

Pulse

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The Literary Magazine of Lamar University

Department of English and Modern Languages

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Gretchen Johnson
Dr. Jerry Craven

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Awards

Barnes Award for Undergraduate Free Verse Poem "Silence" by Dustin Sanchez
Eleanor Award for Undergraduate Formal Poem "Keep Your Head Up" by Jordan McCardell
De Schweinitz Award for Graduate Free Verse Poem "Kut" by John Rutherford
Rowe Award for Graduate Formal Poem "Off with Your Head" by Shelly Dawson
<i>Pulse</i> Award for Undergraduate Fiction "Sponsored by Convenience" by Ryan Ruffaner as Ryan Reudell
<i>Pulse</i> Award for Graduate Fiction "Siren's Song" by Jill Crosby
Rowe Award for Analytical Essay "The Sense of the Sublime in American Renaissance Literature" by Maegan White

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This edition of *Pulse* is dedicated to Sam Gwynn, in recognition of his unwavering commitment to the mission of Lamar University's literary magazine. The *Pulse* staff and the Department of English and Modern

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Undergraduate Form Poetry

Keep Your Head Up

Jordan McCardell

Too many times, I find my head facing down
Thinking about what was instead of what's happening right now,
Hearing my dad on his death bed say "enjoy it while you can."
But finding God this early in life, was never a part of my plan,
Discovering there's a metaphorical version of quicksand
And flipping through dictionary pages trying to find "becoming a man."
But hey, I've gotta stay positive so I'll tell you where I look first—
The family that surrounds me when I'm standing alone at work,
The people who have been there, that pass along the advice
And how I can buy a lot of things without thinking twice about the price,
How I'm able to go home and take a shower to get clean,
Growing up with a mom and dad and never needing to choose between,
Going to class after class and thinking it's so lame,
But never thinking about those who can't even write their own name,
How I'm able to make it sound good when I put a verb next to a noun,
And giving myself a million and one reasons why my head should never
be down.

A Whole New World

Lisa Nguyen

Secluded in this cell,
Feeling desperate and frail.
All you could hear,
Were screams full of fear.
A single mistake lead you astray,
Locked and troubled induce one to pray.
Nothing to do but stare at a wall,
Being frightened to walk down the hall.
In a confinement full of every criminal,
Mindset alters from calm to cynical.
Eight weeks, five months, or one year,
The gate to freedom seemed nowhere near.
For every ounce of trust that falls,
Lied dozens of ruthless brawls.
The unpleasant khaki suits are so dull,
If only they could be thrown in a hole.
Every meal served is bland,
A home cooked meal was seen as grand.
Whether it was left or right,
Guards posted at every site.
Always being told what to do,
Just blessed to not be in the SHU.
Not the shoe you wear on your feet,
But the one that makes you wet your sheet.
Prison is a whole new world,
That'll leave you in bed curled.

Grandmother's House

Dustin Sanchez

My old toys sit on the playroom floor.
I look at boxes stacked in the hall;
in the background swings Grandma's door.

Memories of Golden Girls and cheese toast stay.
A fresh-again childhood packed away, as
my old toys sit on the playroom floor.

The house is sold; my family gone.
A quiet house is all I hear;
in the background swings Grandma's door.

I shake the buyer's hand without emotion.
His child's gaze looks past me;
my old toys sit on the playroom floor.

One last run through—in case memories were forgot.
A well-worn Elvis record goes to the truck, while
in the background swings Grandma's door.

Shaking fingers turn the truck's key,
the rearview's reflection the last I see.
My old toys sit on the playroom floor
in the background swings Grandma's door.

Undergraduate Free Verse Poetry

Phoenix

Nasim Abedelwahab

Sixty years we live the same life
We are helpless
We are hopeless
We are homeless
The sea of death calls our name
Like so many before we heed the sirens call
To the depths from which we will never escape
Holy they once called us
How can we be holy?
We answer death with death
Is this holy?
We flirt with the edge of the abyss
Who will pull us back?
Or is this nature
To fall and be replaced?
Are we fated to fade away in time?
Has our end come?
We do not want to die
Is it our choice?
Will we be reborn?
In death we are alone
Our dependence may be our downfall
Why do we not fight death ourselves?
Or should we embrace him?
To drift silently into the night
Or to burn bright for all to see
Why must the ephemerality of our existence persevere?
All life is beautiful
And yet all death is meaningful

What It's Like

(Anonymous)

I am not who I was.
Though, I have never been a child.
I never got my justice.
When I think about it my throat gets tight.
So rarely do I cry now.
It has stolen too many things from me.
He has taken too much of my memory.

When it first happened I was young, barely eleven.
It didn't stop until I was fifteen.
I couldn't defend myself.
Who would protect me?
I couldn't protect me.
No one did.

When I finally broke the silence,
I was treated like a criminal, a whore.
"He is family!" "This never happened!" "This couldn't happen!"
I was fifteen then.
No one defended me.
No one protected me.

Those were days I had to be strong for myself.
Strong enough for my family too.
CPS got to pick and choose for me.
Where I was to live.
Why I had to transfer schools, and change my number.
They even decided what did and did not happen to me.

They declared that my sexual assaults were preempted.
I must have triggered it.
He was a *good* man with a respectable reputation.
Maybe when I was eleven I wore something too sexy, too revealing,
those nights he'd sneak into my room, and cover my mouth so no one

would hear me cry.
After all he was *family*.

My case was ruled "undetermined."
They could not reach a verdict.
My attacker was set free.
Not even a slap on the wrist.
My case worker kept asking me why I never came forward sooner.
She reminded me there was not enough evidence.

In that court room, on that day, I was only fifteen.
In that room I was not a child. I was an object on display.
I didn't just lose my justice, I lost my innocence.
I was shy then. Ashamed. Of all the things the court said never
happened to me.
Of all the times he hurt me and *no one* protected me.

They gave me medicine.
Prozac for my depression. Xanax for my anxiety.
This was it. This was supposed to *cure* me.
I was told to start over and live with my grandmother now,
my only remaining family.

I cried.
For years I cried.
Hid myself. Washed myself.
Never able to remove his finger prints.
Never able to remove his lips from my skin.
Never able to stop the nightmares or panic attacks.
Only able to stop thinking about it.

I lived on.
Never talking about it. My family never talked about it.
I was seventeen when I met him.
He was older, compassionate, so I thought.
I loved him.

I was eighteen when I moved in with him.

A senior in high school, that June I was set to graduate with Honors.
He taught me how to love myself.
I barely worked that year. He worked to support me.
"He did everything for me." "I drove the car he helped me buy."
"I owed him."

Two months before graduation he decided he was going to take what I
owed him.

It's ironic how I trusted him then.
I told him the things I could never talk about before.
He promised to protect me.
The thing he took I had consensually given him before.
I loved him.

But this time was different.
I was afraid.
I knew it was different this time.
I told him no, and asked him to stop.
This time I fought to protect myself.
He was quicker, stronger, and more violent than me.

I was never afraid of him until then.
That night he told me it wasn't rape because we were dating;
he takes care of me, and I owed him.
Of course this wasn't the last time.
I lived with him and the abuse until the week after I graduated.

This abuse was different.
It was more than physical, it was emotional.
It was June 2014. Early, very early.
I packed what I could and went home.
My real home.

My grandma never asked me why I came home that day,
the way I did.
She did not know, but she always knew.
It was then that I decided I am not a victim.
I no longer seek justice.
I am no longer afraid.

I am a woman now.
I have been hurt, but now I hurt so little.
I am able to understand that the justice system is flawed.
Humans are flawed.

When I was eleven the justice system told me I enticed my assailant.
For four years I "asked for it."
They said I should have come out sooner.
They said I tried to *hide* it.
They *decided* it was not assault.
I was a child.

When I was eighteen I didn't try to prosecute my rapist, my boyfriend.
I wanted to keep the dignity I had left.
They didn't help me when I was a child.
They couldn't help me when I was already eighteen.

I'm almost twenty-one now.
I live a secret life.
I live as if I have not been forced, my innocence never taken from me.
I live as if my body has not been washed until my skin has peeled and
blistered.
As if I don't have the same nightmares of memories four times a week.
My friends don't know who I am.
The things I have done.
I live the life of a college student.
I am the girl with three jobs, and a thousand Instagram followers.
I live the life of a girl who was not robbed of her sexuality.
I do not talk about *it*.
I do not talk about what it's like.

I met her spring of 2015.
My friend came into my life as an almost unspoken angel.
I couldn't talk about *any* of it until this year.
She understood. She too was *not a victim*.
No one protected her when he hurt her.
I don't have to tell her about my secret life.
I don't have to tell her *what it's like*.

We are not victims.
We have survived.
Our assaults. Our attacks. The justice system. The world.
We live our secrets lives.
Maybe now we can tell others what it's like.

Who Are We?

Tamara Davis

Who are we to choose the faith of one's life?
Who are we to say if their actions were wrong or right?
Who are we to decide if they go or stay?
Who are we to decide when to take one's life away?

Who are we to decide if the crime is big or small?
Who are we to say we have the right to end it all?
Who are we to decide that their lives should end now?
Who are we to decide the when, where, and how?

Who are we; do you know? Are we the friend or enemy?
Who are we to say it's right to sentence one to the death penalty?
Who are we, are we God? From this I can't explain,
How wrong it is to end one's life for death is not a game.

Drowning

Mercedes Roth

I know what it's like to drown;
 I do it every day.
I gasp for air,
 Only to be filled with the salty brine from a bygone race.
I dive toward the surface,
 Reaching for outstretched hands
 Only to have the waves crest higher over my breath.
I reach toward the stars,
 Trying to grasp at any pockets I find
 Only to have the demons of the abyss clasp them tight.
I know what it's like to drown,
 Only I've learned to suffocate on air.

An Artwork We Make

Dustin Sanchez

There are no stares; no eyes pass or judge us.
We are here, alone except for the guitar player. Aside
from him and this dance floor, I know nothing. I
touch you alone; Descartes would say you are my world.
The strings of the guitar ring sharply, spurring a
kind of passion within the room.
We flick, we turn, our moves unpracticed,
improvised to the Argentinian fingers along the guitar.

I listen to your push, your pull; you
listen to mine, our steps a conversation;
the flick of your leg, its aggression
reminds me I follow as much as lead.
Each time, our dialogue is different.

Each move is a stroke, each dance is
its own painting; our work of art
lasts but a moment; we will never dance the
same again. I hear the guitarist
reach his final chords. We go to arm's length; in that
moment of silence between the songs, I wonder:
what will we paint next?

Cupid and Psyche

Dustin Sanchez

I am a god—take that
in the literal. I spend
days shooting men and women with
arrows they later thank me for.
All save one; I can't shoot her for mortal man. Instead,
as I look at her, my drawn arrow
finds my own foot.

I am worried—married to a man
I cannot see. Is he disfigured?
He touches with the warmest embrace,
and welcomes sweet words that carry in the dark. My sisters,
they chastise, "How can
you love what you cannot see?" I wonder at their point; I
must look tonight.

The moonlight stops before our bed. My inner motivation—my Psyche
lies beside me in the dark. I wish she knew—but can't.
Mother has forbidden. When Beauty forbids, Love must obey.
My love, I hear your breathing slow. One
more kiss and I'll close my eyes, but leave before the dawn.

I wake in the dark. I reach into the dark for the candle. Quick—its wick.
Winged shadows hit the wall. They move slightly—shifting
in the flame's flickering dance.
He wakes; the light etches even deeper his
deep-set frown.

I rush into the moonlight, where she can see—albeit
it is my going. Love has lost. If only.

Love has lost. If only.

Silence

Dustin Sanchez

We speak with hands, because
we go unheard.
Your words fall on our ears.

We count on our hands as well;
you have five? We have
a thousand.

We have stories; they throw
our entire bodies
into their telling.

You belittle us? We
communicate best
when you're lost for words.

Look at our hands—at the world we create;
sometimes nothing is more creative
than the silence.

The Room

Maegan White

Early morning light peeks through the curtains, bright,
Shimmering, glimmering to your delight.
Beams of gold boldly glitter
As busy dizzy dreams begin to flitter.
As fading fancies whirl away,
Your thoughts are brought to the light of day.
And the curtains aren't real, nor is the sun.
You cannot walk, you cannot run.
With a bloom of gloom you remember your room:
A concrete cell, awaiting your doom.

Rulers

Maegan White

Ruler, King, Queen,
Royal blood, royal gene.
Leader, President,
Citizen, Resident.
In the end, we're all the same.
So who is it we shall blame?

Musca Domestica

Seth Wright

My copious ocelli produce an unfocused view—
After circling in an unceasingly eternal pattern I land—
Although indistinct what I perceive is not pain—
Continuing my inspection zipping within inches- round and around I go
Persistently taunting and challenging it to recognize my existence—
Challenging it to face an annoying yet true realization that my dynamic
 authority is present—
I am here—
The buzz from my transparent appendages are muffled by a sudden gust
of wind—
I am silenced—
Closed off in darkness and pressed tightly against an epithelial layer of
 warmth—
I feel a tightening grasp—a chemically imbalanced irregularity—and
 then to my revelation—freedom—

Undergraduate Prose

Big Bertha

Jacqueline Benavides

My machine beeps, and I absent-mindedly glance over at it. "CHECK LINE," it says in big green letters on the display screen. I reach down and grab the tube sticking out of my stomach. I gently yank on the catheter and follow its length all the way back to my machine. I find no kinks in the line. I reach down and move the white end of the catheter that opens and closes to stop the flow, and I close it and reopen it. The equivalent to "Have you turned it off and back on?" Still the letters appear on the screen, and I know the longer I take to fix the line the shorter my day will be tomorrow. I stand up and whip the line like a cowboy would a lasso. Right after, I hear the machine start to whir. Thank goodness, Big Bertha is back in action.

Big Bertha is my faithful dialysis machine of eight months twenty-three weeks and five days. We met at Texas Children's Hospital; I was still very much under the influence of painkillers when I was wheeled up to the sixteenth floor to meet her. There she was on a cart, her hefty body just waiting for me and my toxins. Laura, my nurse at the time, told me not to be afraid of her, to touch her, to listen to the noises she made and get used to them. I remember being so out of it that I would just lie on a couch while my mom was trained on the proper technique to hook me up, since I was only fifteen and still considered an adolescent.

The first few months were rough. After getting my tubey put in my stomach, we had to wait five weeks to put it to use. The tubey was a medium for fluid to get to my peritoneum. My tubey is a rubber tube going into my skin, connected to a white part that opens and closes the line and a baby blue handle with a white cap at the end that acts as both a connection and an endpoint.

Putting the tubey in my stomach was the first major surgery I ever had; it was also somehow the easiest one to get through. With the first surgery, I didn't know what to expect. I knew to be nervous, but I didn't know what to be nervous of. I knew there would be pain when I woke up, but I didn't know how much pain. After the first surgery, I knew what to expect. I now know that there are three parts to a surgery.

The first part is all mental. It is the prep before the surgery, the knowing what is coming. This is where you can psych yourself out and

convince yourself that you can handle whatever happens, good or bad.

The second part is the anesthesia. People who haven't had it think it is a drowsy feeling followed by a peaceful sleep. It's not. It's the complete opposite. Because I was at a children's hospital, I had a choice on what made me lose consciousness. Option A was a "cocktail" shot that would relax me, then an IV sedative that would knock me out. Option B was a flavored gas with choices like cherry, strawberry, and grape. For my first surgery, I chose option B in strawberry. The strawberry flavor lasted for five seconds and was immediately replaced with what I can only describe as black. Black took on its own scent and feeling and flavor. The gas burns when you breathe it in, and it makes your ears ring instantaneously. I remember the nurses telling me to breathe deep and count to ten. I resisted, screaming about how I couldn't feel my fingers. My nose was covered with the gas pipe, and I tried breathing through my mouth to avoid the gas. I was successful until a nurse forced my mouth closed and my lungs instinctively sniffed the sedative. I started counting: one, two, thrr... My voice sounded far away, and I panicked for a second before everything went dark. That was the worst part.

The third part of surgery is the recovery. My pain management medicine of choice was Morphine. But I had allergic reactions to it that made me itchy, so I constantly had to ask for intravenous Benadryl, which would knock me out within minutes. By my fourth surgery, I had become immune to the effects of Morphine, Vicodin, and Tylenol with Codeine.

"Drain" replaces the check line message, and I remain standing, knowing that this cycle is going to be a struggle because I've been dehydrated lately. When I am dehydrated, my body wants to soak up the dextrose fluid, and my machine wants all the fluid back. It becomes a battle where the only loser is me, because it takes longer to get through the cycle, and it hurts more than a normal drain cycle.

It is one o'clock in the morning, and I have school in a couple of hours. The pressure to get to bed and get some rest makes me almost anxious, but there is no relaxing when Big Bertha reads "drain." I can hear her gurgling as she prepares to draw out the liter of dextrose fluid I am holding in my peritoneum. Then the line jerks, and I brace myself for the pain of the suction. With each slurp, I feel a sharp pain as if somebody is stabbing me from inside my body. I lie back down in my bed on my side. I rock my body back and forth, the only method I have found that somewhat eases the pain.

Towards the end of the drain, the pain is unbearable, and I unknowingly start making noises and moaning with each suck from Big Bertha. Out of the corner of my eye, I can see my mom standing in the doorway. "What are you doing up?" I say.

"I heard you, so I came to check if you were okay."

Ever since my seizures over a year ago, my mother has been very protective of me and has put a baby monitor in my room. Oddly enough, I don't mind; it actually makes me feel safe and a little less alone in my helplessness.

"I'm fine. Just really hurting on the drain. I am dehydrated, I think."

"Oh, dang. I put the wrong bags then. That sucks. You're going to feel even worse tomorrow," my mom says, hanging her head. "Do you want me to stay?"

"Yeah, you can. It should be over soon. It's been draining for a bit already."

"Okay," she says as she walks in and sits at the end of my bed. "You think you'll go to school in the morning? Before you say anything, I don't think you should since you already feel dehydrated. That'll just be extra stress on your body that you don't need."

"I'm not sure. I mean, I want to try. You know how dad gets when I don't."

My mom shifts her weight on the bed, allowing her legs to dangle off the sides. She looks at me in the room lit only by the light given off by a nightlight on the other side of the room and the display screen of Big Bertha. "I don't want you to hurt yourself. If you don't want to go or if you are too tired, then you should stay home. I'll deal with your father. Only you know how you feel and what you can handle."

I sigh when I hear her say "what I can handle." Define handle. I look at my mom and grab her hand gently, "I know, Mom. But, it's not just my dad. I miss going. I haven't been in three days, and I'm sure by now there is a new slut-muffin that's preppers," I say with a smile. Another suck from Big Bertha takes my breath away. "I'm missing out on a lot when I stay home," I say, rocking harder to get the last few drops out of me and into Bertha's line.

She smiles and squeezes my hand before turning her head slightly to the opposite side of where I am sitting. She thinks she is slick, but I can see the tears she is trying to hide, and I look away.

I stare at Big Bertha, a big machine whom we had to buy a special restaurant quality cart throne for. She sits on the top bunk with two levels below her. She holds one bag in a well that has a small metal heater so the fluid can be warmed to at least room temperature. On the second level are two bags of fresh dextrose fluid that she uses to fill me. I use three large bags a night, and every night my mom and I have to decide what strength those bags will be. There are three options, each with varying concentrations of dextrose: 4.25, which we use when I am retaining too much fluid, 2.5, which we use when I am at a normal level, and 1.5, which we use when I am dehydrated. Tonight, we had 2.5's on all three bags.

On the third level is one very large bag where all the drained fluid goes and sits until we empty it into the toilet in the mornings. Usually by the morning, it is well over ten pounds. I never actually participate in the cleanup because I can't lift anything over five pounds. My doctor warned me that if I did I could potentially rupture my peritoneum and have to do hemodialysis, which filters blood rather than dextrose fluid. Now I can have people do things for me, and when they hesitate, all I do is lift my shirt and show my tubey that hangs to the right of my scarred belly button, the place of entry for my last laparoscopic surgery.

I look over at my mom and notice she is staring at Big Bertha now too. I wonder if she likes my pet name for my machine. I wonder if she has her own pet name for it. "What are you thinking?" I ask.

She looks at me with blank eyes and says, "I think I am going to do your laundry tomorrow."

We both start giggling, and I am relieved that she isn't in the mood for a heart to heart either. "Man, you have big plans for the morning. Sounds like you need me to go to school and get out of your hair."

"I wouldn't mind the company. You know that," she says smiling at me.

I love that she is the nice parent, the one that doesn't put pressure on me to do more than I can handle. She is the one I go to when I want to get talked into what I am already feeling. If I want to get talked into doing something I don't want to do, I go to my dad. He's a military man who believes that there are no sick days when you have responsibilities. I guess it's like they say, you can take the man out of the Army, but you can't take the Army out of the man. My dad wakes up at 5 a.m. every day and still gets the same haircut required by the military. Even though my principal and all of my teachers know my situation and understand that I cannot make

it to school every day, my dad insists that I have no excuse to not go. Sometimes I appreciate that he pushes me to my limits, even though at times that means I am having panic attacks in public places or being rushed to the emergency room for pushing myself too far, something he calls trial and error.

My father was trained to push through, mind over matter. His mentality is that your body is stronger than your mind, and unless your body is incapable of performing, there is no excuse. There was one night that I will never forget; I was sitting on my bed hooked up to Big Bertha after a difficult doctor's appointment that my father didn't go to because he had to work. I was on the dwell cycle, talking to my mom about the appointment. I remember my dad walked in and positioned himself at the foot of my bed. He was hunched over, with his fists pressed against my mattress, and looked up at me. I turned away from his gaze; I knew eye contact would only make me emotional, and I have always tried not to cry in front of my parents. My mom had told my dad about the appointment over the phone on our drive back home, but he hadn't had a chance to talk to me about it.

"Listen," he said, "we are going to get through this but ..."

"We?" I asked. Adrenaline rushed through my body as my mind processed what I had let slip out of my mouth.

My father slammed one of his fists into the mattress, sending a ripple through the mattress that shook me. I could feel the dextrose fluid bounce around in my stomach, and I got goosebumps from the strange sensation.

"Yes, God dammit! You think this only affects you? You think you're the only one stressing? You think I want to deal with this shit?" The room fell silent except for the purrs coming from Big Bertha. "Answer me!" he demanded.

His powerful voice hit me, and I struggled to collect my thoughts. "No," I whispered, looking down at my hands to avoid looking at him.

"I have to find a way to pay for you and your mom to drive back and forth to Houston, not to mention all the bills we've been getting. I am doing my part. When are you going to do yours?"

I lifted my head and noticed my mom sitting on the edge of my bed near my feet; she had her back to me and was hunched over, covering her face with her hands. She said nothing. I looked up at my father, "I am doing my part. I'm trying not to die," I said.

"Your job is to go to school and be normal!"

I looked up at my father, and I felt as though I was looking at a stranger. I stared directly at him until our eyes met, "If you haven't noticed by now, I am not normal! I have a damn tube sticking out of my stomach," I said, pointing to the tubey that was now in motion with the drain cycle, "and steroids pumping through my veins. There is nothing normal about me."

I watched my dad's face turn from hard to crooked. The wrinkles in his forehead became deep ridges. His eyes fell from mine, and his mouth opened but nothing escaped.

"Get out!" I yelled. "Just leave me alone." I kept screaming until my mother lifted herself off my bed and pulled my dad out of my room by his arm.

I turn to my mom when Big Bertha declares that it is time for the fill cycle. "I am done draining, Mom. You can go back to sleep now."

"Are you sure?" my mom says with a yawn.

"I will be fine. I promise, as soon as it's done filling I am going to knock the hell out."

"Don't curse," she says as she kisses me on the forehead. "I love you."

"I love you too. Goodnight." I watch her walk almost zombie-like out of my room.

I lie down, facing Big Bertha and her green glow, and ease into a comfortable position with my right side in the air. I can feel the cold, foreign fluid entering through my tubey, and goosebumps spring up all over my body. I pull the covers over my shoulders and adjust the line to make sure it doesn't kink again. Big Bertha pumps the fluid one squirt at a time, and I feel my eyes getting heavy. I reach down and grab my tubey, pulling it a little bit to get extra length. I fold it on itself, careful not to create a crease, and I shove the loop in my underwear to keep it in place for the night. I pat it down and listen to the hum of the machine until I fall asleep.

"Good morning," my mom says gently from behind a yellow medical mask. She is the one in charge of connecting and disconnecting me from Bertha.

"Good morning," I say, my voice still hoarse from my deep sleep. I

lie on my back and notice the sunlight pouring in from my window. "What the ...? Mom, what time is it?"

"It's nine. You looked so comfortable. I didn't want to wake you. Here," she says, handing me my mask. We have to wear them so that our breath doesn't contaminate the air and risk getting germs on my tubey.

I put it over my mouth and turn to my side, so my mom can reach my tubey and take me off the machine. "Mom, I was going to school today, remember?"

"Because of the kink last night you didn't even finish till ten minutes ago. I didn't wake you up because it would've been pointless. You would've had to just sit in bed until it was done. Turn off your fan," she says with a stern voice.

"Oh, did you call the school?" I reach over and click a button on the remote that controls my fan. I turn it off, and we wait for the blades to stop moving and the dust to settle. Our careful precautions for avoiding infections have become habit by now.

"Yes, I did. They said that you should consider homeschooling again. They have all of the work you missed at the front office, and I am going to go get it in a little bit. Do you want to go with me?"

"If I am not going to stay, there is no point in me going." I take a deep breath as my anxiety quickens my heartbeat. To me, homeschool is the equivalent to giving up and admitting that I am really sick. "You know what, I'll just go in late. I can still make it to third period if I go eat and get ready now."

"Are you sure?" she says as she closes my side of the tubey and opens the iodized plastic containing the cap.

"I am positive," I say from behind my mask. "What's the worst that can happen?"

"Okay," she says, unscrewing Big Bertha's line from my tubey and quickly replacing it with the sterile cap. "I now declare you free."

"Free at last, free at last!" I cheer as I jump out of bed. My tubey flops out of my underwear, and I wince as I feel the weight of the pull on my exit site. My hands immediately go to my tubey, and my eyes water from the sudden pain.

"Oh my gosh, are you okay?"

"I am fine," I say through gritted teeth. "I just wasn't thinking." I sit back on the bed and hang my head. Not only am I in pain from my tubey free-falling, but I got up too fast, and all the blood is rushing to my head.

"I just need a minute."

"See, this is why you shouldn't go to school!"

"No, Mother, this is why you shouldn't shout historical chants from the Civil Rights Movement out of context. There is a lesson to be learned here," I say as I limp into my bathroom, careful not to put too much pressure on my right side. I go inside my bathroom and close the door behind me, leaning on it for support. I turn to the mirror and lift my shirt to examine my exit site. My belly is distended from the fluid I have to carry around daily in what Big Bertha calls my "long dwell," and the bandages around my tubey look intact. I look closer and see that just around the exit site there is a little bit of fresh blood. My hands shake as I realize what I have done. I open the bathroom door, still holding up my shirt, and I shout for my mom to come.

"What?" she shouts from the guest bathroom where she is dumping my drain bag into the toilet.

"Come here, please."

She walks up to me and notices my belly out. "What am I supposed to look at?"

"I am bleeding," my voice cracks at the last word. I limp over to my bed and sit on the edge, carefully lifting my legs until I am lying flat on my back. "Help me," I say as my lower jaw chatters with anxiety. Tears roll down either side of my face, and my mom runs out of the room.

When she returns she is holding the kit we use every day to clean my exit site. She rips off the tape as gently as she can, to peek under at where the tubey enters my body. She gasps before quickly reapplying the bandage and tape. "We have to go to the emergency room."

"No," I scream, grabbing at my hair and pulling it for no reason other than I don't know what else to do. "Mom," I whine. My voice trails off, and we both sit in silence for a moment. "Let me go brush my teeth," I say.

I slide myself off the bed and go into the bathroom. I look at my reflection in the mirror, and I see a chubby girl with purple and green bruises covering both arms, from weekly blood draws. My eyes are red and puffy, and my lips are dry and chapped, a sign of dehydration. I turn on the water and brush my teeth as if it is an ordinary day. The toothbrush vibrates in my right hand as it jolts around my mouth. My left hand is awkwardly crossing my body, still tending to my wound. I keep pressure on my protruding exit site in hopes that the pain from my own force will

combat the pain from the tear. I turn off my toothbrush and spit in the sink. I wipe my mouth with a nearby towel and glance at the girl looking back at me. Her lips are pale, and her face is red, shimmering beneath sweat. I shake my head at the pathetic reflection in front of me, before turning off the light in the bathroom. I decide that there is no point in changing, and I limp over to my closet, still clasping my tubey, and grab the first sweatshirt I see before heading to the kitchen. "Ready?" I ask my mom.

"Yeah, let's go. I'll call and tell them we are on our way."

"Okay." I grab my purse as we are walking out the door. We get into my mom's car, and I pull the lever that reclines the seat all the way back. "Hey, mom," I say.

"Yeah?"

"I guess this means I have to do homeschooling, huh?"

"It looks pretty bad. But maybe there is still a chance you can go to school next week if they can fix you up."

I look out the top of the window at the clear blue sky and see perfect clouds, like the ones in the opening scene of *The Simpsons* intro, clouds that casually watch over everything below. "I give up," I say, focusing on the clouds. "No point in pretending like everything is going to be fine. It's not. I just need to deal with it. This is my life now."

My mom doesn't look at me, and she shows no indication that she's even heard me. Just as I am about to repeat myself, she removes her hand from the steering wheel and places it on my knee.

Hey, Girly Girl

Jacqueline Benavides

I watch as the DJ grabs the microphone, and I anticipate an update. "Is everybody ready?" he yells to the crowd. Everybody around me cheers, and I let out a petite shout in agreement with the crowd.

To my left, sits my older brother; he doesn't seem as excited to be here as my mom and me, but I am sure deep down he is just as anxious as we are. To my right, my mother is sitting, gripping her purse tightly. As I am examining my family, a short, stumpy woman walks up to my mother, smiling.

"Mrs. B, I just wanted to thank you so much for helping me get through this deployment. I swear you kept me sane. I really wouldn't have been able to handle it without you."

My mother stands up and gives the woman a hug. "You're welcome, Samantha. I think we both kept each other going. It was a hard deployment."

"It was," the woman says, nodding at my mother.

"Mrs. B!" another woman says, throwing her arms in the air. "Can you believe the day is finally here? I am so excited! I swear I must've changed my outfit at least twenty times."

The noise level in the auditorium forces the women to yell at each other, even though they are separated by only a foot or two.

"Trust me, I know," my mother laughs. "This wasn't my first choice either, and you should've seen how long it took Eiza to get ready this morning," my mom says, pointing at me.

"Hey Sweetie, are you excited to see your daddy?" the woman asks, leaning down to my eye level.

"Yes, ma'am. I just want to hug him and never let him go," I say, my voice slightly cracking.

The DJ pauses the background music and interrupts our conversation. "Ladies and gentleman, the plane has just landed!"

The entire auditorium erupts in screaming, and a frenzy of anxiousness begins. I scan the room and see children running around playing tag, families gathered around smiling and talking, and people taping signs to the walls and handing out American flags.

I turn to my brother. "Are you excited?"

He pushes pause on his PSP and looks over at me. "It's still going to be a while, Eiza. They have to get all their bags and still drive over here from the airport. Don't get too excited yet."

"You're such a party-pooper," I say, scoffing at him. I look over at my mother, who is now seated and no longer has women approaching to thank her. During my father's deployment, my mom was the FRG leader, FRG meaning Family Readiness Group. She was my father's right-hand man, so to speak, keeping things at home in check while my father led his portion of the 13th Coscom Brigade, the 503rd Core Support Battalion, in Iraq. During the past twelve months, she has had to deal with a lot of different and often difficult issues that 602nd Maintenance Company's families were going through, which was an even smaller group of families left behind. She had to handle personal issues such as helping with finding childcare and housing. She also had to find ways to keep all the families involved and form a makeshift family of the loved ones left behind. Often this meant bimonthly meetings and get-togethers where we would make care packages full of back home goodies to send to our soldiers. There were times when my mother would receive phone calls in the middle of the night from family members who were finding it hard to keep it together. She would try her best to console them, and I think they felt comfortable talking to her, knowing she was in the same boat. We were all in this together; we had to stay strong for each other.

"Okay, folks," the DJ interrupts. "I just got word that our soldiers are loaded onto the buses and heading this way!" Cheers again erupt, and I instinctively cover my ears.

I grow anxious knowing that I will finally see my dad after months of only being able to hear his voice and read his emails. I would cry every time I read his emails, each one beginning with "Hey, Girly Girl" and ending with "Love you, Girly Girl." I would latch on to the phone and wait until the line would completely disconnect and leave me with an echo of my own breath. I hated saying goodbye; I hated not knowing if this phone call could be the last one. I remember I would get home from school sometimes and find a voicemail from my dad. I would play it over and over, focusing on the disappointment in my father's voice that he had missed us. It was often hard for him to call when it was convenient for us, being that he was stationed in a time zone nine hours ahead of ours. He would try his best to call when we would be home and preferably awake, but sometimes he just had to call whenever he had a chance. There were times when I would have

to go a while without hearing from my father because every time a soldier died they would shut down all lines of communication until the soldier's family was notified of the death of their loved ones, which happened more often than anyone would like.

"Eiza," I heard my mother's distant voice. "I am going to the restroom. Do you want to come with me or are you going to stay with your brother?"

"I'll just go ahead and stay." I watch my mother walk away and turn to my brother. "What do you think daddy will say when he sees us?"

"Hmmm, I am guessing 'hi,'" he says, not bothering to look up from his game.

"You think he will cry?"

"He might."

"Are you going to cry?"

"No, I am not going to cry. I bet you're going to cry though."

"Oh yeah, for sure. I'd cry right now if I didn't think I should save my tears for daddy," I say smiling. I picture my dad walking into the gym and making eye contact with me and then we both make a run for it, meeting in the middle and crying in each other's arms like they do in the movies. I smile as I picture my fantasy.

"Eiza, I just saw the buses going around the back of the auditorium," my mom says, pulling at my hand.

I look at her excitedly and do a little wiggle in my seat.

"The buses just pulled up!" the DJ yells followed by more cheering in the auditorium. I can see a man in Dress Blues talking to the DJ, and I watch carefully, trying my hardest to read his lips.

"Ladies and gentlemen, if you could please find a seat or form a line along the back wall, we are about to bring in your soldiers!" The DJ turns the music up louder, possibly in hopes of drowning out the cheers of the anxious crowd. The music does nothing but pump the people up more, and now there is singing and dancing and posters reading "Welcome Home" waving in the air. I watch as a man runs around the auditorium making everyone do the wave in front of him. I laugh and throw my hands in the air when he makes it in front of my section.

I sit back down after my turn and look at my clammy hands before wiping my palms off on my new dress. My ears are ringing; my mouth feels dry. I feel as though I could pass out at any moment, and then the room starts filling with smoke and neon lights cut through the dense fog in

random motions. The room feels claustrophobic, but in an exciting way. Everybody's gaze follows the trail of smoke pouring in through the auditorium's entrance.

"Are you ready?" the DJ yells.

"YES!" the crowd replies, screams filling the room.

Half the lights in the auditorium turn off and the song "The Boys Are Back in Town" starts blaring throughout the building. A stream of soldiers starts flooding single file into the auditorium in a hurried jog. One by one I scan the faces rushing by, looking for my father. As each soldier runs by, I notice that none have taken in their surroundings. It isn't until they line up in rows facing straight ahead that some soldiers' eyes begin to wander. I watch as several faces I recognize scour the room looking for their families.

I elbow my brother in his side, "Do you see him?"

"No," he replies. "Just keep looking. He'll come."

Desperate, I climb on top of my chair and continue my search. Then, I see him. His cheeks jiggling with each stride he makes. When his arms come up near his chest, I can see his gold wedding band reflect a small light in our direction as if it wanted to catch my attention. He is dressed in fatigues, the same as all the other men and women lining up, and yet he seems so distinct. He stands out amongst the swirly dark brown and tan of the uniforms. His face is slimmer than I remember. As he lines up with his comrades, I see him scanning the room for us. When he sees us, he smiles and shifts his weight onto the balls of his feet, picking his heels up off the floor. He looks at us for a brief moment before returning his attention to standing in line with his comrades, his feet shoulder-width apart and his hands behind his back.

Finally, the last few soldiers trickle in, and the music comes to a halt. The DJ hands the microphone to the man in Dress Blues; then the man walks to the front of the rows of soldiers and begins speaking. "We did it."

A united "Hooah" fills the now still room.

"Welcome, family and friends, and welcome home 3rd Corp Major Command. Operation Iraqi Freedom ..."

I look at the side of my dad's face and remember the day he left. He had insisted that it would be easier if my brother and I went to school instead of going with him to the airport to see him off. I tried my hardest to resist, but he wouldn't budge on the issue. I got dressed, and my dad

served me cereal. I couldn't eat. I wasn't hungry; I was nauseated. When we saw the bus coming, barreling down our street, I ran to my dad and buried my face in his chest, breathing in his peppery aftershave. I begged him to let me stay, to let me spend a couple more minutes with him, for me to at least catch the bus on its way back. He refused and instead helped me put my backpack on. I remember: he walked my brother and me down our driveway to where the bus stops every day to pick us up, and when the bus was four houses down, he bent down to my level and simply said, "I'll be home before you know it." Then he hugged me until I could hear the doors of the bus open, and he pushed me in.

"We had our mission ..."

My eyes water as I think of how long it has been since the day my dad left and how much he has missed. I still remember that I sat in an empty seat and scooted all the way over to the window to watch my father wave. I watched until he was out of sight, and then I sat back in my seat and cradled myself in my arms, silently crying until I got to school. I didn't talk at all that day; nobody knew what I had gone through that morning, and nobody knew what I went through for the next twelve months following that day.

"I know everybody is eager to get back to your families, so I am going to keep this short. I am proud to have served with all of you, and let's be thankful that we all made it back and pray for those families who were not as fortunate."

"Hooah!" the rows of soldiers respond. Their proud cry roars within the walls of the gym.

"Report back Monday morning at oh nine hundred hours. You are dismissed."

Immediately after the man dismisses the battalion, the "Army Song" starts playing and soldiers chant along in unison. After hearing the dismissal, chaos ensues as the family members swarm the soldiers and both groups, soldiers and civilians, mesh together.

Right away, I take off running to where I had last seen my father, but by the time I make it through the maze of soldiers, he is gone. Being only four feet and one inch tall, I find myself surrounded by taller people in combat boots that could easily crush me. I quickly turn around and see a clear opening back to where I came from, and I take a gamble running through it. As I make it out of the hive, I see my mother and father in a tight embrace, and I sprint to them, throwing myself into my father's side

and smashing my face into his dusty fatigues that smell like a mix of sweat and moth balls. He turns to me and rips me off his leg, picking me up in one swift motion. Tears are streaming down my face as I throw my arms around my father's neck and wrap my legs around his torso tightly. He holds me for a while before setting me down and pulling my brother in close to him. I look up at my brother's face and notice that behind his glasses there is some obvious mist. I smile at him, but he quickly looks away and wipes his eyes.

"Well," my father says, before clearing his throat, "y'all ready to go?"

I grab his mighty hand with both of mine and follow him outside where I see a parking lot full of buses with green duffle bags lined up beside each one.

"Let me go get my bag; you stay right here."

My father lets go of my hand, and my mother immediately takes his place, grabbing my hand before it has a chance to make it back to my side. I watch as my father speaks with other soldiers while searching for his bag. Each soldier he approaches gives him a firm handshake and a hug and smiles in my direction. He finds his bag with our last name written across it in big black lettering, and he effortlessly throws it over his back before walking back towards us.

When he reaches us, he drapes his arm over my mother, and we walk to the truck that he drove every day before he left; the vehicle that my mother refused to drive while he was gone.

"I'll drive," he says confidently.

"Are you sure?" my mom protests.

"Yes, I am sure. I was still driving over there, Luisa," he says with a smile.

"Hum-v's and tanks are slightly different than a Dodge Ram," she says worriedly.

"We will be fine."

The ride home starts with my dad running multiple stop signs and justifying it by saying he hadn't seen street signs in a while. He also keeps trying to go off-roading to cut through traffic, but my mom won't let him. After a couple of miles, he somewhat gets the hang of driving safely, but even then my brother and I are in the backseat holding on for dear life because of his speed and lack of patience.

As we pass by the motor pool where my father will soon return to

work, I yell out, "Look daddy! See that sign?"

"Which one?"

"The one that says 'Welcome Home Daddy' in big pretty letters with paint sprinkled on it!"

"Oh yeah, I see it."

"I made it!"

"You did? Wow, that's really nice. Good job. Thank you, Girly Girl."

I don't mention that the night I made the sign I cried myself to sleep. I don't mention that there were many nights where I cried myself to sleep. Instead, I look at my dad through the rear view mirror and smile and feel that everything is going to be okay because my daddy is back home.

Becoming a Ghost

James Bryant

I always thought that it would be tragically easy to leave this place, to pack everything away for the final time: clothes into suitcases, disused and misplaced things into plastic black bags that would then be thrown away. Me and the friends that I had known since we were in diapers would share one last meal together: overcooked IHOP pancakes, lukewarm coffee, and bacon.

We'd sit in silence until someone, probably me, said something stupid like,

"I can't believe it's actually over."

We'd sit solemnly for another moment or two before someone else promised to always keep in touch, a sentiment that would be echoed around the table. We'd actually do just that until after Christmas break in our sophomore year when we all began to have different things going on in our lives.

We'd eventually become those Facebook friends that liked each other's status updates and occasionally wished each other a "happy birthday," failing to capitalize anything in our haste. One day someone, probably me, would post a photo of bleary-eyed, wild-haired kids, too young to be drinking, but too stupid to care, tagging everyone in it.

A few comments of, "Where was this even taken?" would flash across everyone's dash.

"Mr. Synders house, right after the choir's winter concert," someone would answer.

We'd all sit back and wonder why we thought it was cool for a man in his forties to be totally okay with a bunch of hormonal teens drinking in his basement.

I thought it'd be easy to leave this place, to drive up to a new school, filled

with new people and new opportunities. I'd start dating a feminist. Someone who hated my hair and the way that I always reeked of pot. She'd "clean me up" by insisting that I start wearing button ups, even in the dead of summer when sweat would pool at my pits. I'd come home freshman year, ten pounds lighter from only eating microwaved mac n' cheese. I'd wax poetic about ... poetry. I'd mispronounce Nietzsche, but correct everyone who corrected me.

I'd return to school that semester to find that my girlfriend had a girlfriend. They met, unironically, at a Melissa Etheridge concert. We'd break up, consolidating ourselves to friendly smiles from across the quad.

I thought it'd be easy. Leaving this place would be nothing more than packing some bags, walking across a stage, smiling for photographs. I'd eat waffles, because the pancakes in the dining hall are on par with a Frisbee covered in whipped cream. (No offense.) I'd pile everything into my car and drive back home to sleep in a room that was now filled with gym equipment that hadn't been used in four years.

I'd forget about the late nights, the new friends, and effectively become a ghost.

If only it were that easy.

My Sister's Eyes

Malorie Rich

"Guten Morgen! You have a letter this morning!"

The German wind seemed even colder at that moment. My heart fluttered against my ribcage. My hands began to shake as I tore open the envelope. *When was the last time I got a letter? When mom and dad died?* I knew the letter couldn't be good.

Dear Melody,

I have some family news that requires your attention here in Texas. I've already purchased your ticket and your plane leaves at six in the morning on the eighth. Clair can't wait to see you.

Sincerely,

Tabitha

That was the letter? That couldn't be it? My thoughts were furious. Who does she think she is? How does she expect me to put my entire life on hold? What about my novel? What about my life here?

My inner voices paused when a picture of my niece fell from the opened slit. Her bright blue eyes matched her mother's and mine, but she had fiery red hair and freckles like her father, the man she never met. She was holding a tiny box while she stood next to what looked like a dumpster. On the back of the picture it said, "Clair, Age 7. We found her first geocache today. She wants to be an adventurer, just like her Aunt Melody." *Ugh.* I couldn't ignore those beautiful sapphire eyes.

By the time I reached Houston, I was entirely too exhausted to deal with anything other than a nap. So, naturally, Clair had a million and one questions.

"How was your trip across Europe?"

"It was fine."

"Where have you been staying at?"

"I found a nice little town in Germany."

Her eyes widened. I loved how amazed she was about everything.

"What kind of adventures have you been on since you've moved to Germany?"

"I went skydiving last week."

Her questions went on the entire trip to Beaumont. It was nice having someone who was simply interested in what I was doing with my life. Being a writer has its perks, but no one really takes you seriously.

"So, what was the big deal that I had to leave my life in Germany so quickly?"

Tabitha sighed, "You haven't even unpacked your bags. It's your first day home in two years. Why don't you just relax? There is a ton of new geocaches in Tyrrell Park, and there are a few new restaurants on College Street. We aren't in a rush, sister."

Tabitha had become a stick in the mud since she had Clair, so she wasn't exactly the most exciting person to be around.

"Fine."

We spent the entire evening running around the sporadically placed trees of Tyrrell Park. I loved watching Clair as she tore through the earth looking for the treasure of strangers. She was quite the little adventurer. I was so involved with her that I didn't realize that Tabitha had fallen behind. Actually, Tabitha had fallen too far behind.

"Tabs, catch up! You're missing all the ..."

That's when I noticed her coughing. It wasn't her normal cough from allergies either. It was like she was hacking something up and gasping for air at the same time. I started walking toward her, but Clair grabbed me by my hand.

"That happens a lot now," stated Clair. "She usually tells me to keep going and she'll catch up when she can."

Sure enough, Tabitha urged us to go on without her. She just needed to catch her breath. "I'm out of shape. That's all."

Something is going on. Clair was pulling me by arm, so I continued on.

"Jerry Nelson's Woodfire Grill? Could the name be any more country?"

Tabitha giggled. "It's better than Catfish Cabin. Come on, they have

some amazing chocolate cake."

Tabitha and I didn't get to talk much during dinner. Clair wanted to know everything that was going on with me.

"What are you writing about?"

"Well, it's not so much writing as it is planning, but I have a few story ideas."

"So, writing is a job?"

I smiled. "Well, of course it is!"

"Can I be a writer?"

"You can be anything you want to be, Clair."

Her blue eyes began to sparkle. "Did you hear that, Mom? I can sell my stories and make money and that will help you get better!"

Get better?

"Wait ... What does she mean by that?"

Tabitha's eyes began to water over.

"Tabitha ... What is going on? What is she talking ...?"

"I'm sick, Mel ..."

My heart skipped a few beats, and my blood ran cold. *Sick?*

"What kind of sick? Like the flu? We can go home and let you get some rest ..."

Tears were already rolling down her cheek as she shook her head. "I have cancer, Melody. I wanted to wait until this evening to tell you."

"Why didn't you call me? Why didn't you send a letter sooner? I would have come home!" I could feel my voice growing louder.

"The doctors thought they could cure it. They told me not to worry. But ..."

"But what?" *Why am I getting so angry?*

"But it continued to get worse. It started out as lung cancer, and after about six months of chemo, it began to spread. I stopped treatment last week."

Tears crept out of the corners of my eyes. *Why is she telling me this here?* I kicked the chair out from under me and stormed out before anyone could see how upset I was. I didn't see my sister until late that night.

"Mel, where have you been? I have been worried sick!"

"It's College Night on Crockett Street. Where else would I have been?"

Tabitha sighed. *That sigh is literally the worst sound.*

"How could you do this?"

She glared at me. "What are you talking about?"

"How could you get sick? Why?"

Tabitha leaned in to hug me, but I jerked away from her. Actually, I ended up tripping over my own feet and landed on my ass.

"NO! How could you do this to Clair? TO ME?"

There must have been a screw lose because as soon as Tabitha plopped down, the vintage Coca-Cola chair fell apart. The look on her face sent me into a fit that I couldn't control.

"Stop laughing! It wasn't that funny!" screamed Tabitha through her stifled giggles.

We sat there on the kitchen floor and laughed until our sides hurt. It had been years, since before Clair was born, that we had laughed like that. It was something I had needed for a long time.

But, as soon as we stopped laughing, I put my head in my sister's lap and began to sob. I couldn't help it. I hadn't seen my sister since our parents were killed, and now I was losing her. *Why didn't I come home more? Why wasn't I here? Why didn't I take them with me? Shut up, brain!*

"How the fuck does someone who doesn't smoke get lung cancer?"

"The Beaumont/Port Arthur area is one of the most awful places to live. The refineries cause lots of people to get sick. I just happen to be one of the unlucky ones."

I had snot running down my face, and I could feel the five screwdrivers rumbling around.

"But ... What am I going to do? You're my best friend! I know you don't really like me because I get to do everything you wanted to do, but ... I love you, Tabs. You're my best friend ..."

I couldn't control my emotions after that.

"Melody, what the hell are you talking about?"

"You stopped writing me back after awhile! You always seemed so bitter when I would call or come home for holidays ... And, mom and dad being killed in the wreck didn't seem to help things. You just acted like you didn't want to be around me."

"Mel ..."

"I just wanted to make you proud! You ended up pregnant by that soul sucking ginger and ended up giving up all of your dreams. I wanted to earn enough money so I could take you and Clair with me, but I just

haven't been able to write and ... I ... I ... I just don't want you to go!"

I put my head in her lap and began to sob again. The mixture of alcohol and emotions weren't making the situation better, but Tabitha just rubbed my hair.

"Melody, look at me."

She grabbed my face and made me look into her sky blue eyes. *I'll never see them again!*

"I am so proud of the person you have become. You have been such an amazing role model for Clair. I love that she looks up to you and wants to be just like you. There should be more women out there like you. You can't let this little bump in the road stop you. Just because I may not be here, doesn't mean you should stop living. You are the person I always hoped to be. That's why I have a favor to ask of you ..."

"I don't think I'm in the right mind to be giving favors," I giggled. "Can you ask me tomorrow?"

She stroked my hair. "Sure thing."

One Month Later ...

"Mom! Billy bought my story for a dollar today! I can start saving to help you get better!"

Tabitha weakly grabbed Clair's hand, "That's wonderful, baby. I sure do appreciate it."

"You are going to get better, huh?"

"Maybe if I take a nap, I'll be up to going for a walk in the park. Does that sound good?"

Clair's whole body began to bounce. "Can we have a picnic?"

Tabitha tried so hard to force a smile. The life in her blue eyes went out a couple days ago. The doctors told us that there wasn't much they could do now. We just needed to make her as comfortable as possible until she passed.

"Whatever you want."

Clair gave my sister a peck on the lips. "I love you ..."

And Tabitha replied with, "a bushel and a peck and a hug around the neck."

I went to follow Clair out of the room, but Tabitha stopped me with her hacking.

"Do you want me to get you some water?"

She shook her head.

"Come sit with me for a minute."

I crawled into the bed and put my head in her lap. She started stroking my hair; it was a habit by now.

I sat there for a long time and simply sobbed. *I have so much to say, but I have no clue how to say it.*

Tabitha understood, though. She knew that I wasn't very comfortable saying my feelings out loud, unless I was drunk on the kitchen floor. She just continued to stroke my hair and let me cry.

"I'll do it."

"Do what?"

I took in a big gasp of air and let it out before I answered with, "I'll be Clair's guardian."

I didn't realize as I took in that big gulp of air, that my sister would take her last.

Six Months Later ...

"So, you're ten years old today, right?"

"Do you not remember how old I am, Aunt Melody?"

My sister's shining blue eyes stared back into mine, and I laughed.

"Well, of course I do! I was just trying to figure out if you were old enough to learn how to drive the moped around Madrid."

Clair began to bounce up and down.

"Really? You mean it?"

"Let's go see if you have gotten any birthday cards or letters from your friends back home first."

"Buenos Dias, Pablo. Do we have any mail this morning?"

"Hola, Melody! Hola, Clair! You actually have one letter this morning."

"Oh, is it from Billy? The boy we met when we visited London?"

I smiled. *She is so much like Tabitha.*

"Drum roll please." Clair began drumming on the wooden floor.

"It is from ..."

I paused. *No, this can't be right? This isn't even possible.*

"Well, who is it from," asked Clair, impatiently.

"... It's from ... your mom ... The letter is for me."

The envelope had stamps from all over Europe; it ended up following us as we traveled through the continent. The letter hit every

major city that Tabitha wanted to see when she was planning to visit, before she had Clair.

My blood ran cold, and my hands began to shake. I'm not entirely sure how I even opened the letter, but I managed it.

Dear Melody,

I'm hoping this letter reaches you around Clair's birthday. I'm sure it'll do some bouncing around trying to chase the two of you.

I've decided to write this letter before you give me your answer about being Clair's guardian, but I know you. You fell in love with that little girl the moment you first held her. I've loved watching you two grow closer this past month. It fills me with joy knowing she will be well taken care of while I'm gone.

She told me last week she has been practicing her story writing a lot more now because she wanted to grow up and be just like you. She gave me one story to keep, but I put it with this letter for you. Hope you enjoy her distracted doodles and wonderful words just as much as I did.

I just wanted you to know that no matter how far apart we are, you will always be my best friend. I love you and am so proud of you.

Love always,

Tabitha.

"What's wrong, Aunt Melody?"

I looked into those sweet blue eyes and just smiled. I put the letter in my backpack.

"Nothing, sweetheart. How about we head up to Madrid and teach you how to drive?"

Clair took me by the hand and pulled me through the open door. *You'll always be my best friend.* The Spanish air seemed warmer in that moment.

Sponsored by Convenience

Ryan Ruffaner as Ryan Reudell

Young Michael's smart phone was blasting him with a barrage of shrill *bloops* and *blings* as the comment section of the Memories app erupted with excitement.

His mom was nagging him to hurry up and get ready—she wasn't going to run late to her own father's funeral—so Michael grimaced and groaned and found the will to slip on an old pair of stained sweatpants for a dead man he barely knew; and then he went to his bedroom and locked the door behind him.

His grandfather had once told him that people used to dress up in fancy suits and ties and attend funerals with their physical person, but that was ages ago. In the year 2055, people agreed that was needlessly uncomfortable and complicated, so they stayed at home and watched the funeral through the Memories app, which streamed live video footage to people's phones via cameras around the event. It was easier, quicker, and more convenient this way.

Michael picked up his phone and logged into the app now. His mother, father, brother and sister, as well as uncles and aunts and neighbors and coworkers, old friends and classmates near and far alike, flooded the comment section with grief.

"Praying for him," said a friend of a friend who had never touched a holy book, and they chased the text with cartoon hands clasped in prayer.

"He was my whole world," said an unfaithful ex-lover, and they embellished it with a sobbing face.

"Literally bawling my eyes out," said Michael's little sister, whom he was certain had never met their grandpa before; and for a moment he wondered why she was so powerfully affected by his loss—he received his answer moments later when a parade of people showered the comment in cartoon Thumbs Ups of their approval.

The commenters may have been stricken with grief, but they were careful to keep their comments under 40 characters long, as instructed by the Excessive Information Act. The Act prohibited messages above 40 characters and videos above 3 minutes—to exceed these limits forced people to focus for too long and put an unnecessary burden on mental health, the government said. And so it was, and so it had been for the last

five decades—as long as anyone in Michael's home could remember. It was easier this way; quicker, and more convenient.

Michael wanted to contribute to the comment section—maybe he could get more Thumbs Ups than his sister, he thought with a thrill. He began to type a somber comment—

And stopped abruptly. He wasn't dressed yet. Or at least his cartoon avatar wasn't.

He couldn't let his mother see him like that. It would be grossly inappropriate.

He tapped his phone screen, selected the "Outfit" icon, and changed his clothes from the khaki slacks and teal dress shirt he'd worn at his Aunt Lucille's beach wedding to a somber pinstripe black suit and black tie. As the new clothes materialized, he wandered back to the wedding ceremony with a wistful grin on his face. It had been wonderful, magical, just like in the movies. And Verizon had sponsored all of it! How many couples could boast that?

His avatar was still cheering for the newlyweds with a cheek-to-cheek grin; he switched his "Emotions" from Elated to Devastated and the cartoon boy's smile deflated into a quivering frown. Perfect.

Michael checked the countdown. Two minutes. Unbelievable.

He tugged at his hair, gnawed at his lips, groaned. He scoured the room for something to do, anything. His eyes settled on a book his grandpa had given him years ago at Christmas. 1984, George Orwell. Michael would never forget that Christmas because his grandpa had snuck out of the Shady Oaks nursing home and given it to him in person. It was Michael's only Christmas that had taken place outside of the Memories app and his parents had been bewildered. Why would someone deliberately inconvenience themselves? It was a clear sign his grandpa needed urgent help—they sent him to a mental health facility for the remainder of his life.

Michael studied the book with a renewed curiosity. He had promised to read it one day; why not now? He had a little time, after all, even if he only got through a few pages—

But the familiar *bloops* and *blings* of the comment section brought him, unconsciously, back to his phone. He could miss something important if distracted from the constant updates for too long. Within a few moments, Michael had forgotten about the book entirely. He had eyes only for the endless stream of comments.

Cartoon faces flooded the feed, all of them displaying vivid

variations of sorrow—one whose thick juicy tears rolled down into a mouth agape with anguish, one whose eyes were screwed shut so tight in misery they couldn't be pried open with an industrial-sized crowbar, and more and more and more.

Messages poured in, too. An avalanche, each under 40 characters long.

Michael tried typing his own message again, something somber and poetic, something that would make his grandpa proud and maybe win more Thumbs Ups than his sister's comment; but no matter how many words he removed, the comment wouldn't fit under 40 characters.

So he sighed and posted a cartoon crying face like everyone else.

The app awarded him Memory Points for his contribution, which he used to purchase an icon of a red rose and send it, digitally, to his mom, who sat not twenty feet away in the living room.

She sent him an icon of a mother hugging a son to show her appreciation.

Michael smiled. He felt loved.

Then the funeral began.

Michael's screen transformed to a camera shot of a rain-soaked sidewalk running through a small town. The rain fell steadily on the brick buildings, *plinking* sharply on the metal awnings over the windows and *plopping* crudely in black puddles gathered by the side of the road.

A man and a woman, both breathtakingly beautiful with cheekbones sharp enough to slice through steel and sculpted bodies befitting Greek gods, shuffled down this sidewalk, black clothes and black umbrellas sheltering them from the rain. Their distant eyes and slumping shoulders suggested nothing on earth could keep the cold gloom out of their souls.

They shuffled aimlessly down the sidewalk until they came to a bar with the word *Nelson's* glowing in curvy fluorescent letters above a rain-streaked glass door. Upon sight of it, a little life returned to their eyes.

The man held the door for the woman; she entered and he followed. They slid onto the bar stools with choreographed grace and ordered two *Nelson's Brew* beers.

A blonde bartender said, "Coming right up," and moments later the man and woman were drinking deeply in memory. They sat up straighter, let a little light into their eyes, and found that they might, with another sip of *Nelson's Brew*, be able to smile again.

As the camera zoomed out, they put a hand on each other's shoulder. *Nelson's Brew* materialized on the screen in large curvy letters and a deep voice said: "*This funeral brought to you by Nelson's Brew. Nelson's Brew, just what you need on a day like this. Drink responsibly.*"

The advertisement ended and another one took its place. Tissues, coffins, cremation services, eulogy speakers for hire, more alcohol; the list went on and on, but collectively the ads lasted under 3 minutes. They didn't want to waste anyone's time, after all—easy, quick, convenient, that was the rule.

When all the advertisements were over, Michael's phone displayed an open coffin sitting in the middle of a church. It gleamed obsidian black and was swallowed in digital red roses and freckled with logos—Facebook, Chevy, Chevron, Apple, McDonalds, and more. To the left of the coffin stood a mahogany podium with the *Nelson's Brew* logo plastered on the front.

If Michael's grandpa had still been alive, he would've ranted and raved and ripped it off with his bare hands. The thought of his grandpa piqued Michael's curiosity. It had been a long time since he'd last seen him and he wondered how he'd changed since then. Maybe his jowls were droopier or his eyes more crinkly or his nose more bulbous. He cycled through the different cameras in the room, searching for the one peering into the coffin. He found it.

And furrowed his brow, confused.

The man somehow looked *younger* than when he'd last seen him. The broken veins in his nose had been slim winding wires of blue and purple, like a bruise stretched into spider webs, but now they were nowhere to be found; and his grandpa's lips, which he was absolutely certain were dry and cracked like an old wax seal, were now moist and plump and flawless.

This must have been 30-year-old wax replica of his grandfather, not his real grandfather.

Michael sat on his bed, puzzled, then remembered that the *Memories* app often used filters to enhance the mood. He went into the app's settings and searched through the filters and sure enough he found the culprits responsible. Youthful and Peaceful enhancements were both activated. He tapped them to turn them off.

A message appeared. It said: *Due to a recent update, Memories no longer allows users to alter Real Time Enhancements.*

He didn't remember agreeing to that update. But he didn't have time to think about it, because a man was saying, "Good evening, ladies and gentlemen ..."

Accepting that he'd never truly know what his grandpa looked like now, Michael returned to the camera displaying the podium and casket. A priest stood behind the podium, a crisp sheet of paper wrapped in his smooth, young hands.

There wouldn't be many words on the paper—the Excessive Information Act prohibited eulogies over 30 seconds long, deeming anything longer an unnecessary use of time, and therefore inconvenient—but the prompt was necessary because people had trouble memorizing things nowadays, and that was on the rare occasions that they tried. The priest read on:

"We are gathered here today to remember the life of Charles Montgomery, and to mourn his passing ..."

The priest continued, but Michael had stopped listening. He had eyes and ears only for the *bloops* and *blings* of the comment section. He was so hypnotized by the little bursts of emotion that before he knew it the priest was finishing up.

"... gone but never forgotten. Rest in peace, Charles Montgomery." The priest stepped off the podium to an applause of electronic *bloops* and *blings* as the comment section was drowned in cartoon crying faces and superficial sorrow.

Michael breathed a sigh of relief. A friend once told him of a funeral that had lasted a full 30 seconds! He could think of nothing more barbaric; he would've died of boredom.

He moved to exit the app, but stopped when an old man in a black and white suit—a real black and white suit—shuffled onto the screen and took his place at the podium. With one crinkled hand he held a bouquet of real roses and with the other he adjusted the mic.

The old man cleared his throat and opened his mouth to speak, but found his voice strangely muted. He turned away for a moment. When he turned back, tears were streaming down his cheeks. He sniffled and wiped them away with the back of his hands, cleared his throat again, prepared to speak.

Michael doubted he'd get a word out, because swaggering up to the podium was a security guard fingering the gun in his holster. The guard's uniform was poked with logos like everything else. Starbucks across his

shoulder blades, the Apple logo on one sleeve and Microsoft on the other, Instagram on the seat of his pants.

"You can't be here," the security guard said. "The funeral's over. Go home."

The old man, his voice breaking in and out, said, "Please, sir, I only wish to pay my respects—the proper way. He was my friend and he deserves that."

But the guard was shaking his head before the man had finished. "If you wanted to pay your respects, you should've used the app like everyone else. There's nothing to be done now. Just go home. I don't want to have to use force."

At that last sentence the old man stiffened. His eyes narrowed, nostrils flared. He scoffed. "You call this respectful? Since when did convenience trump courtesy, hmm?"

"Sir—"

"No, son, let me tell you something," the old man said, his voice no longer breaking but finding footing and rising and deepening to a thunderous roar, "I will not stand for this superficial bullshit! Do you hear me? I will not stand for it. I—"

Bloop! Bling! Blorp! Notifications flooded Michael's phone. They said:

NEW VIDEO! *Top 7 Times Brad Coleman Made Us Swoon. You won't believe #3!*

NEW ARTICLE *25 Adorable Accessories Every Girl Needs RIGHT NOW*

NEW TWEET *This Crazy Muslim Mom Will SHOCK you!*

Michael watched, skimmed, and scrolled through each one and then closed the windows and returned to the Memories video feed. He gasped. The security guard had his gun drawn. It was pointed right at the old man's chest. The old man was shouting and waving his hands so wildly that rose petals were ripped from their crowns and tossed to the ground in a red rain of deep, swooping arcs. The security guard was shouting too, but it was impossible to distinguish what either of them were saying.

Michael watched the scene play out with morbid fascination. He wiped his sweaty hands on his sweatpants so the phone wouldn't slip out of his grasp. He licked his lips, swallowed.

The old man was stamping his feet now, sneering, snarling. The veins bulging on his forehead were as thick as pythons. Suddenly he seized

the Nelson's Brew logo on the front of the podium with his veiny hands, prepared to rip it off like a scab. The security guard was screaming, still incoherent but the message clear: desecrate the logo at your own peril!

Michael leaned closer. He didn't want to miss this.

Bloop! Bling! Blorp!

Michael didn't remember opening the notifications, but sure enough the video feed had vanished from the screen and was replaced by a celebrity's leaked nude photos. Her curves were so mesmerizing. He wanted to look at them all day. And her breasts were—

Another *bloop* and Michael was reading a tiny list titled "Top 10 Reasons Anna Abraham is Your Idol" and the nude photos were forgotten. He'd never heard of Anna Abraham before, but he wanted to know why she was his idol. By the end of the list, he decided Anna Abraham was pretty cool. In fact, she—

Bloop! Your Childhood Cartoons Reimagined as Goths.

Michael clicked on it.

Bling! The Funniest Laugh You'll Ever Hear!

Michael clicked on it.

Blorp! 13 Things to Make You the Perfect—

BANG! BANG! BANG!

Michael jolted upright, squeaked in surprise. He switched back to the video feed.

And felt his stomach twist in knots, a cold hand clutch his heart. The Nelson's Brew logo lay on the floor, and the old man lay face down in a pool of his own blood. It was dark and red and spreading, like a crimson tide; spreading and spreading.

The security guard doubled over, vomited, stumbled out of sight on rubbery legs.

The screen went black.

Michael gazed at his horrified expression in the screen of his phone. What had happened? And how had it happened so quickly? He'd only been gone for a second, right?

He checked the comment feed—maybe someone else had seen it. But to his surprise everyone else had logged off as soon as the ceremony had ended at the 13 second mark—some, the time stamp showed, like his mother, left even before that.

Was he the only one who'd seen it? Surely he had to tell someone. They—

Bloop!

Michael opened the notification. The screen flashed a list called, "Top 10 Most Controversial Suicides."

Bling!

The screen somersaulted, played a video called "Top 10 Saddest Small Town Funerals."

Michael clicked on the links, then clinked on the next, and the next, and the next after that. And when he was finished, he checked his Facebook, his Twitter, his Instagram, his Snapchat, his Sync, his YouTube, his Tumblr, his Pinterest, and then his Facebook again.

It wasn't that he didn't care about the guard gunning down an innocent old man and it wasn't that he'd forgotten about the pool of blood that grew from a puddle to a pond to a lake, it was simply that he didn't have enough time to think about those things. To do so wouldn't have been easy; it wouldn't have been quick; and it certainly wouldn't have been convenient.

The Mannequin Threat

Dylana Sauerwein

I cursed under my breath as I shoved the mannequin's legs into the pair of tights my girl was supposed to be modeling. Changing the mannequin displays was always a chore, but it became nearly impossible when the figure was supposed to be wearing anything formfitting. It was especially difficult for me, who at 5'1" couldn't get enough leverage to pull the leggings on without totally disgracing myself.

I tipped the body upside-down, naked legs V-ing in the air, and yanked on the waistband and grunted. A passing customer gave me a disgusted glance. I made eye contact with the lady and smiled automatically. My section manager, Ms. Julia, had made it very clear that we needed to be friendly to everyone, so smiling came naturally, even if it was fake.

The mannequin refused to cooperate. The tights stayed bunched up around her knees. I knelt down on the floor so that I was squatting over the figure's head, clenching my thighs around her neck to keep her from falling over on me. Carefully, I reached up to grab the tights and, putting my hand between her legs to pull myself up, used all one hundred pounds of my body weight and tugged on the leggings. No go. They remained firmly where they were. I wiped my forehead with the back of my hand, a streak of orange-tinted makeup coming off with a thin layer of sweat. Mist, my girlfriend Hillary would call it. According to Hillary, I never sweated. I was misty, shiny, glittery—never sweaty. That was a lie and she knew it, seeing as she made me sweat more than anyone as she kissed my neck and let her hands wander down ...

The customer was still there, watching me out of the corner of her eye while pretending not to see me. She checked the size of the lacy shorts that would surely be too short on anyone older than twelve. "Can I help you find anything, ma'am?" I asked as I clambered back to my feet as gracefully as I could, flattening my skirt.

"Oh, no. I'm just looking," she said, her smile as fake as mine.

"Okay, just let me know if I can help you with anything."

She nodded, looking away pointedly, and wandered off to a farther rack of denim vests in various states of distress.

Turning my attention back to the task at hand, I laid the

mannequin on the floor. There was nothing left to do but go for it. The glittery leggings were too tight to try to get off, a problem for the associate who would replace me when I left. I tucked my skirt as tightly as I could around me to maintain an illusion of modesty and straddled the girl. I slunk down her body to better reach the leggings and began to slowly inch them up her legs. The leggings were at least moving now, but so slowly that I knew if I didn't find a way to do it faster, I'd be there all night. I decided to try a more rhythmic motion. Pull, rest. Pull, rest. It wasn't until they were halfway up her thighs that I realized that I was sitting directly over the girl's crotch.

Shit. I glanced up to the security camera in the corner and scooted farther back. The nipple-less points of her wooden tits poked my ass. This was hardly better. A movement from the corner of my eye caught my attention. The fake-smiling customer wasn't smiling anymore. She stared at me, open-mouthed, unable to look away from the train wreck I'd become. My company issued smile popped back up before I had a chance to think of how creepy it was to do so.

I chose to ignore the customer and finish the mannequin before anything else could go wrong. I wrapped my ankles around the girl's neck and, grabbing onto the uncooperative tights, pulled the elastic waistband with all my might. The mannequin slid along the dirty carpet a bit, her wooden boobs now touching my inner thighs. The death grip my ankles had on her neck forced her chin under my skirt as, with a final loud grunt, the damned tights finally popped over the girl's bulbous ass.

I was sweating for real now, not misting, glittering, or shining. Sweating. Wisps of my short blonde hair stuck to my temples and I could feel my mascara running. Raccoon eyes. I pushed my hair out of my face and got to my feet, panting a little as I did so. God, I was exhausted. I hooked two fingers between the dummy's legs and toted her back, topless, to her stand at the front of the Juniors' section. The wide-eyed customer had run off while I was still manhandling my girl. Whatever. Technically, I was supposed to change the mannequins by either bringing them to a dressing room to dismember them in private or waiting until there weren't any customers in my area, but ever since I put in my two-weeks-notice, I had become much more lax about following the rules.

After throwing the ugliest sweater I could find onto the mannequin's armless torso (a white and blue chevron design with a garish orange dinosaur wearing glasses), I flagged down the only other sales

associate working the Juniors' Department that night. I had always been pretty good about sticking to the company's policies for the three years I had worked at the department store. I replaced missing tags, dusted the fixtures, and cleaned out the dressing rooms every time a plague of sixteen-year-old girls trashed them. I tried to stay out of my coworkers' drama, only indulging in gossip if it was especially juicy and, like everyone else in the department, turned a blind eye to the manager that showed up drunk every Saturday morning. However, now that I was leaving the company, I no longer felt the need to follow every rule to the letter. In fact, the only reason I had even bothered to show up for the last few days of work was so I could collect my unused vacation pay, the \$654 that would get me through the month as I looked for a new job in the new town I was moving to with Hillary, my softer spoken, sweeter better half who would never resort to dry humping a mannequin just for a pair of tights. We'd already signed the lease and emptied our savings accounts for the down payment, so all I had left to do was get the vacation pay and get the hell out. I was counting down the days. Five more to go.

"I'm going down to get some jewelry for my girl. Do you need anything?"

Samantha stepped back from her own mannequin, giving it an intense once over before responding. "A coral necklace if you can find one," she finally answered. "Big but not huge. Pink is okay if they don't have coral. What do you think?"

"Sure," I agreed, already walking towards the escalator that would take me to Jewelry. "I'll be right back," I lied, knowing I would be in Jewelry for at least twenty minutes trying on earrings and avoiding customers before I would reluctantly make my way back to help Samantha put away the over-priced crop tops and faux-leather leggings that were piled on our work table.

Teenage girls were the best and the worst customers. They never asked you for help if they needed to find anything, choosing instead to keep to themselves and the hoard of giggling, bumbling friends that never traveled in packs of less than five. Their mothers were willing to spend hundreds of dollars on bedazzled jeans and flowy shirts if it meant their little girl was the hottest bitch in middle school. That was fine with me. The thing I had a problem with was the mess. The Juniors' Department was infamously messy. No matter how diligent my coworkers and I were, there was always a pile of clothes spilling out of fitting rooms that always smelled

faintly of Hello Kitty perfume and urine. The number of overpriced sundresses I'd pulled out with plastic bags over my hands as gloves so that I wouldn't have to touch the pee soaked material myself made me question the hygiene and humanity of teenage girls everywhere.

The Jewelry department was relatively busy for once, not a good place to hide to avoid customers. Middle-aged women with identical haircuts argued about watch bands, bracelet clasps, and the fakeness of the fake diamonds with the ever-patient Jewelry ladies who tried never to come out from the glass counters that served as barricades between them and the angry mob. Jewelry customers were always angry about something. Maybe a side effect from breathing in too many fake tanner fumes.

It only took me five minutes to find suitable accessories for the mannequins waiting for me upstairs. Unwilling to get back to my duties, I wandered off to the Lingerie department.

"Andrea! I thought you were gone!" Meghan said by way of a greeting, never taking her eyes off the bras she was organizing. The colors and patterns got less and less exciting as the sizes went up.

"I wish." I put my armful of overpriced necklaces on the table and picked up a bra. Too big. "Have you been busy?"

Meghan and I had been hired within a few days of each other and had trained together in Lingerie. We were sure we were going to be placed in the department together, but after Hillary came to visit me at work, I got moved out of women's underwear. Meghan was pissed, sure it was a gay thing. I guess the managers didn't want a lesbian to work in a department that specialized in touching boobs. I didn't care. I just wanted a job.

"Nah, I have one lady around here somewhere, I think. I said hi but she looked like she was in a hurry."

"Yeah," I found a bra closer to my size covered in blue and green polka dots. Gross. "I had somebody a little while ago, but I was changing the mannequins so I couldn't really help her. I think I freaked her out, actually."

"Really?" Meghan laughed, taking the bra from me and adding it to the stack of brightly colored underwear. "How'd you do that?"

"I may have mounted it. The mannequin, I mean. Not the customer."

"Oh my God, you *mounted* it?" Meghan snorted. "What the hell is wrong with you? Did you at least say something to her?"

"No," I continued poking through the bras, looking for one that didn't look like something Barbie would wear. "I mean, I think I asked if she needed help or anything, but I didn't really talk to her. What am I supposed to say, 'Sorry I molested the mannequin?' How is that going to be better?"

Meghan delicately wiped tears of laughter out of her eyes with the side of her manicured finger. "What am I going to do without you? No one else here is that stupid!"

"Oh, wow, thanks," I mocked being hurt.

"Shut up, you know what I mean. Oh!" Meghan pulled a lacy red bra out of the unsorted pile I'd been shuffling through and held it up to me to see. "This one is cute."

It was obviously too big for me, but I took it anyway. "Yeah, maybe for you," I held it against her chest. "You can fill it out. You don't have toddler boobs like me."

"Ahem," an annoyed voice sounded from behind me. I spun around. It was the customer from upstairs, I recognized her fake smile and perfectly bobbed hair. Meghan pushed me aside before I could embarrass myself any more.

"I'm sorry, we were checking the size on this one," Meghan said, snatching the bra from my limp grasp. "Can I help you find anything?"

"Is your manager here?" The question was posed to Meghan, but the customer stared at me.

"I'm the only one in this department tonight. Is there anything I can do for you?" Meghan stood her ground.

"I don't think so. Thanks." The customer went back to the racks without complaint and I heaved a sigh of relief.

"Was that her?" Meghan asked, trying not to laugh now that the crisis had been averted.

"Of course it fucking was! Thank God I only have a week left."

"Well, I have to stay here longer than that so you should go before you get me in any more trouble." She said it like she was playing, but I knew she meant it.

I meandered through the makeup department before going back upstairs, afraid the angry lady would be there waiting for me. I hadn't really done anything that wrong, had I? I just changed the mannequin. And touched Meghan's boobs, but not on purpose! Just to see what the bra would look like on her. Was that really so bad?

"Here," I said when I finally got back to Juniors', handing a large chunky necklace to my coworker. "It's the closest thing to coral that they had. Sorry it took so long."

"It's okay," Samantha said, draping the jewelry around the mannequin's elongated neck. "You got a call, by the way."

"Hillary?" I guessed hopefully. Maybe I wasn't in trouble. Maybe she didn't say anything. Maybe she left. Hillary did call sometimes, even though I'd told her a hundred times I wasn't supposed to take personal calls at work. She always seemed to forget. She'd even applied to work with me a few months ago. It was more of a joke than anything, a way to spend more time with me so she wouldn't have to call. Maybe it was her. Maybe it was my girlfriend.

"No, it was from Customer Service. Mr. Keswick wants to see you. They said it was important."

"Shit. Are you serious?" I wished I could have been more surprised.

"Yeah, why? What's wrong?"

"Never mind, sorry to leave you here again."

"It's cool. We haven't had anybody since that one lady you scared off."

After making my way across the store, I stood outside Mr. Keswick's office for a few seconds, trying to take a couple of calming breaths. Everything was okay. I only had five days left. Firing me meant paper work. They wouldn't fire me. Only five more days. I knocked on Mr. Keswick's door.

"Come in."

My heart sank as I opened the door to see not only Mr. Keswick but Assistant Manager Mr. Michaels and Ms. Julia, the manager of Juniors', as well.

"You wanted to see me?" I asked, my mouth suddenly dry. I knew what was happening. There was only one reason to be seen by the manager trifecta: customer complaint.

"Yes, Andrea," Keswick said gravely. "Have a seat."

I sank into the cracking leather seat across from his desk as calmly as I could, tucking my feet under the chair so I wouldn't bounce them nervously in front of me. I folded my hands in my lap, cracking my knuckles.

"How are you doing this evening?" Mr. Keswick asked pleasantly. He pulled a manila file with my name stamped across it towards him.

"Fine," my voice cracked. I wished he would just get on with it. If he was going to reprimand me, I would rather he go ahead and do it so I wouldn't have to deal with anticipation.

"Andrea," Ms. Julia began, her company smile gleaming. "Do you remember anything *unusual* happening tonight?"

"Um." I stared at her perfect teeth. Was there any point in lying? Was it even lying? Changing the mannequins wasn't unusual. Talking to Meghan wasn't unusual. "No? I don't think so. I cleaned out the fitting rooms with Samantha and waxed the contemporary fixtures and changed the mannequins out. I was just getting back from getting accessories for them when I got called here."

"So you don't remember threatening a customer?" Mr. Michaels asked, getting straight to the point.

"No!" I said immediately, my eyes widening. Feeling up a mannequin was one thing, but threatening somebody was another. "No. Absolutely not, sir. I would never threaten anybody."

"We got a complaint that you sexually threatened a customer," Mr. Michaels said, glaring at me through his thick glasses. "We take these things very seriously here, Andrea."

"Yeah, I mean, yes! I know, of course, obviously, but I didn't do anything like *that!*" I felt my face flush.

"No?" Mr. Keswick raised his bushy eyebrows.

"No." I said firmly.

"Andrea," Julia started in sweetly. "Can you tell us what you *were* doing, then?"

"I was just changing the mannequins. I stopped in Lingerie on my way back from getting accessories, but that's it. I didn't threaten anyone."

Mr. Keswick exchanged a meaningful glance with Julia. "Where were you changing the mannequins? Were you in the dressing room like you're supposed to be?"

"No," I answered honestly. "I know we're supposed to take them to the dressing room, but it was late, and I didn't see any customers that needed help. I was trying to put those new leggings you liked on it," I said, directly addressing Julia. She looked the most sympathetic, but her ever-present smile made it hard to tell. "You know how hard those things are to get on them." I attempted a weak laugh, but it sounded more like a cough.

"Well, a customer saw you going at it with the mannequin," Mr. Michaels said, his glasses magnifying his cold eyes. "A Mrs. Jacobson said

you had it upside-down with its face under your skirt, *between your legs,*" he emphasized, looking disgusted. "You made eye contact and smiled at her as you were feeling along the mannequin's ..." he trailed off, "*under-business.*"

"Is this true?" Mr. Keswick asked.

"Yes, but it wasn't like that!" I said hurriedly. "I was just trying to put tights on the mannequin, that's all. There was nothing sexual about it."

"You were straddling it!" Mr. Michaels insisted. "It was nearly naked and you were sitting right on it! We found the security tape of it to make sure, so don't try to lie."

"I'm not lying!" I nearly yelled as my temper flared up. I took a deep breath before continuing. "Yeah, I had to sit on it, but just because I was trying to get the stupid leggings on it. I wasn't trying to *do* anything! I must have made eye contact and smiled at her out of habit. I swear to God, I never threatened her!"

"But you do admit that you were being inappropriate with the mannequin," Mr. Keswick pressed.

"I didn't mean to be inappropriate. I was just changing it like Julia asked me to. I never threatened anyone."

"You said you stopped in Lingerie after getting jewelry, yes?"

"Yes," I answered, suspicious. No matter what, I couldn't throw Meghan under the bus. It wasn't her fault I was being stupid. "I wanted to see if there was anything on sale." I knew it was a lame excuse, but the managers were always trying to get us associates to shop at the store. The more we spent our paycheck at work, the better.

"I see," Mr. Keswick answered dryly. He didn't believe me. "I already called down to Lingerie and the associate down there said you were helping her size something."

"Right," I said, relieved. Meghan had covered for me. "Yeah, there was a bra we weren't sure the size of."

"Well, which was it?" Mr. Keswick pressed. "Were you helping Meghan or shopping?"

"I don't know. A little of both maybe?"

"Mrs. Jacobson says that you followed her there. That you made her feel unsafe."

"I swear, I had no idea she was down there. I mean, she talked to me and Meghan after I got there—"

"So, you did know she was there," Mr. Michaels cut in.

"Yeah, but not until I got there!" I shot back. "I didn't stalk her around the store! I never meant to threaten her, I was just doing my freakin' job!"

"Right." Mr. Keswick flipped through my file. "I see that you've put your two week notice in," he said as though he hadn't signed the papers the same as me. "Any reason why you decided to leave us?"

"I haven't threatened anyone, if that's what you're saying." The managers sat in stony silence. "I'm moving out of town."

"With your girlfriend?" Mr. Keswick asked.

"She calls here asking for you a lot, you know," Mr. Michaels added accusingly.

"Didn't she apply here a few months back?" Mr. Keswick pressed.

"I don't remember," I lied. It wasn't his business. She'd never heard back from anyone anyway.

"Hmm." He shuffled through my papers. "You've worked here for how long now, three years?"

I nodded stiffly.

"We haven't had any problems with you in the past, have we, Andrea?"

I allowed myself to feel a brief glimmer of hope. I had been a model employee since I was hired. I only called in once every two months and had a mere handful of tardies. I'd never had a serious complaint in the entire time I'd been employed there. "No," I said with confidence.

"Well, like Mr. Michaels said, we take this sort of complaint very seriously. Since you've already shown an interest in leaving the company, I think it would be best if you didn't come back for the remainder of your two weeks."

"Best if I didn't come back?" I repeated. "So, fired, right?"

"Technically, yes. We feel it would be best if we let you go at this time." Ms. Julia and Mr. Michaels nodded in robotic agreement. Teeth and glasses flashed accordingly.

"I only have five days left!" I said, desperate.

"That's right." Mr. Keswick said pleasantly without offering any explanation.

"What about my vacation pay?"

"You don't have any vacation time, do you?" Mr. Keswick shuffled through my papers again.

"Yeah, I do." My volume went up again. "I have over \$600 in

unused vacation pay I should be getting. It's my rent for next month!"

"That money doesn't get added to your last paycheck if your employment has been terminated."

"Like it just has."

"Right."

"I haven't done anything wrong, though! I just—This is stupid! You can't just fire me, I only have a few days left! It was just a mannequin!"

"Andrea, I'm going to have to ask you to calm down, or do I need to have security walk you out?" Mr. Keswick remained impassive.

I took a deep breath, trying to calm myself. I could feel angry tears burning my eyes. "No, I'm fine."

"I'm sorry you had to leave like this."

I nodded. There was nothing left to say. I wiped my tears away as I walked back to the Juniors' Department to get my bag.

"Andrea!" Samantha called as she came over, walking to me as fast she could without running. Running was against company policy. Her heels clacked on the marble floor. "What's going on? Are you okay?" she asked, seeing the tears in my eyes.

I shook my head. "I just got fucking fired," I whispered.

"Fired? Are you serious?" I appreciated her outrage.

"I don't know what I'm going to do. I'm not getting my vacation money. What am I going to tell Hillary? That was supposed to be our rent money! We were supposed to be getting married!" I wailed. I couldn't help it. It was so unfair.

"I'm so sorry, Andrea."

I shook my head. "It's fine," I lied. "We'll figure it out. It just sucks. I've never been fired before. I'm going to get out of here."

"Well, I'm still sorry," Samantha said.

I got my bag out from under the register and thought about calling Hillary, but I couldn't. Not yet. We'd have to break the lease. There would be no big moving day. No apartment. No ring.

"Bitch," I cursed at the still armless mannequin as I headed towards the door.

The Two of Wands

Dylana Sauerwein

"I've got your shoes for you, girly girl," Mom said as she burst into Holly's room, not bothering to knock. "You need to stop leavin' them all over the house or the dogs'll take them outside." Holly looked up, startled, the phone nearly slipping out of her hand.

"I'll talk to you later, Nat," Holly ended the call. Mom never came in her room without a good reason. She watched as her mother set the worn-out canvas tennis shoes on the shelf in the closet, the only pair to actually be put away besides the Easter sandals she never wore.

"Who was that?" Mom asked, gesturing to the phone still in Holly's hand.

"Natalie." Holly ran her fingers through her tangled hair. She and her family had known Natalie for years, but ever since Natalie agreed to dye Holly's hair blue, Mom hadn't been on the friendliest terms with her. Mom pursed her lips, but didn't mention the blue mess that was her daughter's once-blonde hair.

"How's her mom?"

"I don't know. She didn't say. She got a letter from some school, though, so that's good."

"Speaking of which," Mom said, finally getting to her point, "you need to make a decision soon."

Holly shifted uncomfortably on the perpetually unmade bed. She really didn't want to have this conversation again. "I know."

"Yeah, you keep sayin' that, but you're still not doing anything about it," Mom said, hands on hips, her power stance. "Now's the time to get serious about this, Holly." Holly stared at a freckle on her knee, unwilling to meet her mother's eye. "You said you wanted a year off to decide what you wanna do. Me and your dad have tried real hard to stay outta your hair and let you do what you wanted, you know we have. You're an adult now, so I can't tell you what to do anymore, but if you wanna be an adult, you gotta act like one."

"I know, Mom. I'm going to do something, I just don't know what yet." She tried picking up a pair of jeans from beside the bed and pretending to fold them to diffuse the situation, but it didn't work.

"You don't know yet? What have you been doing all this time? You

don't know?"

"Well, I know for sure I want to go to school, but I don't know for what yet, and it seems like a waste of time to go if I don't know what I want to do." This was a lie. She still had no idea if she wanted to go to school or not, but figured her mother would go easier on her if she had some kind of decision, even if just a half-ass one.

"Look, I don't care what you choose, it's your life, but I better see some applications in here by tomorrow night. Job or school or both, whatever, but you're doing something or you're moving out, you got me?"

"Yes ma'am." Holly stared back at her, meeting her angry look as best she could.

"Me and your dad aren't supporting you forever, young lady. You can ask your sister about that."

Holly did her best not to roll her eyes. Poppy hadn't needed anyone to look out for her since she was 18, not with her own business and everything else she did to make money from home. "I kn—uh, yes ma'am."

Sensing weakness, Mom continued to stare. Finally, she nodded curtly. "This room is a mess." That was true enough. Piles of laundry sat in mounds around the room, arranged in a vague sense of organization by color, use, and degree of dirtiness, while shoes spilled from the closet in an unchecked jumble. Stuffed animals from her childhood poked their heads out from under the bed.

"I'm cleaning it now." Holly held up the dirty jeans she'd been folding and kicked a teddy bear back under the bed.

"Uh huh. Sure you are," Mom said, looking pointedly at the phone poking out from the messy sheets.

As soon as she was out of sight, Holly slumped back on the bed, letting the jeans fall back to the floor. It wasn't like she hadn't done anything in the year since graduation, just nothing important. She had started the year off really well, looking into different colleges, building a résumé (though she'd never sent it to anyone or used it at all. It seemed like a good adult-type thing to have saved on her desktop), and making a profile on care.com even though she'd only babysat once in her life and had to call her dad to bring her a change of clothes after the baby pissed down her shirt. She'd even looked into a couple of jobs, but nothing jumped out at her. She refused to work at the Dairy Queen behind the elementary school and had dismissed all her mother's less-than-subtle hints about waitressing jobs around town. She still had time.

That momentum slowed a hell of a lot though as the months went by and more and more friends made plans and went off to school and work and life without her. She hadn't checked back with care.com in over two months, despite getting a couple of emails on her phone telling her people wanted to interview her for some position or another. She was on Facebook way more than Indeed anymore. She felt the panic building in the back of her throat as the days on her Alice in Wonderland themed calendar fluttered by uselessly. The year was almost gone. She got desperate. She ran in the mornings. She listened to opera. She dyed her hair blue for inspiration, but only found that it clashed with her skin tone and depleted her already dwindling savings account.

More than anything else, Holly was waiting for a sign. Some cosmic event to tell her what to do. Not for the first time that year, she wished she were someone else. Specifically, her sister. Holly looked around her room at the piles of laundry standing in the corners and the teetering stack of magazines beside the bed. The backpack under the desk was still full of her high school papers. She'd avoided it this long, but the year was finally up. She had to go see her sister. Poppy specialized in cosmic events. It even said so on her business card.

"You have a Seer's hands," Gramma had told Poppy when she was only nine and Holly was five. She had turned the plump pink palm in her hands, studying each line and groove through thick, tortoise shell glasses.

"Really?" Poppy asked, ever hopeful.

Holly sat on the edge of the beige, floral sofa, swinging her short legs as she waited to be called. Gramma hated when Holly or Poppy ran around during a reading, even if she were doing a reading for one of them. She twisted her hands in her lap to keep herself from pulling on the lace doilies that seemed to cover every available surface of her grandmother's house. There was a lot of stuff in Gramma's house that she wasn't allowed to touch. The doilies, the jars of tea leaves, the ceramic dolphin statues, and Gramma's knitting needles were strictly off limits. She could play with the acrylic paints, but only if Gramma was watching and said it was okay. Poppy had once spilled hot pink paint on the carpet. Holly had never seen her so mad. Everything in Gramma's house was clean and neat and in its proper place. Gramma had replaced the carpet rather than live with the pink stain.

"Oh, yes, my dear. You can see it right here," Gramma traced a faint

line from Poppy's wrist to her middle finger. The girl snatched her hand back and stared at it, as if it were a book only she could read. Holly jumped up from her place on the sofa, unable to sit still for even a second longer, and ran over to her sister.

"Lemme see!" Holly insisted, pulling at Poppy's hands. Her sister took a step back, hands out of reach, her eyes on her magical palms.

"Do me! Do me!" Holly pleaded as she waved her hands in her grandmother's face. "What do my hands say, Gramma? Am I a Seer too?" Four years younger than her sister, Holly was content to be Poppy's shadow as long it meant she could be just like her.

Gramma smiled and tucked a strand of Holly's flyaway hair behind her ear. Holly had seen *Cinderella* and *Sleeping Beauty* enough times to know what magic was and was always a little disappointed that Gramma didn't have fairy wings. In fact, Gramma looked a lot like the other old ladies who went to their church with her permed gray hair and tasteful pantsuits.

"Let's have a looksee," Gramma said, taking Holly's hands in her own. Holly held her breath. Poppy hovered over her shoulder.

"I don't think so," Gramma said at long last. "You don't have the Seer's line like Poppy, see?" She pointed to an invisible line on her palm. "See here, Holly?" Gramma pulled Poppy's hand back towards her and splayed it palm up next to Holly's. "You see this line, my love?" she asked Poppy, running a long red fingernail down the length of Poppy's hand. "This is your Sight line. I have one, too. All Seers do. It's right here."

"There?" Poppy asked pointing to the thin, invisible line marking her future in her pudgy hand.

"That's right. Now look at Holly's hand. What do you see?"

Standing side by side, Poppy looped her arm around Holly's to better compare her hand to her sister's. "I don't know," she said after a long moment of study.

"Do you see that line I just showed you?" Gramma pressed, pushing her glasses up the bridge of her narrow nose.

Poppy examined the two hands a minute longer. "No!" she finally said. "She don't have that line at all!" Holly thought she could cry. She bit her lip and kept in the tears. "See? Look at my hand," Poppy instructed. Holly looked. "Now look at yours. Do you see the difference?"

She didn't see it, and that was the point. Holly would ask twice more before finally giving up the hope of being a mystic. Whatever

Gramma saw in Poppy's hands, she couldn't see in Holly's.

"A worker," Gramma would say. "A reader. A thinker. A teacher." She changed her mind every time, but Holly was never a Seer.

Holly opted to walk to Poppy's house rather than drive. Though it was on the other side of town, nothing within the city limits was outside a walking distance. Besides, the car was almost out of gas, and since she didn't have a job, there was no way to fill it up until her mom finally broke down and put gas in the car herself. However, she hadn't filled up the car in three weeks, and Holly was in no position to ask for money. Her dad used to be the one who filled up the tank whenever the gas light flashed on the dashboard. Holly remembered waking up one morning a month or so ago to find an envelope containing forty bucks just inside her bedroom door. "Don't tell Mom" was scribbled on the front in her dad's messy handwriting. Holly guessed her mom had told him not to do that anymore, just another way to force Holly's hand and make a decision. She wasn't sure what exactly had gone down, but it didn't matter. If Mom said no, she meant no and that meant everybody, including Holly's father. That's the way it had always been. Sighing, Holly slipped on her mud-encrusted sneakers and slipped out the front door.

It was surprisingly cool for a June afternoon, but that didn't stop Holly's faded blue hair from sticking to her forehead and the back of her neck. The quickest way to Poppy's house was to cut through the back of the unkempt golf course in the middle of town. At one time, the golf course had been the only source of entertainment in the small town, but then when the bowling alley/karaoke bar was built closer to the highway, the greens had fallen into disrepair. The front half of the course was kept in moderately good shape by the Maynard family, the owners who lived right on the property, but when business slowed down, it was more cost effective to ignore holes thirteen through eighteen.

When Holly got there, Old Mr. Maynard was weed-eating the small fenced-in area where he stored the slowly rusting golf carts. He turned the engine off when he saw her coming. "Mizz Holly Hensley," he greeted her the same way he always had for nineteen years. The Hensleys trekked through his property nearly every day during the summers to visit Gramma, whose house Poppy now lived in. "What can I do fer ya taday?"

"Nothing," Holly called through the fence. "Just cutting through."

"Ya off to see that sister of yers?"

"Yes, sir."

"You tell 'er my wife loves that potato salad recipe she sent home with 'er last week. Couldn't make potato salad for shit til Mizz Poppy gives her that recipe. We've had it every night since."

"Yeah, I'll let her know."

"Good. You wanna cart to take over there?" he asked, gesturing to the sad-looking golf carts behind him.

Holly wrinkled her nose, thinking of all the sweaty butts that had sat in those seats. "No, I'm good. Thanks though."

"Alright. More pow'r to ya, girl. I don't think them old carts could make it through that back half anyhow. Well, you tell Mizz Poppy we all said 'hi' an' my wife'll be seein' her sometime next week."

"Yes sir, I sure will. See you on the way back through."

"Yes ma'am. You be careful in that back lot, now. I ain't got back there in a while an' there's brambles all over the place."

Brambles had indeed taken hold of the back half and scratched Holly's bare legs as she waded through them. Strings of honeysuckle clung to the brush and the bases of the scarce tallows. Tall purple stalks of thistle broke through the high grass. Pink buttercups dotted the narrow path. Or were they prim roses. Maybe she should be a botanist. A botanist would know if it was a prim rose or not. Images of sitting in a field not entirely unlike this one as she pressed flowers into journals filled her mind. Was that botany? Her foot caught in a rabbit hole, tripping her. Maybe not botany then. She'd have to ask Poppy.

Holes thirteen through eighteen had turned into rabbit holes and it wasn't uncommon to see small brown rabbits dart along the path, gathering food for their dinners. Cute as the bunnies may be, they didn't make the path any easier to walk. Holly stood back up carefully, testing her weight on her ankle. Everything seemed to be in order. She still wasn't a botanist though.

The sounds of the cars passing on the street behind her fell away as she walked further into the overgrown field. There hadn't been a lot of places for Holly and Poppy to play when they were growing up, but the Maynards never minded if the girls played in the field, so long as they didn't bother the middle-aged men who were actually paying to be there. The Hensleys lived in an apartment building whose courtyard consisted of a small circle of dead grass next to a concrete basketball court. The golf course going to Gramma's was infinitely more exciting. Holly and Poppy

would play explorers, looking for fairies or trying catch rabbits. Whatever they played, Poppy always was in charge. It was her divine right as Older Sister, and Holly never questioned her authority, though she did occasionally throw golf balls she would find at Poppy's head if she got too bossy.

Poppy's house was just beyond the golf course, nestled in the only wooded area in town that hadn't been cut down to make way for apartment buildings or fast-food restaurants. Gramma used to say that the reason why the land around her house hadn't been disturbed was because she'd used her Tarot cards to pray to protect her house to do God's work, but Holly suspected it had more to do with the fact that it was blocked off by the golf course on one side and a rundown Big Lots on the other.

Gramma had read palms and cards alike all of Holly's life, using a mix of Tarot and Christianity that Holly never really understood but everyone seemed to accept without question.

"I got them blessed by Reverend Carver last Sunday," Gramma told her once, emptying her purse onto the scratched-up counter. Peppermints rolled out alongside the crisp deck of Tarot cards. "The cards themselves ain't of the devil. Some devilish folk use them for bad, that's all. I told Reverend Carver that and he blessed them good to keep them outta the devil's hands. He blessed me this oil, too, for my palm reading. Even if the devil come in with one o' my customers, I can mark their palms and do God's work."

She marked her granddaughter's palms with her holy oil and said a prayer to baby Jesus, but Holly's sensitive skin broke out in hives anyway. It didn't matter that Holly explained that she was allergic to cinnamon oil; Gramma didn't read her palms anymore after that, something Holly couldn't stop thinking about when Gramma died of a heart attack later that year.

The funeral party who met at Gramma's house for the reception was a divided bunch, the women holing up in the pristine living room to talk about the flowers, the sermon, and Gramma's odd habits such as cleaning out the deep freeze every Thursday at sundown and walking her cat on a leash to the Big Lots and back, while the men were left outside to barbeque and feel out of place. There were simply too many doilies in Gramma's house for testosterone to be a welcome additive. It was the only time Holly could remember seeing her mom having anything resembling mixed feelings; Mom was not one much for indecisiveness. Mom and

Gramma had been not estranged but on rocky terms most of Holly's life. Something to do with the cards, or the girls, Holly didn't know. Whatever the problem was, it wasn't made any better when Poppy inherited Mom's childhood home at 18. "Seeing's the kinda thing that tends to skip a generation or so, you know," Holly had overheard Gramma telling Poppy one summer afternoon. "Your mama ain't a Seer any more than I'm a witch."

"You're not a witch?" Poppy had asked. Gramma swatted her smartly on the ass and Holly got to gloat as Poppy's mouth was washed out for soap. Magic was allowed. Blasphemy was not.

"Well, there you are, girl," Poppy said as she answered the door. Her red hair sat in a wild bun on the top of her head, long tendrils falling down to frame her round face. Holly raised an eyebrow at her sister. "Mom called me," Poppy admitted.

"Ah," Holly said as she pushed past Poppy into the house, too winded to say more. The trek across the golf course had taken her the better part of half an hour and she could feel her sweat-soaked shirt ripple against her skin from the force of her sister's powerful air conditioning. Poppy trailed behind her as she went to the kitchen, stepping over half-unpacked boxes of Avon makeup and vibrators to get there. A cup of ice water sat waiting for her on the pockmarked table Gramma had used for her own readings. "When'd Mom call you?" Holly asked, draining the World's Best Granny mug of water. "I didn't tell her I was coming here."

"About ten minutes ago, I guess." Poppy busied herself pulling Holly's hair away from her sweaty neck and into a messy bun of her own. "Mom knows everything. She woulda been a good psychic."

"Gramma said she wasn't a Seer," Holly replied instantly.

"Yeah, well," Poppy shrugged, "I don't think you have to be a Seer if you're a mom. Or at least our mom. Our mom knows everything."

Holly shrugged.

"Do you wanna sit for a little while?" Poppy asked, changing the subject. "You're all sweaty and gross."

"Sure." Holly refilled her cup and followed Poppy back into the living room, the carpet under her feet crunching with kitty litter that spilled out of the thankfully-clean litterbox, and took her usual seat on the far side of the faded floral sofa, now covered with brightly colored throw pillows Holly strongly suspected came from her sister's secondhand patio

set. Lace doilies still sat limply on the side tables and bookcases, though they were mostly hidden by the various tools of Poppy's many trades. Measuring cups still coated in flour found their way into the living room from her Saturday afternoon cooking class. A framed photo of Gramma and Poppy as a little girl stood next to a row of dildos. Ratty paperbacks stood in precarious towers throughout the house, waiting to be picked up from last week's book club. A photo of Gramma at Poppy's high school graduation sat beside a brand-new TV. Stacks of Avon boxes served as her coffee table where a deck of Tarot cards were splayed face up across the surface in a traditional Celtic Cross Spread. The Devil caught Holly's eye.

"You don't really believe in this stuff, do you?"

"Believe in what?" Poppy asked, pulling a wad of blue yarn from under her squashy armchair.

Holly tapped a finger on the card closest to her. She was using it as a coaster.

"Which one is that?" Poppy asked. Holly flipped the card over. A woman in rags knelt before a mirror. Her mirror image stood tall and proud and dressed in red. Two sticks sat crossed at the corner of the card.

"The Two of Wands," Holly answered.

"Hmm." Poppy went back to counting loops in the misshapen lump she'd been crocheting.

"So do you believe in it or not?"

"What? Just Tarot or fortune telling in general?"

"I don't know. Both. Either. Does it matter?" She hated when Poppy was like this, treating Holly like a client instead of like a sister.

"I don't know. Does it?" Poppy countered.

"You're just trying to piss me off now," Holly groaned, flopping back against the scratchy throw pillow. Poppy had handstitched a smiling orange sun across it just under the words "You are my sunshine!" Holly nudged it off the couch with her elbow.

Poppy idly wrapped yarn around her finger. "I don't believe in it more than anything else I do, I guess."

"Practicing palmistry is different than selling makeup or dildos door-to-door."

"Maybe," she allowed.

"Never mind," Holly rolled her eyes. "I'm not gonna talk to you if you're going to be all mystic about it."

"I'm not being mystic." Poppy didn't look up from her work.

"Whatever. Are you going to do mine or not?"

"Do what?"

"My hand!" Holly exclaimed, exasperated. "Or my cards or whatever it's called. Your whole fortune thing."

"Why? You've never wanted me to do your reading before."

"I have to figure out what I'm going to do. My year is almost up."

"Your year?" Poppy finally looked up from the blue mass in her lap.

"The year since graduation."

"Oh, that's right. Mom said something about that on the phone. Have you thought about what you're gonna do?"

"Yes," Holly answered, doing her best to sound indignant. Poppy raised a red eyebrow. "No. Well. I don't know. It's complicated."

"What's making it complicated?" Poppy asked, going back to her sewing.

"I don't know. It's like, I know I have to do something, but I have no idea what that something is yet, you know?"

Poppy grunted in a noncommittal sort of way. Holly rolled her eyes. "What are you making anyway?"

Poppy held the wad of blue yarn she had been weaving up to the light. "You know, I'm not sure. It was a hat, but now I think it's a rug?"

"Right."

"Look," Poppy began, leaning over and sliding the Two of Wands out from under Holly's mug. "I don't know what you think this is. My 'whole fortune thing' or whatever you called it. This is just my job. This is how I pay my bills."

"Yeah, you make money doing this, but you're still reading people's fortunes," Holly insisted. "You're helping people."

"Maybe, but it's not magic. This is therapy."

"No, it's fucking not!" Holly's voice got louder, sounding whinier than she wanted it to. "Does the sign on your door say 'Palmistry and Tarot Readings' or not?"

"It does, right under the one that says 'Cooking lessons every Saturday or by Appointment!'" Poppy's voice filled the room and Holly sank back in her seat. "Look," Poppy said with a sigh as she rubbed at the crease between her eyebrows. "Do you know how many psychics there are in this area?"

"I don't see what—"

"Over thirty," Poppy answered her own question. "There are more

than thirty people who do what I do in this area alone. And how many psychological centers are there?"

"Fifty?" Holly guessed.

"Seventeen. I don't know what to tell you, Holly. People are more willing to come see me, or at least people like me, than go see a licensed therapist. I'm cheaper and I can listen to people bitch just as well as the next person."

"But Gramma—"

"—was fucking insane," Poppy finished with a laugh. "Are you kidding me? This is the same person who performed an exorcism on her cat."

"He was sick," Holly protested, her voice small.

"He was a fucking cat!" Poppy laughed. "I don't know what you've been thinking, but this isn't magic, Holly. I'm not magic any more than you or Mom are or Gramma was. As to what you're gonna do, I don't know. It's your choice. Ain't nobody can make that for you, but I sure hope you choose to grow up."

The walk back home felt much longer. The sun had set behind the trees and the rabbits were gone. Long shadows spread out in front of Holly, hiding the rabbit holes and thorny brambles that bit at her calves and ankles. Even with the sun down, the heat was invasive. Sweat dripped into Holly's eyes and stung before she was even halfway across the field. She wished she'd taken Mr. Maynard's golf cart after all.

The Factory Farm

Maegan White

It's dark here. It's always dark. For as long as I can remember existing, I remember the blackness. Sometimes we are given light, but only for a few brief moments as the doors open and close. There are so many of us here. We can't move more than a few inches. I shuffle around uncomfortably against my neighbor. She expresses the same misery. Sometimes we cry out together, hoping beyond hope to wake up somewhere new. Metal bars press against us as we grow, never budging.

My neighbor has become sick. She has an infection on her leg. Feces steadily drip into her wound, making it fester. She has nowhere else to go. When we make a mess, we can't get away from it. We must sit in this stinking pit all day, every day.

Stinking actually doesn't begin to describe it. Every neighbor I have endures the same conditions I do. We all have infections and reeking rooms of metal bars. No cushion lay below us, to guide us to sleep at night. No comfort can be found here. Each day, my feet ache and ache, but no relief comes.

In truth, there is no difference between day and night. The only thing that reigns is when we receive our food. He comes and delivers it while the sun is beginning to rise. When he opens the door, we get only the smallest glimpse of the beautiful light. We never feel its warmth, though. In here, there is always a chill in the air, musty and sickly. The fumes from our waste rise up and fill the atmosphere. Our eyes water, but we can't escape our own stench. Our food is grainy, always carelessly dumped into brittle, metal dishes. My aching stomach grumbles as I desperately try to catch the stray pieces before they fall below, where I cannot reach them. We all frantically repeat this pattern, twice a day. I sadly watched a neighbor die in this frenzy.

It happened so quickly. One neighbor stuck her head into another's space, chasing a stray pellet of food that had missed her bowl. Without thought, the second neighbor attacked her. The pelting and pecking didn't stop until she was dead. You can't blame the attacker though. We don't have many pleasures in life, food and water are the only ones.

The days blur together. I can't recall how many times this feeding frenzy occurred. The first time, I was shocked and terrified. The attacker

was even mortified by her actions after she saw the results of what she'd done. After the third time we'd all witnessed this horrific scene, we were desensitized. It became just another aspect of our miserable lives.

Every day, it was the same routine. We'd awake from our standing sleep, covered in feces and urine. We could sense the sun rising, though we couldn't see it. We'd begin crying, chattering, and chirping. We always hoped that someone besides him would hear, that they'd come save us. It was always him though. He'd open the door and we'd see the rays of light, so far from us. We were tossed our first meal of the day. The frenzy gripped all of us as we tried to catch every last morsel. Then, hours of darkness, breathing in the stench. The flies were terrible, but we didn't mind. Sometimes, we could reach out and catch them. They served as a treat and a way to pass the time. We'd begin to chatter again near sunset. He'd come and fill up our bowls again. Occasionally, he'd liberate us from our stinking filth by spraying the bottom of our feet with a water hose. So then, the frenzy took hold of us all again. Then night would fall and all was silent, apart from the mice that scurried about under our feet. We envied them furiously. They were free to move their legs, free to run and do as they pleased. They'd sometimes stop and peek up at us, with pity in their eyes. Of course he had set traps for the mice, but we knew where the traps were. When one of the mice neared a trap, we'd make a sudden ruckus with yowling and yammering, as loud as we could. The mice, startled, would zip away in the opposite direction. When morning came, it was a miracle if at least one of us wasn't dead. It didn't matter to him though. He replaces us daily. And daily, he takes us away.

One day, the new replacements contained the most spry, young girl. She was plump, and her feathers were clean. She looked about, cooing softly as she was brought to the rest of the neighbors. I could see the light fade from her eyes as fear took hold of her. She struggled and jumped about in her new room, only to find that she could move merely a few inches. She hated it. We all did, but something was different about her. She spoke dreamily of her past life. She chirped of fields and flowers. She sang of the grass and how soft it was beneath her feet. Where she came from, she was free to roam. The man who brought her food always brought plenty for everyone. No one had to fight. She could explore the vast acreage anytime she felt the need. She and her friends had perches upon perches to roost at night.

Though we'd never shared her experiences, we delighted in her

stories. They reminded us that the whole world wasn't just in this room. Beyond this rank pit, there was life. There was sun that warmed all the creatures. The light wasn't brief. It was always there. In the daytime, there was the golden sun. At night, there was the silver moon. What a beautiful sight they must have been.

When she told us of her old home and her old friends, we were at ease. Comfort was a rare thing to find in the life we lived. Soon, however, her stories grew less and less whimsical. She began to lose hope. The darkness was slowly moving in on her soul. We could all see it. She belonged in the light, we all did.

One day he came to do his monthly collecting. He selected a group of neighbors at the front of the building. They began to cry and screeched goodbye to all of us. With fear and sadness, we clucked back to them.

They went through the door and disappeared. The new girl turned to me with big curious eyes. "They don't come back," I tried to say.

"Where?" her eyes asked desperately. My neighbor and I shook our heads. No one really knew. All we knew was that they didn't come back. Most of us had a bad feeling about it. Deep down, those who had been here their whole life knew. We felt it in our bones and sometimes the thoughts welled up and created tears in our eyes, but crying wouldn't help. Instead, we tried to focus on the flies, the mice, and the stories of our new friend. Somewhere out there, are places where we wouldn't live like this. Somewhere out there, there is happiness. And grass. Grass that would cushion our feet. Our wounds would heal and we could sleep at night.

After she moved in, we all began to dream. We dreamed of these faraway places, especially of the glistening green grass. We dreamed of streams and ponds, full of water and the light of the sun and moon. Somewhere out there, was something worth hoping for.

One bleak morning, the doors swung open with an ominous creak. I felt an overwhelming dread fill my body. My neighbor and I glanced at each other sadly. Our new friend turned her head to us, confused. I gulped and shook my head. The time had come. He gathered up all of our tiny crates on a rolling contraption. On one side of me, my long time neighbor was panting furiously. She shivered, turning her head slightly to make eye contact with me. She gave one long, slow nod to me. I gave an identical nod back to her. My eyes swelled with tears as I turned to see our new friend. She breathlessly darted her eyes about in all directions. As we were carted toward the door, she suddenly became calm again.

"Maybe we will see the grass again," she clucked. The doors creaked open again and we were rolled into the light. The sun shone brightly. It was beautiful, the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. For a moment I felt free. The rays of light warmed my back and I sighed.

Maybe we would see the grass.

Undergraduate Essays

Cinderella: A Change in Values

Dylana Sauerwein

Fairy tales have been around for centuries, either being passed down orally from generation to generation or being written down to be enjoyed by millions all over the world. Even though every culture has its own set of traditional tales, some of these stories are the same globally. Such is the case of the Cinderella story. Though Cinderella as most Americans know it was popularized by Disney's adaptation of the tale, various versions of the Cinderella story have existed for centuries in nearly every culture. Despite the fact that all Cinderella stories must contain certain elements in order to be classified as a true Cinderella tale, the interpretation and variation of these prescribed set of characteristics change from time period to time period depending on the culture in which they are presented, which means that Cinderella stories can be read not merely for plot, but also as a way of understanding the values of the cultures by which they are being told. This variation of values can be seen in the Chinese "Yeh-hsien" and in the French version of the same tale, "Cinderella; or, The Glass Slipper."

Cinderella stories are now prevalent all over the world, though this was not always the case. Folklorist Alan Dundes says that "'Cinderella,' ... although extremely widespread in the Indo-European world, is not found as an indigenous tale in North and South America, in Africa, or aboriginal Australia. In other words, more than half the people of the world do not have a version of 'Cinderella' except as borrowed from Indo-European cultures" (Dundes 339). Due to the geographical limits of Cinderella stories, it would make sense that the oldest known Cinderella story, "Yeh-hsien," comes from China, which is part of the Indo-European continent. Though it is probable that "Yeh-hsien" is not the very first Cinderella story ever told, it is the oldest one of which people know and so it can be used as a sort of acting origin. The signature characteristics that make up every Cinderella story are present even in this early form of the trope. Critic Jack Zipes establishes the Cinderella standard as including: the persecuted heroine who is mistreated by her step-mother, the magical help that gives advice, the prince and the proof of identity, and the marriage eventual to the prince (Zipes 81). These factors must be included in the tale for it to be classified as a Cinderella story and "Yeh-hsien" most certainly conforms to

this criterion. In "Yeh-hsien," the title character portrays all of the characteristic sweetness and niceties that have become commonly associated with the character and are used to show how young girls should act and look in order to attract a good husband. Right away, the author establishes that Yeh-hsien is "intelligent and good at making pottery on the wheel" (Tartar 107). It is interesting that these attributes are placed above beauty in this particular telling. In the early 800s, it would seem as though the Chinese preferred their women to be useful over simply being beautiful, a value that will change in later adaptations. Yeh-hsien is also a nurturing person. She receives a fish "about two inches long, with red fins and gold eyes" and takes care of it, feeding it her leftovers (Tatar 107). She is willing to go without as much food as her step-mother and step-sister so that she can raise her pet fish to be big and strong. Yeh-hsien would make a good wife because of her ability to nurture others and her willingness to go without so that others may flourish. This paired with her already established skill at pottery and innate intelligence makes Yeh-hsien an excellent wife. The young girls who would have heard this story would want to be like Yeh-hsien, who ends up with not only "gold, pearls, dresses and food whenever she wanted them," from praying to her fish bones, but with the king as well (Tartar 107). However, the tale never promotes trying to advance oneself in terms of her station. Yeh-hsien does not do what she does in order to try to marry the king. Rather, she acts as she should as a woman and is rewarded for it. She makes no movement to climb the social ladder in any way.

Another main device of Cinderella stories is that of the cruel step-mother often accompanied by her own wicked daughter or daughters. Yeh-hsien is plagued by her evil step-mother, who forces her to "collect firewood in dangerous places and draw water from deep pools" (Tartar 107). Although the wicked step-mother is present in "Yeh-hsien," the story is too short to spend a large amount of time on establishing the step-mother as a main character. However, the reader is still made very aware of her cruelty as the author shows the step-mother killing the fish that is Yeh-hsien's only friend. Luckily, Yeh-hsien has the magical guide that is also common to Cinderella stories, this one taking form in the bones of the fish she keeps as a pet until it is killed by the stepmother and the "man with his hair loose over his shoulders and coarse clothes" who "came down from the sky" who tells Yeh-hsien what she needs to do to escape her family home (Tartar 107). Yeh-hsien's salvation, in true Cinderella tradition,

comes in the form of a rich man. The king of T'o-han gives an example of how men are meant to behave if they are to be considered manly or honorable. However, while Yeh-hsien presents several good qualities, the traits the king shows would now be considered less favorable. Once the king gets the shoe from the cave-man, he puts "him in prison and torture[s] him" (Tartar 108). Instead of simply talking to the man, the king feels he must torture the man in order to find out about the origin of Yeh-hsien's shoe. Later, after he marries Yeh-hsien, the reader is told that "the king was very greedy and by his prayers to the fish-bones got treasures and jade without limit" (Tartar 108). From this, one can infer that the Chinese people of the 800s valued powerful men who are willing to go after what they want, even to the point of greed. The king is never punished for these actions, so one must assume that this is reasonable behavior. Torture and greed certainly show the king's power; he has the power do whatever he wants because he is the king.

The most memorable element of the Cinderella tale is the shoe. In every Cinderella story, the true love or prize of the upper-class man who has fallen in love with the lower class woman leaves behind a clue to help guide her prince to find her. This seemingly magical item is commonly some article of clothing, primarily a shoe. Because the man has obviously taken much care to look at the Cinderella figure's face or has possibly never met the girl at all, the only way he can identify his future wife is through the tiny, beautiful shoe that she *accidentally* leaves behind. Because the story of Yeh-hsien is one of the first recorded Cinderella stories, it is safe to assume that this is the beginning of the tradition of Cinderella's slipper. Yeh-hsien leaves her shoe behind at the cave-festival and it is eventually brought to the king of T'o-han. Just like the other Cinderella stories, the king goes around his kingdom to have all the women try on the shoe "but it was an inch too small even for the one among that had the smallest foot" (Tartar 108). The preference for women to have tiny feet should not be all that surprising. However, it is important to note that in the ninth century, the time at which this version of the story was written, the practice of foot binding was reaching its peak in China. As Marina Warner mentions in her book *From the Beast to the Blonde*, Yeh-hsien's lost, "precious golden shoe, a treasure among country people who would have gone barefoot or worn bark or straw pattens, also reverberates with the fetishism of bound feet: the T'ang dynasty, established in the sixth century, introduced this custom to China and it marked out highborn, valuable, desirable women"

(Absent Mothers 203). The size of Yeh-hsien's feet shows how she is able to change social classes. The members of the lower class into which Yeh-hsien is born would not have bound their feet, and yet Yeh-hsien has the tiny feet of highborn ladies. Yeh-hsien's small feet illustrate that she is essentially already a member of the upper class. The process of foot binding begins at the age of five or six and is incredibly painful. Journalist Amanda Foreman relates in her article that the young girl's "feet were massaged and oiled before all the toes, except the big toes, were broken and bound flat against the sole, making a triangle shape. Next, her arch was strained as the foot was bent double. ... The girls were forced to walk long distances in order to hasten the breaking of their arches" (Foreman 24). This process took two years to complete and was irreversible. Though binding one's foot does indeed make the foot appear smaller and allows the woman to wear tiny shoes, the foot actually becomes deformed in the process. The feet of the women who practice foot binding are bent and broken out of shape to such a degree that walking becomes incredibly painful and running is nearly out of the question all together. This gives Cinderella's lovely slipper a bit of a dark past as it enforces the importance of obedience. The king wants the woman with the tiniest feet because that would mean that his bride's feet are so mangled that she could not run away from him. The bride has no choice but to be obedient to her husband if she has no chance of getting away from him.

While "Yeh-hsien" may be the oldest Cinderella fairy tale, the most well-known version of the Cinderella story comes from French author Charles Perrault. Written in 1697, "Cinderella; or, The Glass Slipper" is the version the Disney Corporation used in the 1950 film with which Americans are so familiar today. Because Perrault's version of the Cinderella story is simply physically longer than "Yeh-hsien," more time is given to the development of characters and themes. Perrault is able to spend more time on his version of Cinderella because of the culture into which he was born. Perrault's Cinderella is written some eight hundred years after "Yeh-hsien" is copied down, so there has been a huge amount of advancements in both society and education, meaning that there is now much more leisure time available to be spent hearing, reading, and writing fairy tales. With the advancement of education and society comes the advancement of values. Though Perrault's version is assuredly still a Cinderella story, there are quite a few differences to be found between "Cinderella" and "Yeh-hsien," which reflect the French culture of the late

1600s. Again, the Cinderella character is the standard to which all other women are judged and seen as unfit. In the earlier Chinese version of the story, readers are explicitly told of Yeh-hsien's good qualities, the author highlighting the girl's usefulness over all else. In the much later French version, readers are told only that the step-mother's "husband had a daughter whose gentleness and goodness were without parallel" (Perrault 449-450). What this divine goodness is exactly is given in glimpses as Perrault describes Cinderella as never complaining no matter how poorly she is treated and as having "excellent taste" (Perrault 450). While being able to withstand the horrible treatment she receives from her family and being a good stylist may be an asset, Cinderella is not nearly as useful as Yeh-hsien when it comes to practicality. Cinderella's interests in style do make her a better servant to her family. A much larger emphasis is placed on Cinderella's beauty than anything else. It is said that "Cinderella looked a thousand times more beautiful in her shabby clothes than her sisters, no matter how magnificent their clothes were" (Perrault 450). Because Perrault's version of Cinderella does not possess any mentioned useful trait, one can infer that the French at this time placed importance on the women's role of being beautiful than being overly useful in the home. All fairy tales at this time are told for a purpose, as can be seen through the moral tacked onto the end of most stories. The moral in "Yeh-hsien" seems to be that in order to be a good wife, one should be a kind, intelligent, and nurturing person. The moral of the French version has changed somewhat so that more importance is placed on being beautiful and patient than intelligent. Perrault tells readers again and again that Cinderella is beautiful, whereas this particular is hardly even spoken of in the Chinese variation, showing that values have changed.

The stepmother and her daughters play a more important role in Perrault's "Cinderella" than they did in "Yeh-hsien." Yeh-hsien is only ever called by her given name. Perrault's variation uses the step-sisters to introduce the idea of Cinderella being used as a cruel nickname. Due to the girl's habit of sitting among the ashes after cleaning out the fireplace, "she was commonly called Cindertail. The second daughter, however, was not as malicious as her elder sister, and she dubbed her Cinderella" (Perrault 450). Though the younger sister still resorts to name calling, the name Cinderella is considered less offensive than Cindertail, which makes the younger sister at least marginally nicer than her older sister. The name Cindertail is meant to have sexual connotations as it implies that the

private areas of the girl are dirty. Warner explains that Perrault's "Cinderella," "recalls the sexual plot of related tales of wronged girls when, as we saw, he gives his heroine's nickname as Cucendron (Cinder-bottom), and adds that the kinder of her sisters softened it to spare her" (*The Absence of Fathers* 347). This small action is not done without purpose, as it perpetrates the idea that the younger a woman is, the better or kinder she is. Cinderella is the youngest of the three sisters and is easily the most beautiful and the kindest. The second youngest sister is the second kindest. The prince is also incredibly different in this version of the story. Whereas Yeh-hsien's king is shown to go to great and even cruel lengths to find his true love, Cinderella's prince is nothing but gentle. In fact, the only thing said of him at all is that he finds Cinderella incredibly beautiful and that he is "very much in love with the beautiful person who had worn the slipper" (Perrault 453). The prince does not show any sort of personality, good or bad. His only defining characteristic is his title. The story of "Yeh-hsien" does not have a defined audience and so it does not focus on any one character or moral. "Cinderella," on the other hand, is written for a specific audience and not merely more entertainment's sake. Because Perrault's version of the tale is intended for highborn, educated women and children, it focuses on Cinderella and her role within the household and the French society.

Magic plays a much larger role in Perrault's "Cinderella." It is likely for this reason that Disney chose this particular version of the story to make their movie. Perrault replaces Yeh-hsien's magical sky man with the fairy godmother now most commonly associated with Cinderella stories. The fairy godmother is able to help Cinderella more directly than the man in the Chinese version. She sends her goddaughter to find a pumpkin and "struck it with her wand, and the pumpkin was immediately changed into a beautiful coach gilded over all" (Perrault 451). Time is also spent showing how the fairy transforms lizards into footmen and mice into horses and Cinderella's miserable attire into a beautiful ball gown, complete with "a pair of glass slippers, the prettiest in the world" (Perrault 451). One of the main vestiges left over from the original Chinese Cinderella telling is the tiny, beautiful slipper. The slipper is so small that no one but Cinderella is able to fit her foot inside the shoe. Even the higher-born step-sisters try "their utmost to force one of their feet into the slipper, but they could not manage to do so" (Perrault 453). While it makes sense that the glass slipper is beautiful as it matches the rest of the magical clothes gifted to the girl by

her magical godmother, there is no logical reason for the slipper to be so small. Foot binding has long since died out in China by the 1600s and the practice never made it to Europe at all. However, the French Cinderella still has tiny feet. Because there is no longer a logical reason as to why the protagonist still has the small feet associated with Chinese high society, it could be assumed that the French find small feet to be more womanly or fashionable than larger feet even though the feet of the aristocrats are not smaller or larger than the feet of anyone else.

This issue of foot size is used by Disney in their 1950 film version of Perrault's "Cinderella" as a comic visual rather than for any social reason. Viewers can see Cinderella's wicked step-sisters try and hilariously fail to stuff their incredibly oversized feet into a shoe barely the length of each sister's big toe. Any social context or importance of Cinderella's tiny feet has thus been stripped out of the Disney remake entirely. In the American 1950s, foot size is irrelevant when it comes to determining the social standing of an individual. This crucial element of "Yeh-hsien" is reduced to comic effect for Disney, who focuses on the magic of the story over the social implications. Disney would rather try to please its audience than keep true to an older version of the story. Just as Perrault updates "Yeh-hsien" for the seventeenth century French audience, Disney updates "Cinderella." As critic Betsy Hearne points out, "*Cinderella* spends as much time on Lucifer the cat chasing Gus and the other mice as it does on the main characters. Even Cinderella's return from the ball turns into a chase scene, not just the prince following her down a flight of stairs, but a wild pursuit of the king's horsemen thundering after her carriage" (Hearne 391). The twentieth century American audience would rather watch chase scenes filled with action than listen to a story involving a giant fish, and so the story is once again amended to fit its audience. One of the main differences in this much more modern version is that no specific moral is intended. In modern society, parents no longer have to rely on fairy tales to teach their children what is expected of them. Instead, fairy tales can be used simply as a form of entertainment.

Cinderella stories have been told for hundreds of years and are still being told today as there is now a huge industry dedicated to delivering fairy tales and their like to an ever widening audience. With each retelling of the story, certain elements are distilled or else omitted altogether in order to mold the story to fit the needs and value systems of the society that is the current consumer. There are hundreds of versions of

Cinderella" and no two are exactly the same, just as no two cultures are totally alike. Though people may complain that the more modern retellings of Cinderella do not remain true to their original source, even that so-called original source is the distilled version of another variation of the story told years ago. In essence, the story itself has not changed, as all Cinderella stories adhere to a common code. The only aspects that are not remaining true to the older versions are the values.

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The Sense of the Sublime in American Renaissance Literature

Maegan White

While wandering the towering redwood forests of the Pacific Northwest, a curious traveler may come across a single bench in the forest. This lone structure is engraved with a quote by William Shakespeare. "One touch of nature makes the whole world kin," it reads. The meaning of this quote is not only read and heard, it is felt. In the pristine forest, surrounded by ancient trees and mossy sea cliffs, travelers may find themselves experiencing a divine oneness with nature. Writers are able to express this feeling through their work, especially the romantics of the American Renaissance. This feeling is known as the sense of the sublime. Sublime, in general terms, usually means something that is elevated or awe-inspiring. In literature, authors cultivate the sense of the sublime by finding the presence of God in nature. M. H. Abrams explains, "We recognize a consonance with the earlier theological context, in which the beautiful elements in nature are enduring expression of God's loving benevolence" (101). It is not only the beauty in nature that reminds of God but the chaos as well. "The vast and disordered in nature express his infinity, power, and so evoke a paradoxical union of delight and terror, pleasure and awe" (Abrams 102). Writers of the American Renaissance, like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Emily Dickinson, William Cullen Bryant, and Henry David Thoreau, cultivate the sense of the sublime in their work through the use of imagery and symbolism.

In Emerson's essay, "Nature," he makes use of both imagery and symbolism, creating a vivid picture for the reader that allows them to experience the sense of the sublime. This essay details not only the uses of nature, but our connection to nature as well. "In the tranquil landscape, and especially in the distant line of the horizon, man beholds somewhat as beautiful as his own nature," he says (Emerson 217). This image is something readers can envision and relate to. Emerson's feelings toward nature are evident as he explains that nature is always divine and calming. He writes, "Crossing a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune, I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration" (Emerson 217). In this

single sentence, Emerson paints a picture of what would normally be considered a gloomy day. However, he describes it in such a way that it seems beautiful. One of his main points is that the beauty of nature exemplifies God's presence in nature. Nature is a way for humans to experience the existence of God. Emerson encourages this with his symbolic metaphor of the transparent eyeball. He says that when he went out into the woods he "became a transparent eye-ball. I am nothing. I see all. The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God" (Emerson 217). This creates a very literal image, as depicted in Christopher Cranch's famous illustration of Emerson as the transparent eyeball. More than this strange, thought-provoking image, Emerson intends this metaphor to symbolize his complete connection with God when he is in nature. This belief of the oneness of nature and God is sometimes called "pantheism." Richard Hardack explains, "Transcendental pantheism represents the immersion of self in nature, its loss of personal borders, as evidenced in Emerson's merger into the transparent eyeball" (54). In "Nature" Emerson demonstrates that God is present in nature and that humans are a part of nature. With this view, each person is connected directly to God.

Emily Dickinson is another writer who embodies the sense of the sublime in her work. Gary Stonum's article outlines different ways in which the poetry of Emily Dickinson aligns, or does not align, with aspects of the sublime. He explains that one major way that her poetry cultivates a sense of the sublime is "by locating the interior drama in the poet's own mind, thus reinforcing and helping to legitimize a general romantic tendency to make poetic subjectivity a principal literary topic. Indeed, sometimes the poet's aptitude for experiencing the sublime seems to be a prerequisite for achieving it artistically" (Stonum 31). In her poem listed as "236" she describes a simple Sunday morning. It begins, "Some keep the Sabbath going to Church- / I keep it, staying at Home" (Dickinson 1668). By this, she means that she has a connection to God, without having to go to church. As the poem continues, Dickinson uses imagery to depict the sense of the sublime in her ordinary life. In the poem, Dickinson says that a bird is the chorister and an orchard is the dome (1668). Nature is her church; this is why she does not have to physically go. Next, the poem reads, "Some keep the Sabbath in Surplice / I, just wear my Wings" (Dickinson 1668). This is a comment about how people dress in a more formal manner for church, especially clergymen. In nature's church, such customs are

unnecessary. The image of a peaceful day at home with a little singing bird and an orchard are used in contrast with the hectic image of a Sunday at church, full of bustling people and high expectations. It makes a great deal of sense to relate God to the much more peaceful image. As the poem draws to a close, Dickinson even seems to be a bit critical toward the standard tradition on Sundays. "God preaches, a noted clergyman- / And the sermon is never long," (Dickinson 1668). What preacher at a church could ever preach a better sermon than God himself? The concluding lines of the poem read, "So instead of getting to Heaven, at last- / I'm going all along" (Dickinson 1668). Dickinson reveals her laid back view of religion. The sublime moments, to her, were not in church. They were simply present all throughout life. Instead of focusing on the afterlife, Dickinson chooses to focus on the present because God is already all around her.

Another poet who invokes the sense of the sublime in his work is William Cullen Bryant. Relying heavily on imagery, Bryant uses vivid descriptions to create serene ideas of nature, drawing specifically on aspects we tend to find beautiful, like sunsets. Cecilia Lippai says, "In the case of the sublime, the boundary refers to the limits of our cognitive capacities (rationalizing nature and our surrounding world in general—up to a point where this proves impossible) and practical possibilities (reaching the point where we come to the limits of what we can do, how we can move or act in nature)" (61). In this same way, Bryant finds a way to relate an ordinary event in nature to our relationship with the world around us and with God. In his poem "To a Waterfowl," Bryant describes an evening where he watches a duck fly off into the distance. He wonders where the duck is going. "Seek'st thou the plashy brink / Of weedy lake, or marge of river wide / Or where the rocking billows rise and sink / On the chafed ocean side?" (Bryant 125). The beautiful scenery helps summon a sublime connection as he goes on to say, "There is a Power whose care / Teaches thy way along that pathless coast- / The desert and illimitable air- / Lone wandering, but not lost" (Bryant 125). Bryant does not see a simple duck. Instead, he sees a creature guided by God. The imagery becomes even more vivid as the poem comes to a conclusion. Bryant observes keenly, "Thou'rt gone, the abyss of heaven / Hath swallowed up thy form; yet on my heart / Deeply hath sunk the lesson thou hast given / And shall not soon depart" (125). Bryant is noting how the duck has become part of heaven. It has been completely led by nature and is one with it. The duck can represent all mankind in our relationship with God. Bryant expresses

this idea with his last stanza, "He, who from zone to zone / Guides through the boundless sky thy certain flight / In the long way that I must tread alone / will lead my steps alright" (125). The sublime idea is that God orchestrates nature and leads the duck home, so he will lead us home as well.

There are many different ways that authors can represent the sense of the sublime. One way to do this is to draw a connection between sublime experience and natural science. In this way, the theme of the sublime becomes linked with both science and religion. This idea is expressed by Peter K. Walhout as he explains, "First, science reveals beauty and the sublime in natural phenomena. Second, science discovers beauty and the sublime in the theories that are developed to explain natural phenomena. Third, the search for beauty often guides scientists in their work. Fourth, where beauty is perceived, feelings of the sublime often also follow upon further contemplation," (757). These ideas correlate most closely with Thoreau's "Walden." Unlike many other authors who wrote on the topic of nature, Thoreau engages in an experiment of sorts. He decides that he will go out in the woods, build a house, and live in nature himself. He continues with this style of life for two years and two months (Thoreau 981). "Walden" is a collection of his observations, experiences, and new knowledge learned while living in the forest. This is a very scientific way to go about cultivating a sense of the sublime for the reader. Instead of speaking merely from what Thoreau personally believes, he speaks from experience. In the first chapter, Thoreau explains the economy of nature. He remarks that man has "no time to be any thing but a machine," (Thoreau 983). In the city, men solely focus on money, they live in debt, and they are constantly confronted with lies and chaos. Thoreau summarizes these woes with the famous line, "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation" (984). In society, one is trapped in a routine, usually an undesired routine. In nature, on the other hand, man need not worry about any of that. Thoreau explains that one can find the four necessities of life (food, shelter, clothing, and fuel) within nature (986). Essentially, everything we need has already been provided by God. Everything else that is man-made is a luxury. Thoreau recounts an event from his time in the woods through the use of imagery and symbolism to bring about the sense of the sublime. He recalls a day when his axe became submerged in the semi-frozen pond (Thoreau 1002). This is symbolic because the axe is man-made, being completely immersed in an aspect of nature. Much like the

axe, Thoreau is immersed in nature throughout his experience. Despite his separation from most of the population, his time in the woods leads him to discover much about human nature. On this same day, he observes a snake slither into the pond and sit upon the bottom, "apparently without inconvenience" (Thoreau 1002). This image reminded him of how people live. "It appeared to me that for a like reason men remain in their present low and primitive condition; but if they should feel the influence of the spring of springs arousing them, they would of necessity rise to a higher and more ethereal life," Thoreau says (1002). This expresses Thoreau's view that true divinity is present in nature and can be reached by anyone. However, it is societal life that interferes with our connection to spiritual enlightenment. Peter Walhout states, "Scientific experiences of the sublime are intimations of a transcendent reality, God the Artist ... science experiences of the sublime often follow a judgment of beauty, and both are linked to scientific knowledge" (759). This is what Thoreau has done. His experiment has given him first-hand knowledge of nature, and so he presents his informed conclusions of sublime experience in "Walden."

Lippai reminds us that there are many definitions of "sublime" (60). While different, each definition of the word implies something that is divine, something bigger than ourselves. Nothing tangible exemplifies this better than nature. With nature comes peace. It is our greatest link with the divine energy of the world. Writers like Emerson and Thoreau understand this. They explain that by immersing ourselves in nature, we become one with nature and God. Dickinson and Bryant observe the sublime existence in nature through everyday events. Each of these authors recounts their feelings, observations, and knowledge of the sublime with beautiful imagery and powerful symbolism to cultivate a sense of sublime for their readers. Nature has the power to connect people to their world and to each other. This divine connection travels through many vessels, though few are as powerful as writing.

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Graduate Form Poetry

Off with Your Head

Shelly Dawson

You have no idea, who I am with you.
Let me see, what I can do.
Every time I rip you apart.
It tears a piece of my heart.
Look at you with that halo on your head.
Soon, it will be a thing of dread.
Slipping down around your neck.
I grab it to pull you down to me.

Whisper in your ear:
"What is your greatest fear?
Is this where you are lead to be?
Need something to make you see me.
Did you think it was going to stay up there for you to wear?
Up above where you did not care?
The truth is but a whisper that has a deafening sound.
It lays you on the ground; where I will always be found."

Graduate Free Verse Poetry

Where's Alice?
Dedicated to Alice Alsup

Shelly Dawson

clutches her poem tightly.
ask if she would like to read.
says, "No," but her friend signs her up.
ll her to the stage.
reads the poem without taking a breath.
y, "Breathe."
says, "I can't."
is folding her arms tightly.
y, "Relax."
says, "I won't."
compares her current boyfriend to fast food.
y, "There will be others."
doesn't believe me.
takes pictures from high places.
eg her to come down.
goes higher.
reach for her.
opens her arms wide,
d jumps down the rabbit hole.
y to pull her out,
the hole has closed.

Tweetorats

Omkar Dhok

That busy day full of work
didn't even had time to lift a fork
life seemed going bitter ...
but just for a change logged on to Twitter ...

I loved that glam I felt that charm
was mesmerized with the views and
laughed on some fun ha-hews ...

The emotions I thought could be real
were just a tap on emoticons and usual ...
as a child I used to play on streets
roam around but suddenly as I grew
things were virtual ...

Although all the jeopardy in this world would disappear
'cauz of Twitter ...

Still miss the fun I used to have with my friends outdoors ...!!!!

The Anemone

Verity Ockenden

My anemone heart is closed,
To the dusty, bloodlust desert,
Its tendrils tightly furled.
"Don't breathe that dead air," it whispers,
Shrinking from a toxic touch.
I feel it swim in the
Reservoirs of my eyes, windows so damned dull,
Opaque, still, nobody knows it's there
For all to see.
Paned with iron,
My soul's clamped in, clammed up.
I shrink away from a clammy hot touch.
It buries itself, in itself,
Bares itself, only
With a laugh
So hearty
That the meaning is stifled.

An ocean lies over me, one great droplet,
Magnifying and distorting
The sky that is so dry
On the other side.
Under here,
Looking up at everything
There's oxygen that can't be found in air.
I watch as,
Drifting through oil smoke clouds,
The moon hangs upside down,
Too large,
Kissing the horizon.

Preserved in my watery paperweight,
Those crimsoned tendrils wave mockingly,
And recoil

As the hands and hearts of others
Reach through, and puncture that perfect surface,
Leaving trails of grit
And other places

In the doorstep of my world.

Dreaming of Verdun

John Rutherford

I spend my dreams
at Verdun,
crossing the muddy,
gas-choked planes
bombardment-bloody,
pummeled by a thousand guns,
or so my dream-men say.

Armed as they are,
my Tommy-boys, blades shining bright,
glimmering in the winter sun.
I, their lieutenant, sharp salutes
and one whistle-blow away
from the charge.

I lead the rush
and the guns go off,
as we cross no-man's land to join
the legions of no-men.
I shout orders that none but the dead can hear,
troops in disarray.

Their rifles crack
with shots of .303,
men and horses scream,
when I wake I wish
that I can thank those powers that be
that it was just a dream,
for me, at least, in that moment
it was my reality.

Kut

John Rutherford

The tin cans were emptied
long ago, the tea, the coffee and tobacco too,
the grain is gone,
the rats, the cats,
the dogs and horses
devoured in the wait.

The men grow thin,
ribs, sternums, spines on show,
eyes bulging on parade,
until the news comes in,
no relief is on the way.

Alone like ghosts we wait
within the walls of Kut,
the enemy surrounds the gates,
and bows five times daily,
each man faces east and praises their god,
while ours seems so distant.

Biplanes fly by to make their drop,
they almost always miss,
and starving men watch while
hope and supplies float down the Tigris.

The Mornings After

John Rutherford

The mornings after are the hardest part,
the waking up, and you not being here,
but through the day's fog nothing is more clear.

Outside, it pours, wind and rain fill the streets,
the very sky, with crying thunder, weeps
at our parting, the gutters fill with flood,
the path before us messy, covered in mud.

We both know this will not last forever,
this parting, this painful separation,
water rises, and it always recedes,
leaving behind new growth, new life, for us
to feast.

Our Nights

John Rutherford

She moves,
peace in the palm of her hand,
she passes it 'round
better than a bottle,
smoother than water.

Slick skinned she slides across the floor,
body rocking, wine for the glass,
lips an upward curve, like her hips.

Sips, misses, a line
of red bubbling down her chin,
eyes glance up, rap song plays,
these our nights, our days.

Sharing Silences

John Rutherford

I share lots of things with people,
and mostly all of myself
and to you, I give everything.

What I value most are the silences,
the silences that you and I share so easily,
the quietest parts of the nights and mornings,
where all is still and somnolent.

Where the time goes slow
and the infinite moments pass,
minutes turn to hours, and hours into days,
no force to speak, no jumpy, jolting verbiage
to fill the space;
just silence and us,
love and us,
you and I,
so comfortably quiet with the silences we share.

Graduate Prose

Siren's Song

Jill Crosby

Jeanine mumbled curses as the rice boiled over and coated her lemon-fresh stovetop in a thin, sticky film. The flames of the propane burner licked higher around the edges of the old, cast-iron Dutch oven, and steam hissed from beneath the dinner plate Jeanine used for a lid.

"*Merde!*" She stretched the word into two syllables as the heavily chipped porcelain clanked back down against the rim of the pot. Jeanine quickly turned down the heat on the rice while snatching up one of the crocheted, yellow potholders she had received from her *grande-mère* as a wedding gift.

"Tink of me e'ry time ya use 'em, *Cherie*." Two small bubbles popped in the pool of starchy water while Jeanine's mouth curled into a weak smile, and she thought about her grandmother's gnarled yet nimble fingers manipulating the knots and tangles of cotton yarn. Every stitch—each one a small victory over arthritis and cataracts—testified *Mémé* Ardoin's love for her grandbaby.

The creak and bang of the kitchen's screen door opening then slamming shut snapped Jeanine back to reality and her task-at-hand. The puddle disappeared in a matter of seconds, and hamburger steaks, rice and gravy, fried okra, and cornbread crowded the wooden kitchen table. Albert would soon finish washing up.

"How's the catch today?" Jeanine yelled down the hallway as she plunked ice into glasses. "Ya haul in enough to buy more than just diesel for tomorrow?" She stopped pouring tea, waited, then frowned. "Look, it's the slow time of year, but Lent's early. That'll get us through 'til April. Things'll be okay." She tried to sound supportive, but her brow furrowed as she spoke. She hated that this same fight was becoming just as much a part of her evening routine as dinner and dishes.

"Look, you didn't have a problem takin' time off before the end of last season, so you can't complain too much now. Besides, it's not like you're doing ..." Jeanine's eyebrows leapt up her forehead as the fire that had been growing within her chest sprang to her cheeks. "You're not Albert!" The frumpy calico blinked at her from the hallway and responded with a hoarse, raspy sound. "You should be glad, too. You were about to get an earful, *Fou*, but where is he?" The cat brushed against Jeanine's ankles,

causing her to lurch forward slightly.

"You're no help, *chatte*. He's usually home by now. I guess the days are getting longer again, though." She poked her head out the screen door and leaned against the doorframe. "I wish they'd stick a cell tower somewhere out here. I'd even let 'em use my front yard!" Purring, Fou leaned into another rub against the back of Jeanine's calves, and she stumbled onto the back porch.

"Fat bag of fuzz. Maybe he's out front." Jeanine laughed as she turned the corner toward the other side of her house. Fou wheezed softly at Jeanine's feet once they stopped to look around the front yard, but the feline suddenly and effortlessly leapt onto the rusty, dented hood of a Jeep parked beneath an ancient bald cypress. Jeanine hoisted herself up into the driver's seat and twisted the knob on the C.B. radio until a cacophony of stations and static hummed through the speakers.

"Froggy, it's Blue Jean Baby. You copy?" Jeanine changed her handle as often as she changed clothes, unlike Froggy who preferred his moniker over the name his mother gave him—Arlo Guidry.

"Ya, Jeanie. Froggy's croakin'. Watchoo need?" The thick Creole accent of her closest neighbor comforted her and made her feel less isolated and alone, even if Arlo and his family were only accessible by radio or airboat most of the year.

"Ya giggin' tonight?" A knot began to tighten in her gut. Even if the Jeep were running, she needed to navigate some of the more remote areas of the bayou, and the water was high.

"Na, *Cherie*. S'posed ta be fog tonight, and I don' feel like workin' dat hard." The knot loosened slightly. Fou jumped into her lap and began kneading her leg.

"Can I use the boat, Froggy? I gotta try and track down Albert. He's normally home by now; supper's gettin' cold." Jeanine passed her fingers through Fou's black, orange, and white coat for comfort. Her voice was as tight as the pit of her stomach.

"Ya welcome to da boat, but you gotta buy da fuel. Or I fixed da *pirogue* if you don' wanna spend da money..." Arlo trailed off into a warm chuckle. Relief washed over Jeanine and emboldened her.

"I'm sure I'd be a sight trying to punt around in that rickety, old flat-bottom of yours." Jeanine jabbed back. "Swing by in about ten. I got diesel. Ya'll want some dinner?"

Albert grimaced and shut his eyes again then absentmindedly tried to rub the grit out of them. He spread his arms wide but slammed his fists against the nightstands on each side of the cast iron, double bed as he tried to stretch out above his head. The sudden rattling impaled Albert's eardrums, and he instinctively pressed his thick, callused palms to his temples. Yawning was no relief and made him aware that his tongue was stuck to the roof of his mouth. His vision blurred as he hoisted himself up. "Woah," he croaked and pressed one hand to his heavy brow as the other groped around in front of him for something—anything—to steady himself. Instead, after wobbling around for thirty seconds or so, he crumpled to the floor with a booming thud.

The shock of the impact against the hardwood sobered Albert, who again sprang to his feet and stood at attention. His mind clearing a little, Albert felt his cheeks flush as he realized he was alone, but a soft knock at the door brought his headache back full force. "Come in," he managed to spit through clenched teeth.

"I thought I heard you bumping around in here. Are you okay?" Albert's headache disappeared upon hearing the lilting cadence of the young woman who was delicately tiptoeing into the room.

"I fell, but I'm okay now." Albert glanced out the window; the giant, orange globe sagging in the evening sky cast a gentle, golden light over everything in the room.

"Glad to hear it. Aren't the sunsets here amazing?" Delicate fingers alighted Albert's shoulder, and his full attention turned to the dazzling creature standing next to him.

"*Incroyable ...*" Albert stammered out a French word he had not used since 4th grade.

"*Merci*," she giggled in retort. Her brief laughter filled the room and warmed Albert. "Are you hungry now? It's almost dinner time."

"You know, *Chansonne*, I was feelin' pretty shitty, but now I'm kinda hungry. Yeah." His stomach rumbled in agreement. Albert scratched his head and tried to remember the last time he ate.

Chansonne scampered out the door and in a knowing, sing-song voice called over her shoulder, "I'm surprised you're not hungover! You were really throwin' 'em back at lunch."

"Yeah, me too ... I mean, I'm surprised" He stammered in response and haphazardly trailed after her. She floated down the short hallway and glided down the stairs; he galumphed down the same path, rattling

pictures and light fixtures along the way. He settled in at a wicker table on the screened porch. "Are we gonna be alone?" Albert wanted to smack himself in the forehead. "I mean, are you expecting any more company for dinner?"

Chansonne's dark, waist-length tresses shimmered as she threw her head back in a full, melodic laugh. Her eyes twinkled with a mischievous light, "Well, I never really expect company, but it's always a possibility. You know how swamp life is." She held out a sweaty mason jar and broadened her smile, "You want something to drink while you wait on your supper?"

"It's hard to say no in this heat." Albert took a slurp from the clear liquid he knew from experience was not water, yet it more fully quenched his thirst than anything he'd ever drunk. It was only when Chansonne flitted away to the back of the house that Albert surveyed his surroundings and noticed the sun had become a glowing, rose-colored ball hanging low above the horizon. Lightning bugs signaled to one another, and a crane lazily took flight. He listened to the crickets begin to chirp as he closed his eyes. When he opened them again, Albert's heart attempted to jump out his throat.

There, sharpening her claws on an oak stump at the edge of the yard, was Fou. Just as Albert stood and cracked the screen door for a better view, the husky cat turned, met his squinty gaze, then began to saunter across the lawn toward him. Albert took another long drink and yelled over his shoulder through the house behind him, "You got a cat?" Maybe—hopefully—his eyes were playing tricks on him.

"No, has one come to visit?" Even if Albert had not heard Chansonne's clear, harmonious reply ring out over the chorus of cicadas and bullfrogs, he could not deny that the colorful mouser now rolling around at his feet on the stoop was most definitely Fou. For a split second he thought he heard an engine cut off.

The dowdy calico strutted into the deep shade of the screened porch, and Albert sat back down and put his head in his hands. The air was thick and oppressive, and it clouded his thoughts. He nudged the chubby cat with a toe, and Fou promptly sunk her claws into the leather of Albert's size twelve work boot. "Moo-dee!" He howled. "How did you get here anyway?"

"You askin' me or talkin' to yourself?" Chansonne giggled a reply as she glided through the doorway behind Albert, holding a large, full tray over her head. "Awe! *C'est une minouche grande!*" All at once, in a series

of movements Albert could hardly follow, she placed the tray on the wicker table and lifted the overweight feline to her eye-level. "Are you a fatty, Kitty-Cat? Are you hungry?"

Fou squirmed and wriggled for a full three and a half seconds before tiring herself out and resorting to a meager "Ork." The chunky calico turned her attention to the tray Chansonne had been carrying loaded with, among other things, brimming bowls of spicy etouffé over steaming, long grain jasmine rice. Fou slowly swiped a paw in the general direction of the fragrant, piquant dishes.

"Fou is always hungry," Albert said as he glanced around the yard. "That's a fact. There's something else you should know about that cat too." Fou slunk out of Chansonne's grasp, sprang onto Albert's lap, and leaned-in toward the dinner tray. Albert tucked Fou under his arm as he rose from his seat and cleared his throat.

"Fou? What a perfect name for such a gregarious animal!" Chansonne pinched both of the cat's round cheeks, "I take it you know Fou here, but why does your own cat make you so nervous?"

"Because it's not my cat," Albert croaked. Chansonne raised an inquisitive eyebrow but turned her head to face the person preemptively answering her next, unasked question.

"It's his wife's." Jeanine's response was acid.

Chansonne calmly opened wide the screen door to face the steaming, petite redhead standing on the other side. "I see," the raven-haired beauty stated gently. She turned to Albert, who was as white and stiff as a cotton towel left on the clothesline too long.

The sun paused its descent beyond the horizon, and the cicadas and the crickets hushed all at once as Jeanine and Chansonne exchanged loaded gazes. Albert inadvertently shook his head "no" as he repeatedly glanced between the two women.

"Albert, *dit mon la verité! Qui c'est q'ca? Ton gaienne?*" Albert shuddered. Jeanine was speaking Cajun. "*Je vas te passe une callote!*"

"*Gar ici!*" Without thinking, Albert let Fou drop to the ground, and the feline took its place beside its owner. "Look here, Jeanie! Don't get physical; we didn't."

Jeanine, whose fists were clenched as tightly as her jaw, looked the would-be homewrecker up-and-down as Chansonne, on the other hand, stood calmly within arm's reach of the furious housewife and gave her

potential attacker a sad, almost sympathetic stare. "I understand that you feel betrayed and angry. I understand you think you need to act, but you really need to understand. Please, let me explain."

Two more excruciating minutes dragged by, and Jeanine's jaw became less hardened, but there was still a glint to her eyes as she considered Chansonne's request. "You're right. I don't understand what there is to explain about my husband puttin' his feet up here when he has supper waitin' for him at home." Her fists loosened as she spoke, and her voice quivered with a different, softer emotion as she challenged Albert with, "What are you doing here?"

"Jean Jeanie," Albert tried using one of his wife's favorite pet names. "The answer I am going to give you is not going to make you happy, but all this ..." He motioned around all three of their heads, "... is not what you must think." Albert looked toward Chansonne, whose voice remained as cool and refreshing as the crystal liquid she had given him earlier.

"Jeanie ..." She began.

"Jeanine." She was curtly corrected.

"Sorry, Jeanine," She continued, "Albert has been helping me fix up this place for the last couple of weeks."

"It's not been much money, but it's been steady, and I like the work. That's all there is to it really. I been comin' out here around lunch every day after shrimpin' then hittin' the markets all mornin'." Albert searched his wife's face for any sign of sympathy.

Jeanine swayed a little as Fou bumped against her shins, and she processed what she had just been told. Albert's words were honest, but something still didn't quite make sense. "So what you're tellin' me, is that you've been workin' two jobs the past month?"

"Pretty much." Albert's eyes were pleading with Jeanine.

"So help me understand." Her eyes cut from Albert to Chansonne and back again. "Why not tell me? And where's the extra money? Even if it's not much, we should be ahead on our bills-not jugglin' past due notices!"

"Well," Chansonne blushed. "I don't always pay in money. Times are tough here too, you see."

Jeanine sank into one of the wicker chairs scattered around the porch. "Sometimes, Jeanie, Chansonne starts me a tab. You may not have noticed, I surely didn't at first, but this ain't just a house here. It's her business." Albert sat across from his wife and placed his hand on hers.

"I call it *Fais Do-Do's*." Chansonne offered, "I'm trying out a Bar & Breakfast sort of thing. I find most people want a drink by the time they find their way here, and I'm so far out in the middle of nowhere ... It only made sense to offer rooms ..." She feebly took her own seat.

Whatever relief Jeanine had started to feel burned away as color blazed back into her cheeks. "You been drinkin' and partyin' away whatever extra you coulda brought home? And do you have any earthly idea what I've been through just findin' you this evenin'?"

"Jeanie," He began to attempt an explanation.

"Jeanine." Her accent corrected him. Before Albert could begin again, Jeanine continued, "You really think it's okay to not tell me about this whole second life you been livin' for the past month as long as you kept it in your pants?" She sprang to her feet and started for the screen door.

"It ain't always easy being married, you know?" Albert tried one last time. Jeanine couldn't determine if the tiny break in his voice was real or not.

"Yeah, believe me. I know. Your life is about to get real simple, don't worry." She paused at the threshold for just a moment and turned to Chansonne. "You can keep your best customer, Honey. C'mon, Fou."

Stunned, Albert watched as the cat gave him a mean spirited grunt then awkwardly trotted after Jeanine through the lawn's scattered colony of crawfish mounds leading into the dark at the water's edge. A few moments later, an airboat motor whirred to life, and the newly single Albert felt a tinge of panic as he heard it fade into the distance.

"Um ..." Slowly, he turned his head back toward the elegant being sitting to the side of him. In an instant, Chansonne was on her feet.

"After that, you could definitely use another drink!" She fluttered away and returned before Albert could even heave a sigh at her comforting tone. He readily accepted the new Mason jar she offered and began to numb the memory of his wife.

Strand upon delicate strand of tiny bulbs blinked to life all around *Fais Do-Do's*, and sultry shadows hugged Chansonne as she moved through the soft, warmly glowing light of the porch back into her bar-and-breakfast. Albert's jaw slackened as his gaze lingered a moment at the back door into the house, and the thick, rich smell of perique tobacco wafted through the doorway to hang in his nostrils. Chansonne returned cradling the arm of another, older man with more belly than hair and a long, hand-rolled cigarette hanging from the side of his mouth.

"This is my most loyal customer here on the screen-porch. Be nice to him, Bach. He's brokenhearted." The men locked eyes and furrowed their brows as each attempted to mangle the other's hand. "You boys make yourselves comfortable. I'll be right back. Want anything?" She raised an eyebrow along with the last syllable she chirped.

Both men completely forgot their silent battle upon hearing Chansonne's voice. Bach released his grip and settled into a rocking chair situated just far enough away from his competitor that they needn't interact. "A jar of the usual would be nice, Honey."

Albert gave Chansonne his usual dopey smile while he slowly wagged his head to either side a couple of times in response to her question. Giving a sly grin, she turned on her heels and popped back inside. A fiddle began to cry, accompanied by the long, slow wail of an accordion, and as the singer began his woeful verse, Albert's attention turned to the inky blackness of the swamp beyond the backyard, and he let his mind swim.

Three Times 'Round

Jill Crosby

Just past the greasy fingerprints smeared all around the glass, there was a little girl wearing the strangest clothes. Her Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles shorts didn't exactly match her Little Mermaid tee-shirt, other than the fact that they both had lots of green colors on them. Faded from daily wear and washing, her purple, lace-trimmed bobby socks should probably have been folded down instead of pulled up almost to her knobby little knees. The right one steadily crept down her leg. The heart-shaped sunshades were a nice touch, but it was the white swimmer's cap that really stood out from the rest of her garish outfit. Ouida touched her hand to her head and, holding her hand still, began rolling her head all around to feel its smooth, egg shape.

Ouida stopped the second she heard her mother shout, "Wee-da, come eat!" and she bolted out of her room and down the hallway to the tiny kitchenette where her mom was making cheese toast. She hopped onto her stool—the middle stool—between her sisters at the counter. On the other side, her mother was stirring a big pitcher of Ouida's favorite color Kool-aid, Grape-a-Saurus Rex.

"Momma, lookit what Ouida's got on!" her older sister, Clementine, yelled even though everyone she wanted to hear was within five feet of her.

Their mother turned around, and the smile that spread across her face was so bright it could have caused Ouida's porcelain skin to freckle. "Hop down, Young'un. Let me get the full picture."

Ouida spun around and half fell onto the ground, only gaining her footing at the last second. "Them's mine," her younger sister pointed to the well-worn socks creeping down toward Ouida's scrawny ankles.

"No, Nor, yours is blue." Ouida gave each sock a good yank upward to cover her scrapes and scratches.

"Hers *are* blue," Clem corrected her kid sister.

"Yeah, see? Clem says so too." Her sister's smarmy tone was completely lost on Ouida, who again climbed atop her barstool. The space between Nora's eyebrows wrinkled as she scrunched up her nose and stared at her older siblings.

"Mom! Nor's tryin' to cry!" Clem sounded the warning as her mother slid a sippy cup under Nora's chin. The four-year-old immediately

turned it up to take a long pull.

"So, do you wanna explain your fashion choice?" The girls' mom asked, pouring a jelly jar full of the not-quite-grape flavored drink.

"Why you got on them Ninja Turtle shorts? Didn't you get those from Nate?" Clem shot off a couple questions as she made it three times around in one spin. "Can I have sweet tea?"

"Ya'll said I can pick out what I wear on the weekends as long as it ain't for church. I like the Ninja Turtles." Ouida tried to out-talk her big sister.

"Well, why not a shirt that matches it, like that black one your Mamaw got you?" Mom suggested as she placed the jelly jar in front of Ouida. "Clem, you can't have the caffeine."

"Yuh-huh! I ain't had a coke or tea yet today!"

"I like the Little Mermaid too." Ouida dragged the back of her forearm across her mouth then looked at the purple streak left between her elbow and wrist.

"Ouida! Why'd you do that? If that stuff stains you again, I'm gonna stop letting you drink it." It was an idle threat, Ouida knew. Every flavor of Kool-aid stained her, and she also knew her mom mostly just didn't want any substitute teachers calling about strange bruises up and down Ouida's arms. Ouida always wondered why grown-ups never noticed her "bruises" matched her Kool-aid mustaches.

"Smoke." Nora pointed behind Mother at the oven.

"Smoke! Momma! Smoke!" Clem made sure their only neighbors for three miles heard.

"Stop, drop, and roll!" Ouida was on the linoleum squirming before the smoke alarm went off.

"Shoot! Clem, get the broom!" Mom yelled as she grabbed a dish towel—the blue one with cows on it Ouida like so much.

Four seconds later and Clem was swiping at the smoke detector while Mom pulled charred cheese toasts from the oven. "Yuck!" squeaked Nor as she stuck out her tongue and squinted.

"Gross!" came Clem's two cents.

"The cheese looks like burnt skin," said Ouida.

"Well, tough titty said the kitty, but the milk's still good!" exclaimed Mother.

The girls all laughed at their grandmother's old saying. Ouida still wasn't quite sure what grown-ups meant by that, but she knew she and her

sisters would be scraping the burnt layer off the bread side of the cheese toast with butter knives. At least they could pull off the crispy layer on the cheese side, and it would still be okay.

"How come you always burn it?" Clem demanded.

"This is my softest shirt," Ouida attempted to redirect the conversation.

"That's fine," her mother was preoccupied with wiping black crumbs off the countertop. "I like the shades," Mom continued over her shoulder as she wrung out the thoroughly stained rag.

"Ain't those mine?" Clem remained a vital part of the conversation.

"Nuh-uh, yours was stars," Ouida remembered because she'd wanted the purple star-shaped sunglasses, but Clem grabbed them out of the goody bag as soon as Daddy had plopped it down. "But we can trade if you want to."

"Aw yeah, I like the purple ones. You can keep them pank ones." Clem crunched through a whole corner of her cheese toast.

Ouida pulled off the heart-shaped shades and gave them a good look. "Thanks. Sometimes I like to wear them like this ..." she turned them upside down and forced the stems back over her ears then looked right at her mom, who was pouring tea over a mountain of ice cubes.

"That's funny! They sorta look like spades that way." Momma took a long sip. The ice bumped against the tip of her nose even though she barely tipped the glass.

"What's a spade?" Ouida asked.

"It's a little shovel. Mamaw uses one in the yard diggin' up weeds and stuff." Clem informed her kid sister.

"Yeah, Clem, but that's not it." Momma ran another rag over Nora's face, which scrunched and contorted in mild protest. "It's a suit in playin' cards too."

"Which ones?" Ouida wanted to know. She thought her glasses looked like teardrops.

"The black ones that ain't the clubs." Momma refilled Nor's sippy and slid it back over to the blonde tot.

"Bye." Nor scooted off the edge of her stool, sippy cup in one hand and bald baby doll in the other, and somehow managed to land on her feet before scurrying off to mischief.

"Clubs?" asked Ouida.

"Puppy toes, Ouida. You got your book bag put up?" Momma

turned her attention to Clem.

"Yuh-huh," Clem's voice echoed from inside Momma's glass.

"M'kay. We don't need another incident with the safety scissors." Momma snatched her drink back and refilled it.

"So, Ouida, there's only one question left." Mom's tone grew serious as she leaned across the counter to look into her daughter's eyes.

Ouida couldn't help but grin as she felt her ears turn red. "Whut?"

Mom looked over to Clem to give her oldest a chastising look, then her full attention was back on Ouida—who was loving the interrogation. "Where'd ya find my old swimmin' cap?"

"What's that?" It was an honest question, but Ouida's smile seemed deceptive.

"You should know. You got it on your head!" Clem pointed out the obvious, then hopped off her stool. "Can I have the red rind? I ate all my cheese toast, even though it was burnt."

Personally, Ouida didn't know why her sisters liked the red, waxy rind from the wedge of hoop cheddar her mom bought every month. It was pretty much cheese-flavored gum, except not as chewy, and Ouida hated gum. Her mom jerked open the fridge and pulled out a couple small pieces of the wax she'd saved when fixing lunch then dropped them into Clem's outstretched hand, which immediately closed tightly around the crimson treasure. Off she ran.

"I found it under your bed." Ouida finally answered.

"Found what? Oh, the cap. Yeah, so you like it, huh?" Ouida's mom put the pitcher of tea and the gallon of Kool-aid into the fridge.

"Yup, but my head's itchy." Ouida stuck her pinky under the edge of the cap. "Did you wear this when you were little?"

"Naw, I got that a few years ago so I wouldn't mess up my perm swimmin'." Ouida knew her mom loved to swim, or at least to lay around in the sun.

"Wanna go swim!" Nor had materialized out of nowhere, and she was kicking off her sandals and tugging at her shorts. Nor always wore her favorite swimsuit under her clothes—just in case. Ouida could see the little green frogs that dotted her baby sister's yellow one-piece, which was starting to turn from mustard to butter.

"Pull your britches back up; we ain't goin' nowhere. You're still in trouble from the scissors. Ouida, do the snaps for her, 'kay?" Momma was washing her hands.

Ouida pinched the pieces of metal as hard as she could between her fingers until her thumbnail was white and she heard the "snap." She then dragged Nor back into the living room, where the imaginative youngster had gathered all her stuffed animals to watch *Mister Roger's Neighborhood*.

"Momma, can I have this?" Ouida shouted as she bounced on their big, overstuffed couch with Nor.

"What? The cap? Sure, I don't ever want another perm, so have fun. You gonna watch TV with Nor, or ya wanna go outside with Clem?" Momma yelled from the little laundry room connected to the kitchen. "And stop jumpin' up 'n' down on that couch!" she responded to the undulation in her daughter's voice.

"Can I play in the hose if I go outside with you and Clem?" Ouida's mom was wearing the same rainbow string bikini she wore to answer the door for Jehovah's Witnesses, who didn't come around so much lately.

"Not today 'cuz Nor's being punished and she'll fuss." Ouida heard the washing machine start-up.

"Can I watch the clothes wash?" Ouida stepped back into the kitchen to hear better.

"No, your daddy fixed the lid and now it won't work unless it's down," Momma said, grabbing the bag of clothes pins.

"Stay in here then." Ouida really did not like to sweat.

"Good, keep an eye on Nor while I go hang up this load and pull the other off the line." Ouida's mom hoisted an almost unwieldy wicker basket overflowing with wet towels and sheets and shoved her way through the back door and out of the kitchen.

"Okay." Ouida ran, and belly flopped onto the big, overstuffed couch. She squirmed around until the rips in the vinyl didn't itch her anymore. Mister Roger's voice was so soothing as he talked about sharing and imagination and being yourself. Ouida's eyes kept drooping, then popping back open, until finally, they stayed closed.

Daddy slammed the door behind him as he rushed through the living room from the carport. "Gotta pee!" He zoomed right past the mob of brightly colored bunnies, bears, and frogs and only half glanced toward his two youngest kids. Ouida was up in a flash upon hearing the loud thump.

"Hey, Deddy!" She loudly croaked down the hall toward the

bathroom. Ouida rubbed her eyes, and something scratchy tore and poked at her thin eyelids. Her eyes began to tear-up, and Ouida looked around her to see Nor throwing something behind the couch. "Nor-rah!" Ouida screamed at her sister. "Deddy! Nor's got on the swimmin' cap Momma gave me!" She grabbed at Nor's head, but the tiny thief stepped aside and Ouida tumbled off the edge of the couch onto a small pile of blonde hair. "DED-DEE!"

"I'll save you, Earth Child!" Ouida heard a funny yell over the sound of the toilet flushing. "Dum-duh-da-dum!" He pretended to fly into the living room. "Whose hair is that?" He said in his normal voice.

The back door screeched open, and a breeze seemed to rush Clem into the house. Hair scattered over every inch of the living room. "Momma wants to know what ya'll are yellin' ... Whose hair is that?"

"That's what I wanna know," said Dad.

"I don't care whose," Ouida's voice started to tremble. "I just wanna get it off me!"

"Whose hair is that?" Mom asked dropping the clothes basket onto the couch.

"That's the million-dollar question, Tabby," Dad smiled at his wife, who was already leaning-in for a kiss.

"Ew!" Clem taunted in typical second-grader fashion. Dad smooshed his lips even harder against Mom's, and the two adults made goofy kissing noises as Clem squealed.

"Everybody stop smoochin' and get this hair off me!" Ouida demanded. Her parents did stop. They looked at her, then at each other, then continued to annoy their children by showing affection.

"I luh-uv you, Tabitha!"

"Not as much as I luh-uv you, Will!"

"Stop lovin' each other!" The girls shouted together in protest.

"Okay, okay," Daddy chuckled. "Here's a better question: Where's Nor?"

"Behind the couch," Ouida pointed to the small, white sandals peeking out from behind the sofa.

"Nora, come out from behind there. Tell us what you did." Daddy commanded.

"No. I'll get in trouble." Nora said.

"In that case, you're already in trouble," Mom insisted. "Come on out and let's see." Scissors slid from beneath the couch, and Nor scooted

into view.

"Give me back my cap!" Ouida snatched her new favorite piece of clothing from Nor's head, and inside it was more of the fine, blonde hair. Clem laughed wholeheartedly.

Dad grinned like the Cheshire cat.

Mom stifled a giggle.

Ouida snorted.

Nor howled as she worked-up some tears.

Mom lifted Nor to assess the damage. "Clem, go get the broom."

"How bad is it this time?" Needing a distraction, Dad began folding laundry to keep his grin from turning into a full-blown laugh.

"To the scalp. Straight down the middle," Mom said, dusting the rest of the clipped hairs from Nor's head and shoulders. "Not very far back, though."

"Guess she couldn't reach that far!" Dad finally gave a modest chuckle then returned to mating socks.

"We'll have to buzz it to fix it. Toss me a washcloth." Mom wiped Nor's nose, while Nor turned beet red and tried to bury her face in Mom's shoulder.

"Whose scissors?" Clem had returned with the broom, but—refusing to clean voluntarily—leaned it against the couch and picked up the sewing shears. Mom blushed.

"Is Nor in trouble?" Ouida didn't know how her parents could punish her sister if they were laughing at her.

"I think Nor punished herself," Dad recommended. "You weren't watching her, Tabby? Those look like your sewin' scissors."

"Mine are in my book bag!" Clem proclaimed. She wouldn't be in trouble.

"I was asleep!" Ouida certainly didn't want the blame.

"I was grabbing the laundry," Mom defended herself but half-scolded Ouida. "You're lucky she didn't cut your hair."

"I guess so," Ouida said pulling her cap down to her ears.