, then, kids. Shall we?”

“We already did,” Lauren smiled. “So can we get ice cream now?”

“Yeah! Ice cream!” Annie jumped in excitement.

“Now, now. You know your mother doesn’t like when I feed you ice cream.”

“But, Mom!” Lauren and Annie pleaded.

“Did I say no?”

The kids latched arms and hopped in joyous, synchronized circles. “Ice cream! Ice cream! Ice cream!”

“Be careful,” I said. Lauren’s foot grazed the top of Annie’s masterpiece sitting peacefully on the linoleum tiles. “You wouldn’t want to get Annie’s picture dirty.”

Four pairs of cinnamon eyes and a lone set of aquamarine eyes darted to me instantly when her name escaped my lips. Ms. Bell’s blue eyes were like sharp, ice daggers piercing my skin with goosebumps. The cinnamon eyes of Mr. Bell flickered in annoyance, confusion, and mistrust. Lauren and Dylan glanced at me immediately, and then they diverted their eyes back and forth between their mother and father. Annie’s cinnamon eyes were the only pleasant ones to look upon; they lit up like a lone beacon from a lighthouse.

“Annie?” Mr. Bell questioned. Ms. Bell echoed her own inquiry.

“You’re right! Katlynn! Thank you!” Annie was beaming. She bent down, scooping up the piece of paper as if it were a delicate rose from a thorn bush. Her smile grew ten times wider, from ear to ear, as she rediscovered her work of art. “This is for you, Daddy!”

Dylan shot me a worried glance, and I knew that I had made a mistake by saying anything.

Mr. Bell gave his Santa Claus laugh and reached out to take the paper from his child.

“You drew me a picture, Tony boy?”

Tony boy? I cringed.

As Mr. Bell examined the rainbow scribbles on the paper, everyone stared in uncomfortable silence. The silence spoke louder than anything we could have said.

“Can you tell me about this picture?” It was the typical, go-to question for getting a child to explain what the scribbles meant.

“Okay!” Annie was ecstatic. “This is Momma, in the purple. She’s the queen in the rainbow tower. That’s Dylan, the blue knight who has to beat the mean green dragon, who has kidnapped Princess Katlynn. She’s also purple, but I drew her hair yellow. This is the scary, evil dragon who kidnapped her. He’s got razor sharp teeth and a long tail and scary red scales and lightning-fire breath. But, dragons don’t have mustaches, so I didn’t draw one on there.”

Dylan chuckled.

“That one there on the other side of the tower is you, Daddy,” Annie continued. “I drew you in gray, because your hair is gray. Even though you don’t say so. And that’s Lauren, who is a scary, ugly dragon! But she doesn’t have to be mean, which is why she is purple, too. She’s a nice dragon. Sometimes.”

“Where are you?”

Dylan discretely collapsed into the chair next to me. I watched his face contort with strained discomfort. His leg came to life under the table, rattling beneath the tablecloth in sporadic vibrations.

“Silly Daddy. That’s me!” Annie pointed to the center of the paper. “In the pink. I’m a Warrior Princess.”

The silence was deafening.

Lauren

Dear Diary,

Even I will admit that Daddy was terrifying after Anthony’s picture. I’d never heard him swear so much in his life. Even before the divorce. Even *during* the divorce.

I’d never seen Anthony cry so hard, either. And when he rushed up the stairs to his bedroom, Dylan was quick to follow. Mom, naturally, pushed Daddy outside onto the deck to “have a word with him.” Leaving me with Katlynn in the kitchen.

We didn’t talk for the longest time, but finally I decided to come clean. I knew what the big deal was: Anthony is gay. Most dads don’t like that according to Jayson.

But, Katlynn told me I was wrong. Anthony may be gay, she said, but that’s not the real issue. She said the term was “a transgender.” It’s our “internal self-awareness of our gender.” Sometimes, people are born in the wrong bodies, she said, and we don’t get the same parts as who we are inside.

Which means Anthony is really my sister. Which is weird until you really think about it. Like, he—I mean, *she* didn’t choose to come out as a boy, it just happened. And like, you don’t get to choose if you’re born with brown eyes or blue eyes or right or left handed. I mean, I would’ve totally chosen to have Mom’s eyes instead of Daddy’s nasty brown ones. But, that’s not how life works.

But after listening to Daddy’s blow up, I can’t help but feel sorry for what Anthony is going to go through. Like, his—sorry, *her* own dad thinks she is some sort of corrupted monster...

Well, I for one refuse to see her as such. I love my brother. Err, sister. Gosh, this is going to take forever to get used to...

Annie

Katlynn says I'm a Princess. Princess Annie, she calls me. It makes me smile.

Dylan and Lauren play Princess with me sometimes, too. Dylan says that I make a great, strong Princess. Lauren says that I'm almost more prettier than she was as a Princess. I make her be the evil dragon most of the time.

Momma says I can be whoever I want to be. Whether that's a Princess or an Astronaut or a Cowboy. Even a Cowgirl, if I want.

After Daddy left, she took me to the store and she bought me a new Princess dress. My own! She said if I was good for Dylan the next few days that she would buy me a matching crown next time.

When we got home, I tried it on. Lauren said I was certainly more prettier than she was when she used to be a Princess. Dylan bowed to me as I walked out into the living room.

Momma looked at me. Her eyes fluttered, and she smiled. So, I smiled back.

"You're beautiful."

Then, she started crying. I usually cry when I'm sad. But Dylan says that she wasn't sad. That this was a good cry. He says that sometimes you can be so happy that you cry. But, he hadn't said that when Momma was crying then.

So, I hugged her. And she hugged me back.

I told her I loved her. She just hugged me tighter.

"I love you too, my little Princess."

Miss Lilac Arugg

By: Robert Boucheron

Louisa walked the few blocks down Main Street. The day was turning out to be fine. As she reached the café at noon, a man unlocked the door. Wearing a black vest, bowtie and a handlebar mustache, he was either an actor in a movie about the Wild West or a bartender. From behind the bar, he set a paper napkin before her.

“A little early in the day for a cocktail, ma’am, but you may have a reason. Charles is the name. What will it be?”

“Nothing to drink, thank you. Unless you happen to have a fresh pot of coffee?”

“Coming right up.” Charles assembled a cup and spoon. “We don’t get much of a lunch crowd here. We do get folks with a thirst for something other than whisky. So we offer a little bit of everything. Come for the booze or come for the atmosphere. There’s plenty of both.”

“I came on another errand,” Louisa said. “I want to talk to someone who performs here and goes by the name of Lilac Arugg.”

“Hapsburg’s reigning queen of camp. I wouldn’t have pegged you as a fan.”

“Do you know where I might find her?”

“Sure thing. She lives upstairs, over the café. Mr. Small owns the building. He likes to rent to tenants in the arts. Go back to the street and ring at the apartment entrance. Or you can use the back stair.” He gestured behind the bar. “It’s more convenient if you’re in a ball gown and high heels, with an ostrich plume on your head.”

“I’ll use the street entrance. Thank you, Charles.”

Louisa gulped her coffee and exited. She rang, climbed two steep flights of stairs, and arrived winded at the top. An overweight man in a lavender robe and sparkling slippers opened the door. The same height as Louisa, he took her in from head to toe and frowned.

“I don’t know what you’re selling, lady, but it better not be cosmetics. You look like a girl who doesn’t know which end of a lipstick to suck.”

Louisa had not expected a challenge. “I am Louisa Abernethy Jones, from the Vindicator.”

“And I am the Queen of England, just in from Buckingham Palace.”

Louisa’s face fell.

“Just kidding, honey. You look as forlorn as a nun in a brothel. What can I do for you?”

“I’m looking for Lilac Arugg.”

“Then you came to the right place. It’s much too early in the morning to receive visitors, but slide on in and make yourself at home.”

Louisa entered a spacious, sunny room furnished with a few tattered pieces that resembled theatrical props—a sofa upholstered in crimson plush, a clawfoot armchair, and a vast painting of a carnival scene in an ornate, gilded frame. Water stains marked the ceiling, and the carpet was frayed.

“Take a throne, any throne.”

Louisa sat in the armchair, which creaked.

"Don't worry, it won't break. Heavier hitters than you have taken a load off in that chair. I'm a big-boned gal myself." The man sat on the sofa and leaned back with one arm raised, as though a servant might appear with a cocktail or a cigarette.

"The maid is off today. She's a wicked little bitch, but what can you do? Here I am with my hair undone, no makeup, and barely a stitch on. And with the worst craving for a smoke. But I quit that nasty habit. Now I'm looking for a new one. So where were we?"

"The newspaper editor asked me to write about Ralph Willis, the musician who was shot. In the course of my wanderings, some people mentioned you and your show, so I thought I should ask. Did you know him by any chance?"

"In passing. We danced together. We talked. We're about the same age with similar tastes, as you may discern. You look like the discerning type. Are you sure I can't get you something, Miss . . ."

"Louisa. Charles gave me a cup of coffee downstairs."

"I'll bet it was hot. Now, that's what I call a full-service bartender."

"He added a good word for you."

"Don't you believe it, honey. I'm as mean as the next girl and twice her size."

"If you don't mind, do you have a day job?"

"In civilian life, I'm Stan Maupin, a youth counselor for social services. Youth as in troubled teens, boys with problems, emotional and otherwise. It takes one to know one, as I tell them on our first date. Make that our first counseling session."

"And by night . . ."

"A performing artist. I picked the name for its entertainment value. Lilac is my signature color, as you see." He flounced the hem of the robe.

"Who are the Ladies of Illusion?"

"Oh, honey, you make it sound like a cult! We're a collection of misfits and has-beens, street tramps and trollops. The only qualifications are a smart mouth and an overwhelming disregard for standards. The current roster includes Miss Kitty Litter, Miss Helen Highwater, and Miss Ivana Getsome, all local talent."

"Did Ralph Willis come to the show?"

"Now and then. There's not much of a bar scene in the Shenandoah Valley. Where else can an eligible gay bachelor go to see and be seen?"

"So he was visible?"

"In a small town like this, everyone gets to know everyone. There's no place to hide."

"Did he ever mention a romantic interest?"

"In a veiled way. He claimed to have a hot boyfriend, an active-duty cop in uniform who rode a motorcycle and arrested crooks—the whole police department scene. It sounded more like a fantasy than anything that could happen here in little old Hapsburg. Then, as the entire world was shocked to learn, the fantasy turned out to be real, our very own chief of police."

"Did Ralph give any hint of dissatisfaction?"

"Toward the end of last year," he grumbled. "I put it down to the seven-year itch. Carrying on with a married man is dicey in any case. E. M. Forster got away with it, with Policeman Bob, no less. That's England for you. In America, bisexual is a fancy word for confused."

"Did Ralph say anything about that?"

“He said he was going to break off the affair. It had dragged on too long, he saw no future, he wanted to settle down, and so on. A soap opera has better dialog. Now if you ask me, this is when things get messy.”

“How so?”

“Consider the cast in this drama, none of whom is getting younger. How will the valiant officer react to being dumped? And how will the valiant officer’s wife react?”

“Mrs. Ryder didn’t know.”

“Oh, Louisa, get a grip. The wife always knows. She puts a good face on it, hikes up her hose, and gets on with life. At a moment like this, however, as power shifts and lead weights start to drop, she may get just a smidgeon bent out of shape.”

“Alice Ryder made a spirited defense of her husband.”

“To which I say brava diva!”

“What about Gary Nash, the missing young man? Did you ever meet him?”

“Far too young for Miss Lilac. My social service clients are his age. Willis introduced him to me, said he sang like an angel. He came to the last show, a week ago Sunday.”

“Was Willis there too?”

“No, I didn’t see him. But I saw something else. Our musical friend Nurse Nash engaged in a tête à tête with a suspicious character.”

“Do you know who the other man was?”

“Never saw him before. Heavyset, fair, wearing a ballcap and sunglasses in a dimly lit bar. The hearty, he-man type, what we in the business call acting straight.”

“Your description matches J. D. Ryder.”

“Ooooh!” Miss Arugg squealed. “The Captain does drag.”

“I wonder what he wanted with Nash.”

“From my vantage point, it could have been a pickup or a body block. The stage lights made it hard to tell.”

“Did they leave together?”

“Miss Louisa, what an improper suggestion! No, come to think of it, Nash did not look at all pleased by the encounter. Up to that point he was gay as a lark. He must have left the café soon after.”

“Whatever Ryder said to him spoiled the mood.”

“So it would seem.”

“When did Ryder leave?”

“At the end of the evening, about eleven. I remember, because he loitered, as if he had nowhere to go.”

“So Ryder didn’t casually drop in for a few minutes.”

“If that’s what he told you, honey, he was fibbing.”

“You say he was reluctant to go?”

“There’s always one or two. We have to sweep them out with the trash. It’s no reflection on the entertainment. The malingeringers are sad or drunk or both.”

“Was Ryder?”

“Sad, maybe, but sober.”

Louisa stood. “Thank you so much for your insight.”

“The pleasure was mutual, I’m sure. Love the hair and the outfit. Come see the show. You might get some tips on makeup.”

The Deputy Clerk's Daughter

By: Vanessa Escobar

The first girl I ever kissed was Eleanor Carlson. Her family called her Edy for short but she said she would do away with all that once she ran for the senate. She said no one would take her seriously if she ran as Edy Carlson, but Eleanor Carlson, that was a name that could win, a name that could be respected. I didn't come from a political family like her so I didn't know what a name was worth.

We lived in a small southern town called Allan. Everyone went to Laurent High, or got home schooled. Edy's parents had home schooled her for most of her life; but at fifteen she told her parents she needed to be with the people, to learn social skills, so she enrolled at Laurent High School at the end of freshmen year.

We didn't meet until mid-January of our sophomore year. I'd wanted to take drama because I liked plays about New York City, but the class got full so I was put in my second choice: reading. I liked books so I was okay with the choice but was sure it wasn't going to be as much fun as all my other friends were having, acting out scenes of *Rent* and *Stop Kiss*.

Our reading teacher was Miss Michelle Carr; she was young and beautiful. Her accent was a little funny though. She said it's because she was from Atlanta. The first book she had us read was *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*. It was fun and we even got to see the movie. But then some kid complained Harry Potter was against her morals and religion so the Principal scolded Miss Carr for exposing us to fictional witchcraft. He said we were impressionable and that she needed to stick to the curriculum. Edy spoke out and said that it was "dumb" for the Principal to make such a statement and "damn Baptists."

Everyone's mouth flew wide open when she said that. I didn't know if Edy was new to town but she couldn't say that when almost all of her classmates were Baptists! Allan was full of Baptists and Pentecostals and they were always angry at one another. I was a Catholic so I never mentioned it and the nearest Catholic Church from our house was two towns over. I hated the Sunday drive to mass but my father always stopped at Taco Bell on the way home so that was good.

I tried to come to Edy's defense. "She didn't mean that!" I shouted over my angered classmates and Edy yelled even louder, "Yes I did!" I thought everyone was about to hang her out to dry but Miss Carr calmed everyone down. She told us take out pen and paper and write all our thoughts down. All my classmates scribbled angrily on their sheets while I stared dumbly at a defiant Edy, who had her arms covering her chest and a frown on her lips. She caught me staring so I tried to wave but she looked annoyed.

I gave up and wrote on my paper, "I think everyone would have liked The Goblet of Fire."

That night at dinner I told everyone about the scene at school. My brothers laughed and my father told me to pass the salsa verde. Then my mom said, "I know her, that's Judge Carlson's daughter. I work for her dad." My mother worked at the Allan courthouse as a clerk. She worked with a few of my friend's parents so I was not surprised. Everyone knew everyone in Allan.

"They don't live too far from us." My mother said.

Edy and I both lived on South Patchett Road. It was ten miles long. She was at 1405 and I was 1409, which was a good two miles apart. Some nights, after we were already good friends we'd lay in the bed of her pick-up truck and stare at the stars. Allan's stars were the best she would say to me because city light would just get in the way of the beauty. Her body always felt sticky next to mine; the humidity always messed up her hair, but she would just laugh. I could never tell if the heat on my skin was from her or the tight air.

The day after the Harry Potter incident, Miss Carr produced copies of Crime and Punishment by Fyodor Dostoyevsky. It took the rest of January, all of February, til mid-March to finish the book. By the end of it we were all tired of Raskolnikov's moral confictions and everyone was mad at the girl who got Harry Potter banned. But I was no longer jealous of my friends in drama class because I had Edy. She didn't mind my rowdy brothers or that my mom always cooked spicy food. She said eating pollo con mole would help her win the Hispanic vote. I smiled and pushed the brown sauce onto my rice.

Edy had an off-again-on-again boyfriend that she didn't care too much about. She said he was for appearances. The July before our junior year Edy would come over a lot. We would walk in the forest behind my house, she would talk about philosophy, and I would pick flowers and put them in her hair. One Thursday she was very serious about this one philosopher, her hands were waving around and her cheeks were red. She asked if I ever felt like I was in a dark cave, unable to see past the projections. I said no because I really had no idea what she talking about.

"Don't you want more than what's in front of you?" she said, flustered. The yellow flower petals were already falling out of her hair, her white tank top was drenched in sweat, and I could tell the material was clinging to her body. She pushed the blonde hair out of her face and stepped forward to me. I stepped back. "I'm not going to hit you," she whispered. I counted every freckle on her nose and she pushed her lips against mine and I let her.

Her lips were soft, not like a boy's. And she was gentle, not like a boy. My body felt like it was on fire, it was never like this with a boy. Her hands seemed to know where to go but mine didn't. I thought maybe I should touch her breasts, so I did. I let my right hand cup her left breast and it lingered there until I got brave enough to slip my hand under her shirt.

My clothes had to have been wet. I was sweating everywhere but her mouth didn't care. Her breath was hot against my neck and her teeth bit into my collarbone like I was a piece of meat. My underwear were soaked, a mixture of mostly sweat paired with a new feeling I didn't know. "Aida!!" I could hear my brother screaming. "Aida! Dad says how many enchiladas do you want? Edy?" I moved away from Edy and held onto the nearest tree.

"I want three!" I shouted and looked at Edy. Her chest was pink. "Two," she yelled.

I was glad my brother had called out instead of finding us. I wouldn't have known what to do. I let go of the tree and grabbed her hand, noticing her yellow nail polish. I whispered in her hair the word yes, over and over.

Later that night I felt incredibly calm as if everything finally made sense. I replayed the kiss in my mind a few times before falling asleep. The next morning I got a text from Edy stating she had decided to spend the rest of the summer in North Carolina. She said that she was back with Thad and felt this was the best move for her political career. Thad's father was a senator and she would need the numbers that her ties with the Stone family would bring. I told her that it made sense and she thanked me for understanding.

When she came back in the fall things were strained but we would still have sleepovers and dinners together. Some nights I could feel her arm pressed against my back and I willed myself not to turn over and face her. She would hold my knee and tell me how much she loved Thad and she was sure they'd get married one day, even though I'd pictured Edy and I getting married.

One night she sent me an extraordinarily vague text saying she broke up with Thad and had finally saw the light. At first I was annoyed, now instead of hearing "I love Thad" all the time I'd be hearing how much she hated him, and I would have to pretend to be supportive and not jealous. But the worst thought came to me: Edy had broken up with Thad for me! I could hardly eat my father's pozole. I concealed my giddy smiles by stuffing cabbage in the soup. My brothers stared at me and my father muttered I must be on my period.

The next morning I waited at our usual spot at school. I thought about the kiss in the woods and I felt my neck burn. I saw her walking towards me and I tried so hard to keep the smile down, but it wasn't too hard considering I realized right away she was holding another boy's hand. She came over to me and they both talked excitedly. Mostly about boring government stuff and how joining the Peace Corps to save those hurt souls in Ethiopia would come in handy one day if she ever decided to run for president. My neck and eyes burned.

In a moment of teenage haste, or to get my mind off of Edy, I went and bought menthol cigarettes and played the lottery. I didn't win. I called my old boyfriend and told him to come to my house. That's when I told him I thought I was bi. He said "that's cool" and kissed me. I let him and tried to pretend that his wet, salty kisses could one day be desirable. To say Edy and I began to part ways sounds like an old boring Western, which it felt like at times. We'd shoot each other with words. Hers were always more eloquent. At my mother's job, Edy's father asked her where I'd been; telling her I'd missed out on Jenga. My mother lied and said I was failing Spanish class so I'd been trying really hard to study. Well, it wasn't a complete lie, I wasn't doing well, but I wasn't trying either. How could they expect me to conjugate verbs in Spanish when I could hardly do that in English?

I started dating my old boyfriend again as a distraction and to look as if I didn't care. I confronted Edy and made an emotional spiel about losing my virginity to him. I didn't actually have sex with him, the thought made me want to vomit. But it worked, and she wanted to be around me all the time and hear all about it. I borrowed some of my brother's porn so I could know what to tell her, but looking at all those girls with their legs spread in magazines made me uncomfortable. I didn't want to objectify my fellow women and they never looked happy. How can you enjoy it if they're not happy?

I decided to come clean to Edy, to tell her how I felt. I was terrified because all my life I'd heard bad things about homosexuals, but I didn't feel like a homosexual, I was just like a girl who really liked another girl. I liked how soft her arms were and the different designs she put on her nails. I saw no reason as how this could cause me eternal damnation.

Unfortunately Edy decided to give me the truth first as we sat in the back of her truck, in the middle of the woods. She caught a lightning bug with her hands; I tried as well but accidentally killed mine. She laughed and smiled so I did too. We were both sweating because the heat kept getting worse and no one believed in Al Gore's global warming theories. The tips of my hair began to curl and Edy started playing with them; I held my

breath not knowing what else to do, then she kissed me softly. I didn't realize this was one of those goodbye kisses like in the movies, so I kissed her back really fast before she turned away, leaving me with a mouthful of hair. She then proceeded to tell me how I needed to get over her, and how it's "so obvious you're in love with me". She'd also told her parents I was gay and they felt really sorry for me; then she told me how lucky I was my mom still had her job and what would happen if everyone at the courthouse knew that the deputy clerk's daughter was gay.

I shoved her really hard and she fell out of the truck onto the ground. She tried to get up and I shoved her again. "You know I'm a pacifist!" She cried out, dirt on her face. I bent over and threw up yellow bile. "I'm sorry," she told me. "I'm sorry but I can't have a political career and be gay. I would never make it."

She drove me home. I stuck my right hand out of the window and tried to catch lightning bugs. She whispered about having to be careful or I'd kill them.

A few years later when I came home to visit my parents from college there was a "Vote Eleanor Carlson for Mayor" sign in the front yard. The girl I was dating was in the passenger seat so I tried to look calm. "That's her, isn't it?" I nodded. We'd only been on four dates but she said she really wanted to hang out with my family; she said they sounded fun and she would love to learn how to cook real enchiladas one day.

She got out the car and walked over to the sign; I turned the car off and followed her. "What are you doing?" I called out. She turned around and said, "I really want you to run this sign over but I know how you hate looking angry and immature, so I'm going to be immature for you." She took a pen out of her purse and drew devil horns and a mustache on Edy's face, and then she grabbed my hand and swung me around, a failed but romantic attempt at ballroom dancing. We laughed and I wiped my eyes, watching her walk toward the sign to take it down.

Missing People

By: Stephen Mead

Picture on the mantel,
everyone apparently
there
in this posing nuclear
unit,
& its additions
accepted:
boyfriend, girl,
the expected enlargements ex-
cept, next
to one son,
the space is cropped
in such a way
another person fit,
& there stands the
invisible lover,
the secret sharer, at
home, uninvited
because who else
knows, would guess
that the man
is family,
that the man has spent
years
looking in on, being
private support.

Here's a different un-
photographed image:
Son in the hospital
cities away,
delirious speech, the
bed sheets,
an imagined rack,
control growing desperate—

That guy is a doctor.
I know by the coat,
the stethoscope
pocketed
& they're shaking

hands over me
as if making a
deal...my parents...as if ...

where is...Look, I can
write checks, sign my name
&...time I've been biding, I
will buy, bring
back...Jim...help... Don't tell

I said, wrong stupid,
denying,
hiding

our life is out there
in the distant open & yet
...the mantel picture,
the family portrait...wrong
wrong because ...no
skeleton...no closet...you're
the person I confess to them
now as the door, their
handshake, words agree to seal
over, against:

this Jim person,
listen,
don't you dare give
admittance.

Mary Jane and Cream of Wheat

By: Erren Geraud Kelly

She only ate it cos her mama made her
She said she had to, otherwise
No swimming lessons
So she tolerated it
Sometimes, she made a happy face
With raisins in her bowl cream of
Wheat
The smiling face reminded her of
The iconic black man on the
Box
That magical negro, who instantly
Made her breakfast better

Mary Jane stopped eating cream of wheat
Once she got to high school, but
She never stopped looking at black men
As magical
To her, they were larger than life
She tried to find the magical negro
In all the black men she
Saw
She loved how black men
Could move their bodies
At sports or dancing , as if their
Bodies became poetry
Mary Jane saw black
Men's muscles the way
A jeweler
Appraised a diamond

In college, she saw a black man
Who came to Long Fieldhouse
To swim daily
Mary Jane loved the way his body
Knifed into the water
When he dived
She thought of him as Black Hercules
A semester later, she and the diver
Took a Western Civilization History
Class together

Mary Jane made an effort to become his friend

Mary Jane tingled every time he touched her
Her breasts small like snowcones, in his black hands
Which made a human bra
The image profane and sacred all at once
She always told him when they spooned
The two of them
Looked like a root beer
Float

But Mary Jane's idyllic
Existence was shattered
When she brought her black diver
Home

" well, it's not that he's not a
Nice boy, we just had such
High hopes for you..."

" it's not that we're not liberal, honey
After all, I coach a basketball team
In the inner city, I treat those boys with
Respect. I just don't feel comfortable
Seeing you with one..."

" it just wouldn't look right, baby
People would talk..."

" we want you to
Marry a nice banker and have some
Babies..."

" what would people think?"
" what would people think?"

So, Mary Jane caved in to reality

It wasn't like anything substantial
Was going to come of being
With the black diver, anyway

It was like the art house movies
She watched
Mary Jane loved and hated art house films

Because the endings
Were too depressing, they were too
Real
She liked happy endings

So, she ended up marrying a white guy
A nice, safe, stockbroker

At their wedding, however
She danced with everyone, but him
But he didn't care
He really just wanted arm candy
To show off on business trips and
Dinners
And Mary Jane made a perfect
Trophy....

Mary Jane learned
You can grow to love someone
Eventually
Even, if there's no fireworks
At first

So, she learned to love the stockbroker
She figured it would be no sweat
“Fake it till you make it”
As they say
Learn to love a man
Like loving a bowl of
Cream of wheat

A Last Dance with Mary Jane

By: Erren Geraud Kelly

he picks her up holds her
by her leg and foot
spins her around like she's
nine years old
he spins her around
like her daddy used to
during the dog days of summer in louisiana
sometimes, when they made love
she would call him " daddy "
his coal dark hands covering
her breasts
as she buried her fingernails into
his back
he pulls her close to him
and then she breaks away spins around
by herself

she forgets about her husband
she forgets about her kids
she forgets about the lie that became her life

mary jane looks into the black diver's eyes
and smiles, she's a college girl again
he takes her hand and then walk away

the music begins a slow fade out....

What You Do When You Die

By: Lucas Khan

For Jason Topper

When you decided to die
The earth hung headlong
from the sky, then fell choking.
Two revolving stars kissed,
and in the swirling friction
ate each other raw.
Everything homogenized
 divided
when you decided to die
I turned my back to the sun,
I tried to imagine the grass
as your body, and then
threw it overhead
like funeral confetti.

When I'm dead, I'll decide
whether to forgive you
for what you do when you die,
Or dissolve like an alkali
ghost into the digestive earth.

Highlighters

By: Brooke Hendricks

*“Just picture it. Four years from now, you and me, Howard U grads. Dope, right?”
She wraps her arms around mine, her thick hair flapping like a branch against my skin. The tour guide herds us on to another part of the campus. She doesn’t move, though. Neither do I. I’m manacled by her grip as she pulls out her phone, directs the camera, and snaps a pic.*

I can still hear the camera’s shutter, still smell the vanilla lotion spread across her skin. It’s like some kind of magic trick, the way her smile springs off the image. I take the photo from my wall. I crush it in my hands.

There’s too many.

Everywhere I look, she’s there. Smiling at me with that stupid face. Staring at me with those stupid fucking eyes. I just wanna punch someone. Kill something.

Malik screeches in the kitchen. Goddamn it. Doesn’t Ma own a pacifier? Why is he always whining? It’s not like he got something to cry about. If the least of my problems were swallowing a crayon, I’d rejoice.

“Carter!”

I rip another photo from my wall and pretend like I don’t hear her.

“Carter, I know you not deaf. Get your ass in here!”

Today’s not the day, Ma. I am not in the mood.

I know better than to say this out loud, so I take my sorry ass down the hall and into our cramped, bootleg kitchen. Ma’s there, leaning against the counter. She’s got Malik in her arms and a cordless phone wedged in the nook of her neck. It’s the middle of Satan’s season, so the windows are jacked all the way up. Mosquitoes hover over an abandoned bowl of potato salad by Ma’s arm.

Ma says something to the person on the phone. Then she turns to me. Hair black like skid marks, brown skin two tones richer than mine, Ma’s the anchor of this household. I tower over her, drown her with the blackness of my shadow, but God be damned if she lets my height intimidate her. “Sprung up like a weed, but you gon’ always be my child,” Ma always says. Not even Dad strikes fear in her, and he’s got a head and full frame over me.

Malik fusses in Ma’s arms, his bread roll thighs dangling out of her clutch. He screeches again. Ma tries to get him to stop. He doesn’t.

I wanna punch him in the face.

“I’m working a double tonight,” Ma says over Malik’s demon calls. I already know what comes next, before Ma continues with, “Make sure no one starves before your father comes home, okay?”

And then she shoves the demon child at me, with his screaming and slobbering and his chubby infant body just writhing, writhing, *writhing* in my hands. Fuck. I didn’t ask for this.

I shrink away from his tiny prying hands as Ma darts all around me. She plucks abandoned plates from the floor, tosses dirty dishes into the steep pile already filling the sink. “Wash those, too,” she says, “Gonna have the whole damn neighborhood thinking we living in a trash can.”

She sweeps a collection of Xavier's tiny animal figurines in her hands, throws Amber's dolls in her room on the way to her own. "Did you even clean the bathroom like I asked? Got stains all over the tile... Can't you teach your brother how to aim? Good lord."

Ma's on the other side of the house now but I still hear her voice, grating like a dropped mic as she rattles on. And on. Why did I let her plant die? Why haven't I cooked dinner? Why am I still hovering around here, drinking her water and breathing her air when Will 'cross the street left for Georgia Southern?

Twenty minutes later, Ma's car sputters down the driveway. I'm trying to feed the slobbering demon in his high chair when my other younger siblings Amber and Xavier shoot through the front door. Bookbags rustling on their backs, the two carry the stench of outside and fill the room with their high-pitched, meaningless conversation.

I wanna punch them, too.

But if I punch Xavier any harder than I did last time, Ma will go insane.

I can't help it, though. Kid runs around saying stuff like, "Do you know how many seeds are on a Big Mac bun? I do. There's 178. Can you imagine eating them one by one? Do you know how long that would take? I do. Two minutes and 37 seconds."

It's like he asks for it.

"What's for dinner?" Amber asks. She runs beside me and pats the demon child's head, smiling like the drooling thing gives her happiness.

"Whatever you can make," I say. I take a spoonful of baby food and shove it in his mouth. It dribbles down his chin.

"But Ma said you gotta cook for us."

"Is Ma here?" I ask. "You got hands. Cook for yourself."

Amber wrinkles her nose. "I'm telling Ma."

I snicker. Okay? Did she think that was gonna make me get up and cook her a five course meal? Ma can keep me here, sure, but she can't make me do much else.

A chunk of Malik's dinner plops onto Amber's hand, hot and wet from his toothless mouth. Amber slinks back. She wipes it off, flips on the TV, and immediately starts singing the lyrics of the music video flashing across the screen.

Some old guy—I guess an uncle or something—came to one of our cookouts and told Amber she'd be "the next Jennifer Hudson." The chick hasn't stopped singing since.

It drives me insane.

Because there's just too many things going on now.

Too many sounds and breathing and people.

I can't take it.

I look around. And I hear Amber and her wailing, Malik and his screaming, Xavier and his stupid nerd rants. And I realize that there's nothing more than this. It's this same scene rolling again, day after day, and nothing's gonna change but the seasons and our years. The world's gonna keep spinning and people are gonna keep doing all these great things. And I'm gonna be stuck here, living the life of an endangered panda waiting for nature to exterminate me.

It's overwhelming. I can't breathe. I can't stay and look at these creatures that pin me down here, these creatures that have wiped away any chance of a better future. And so I leave the blubbering kid spitting up his mashed carrots. And I get up.

"Where are you going?" Amber asks. She looks at me with Mom's eyes and I look away.

"Out," I say.

"But Ma said—"

"I don't give a damn what Ma said. I'm leaving."

I walk to the front door.

And I leave.

Downtown Savannah is a lot like the one room you clean when guests come over, while my side of town is more like the room you lock and don't show. Cobblestones slather the roadways, sandwiched between the rustic entrances of small shops and diners. I walk down the road of tourist traps, where the river rushes in the distance.

It's a mystifying thing, that river. It sways back and forth like a pendulum, each wave building on top of the other as if forming its own furious stampede. I hold the railing and stare down at it.

The river looked a lot better when she stood beside me.

But I guess everything did.

The memories come again. I hate it. What's the point of having them at all if you can't change them? I don't need to relive that moment *every single second* of my life. I want to fucking breathe.

A little girl runs up beside me, jumping up and down to stare across the railing. She has that weird little girl voice like Amber, the one where she sounds either super excited or super constipated. And now instead of the memories it's my sister. It's my brothers and my mom and my dad and every other reason why she's up at Howard and my acceptance letter still hasn't left the confinements of my desk drawer.

My blood pulses a little too loudly in my temples. It hurts. I stare down at the river because I know it'll hurt a lot less if I dove in. I close my eyes then.

I drown.

The water rushes all around. I feel it as it pulses in my ears, thick waves sloshing as the wet monster clamps its mouth around me. Good. It feels good. For a second I'm at peace. Because when the chances are eliminated, you don't have to worry about the ones you're missing out on. And that feels good. Better than this dull lust for something *more*, something *better*, something that's not—

A pull.

Everything disappears. Like the Jaws of Life, it yanks me up and out until the black becomes a swirl of greens and blues and oranges. The water is gone. The world returns, and I realize I'm just as dry and pathetic as I was before.

But the pull continues.

Someone stands before me. A girl, with my arm in her hand and her razor sharp brown hair whipping in the wind. She chews gum real fast, like a jittering toy set of teeth, and her grip on me is tight.

"We're starting in a few minutes," she says. A strong scent of peach trails from her mouth. "Come on, we'll be late."

She yanks me again. I resist. "I don't know you."

"But you're wearing the shirt."

We're both wearing white shirts. But everyone owns a white shirt. I don't get how that indicates we know each other.

"I'm busy," I say.

I don't think she hears me.

"You're new so you're scared," she says. She doesn't let go of my arm. "That's okay. The new ones are always scared."

She pulls harder this time, jerking me away from the railing. She shakes with some kind of outer body excitement and I think maybe it's because she's leading me to the back of a van where ten beefy men will rip out my liver and sell it on the black market. With hazel eyes slant like seesaws and boobs too nonexistent to cup, this girl could be a murderer—a psycho who mutilates your body into bloody hash browns and dumps you into the sea. Or she could be the head of a white shirt cult, out to reform every striped tee-wearing person of America.

Either way, I let her pull me along—not because I trust bubble gum chewing strangers and not because she's cute. I let her pull me because the river will always be here, and I think I deserve a little something before I jump in.

"What section are you?" the girl asks as she pulls me through the crowd, maneuvering between the heavy throngs of tourists and old people. "If you're Section A then you're with me and you go after the chorus. But if you're Section B then you start with the first verse with Elijah. Which doesn't really make any sense, because you'd think Section B would start with the chorus and Section A would start with the first verse. But whatever, Elijah decides the section names not me. What section are you again?"

"Um, Section A," I say.

The girl nods approvingly. She leads me to the alley behind a souvenir shop and I'm more than convinced that this is the place where the juiceheads rip out my liver. Two cars are parked by the souvenir shop's back door. More people exit the cars, each one wearing a white shirt. They run up to the girl.

"We're not late, are we?" one guy asks. He's got hair like that Cullen guy and eyes too big for his face.

"Depends on who you're asking," the girl says. She looks around the group of people. "You guys are all my section, right?"

A few nods and murmurs.

"Should we go over the moves real quick?" Cullen guy asks over the crowd.

A loud bass beat drops before the girl can say her reply, and the white-shirt-wearing people run to the edge of the souvenir shop to find the song's location. The girl gets a big grin on her face. "This is it," she says aloud to no one in particular. "It's time."

I join the hiding crowd to see what they're looking at. Not too far away from us is a guy. He looks like a street performer, and he's got a boom box blaring music on the street as he dances hardcore to the song filling the air. By chance or by reason, he also wears a white shirt.

A crowd circles around him. As the song transitions to another part, people run from the distance and break through the crowd. They join him, and now instead of one street performer, it's a small group. All wearing white shirts, all cranking out the same moves.

And instead of following the peach bubble gum chewing girl to a sketchy black market, I realize I've just joined a flash mob.

"We're almost up," she says, nudging my shoulder all excitedly. Of all the things that a stranger could have led me to, why did it have to be a source of public humiliation? I know I said I wanted some kind of excitement, but this isn't what I was picturing. I try stepping back and running away, and that's when the peach bubble gum chewing girl stops me.

I guess it's our turn to embarrass ourselves, because now the entire white shirt wearing group exits their hiding place and runs to join the dancers. The music is louder where we are now, and the girl has released my hand. She dances beside me in the group. It's like I'm in a Disney musical, only I'm the normal guy who doesn't have synchronized dance moves programmed into my brain.

I make a fool of myself trying to keep up. The crowd doesn't notice. Or if they do, they don't seem to care. They eat the performance up, whipping out their cell phones to record it forever. I'm sweaty and disoriented when the dance is over, and I'm not entirely sure what my life has come to in the past five minutes.

A few people from the crowd high-five members of the white-shirt-wearing group, complimenting them on their dance. No one comes up to me, but I don't expect them to.

"Hey, see, that wasn't so bad was it?" the peach bubble gum chewing girl says. She tries to put her arm around my shoulder, but it's too far up, so she punches my arm instead. "I mean, you could've done a lot better, but even Elijah was sucky the first time around."

Backhanded compliments. Feels like home.

The Cullen guy comes over with the hardcore dancer who started the flash mob off. The hardcore dancer is about my height, but pale and more toned. His eyes glow green like the river, and he grins like he loves life.

"Elijah," the peach bubble gum chewing girl says, "tell him he did good. I had to lure him away from the riverfront, the guy was so scared."

The hardcore dancer, Elijah, looks at me. "You were great out there, man," he says.

"I didn't say *lie* to him," the peach bubble gum chewing girl says. "Just make him feel better."

Elijah laughs at her, but he's still looking at me, like he's trying to figure out something. "You don't practice with us, do you? I don't recognize your face."

"I don't dance," I say. I scratch my head then, because it feels awkward to admit that. "Someone just dragged me here."

Elijah and the Cullen guy look at the peach bubble gum chewing girl.

"Ah, shit, Bree," the Cullen guy says with a hearty laugh, "You recruiting strangers now?"

Bree, the peach bubble gum chewing girl, punches the Cullen guy's shoulder. "He was wearing a white shirt! What was I supposed to think?"

The Cullen guy continues to tease Bree, who gets even more violent by the second. Her foot comes dangerously close to the area that no foot should ever come close to.

"What's your name?" Elijah asks me over their banter.

"Carter."

He puts his hand out, shakes mine, and tells me his.

"You're coming to Fisher's place with us, right? To celebrate?" he asks.

"I've been told I make the best burgers," Fisher, the Cullen guy, calls out, holding Bree's arms in his hands as she tries to punch him again. "Would be a shame if you missed out on them."

"You're already this far," Elijah says. He smirks. "Might as well go all the way."

A horn blows from a riverboat. I look toward the riverfront then, watch the waters flow and lap in the distance. Right now, with these strange people laughing and smiling before me, the water doesn't look as inviting.

I turn back toward Elijah and tell him, "I'll go."

It's a sea of white in Fisher's backyard. Wired fences surround its every perimeter, closing us in, and people lounge around his pool. A few of the more talented dancers, including Elijah, form a circle and dance to the music blasting from the stereo. Clustered here, the flash mob group looks much bigger than it did spread out on River Street.

"Why do you have to make burgers at a barbecue?" Bree asks. She leans over the top of Fisher's grill, smacking on another wad of peach bubble gum. "Why can't you barbecue things like fruits or vegetables? You know, things that you don't have to *kill* to eat."

"Are you vegetarian?" I ask her. She shakes her head and opens her mouth to speak, but Fisher rushes in before she can.

"No. She's 'vegan-curious,'" he says, making air quotations. "It means she'll eat everything like everyone else, but some days she's vegan."

"It's healthy. You wouldn't be so tired if you tried it," Bree says.

Fisher waves her off, laughing as he turns his attention back to the food blazing on the grill. He looks at me.

"You're not as picky as she is, right? You'll eat my *disgustingly beefy barbecue?*" he asks.

"Course. Beef is where it's at," I say.

"Wise man," Fisher says. "You're already cool with me."

"So what's your deal?" Bree asks me. "Why'd you follow me if you didn't dance?"

"Would you have left me alone if I didn't?"

Bree hesitates. "Probably not."

Fisher laughs. "She's persuasive that way."

Fisher flips something over on the grill, and a sweet, smoky scent floats through my nostrils. I look around his backyard, where the sounds here don't fight for attention and the people aren't clawing my life away. They mix and mingle in a way that's pleasant. It feels weird, but a good kind of weird. I almost forgot what that felt like.

"What is it you guys actually do?" I ask. "Are flash mobs y'all thing?"

"Yup," Bree says with a wide smile. "We're called Highlighters. Elijah had the idea back when we were in junior high, but it didn't go into full effect until we all graduated."

"So you've known each other awhile?"

"A few of us. But we're mostly a bunch of mismatched puzzle pieces from all over the place."

"Burgers are ready," Fisher calls out. Like an alarm, the sentence grabs everyone's attention. The dancers stop, the swimmers jump from the pool, and a crowd forms around

Fisher and his grill. When the burgers transfer from the grill to styrofoam plates, Elijah ends up sitting across from me at the lawn table.

"How do you like us so far? Enjoying yourself?" he asks. He dumps a crazy amount of barbecue sauce onto his burger.

"I guess. You guys are a pretty interesting group," I say.

"Oh come on. Just pretty interesting? Give us more credit than that. I know you've met Bree."

I laugh. Bree sits at the lawn table not too far from ours with Fisher and some other girl. She doesn't have a single ounce of meat on her plate, and instead chomps on one of the grilled potatoes. I guess she's vegan today.

"What got you into this?" I ask. "A lot of the guys I grew up with started gangs, not flash mobs."

"The flash mob thing really ruins my street cred, doesn't it? I don't know, I love to dance, and when you meet a lot of people who love to do the same thing, amazing things happen, you know?"

I nod. I do know. "I played varsity basketball back in high school. My team was amazing."

"You play college ball now?"

"I could have."

"Why aren't you?"

Because I'm tied down here. "I don't know."

"I say you figure it out," Elijah says, still chewing the food in his mouth. "The universe helps the doers. Look at us. You couldn't tell me this would be my life a year ago. Now it is. I'm telling you, man, the universe *wants* to be on your side. You just gotta give her something to work with."

Elijah reaches beside me for more barbecue sauce. As he reaches over, I see a tattoo peek out from the collar of his shirt. He dumps the barbecue sauce on his second burger patty and grins at me.

Something flutters in my stomach then. I don't know what it is, but I've felt it before. It's a wild and nervous and weird feeling and I'm not used to feeling it for another dude. I try shrugging it off, but it happens again when he licks the barbecue sauce from his lips. I have to make a conscious effort just to calm myself. Don't know what my body's doing, but it needs to chill.

"When's the next event?" I ask him.

Elijah smirks. "Shouldn't you learn how to dance first?"

"You know all the moves," I say. "Show me something then."

Elijah finishes his second burger in three huge bites and jumps from the table. "Fair warning, I don't go easy on new members."

"Or anyone," Bree shouts from her seat.

"That too," Elijah says. He rolls up his sleeves. "So you ready?"

I follow Elijah to the edge of the pool and dance until the sun peels away from the sky and I forget what awaits me at home.

"You're probably the worst dancer I've ever seen," Bree says. "I didn't think it was possible to be that uncoordinated, but hey, look at you."

"You're just one bundle of compliments," I say.

Bree's pink Mini Cooper screeches to a stop before my front yard, Katy Perry blasting from its speakers. Elijah has to get out of the passenger seat so I can climb out of the back. My legs are still sore from our struggle of a dance session earlier and I feel them buckle as I try to stand.

"A for effort," Elijah says. He leans against Bree's car, stifling a laugh. Bree's not so subtle and cackles like a witch in the driver's seat. I glare at them both.

"It's funny now, but I bet none of y'all could survive a minute on the court," I say.

"Is that a bet?" Bree calls out.

"Sounded like one," Elijah says. He crosses his arms and looks at me. "Tell you what. If you can give me two hours of hard work at our dance studio, I'll let you kick my ass in basketball. Deal?"

I smirk. "Deal."

We shake on it. His shoulder hits mine and the feeling erupts again.

"I'm holding you to your word," Elijah says. He jumps back into Bree's toy car.

"Enjoy your pride while you have it," I call out as Bree hits the ignition.

Their laughter hangs in the air long after they're gone, and I replay it like a song as I brace myself for my return to hell.

Crying.

It's the first thing I hear when I open the front door, and it's not the demon calling that Malik does. It's a wail. Loud and childlike, it pierces my ears. I step inside and it gets louder.

In the kitchen there's water. A pot sits overturned on the tile floor, long veins of noodles twisting and turning out of it. The smell is acrid. Amber curls in a ball, screaming, wailing, and her hand clamps around a mark black and gaping on her arm.

Oh no.

Dad scoops her up. His colossal frame dwarfs the kitchen, makes it look like it belongs in a dollhouse, and I feel the fury boiling in his blood when he glares at me. Amber cries, Malik cries, and Dad's black hole eyes clawing through mine make me want to cry, too.

"Get in the car," he says.

My shoulder rocks back as he storms past me.

Amber's whimpering echoes in my ears.

There's more than one type of anger.

There's the raving, screaming kind that draws onlookers' attention.

There's the anger that drives you to that gun hidden under your mattress, the kind that makes you go Rambo on everyone you see.

And then there's the hidden anger. The one that doesn't look like anger at all because it's calm and tamed and disguised behind a mask of contentment. That's the one Dad has. He paces back and forth outside of Amber's hospital room, frustration buried in the luggage

bags beneath his eyes. He didn't say a word to me on the way here, and he hasn't looked at me once since we've arrived.

"Dad," I start, but can't seem to finish.

Dad runs a hand down his face. He hesitates. "What were you thinking?"

It's a question with no right answer, and I can't bring myself to even try.

"Walk me through your thought process here, Carter. Tell me, on which one of God's everlasting planets did you think that it would be a good idea to leave your ten year old siblings alone?"

"I just wanted to go out," I say. "I didn't know this would happen."

Dad snickers. The sound is humorless and scary. "You better thank God I'm a Christian, boy, because I swear what I want to do to you right now would send me to hell."

"I messed up, I know that—"

"She has third degree burns, Carter! You didn't just mess up. You put Amber in danger. I don't know who you think you are or what you think this is, but you better get your priorities straight. Your responsibilities come before anything else. Don't forget it."

A couple of nurses duck their heads as if to pretend they're not paying attention, but I know they're still listening. I hesitate and lower my voice.

"It's my fault she burned herself. I know that," I say. My voice shakes. It's now or never. "But have you ever stopped to think that maybe this shouldn't always be my responsibility? That maybe I want to do more than play babysitter when it's convenient for you and Ma?"

"Is there something you need to be doing that's more important than making sure the people you're *connected to by blood* are safe? If there is, then please, do tell, Carter. I didn't know your family was so unimportant."

"You know that's not what I meant."

"Then tell me what you meant and make it crystal damn clear."

Dad glares at me, his body frame eclipsing mine. I'm breathing harder than I ever have before, and I've got so many things running through my head that I can't focus.

I hesitate, and when I finally speak, it's strangled and breathless and not what I wanted to say at all. "Why didn't you let me go?"

Dad sighs. "It's hardly the time, Carter."

"I was accepted," I say. "Why didn't you let me go?"

Dad crosses his arms. "You have responsibilities as the eldest son and as a brother to your younger siblings."

"But I'm not just their brother! Why don't you get that? I don't want *this* to be my entire life."

Amber's doctor exits her hospital room. He looks between us and clears his throat to break the silence.

"We'll discuss this later," Dad says.

I know we won't.

"I'm not babysitting anymore," I say as he turns away. It's a revelation that's new to even me but it comes out like a concrete plan. Dad stops walking but doesn't turn around. "I have my own life. You and Ma have to realize that."

Dad's hand clenches at his side. He releases it when Amber strolls out of the hospital room, her arm wrapped in gauze. All attention reverts to her. Dad coddles her on the way to the car, and Amber's the only one who speaks on the way home.

Ma and Dad are both in the kitchen the next morning. Both working early shifts, they move around the kitchen like robots as they dump cereal into their bowls and brew endless cups of coffee. Neither one speaks to me. I reach over Mom's head for a bagel.

Bree and Elijah are outside waiting for me, and I can almost feel the walls vibrating with the bass from Bree's car.

I smooth cream cheese onto my bagel and leave the kitchen with it hanging from my mouth. Two feet away from the front door and Ma finally speaks.

"I work another double shift," she says. I know what comes after and what it means. It's the same situation but I feel different.

Because even though I couldn't walk Howard University with her, and I can't escape the pressing void of my family, I've got something to look forward to when the river calls me. So I think I'll be okay.

Already

By: Hannah Pascale Jarvis

I never had the chance to ask you
what you meant when you said she was the first person you had ever met who was more
fucked up
than you were.

You showed me.
in your stained cathedral windows
that told a different story than my faith would let me hear
But that's okay now—
one day I'll be okay and somedays
I can almost taste it already

Scars drip while times flies and somedays
I'm watching paint dry and somedays
I'm watching my eyes dry already?
Already.

I have a rule about reading one of my new poems
until I've written another one
Because how can I judge anything while my brain is still colored its own bias?
Beauty is in the eye of the beholder and somedays
my eye is dead and decayed already?
Already. and somedays
it's not and it's a newborn deer wobbling and blinking
as life flies by on a Harley
ridden by the butchiest motherfucking woman I have ever seen
and she is beautiful and somedays
I know I will grow up to be just like her.

already?
Already.

Jump, Bitch, Jump

By: Allison Whittenberg

Jump, Bitch, jump was the last thing I heard. As if I needed further proof I'd made the right decision to go up there. This is a no good world and no one really cares about you but your mother and in my case that's not even true (but don't get me started on how that tramp fucked up my life).

Jump, Bitch, jump. They sounded beyond impatient—there was indignation to their chant. Sure, traffic was snared for miles but their snotty tone confirmed my verdict on humanity (or the lack thereof). People are shits. It's all about them, them, them. What about me, me, me?

Jump, Bitch, jump, so I did. I felt the freedom of flight, a lovely sail through the air then the big drop—swift and sure. I really thought that splat would do it, but I lived. Broken, hospitalized, and in intensive care, I was alive. You should have seen the avalanche of flowers, stuffed animals, hard candy, and the cards and letters that read: Get well, Bitch, get well.

Pig Alley

By: Haley Fedor

They stopped on Boulevard de Clichy at a bar, and then wound up at *L'Ane Fontaine*, one of the famously sordid bathhouses in Pigalle. It was right down the street from the Moulin Rouge. This bathhouse, like many in the area, charged a steep fee at the door. Then the bored man at the desk handed out towels, sarongs, locker keys, and a handful of condoms. From there, you could spend time at the bar—with seriously overpriced drinks—and watch porn on the surrounding screens. After that you went to the Jacuzzi, the sauna, or the private rooms. Well, mostly private. Sometimes people liked an audience.

Not Corinne, though. The mirrors that hung inside the chamber already made her feel even more naked. Residual sounds of the porn playing on the hallway televisions leaked in. They slid in like shadows and crept into the ear. Fake moans and grunts assaulted Corinne. The added noises from other occupied chambers only made things worse. She couldn't fathom why anyone would want others to walk in and join, or voyeurs privy to their sex. A dozen of Henri's eyes looked at her, and that was enough. It was more than enough. He loved Pigalle, but she didn't really understand why. It was seedy and full of tourists, ejecting them from peep shows like pus from a wound. Corinne hated tourists. She was often mistaken for one, which added to her discomfort. Her father was from Morocco, and the inherited dark hair and tan skin labeled her a foreigner in her own city. She was often complimented on her accent, as though she had struggled to learn her native language. There was never a struggle in her response. Such insults were met by a click of the tongue and a tirade, usually. The racism was bullshit, but everyone had some sort of bias—she was guilty too.

But Henri turned back to her and she focused on him. He didn't mind that she looked foreign, just as she didn't mind that he was married. But when he turned to her tonight, Henri looked much older than forty. He would be an old man before her, with sagging flesh and a receding hairline. His sandy hair was already thin when she ran her hands through it. She didn't like to think about getting older, either; in a few years she would be thirty and expected to settle down. What would Henri look like then?

Perhaps they both drank too much tonight, Corinne thought. She was feeling maudlin, and Henri couldn't get hard. He pulled back to try for a while, before letting her use her hand. Was this a precursor of what was to come? Or not to come. Henri was getting upset about it, and her assurances didn't help. If anything, it incensed him. His hand in her hair tightened, before coming to rest firmly on the back of her head, pushing down. Corinne had never been forced like this before, and she had half a mind to scold him, but she couldn't really articulate it at the moment. Her thoughts were hazy from the alcohol, and the joint they'd smoked together in a side alley before coming to *L'Ane Fontaine*. He should be nicer to her, though, she thought. But his sweaty fingers clutched her dark hair, keeping her bent over. The smoky incense on this floor clogged her nostrils and she gagged for a moment, unable to breathe. Henri pushed her down further. Her chest felt tight, and she thought she felt something coming, but it wasn't Henri. Vomit spewed from her mouth as she gagged again, covering his lap with it.

"That wasn't me," he said thickly, before he looked down and blinked in shock.

"It was me, sorry," she murmured, wiping at his lap with the sarong she'd thrown off before. Corinne felt some in her hair and along her chin, and knew she'd have to wear that sarong back to the locker room. She felt horrible and dirty, and just wanted to go home. "I have to go, I'm sorry," she apologized, moving away from him—he'd let go in shock. Henri looked up at her, his expression confused and a little angry. Were his cheeks turning red, or was that the glow of the room? He made a small, angry noise as he grabbed for a towel to clean up. Corinne slid off the mat and wrapped the stinking sarong around her quivering naked body. Before he could say anything—to ask her to stay or yell about ruining the night—she left. Even though she wiped off most of it in the changing room, she still felt acutely aware of the sludge-like residue clinging to her. All Corinne wanted was a shower and to forget this ever happened.

It was late when Corinne returned to the apartment. The metro turnstiles clanked and locked for the night behind her. Despite all of the fun going on in the ninth and eighteenth arrondissements, or districts, she lived on the Left Bank, all the way down in the fourteenth off of the Porte de Vanves station. It meant a twenty minute metro ride and at least one transfer, but she made it home safely. In this part of Paris, this late, there were mostly just vocal drunks or homeless people—either on the platform or in the cars. They oozed desperation the way certain frogs secreted poisons, rattling a cup of change. The echoes of "I'm hungry, s'il vous plait" haunted the tile station walls. There was also the lurking threat of someone with a knife, just around the corner to mug random passersby. She had never been mugged, although her roommate Sophie had been, once. It was best not to linger at night, particularly in the outer districts. They never had any problems in their apartment, thank goodness. The front and hallway doors had codes to stop anyone with ill-intentions, and the concierge lived on the first floor. An old, eccentric woman, their building's concierge collected Japanese waving cats and the portraits of famous dead people. Colette bumped elbows with Jean-Paul Sartre and Coco Chanel, while André Gide stared bespectacled and bemused at his neighbor Georges Braque. The concierge's apartment was cluttered and the door was always open, so she could catch thieves sneaking in while watching an episode of *Plus Belle la Vie*. It was late, so luckily Corinne didn't have to make small talk while slinking back to her apartment.

"Ça va, Sophie?" Corinne called when she opened the door. It was a general greeting, unlike the warning call that she had company. Sophie had a flair for casual nudity around the apartment. In the end, Corinne had insisted that she at least wear underwear when in the living room.

"Ça va," Sophie replied. Her voice was muffled by the bathroom door. She came out after a moment, still running a comb through her thick, damp hair. "How was it? Did you go to a new place?"

"I'm going to get a shower; can you make me a kir?" Corinne asked, evading the question for now.

"*Merde*, girl," Sophie breathed, shaking her head. "You're trouble. Yeah, I was going to open a new bottle and make one myself." They joked that kir was the poor person's drink; unable to afford good wine, they would buy a cheap white and a bottle of syrup. A measure of syrup went into the bottom of the glass—they both liked redcurrant—and then the wine. The two liquids would meet and the kir turned a hazy pink.

“Thanks.” Corinne was glad that her roommate was being helpful, especially when she was feeling frustrated. Maybe she would have more than a glass before she went to bed. “Roll a bedo too.”

“I’m already on it,” Sophie assured her. Sophie was the queen of rolling the bedo, a joint with a mixture of hash and tobacco. When she walked into the bathroom, she washed her hands, idled in front of the mirror for a moment. Getting to the shower, however, she stopped dead. “Sophie! Get this thing out of here!” Edging closer to the tub, she looked at it. A dildo. It was flesh-colored and long, held to the wall of the shower by a suction cup. Corinne didn’t want to touch it herself, nor did she want to run into it while showering. Her usual strategy with Sophie’s toys—ignoring them—wouldn’t work. gingerly she grabbed a hand towel and pulled the thing off. It resisted, and then pulled free with a loud *squelch*. Corinne set it on the sink, but it rolled and flopped into the white bowl, making a slapping noise against the porcelain. Refusing to touch it again, Corinne moved away from the wiggling dildo in her sink and started the shower. She glanced back into the sink and saw it was still rocking gently; quivering like it had a pulse. “Are you fucking some *putain* in the shower and leaving her toys behind?” Corinne demanded from no one. The noise made by the shower was too loud for Sophie to hear her, even if the door was opened.

After she came out of the shower, her jet hair was a roiling mass of tangles. Hopefully it would dry before she fell asleep, but it was unlikely. At least she had scrubbed herself thoroughly, as though to banish more than just the stink of vomit. Still covered by the towel, Corinne hurried into her bedroom. She preferred to be dressed when confronting Sophie.

“You can’t just leave your fucking toys out like that.” Corinne returned to the living room and saw Sophie waiting for her, lounging on the sofa. Her brown hair was pulled into a messy ponytail, and her hazel eyes widened in surprise; she wasn’t expecting any kind of fight tonight.

“Which toys? You never mind,” Sophie countered. She had poured two glasses of kir, and they sat on the coffee table. Most likely she had already drunk one glass, or maybe she had been drinking before.

“The dildo that was attached to the shower wall, you *putain*,” Corinne replied hotly. We are not all like you, she meant to add.

“I’m not a fucking whore.”

“Well, you’re fucking like one.”

“I take that as a compliment.”

“Well will you at least take your fucking toy back and put it away next time? It’s in the sink,” Corinne informed her.

“Fine. Fine, *n’importe quoi*.” Whatever, she said. It doesn’t matter. But it did matter; Corinne was tired of picking up after her roommate. But Sophie handed her the glass of kir and waited expectantly for her to take a sip, as though it erased all disagreements with a silent contract. While Corinne sipped at her kir—there was too much syrup in this one—she watched Sophie pick the book up once more. The large thin book was meant to decorate a coffee table, showing off modern artists and the Pompidou Museum, but no one ever looked at it. Sophie called it her “rolling desk,” the book she used to cut the hashish on, then roll

her joints. This one turned into a fat, squat little thing, but Sophie's thin fingers pushed and prodded and squeezed in deft movements. She wore a lot of silver rings, big and garish, and they flashed among the crumbling brown of the hashish and the fluffy tobacco. When it was complete she held up the joint, smiling, and handed it to Corinne. It was another one of her ways of apologizing for the dildo—usually the one burdened with the creative task of rolling it got to savor the results first. The joint was perfect, but Sophie was so practiced that she never rolled a bad one anymore. Corinne snagged it from her roommate's fingers, and picked up a lighter from the coffee table. When the smoke hit her lungs, she relaxed, feeling the tendrils of a buzz creep down her arms—it was seamless, but she knew smoking would only make her throat hurt worse by the end of the night. Vomiting was hard enough on her esophagus. Leaning back on the sofa, Corinne exhaled in Sophie's direction, ending in a cough. The other woman wore a loose-fitting shirt and boxers, though there were red welts coiled around her thighs. She glanced down and saw the same marks snaked around her ankles.

"Did you do a bondage show tonight?" Corinne asked curiously. She wasn't sure if this was for fun or for a performance.

"Yeah, it was part of the Impakt Festival. I was all trussed up like a goose on Noel."

"I'm sure you were." Corinne didn't go to her shows; she'd never been to any of them. Sophie was into bondage. Using scarves to keep your lover's hands busy was one thing, but this, this only caused dread to rumble in her belly. It sloshed inside her, refusing to be idle while Sophie described the exotic show and who was in it. The tightness of a studded leather collar marked her first, followed by the rope. Sophie had shown her this knot they tied around her breasts, dancing around pinched, pert nipples.

"He's a cock, you know," Sophie said after a long moment, returning to Henri and his cheap infidelity.

"Yeah, I know," she replied. Corinne knew this objectively, but it didn't help at the moment. All she could think of was Henri's untidy sandy hair, and how it would look almost red in the sauna. She liked the way his aftershave smelled like citrus, and the way his jaw locked and jutted in the throes of passion. He would always make a face that looked pained, but she thought he looked open and vulnerable. What did his wife think? In her mind, Corinne saw an unattractive woman—she was American, so she pictured her fat—and someone who didn't know the first thing about loving Henri. But that was because of her bias. It was a strange position to be in, but ultimately it was her husband that made the decision to go out and party, to sleep with other women.

"But his wife is a bitch."

"All cheating husbands have bitchy wives," Sophie replied wisely. "Why else would they cheat in the first place?"

"N'importe quoi," Corinne said with a shrug. *Whatever*. But she knew it was true. "Marriage is overrated," she told Sophie. Her roommate agreed; Sophie could only get a civil union certificate with a female partner, though it was essentially the same. At least, she didn't really see the difference. Corinne had always thought of marriage as a religious ordeal, and her parents were atheists. Sophie would argue with anyone the importance of equality. But in the three months they had lived together, nearly a dozen girlfriends had come and gone. Some were in the porn business as well, and others were fans of her work. 'I always see something attractive about everyone,' Sophie told her once. She believed there

was no such thing as a straight woman. Corinne disagreed. At first she didn't think it could work, living with a porn actress. But they made it work. Corinne ignored the toys and wanton nudity. Sophie had the hash connection and never tried to sleep with her.

"Come with me to the Techno Parade," Sophie asked suddenly. "It's in two weeks. We should go check it out."

"Why?" Corinne asked. What was there to do at the Techno Parade? It was crammed with people every year, from St. Michel all the way to St. Germain. Last year there had been a riot and the gendarmes resorted to arresting dozens and brutalizing more. There were thousands who flocked to the wide, cobbled streets that started at one monument and ended at another. The St. Michel fountain was the starting point, and it was already notorious for pickpockets and drug deals; Corinne wished the giant St. Michel would trample everyone. The twisting, fighting Satan could wait. Besides, the music wasn't even that good, and so loud it could burst an eardrum. As it went on, the parade snaked its way to Place d'Italie, crossing the Seine. All of Paris could hear it, she imagined.

"I'm going to support Marguerite, that director friend of mine," Sophie informed her.

"Why is she there?" Corinne asked, but immediately knew the answer. "Is one of your porn groups up to something?"

"Just handing out information and stuff." *Sure you are*, Corinne thought. *I bet it's another sex workers demonstration, like the last one.*

"Maybe. I might be busy."

"Visiting Henri?" Sophie asked. "What happened tonight? You looked upset when you came in." She scooted closer to her on the sofa, placing a hand on her knee. It made Corinne feel a little awkward.

"Nothing," Corinne said dismissively. "Well, I found out he has a son."

"Prick. Just like Sarkozy," Sophie declared. She jabbed her thumb in the direction of the large political poster from the 1960's, that read: *SOIS JEUNE ET TAIS TOI*. Be young and shut up. Sophie always said that Sarkozy was doing the same thing to all of the French youth. In reality, it was because Sarkozy passed a law that forbade "passive prostitution," which meant being in certain areas while wearing revealing clothing. Now that he was running for president, Sophie always found a way to bring him up, predicting he would ruin the lives of sex workers everywhere.

"So will you come?"

"Sure, if only to make sure you don't get arrested," Corinne said pointedly. "The police will be there, you know. Don't do anything illegal."

"I won't," Sophie promised.

"None of your social activism crap." She meant it; Sophie had a knack for getting out of trouble, but all it took was one protest too many to land in jail. The other woman would lose her job at the nightclub and Corinne would have to foot the bill for rent. It wasn't something they could do on their salaries; Paris was expensive. They both barely made a living as it was, and this apartment was cramped with only one bathroom, no balcony, and less than a hundred square meters.

"None," Sophie agreed. "It'll be nice to just check it out."

"With the other drunk teenagers, spilling beer everywhere and pissing in the streets," Corinne said dryly.

"Exactly. It'll be a good time," Sophie told her.

“Then I’ll come with you.” She wanted to spend less time with Henri, anyway. A distraction would serve her well.

The day of the parade Corinne got off the metro and exited near Place de la République, where the Techno Parade was supposed to pass through at 3:00. It was packed with people, either pushing up or down the stairs leading to the street. The aimless, drunken wandering of the crowd was disorienting at first, too. If Sophie hadn’t found her first, Corinne was sure she would’ve drifted away. The booming in the distance was supposed to be exciting, but it was like thunder in the rumbling. It would only get worse, and she didn’t want to stay too long. Groups of gendarmes lined the edge of the street—all in full riot gear. Visors were down and the plastic shields were up, but she was afraid they would bring out the batons if fans became rowdy.

“I’m glad you’re here!” Sophie said excitedly, grinning broadly. She was wearing a tank top that promoted the anniversary of some feminist porn award, and had been handing out fliers for a show. The top she was wearing was tiny; baring midriff and showing most of her breasts, the top could pass for a handkerchief. It was a great way to tempt the curious tourists into visiting someplace daring on their vacations. They did a lot of business after events like these, so a lot of people in the porn industry handed out fliers. Corinne was used to it, even before she met her roommate. The curiosities of Pigalle were always at the top of any visitor’s list. One of her American students mentioned that it was often called Pig Alley by soldiers during WWII. It was an apt nickname. Everyone was drawn to Pigalle, like a pig to shit. The neon lights were bright and alluring, and men would stand at the entrances of shops and peepshows, trying to “hook” anyone they could into spending a few euros on true French debauchery. Tourists here would be looking to spend a night living whatever Parisian fantasy they could conjure up. Sophie handed a flier to a girl with flamingo pink hair, giving her an easy smile.

It had been the same easy smile that got them to move in together, Corinne remembered. A mutual friend had introduced them, during a women-only party at a nightclub. It was called Crazy Cows Night, and mostly full of lesbians. Corinne had been hit on relentlessly until Nadége found her and brought her to the bar. Sophie was surrounded by younger dykes, some looking butch with leather and piercings, others femme and wearing polka dot, vintage dresses. She attracted all types. They were introduced, and yet other women called out to her, using the name “Molly Minx.” When she admitted not being familiar with the other woman’s work, Sophie was shocked. She convinced the bartender to “show her work,” and gleefully pointed out her favorite scene to a surprised Corinne.

“That’s me peeing on the stage in Berlin!” Sophie had declared, thinking it to be a fine accomplishment. Corinne could hardly disagree, at least when it came to having the guts for such a performance. Sophie had never had a problem with exposing her body for anyone to see and enjoy.

She was flaunting her body here today at the parade, letting the pink-haired woman ogle her breasts. There were leering men nearby as well, and from the way Sophie jumped she imagined someone had pinched her. Hotheaded as always, Sophie turned and began to yell at someone. Before she could intervene, there was a looming, repetitive boom, and the crowd shifted like a wave in anticipation. The buses were coming down the boulevard, and the thump of bass followed. Corinne lost sight of Sophie as she tried to move through the

crowd—one drunkard spilled his cup of beer on her, and people pushed at the shoulder to get a view of the square. The gendarmes tried to keep everyone back, but there was shouting and suddenly beer bottles were flying. They were aimed at the riot shields, but Corinne worried about broken glass. The crowd pulsed against the gendarmes, and Sophie saw a group of people break through and run to the middle of the square. Barricades had been set up to block access to the monument of the republic, but they swarmed over the barricade and began climbing.

“Liberté! Égalité!” The cry went up, and more bottles began to fly. The gendarmes began pulling out and using their batons. Long and cruel, they beat back people mercilessly and shouting colored the air. Corinne saw a group of people at the monument continue to climb up...and spotted Sophie among them. Damn her, she thought. She had promised no crazy activism, yet there she was. Her roommate had passed the barricade and climbed atop a metal lion near the base of the monument. Her peers climbed higher, shouting something and throwing things at the police response. Sitting astride the metal lion, Sophie threw her top off and bared her breasts to the thousands of spectators. She threw her fist in the air and screamed something.

A group of gendarmes moved toward the monument, but the buses were coming through. Loud, thumping music blanketed everything. More shouts went up and the crowd writhed like an angry viper. A woman ran into Corinne, stumbling to get away. Corinne could only watch as the music blocked out the shouting, but she saw projectiles launched. Her throat and eyes were burning; they must have started using tear gas. She wanted to get away from this place, but she didn’t want to leave Sophie. Topless women climbed statues and waved at the buses. It became an island of rowdy girls, shouting indistinctly as the police tried fruitlessly to bring them down. They simply climbed higher. Sophie threw her shoes at a gendarme, shaking her fist at him. Her breasts jumped with movement and her hair whipped around her face in the wind. She was beautiful, Corinne thought. Even if she would get arrested today. She had the fierceness of someone who had a purpose, and her passion was admirable. The more Corinne thought of Sophie’s activism, the more she focused on that bare torso, those bouncing breasts.

Corinne blearily looked around, hearing someone come into the apartment. The clock on her nightstand said it was late—or very early. “So-Sophie?” The yawn shook her like a dog, sending ripples down her sheets. She had returned from the riot, throat burning, after the gendarmes started rounding up the protestors. A cup of tea and dinner helped with the aftereffects of the tear gas, until she fell asleep curled up in bed.

“Oui.”

The other woman’s response sounded just as tired as she was. Despite the temptation to go back to bed, Corinne climbed out and wandered into the living room. “Is everything all right? I thought you were arrested...” She trailed off when her roommate turned around. She sported cuts and her clothes were torn. A bruise blossomed along her left cheek, sending tendrils to her eye socket. Rooted in a stare, Corinne couldn’t look away. “Oh, Sophie.”

“It’s all right,” Sophie assured her, giving a too-wide smile and shrugging. “I got a fine, that’s all. They arrested a lot of people yesterday, they probably didn’t want to do all the paperwork.”

"It's not all right," Corinne insisted, closing the gap between them. She reached out, almost touching Sophie's battered jawline. "Fucking pigs, they did this to you."

Sophie shrugged again. Corinne often forgot that her roommate was used to getting arrested; she herself had never gotten so much as a citation for littering. Leaning forward, she enveloped Sophie in a hug. The other woman stiffened in surprise briefly, before her arms wrapped snugly around Corinne's waist.

The jangling phone startled them apart.

"Who's calling at this ungodly hour?" Sophie nearly spat, glaring in the direction of Corinne's room.

"It's Henri," Corinne replied guiltily. "He's been calling since yesterday."

"You didn't talk to him at all?"

"No, I couldn't," she told Sophie honestly. "I'm so sick of him, and the bathhouses. I hate being his mistress." Corinne was vaguely aware that her voice grew louder with each syllable, trying to drown out Henri's desperation.

The phone abruptly died after one last, shrill gasp.

They both looked at the phone suspiciously, expecting it to erupt again. "I'm going to bed," Sophie warned, "and if he keeps calling, *I'll* answer the damn thing and give him a piece of my mind."

Corinne smiled at the reemergence of her roommate's attitude—she had started to worry that the gendarmes beat it out of the other woman. "Thanks," she told Sophie simply. This time, it was Sophie who came in for a hug. After a moment, Sophie's head slid downward to rest on her shoulder, pressing a kiss to her shoulder with her hair spilling everywhere. Corinne didn't pull away, but instead felt compelled to run her fingers through those wayward, gentle tresses. She liked it when Sophie squeezed her arms around her, thin and clever fingers finding bare flesh to explore.

Broken Glass

By: Andre-Naquian Wheeler

It was seven o'clock on a Saturday night and I was in my bedroom taking a nap when Jonah woke me up. He did his knock and open the door at the same time routine that always left me startled and I wanted to scream out: "What's the purpose of even knocking!" but then Jonah would always flash a sheepish apologetic smile as he stepped into the room and so I never did.

"Yo Daren," Jonah spoke quietly in the darkness. He stared at me as I groggily sat up in bed and rubbed my eyes, trying to pretend I had only closed my eyes for a second. "I thought you said you weren't gonna take any naps this semester?" I was a compulsive napper, always preferring to sleep and escape the stress of the world over actually dealing with it.

I was caught. "I tried, I'm just really tired, and I've had a busy day. Plus Bobby's gone and it was just so quiet so it was bound to happen." Whenever Bobby, my roommate, left the awkward tension between us left with him.

"Well get up," Jonah said to me, as if it was an order. "I'm about to start watching *United States of Tara* and was wondering if you wanted to join me."

I sat quiet for a beat, pretending I was mulling over the option.

"Sure," I said in a faux-casual voice. I hopped off my bed and took off my shirt, which was soaked with sweat. I'd had a nightmare: I'd dreamt of walking around New York City with shards of glass filling my shoes, blood soaking my Converse, and making a squishing sound with each step I took. For some reason in the dream I never thought to just take off my shoes, which made me feel very foolish now.

Jonah leaned on my door frame, looking at me through the fluorescent light flooding in from the kitchen, and said: "You look like you have more muscle..."

"Yeah I think so too." I held my arms up and flexed for him. "I guess going to the gym with you hasn't been pointless."

Jonah smiled and gave me a once over. "You should keep going with me."

"Yeah, maybe," I lied. I had stopped my tag-alongs to the gym with Jonah a week before because I couldn't stand the out-of-place-feeling in there. I'd be the scrawny guy standing above Jonah, who'd be lustfully sweaty and straining, as he lifted the heavy weights rhythmically. I would spot Jonah even though we both knew if he actually needed me it would be of no use. But that was Jonah's usual effect on me, driving me to do things I wouldn't normally do just so I could please him.

I don't know what it is about him.

I remember walking into my dorm for the first time on a sticky late August day and seeing two extremes for my roommates. Bobby being scrawny, unimpressive, and socially awkward, pushed his glasses back into place, looked up from his computer game, held out his long, limp arm, and simply said hi. That was the extent of conversation we'd the first day. But then there was Jonah. He sauntered in with confidence and an infectious energy.

"Yo," Jonah said in a voice that sounded like Seinfeld's. "I'm Jonah." For some reason I was entranced by the short, muscular, tan guy with a five o'clock shadow who wore plaid shorts and a baggy, faded polo.

Jonah and I first bonded over photography; Jonah being the photographer and me, the model. One morning, during the first week of school, Jonah performed his knock and enter routine for the first time with a camera in his hand, snapping pictures of a sleeping me. I enjoyed being studied by Jonah through his lenses, knowing, even if for just a couple of seconds, that I was his focus. Then we would print out the pictures, sitting close to one another, and admire them. He would say things like: “look at the boca in this one!” or “you see the way the shadow falls on your face!” or my favorite: “you look amazing here!”

One gray winter day Jonah and I did a photo shoot in Central Park; I shivered inside Jonah’s warm fleece coat during most of the shoot.

“When did you know?” Jonah asked after taking a picture of me standing on a giant rock with a dramatic hand-in-the-air pose.

“Huh?” I asked through clattering teeth.

“When did you know you were gay?”

“I don’t know.” I grappled for a suitable answer while trying to figure out why Jonah was asking me this now. “That’s a hard question to answer. All I can say is the cliche ‘you just kinda always know’.”

“You were never confused or unsure? I mean everyone goes through that right?”

I was taken aback by why he was asking me such direct questions. “It’s different for everyone,” I said. “I just mean deep inside I always knew the truth. I just tried for a while to ignore the truth, though the truth never goes away.”

“Huh,” Jonah said and for the rest of the time in the park he stayed painfully quiet. Once we were through taking pictures we stood above the ice skating rink looking down at the moving circle of smiling faces skating around. I looked over at Jonah, who stood looking down at the rink with clenched teeth and piercing eyes.

Later, I walked into the living room after changing my clothes. I wore my pink baja hoodie, which was really hot and made my skin itchy, but Jonah said he liked it.

I sat on the couch next to Jonah, who was busy twisting his weed grinder back and forth, and stared at the ridiculous fifty inch flat screen Jonah bought for the dorm so he could watch his treasured movie collection. I poured a shot of vodka into my red solo cup of orange juice and took a sip, the vile taste burning the back of my throat, as I awkwardly waited for him to press play.

Thirty minutes into the show I began to feel the alcohol drip into my brain. I cycled over the idea of reaching over to Jonah, placing my hand on the back of his head, clutching the curly strands of his bushy black hair, and reaching in quickly to kiss him before he could refuse. I would feel the stubble on his chin rub against my face and the softness of his lips. Instead I tried to focus on the show we were watching. It was about a woman with multiple personality disorder, who commonly lost her shit and went bat-shit crazy yet her family was always there for her, especially her husband. No matter what she did, even when she changed into a toddler alter ego and peed on her son while he was sleeping, her family just shrugged their shoulders and forgave her. And most importantly, they always loved her. I wonder if I’d peed on Jonah would he just shrug his shoulders and say: “It’s cool man.”

I would if he did it to me.

Jonah paused the movie again for what seemed to be the twentieth time, which pulled me out of my drunken reflective trance. He held his glass bong, which had turned a dirt brown color from constant use, up to his lips. He lit the bowl, inhaled, holding the harsh

weed smoke in his chest for as long as he could and then exhaled. Then we sat in silence for a little while. It was annoying and I wished we could've just watched the show or talked, which I almost said every time Jonah pushed pause, but I silenced myself by taking a sip of my drink.

"Hey Daren, you want a hit?" Jonah said to me, holding the bong out in my direction with a smile. "Come on, you know you want to." The last time I smoked with Jonah I ended up lying paralyzed in my bed because of the heavy laziness that crushed me and endured what felt like a psychotic panic attack in my head. The whole experience was traumatic yet Jonah laughed every time he thought about it.

"No," I said resolute. Then I smiled playfully to make Jonah think he didn't bother me with his jokes.

"Alrightttt, you don't know what you're missing out on," Jonah said before lighting the bowl and placing his thick lips on the bong.

"That's okay. I have this," I said, holding up my drink and taking another sip. I knew I was getting drunk when holding up my cup took way more concentration than it should've.

Jonah's vibrating phone broke the long resulting silence.

"Louis just asked if I wanted to come downstairs to smoke with him and Ernest."

I shook my head. "Don't you get tired of smoking all day?"

Jonah looked up at me with dagger eyes. He spat out, "Well what else is there to do?"

"I don't know," I whined, stopping an argument before one started.

Jonah sighed. "Well I'm going down to Louis' and Ernest's," he said while getting up in one fluid motion. "You can come down if you want." Jonah went into his bedroom and closed the door behind him.

"Mmmmm," I grumbled dissatisfied with the way the night was going.

"Maybe."

To be honest, I didn't want to go to Louis and Ernest's room because I didn't want to see Ernest. Two nights ago, while drunk, I had bluntly asked Ernest if he cut himself after hearing Bobby and Jonah talking in the kitchen that afternoon about seeing a flash of a red and black scar on Ernest's wrist. Ernest slowly nodded his head and pulled up his black sleeves and showed me the deep scars covering his pale white arms. But somehow the night ended with me crying on Ernest's shoulder, sobbing and saying: "I just wish Jonah loved me." I was self-centered and embarrassed by the fact that I didn't even want to change that fact about me.

Then, Jonah came out of his room in grey boxers.

"What are you doing in your underwear?" I squealed, crossing my legs.

"Calm down, don't get too excited. I got the munchies." Jonah rummaged through the kitchen cabinets, pulling out a bag of chips that were mine. I didn't say anything.

"You couldn't wait until you put pants on?"

Jonah looked at me, throwing a sheepish smile, and shrugged before he filled his mouth with a handful of chips.

"You're torturing me," I said.

"I know. Eh, you get to look at me and I get attention. Win-Win." Jonah flashed an unapologetic smile at me.

I wanted to say: "No, Win-Lose." but again I reached for my solo cup instead and imagined what I would do if I woke up to a crazy Jonah peeing on me.

In Louis and Ernest's room I sat on Ernest's bed scrolling through Facebook on my phone, trying to block out the sound of the blaring music, and Jonah and Louis' voices struggling to talk over each other.

"P.T. Anderson didn't write *The Master* to be about scientology!" Jonah yelled.

Louis finished taking a hit from the bong and passed it to Jonah. "Come on it was about a cult!" Louis shouted, egging Jonah on.

"Yes, but it wasn't about scientology specifically. And the movie was about so much more. Freddie and Lancaster's relationship..." Jonah stopped and took a hit and signaled to Louis for the smoke-buddy to blow into. Jonah exhaled and began to rapidly talk again while passing the bong back to Louis, "...was actually the central focus, I mean look at Joaquin Phoenix..."

I laid on Ernest's bed exhausted from just listening to the conversation.

"You okay Daren?" Ernest asked, who sat at the foot of his bed and looked down at me, worried.

"Yeah," I croaked out. "I just can't take any more of this conversation."

"I know right?" Ernest said with a laugh. He made a dramatic face of exhaustion that made me laugh with him.

"How are you feeling?" I asked, sitting up. "I'm sorry about the other night."

"No, it's nothing," Ernest said, waving his hand, "it's good to let it all out sometimes y'know?" I believed him. Ernest had a likable mid-western accent that made everything he said sound genuine. "So how it's going with him? Any luck jumping into that car?" Ernest asked, pointing to Jonah.

"One day," I said looking over at Jonah, who was still arguing with Louis over the central theme within P.T. Anderson's *The Master*.

Ernest shoved my shoulder. "I'm sure you'll find the right guy."

I shook my head. "I just want him. No one else."

"Just promise me this," Ernest said seriously, "don't let him be the only guy you spend your time thinking about. He doesn't deserve that. Don't give him that much." Ernest suddenly turned joyful again. "Hey, maybe you could get with Louis?"

Louis had a nice smile that always appeared when he saw me. He shared the same deep love for pop music as me, always playing new tracks that he thought I'd like while I sat back and watched Jonah and him smoke. He also had a likable personality, becoming friends with almost everybody. And I liked his curly brown hair. Louis was a good friend and just that.

"No, no, no, not Louis," I slurred, turning my head and noticing the wonderful separation I felt between my mind and body.

"Come on take a hit." Jonah said before I felt the wet glass pipe touch my lips. Then burning smoke entered my chest and I wanted to blow it all out as if I were a fire breathing dragon and then cough my heart out. Then I was on the bed crushed with laziness. I laid spread eagle on the bed; my body feeling dead other than the occasional violent shiver that would pass through it, but inside I was fighting a mental war. A tidal wave of vivid memories crashed down upon me as if they were actually taking place again. I was trapped in the memory of a fifteen year old me crying alone in my dark room at night, as if I was lying in the same bed and crying the same tears over the same heartache.

I tried to keep it all together and make Louis, Ernest, and Jonah think I was asleep but tears began to fall down my cheeks.

"Is he okay?" I heard Ernest ask, his voice had a heavy echo to it.

"Yeah he's fine." A deep chuckle. It was Jonah. "This is ridiculously funny."

I sat up slowly. I needed it all to end. So I laboriously reached for my cup and took a big gulp. The normally vile vodka tasted refreshing to my dry, scratchy mouth.

"I don't think that's a good idea Daren," Jonah said.

And I closed my eyes, hoping my mind and heart would do the same.

I woke up in the dark, disoriented in Ernest's bed. I sat up, shivering, and still felt the schizoid frenzy of from the weed in my head. I looked around to see Ernest sleeping at the foot of the bed and Louis snoring in his own. No Jonah around.

"Ernest," I whispered into the darkness. "Help me."

"What's wrong," Ernest said while rubbing his eyes and trying to see me through the darkness.

"Just, can you help me back to my room?"

I leaned on Ernest's warm shoulder as we walked up the stairs and down the hallway. I tried to keep it all in but every now and then a tear would betray me by falling down my cheek or a sob would quiver in my chest.

"You sure you're okay?"

"Yeah," I whispered slowly.

Finally we ended up at my dorm. "Bye. Thanks," I said, before turning around and clenching my teeth to keep the tears in and stop my body from shaking.

"Wait. What happened? Do you want me to stay with you for a while?"

"No," and closed the door behind me with a bang.

"If you need me just call me," Ernest shouted through the door.

Many times I have run through that night and I can never understand or remember much after I closed the front door and was alone in the pitch black of my dorm. I look back and all I can remember are the feelings but not the cause behind them. I laid down on the cold tile floor of the common room and sang to myself in a slurred voice, feeling alone. I had come to an acceptance that this beating sadness laced with anger and self-hate would last forever. There was nothing I could do about it. I'd decided that Jonah viewed me as a joke and I'd never matter to him as much as he did to me. I remember feeling I didn't belong here in the city and that it was time I stopped pretending I did. All of the self-hate bubbled inside of me and I needed it to leave me, for the first time tears, sobs, and wails weren't enough. I crawled my way to the kitchen crying "Why me?" repeatedly in a voice that sounded too broken to be mine. Was I asking the question to Jonah, or maybe myself, or maybe God? I'm still not sure.

I grabbed onto the kitchen counter and stood up. I wobbled over to the light switch and flicked the lights on. Then I remember the sound of glass hitting the floor and how it gave me pleasure. Then another, and another, and another, and another. It was all fluid and quick. It all played out in less than thirty seconds and I sat down beaten and shaken but relieved.

I pulled out my phone, my hand no longer shaking, and texted Ernest: "Come." The glass crystals on the floor sparkled from the light that hit them and I was mesmerized. That amongst all of those broken pieces the light could touch them and make them beautiful. I looked up, my head heavy and my body still tingling with numbness, and stared at the light.

I woke up the next morning in bed with my clothes still on. My mouth bitterly tasted of vodka and I felt groggy and submerged in a thick cloud of confusion. As I sat up, my body heavy with exhaustion, I remembered some the foolish things I had done. I sat up and stared at the beige wall thinking that I could stay like this for the rest of my life. But then I went into auto pilot, my method for coping with problems, deciding it would be easier to ignore the catalyst.

I tip-toed to my door, swaying a little along the way, and immediately saw the mess of my emotions beautifully materialized on the kitchen floor. Cherry red pieces of dish-ware sprinkled the tiles and even spread out to the common room. The trash can laid defeated on the ground, spilling out near it were smashed cans of beer and plastic bottles, browned banana peels, and crumpled stained brown napkins. The trash just needed to be swept up and things would be rebuilt, better this time. But I knew Jonah and Bobby wouldn't see it that way. I closed the door, locking it, and pulled my blankets over me, pretending they were my castle walls.

I woke up to Jonah banging on my door. Boom. Boom. Boom. My heart dove into my stomach and I quickly chickened out and decided I would just ignore him. Boom. Boom. Boom. "Come on Daren. Open up... please," Jonah pleaded, in a voice I'd never heard from him before. It made me feel guilty for pushing him into my dark hole of sadness. I turned onto my side and stared at the beige wall again, trying to make figures out of the random stucco blobs. Boom. Boom. Boom. "Daren, please."

I heard a tense voice. "It's whatever! I'll get my stuff later, but this is ridiculous!" It was an angry Bobby.

"No, no, no. I'm going to get him to open up." Boom. Boom. Boom. "Daren, Bobby just needs to come in and get something real quick, that's all." I sighed, Jonah wasn't going to give up. I inhaled like I did before the doctor stuck a needle in me and prepared for the pain. I opened the door, leaped back into my bed, and pulled my castle wall blankets back over me. I peeked out and saw Bobby with a clenched jaw and dagger eyes swoop in and grab his backpack. He flashed me a quick glance of judgement that I'm sure he relished and slammed the door behind him.

After an hour of lying in bed, still shaking from my hangover and fear, I finally got up. I kneeled down on the kitchen tile and endured the small pain it drove in my knees because I thought it was a beautiful punishment for what I had done. Jonah came out of his room and sat in a chair facing me and just sat there, blank faced with his eyes locked to me. For fifteen long minutes we just stayed like that: me violently shaking on my knees, in my sweat soaked green sweater and jeans from the previous night, cleaning up my emotions and Jonah in his grey boxers staring at me for God knows what reason. I felt as if he was watching me pee and I just wanted him to stop. Finally Jonah broke the silence by rising out of his chair with a sigh and saying: "Let me help you." I looked up at him and it felt like he'd risen over me like the sun over dirt, but maybe that was because his intense stare made me feel hot. I was confused. He should have been angry with me, but he wasn't.

"No. It's fine," I whispered, averting my eyes to a streak of rainbow inside a piece of broken glass.

"No," Jonah said resolute. "Let me help. It'll be much quicker this way." He wasn't going to run away. I obliged and handed him the broom and dust pan before I started scrubbing crusted patches of dried food off the floor.

"I think this is the best thing to happen to the dorm," Jonah said to me after some minutes of silence. "We're actually cleaning up for once." He looked at me expecting a laugh but I did nothing.

After Jonah cleaned up there were still pieces of glass small like sand that I had to clean up myself. I wished he would've just let me do it myself because then I wouldn't've had to clean up after him, even though it was nice just to have him there.

When I was done, I laid lifeless on my bed. My left arm limply hung off of my bed and my face was blank as I stared at stucco blobs again. Jonah knocked and walked into the room and snapped above my head while saying "Yo".

"Yeah?" I asked, not moving. I don't know why he insisted on talking, it felt like he was dumping whole salt containers on my open wounds.

"I'm just trying to understand," Jonah said while sitting on Bobby's bed. "What exactly happened last night?"

"I don't know," putting my hands over my eyes, hoping it looked like I was trying to think when really I just didn't want to look at Jonah.

"It was just everything. I think it was the weed plus the alcohol. I'm fine. I don't know... I think I was just stressed out...I'm fine now. I am." I looked at Jonah to see if any of my lies stuck.

"Did something happen when you came back here? Everything was alright before then." "I don't know. I don't really remember much."

"Was it something I did?"

"No, no, no. I don't know what happened."

Jonah sighed, looking at me suspiciously, and started to walk out of the room but then he stopped and turned back around towards me. "Are you going to be okay?"

"Yeah," I said, telling the truth for the first time.

"Alright," Jonah said with a sigh and started to walk out of the room again. "Oh, Ernest and Louis came by while you were sleeping. Ernest wanted to make sure you were okay," he said over his shoulder.

After I texted him, Ernest came up and sat by me on the cold kitchen floor, rubbing my back as I sobbed into his soft cotton t-shirt until I fell asleep. I probably should have texted Ernest to thank him and let him know I was fine but I didn't see much purpose in it.

Jonah slowly closed the door behind him while throwing glances at me. He opened the door again. "I'm sorry," he said.

"For what?" I asked, raising up.

"Just everything. I feel like I've been an asshole to you sometimes. We're cool right?"

I nodded rapidly. "Yeah, why wouldn't we be?" I asked, pulling my voice down a couple octaves to sound cool.

"I don't know," Jonah said, shrugging his broad shoulders. "I can never tell if you really hate me or like me. It always feels like a back and forth kind of thing." He grinned and I realized he did it because he was anxious.

"No we're fine. We're cool. Really."

After that I emerged from my room and sat on the common room couch with him. We sat in silence for a couple of minutes until Jonah asked me if I wanted to watch something.

"Yeah, sure," I mumbled and Jonah threw me the remote. I put on the show about the crazy woman who peed on the people who always loved her.

Jonah and I sat in silence as we stared ahead at the T.V.; I sat on the couch balled up trying to pull in every limb of my body to become as small as I felt, and Jonah sat tense, staring blankly ahead. I stared at him from the corner of my eye and I could see the confusion on his face in the way his mouth sat slightly open and his brow in a deep furrow. I thought to myself, He probably thinks I'm crazy. That thought made me want to burst into tears but I stopped myself because then Jonah would have definitely thought I was crazy. For thirty minutes we sat in silence, attempting to put on airs, and I wanted to say thank you to Jonah for it but I never did.

I moved out of the dorm two days after that as Bobby never got over what I did and complained to the RA that he didn't feel safe living with me. I guess I understood it. I guess he wouldn't let me pee on him. Ernest helped me move out. Jonah and Louis were too busy smoking to help.

My new roommate Justyn was gay and we got along well. I didn't hang out with him like I did with Jonah but we didn't passively hate each other like Bobby and me. I messaged Jonah a week after I moved out asking him how things were and then he replied: "Do you think you're going to have sex with him?"

I joked and messaged Jonah no, but that I would be sure to message him if I did it. Jonah never messaged me again.

The rest of the school year I tried to hang out with them again but Ernest and Louis would always say they were busy or simply not text me back. I guess they chose Jonah over me.

It took six months for me to talk to Jonah again, when I ran into him on the 6 train, and sat next to him. When I asked him how his life was going Jonah simply said: "Good." and stared out the window.

I tried to joke about how the turtle neck sweater he was wearing was a major step up from his old style but Jonah just sat stone faced and said: "No, I still dress the same."

As I followed him out of the train station Jonah complained: "I could never walk barefooted thanks to you." I stopped and Jonah just looked back, threw his hand up, and kept walking.

The Closet

By: Philicia Montgomery

We had been in the city when I bought it for you.

"Five dah-la, five dahlaa!" the eager Asian woman spieled when you stared at it for ten seconds too long. Smoke drifted up from the subway station as we stood there, the early morning chill causing me to shiver and rub my gloved hands together. The busses rolled by on their commute, tailpipe smoke slapping us in the face with gray puffs of hot air. We stood at the corner of the sidewalk, the woman staring at us expectantly.

"Five dah-la, five dahlaa," she said desperately, and you poked your lip out and pleaded with gray eyes. You knew I thought the shirt was hideous with a gooey pink brain falling out of the head of some deformed smiling man vomiting oatmeal mush, but you wanted it anyway. I didn't get the message of the shirt and I'm sure you didn't either but it looked rebellious, so it was a champ in your eyes. I slipped out a five dollar bill and handed it to the woman, her greedy hands grabbing it quickly, shooting me a winning black toothed grin. You wrapped me up in your arms after she handed it to you in a black plastic bag and I tried to scowl at you as you placed a dozen little kisses all over my face. You had thanked me in your baritone voice with that smile that always made my insides tingle.

I can hear her little moans as you kiss her neck and I can almost feel you grabbing her skin. She has her eyes closed as she bites her bottom lip and you slowly unbutton her white collared shirt.

As the sound wafts to my ears, my throat closes and wells with stubborn tears.

My hair looked wild in this Polaroid. I am cowering down and holding on for dear life as you are smiling with both hands in the air. Strands of my long brown hair had fallen into my face as I squeezed my eyes shut, convinced that opened eyes would only increase my chances of death. I never wanted to get on the stupid ride but you pleaded, even intertwined your hands together and got on one knee. I nervously laughed and pulled you up out of embarrassment and when I said yes, you swiftly put your arms around my waist and lifted me to kiss you. As we joined the long line and I looked up at the roller coaster zooming above our head, my heart thumped in my chest, partially out of nervous anticipation but mostly out of blinding, painful, paralyzing fear. Our place in line provided me with the perfect view of the roller coaster making its first dip, the screams of excited teens and workers playing hooky ringing out, loud enough to be heard over the roar of the roller coaster accelerating down the vertical plunge. My heart raced and my senses immediately keened in on any and everything but my inevitable death. The way a droplet of sweat trickled down in a lazy zig-zag on the neck of a girl who stood in front of us; the orange freckled skin of a middle-aged blonde as she chattered away to an equally orange middle-aged brunette; the comfortable silence of the couple ahead, her slender olive arms wrapped around his torso, his blonde head leaning back against the top of her dark one. You smiled and squeezed my hand in anticipation as we pushed through the metal turnstile just before the large line was separated into smaller ones, the longest line for the front of the roller coaster. Of course you pulled me to that line despite the drag in my feet and the

widening of my eyes. You sat there cheesing as we settled down into the damp seats and the black pole lowered the yellow restraints into our laps, trapping us inside. You elbowed me with excitement as the train took off and hooted with the other excited people, throwing your hands in the air as we started the dreadfully slow ascent.

There is ruffling and I know you have just flipped her onto her back. You have pulled down her pink bra and her breasts look enticingly plump as you rip down the brassiere and they spill out. She is smiling as you adore them.

You were wearing these when I met you. I remember them because as I looked down blushing, I caught sight of these same worn jogging sneakers. I had no reason to blush; you had only needed to know if class was cancelled. You were speed walking to our building until you saw me walking in the opposite direction.

“Is class cancelled?” you asked me out of breath and my heart jumped into my throat as I realized your eyes had not only been gray but had specks of green in them. The brown strand of hair that never fails to fall into your face is grazing your forehead in the chilly autumn air and as you huff and puff, you tuck it behind your ear out of habit.

The green in your eyes matched the leaves on the trees that stood behind you, before they died and fell to the ground in a red and orange heap.

My brain registered that I needed to answer your question but my throat had closed up with the speed of a mimosa leaf—a subtle nod was all that I could suffice.

“Oh great,” you said mordantly, looking in the direction of the building you were headed to, clearly peeved that you had stumbled out of bed and skipped brushing your teeth in vain. I realized I was staring at you and smiling like an idiot when your attention went back to me and I looked down at your shoes trying to regain some type of composure. They were gray and blue and had bits of neon orange in them and as I tried to focus on the large skinny N on the side, you asked if I wanted to get some coffee.

She is moaning louder now as you kiss down her navel. You unbutton her jeans and slither them off, the lift of her ass making your heart beat rise at a frantic rate. You revel in her eagerness and kiss down her torso at an agonizingly slow pace.

I hated this hoodie. You insisted on wearing it when you met my parents. As we pulled up to my parents’ brick bungalow house with four windows and a colorful, healthy flowerpot underneath, you called me spoiled. You said how perfect everything looked and mocked how my parents probably sounded at dinner parties, discussing how wonderfully their magenta petunias contrasted with the green of the grass. How they insist that the gardener come twice a week to make sure the grass is low, they didn’t want to seem cheap. How they didn’t need a gate because they didn’t want to feel any more trapped in their five-bedroom, four bathroom, full basement house. You laughed at me as I tried to defend them, said that they didn’t sound nearly as snooty as you made it seem, though they did. The hoodie was black and said “I heart boobs” in white lettering with the bright red heart flipped upside down. I remember looking at it just before I sighed and made my way out of the car.

Her moans reverberate throughout the house, bounce off the thin white walls. You are kissing her center as she squirms and whimper; bites her lips, points her toes. The sheets becoming damp, she writhes deeper into them, crumbling the whiteness beneath her as your tongue flickers.

It was 10° outside when you wore this last. The line had swollen around the corner and down the long street as we waited, my fingers losing feeling in my black and red mittens. It was at least twenty degrees lower than I anticipated and as you stood motionless with your hands in your pocket and your scarf covering half your face, I envied you. You looked at my shivering and smiled, my nose was flaming red and my ears were dark pink, my hair doing nothing to warm them. Just as my teeth involuntarily began to chatter, you zipped down your jacket, pulled me inside, and zipped it up. I laughed at the fact that I could fit and my hands immediately warmed with the help of your body heat. We moved in unison in the procession of the line, taking little steps to not drag you or slow you down. After fourteen hours of slow moving, sitting, and chit-chatting with other excited fans, we arrived at the glass box office and bought our tickets.

The bed creaks as you drive into her. Her legs are wrapped around your waist and she scratches your tanned back. You place a palm on the top of her hair as you thrust roughly into her, your face pink with concentration. Sweat dribbles down between your furrowed black eyebrows and coherent thoughts dissolve as you both near your end.

This cap is burned into my memories. I go to sleep dreaming about it as I dreamed about you, replayed the scene in my head like a child rewinding a VHS. A little girl with braided pigtails whizzed by me shrieking and laughing as I waited for you on our bench in the park. It was the bench that was witness to my trembling hands when your calm warm lips pressed to my shaking cold ones for the first time, the bench that let us sit while we looked up at the yellow full moon after closing hours.

You walked over to me with this cap pulled down over your eyes, your black hoodie on top of it, the zipper of your sweater pulled all the way up despite the Spring warmth. I tried to look into the gray bullets that still made my heart throb regardless of the two years I spent looking into them. But every time I tried to look underneath the dark blue brim, you sunk your head lower, refusing to look into my brown eyes. You began to speak and as my brain registered the words I never saw coming, your voice became foggy and distant until I couldn't hear you at all. I stared at your lips as the words "I just don't want this anymore" and "I'm no longer attracted to you" and "I've changed" took shape. The pressure behind my eyelids burned and stung and as my broken voice tried reason, two droplets slowly spilled out as I blinked. I stare at the pink mark on your neck, took note of the almost perfect mouth shape I could never create.

Despite it I reach out to touch you, prove to you that my fingers can still set your arm hair on edge, cause your heart to quiver, but you drew away from me. As the tears glided down my face setting a mini puddle at the bottom of my chin, you rose from our bench and said "sorry, but no" before leaving the park and passing a group of kids jumping in and out of the park sprinklers.

You bury your nose into her neck and a sound escapes her lungs with every hard pump. She moves frantically with you, fingers absentmindedly squeezing your back and ass, biting her full lips at the sweet nothings you whisper on her lobe. You come with the force of an exploding newly ruptured fire hydrant on a hot summer day and she squeals like an old chew toy. You collapse onto her and as your breathing comes to a slow, steady pace, you slowly rise off of her.

You stand and as she sits up against her elbows, she decides that it's best for the two of you to wash up before returning to the job you both skipped. As she tends to the cell phone that had vibrated ten times during your love making, you take a leisure stretch and head to the closet for the murky green towel I now stare at. I close my eyes and take a deep breath seconds before you open the door to your walk-in closet. As daylight pours into the darkened space and onto my wet face, you look at me with shock and bewilderment as I sit with your shirt, our photo, your shoes, hoodie, and cap in my lap. The words get stuck and lost in my throat as I try to tell you that I was only here to return your key and the few things I had of yours in my closet. But as you stare at me expectantly and wait for the explanation my streaming silent tears won't allow me to get out, the only thing I can manage between low sobs is "I love you."

My Summer Something

By: Liz Gauthier

“When you said ‘Nothing’ earlier, I felt like there was something.”

She had just finished hugging me goodbye.

I step back, trying to decide whether telling her how she makes me feel matters now. She looks at me encouragingly, subtly coaxing me into admitting that there really was something, something I hadn’t wanted to discuss over a falafel gyro and fries.

Standing in the Florida night, in the soft glow of the street lamps, I am thinking about letting it out.

Part of me is content with the state of our friendship, the passive aggressive chuckle when she says something that reminds me of how dismissive she can be, the superficial dinners where we talk about her work, all of it could be good enough.

Not tonight.

“I feel like you patronize me and dismiss my feelings whenever I open up to you.”
This will do for now.

A silence as heavy as the swamp air surrounding us begins to grow between us. Softly, she says “I’m really sorry that I make you feel that way.” She gently pulls me into her arms. When she suggests we go to the back seat, saying “no” does not even occur to me.

The second we sit down, she slips her hand under my arm and rests her head on my shoulder. We begin to talk and I am only sometimes aware of what is being said. A small tear escapes my eye and falls into her hair. I am running my fingers through her hair, I tell her it feels like a baby’s hair, I kiss her head, she says something funny, laughs, and I smile. All night we talk, about our love interests, our mothers, the queer families we want to create.

For a long time, we hold each other.

To Aria

By: Catherine Plath

To Aria:

First off, before I begin anything, I want to apologize for my handwriting. I'm currently writing this in the back of a dangerously fast cab. We're cutting everyone off and breaking every speeding law in order to try to catch your flight. Every single time I try to write anything, the car jerks and throws my hand all over the paper. (I had to pay the taxi driver an extra \$200 to cover any possible tickets he'd get from this ride, and I can see he's going to use every penny.)

In less than thirty minutes from now, I'll hand you this wrinkly paper covered with scribbles. With that, with this simple piece of paper, your opinion about me will drastically change forever.

Where to start? I guess the best place is our beginning. I actually don't remember our very first interaction together, but you claim you do. You were discussing laundry duty with your roommate Sarah, and I, being me, interrupted to talk to her. You tease me all the time about how you couldn't stop thinking, "Why can't this girl shut up?" I have to admit I don't remember this at all, but it sure sounds like something I'd do.

This brief encounter explains why you looked so familiar when I found you sitting in the quad. It was still pretty early in the morning, and fresh rays of sunlight danced on you as you sat under an old oak tree, diligently working on something. As you feverishly scribbled on a notebook, you hunched your back into an inhumane angle. You had whipped your blonde hair into a messy bun, although two rebellious strands inched towards your face. You couldn't stop to fix them, though- you were too busy writing.

I don't have common social sense. You tease me about that all the time, too. When most people see someone diligently working, they leave so that person can continue. The curious, nosy oddballs, like me, decided they must know what someone could be so passionately absorbed in and decide to interrupt to find out.

You didn't notice me walk up to you, even though it was fall and my new brown leather boots made an awful racket crunching on the leaves. Your nose remained pressed to the page, with your hand flying this and that way. I stood, three inches from you, and asked, "What's that?"

Your face was priceless. It twisted in equal parts annoyance, hatred, and confusion. "What?"

"What are you working so hard on?" I asked, sitting down next to you. I had the audacity to just plop myself next to a stranger who didn't want to be with me, but as you know, I have very poor social sense.

"My homework," you answered, still befuddled.

I had the guts to snatch your notebook right from your hands to personally inspect it. After only a few seconds of staring at your work, I noticed you had a very distinct handwriting - very angular and geometric.

"What class?"

"Engineering," you answered.

"Grade?"

“Junior,” you say.

Pointing to myself, I add, “Sophomore,” even though you didn’t ask. I handed you back your notebook. “What’s your name?”

“Aria.” (But you knew that.)

“Hannah.” (But you knew that, too.)

I’m pretty sure you begged me twenty times to leave you be, but I kept asking questions, some relevant and some not. I told you the barebones about myself- I was debating what to major in (still!), I liked cats over dogs, tea over coffee, and I had two siblings.

You didn’t tell me much about yourself, actually, now that I think of it. I still feel like I know all about you- your desires, your hopes, your being- but so little about the details and facts. What’s your favorite restaurant? What’s your mother’s middle name? What’s your favorite song?

We talked for an hour. It was an hour too long for you, because you obviously had a lot of work to do. I think you enjoyed it, though (I like to think so). I was so proud that I managed to get you, the most serious person I ever met, to laugh.

I love your laugh. Your lips curve upwards and for once in your life you completely let loose. Your little, skinny body quivers- vibrates more like it, shaking back and forth in joy.

The next time I saw you, we were at a party. Both of us were outgoing and blunt, but only in a small, safe, reassuring social atmosphere. This party was anything but that. There were so many people crammed into that ratty dorm room that you couldn’t move without violating someone.

I found you in the corner, sipping on a beer. You were pretty wasted, I’m not going to lie; you were smashed out of your mind.

Can I say I love seeing you drunk without sounding like a rapist? You let loose. You finally relax. The tight, wound muscles in your shoulders ease, and you laugh more. You know that I love to listen to you laugh. If you forget, re-read the paragraph three up.

“Aria, right?” Despite our close distance, I have to scream at you, because someone is blasting my ears off with the latest dubstep track. I push a drunken couple foundling each other out of my way and step closer to you. Your hair was out of a bun (I’d never seen that before!) and flowing from your head in soft, bouncy, natural curls.

“Yeah,” you slur. “Hannah?”

“Yup,” I say. “Your hair looks nice down, by the way.”

You grab a strand of your blonde hair and hold it in front of your face to analyze. “Really? I haven’t washed it in forever.” (Another thing about you- you never accept compliments, no matter how true they are.)

I squeeze in next to you, so I could talk to you. And that we did. For hours. I mean it, hours. We passed out talking and slept the night curled up next to each other like two old cats.

Two weeks later, our roles switched. Now, I was the studious one and you were the distractor. As I was quietly walking along to class, a hand abruptly grabbed my elbow, stopping me dead in my tracks.

“Hannah, your last name is Hoffman, isn’t it?” you questioned intently. Before I could answer, you began to search through your bag. Next thing I knew, the school literary magazine was pressed against my nose. “This is you, isn’t it?”

I grazed my eyes over a short story I had submitted. "Oh," I said, shocked. Who actually read the school literary magazine besides those who wrote it? "Yup, that's me. How'd you find it?"

"I read it," you tease. "You've got talent, Hannah. This—" You waved that flimsy book in my face yet again. "was good. Really good."

And you were off as unexpectedly and quickly as you came. You left me stunned, standing in the middle of the hallway, until the school bell rang and sent me back on my way.

I want to point out that at the time, I thought nothing of this magnet-like attraction I had for you. I didn't associate it with anything sexual or romantic. I just felt that I need you and you, if you knew it or not, needed me. I explained everything I felt for you- the admiration, the fascination, even the jitters in my stomach when you brushed my elbow- by believing that destiny was simply trying to convince me fate chose you to be my platonic best friend.

Late in October, I had my first dream about you. It was romantic. You wouldn't believe my surprise as I opened my eyes and realized I had dreamt about a woman that way.

I never believed I was anything but straight. Sure, I never felt anything towards men, but I assumed I simply hadn't met "the one" yet. I never even guessed I could feel anything towards a woman, until I had that dream about you.

I fell into disbelief. I ignored that dream as best I could. When I couldn't ignore it enough, I made up outrageous explanations. Once, I blamed it on over-sugary cereals. (Didn't you know Lucky Charms causes lesbian fantasies? Read the warning on the label.)

Well, we spent almost every waking moment together that we could after that party, because a higher power really did want us to become best friends. When you are best friends, you learn everything about that other person. This is how I learned you were homophobic.

We were flipping channels, when Ellen happened to be on. Curled up in blankets and drinking hot cocoa (it was December by then, and it was a particularly chilly winter), we laughed as we watched Ellen prank her intern.

"She's the best," I giggle.

"She's pretty good," you shrug. Your eyebrows raise as you add, "But definitely not the best."

"Oh, c'mon, everyone loves Ellen. She's perfect."

"If she wasn't... well, you know what I'm saying, she'd be bearable."

"What are you talking about?"

"She's a... how do I say this... *lady licker*?"

I still remember the way you said that. Lady licker. Like you couldn't bear to say lesbian, so you had to make up some outrageous phrase.

The sad part was I was in love with you too far to save myself. Too far in to use common sense and stop the pain that will come once you read this letter. But you have to know. You have to.

I couldn't just let you fly to your new job halfway across the country (which I'm so proud of you for getting, no matter how you feel after this letter) without letting you know that I have hopelessly loved you for the past two years. It just felt wrong and incomplete, you know? Like a story with no ending. You said I'm good at writing stories, so I'm trying to finish my own.

My God, I feel like I'm not even speaking English. I wish I had the courage to do this in person, on the phone, or through email- anything interactive. I really hope I address any questions you have in this letter, because after this, I think we should never see each other again.

Maybe I'm being slightly ridiculous or childish for wanting to completely part ways. Maybe I'm even being a bit of both. I must be somewhat out of my mind to willingly throw away two years of the best friendship I've ever experienced because I'm making, as you say, "a sinful choice." But I love you. If this isn't how a man feels when he loves a woman and vice versa, then I'm sorry for them. When I ignore the hatred you have towards the idea of us, I feel like the happiest person in the planet, because I love you.

Jesus, ignore the wet spots on the page. I can't lie to you and say it's my drink or something. We respect each other too much for that (at least we did, and I hope we still do). I'm crying, okay?

I'm crying because life screwed me over. My first love, my first love at all, the love that made me feel something for the first time ever, the love that revealed my sexuality, was to someone who believes my love for her is from the devil.

I love you. I love you. I love you. Damn it, I love you.

I wish it was a choice like you believe. I want to stop loving you. I want to so badly it hurts. But I can't. I can't get you out of my system.

The cab is pulling up to the airport now. If things went according to plan, I caught you, threw this at you, and ran. I don't want you to try to contact me, unless a miracle happens and you say, "I feel the same way." Otherwise, it will hurt too much.

Just know I love you.

Goodbye,

Hannah.

Nomad's Land

By: Heather Lyn

You took advice from the Grateful Dead, you, then grateful to be walking— thumbing to anywhere that wasn't Nowhere, Louisiana. Every car that stopped was a lover, darkened by the storm that took you over. They drove you past the train tracks, eyes out the window, words in your head. Shelter in a bathroom with a girl named Rose, who let you touch her with young hands, learning her like the road – and you stayed on the floor, locked in a stall listening to drug-addicts scream about nothing at all. You and Rose kept quiet with lips pressed to mouth, and when the meth heads disappeared you decided to head South. You kissed Rose goodbye as she walked out East, her curved thumb extended, your tongue between clenched teeth, biting back the fear you were too afraid to mention. You watched her go, humming to yourself then—*Ramble on, Baby. Settle down easy.*

At the Gambling-Related Suicide Prevention Workshop for Pathological Gamblers in Kansas City

By: pd mallamo

So he walks in and the guy asks, What is the pressure that is bringing you here today?
English, please
Thank you. So he says, Let's put it this way: I'm robbing mini-marts for casino money
That's pressure
Yes it is
He's actually doing this?
So the guy asks, You rob one lately? And he says, Not saying, just that I gotta stop before I
kill someone
That's pressure
Front-row seat
Guy's gotta turn him in
And of course he STILL wants to bet
Be selling his ass next. Least robbery's respectable work
Selling your ass won't get you a lethal injection
What else? - crank, crack, vodka, porn - meat for god's sake. Protestant work ethic
Fat is the new cigarette, my friend. That man could DEAL with a burger! Where'd he do it?
Kickapoo res
Ah the Golden Eagle. That buffet!
Eight shooters and a handful of k-pins with the fish on a dollar pull. This was AFTER prime
rib and cheesecake
End of that sad story
There is no Zion, pal. There is no Oz.
Bullshit and thin air
Ever read the Magic Christian - people swan-diving into vats of shit for dollar bills?
Saw the movie
Humanity fatigue
Just the fucking bankruptcy lawyers! How do they face this every day?
The only sex that man ever had was crapping on himself in the bathtub
Haw haw haw. I should laugh
They gave him a deal, you know
Let me guess: restaurant
Uh hu. Grease fire in Wichita
Tell me you don't believe in karma
The modern world, my friend. Dick Cheney trashed Iraq and sold it to Halliburton
Ever meet dad?
Old pain-in-the-ass from Louisville. Actually came out to borrow money
Met him once. When I saw that I said to myself, This one goes young
Bad apples don't fall far from the tree

Off'd himself, too, didn't he?
Last year
And there you go
In the kid's defense he DID try to slow it down
Let me guess: ponies
Ponies are the worst
This is the lie we tell ourselves: I KNOW that horse
When he was going like this [makes throat cutting motion] you were over there belly laughing. Does not fill a man with confidence.
Understood – but the man had the belief system of a four-year old. Find hot married women in your town!
That's our boy
Date real cheating wives!
Jesus god
To him this was family night. What I'm saying? - Less likely it was the more he believed it
See, and when it gets that crazy it's solitary
And when it gets solitary you're done
Just give me my nicotine delivery system and leave me the hell alone
Those dreams don't come true, old buddy.
Only the bad ones
Just the bad ones
[(♣)]

Garage Sale in Oak Bluffs

By: Kirby Wright

Damn. Late again. Late for that crap at the Ogilvie's annual cleaning, after everything's been picked over for hours. I shoulda set the alarm; now only the crappiest of crap remain. I mean, who really wants a soiled Ninja Turtles throw rug or a Cyndi Lauper CD with a cracked case? Faye Ogilvie swears she starts stockpiling their garage every Ides of March.

Oh! There's neighbor Justen flipping through a stack of LPs. Wasn't that The Animals? No worries. That cheapskate's a pro at fingering stuff he'll never buy. Sarah, his wife, gabs about Carly Simon and whale pods off Vineyard Haven Harbor.

Then I spot it—a Hulk Hogan doll with mottled rubber skin. He was champ of the world the year I got married, long before Ruth slowed down. A simple bath might clear up his skin condition. I pick up Hulk and wave him. "How much?"

"Two bucks," Burt Ogilvie shoots back, flashing the peace sign. That prick's a tight-fisted banker.

I retreat to my wallet. I know I'll bring Hulk back to an empty house, one where simple things like crackling eggs, shuffling plates, and the whisper of running water help me pretend I'm not alone.

**Look for Issue 2 of Crab Fat Literary
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